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Editor: **Ralph W. Klein**
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
rklein@lstc.edu
Associate Editor: **Norma Cook Everist**
Wartburg Theological Seminary
Assistant Editor: **Peggy Blomenberg**
pbe@lstc.edu
Editor of Preaching Helps: **Craig A. Satterlee**
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
csatterl@lstc.edu
Editors of Book Reviews:
Edgar Krentz
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (773/256-0752)
ekrentz@lstc.edu
Connie Kleingartner
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (773/256-0747)
ckleinga@lstc.edu
Craig L. Nessan
Wartburg Theological Seminary (563/589-0207)
cnessan@wartburgseminary.edu
Circulation office: 773/256-0751
currents@lstc.edu

Editorial Board: **Paul G. Bieber, Pamela J. S. Challis, Connie Kleingartner, Randall R. Lee, Richard L. Ramirez, Susan Rippert, Barbara Rossing, Jensen Seyenkulo, Susan Swanson, Vicki Watkins, Fritz Wehrenberg, Vítor Westhelle.**

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Tomorrow

"So do not worry about tomorrow," (Jesus, in Matt 6:34)
"Never Stop Thinking about Tomorrow" (campaign theme song of Bill Clinton)

I love paradoxes. I preached recently on Psalm 113, which celebrates a God who is at once exalted in the place of divine enthronement and quite low in the places where God looks, in heaven and on earth. Over the years I have been persuaded that the biblical view of the future sees it as rushing toward us and therefore transforming us, while secular time has us moving toward the future. With presidential campaigns new and old in the air I have been struck by the paradoxical comments at the head of this essay—both of which are good advice in their season. Our writers again help us sort out the paradoxes and uncertainties of the past, the present, and the future.

Richard Jensen reminds us that Eastern Orthodox theology insists that God became human so that humans might become divine. The new Luther research by Finnish theologians has claimed that Luther, too, believed in theosis or divinization. The Lutheran understanding of the indwelling of Christ implies a real participation in God and is analogous to the Orthodox doctrine of theosis. Jensen proposes that a preaching strategy of thinking in story or thinking in image might be congruent with this understanding of theosis. God at work in, with, and under a biblical story can also be God at work in the life of the hearer at the same time. Images taken from the Bible, the arts, or even from everyday life can spark the human imagination to live in the world of the divine.

Mark I. Wegener proposes that Paul's resurrection treatise in 1 Corinthians 15 is argumentative rather than offering consolation or celebration. Paul intended to refute those who denied what is now known as the doctrine of the resurrection. It seems quite likely that Paul consciously used common rhetorical devices in his writings, especially those of persuasive or deliberative speeches. Verse 12 provides the key to understanding the strategy of the entire chapter. What is at stake is not the reality of Christ's resurrection but whether anyone else, particularly those who believe in and who follow Christ, will also experience a resurrection and life after death. The burden of Paul's argument is to prove that those who deny the future resurrection of Christians are wrong. Paul's resurrection language may be the most effective way of expressing one's determination to live *as if* Christ has been raised and *as if* his people can anticipate their own resurrections. Paying closer attention to the rhetorical strategy of the argument in 1 Corinthians 15 helps us understand how this biblical treatise continues to instill in us the assurance of the resurrection.

David Sandmel discusses the significance of Joseph Klausner, a Jewish scholar of Christianity at the beginning of the twentieth century. Klausner believed that a renewed Jewish nation in the land of Israel would lead the rest of the world to live by the eternal values embodied in the Messianic Idea. Klausner is also the first credible Jewish scholar to put the modern critical and Jewish study of Jesus before a wide Jewish audience. While Klausner admired much about Jesus, he felt Paul changed Jesus' teaching into a form comprehensible to Gentiles by combining it with pagan and Hellenistic elements. Ironically, he felt that without the assistance of Christianity Judaism would not have survived at all. Klausner reconstructed Western civilization from a decidedly Jewish and Zionist perspective, and primarily for Jewish consumption. Klausner almost single-handedly made the Jewish study of early Christianity a "kosher" subject.

Bruce V. Malchow points out a number of limitations we face in using the Bible to decide moral issues. The gospel is the central authoritative concern in Scripture, and the writers of Scripture were human thinkers and writers even when they were under the Spirit's guidance. Lutherans ignore the commandment about graven images from the Decalogue and reapply the third commandment to worship concerns when its original emphasis was on the prohibition of work on the sabbath. Many Christians today have far different views on war and capital punishment than their scriptural forebears. The Bible's statements about homosexuality need to be understood in their historical context. The sin of Sodom was hardly homosexual behavior by consenting adults. At times the Bible's statements about homosexuality are primarily critiques of the Canaanite fertility cult, or its statements are hard to distinguish in kind from obsolete observations about sowing with two kinds of seed or wearing garments made of two kinds of material.

Philip Hefner delivered the funeral sermon for Axel Kildegaard, a professor at Grand View and LSTC from 1948–1985, as a letter to him that celebrates Axel's Grundtvigian Lutheran identity, exemplified in the aphorism "human first, then Christian." He gives special attention to Brian Swimme, an astrophysicist whose writings Axel and Phil had both been reading. We also include the wonderfully intimate and treasured comments of **Nis Kildegaard** at his father's funeral.

The book of Proverbs weighs in with another thought about our theme: "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring" (Prov 27:1). Compare similarly "One who puts on armor should not brag like one who takes it off" (1 Kgs 20:11). Or, more popularly: "Don't count your chickens before they're hatched." Listen to another voice from the distaff side: "Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come" (Prov 31:25). For the life of me, I can't stop thinking about tomorrow.

Ralph W. Klein, Editor

Theosis and Preaching: Implications For Preaching in the Finnish Luther Research

Richard A. Jensen
Carlson Professor of Homiletics, emeritus
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
rajensen@frontiernet.com

Over the course of the past several years research by Finnish theologians on Martin Luther has come to the conclusion that Luther shared a significant reality with basic Orthodox theology. This reality emerged in theological discussions that the Finnish Lutheran theologians have had with the Russian Orthodox Church. As the Orthodox advanced their theosis theology the Lutherans began to sense that very similar ideas were present in Luther's theology. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson have edited a book titled *Union With Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Eerdmans, 1998) which presents articles by several of these Finnish theologians. Stimulated by these articles, I am fascinated to see the implications that theosis has for preaching. This new Finnish research on Luther points to some problems in Lutheran preaching and to some creative possibilities of thinking about preaching anew as we move into the future.

Problems in Lutheran preaching

First, a word about a fundamental problem in preaching based on past assumptions in Luther research. The Finnish authors point to two problems in Lutheran studies that have a significant impact on preaching. Tuomo Mannermaa writes that

> Finnish Luther research has come to the conclusion that Luther's idea of the presence of Christ in faith can form a basis for treating the question of divinization. The Lutheran understanding of the indwelling of Christ implies a real participation in God and is analogous to the Orthodox doctrine of participation in God, or theosis . . . the core of the often misunderstood patristic doctrine of theosis can be briefly formulated as follows. Divine life has manifested itself in Christ. In the church, understood as the body of Christ, human beings participate in this life and thereby partake of 'the divine nature' [2 Peter 1:4] . . . in order to restore [humans to their] original condition as imago Dei (pp. 25–26).

Mannermaa goes on to indicate that classic Lutheranism was familiar with the notion of God's essential indwelling in the believer. A problem has arisen, however, in Lutheran interpretation. The Formula of Concord defines the relation between "justification" and "divine indwelling" in a manner different from Luther: "the inhabitatio Dei is distinguished conceptually as a separate phenomenon that is logically subsequent to justification" (p. 27). In this division of the concept justification is understood in a totally forensic manner, "that is, it is regarded as a reception of the for-

giveness that is 'imputed' to a human being because of the obedience and merit of Christ. The inhabitatio Dei is considered merely a consequence of this 'righteousness of faith'" (p. 28). Luther, however, does not separate Christ from his work. "Christ is, in this unity of person and work, really present in the faith of the Christian" (p. 28).

Simo Puera makes the same point in his article. "According to the Formula of Concord the doctrine of justification includes only God's favor, that is, imputed righteousness. . . . This means that God is not really present in a Christian when declaring him or her righteous through faith for Christ's sake" (p. 45). This forensic (legal) understanding of justification gives justification a thoroughly objective ground. The problem that Perua sees, however, is that justification becomes something external to the Christian. Divine agency is separated from human agency. The divine agent has asserted that one is justified. The human agent is then called upon for a response. This is quite different from a view of theosis wherein the divine agent divinizes, transforms, the human agent!

This disjuncture between Luther and the Formula of Concord raises the question concerning which interpretation is normative for Lutherans today. This is an ongoing issue for each of us in the life of the Lutheran church in today's world.

Puera points to another factor that contributes to the same problem. The whole Finnish school seems to point a finger of blame here at Immanuel Kant's philosophy.

> Characteristic of neo-Kantian theology is the radical separation of God's being [esse] and his effects [Wirkungen] from each other. . . . Because of this separation, such theological ideas as the union of God and the Christian become impossible. The neo-Kantian school has had a wide and comprehensive influence on Luther research until now. (p. 46).

As I understand this, it seems to me to be a second way that the Lutheran tradition balks at divinization. We can't be related to God's being itself. Kant told us so! Divine agency is one matter. The effect of that agency and the role of human agency is another matter. The Formula of Concord, on the one hand, and a new-Kantian interpretation of Luther on the other hand, appear to mitigate against an understanding of theosis in Luther's theology as set forth by the Finnish school of research. The Finnish theologians find it necessary to combat these two streams of interpretation of Luther in order to assert their claims for divinization as fundamental to Luther's theology.

The problem for preaching that grows out of the Formula and neo-Kantianism is very serious. Mannermaa again:

> [Luther] claims that if the person of Christ and that of the believer are separated from each other in the locus of justification, salvation is still within the framework of the order of the law. . . . When it comes to justification, therefore, if you divide Christ's person from your own, you are in the Law; you remain in it and live in yourself, which means that you are dead in the sight of God and damned by the Law. (p. 38)

I am particularly struck by Luther's words "if you divide Christ's person from your own, you are in the Law!" Marking a division between divine agency and human agency leads to a false preaching of the Law. In such preaching divine agency doesn't need much emphasis. That's taken for granted. That's objective. That is finished by Christ. That is outside of me. The preacher can take care of justification (or whatever metaphor for the divine deed of God in Jesus Christ we might summon) with just a few sentences.

Theologically what is happening here is that the Christ who is *for* us is separated from the Christ who is *in* us. Christ is

outside. We are inside. We are the human agents. That's where the problem lies. The problem lies within us. The problem lies in human agency. That's where the effort for preaching goes. Preaching shaped by this theological conviction seeks to convince congregants that they must act in response to divine agency. They must summon the faith to believe. "Faith as volitional obedience rather than as ontological participation is all that a neo-Kantianized Luther could allow" (p. ix). Our congregants, therefore, must choose to follow and obey. They must live up to the quality of the mercy shown. They must repent and put their lives right. The Third Use of the Law will surely receive big play. God has a plan for your life as revealed in the Bible. Here is how you shall live. Are you doing so? Why not? Turn around. Act. Do what is required of you. Choose the higher path.

The list could go on. Such a list has can become the dominant theme of preaching when we separate divine agency from human agency. And clearly, in my experience, we often have done so. And so we preach the law as demand for human agency. One could make the case that preaching in our past and in our present has been primarily focused on these matters. We preach the law. We preach the law and we think we are preaching the gospel. The gospel after all is a given. Our names have been written down in a heavenly book somewhere. It's all there. We are justified. So let's get on with it. Divine agency is a given. Human agency is the problem. We preach to the problem; we preach to inspire human agency.

Possibilities for Lutheran preaching

The possibility for a new way of thinking about preaching is implicit in the theosis reality. The authors describe theosis in a variety of metaphors. Let us first of all hear these metaphors and then ask how one might talk about preaching that would do justice to the metaphors. Mannermaa uses Luther's language of the "happy exchange" to describe the Lutheran concept of theosis.

> The core of Luther's concept of participation finds expression in the notion of the 'happy exchange', according to which Christ takes upon himself the sinful person of the human being and bestows his own righteous person upon that humanity. What takes place here between Christ and the believer is a communication of attributes or properties: Christ, the divine righteousness, truth, peace, joy, love, power, and life gives himself to the believer. At the same time, Christ 'absorbs' the sin, death, and curse of the believer into himself. Because faith involves a real union with Christ and because Christ is the divine person, the believer does indeed participate in God. That is what Luther means when he speaks of Christ as a 'gift'. Christ is not only the favor of God, that is forgiveness, but also a 'gift' [donum], God himself as present. (p. 32)

Puera takes up the same image of the happy exchange in his discussion of Luther. He uses the metaphor as a means of explicating the meaning of the divine indwelling of Christ in the believer.

> When Christ gives himself to us, he indwells us and becomes one with us. Thus, redemption is something that happens not only on the cross but also in all believers whom Christ indwells through faith. Indeed, only when Christ indwells us is the redemptive work in us brought into existence. Luther describes salvation as the so-called wonderful exchange. . . . (p. 90)

Another theological image used by the Finnish theologians is generated from the words "favor" and "gift" as we have read above. They indicate that Luther's theology is permeated by the reality that Christ is both God's favor to us and God's gift alive in us.

> "Favor signifies God's forgiveness and the removal of his wrath. And Christ is a 'gift' in that the real self-giving of God comes through him to

the human person. . . . the notion of Christ as a 'gift' means that the believing subject becomes a participant in the 'divine nature.'" (p. 33)

And again,

Christ himself is grace [favor] and gift. Christ himself is the grace that covers a sinner and hides him from God's wrath, and Christ himself is the gift that renews the sinner internally and makes him righteous. This occurs, then, when Christ unites himself with a sinner. (p. 53)

The language of deification is also employed by these scholars:

Luther's view of God and of his nature as self-giving love, then, leads us to the notion of the deification of a created human being. The triune God lives in the Christian . . . this divinization means precisely our transformation into God's love such that we are God's love. Thus, the aim of salvation as participation in God and in his love is to effect in us as well the capacity to fulfill the twofold commandment of pure, unselfish love. (pp. 92–93)

Note the agency of new life, life that keeps the law by loving God and neighbor, is our participation in God, the transformation of human agency. This manner of talking about life under God's law will require a very different type of preaching than preaching as a demand for voluntary, willful obedience. Human agency cannot keep the law. Jeremiah had it right long ago. Speaking prophetically of a new covenant to come Jeremiah speaks for God saying: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people" (Jer 31:33). New hearts are needed. Union with God is needed. Divine agency become the root of our being is needed. Our old hearts won't do. There is no way to order them into obedience. "I will write it on their hearts," says Yahweh.

The point should be clear though the images for theosis continue to abound in these articles. Let me just list some of the other images used for theosis: God donates Godself in the Son. God becomes present within us. A Christian becomes full of God. We participate in the divine life. We live in union with Christ.

According to Luther all this is effected by the Holy Spirit through baptism, and the necessary precondition for baptism is preaching of God's Word (p. 53). In baptism God joins Godself with the sinner and becomes one with him or her. And preaching is the precondition! The effect of this Finnish research leads us to a new way to talk about preaching. Let me single out the many metaphors used for theosis in this article and apply them to the preaching task. The many metaphors used intend to point to the same basic theotic reality:

Theosis means that preaching:
. . . effects the "happy exchange."
. . . brings Christ as grace/favor and gift.
. . . mediates God's indwelling in the believer.
. . . is an instrument for divinization of the believer.
. . . transforms human agency.
. . . gives birth to new hearts within us.
. . . mediates union with God/Christ.
. . . donates Christ to us.
. . . is the "real presence" of Christ "for us."
. . . fills us with God.
. . . creates our participation in God.

And how shall we preach?

How shall we accomplish this divinizing task in our preaching? How shall we shift our preaching focus from human agency to divine agency? These are challenging questions. The Finnish Luther research has brought me to the point of these questions. Answers that form within me are clearly initial attempts to speak to this issue and are largely dependent on my earlier work in preaching (*Telling The Story: Variety and Imagination in Preaching* [Augsburg, 1980];

Thinking In Story: Preaching in a Postliterate Age [C.S.S., 1993]). Hopefully this Luther research will invite many of you as well into this process of rethinking the homiletical task.

How shall we preach? There are some things I think I know and some things that still dance on the edge of my imagination as regards theotic preaching. It seems clear to me, for example, that preaching theosis requires a sacramental view of preaching. Preaching as sacrament is not new to Lutheran understanding. The finite in preaching is the instrument of the infinite in the lives of those who hear. The Holy Spirit works with finite words to bring infinite reality to life within us.

> The task of the Holy Spirit is to produce faith in Christ and to enable us to receive Christ with all of his gifts. . . . Second, the Holy Spirit reveals the work of Christ to us through the preaching of the word, helps us to understand God's love toward us, effects faith in us, and in this way offers and gives Christ and all the gifts of salvation to us as well. (p. 90)

Word and sacraments are the means of grace in Lutheran understanding. Word refers to Bible, witness, and preaching. It is the word of God that makes the sacraments effective. How can water do such things? How can bread and wine do such things? It is not water or bread and wine that do such things but the word of God working in, with, and under the finite stuff of life. That's how Luther puts it in the Small Catechism. In preaching, the word is associated with finitude not by the presence of earthly elements but through the presence of the human preacher who with his/her bodily voice brings Christ into the lives of believers and deifies its recipients.

> The proclaimed word has its origin in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. . . . The proclaimed word is the incarnate Christ himself. As little as the incarnation is the outward shape of God, just so little does the proclaimed word present the outward form of a reality; rather, it is the thing itself. The preached Christ is both the Historical One and the Present One . . . the proclaimed word is not a medium of expression for something else . . . but rather it is the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted in *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, revised edition, ed. Clyde Fant [Crossroad, 1991], 101)

The sacramental nature of preaching implied in Luther's theology can quite easily be applied to preaching as effecting theosis! And what form shall this preaching take? In my own thinking about preaching I have come to the conclusion that most forms of the variety of ways of preaching at our disposal can be divided into three basic categories:

1. Thinking in idea.
2. Thinking in story.
3. Thinking in image (visual and/or metaphoric)

Preaching that is "thinking in idea" is preaching as explanation. Most of the preaching in our history probably falls under this rubric. The problem here is that explanation of theosis does not produce theosis. Explanation of swimming is not the same as swimming. We could multiply examples here. It seems to me that one could make the case that "thinking in idea" preaching is predicated on the split between divine and human agency. Preaching explains the divine work and the human agent sets out to willfully bring theosis to pass.

"Thinking in story" works best when the sermons' stories are stories of God, and especially when the biblical stories are told in such a way that the hearer participates in the story. God at work in, with, and under the story can be God at work in the life of the hearer at the same time. When the hearer participates in the life of God in the story there is, I believe, the real possibility that the work of God is experienced in the

life of the hearer. We experience forgiveness, we experience justification, we experience the divinizing work of God in Jesus Christ in our own existence. Preaching as "thinking in story" appears to me to be open to the possibility that it is a genuine means for the infinite God to indwell the finite hearer. Divine agency is at work through such a sermon. Theosis is a possibility. Hearers' lives are filled with God.

"Thinking in image" or "'thinking in picture" might, first, be a way of speaking about the use of images/icons in the Orthodox churches. Visual images, icons, are used in worship and preaching as a means of grace whereby the viewer actually participates in the reality of that which is seen with the human eye. The human, through sight, participates in the reality of the divine. This may be a fruitful visual way of thinking as we seek to shape a preaching that donates Jesus to people's lives. We hereby understand that both eyes and ears are human instruments that mediate God's grace. Eyes and ears are means through which God can divinize the human. Divine agency can take place through what we see! Theosis is again a possibility.

Second, "thinking in image" is preaching that uses linguistic metaphors as the spark of the human imagination. Images taken from the Bible, from the arts, and from everyday life can spark the human imagination to live in the world of the divine. Finite metaphors become tools of the imagination in receiving the infinite God into one's own body. This, too, might be a helpful way of thinking about preaching that creates union with Christ.

These are some of my initial reactions to the challenging work of the Finnish Luther researchers. I want to add just one more probe of a future for theotic preaching. In my basic works on preaching I have extended sections on first-person, present-tense proclamation of the gospel. There is no reason that such a proclamation cannot be included in all three types of preaching that I have alluded to above. I have worked hard with my students on this aspect of preaching. At some point[s] in the sermon proclamation of promise should be made. This is understood to be the very heart of the sermon. This is what you walked up into the pulpit to announce.

The preacher introduces the proclamation with words such as "What Jesus is saying to us through this story is . . ." or "What God is saying to us through this story of Joseph is. . . ." For example, in a sermon on John 1:1–18 the proclamatory word might be something like this: "What we hear Jesus saying through these words of John is: 'I am the Word from the beginning of creation. All things came into being through me. I became flesh to dwell among you. I became flesh to dwell within you today. I have come to live within you. I have come to make you my dwelling place. I have come to fill you with God. I walk into your lives this morning on the wings of the preacher's words. Believe it and it is yours!' Amen."

Proclamation, the heart of the sermon, announces a promissory event of God. God's word so announced is a creative word. God's word is always creative! It creates what it promises (Isa 55:10–11). It is a word that can make humans divine. It is theosis. The sermon focuses on divine agency, not human responsive agency. I lean toward the idea that preaching effects transformation of human agency; teaching is the community at work discovering ways in which people who have been divinized might best give shape to the new life that has that has taken root within them.

The Rhetorical Strategy of 1 Corinthians 15

Mark I. Wegener
Woodlake Lutheran Church
Richfield, Minnesota
woodlake@unidial.com

No doubt portions of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul's famous treatise on the resurrection, are read most frequently in the pastoral context of offering hope and sympathy to those who are grieving the death of a loved one. Church orders for funeral services regularly include quotations as part of the assigned ritual or as recommended lessons. In such cases the rhetorical strategy is to provide consolation, not unlike Greco-Roman epideictic letters and speeches of condolence.

Alternatively, 1 Corinthians 15 is read liturgically in the context of the church's celebration of the Feast of the Resurrection of Our Lord. Surprisingly, however, the Revised Common Lectionary's three-year cycle includes texts from this chapter only twice during Eastertide—on Easter Day itself in Years B and C. Elsewhere, also in Year C, pericopes from this chapter are appointed for the Fifth through Eighth Sundays after Epiphany and for a Sunday in late May.[1] In this case the rhetorical strategy is to promote acknowledgment of the reality of Christ's resurrection, not unlike ancient judicial or forensic speeches. Such attempts to prove the resurrection are largely misplaced, however, since this was not Paul's goal.

Rather, in the context of his correspondence with the Corinthians, Paul's resurrection treatise serves the purposes of neither consolation nor celebration. Rather, it is argumentative.[2] It is clearly intended to refute those who denied what is now known as the doctrine of the resurrection. Paul's tone is in turn controversial and polemical. He wonders out loud whether his work or the Corinthians' response are pitiful and wasted efforts (vv. 2, 14, 19), and he does not shy away from calling them "fools" (v. 36). In this contentious context, his rhetorical strategy is to persuade those who hold an erroneous opinion to change their minds and adopt his position. This is not unlike the purpose of ancient deliberative discourse.

The purpose of this study is to identify more clearly the rhetorical outline and strategy of 1 Corinthians 15 and to clarify more precisely its likely impact on Paul's audi-

1. *Indexes for Worship Planning: Revised Common Lectionary, Lutheran Book of Worship, With One Voice*, comp. M. K. Stuliken and M. A. Seltz (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 182.

2. An obvious but often overlooked point underscored by Prof. Charles B. Cousar at the Central Seminar of the Pastor-Theologian Program at Galena, IL, on Oct. 21, 2001. See also the chapter, "Jesus' Death and Resurrection," in his *A Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 88–108.

tors as well as its potential impact on modern readers. Good historical scholarship requires that we attempt to understand as clearly as possible how the ancient text would have been read and understood by its first-century recipients. But good biblical scholarship also requires that we attempt to understand how the text can continue to be appreciated and endorsed by twenty-first–century readers.

First, I introduce the components of an effective address, based on the guidelines of three representative ancient rhetoricians: Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Next, I give a history of research and summarize the conclusions of a handful of scholars who have proposed similar rhetorical strategies during the past twenty years. Third, I offer my own proposal for modifying and sharpening our understanding of Paul's rhetorical strategy.

Ancient rhetorical strategies

The prospect of analyzing Paul's arguments according to the standards of ancient rhetorical practices hinges on several key assumptions. One is that 1 Corinthians 15 "is a self-contained treatise on the resurrection of the dead,"[3] in other words, that it is a discrete, stand-alone item that can be considered independent of its immediate context in the epistle. This is less problematic than assuming that Paul deliberately kept this issue until the end of his letter "because of its vital importance"[4] and in order that it could form the climax and therefore the theological grounding of all the subjects treated in 1 Corinthians. If that were the case, one would have to consider not only the rhetorical impact of the chapter by itself but also its force as part of the overall rhetorical logic of Paul's entire epistle.[5]

However, it is not clear that 1 Corinthians 15 must carry this weight, simply because it is not certain that 1 Corinthians originated as a unified whole. One clue that 1 Corinthians may be a composite epistle, edited from two or more originally separate pieces of correspondence, is the way its various subjects are introduced. Of the ten or eleven problems treated in this letter, five are introduced with the phrase περὶ δὲ τῶν/τῆς ("now concerning"). This suggests that Paul learned of these issues from written correspondence he had received directly from the Corinthian congregation (cf. 1 Cor 7:1, περὶ δὲ ὧν ἐγράψατε, "now concerning the things you wrote about"). This letter most likely was sent and/or delivered by those identified as

3. So H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, trans. J. W. Leitch, ed. G. W. MacRae; Hermeneia, ed. H. Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 249.

4. So A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed.; ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), 328.

5. M. M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians*, HUT 28 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1991), undertakes such a holistic task and argues that 1 Corinthians is deliberative rhetoric designed to counteract the factionalism within the Corinthian community. According to her, 1 Cor 1:10 is the πρόθεσις; 1:11–17, the διήγησις; 1:18–15:57, the πίστις; and 15:58, the ἐπίλογος. R. D. Anderson Jr., *Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Paul*, Biblical Exegesis & Theology 18 (The Haag: CIP-Gegevans Koninkluke, 1996), 238, argues against Mitchell that 1 Corinthians "cannot be analyzed in terms of sustained rhetorical argumentation." B. Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), also offers a rhetorical outline of the entire epistle: 1:10 is the *propositio*; 1:11–17, the *narratio*; 1:18–16:12 the *probatio*, with nine topics and two *eggressiones* (i.e., chaps. 9 and 13); and 16:13–18, the *peroratio*.

Chloe's people (1 Cor 1:11).

The issue of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 is one of the subjects that is *not* introduced by περὶ δὲ. One reconstruction of the Corinthian correspondence suggests that Paul learned of the other five or six controverted topics, including the issue about the resurrection, from the visit of Stephanus and his friends (1 Cor 1:16; 16:17–18) and that he responded to those concerns in a separate letter. In that case, we would have no way of knowing in what order Paul originally treated the various subjects.[6]

Whether or not that reconstruction is accurate (and the majority of scholars, even those who partition 2 Corinthians into two or more sources, are inclined to affirm the unity of 1 Corinthians),[7] it suggests the possibility that placing the resurrection treatise at the conclusion of 1 Corinthians may be the work of the redactor of Paul's letters rather than the rhetorical intention of the apostle himself. Consequently we will treat 1 Corinthians 15 as an independent treatise, apart from its immediate context and penultimate position within the canonical book.

A second assumption is that Paul himself had been schooled in or at least become familiar with the conventions of Greco-Roman rhetoric as practiced by orators and authors in his day. The mere fact that Paul could write persuasively is not in itself sufficient evidence that he was familiar with the methods of classical rhetoric. In other words, the fact that his letters were preserved and shared beyond the circle of his original addressees proves that he was effective but not that he was a skilled rhetor. Furthermore, Paul's seemingly negative assessment of "the debater of this age" (1:20) and "lofty words of wisdom" (2:1,4) suggest that he would not have valued a rhetorician's skills too highly.[8]

Nonetheless, several factors increase the probability that Paul had more than a passing acquaintance with rhetorical praxis: He was not only (and obviously) well read in the Jewish literature, as evidenced by his ability to quote and discuss biblical texts, but he could also allude to nonbiblical authors such as Menander (in 1 Cor 15:33). He frequently used such commonplace devices as rhetorical questions and other

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6. W. Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth: An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians*, trans. J. E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 87–113, argues that the Corinthian correspondence originally consisted of six individual letters. R. Jewett, "The Redaction of I Corinthians and the Trajectory of the Pauline School," JAARSup 44 (1978): 390–435, offers a revision of Schmithals' hypothesis that posits seven original Corinthians letters. E. S. Fiorenza, "Rhetorical Situation and Historical Reconstruction in 1 Corinthians," *NTS* 33 (1987): 386–403, agrees that Chloe's people were the official representatives and brought the letter to Paul and that Stephanus brought the oral gossip; she notes, however, that many other scholars reverse the two, with Stephanus as the letter carrier and Chloe's group as the oral reporters. For a significantly different reconstruction see J. M. Gilchrist, "Paul and the Corinthians—The Sequence of Letters and Visits," *JSNT* 34 (1988): 47–69.

7. J. C. Hurd, Jr., *The Origin of 1 Corinthians*, new ed. (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1983), offers a comprehensive survey of all previous partition theories and then argues that 1 Corinthians is a unified whole. As such it responds to information Paul received in both written and oral forms, from several parties—Stephanus, Fortunatus, Achaicus, and Chloe. They, in turn, were responding to a previous letter, now lost, which Paul had sent to the Corinthians to supplement his original preaching when he had founded the congregation.

8. H. D. Betz, "The Problem of Rhetoric and Theology according to the Apostle Paul," in *L'Apôtre Paul: Personnalité, Style et Conception du Ministère*, ed. A. Vanhoye (Leuvenz, 1986), 16–48.

characteristic elements of diatribes. As a result, in recent decades scholars have found enough parallels between Paul's style and other ancient authors that they have warranted exploring Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon, and Romans, as well as the Corinthian correspondence, from the perspective of rhetorical conventions.[9] In other words, while one cannot prove that Paul studied classical rhetoric, it seems more than likely that he consciously used common rhetorical devices in his writings.[10]

A third assumption at work here is that rhetorical analysis originally intended for oral discourse can legitimately be applied to written texts. In other words, is it fair to treat letters as though they were speeches? For it is not necessarily self-evident that epistles and orations function in the same way.[11] Nevertheless, the broad spectrum of ancient letters ranges from those that are purely personal and occasional (some of which are "popular" in the sense that they exhibit the grammar and style of a less educated populace) all the way to those that are clearly meant to be read by a wider public (some of which are "literary" in the sense that their diction is highly sophisticated). Whether Paul's writings should be placed nearer the "popular letter" end of the continuum or more toward the "literary epistle" end may be debated. But the current consensus rightly holds that scholars are justified in using ancient rhetorical categories to interpret his letters.[12]

Since this is the case, the next step is to determine more precisely the genre within which Paul's argument(s) can reasonably be categorized. From the time of Aristotle virtually all of the rhetorical handbooks replicated his threefold distinction between deliberative δημηγορικόν or συμβουλευτικόν), epideictic (επίδεικτικόν), and forensic (δικανικόν) oratory (*Rhetoric to Alexander* 1.7–15; *Art of Rhetoric* 1.3.1–6).[13] Judicial or forensic speeches are oriented to the past; they function in

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9. For a summary of such attempts see S. E. Porter, "Paul of Tarsus and His Letters," chap. 18 in *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period 330 B.C.–A.D. 400*, ed. S. E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 533–85. Also C. J. Classen, "Paul and the Terminology of Ancient Greek Rhetoric," chap. 2 in *Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament*, WUNT 128 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 29–44.

10. Anderson concludes, "It would seem rather unlikely that Paul enjoyed a formal rhetorical training," but adds, "Even if Paul himself did not consciously think or write in rhetorical categories, his letters may still, with profit, be analyzed in terms of relevant aspects of rhetorical theory" (*Ancient Rhetorical Theory*, 249, 255).

11. The question was debated in ancient times; see J. T. Reed, "The Epistle," chap. 7 in *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric*, 171–93. Two volumes in Fortress Press's popular Guides to Biblical Scholarship series illustrate the difference between the two approaches. W. B. Doty's *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (GBS:NT Series, ed. D. O. Via, Jr., 1973) places Paul's correspondence within the realm of "epistolary literature in Hellenism." Burton L. Mack's *Rhetoric and the New Testament* (GBS:NT, ed. D. O. Via, Jr., 1990) places Paul's argumentation within the tradition of classical Greek oratory. The seventeen-year hiatus between the two illustrates the belated interest in rhetorical theory.

12. J. T. Reed, "Using Ancient Rhetorical Categories to Interpret Paul's Letters: A Question of Genre," in *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference*, ed. S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht, JSNTSup 90:292–324. Also, W. Wuellner, "Greek Rhetoric and Pauline Argumentation," in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant*, ed. W. R. Schoedel and R. L. Wilken; *Théologie Historique* 54 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1979): 177–88.

13. References are to *Aristotle: Rhetoric to Alexander*, trans. H. Rackham; LCL (Cambridge: Harvard, 1965), and *Aristotle: Art of Rhetoric*, trans. J. H. Freese; LCL (Cambridge: Harvard, 1926).

courtroom settings and answer questions of fact: "What has happened?" Their purpose is to argue for a guilty verdict or for an acquittal. The orator accuses or defends someone; the auditors play the role of judges. Ceremonial or epideictic speeches are oriented to the present; they function in public rituals and answer questions of moral value: "What is this worth?" Their purpose is to assign honor or dishonor. The orator praises or blames someone; the auditors play the role of spectators. Persuasive or deliberative speeches are oriented toward the future; they function in political assemblies and answer questions of expediency: "What shall we do?" The orator persuades or dissuades someone, to argue for or against adopting a proposed opinion or course of action; the auditors play the role of critics.

Paul's resurrection chapter clearly belongs in the deliberative category, as does most of 1 Corinthians, even though it contains elements of the other two genres. Although the bulk of the verbs in the chapter are not cast in the future tense, the entire outlook of the subject is future-oriented. The chapter begins with a narration of sorts (15:3–11), which is a typical feature of forensic speeches, but in this case the *narratio* is necessary to establish the essential basis of Paul's argument. In the context of a deliberative speech, Paul's purpose is to move his auditors from the position they hold to the position he espouses. Both Paul and some of his auditors—it may not be accurate to refer to them as his "opponents"—apparently agree on the proposition that Jesus rose from the dead; what they disagree on is whether others will also be raised. Paul's task is to convince them to conclude that the resurrection of Christ's people logically follows from affirming the resurrection of Christ himself. But more about that later. Here it is important to place 1 Corinthians 15 within the genre of deliberative rhetoric.

Within the deliberative genre it is then necessary to consider more precisely how such an argument is to be structured. One must determine the logical steps an orator should pursue in order to be convincing. Three representative rhetoricians will demonstrate how effective deliberative arguments are structured. These are Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), Marcus Tullus Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.) and Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (c. 35–c. 95 C.E.). Aristotle holds pride of place among the instructors in rhetoric; his principles, though not necessarily followed by later orators, were largely replicated by succeeding generations of instructors. Cicero, the famous Roman politician and orator, set the tone for Latin rhetoric in the century before Paul. Quintilian, a younger contemporary of the apostle, summarized and elaborated the subject in seven volumes. We use Latin sources such as Cicero and Quintilian because their Hellenistic models are now lost; both of them based their work upon Greek originals.[14]

Unlike the Sophists, for whom the art of rhetoric was primarily a matter of using words skillfully to persuade an audience, Aristotle (and his mentor Plato) grounded his rhetorical theory in his philosophical understanding of what is good and true. If it is correct, as he argued, that "rhetoric is useful, because the true and the just are naturally superior to their opposites," it follows that "generally speaking, that which is true and better is naturally always easier to prove and more likely to persuade" (*Art of Rhetoric* 1.1.12). According to him, deliberative and forensic rhetoric employ

14. For summaries of other ancient rhetorical outlines see W. Wuellner, "Arrangement," chap. 3 in *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric*, 51–87.

essentially the same methods (1.1.10, 2.1.1–4), the aim of both is persuasion (1.2.1), and the two most persuasive types of proofs are enthymemes or syllogisms, which argue deductively, and examples, which argue inductively (1.2.8, 2.20.1).

Essentially there are only two necessary parts to an effective speech: the statement of the case, followed by its proof. If an introduction and a conclusion are added as aids to memory, a good speech has four parts: (a) an introductory exordium, or προοίμιον, (b) the statement of the thesis, or πρόθεσις, (c) a demonstration of proof, or πίστις, and (d) a concluding epilogue, or ἐπίλογος. Additional elements may include (e) a narrative, or διήγησις, (f) a comparison, or ἀντιπαραβολή, and (g) a refutation, or ἀντίδικον or ἔλεγχος (in the sense of "reproof"), but these merely augment the demonstration of proof and are not properly considered separate parts of the speech (3:13.1–5).

Cicero's earlier and most extensive discussion of rhetoric, *De Oratore*, written by 55 B.C.E., does not treat the subject in the customary categories.[15] Instead, in the form of a symposium with other orators, he elaborates on the qualities of an effective speaker and an effective speech. Nevertheless, in several places he names and deals with the various parts of a speech. In two or three short paragraphs he acknowledges the customary three types of orations—in courts of law, in deliberations, and for praising or reviling others (*Oratore* 1.31.141)—and lists these six parts of a speech: (a) an introduction, which gains the good will of the auditors, (b) a *demonstranda,* which states the case, (c) a *controversia,* which defines the issues in the dispute, (d) a *confirmanda,* which establishes proofs for the case, (e) a *refellenda,* which disproves the opposing side, and (f) a closing, which summarizes the argument (1.31.143).

Later in the dialogue Cicero expands on a few of these ideas (2.76.307–2.83.340). He suggests that a speech should not be structured according to a rigid formula, that more important arguments should be placed first, and that one can use any of three methods of convincing an audience: instruction in matters they do not already know, logical persuasion, and appeals to emotion (309–313). Also, he elaborates at some length on three of the standard parts of a speech, the *exordio* (315–325), the *narratio* (326–330), and the statement of the case (331–37).

Cicero's later *De Partitione Oratoria*, written around 46 B.C.E., is in the form of a dialogue in which he answers his sons's questions with more conventional advice suitable to a 19-year-old beginning his formal education. He acknowledges that well-constructed speeches have four parts (*Partitione* 8.27). First comes (a) an introduction, or *exordium,* designed to secure a favorable hearing (8:28–30). Second is (b) the *narratio*, a clear statement of the case, which is to establish the basis for believing the subsequent argument (9.31–32). The third section consists of two moves: (c) a *confirmatio,* which presents proofs for the argument that are based on probabilities, definitions, and the quality of the proposed action (9:33–12:43), followed by (d) a *reprehensio,* or refutation of opposing arguments (12.44–14.51). Finally comes (e) the *peroratio,* which concludes by arousing the auditors' emotions; it may include enlargements (*amplificatio*) of the theme or summaries (*enumeratio*) of the main points, as well as exhortations (*cohortatio*) to hold fast to the speaker's conclusion.

15. References are to *Cicero: De Oratore* and *De Partitione Oratoria*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, 2 vols.; LCL (Cambridge: Harvard, 1942).

Quintilian deals with the practical aspects of outlining a speech in Books 3–7 of his massive *Institutio Oratoria,* which were written under contract to a benefactor over the space of several years.[16] There he proposes that a successful oration, particularly one delivered in a court of law, should be ordered in the following fivefold fashion (3.9.1–5). First, (a) a *proemium* or *exordium* will prepare the audience to give the speech a careful and sympathetic hearing (4.1.1–5). Then (b) a *narratio,* or statement of facts, will relate all the pertinent issues and evidence (4.2.1–4). This will be followed by (c) a *probatio* or *propositio*, which will offer a series of proofs that confirm and verify the truth of the case (4.3.1–5; 4.4.1–4). Next, (d) a *refutatio* or *partitio* will list the arguments of the speaker and/or the opponent (4.5.1–3). Finally, (e) a *peroratio* will conclude the speech by summarizing the argument or by appealing to the emotions of the audience (6.1.1–8). In addition, (f) an *egressio,* or digression, may occasionally be inserted for rhetorical purposes but, strictly speaking, is not to be considered part of the overall structure (4.3.12–17).

At the risk of constructing a list of rhetorical moves that none of the classical orators would have recognized *en toto*, the items named above fall into a recognizable pattern. Accordingly, a well-outlined persuasive speech would include these steps:

(1) An *exordium* (or προοίμιον or *proemium*), designed to attract the audience's attention and gain a sympathetic hearing.

(2) A *narratio* (or διήγησις) that relates the events leading to the situation at hand.

(3) A *propositio* (or πρόθεσις or *demonstranda*), which presents the thesis or states the case.

(4) A *probatio* (or πίστις or *confirmatio*), which presents a series of proofs that confirm the thesis. These may include enthymemes or syllogisms (ἐθύμημα, συλλογισμός), examples (ἐπαγωγή or *exempla*), comparisons (ἀντιπαραβολή), digressions (*eggressio*), and other rhetorical strategies.

(5) A *refutatio* (or ἀντίδικον or ἔλεγχος or *refellenda* or *reprehensio*) to forestall objections or refute an opponent's arguments.

(6) A *peroratio* (or ἐπίλογος), which concludes the speech by emphasizing the main point (*amplificatio*), or by summarizing the arguments (*enumeratio*), or by appealing to the auditors' emotions, or by exhorting them to action (*exhortatio*).[17]

Now it remains to be seen whether these moves appear to underlie Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15.

Previous reconstructions of Paul's resurrection rhetoric

Burton Mack's 1990 handbook on rhetorical criticism avers that "Paul's famous chapter on the resurrection of the dead is a perfect example of rhetorical argumentation" that interweaves elements from judicial or forensic arguments into an essentially deliberative speech.[18] According to his outline, each section except the conclusion includes both a positive argument and a negative refutation.

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16. References are to *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian*, trans. H. E. Butler, 4 vols; LCL (Cambridge: Harvard, 1921–1922), and Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, trans. D. A. Russell, 5 vols; LCL (Cambridge: Harvard, 2001).

17. Mack (*Rhetoric and the NT*, 42) summarizes a standard speech that includes seven or eight items in a four-point outline: (1) *exordium*, (a) the introduction; (2) *narratio*, with (b) a proposition and (c) the rationale or reason; (3) *confirmatio*, with (d) opposites or contraries, (e) analogies or comparisons, (f)

1 Corinthians 15		
1–2	**Exordium**	How the Corinthians received the gospel
3–11	**Narratio**	How the resurrection kerygma came to them
12–19	Issue	Some deny the resurrection
20	Fact & Thesis	Christ was raised, the firstfruits of the dead
21–50	**Argument**	
21–28	Paradigms	As Adam brought death, so Christ brought life
	Opposite	Each in their own order
29–34	Examples	Baptizing for the dead; dying for the gospel; fighting beasts at Ephesus
35–44	Analogies	Seed dies and comes alive; different kinds of bodies
45–50	Citation	Genesis account of creation of Adam
51–58	**Conclusion**	Narrative of eschatological resurrection; scriptural citation; thanksgiving; exhortation

A particular value of Mack's analysis is his penchant for noting where Paul's argument is less than adequate. The series of examples—proxy baptisms, daily dying, fighting beasts—is a weak link; they work better as questions than as proofs. The citations of Adam are nearly self-contradictory; first he is the harbinger of death, then he is the bringer of life. The analogy of the seed is logically inconsistent insofar as a plant's "resurrection" is a natural phenomenon, whereas the resurrection of a dead person would be an eschatological miracle.

Duane Watson made a major move to clarify more precisely the rhetorical arrangement of 1 Corinthians 15 in his 1992 contribution to a conference in Heidelberg.[19] He concludes that Paul incorporated a sophisticated arrangement that includes double *refutatio-confirmatio-peroratio* sequences.

examples, and (g) citations of authority; and (4) *conclusio*, (h) the conclusion. G. A. Kennedy (*New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984], 23–25), lists these eight components of a judicial speech: (a) a *proem* or *exordium*, (b) a *narration*, (c) a *proposition*, (d) a *partition*, (e) the *proof*, (f) a *refutation*, (g) a *digression*, and (h) an *epilogue* or *peroration*. See also Kennedy's historical surveys of the subject: *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton University, 1994) and *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999). C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca (*The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. J. Wilkinson and P. Weaver [Notre Dame, 1969], 495), summarize the traditional but not rigid order of a speech with these moves: (a) exordium, (b) narration, (c) proposition, (d) proof, (e) refutation, (f) conclusion, and (g) epilogue. H. Lausberg (*Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*, trans. M. T. Bliss et al., ed. D. E. Orton and R. D. Anderson [Leiden: Brill, 1998], 112–208), elaborates on four essential rhetorical moves: (a) *exordium*, (b) *narratio*, (c) *argumentatio*, and (d) *peroratio*, but he also discusses several optional or subordinate moves, including (e) *proemium*, (f) *insinuatio*, (g) *initium*, (h) *digressio*, (i) *transitus*, (j) *amplificatio*, (k) *exempla*, and (l) *recapitulatio*.

18. Mack, *Rhetoric and the NT*, 56–59.

19. D. F. Watson, "Paul's Rhetorical Strategy in 1 Corinthians 15," in *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference*, ed. S. E. Porter and T. H. Olbricht (JSNTSupp 90; 1993), 231–49.

1 Corinthians 15		
1–2	***Exordium***	introduces the topics to be developed in the remainder
3–11	***Narratio***	recites past events to facilitate decisions about future events
12–34	**First *Refutatio-Confirmatio/Probatio***	
12–19	*Refutatio*	denies the "fact" proposed by the opposition
20–28	*Confirmatio*	uses a "complete argument" to amplify the main theme
29–34	*Peroratio*	summarizes the main points and arouses pathos for the case
35–37	**Second *Refutatio-Confirmatio/Probatio***	
35–44a	*Refutatio*	begins with two rhetorical questions of the opponents
44b–49	*Confirmatio*	1st Part—proves with examples based on the Adam vs. Christ
50–57	*Confirmatio*	2nd Part—another "complete argument" proves the theme
58	***Peroratio***	again summarizes and arouses emotion[20]

Insawn Saw's 1993 dissertation[21] agrees with the common understanding that 1 Corinthians 15 is deliberative speech, that Paul sought to persuade the Corinthians to agree with him, and that the issue was primarily a matter of fact: Is there or is there not resurrection of the dead? "Thus Paul sought to prove that there was the resurrection of the dead throughout the chapter."[22] His proposed arrangement includes these steps:

1 Corinthians 15		An Argument for the Resurrection of the Dead
1–2	***Exordium***	preparations for the proof: the shared gospel
3–11	***Narratio***	of the resurrection of Christ
12	***Partitio***	arguments
13–32a	***Probatio***	for the resurrection
32b–34	***Exhortatio***	of the dead
35–49	***Refutatio***	refutation of the difficulties of arguing for the resurrection
50–57	***Peroratio***	final argument based on the necessity of our change
58	***Exhortatio***	conclusion

Saw notes the effective ways Paul built up his own *ethos*, primarily by calling the Corinthians his ἀδελφοί and by citing his own experiences. Similarly, he also impacted the *pathos* of his auditors by arousing them to emotions of anger, fear, pity and shame.

Clinton Johnson Jr.'s 1994 dissertation may be the most extended discussion to date of Paul's rhetorical strategy in 1 Corinthians 15. Specifically, he attempts to show "how the words of the text act to move the implied audience [Paul] constructs from one place to another."[23] Both Paul and "some of the Corinthians," according to Johnson, share a belief in the past resurrection of Christ. What they do not agree on is whether there will be a future resurrection for anyone else.

From a strictly logical standpoint, one simply cannot infer from the resurrection of one person the future resurrection of others. The rhetorical problem Paul faces, then, is constructing the middle term/connection between Christ's resur-

rection and a future embodied resurrection that will compel the 'some' to transfer the adherence they grant to the thesis that Christ is raised to the conclusion that there will be a future bodily resurrection.[24]

Johnson emphasizes that 1 Corinthians 15 is a species of *practical argumentation*. That is, Paul's discussion is not merely a sequence of theological propositions but a skilled piece of persuasion that argues from common assumptions and leads to real-life consequences for Christian praxis. Regrettably, however, Johnson does not explicitly base his analysis of the chapter's structure on the familiar categories of classical rhetoric. Rather, he uses a topical approach to outline the argument:

1 Corinthians 15

1–11	The basis of the argument
12–19	The issue and its consequences
20–28	Firstfruits and warfare
29–34	Futility of action and bad morals
35–49	The "how" of the resurrection
50–58	Transformation, victory, and labor with a purpose

These four proposed reconstructions of Paul's rhetorical outline show that no clear consensus has yet surfaced that adequately accounts for the effectiveness of his logic and argumentation.[25] Clearly there is room for another proposal.

Proposal for a more sophisticated rhetorical strategy

The following proposal maintains that v. 12 provides the key to understanding the strategy of the entire chapter. "If Christ is proclaimed that 'he was aroused from [the] dead ones,'" he asks rhetorically, "how do some of you say that 'there is not a resurrection of dead ones'?" In an unusual but effective fashion, Paul uses a rhetorical question to state his thesis.[26] The obvious rejoinder, of course, is that what "some of you say" is an illogical and illegitimate conclusion.

The crux of the matter, as others have acknowledged, is not a debate about the reality of Christ's resurrection. All parties are apparently agreed on the facts narrated in vv. 3–7/8, which establish the resurrec-

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20. A. C. Thiselton (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000], 1169–1313), replicates Watson's outline with minor modifications.

1 Cor 15	
1–11	***Narratio***
35–49	Second ***Refutatio***
12–19	First ***Refutatio***
50	Second ***Propositio***
20	First ***Propositio***
51–57	Second ***Confirmatio***
21–34	First ***Confirmatio***
58	***Peroratio***

21. Later published as I. Saw, *Paul's Rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 15: An Analysis Utilizing the Theories of Classical Rhetoric* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1995).

22. Saw, 279.

23. C. A. Johnson, Jr., "Resurrection Rhetoric: A Rhetorical Analysis of 1 Corinthians 15" (Th.D. diss., Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, 1994), 18. See also his "Firstfruits and Death's Defeat: Metaphor in Paul's Rhetorical Strategy in 1 Cor 15:20–28," *Word & World* 16 (1996): 456–64.

24. Johnson, "Resurrection Rhetoric," 308.

25. Saw (*Paul's Rhetoric*, 31–63) and Johnson ("Resurrection Rhetoric," 4–18) both review several additional analyses, some of which outline 1 Corinthians 15 in accordance with familiar classical rhetorical terms.

26. W. Wuellner ("Paul as Pastor: the Function of Rhetorical Questions in First Corinthians," in *L'Apôtre Paul: Personnalîté, Style et Conception du Mìnistère*, ed. A. Vanhoye [Leuvenz, 1986], 49–77), observes that "Paul is not so much answering questions as questioning answers" (p. 73)." Unfortunately, Wuellner analyzes *every* rhetorical question in 1 Corinthians *except* 15:12, which is never even mentioned!

tion of Jesus and his post-resurrection appearances. What is at stake is whether any one else, particularly those who believe in and who follow Christ, will also experience a resurrection and life after death. The burden of Paul's argument is to prove that those who deny the future resurrection of Christians are wrong. Note this subtle but important distinction: Paul is not initially arguing *for* the resurrection of believers; rather, he is arguing *against* the denial of their future resurrection.

The burden of Paul's argument is to prove that those who deny the future resurrection of Christians are wrong.

Speaking logically, of course, the results are the same. To prove A, or to disprove not-A, amounts to the same conclusion; in either case, A stands affirmed. But *rhetorically* the practical effects of the two approaches can be strikingly different. If Paul had said, "I will prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that there will be a future resurrection for us who are Christ's people," when he had concluded it would have been all too easy for his auditors to nod their heads in agreement, yawn, and listen for the next reading. But because he in effect says, "I will prove that those who deny the resurrection are wrong," he virtually compels his auditors to draw the positive conclusion for themselves. "If those who deny the resurrection are wrong," they are forced to admit, "then there must be a future resurrection for us." The rhetorical impact of refuting the negative may in this case be stronger and more effective than merely affirming the positive.

Accordingly, the resurrection treatise may be structured according to the outline on the following page.

To appreciate more fully Paul's rhetorical logic, several items need additional comment. First, considerations of vocabulary and translation: Nuances in the terminology related to death and resurrection are not replicated as easily in English as in Greek. Paul uses both ἀποθνῄσκω / θνῄσκω / θανατάω / θανατός / θνητός ("to die, be dead," "death," "mortal") and νεκρόω / νεκρός ("to kill, make dead," "dead"), as well as his favorite euphemism, κοιμάομαι ("to sleep, fall asleep"). Likewise, he uses two terms for the reversal of death—ἐγείρω ("to wake, arouse, raise") and ἀνίστημι / ἀνάστασις ("to raise up," "resurrection")—as well as ζῳοποιέω ("to make alive").

In the context of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul uses the "fall asleep" (κοιμάομαι) metaphor only to refer to Christians who have died (15:6, 20, 51). He uses the θανα- / θνη- stem to refer to a person's cessation of life (15:3, 22, 31) and to the power of death, Death-with-a-capital-D (15:21, 26, 53–56). But he uses νεκρός to refer to what remains after a person has died, that is, a "dead body" or "corpse" (15:12–21, 29, 32, 35). (One difficulty with translating νεκρός as "corpse" is the fact that another New Testament term, πτῶμα, is almost a technical term for "corpse," cf. Mark 15:45.)

Furthermore, Paul uses "awaken" or "arouse" or "raise" (ἐγείρω) first in reference to the past for Christ (1:4, 12–17, 20) and then in reference to the future for Chris-

tians (15:16, 29, 32). But he uses "resurrection" (ἀνάστασις) only in reference to the general principle of the "resurrection of dead ones" (15:12–13, 42).

1 Corinthians 15		A Refutation of the Denial of the Resurrection of the Dead
1–2	***Exordium***	*Introduction*
	appeal	Remember the Gospel I preached and you received.
3–11	***Narratio***	*Statement of the facts*
3–8	narration	Christ rose from the dead and was seen by many people.
9–11	example	I [Paul] was the last to whom Christ appeared.
12	***Propositio***	*Thesis expressed in negative terms*
	question	If Christ rose, how can there be "no resurrection"?
13–34	***Probatio***	*Demonstration of proofs*
13–19	syllogism	If Christ were not raised, our religion and life are futile and pitiful.
20–25	comparison	As all died "in Adam," so all "in Christ" will be raised.
26–28	citation	At Christ's coming, "death" will be the last enemy to be destroyed.
29–34	examples	You would not "baptize for the dead" and I would not risk my life if we didn't believe in a resurrection.
35–49	***Refutatio***	*Refutation of potential objections*
35–38	diatribe	It is foolish to try to figure out what kind of body we will have after the resurrection.
39–41	analogy	We will be "sown terrestrial" and "raised heavenly."
42–44a	comparison	What is sown perishable, dishonored, weak and "ensouled" will be raised imperishable, glorious, powerful and "inspirited."
44b–45	citation	The "first Adam" was physical and earthily;
46–49	comparison	the "second Adam" is spiritual and heavenly, and we are in his image.
50–57	***Peroratio***	*Conclusion expressed in positive terms*
50–53	amplification	At the end, God will change us; we will put on immortality.
54–57	citation	Then death, sin and law will be overcome through Christ.
58	***Exhortatio***	*Final appeal*
	exhortation	So keep on working confidently.

Consequently, an overly literal translation of the thesis and the first proof (15:12–19) would look like this:

[12] If Christ is proclaimed that "he was raised" from [the realm of the] dead ones, how do some of you say that "there is not a resurrection of dead ones"? [13] If there is no resurrection of dead ones, neither was Christ raised. [14] If Christ was not raised, then our proclamation, too, is vain; vain also [is] your belief. [15] We are recognized as false witnesses, since we witnessed about God that "he raised the Christ," whom he did not raise, if [it is] such [that] "dead ones are not raised." [16] For if dead ones are not raised, neither was Christ raised. [17] If Christ was not raised–your belief [being] worthless–you are still in your sins. [18] And consequently those asleep in Christ are lost. [19] If only in this life we are hopers in Christ, we are of all people most pitiful.

Second, the precise nature of what it is that "some" of the Corinthians deny is not entirely clear. Did they deny the possibility of any future existence after death? Did they affirm that the resurrection has already occurred, perhaps at baptism? Did they maintain that any future life after death pertains only to the "soul," not to the "body"? The fact that Paul's *refutatio* (15:35–49) goes to such lengths to affirm a *bodily* resurrection, of whatever sort, suggests that the chief point of contention for "some" had to do with what happens after a "body" (σῶμα) dies and the person becomes a "dead one," a "corpse" (νεκρός).[27]

People in the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day held an almost bewildering variety of views about what could or could not happen after death. Some gave credence to stories about resuscitated bodies; some imagined the souls of the dead existing as shades in the underworld; some held to the extinction of both soul and body. But for all educated inhabitants of the Roman Empire, one point was clear: any notion of a resurrection of the body would have been not only ridiculous but objectionable on philosophical grounds.[28] If the self-styled "wise" members of the Corinthian community (cf. 1:18–31) are identical with the "some of you" with whom Paul is dialoguing (15:12), the argument about the resurrection of bodies is not just about hopes for life after death. It is also about the class divisions within the Corinthian church.

According to a common line of Greek thought, later adopted by the Gnostics, the body (σῶμα) is the prison of the soul (ψυχή); at death the soul shakes off the confining clothing of the body and in a "naked" state (γυμνός) enjoys eternal life and freedom. Paul stands that logic on its head. In his analogy of bodies and seeds, it is the seed that is "naked" (15:37), not the soul. Furthermore, "soul" is associated with the body that is "sown" or buried; the body that is raised, on the other hand, is associated with "spirit" (15:44). This results in an antithesis between the earthly "soul-directed body" (σῶμα ψυχικόν) and the heavenly "spirit-directed body" (σῶμα πνευματικόν). (The NRSV translation of the former as a "physical body" is misleading.)

The concept of a "spiritual body," of course, is an oxymoron, which Paul apparently uses effectively to underscore the radical eschatological nature of his resurrection teaching. This explains why "flesh and blood" (σὰρξ καὶ αἷμα, 15:50) are not able to "inherit" (κληρονομέω) God's kingdom. To inherit something implies a

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27. See *inter alios* J. S. Vos, "Argumentation und Situation im 1 Kor. 15," *NovT* 41 (1999): 313–33.

28. D. B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale, 1995), 114, avers that "whatever one believed about life after death, promises of resurrected bodies were not to be given any credence. Such gullibility was reserved for the uneducated—that is, for the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Empire."

natural order of things, whereby one receives something as a matter of course. What is required for a resurrection, however, is not the normal process of inheriting but a radical moment of alteration and changing (ἀλλάσσω, 15:51).

Third, the conceptual context of Paul's argument must be clarified. He was not arguing in a general way about the possibility or likelihood that all human beings will experience a resurrection from the state of death. Rather, he was more of a narrator than a philosopher. That is, he was not so much concerned to establish a belief in life after death as a kind of universal truth as he was to insist that for those who are "in Christ" there will be a raising of *their* bodies, a resurrection of *their* corpses. In other words, the story of Christ will be replicated in the stories of those who belong to him: both move toward resurrection.

Consequently, Paul's hope for resurrection is anchored in his eschatological perspective: everything is moving toward an ultimate goal, in which God is the consummation (15:20–28). This eschatological perspective also accounts for the way he describes the conclusion of the story in apocalyptic terms (15:50–56): This is all a "mystery," which will be signaled by trumpet blasts and will result in the ultimate victory over Death. The point is that "immortality" (ἀθανασία, literally "nondeadness") will be predicated of believers' bodies *after* the resurrection, when all are to be "changed" (ἀλλαγήσομαι). By implication, immortality is thus not a natural quality of souls, which enables souls to exist even after death.[29]

To summarize, the rhetorical impact of 1 Corinthians 15 derives from the way it follows the conventional strategy of a Greco-Roman deliberative treatise or speech. After narrating the events of Christ's resurrection, about which both Paul and "all" of the Corinthians are in agreement, he uses a rhetorical question to establish his thesis, namely, that "some" who deny the possibility of a resurrection of dead people are wrong. This is followed by a series of proofs: A syllogistic argument shows that such a denial leads to a pitiful

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29. In addition to the commentaries and studies cited previously, the following studies offer valuable insights into the content of 1 Corinthians 15: M. E. Dahl, *The Resurrection of the Body: A Study of I Corinthians 15*, SBT (London: SCM Press, 1962), 74–89; B. A. Pearson, *The* Pneumatikos-Psychikos *Terminology in 1 Corinthians, a Study in the Theology of the Corinthian Opponents of Paul and Its Relation to Gnosticism*, SBLDS 12 (Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973); H. C. C. Cavalin, *Life After Death: Paul's Argument for the Resurrection of the Dead in I Cor 15: Part I, An Enquiry into the Jewish Background* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1974); E. H. Pagels, "'The Mystery of the Resurrection': A Gnostic Reading of 1 Corinthians 15," *JBL* 93 (1974): 276–88; C. H. Talbert, "The Human Transformation Yet to Come," in *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 96–104; J. N. Vorster, "Resurrection Faith in 1 Cor 15," *Neotestamentica* 23 (1989): 287–307; A. C. Wire, "Women Risen to New Life in Christ," chap. 8 in *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 159–80; J. Moiser, "1 Corinthians 15," *IBS* 14 (1992): 10–30; B. Witherington III, "Rising to the Occasion," in *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 291–312; J. Holleman, *Resurrection and Parousia: A Traditio-Historical Study of Paul's Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15*, NovTSup 84, ed. C. K. Barrett (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996); S. Brodeur, *The Holy Spirit's Agency in the Resurrection of the Dead: An Exegetico-Theological Study of 1 Corinthians 15, 44b–49 and Romans 8, 9–13* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1996); R. B.

predicament for all concerned; a comparison between Adam who brings death and Christ who brings life shows that Christ's rising is the "firstfruits" for all his people; a citation of Ps 8:6 supports the contention that death will be the last enemy destroyed by Christ; and a pair of *ad hominem* examples suggest that the Corinthians' vicarious baptisms[30] and Paul's own risk taking would be pointless without the prospect of resurrection.

At that point the argument turns into a refutation of a potential objection. In the style of a diatribe Paul rebukes an imaginary opponent who implies that one cannot define the kind of bodies which resurrected dead people would have. An analogy from nature compares seeds that are sown to bodies that are buried; in both cases an "earthly sowing" is followed by a "heavenly raising." An extended comparison asserts that "ensouled" bodies will be raised as "inspirited" bodies, and a contrived citation of Gen 2:7 continues the comparison to affirm that those who bear the image of the "second man" who is spiritual and heavenly are no longer in the realm of the "first man" who was merely "ensouled" and earthly.

The conclusion is a positive argument, based on conflated citations of Isa 25:8 and Hos 13:14, that uses the images of apocalyptic mysteries to affirm that in the end those who are in Christ will be changed and will put on immortality, and the victory will be Christ's. So the final exhortation is an appeal for the auditors to remain faithful in "the work of the Lord."

The continuing rhetorical impact of 1 Corinthans 15

No additional evidence exists to determine whether Paul's rhetorical strategy worked. Both he and those who are merely identified as "some of you" apparently were in agreement in asserting that Christ had been "raised on the third day" after he had died. Some of his auditors, however, did not share his belief that those who are in Christ will also experience a resurrection at some point in the future after they have died. His goal, then, was to argue in such a way that they would change their minds and agree with his belief. Whether his strategy was successful remains undetermined.

However, the fact that his resurrection treatise was retained as part of the redaction of his correspondence indicates that Paul's rhetoric was persuasive, at least to some members of the Corinthian community. (In fact, if 2 Corinthians 5—with its language about "putting off this earthly tent" in order to "put on the heavenly building"—is to some degree a corrective to the way the Corinthians understood 1 Corinthians 15, Paul may have been *too* persua-

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Hays, "The Resurrection of the Body," in *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, ed. J. L. Mays (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 252–82; S. M. Lewis, *"So That God May Be All in All": The Apocalyptic Message of 1 Corinthians 15,12–34* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1998); R. A. Horsley, "Argument(s) for the Resurrection," in *1 Corinthians*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 197–220; and W. Schrage, "Die Auferweckung Jesus Christi und der Toten 15,1–58," chap. 6 in *Der Erste Brief an die Korinther*, EKKNT (Düsseldorf: Benzinger/ Neukirchener, 2001) 4:3–421; P. Lampe, "Paul's Concept of a Spiritual Body," in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, ed. T. Peters et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 103–14; N. T. Wright, "Resurrection in Paul," part 2 in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 207–398.

30. R. E. DeMaris, "Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:20): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology," *JBL* 114 (1995): 661–82; and J. R. White, "'Baptized on account of the Dead': The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:29 in its Context," *JBL* 116 (1997): 487–99.

sive!)[31] Furthermore, the fact that these heavily redacted Pauline epistles were included within the canonical collection of Christian scriptures indicates that his resurrection beliefs have validity beyond the immediate situation in Corinth that occasioned the apostle's response. The question is whether Paul's arguments remain persuasive today.

On the one hand, because portions of 1 Corinthians 15 continue to be quoted both at funerals and at Easter celebrations one may assume that contemporary communities still resonate with Paul's words and find them helpful. These quotations are usually of the sections that affirm the resurrection, whether of Christ himself or of Christians in general, or describe the nature of the believers' resurrection bodies, or anticipate the eschatological victory over death. They are quoted because they support and affirm conventional hopes for life after death.

On the other hand, it is not clear that Paul's rhetoric would persuade anyone who did not already agree both with his premise (namely, that Christ was raised) and with his conclusion (namely, that Christians will also be raised). In today's modern world rigorous historical research rightly questions whether Jesus' purported resurrection can be in any sense considered a *factum* in history. Likewise, more sophisticated biomedical research into cell structure, DNA and the human genome, and the electrochemical workings of the human brain questions whether it makes any sense to imagine that the *matériel* of a physical human body could ever be made alive again after heart, lung, and brain functions have ceased. If human personality is a function of the thought processes encoded in the neurons of the brain, in what sense can it reasonably be said that a "person" somehow survives the cessation of life, the experience of death? And in what sense could such a survived or revived personality be "embodied"?[32] The likelihood that Paul's rhetoric could be persuasive in such a context is no doubt minimal.

Nevertheless, it may be that Paul's rhetorical strategy can still be persuasive on another level. To the degree that one can use descriptive language in an "illogical" yet compelling way to express personal resolve or commitment, Paul's resurrection language may be the most effective way of expressing one's determination to live *as if* Christ has been raised and *as if* his

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31. My thanks to Richard I. Pervo for drawing my attention to this possibility and for offering helpful suggestions after reading an earlier draft of this study. See also J. Gillman, "A Thematic Comparison: 1 Cor 15:50–57 and 2 Cor 5:1–5," *JBL* (1988): 439–54.

32. Lampe ("Paul's Concept," *Resurrection*, 105) summarizes the issue appropriately from the theological side: ". . . God's salvation, including the raising of the dead, grasps more than just parts of a human being, than just a soul or a spirit. It grasps the entire person and subjects this person to a transforming and newly creating act called 'resurrection.' Consequently, the resurrected person will have a bodily existence." Peters ("Resurrection: The Conceptual Challenge," *Resurrection*, 307–8) clarifies the issue from the scientific side: "This theological commitment to a resurrected body appears to be dissonant with scientific understandings of present embodiment. This is especially the case for contemporary scientists who reduce all that we as persons are to our biological substrate. Molecular biologist Francis Crick, famed for his role in the discovery of the double helix structure of DNA, flies the flag of reductionism: 'You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, you sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules'" (*The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* [New York: Scribner's, 1994], 3).

people can anticipate their own resurrection(s). The fact that Paul used apocalyptic analogies to discuss this subject indicates that straightforward scientific description is not adequate to the task. Thus, resurrected bodies will be like seeds sown and



sprouting, only more so, and with a difference. In the present condition human bodies are inferior, earthly, physical, etc.; in the eschatological transformation they will be superior, heavenly, spiritual, etc. As a way of affirming both the continuity between life in the here-and-now and life in the hereafter, as well as the radical difference between the two states, resurrection-of-the-body language may be the best alternative available.

Furthermore, because Paul structures his entire argument within an existential narrative context (rather than framing it in philosophical ontological terms), and because he limits his focus to the future of those people who are "in Christ" (rather than discussing the after-death fate of all people in general), his rhetoric remains persuasive to those who at some level share his affection for Christ and his commitment to the radical impact of the gospel. The result is that Paul's argument may not be "persuasive" in the sense that it would compel nonbelievers to change their opinion and to adopt a posture of faith. Nevertheless, his discussion may serve to inform and support those who are inclined to affirm or who want to believe in the hope of life after death. In this case, his treatise would serve to emphasize the "embodied" character of that future life and thereby give such hope a greater degree of substance.

Hermeneutical postscript

This study is a project inspired by the 2001–2002 Pastor-Theologian Program of the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton. The theme for the year's discussions was a "Theological Reading of Scripture—Especially Its Witness to the Resurrection." The choice of 1 Corinthians 15, the only chapter in the Christian Scriptures that discusses the resurrection at significant length, is obvious. The choice of a *rhetorical* analysis of this chapter (rather than an overtly *theological* analysis, for example) invites an explanation.

The theme was occasioned by what some would call a "crisis of faith in the contemporary church," which in large part is due to a significant loss of biblical literacy, both within the church as well as throughout our so-called post-Christian and postmodern society. One imagines that in previous generations Americans generally had a working knowledge of the narrative flow of the Bible. They may not have believed the stories or even held to traditional doctrinal systems, but by and large they knew the Scriptures' leading characters and many of the key stories.

Conventional wisdom has it that members of the Baby Boomer generation (born roughly between 1945 and 1965) abandoned the churches of their parents' Builder

generation (born before 1945), although they retained a memory of the church and its traditions. However, the Boomers' children, popularly called the Baby Busters (born between 1965 and 1985), have grown up without significant involvement in the church and consequently have little memory of the church's beliefs or its biblical heritage. No one realistically expects conditions to improve for the emerging Bridge generation (born between 1985 and 2005). As a result we no longer possess the two key ingredients necessary for forming a cohesive society, namely, a heritage of stories and songs we all share in common.

Furthermore, within the span of fifty years, from the end of the World Wars to the turn of the new century, academic biblical studies themselves have undergone a significant evolution. Using the techniques of source criticism and form criticism, historical-critical scholarship analyzed biblical pericopes and looked *through* them to reconstruct the history of the traditions that lay behind the canonical documents. In reaction, the synthesizing approaches of the 1960s and 1970s used redaction-critical analysis to bring the focus back onto the broader scope and the theological impact of the scriptural documents. Within the past twenty years the techniques of narrative criticism and rhetorical criticism have led to a true literary-critical brand of scholarship that allows us to focus on the aesthetic world created by the texts themselves. Such literary analysis, especially the subspecies known as reader-response criticism, holds great promise for helping contemporary Americans recapture the vision that comes from a sympathetic reading of the Bible.

Furthermore, understanding how narratives and rhetorical arguments work helps us better appreciate how the biblical documents function in an authoritative way in the life of the church. A good story well told has an inherent power for capturing an auditor's imagination and taking hold in one's life. Similarly, the logic in a well-crafted discourse has the innate capacity to affect one's way of thinking. In the present case, paying closer attention to the rhetorical strategy of the argument in 1 Corinthians 15 helps us understand how this biblical treatise continues to instil in us the assurance of a bodily resurrection.

Joseph Klausner, Israel, and Jesus

David Fox Sandmel
K.A.M. Isaiah Israel Congregation, Chicago
Crown-Ryan Professor of Jewish Studies, CTU
rabbisandmel@kamii.org

This essay focuses on the work of a Jewish scholar of Christianity, Joseph Klausner, who did his work at the beginning of the twentieth century. More broadly, it examines what I consider to be the symbiotic relationship between New Testament scholarship, or, more precisely, scholarship about Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity, and Jewish-Christian relations.

Beginning with the Enlightenment, many scholars and theologians, both Jewish and Christian, have analyzed Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. Jewish attitudes to Christianity, though by no means totally ignored, have received less attention. One explanation for this imbalance is the now widely shared view that the historical realities of the relationship between Jews and Christians have been tragic. This realization has resulted in the desire on the part of both Jews and Christians to study and explain the past and, for some, also to draw moral, religious, social, and political lessons from it.

Because Christians have, for most of this history, been the oppressors and Jews the oppressed, the attitudes of Christians that led to this oppression have been of greater interest for both Jews and Christians than have the attitudes of Jews toward Christianity. Thus, in the words of a Christian colleague of mine, much of contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue has been about "getting Christians to clean up their mess," with much less attention being paid to the Jewish "side" of the dialogue. Similarly, Jews and Judaism have always been significant for Christian theology in terms of the new covenant, supercessionism, and the continued refusal of Jews to accept Christianity. The reconsideration of these questions in the wake of the Sho'a, the Holocaust, has given rise to post-Holocaust Christian theology, a phenomenon that has had, and continues to have, significant impact on much of the Christian world. In comparison, while it is a gross oversimplification, for Judaism Christianity is merely another gentile religion with no special theological significance. There is specific terminology for Christian attitudes toward Judaism: anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism (often, but not always, qualified with the adjective "Christian"). We also have, in the middle ages, the phenomenon of "Christian Hebraists." For none of these is there a common term or a recognized Jewish counterpoint. In terms of bibliography, the sheer number of books and articles on Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism is far greater than the reverse.

It seems to me that the study of Jewish attitudes toward Christianity can provide a novel perspective on the complicated issue of Jewish identity and self-definition in the modern era. It also can shed light on the Jewish side of Jewish-Christian relations.

Since Emancipation, Jews who do not actively isolate themselves from Western society[1] have had to construct a sense of self that in some way responds to the implicit—and occasionally explicit—challenges of being a Jew in an essentially Christian world.[2] Jewish constructions of Jesus can be particularly fruitful because of the liminal nature of the figure of Jesus for Jews. As a Jewish individual who became the Christ, Jesus straddles the boundary between Judaism and Christianity. From the Jewish perspective, then, he is both "ours" and "not ours." Thus, it is possible for Jesus to serve, in the words of Susannah Heschel, as a "theological transvestite." By dressing Jesus up in intellectual, historical, theological, or polemical "drag" a Jew can define Jesus in his or her own terms.[3] Then, through this newly "accoutered" Jesus, the Jew can locate himself or herself in relation to the broader society and at the same time challenge the dominant Christian view of Jews and Judaism.

Similarly, Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus has suggested, "Our concrete social contexts not only shape the content and arguments of Jewish scholarship on the New Testament but also provide an orientation to *choose* (by means of our emphases and arguments) to transform these very concrete social contexts in turn."[4]

It is in this light that I view my current study of Joseph Klausner's construction of Jesus and early Christianity. Klausner was born near Vilna in 1874 and began his

1. It is questionable the extent to which any group can truly isolate itself from the rest of the world. A study of attitudes to Jesus and Christianity among separatist or fundamentalist Jewish groups, along the lines of Israel Bartal's study of Orthodox historiography, is warranted. Views of Jesus and Christianity in Israel, where Jews are the majority culture, are also deserving of study; see Pinchas Lapide's brief and somewhat dated *Israelis, Jews and Jesus*, trans. Peter Heinegg (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., [1976] 1979).

2. Some would argue that society is becoming increasingly secular, with both Judaism and Christianity becoming increasingly marginalized. It may be that this trend itself has provided the "historical moment" for the kind of analysis I attempt in this paper.

3. Christians do this as well.

4. See Susannah Heschel, "Jesus as a Theological Transvestite," in *Judaism Since Gender*, ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (New York: Routledge, 1997) 188–99, and "A Jewish Ideological Perspective on the Study of Christian Scripture" by Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, *Jewish Social Studies* 4:1, 121–52. Heschel attempts to apply some of the lessons of feminist theory and queer theory to Jewish portraits of Jesus. Brumberg-Kraus uses the work of Clifford Geertz to suggest an analytical approach to Jewish scholarship on Christian origins. These articles represent, I believe, the first attempts to address some of the broader issues involved in the Jewish scholarly study of Jesus and early Christianity.

For a more complete study of an individual Jewish scholar, see Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Geiger (1810–1874) was an early leader of German Reform Judaism. His work on early Christianity was part of his larger effort to overcome the anti-Judaism that characterized German New Testament studies and to provide support for the struggle against the religious and cultural objections to Jewish civil equality. He also wanted to give Jews "an explanation of Christianity that would foster respect for it among Jews without encouraging abandonment of Judaism or conversion." By defining Jesus as a figure within Judaism rather than as the founder of a new religion, Geiger sought to empower his co-religionists by providing them with a view of Judaism as "the original, true religion, from which Christianity was a deviant derivative." This portrayal of Jesus and Christianity, not surprisingly, caused quite a storm in Christian theological and scholarly circles. It is an important episode in the history of both scholarship and Jewish-Christian relations.

education in a traditional Jewish *heder,* or schoolhouse. While still young, he moved to Odessa, where he received an "enlightened" modern education and was part of the vibrant Zionist and Hebraic intellectual culture then centered in that city.[5] He was particularly committed to the revitalization of Hebrew as a modern, spoken language. He received his Ph.D. in 1902 from the University of Heidelberg and gained a reputation as a literary critic, historian, Zionist ideologue, and ardent Hebraist. He made *aliyah* to Palestine in 1919 and joined the faculty of the Hebrew University at its inauguration in 1925. As both a scholar and a popular commentator and essayist, Klausner was an important public figure in the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine under the British Mandate) and, subsequently, as a venerated senior citizen, in the new state of Israel. His politics were closely aligned with the right-wing nationalism of Ze'ev Jabotinsky and the Revisionists (the ideological ancestors of today's Likud); he was therefore on the extreme edge of the political minority. His feisty and confrontational personal style contributed to a constant atmosphere of controversy and conflict that alienated some, especially at the Hebrew University, but probably served to increase interest in his work among the general reading public. His books and articles were popular, and his courses at the Hebrew University were often the best attended. His writing has influenced not only the history of scholarship on Judaism and Christianity in the Greco-Roman world but also the emerging Israeli "collective consciousness."[6]

Among his many areas of interest, Klausner's true love was the history of the Second Temple period. This was by no means merely a matter of intellectual curiosity. He found in this period, and especially in the Hasmonean dynasty, a golden age of Jewish independence that could serve as a model and inspiration for his own generation and its quest for national "resurrection and redemption." So, for example, he concludes an article on "Jewish Religion in the times of the Hasmoneans" with the following words:

> But with the striking of roots in the land of our birth, in the state of Israel, which is in the process of occurring before our eyes, we are obligated to return to those same spiritual plants that flourished on healthy Jewish soil in the days of independence of the kings of the Hasmoneans. Then the old-new Israelite faith will grow and flower and thrive and it will bring honor to the people Israel, a blessing to the land of Israel, and [serve as an] example for the sons of Shem, whose earliest ancestors were an example for us, and will [bring us great distinction] among all the peoples of Europe, our students and our teachers as one.[7]

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5. See Steven Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985).

6. In this regard, see Nachman Ben Yehuda, *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory Making in Israel* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

7. "Ha-emunah hayehudit biymei ha-hasmonaim" [The Jewish Faith in the Days of the Hasmoneans], in *Biymei Bayit Sheni* (Jerusalem: Hotzaat "Mada," 1954), 196–229. Other examples are "Zehu hag ha-hashmonaim lanu kayom" [Thus is the Festival of the Hasmoneans to us today], *Herut* 23 Kislev, 5719, 3, and "Keyzad hafkhu ha-hasmonai-im et eretz yehuda l'eretz yisrael" [How the Hasmoneans turned the Land of Judah in to the Land of Israel], *Ha-Mashkif* 68 (April 24, 1939); "Yannai hamelech—hakovesh ha-gadol me-bet hasmonai" in *Ma-asaf Sofrei eretz yisrael l'sifrut ul'divrei mahshava* [Journal of Authors of the Land of Israel for Literature and Thought], ed. A. A. Kabak and A. Shteinman (Tel Aviv: ha-Mif'al ha-'atsmi shel Agudat ha-sofrim ha-'Ivrim be-Erets-Yisra'el be-hishtatfut "Keren ha-tarbut" be-Amerikah, 1939) 61–73.

Klausner repeatedly claimed to be an objective historian whose scholarship was free of bias. Even in his day, however, the strong nationalistic bent of his scholarship was recognized and criticized, as was the originality of the scholarship itself. Klausner bristled at being called a "popularizer," a charge his academic critics used to suggest that his writing was shallow. However, he states over and over that the primary goal of his work is to educate the Jewish people.[8] He even defended his combination of scholarship and public activity by comparing himself to Jewish intellectual heroes such as Saadya Goan, Maimonides, Judah Ha-Levi, and Moses Mendelssohn, who, like Klausner, did not isolate themselves in ivory towers.[9]

In order to understand Klausner's view of history, including Christianity, we should start with the phrase *yahadut v'enoshiuyut* —Judaism and humanism—that was his motto and represents his own unique view of Jewish identity. It was worked into the iron of the gate of his home in Talpiyot and was the title of a collection of essays in which he explicated his Jewish "world-view." "Judaism and humanism" represents the combination of the best of Jewish (that is, moral and religious) culture with Greek aesthetic and scientific culture. Greece was polytheistic and therefore created a philosophy that considered nature and humanity as one entity; it focused on the external, on explaining and manipulating the world. The Jews, because of their ardent monotheism, focused on the internal and created an ethical philosophy that includes only humanity and its relationship to God and the universe. Though Klausner sees both as essential, complementary elements of Western culture and highly values the Greek contributions, implicit in this dichotomy is a belief in the moral superiority of Judaism as well as its ultimate significance.[10] Judaism and humanism are able to coexist because Judaism has always been open to change and to learning from other peoples and cultures. It can absorb art and science as long as there is no contradiction of the foundational values of Judaism as found in the Tanakh (the Hebrew Old Testament), especially in the Prophets, whom Klausner credits with developing the vision of the Messianic era, which he consid-

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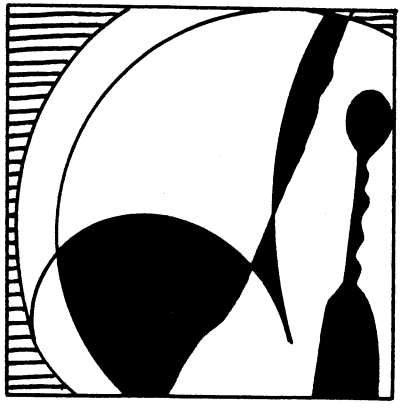
8. *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times and Teaching*, trans. Herbert Danby (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., [1922] 1925), is a "book in Hebrew for Hebrews . . . [to fill] a blank page (from the point of view of Hebrew writers) in the History of Israel which has so far been written upon almost solely by Christians" (p. 10). *The Messianic Idea in Israel from Its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah*, trans. William F. Stinespring (New York: Macmillan, [1927] 1955), was written to put "before our minds the future of our Jewish people and of all humanity; for Messianism, whose origin is from the ancient past, is the summation of the most exalted hopes for a shining future, which our greatest and most venerated dreamers await" (p. 6). In the introduction to *From Jesus to Paul*, trans. William F. Stinespring (New York: Macmillan, [1939] 1943), written after the beginning of World War II, Klausner states that if the Jews had accepted Paul's religion 1,900 years ago there would be no Jews and Jewish problem. Given all that the Jews have suffered, why had they not abandoned their Torah and the nationhood? The book strives to answer this question, "to strengthen the desire for complete redemption" and to answer a "burning question as old as both the Israelite exile and Christianity" (p. viii in the Hebrew; this passage is omitted from the English translation).

9. *Darki likerat ha-techiyah v'hage-ulah* [My path toward resurrection and redemption] (Jerusalem: Hotzaat "Mada," 1955) 2:164.

10. See "Yehuda ve-yavan, shenei hafachim?" [Judah and Greece: two opposites?] in *Yahadut ve-enoshiyut*, 2 vols., 4th ed. (Jerusalem: Hotzaat "Mada" Ltd., 1955), 1:214–30.

ered the great original Hebrew idea and Israel's gift to the world.

For many Jews, Zionism was a kind of secular Messianism promising national revival for the Jews in their ancestral homeland. For Klausner, Zionism was ultimately not just about Jewish self-determination. Rather, a renewed Jewish nation, reestablished in Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel) and restored to its full cultural power, would



lead the rest of the world to value and to live by the eternal Jewish/humanistic values embodied in the Messianic Idea, thus helping all humanity to move toward the Messianic Era.

As both a historian of the Second Temple period and as a Zionist seeking to redefine the Jew and establish this new Jew's proper place in the world, Klausner was naturally interested in Jesus and early Christianity. Indeed, his reputation in the non–Hebrew-reading world, his international reputation, is based almost entirely on the three books that were translated into European languages. Two of these, *Jesus of Nazareth* and *From Jesus to Paul*, focus specifically on early Christianity. The third, *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, a study of Jewish messianism, is closely related to the other two.

For the Jewish community, which had a tradition of never pronouncing Jesus' name (referring to him as *oto ha'ish*, "that man") and which considered the very act of reading the New Testament idolatrous, the production of books in Hebrew about Jesus and Paul was a radical step. But Klausner had impeccable Jewish credentials. He was a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he had a German Ph.D., he was a committed Zionist and Hebraist, and he was ritually observant. While other Jewish scholars before Klausner had dealt with Jesus, most of that work was in German or English. Some of it was buried in multivolume histories or in journals, and some of the authors (especially reformers like Geiger or Montefiore) were suspect in the eyes of both nationalists and traditionalists. Klausner is the first credible Jewish scholar to have put the modern critical (Jewish) study of Jesus before a wide Jewish audience. It marked, if not a turning point, at least a milestone in the modern engagement of Jews with the Christian world and provided the Jewish study of Jesus with, if you will, a sort of *hechsher* (made it kosher).

So where do Jesus and Christianity fit into Klausner's historical and nationalist agenda? I think that in order to liberate the Jews from the effects of the *galut* (extended exile) and establish a revitalized, authentic Jewish culture, Klausner had to confront the numerical success of Christianity and refute the claim that Christianity lies at the heart of Western, European civilization. So, using the tools of European objective scholarship, Klausner constructs the following portrait of early Christianity.

Jesus was a Jew who preached the purest form of Jewish morality, yet there was nothing original in Jesus' teaching and

nothing that was not fully consistent with first-century Judaism.[11] Furthermore, Jesus was a Pharisee, and therefore what he taught is essentially consistent with rabbinic tradition, that is, with normative Judaism. Jesus' major failing or weakness is that his extreme morality eclipsed the national aspect of Judaism, thus his vision is flawed or incomplete. Turning the other cheek, giving up one's possessions, and the like make uplifting ethical sermons but do not form a practical foundation on which to build a society that works in the real world. Judaism, on the other hand, especially the renewed Judaism Klausner envisioned, is such a religion.

Paul is responsible for translating Jesus and Jesus' teaching into a form that was comprehensible to the masses of Gentiles by combining it with pagan and Hellenistic elements with which they were familiar and comfortable. This version of Jesus' expression of Jewish values further distorted the purity of the Jewish vision. Unintentionally, however, it also served the useful purpose of spreading Jewish monotheism in general as well as that great Jewish cultural creation, the Tanakh, with its prophetic morality and its great messianic idea, to the world.

Klausner argues that were it not for Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Islam, Judaism would not have survived at all.

> Only in a place where the Hebrew Old Testament, in its original form and in translations, is recognized—alongside the New Testament and the Koran—as a great and influential religious book; or in a place where the great Jewish cultural influence of the "Book of Books" is a third part of total culture alongside the influence of Greece and Rome—only in such a place can Judaism survive as a religio-national unit, to develop its internal life and also to influence the outside world. In a place where the Old Testament is not a recognized and influential cultural force, there Judaism is not revealed as a power to itself and to others, and it steadily wastes away or else "vegetates" without revelatory or creative power.[12]

Once a new and free Judaism is resurrected/renewed (he uses both words) in its own land, the great messianic idea of human progress will be realized, and through Israel the entire world will be redeemed, though in a sort of evolutionary rather than supernatural way. Judaism will be a "light to the nations" and by example and instruction will lead humanity toward the world to come.

It seems to me that Klausner has, in a sense, co-opted the death and salvific resurrection of Jesus—the Christian myth—and replaced it with the "death" and "resurrection" of the nation of Israel. Israel dies, or, more precisely, is put to death by Rome (the same folks who executed Jesus!) with the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., and its "body" is placed in the "cave of burial" that is the Diaspora.[13] There, unable to live full national life because of oppression and lack of political and territorial independence, the Jewish people wait for 1,900 years. Zionism gives the Jews the power to roll back the rock of the *galut* and "rise" to a new life in its new land, through which salvation is brought to the world.

Just as Christianity portrayed the covenant with the Jews as temporal and having served its purpose because the law was ultimately unable to lead to salvation, Klausner sees the success of Christianity as temporal because its distorted teaching is

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11. "*Jesus of Nazareth* [in contrast to Christianity], however, was a product of Palestine alone, a product of Judaism unaffected by any foreign admixture. There were many Gentiles in Galilee, but Jesus was in no way influenced by them." Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 363.

12. Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 606.

13. Or better, in 135 with the defeat of Bar Kochba at Beitar.

Judaism provides the moral and ethical core and especially the messianic idea of progress that holds such hope not just for Jews but for all of humanity.

unworkable in the real world. Christianity has served its purpose by providing an environment in which Judaism could survive and by preparing the world to receive the word the new/old people in its new/old land will send forth from Jerusalem. If Christianity portrays the Jews as scorning and rejecting Jesus (as an incarnation of the Logos), Klausner portrays Christianity as scorning and rejecting (crucifying?) the Jews, in whom the true Logos, the Jewish Idea of Messianism, is incarnated.

This inversion of the Christian myth is not explicit in Klausner's work. But he is very clear about the superiority of Judaism to Christianity. His books on Jesus and on Paul end with chapters titled, respectively, "What is Jesus to the Jews?" and "What is Paul to the Jews?" In these chapters and in numerous other essays Klausner rejects the teachings of both Jesus and Paul *in toto* and even more so what was done to their teachings by subsequent generations. At the same time he recognizes in each "lofty ideas" worthy of (or, better, identical with) the best that is within Judaism. Thus both Jesus and Paul *as Jews* are part of the unfolding story of Judaism and humanism.

In sum, Klausner reconstructed Western civilization from a decidedly Jewish and Zionist perspective, and primarily for Jewish consumption. Western culture finds its roots in Jewish and Greco-Roman culture. Judaism provides the moral and ethical core and especially the messianic idea of progress that holds such hope not just for Jews but for all of humanity. Greece provides the arts and the sciences. Christianity has played a central role in history but has contributed little of lasting value to human culture. When the pagan elements that enabled it to spread at its given historical moment are finally stripped away (as they inevitably will be), what will remain is the pure Jewish core of which Christianity is but a distortion.

For Jews of Klausner's generation, emerging from the isolated world of Eastern Europe and searching for a new understanding of their place in the world, this reading of Jewish and Christian history served a crucial purpose. It stood in stark contrast both to the dominant Christian view of history and of Jews and Judaism and to the traditional Jewish refusal to consider Christianity at all. Jews like Klausner, who sought a middle ground between conversion and assimilation on the one hand and religious obscurantism on the other, now had an interpretation of Christianity and Western culture in which the Jew was no longer a marginal relic. Instead, Jews and Judaism provided both the foundation of society and its hope for the future—they have become, if you will, the alpha and the omega of humanity.[14]

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14. "And finally, since the Messiah is nothing but 'a righteous person ruling with the fear of God' and he brings only freedom and ethical completeness to the world, the progress of humanity is not dependent on him, but—*on humanity itself.* The Talmud innumerably

In my final comments, I want to step back and say a few words about Klausner's work and the history of scholarship. It is hard for us to imagine a study of early Christianity that is not rooted in a nuanced understanding of the Judaism of the time of Jesus, but that, in fact, was the dominant model at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Driven to a great extent by the history of Christian contempt for Judaism, scholars assumed that the Judaism of Jesus' day was dry legalism and that the Jewish people groaned under the yoke of the law and of the corrupt priesthood. (There is a strong element of anti-Catholicism in this mostly Protestant model as well.) Jesus sought to liberate the Jews from both of these stifling influences, but they, in their ignorance and stubbornness, crucified and denied him. Perhaps the extreme of "Jesus over and against the Judaism of his time" is represented by those scholars (or perhaps so-called scholars) who denied altogether that Jesus was Jewish and tried to prove that he was, in fact, Aryan.

Klausner comes on the scene at a time when Christian scholars were just beginning to take first-century Judaism seriously. Emil Schürer's *The Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* appeared at the end of the nineteenth century; as Schürer revised

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repeats the idea that redemption depends on repentance and good deeds; the interpretation of the verse 'I the Lord will speed it in due time' [Is. 60:22] is well known: 'if they are worthy, I will speed it, and if they are not, in its time.' [BT Sanh. 95a] And the people of Israel, who first recognized one God, the god of good, and were his prophets truth and righteousness, must and are first able to 'speed redemption' by repentance and good deeds. That is to say, it must and is able to walk at the head of humanity on the path of personal, national and cultural progress, on the path to freedom and ethical wholeness. This will only be possible when it returns to its land and gathers in its exiles, and will no longer be found under the oppression of strangers; rather the 'kingdom of heaven' is the purpose and the lofty desire without which Israel will not be released from 'the bondage to foreign powers,' the abolition of which is the clear, *external* sign of 'the messianic era.' And therefore we can say without any suspicion of special inclination to Judaism: the messianic faith of Judaism is the seed of progress that was sown by Judaism in the entire world." "The Jewish Messiah and the Christian Messiah," in *Yahadut v'enoshiyut*, 2:217.

"And therefore we, the Jews, who yearn for resurrection of the nation with all its material and spiritual possessions on its historic land, take another step forward. We hope that the day will come when Christianity will give up everything it inherited from idolaters and only that will remain which Judaism bequeathed to it and which was purified and refined by the loftiest Greek and new (modern) thought. And Judaism, which will be complete with all its possession and rooted in its land, will no longer require, for the continuance of the nation, so many fences and gates, and it too will be purified by the loftiest, ancient European thought, and even that lofty thought which will become the fruit of a reawakened and resurrected Asia in its entirety. And them Christianity will return to its source—to pure and refined, prophetic-Pharisaic, old-new Judaism. And then, as in our prayer during our Days of Awe, humanity 'will become one band' of nations who 'will do the will of God with a whole heart.' The Jewish messianic and social-national idea will be realized as one, and 'God will be king over all the earth, on that day the Lord will be one and his name one.

"This is the distant ideal of Judaism which thinks thoughts and which creates values of resurrection even today. And the day will come, and all 'the righteous of the nations' will recognize this beautiful ideal, national-humanistic idea, that 'they have a place in the world to come'" ("Righteous Gentiles on Judaism," in *Yahadut v'enoshiyut*, 2:271).

the work, he included references to Klausner's Ph.D. dissertation. Herbert Danby, whose translation of the Mishnah is still the standard, worked closely with Klausner on a translation of Klausner's *Jesus of Nazareth*. R. Travers Herford and George Foote Moore were contemporaries and correspondents of Klausner's. All of them stressed the necessity of placing Jesus and early Christianity in its first-century context. The four of them—Danby, Herford, Moore, and Klausner—initiated a major shift in the study of early Christianity that has shaped its direction to this day. Klausner's book on Jesus, despite its many weaknesses and eccentricities, served as a model for both Jewish and Christian scholars.

Klausner argued for the relevance of both Jewish classical, especially rabbinic, texts and contemporary Jewish scholarship, and he presented them in some detail in his book. For many Christian students, this was their first exposure to these materials. And he provided to many Jews their first exposure to the literature of early Christianity and to the work of contemporary Christian scholars. It is fair to say that Klausner almost single-handedly made the Jewish study of early Christianity a "kosher" subject.

This shift in scholarly emphasis was affected by and in turn affected Jewish-Christian relations. The growing recognition of the vitality of Judaism, both in the time of Jesus and after the crucifixion, combined with a growing appreciation of Jesus' Jewishness, meshed with modern tolerance and post-Holocaust sensitivities. Scholars who were more open to Jews and Judaism became more open to reexamining the assumptions of scholarship, and religious leaders could rely on scholarship to question long-held religious assumptions and prejudice.

Rabbi David Fox Sandmel coordinated the publication of "Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity," www.icjs.org/what/njsp/dabruemet.html.

Scripture as a Norm of Moral Deliberation and Its Application to Homosexuality

Bruce V. Malchow
Sacred Heart School of Theology
Hales Corners, Wisconsin
bmalchow@shst.edu

How do we use Scripture as a norm of moral deliberation in the church? First, we recognize that Scripture is not our ultimate norm or standard of decision. Rather, our basic norm is Christ. The textbook used for systematic theology courses in many of our ELCA seminaries, *Christian Dogmatics*, states that "the ultimate authority in matters of faith and life must be the Word of God made flesh." It also says, "The ultimate authority of Christian theology is not the biblical canon as such, but the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness."[1] Lutherans base this principle on the fact that Luther discovered in the Bible a standard by which the parts of the Bible could be judged. That standard was whether they presented Christ. So Luther derived the authority of Scripture from its gospel content.

Because of this, the constitution of the ELCA states first in its confession of faith that "This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe" (2.02). Only later does it say, "This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life" (2.03). Christ and his gospel are the primary standard in deciding the faith and morals of our church. The Scriptures are secondary.

Practically, what this means is that when we look at a moral question we ask first how our faith in Christ affects our decision and only secondly at what the Bible says about it. We use the Bible from its Christ center and not as a series of isolated texts. The core of our moral decisions is how they reflect the love that we have learned to know in Christ. We recall that Jesus said that the greatest commandments are "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30–31). And Paul said, "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13:10).

Second, when we use the Scriptures as a norm of moral deliberation, we need to examine them carefully and use them accordingly. One thing we learn from the

1. Carl Braaten, "First Locus, Prolegomena to Christian Dogmatics," *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), I:75, 61.

Scriptures is that the Holy Spirit has inspired them. It is important that we find the meaning of that truth from the Bible itself rather than reading our own meaning into it. The passage that speaks most directly about inspiration is 2 Tim 3:16. This is what it says in its context: "from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." In other words, the purpose of God's inspiration is that we may know about salvation through Jesus, Christian teaching, and moral behavior. The center of inspiration is Jesus, and that center is supported by the Bible's doctrines and moral instructions. The truth of Scripture consists in these central things.

So the Bible teaches us a great deal about how to live morally, in line with the central command to love others. It tells us to make God the center of our lives, to be honest in our words and actions, and to respect parents and others in authority. It warns us against stealing, gossiping, and murder. It urges us to treat the poor justly and seek peace. We could easily go on and mention many other moral values that we learn from Scripture. The majority of what the Bible says about morality is useful and supports our Christian faith.

The second thing we learn from a careful examination of the Scriptures is that when the Holy Spirit inspired the writers, the Spirit did not control and dominate their thinking and writing in a way that made them less than human. Their words are fully human words as well as the word of God. So what the writers say fits the time in which they lived. Some of their ideas were derived from the society in which they lived and from other nations around them. So we must read the Bible in the light of its historical setting and be careful that we do not read our modern ideas into the text. *Christian Dogmatics* says, "biblical texts can only be interpreted out of their historical contexts." It is our task "to make an intelligible transmission of meaning from the biblical text to the completely new situation here and now."[2] Part of this process of interpretation is distinguishing the inspired teaching of God in all parts of the Scriptures from the human elements that have come from its environment.

For example, while talking about creation, Psalm 74 says to God, "you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan" (vv. 13–14). We know what the psalmist is talking about because archaeologists have recovered ancient texts that deal with the same image. In the Babylonian creation story their great god Marduk fights the sea dragon Tiamat. When Marduk kills her, he cuts her body in half from head to tail. Then he uses one half of her body to create a solid sky and the other half to form the flat earth below. In Canaanite material the dragon's name is essentially the same as Leviathan. So the psalmist has gotten his idea of God killing the dragon Leviathan from Israel's Canaanite background. Today we affirm the teaching of this passage that God is the creator but reject its picture received from Israel's Canaanite setting of God killing a dragon. In other texts the Bible itself opposes such a view of creation. One purpose of Genesis 1 may be to contradict the Babylonian creation story. Unlike the Babylonian story, which sees the dragon as uncreated and existing from the beginning, Genesis 1 says "God created the great sea monsters" on the fifth day of creation (v. 21). The dragon story comes from Israel's environment and is not part of the truth

2. Braaten, "First Locus," 77.

revealed in Scripture, but the fact that God is the Creator is part of that truth.

Moral teachings change

There also are moral teachings in the Scriptures that are outdated, somewhat like the dragon story, and can be left behind. In the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:4 says "You shall not make for yourself a graven image." Lutherans do not even mention this verse when we list the commandments. But the Jewish community probably rightly says that this is the original second commandment. Because we have left this one out, we have to divide what was originally one commandment against coveting into two commandments, the ninth and tenth, in order to get ten. We have not retained the commandment against making graven images because it is no longer relevant. Originally it helped Israel to prevent the worship of idols. Making no statues at all was a safeguard against worshipping them. This is no longer a temptation for us, and so we leave behind this outdated moral teaching.

Another of the commandments that we do not retain is what Lutherans call the Third Commandment, "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy" (Exod 20:8). We claim that we are using this commandment when we employ it as a command to attend church on Sunday. But the original commandment is about Saturday, not Sunday, and it is not about worship. This was a command to not work on Saturday. The reason that we do not keep this commandment is that Jesus freed us from it. He healed on the Sabbath and allowed his disciples to pick grain on that day and then said, "the Son of man is lord even of the sabbath" (Mark 2:28). So we do not follow one of the commandments because another passage in Scripture opposes it. We see going to church on Sunday as a moral responsibility not because of the Third Commandment but because New Testament texts urge us to gather for worship (e.g., Heb 10:25).

There are other passages in the Bible that come from the surrounding world and that we do not follow because they go against our sense of what is Christian. For example, Deut 20:16 commands, "as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive." Likewise, 1 Sam 15:3 portrays God as ordering, "utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." These commands were part of Israel's moral code. They were part of the institution in Israel known as holy war. At the end of a battle against certain enemies, Israel was to kill everything living of the enemy, including women, children, and animals. Biblical scholars do not believe that God commanded this. In spite of rationalizations that people may invent to excuse the murder of infants and animals here, this command is morally wrong. It goes against all that we know of the God revealed in Jesus.

Again, archaeology helps us to understand where Israel got this idea. One of Israel's immediate neighbors was the Moabites. We have recovered one of their monuments, which we call the Moabite Stone. That stone contains an inscription showing that the Moabites also killed everything living of their enemies. Israel did not receive this command from God but from the society in which they lived. It is one of the human words in Scripture that the gospel teaches us to reject.

Likewise, Exodus 21 commands "you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (vv. 23–24). These are penalties that the Israelite law demands when a person has caused an injury. They probably



originally had a good purpose. They kept people from taking more revenge than an offense called for. You could knock out only one tooth for a lost tooth, not two. Nevertheless, this law was stern and vengeful. Israel received this idea also from their neighbors. The Babylonian Code of Hammurabi called for an eye for an eye long before the Israelite law did. This time Jesus himself tells us how to regard this law. He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matt 5:38–39). Jesus overturns this law that Israel received from its neighbors and tells us that the gospel calls for the opposite behavior.

Not only the Old Testament but also the New Testament contains passages that come from the world around and that we do not follow because they seem to us today to be less than Christian. Col 3:22 is typical of several New Testament texts: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything." Like the world of its day, the early church accepted slavery as a normal institution. So several passages in the New Testament told slaves to be obedient to their masters. Because of a growth in moral understanding in this area, we today consider slavery to be an evil and consider telling slaves to be obedient morally objectionable. The New Testament itself seems to agree when it says "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). In this text Paul sees the implications of the gospel for issues like slavery. He sees that it does not conform to what we know of Christ. Passages that advise slaves to obey their masters come out of the world of their day and seek to maintain order in society. But they are morally inferior, and we rightly set them aside.

I believe that the same can be said of texts like Col 3:18, "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." The issue is the same as with slavery. In the world of that day, it was considered right that husbands should dominate their wives. So the New Testament writer thought that his advice was appropriate. However, it conflicts with the statement just quoted, "there is no longer male and female; . . . all of you are one in Christ Jesus." This statement from Paul catches the implications of the gospel for marriage. The advice for wives to be subject to husbands does not. Seeing that we are not male and female in Christ agrees with the equality that should exist in marriage. So today most people see husbands and wives as equal, and they show moral sensitivity in doing so.

There are also actions allowed in Scripture about which Christians have had moral doubts. They have wondered whether such actions are compatible with the gospel. Examples are capital punishment and war. There are numerous crimes for which the Old Testament penalty was capital punishment, including deeds like murder but also such less serious actions as working on the Sabbath and cursing one's father or mother.

Society in general no longer considers it plausible to kill people for such offenses. And many wonder whether capital punishment should be prescribed for any crime. Some Christians see it as contradictory to the loving spirit of the gospel.

People generally see war as horribly destructive and an unhappy choice. The Christian position has never been that a nation is free to wage any war it chooses. Historically the church taught that wars could be fought but only for a just cause. The church saw wars as an unfortunate alternative but as something that sometimes had to be done for good reasons. However, there also have been Christian pacifists throughout church history who have felt that waging war was so much against the spirit of Christ that they could not approve of it for any reason. While Christians have never been able to agree on the issues of capital punishment and war, for our purposes they are good examples of actions approved in the Bible that some committed Christians have seen as incompatible with the gospel.

There are also ethical teachings in the Scripture that are general norms for our behavior but for which the Bible itself shows that there are exceptions. For example, Rom 13:1 says "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God." So, most of the time it is our responsibility to obey the laws of the government. However, Christians have regularly pointed out that there are limits to our obedience. They have pointed to passages like Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." If the government goes against our Christian beliefs or ethical obligations we must oppose the demands of the government. An obvious example was Germans living under the Nazi regime. Dedicated Christians in Germany, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, worked for the overthrow of their government. They saw opposition to their government as the right moral choice for Christians.

Another general rule for which Scripture gives exceptions is divorce. Mark and Luke quote Jesus giving a teaching on divorce that contains no exceptions. Mark's version reads, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (10:11–12). Mainline biblical scholars generally agree that Jesus' original saying was similar to this. And Jesus' teaching is a good common rule. If at all possible it is best that people not divorce. However, already in New Testament times some Christians saw that this command could not always be followed. So, when Matthew quoted Jesus' teaching, Matthew added an exception to it. In his gospel the saying reads, "anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (5:32). Now, there is one reason why divorce may be acceptable—unchastity. Paul adds another exception to Jesus' rule. In a context where he is talking about divorce, Paul says, "if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound" (1 Cor 7:15). So now there is a second reason that divorce can be all right—desertion. Experience has shown that there are other valid causes for divorce. So, while Jesus' rule stands as our general guide, we pastorally evaluate every case to see whether divorce is the better alternative.

In some cases there is no direct biblical teaching, and our only guide is the spirit of the gospel. They include ancient issues such as abortion and modern situations that

have arisen because of discoveries in science that have made in vitro fertilization and cloning possible. They also include issues where Christians generally changed their minds. When life insurance first appeared, many Christians considered it immoral to buy it. Their reasoning was that buying insurance showed a lack of faith in God to provide for them. Eventually most Christians saw no problem with life insurance. Also, early in the twentieth century, most Christians saw the use of artificial means of birth control as sinful. By the middle of that century, most Protestants had the opposite position. By the end of the century many Protestants saw the use of birth control as a more moral decision than the nonuse of it because of the problem of world overpopulation.

Scripture and homosexuality

Let us now look at a few of the biblical texts that have been used in the discussion of homosexuality. It is important that we remember what we have learned from the study of these other scriptural passages on ethical issues as we do so. It is not sufficient to merely quote texts on the subject as though doing so immediately solved the question. We must recall that while Scripture is one norm in dealing with the issue, the gospel is our primary norm. It is also important that we examine the biblical passages with the same amount of study and careful thought that we gave to the texts on other issues.

It has been said that the sin of homosexuality caused God to destroy the city of Sodom. According to this story in Genesis 19, two messengers from God came to Sodom and agreed to spend the night in Lot's house. In the evening the men of Sodom surrounded the house and insisted that Lot send out the two messengers so that the men could "know" them. Lot then offered to give them his daughters instead of the messengers. The men of the city would not agree with this substitution and tried to break into the house. Then the messengers made them blind.

There are several problems with maintaining that homosexuality is the sin in this story. First of all, it is important to understand what a true homosexual is. A homosexual person is one who is exclusively or primarily sexually attracted to members of the same sex (sexual orientation). This is not something that he or she chooses but something in the very nature of the homosexual person that makes this person this way. Are we supposed to believe that every male in Sodom had a homosexual orientation? The text says, "the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house" (v. 4). The majority of these men are not pictured as homosexuals but as heterosexuals trying to engage in sodomy with males. In addition, this was not a sexual relationship to which the messengers consented but an attempt at gang rape.

Beyond that, it is not at all clear that this is Scripture's reason for God's destruction of Sodom. Other sins were involved in the story of the city's destruction. One was inhospitality. That was a major concern in the ancient Near East. If a person accepted a guest into his home, the host was completely responsible for the safety of the guest. The host even had to be willing to give his life to protect the guest. The Sodom story makes clear that hospitality is a concern of this account. It says, "When Lot saw the messengers, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, 'Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.' They said, 'No; we will spend the night in the square.' But

he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house" (vv. 1–3). Lot insists that the messengers accept his hospitality even when they are reluctant. Not only Lot but the men of Sodom had a responsibility to show hospitality to those who were guests in their city. But the men of Sodom violated that responsibility.

Beyond that, Ezekiel mentions other sins for which Sodom was wiped out. In 16:49 he says, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." Therefore, Sodom's sins were pride and neglect of the poor. There were many sins to which the destruction of Sodom was attributed. Homosexual behavior by consenting adults was not one of them.

Deuteronomy 23:17 is frequently mentioned in discussions of homosexuality. It reads, "None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute; none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute." This passage must be understood in light of its historical context. Temple prostitutes were part of the worship of the people from which Israel emerged, the Canaanites. In Canaanite belief the god Baal caused rain. He left his mountain home north of Israel and rode on the clouds over that land. As he did so, he had sex with a goddess who was identified with the earth. He fertilized the earth with his rain, and therefore the earth brought forth its crops. Humans could get Baal to send rain by motivating him to have sexual relations by having sex themselves. So Canaanite men had intercourse with temple prostitutes, both female and male, as a religious act. Deuteronomy forbids temple prostitution. The major problem is hardly that some of the prostitutes were men. The major problem is that the prostitutes of both sexes were part of the worship of the false god Baal.

It is in that context that we need to understand the statements in Leviticus about homosexual behavior. For example, 20:13 says "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them." Bishop John Beem claims that in Leviticus 18–20 are universal laws that apply to us and that the chapters before and after them contain ceremonial laws that apply only to ancient Israel.[3] The text itself disagrees with him. In 18:3, one of the chapters he considers universal law, we read, "You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you." So chapter 18 is directed against Canaanite practices, and the statement in verse 22 against homosexual behavior is against one of those practices. There is a strong possibility that Leviticus speaks against this behavior because it is part of Canaanite worship. It is artificial to try to divide the book into universal law and ceremonial law. 18:3 places all of these chapters in the context of combatting Canaanite behavior.

Also, how can we single out the passages about homosexual behavior in these chapters and ignore the verses around them? 19:19 says, "you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials." We break this commandment if we put both green beans and squash in our garden or if we wear clothes made of both cotton and polyester. 19:27 states, "You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard." Every man

3. Beem made this statement in an oral presentation to a forum of the Greater Milwaukee Synod on homosexuality on February 18, 2001.

who shaves or trims his beard breaks that one. And only four verses after the passage we quoted about homosexual actions, Leviticus says, "All who curse father or mother shall be put to death" (20:9). We would have a lot of dead children if we followed that command. We take none of these as universal laws that apply to us, so there is no good reason why we should take the statement about homosexual behavior that way. In addition, both that command and the one about cursing parents attach the death penalty to these acts. Assigning a punishment to a deed is a part of civil law, not moral law. So these are obviously civil laws for Israel, but Israel's civil law is not ours.

Finally, we will look at one of the New Testament texts commonly brought up in dealing with homosexuality, 1 Cor 6:9–10: "Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God." It is not certain that the words translated "male prostitutes" and "sodomites" here refer to homosexuals. But even on the chance that they do, it is important to look at the other people mentioned in the list. Greedy people who want more than they need will not enter the kingdom. Those who drink too much will not enter the kingdom. Revilers, people who tell harmful gossip, will not enter the kingdom. According to this list, most of us would not get into the kingdom. It is true that without Christ none of us would. But in Christ we have forgiveness for all of these sins when we repent of them and believe in him.

What are we to say about the biblical passages used against homosexuals? Some of them, like the Sodom story, are irrelevant to the issue. Some of them, like the Deuteronomy and Leviticus texts, are dealing with an issue that ancient Israel faced but that we do not face. They are not universal law and do not speak to us. Other texts, especially in the New Testament, may or may not be speaking about homosexuality. Whether they are or are not, they may no longer be relevant to us. As Bishop Herbert Chilstrom has stated, experience is teaching us that homosexuals are not what people once thought they were. They are not persons who choose this lifestyle but who are this way because of causes beyond their control.[4] It is possible that any biblical texts that speak against homosexuals are based on prejudices that came out of the society of that day, prejudices that have endured until the present.

These prejudices are unfair to homosexuals. They may be as untrue as the Leviathan story in the Bible. Then they should be left behind as much as that dragon even if they are in the Bible. These prejudices may be as unacceptable as the biblical commands to slaughter enemy children and animals and to take an eye for an eye. The gospel priority in Scripture may be teaching us to accept homosexuals as they are. The Holy Spirit may be trying to tell us that practicing homosexuals are as much God's children as we are.

The Greater Milwaukee Synod of the ELCA decided in two successive annual assemblies (2000, 2001) that congregations of the synod that chose to do so could authorize their pastors to bless same-sex unions. The original form of this article was a presentation to a forum of the synod on April 29, 2001, in preparation for the second vote.

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4. Chilstrom said this in an oral presentation to a forum of the Greater Milwaukee Synod on homosexuality on February 18, 2001.

A Letter to Axel

Philip Hefner
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Dear Axel:

You will recall that on the twenty-fourth of February last you sent me an e-mail about an exciting article you had just read in the *U. S. Catholic* by Brian Swimme. You wanted to have some discussion with me, and you cited a page full of ideas and page references to the article. I responded to you only briefly and waited for the article itself, which you were going to send me by e-mail. You tried several times in the following weeks but couldn't get it through to me. I searched the magazine's Web site, but I could never locate the article you read. The upshot is that we never did get to have that discussion, at least not over the Internet. On March 18 I received my last message from you. It went like this:

> Dear Phil . . . The interview that I have was printed in June of 2002 in the "U.S. Catholic." I'll try once more to get it to you. I've been having some health problems . . . don't know yet what is going on—next step an endoscopy . . . whatever that may find! yours, Axel

We know now what was going on, and since our discussion never got done before those critters inside you finished their dirty work, I have decided to write you this letter. Of course, from your present perspective, you very likely already know everything that I am about say. I might say that this letter is more for my benefit than for yours, but knowing you, I know that you want me to write it and that you will take some satisfaction in the community between you and me that the letter represents.

You ask if I know Brian Swimme. Yes, I do know him, and as a matter of fact, Neva and I will hear him preach six sermons in July at a conference we attend each summer. He is a fine preacher. You might say that Brian is an astrophysicist who went "spiritual" but took his science with him.

You like Brian's idea that being human has something to do with remaining fascinated, with having a mind attuned to wonder, with being able "to enter into the delight of the Lord," and you infer that he must be a "Grundtvigian without knowing it." That may well be, but it is clear that he is an "Axel Kildegaardian," whether he knows it or not. That's one of your great gifts to me, teaching me about your Grundtvigian Lutheran faith by embodying it in my presence. That you are turned on by Brian Swimme's ideas in your ninth decade of life says all that need be said to demonstrate your capacity for delight.

We have to mention one of the great axioms of the Grundtvigian tradition—"human first, then Christian." The creation God has given us, the bodies and the selves that God has given us, these are our access to Christ and grace, not barriers, because they are God's primal gifts to us.

I've been reading Saint Benedict's interpretation of Jacob's ladder. When I was in young people's camp many summers ago, our camp counselors frowned on the

old song "I am climbing Jacob's ladder" because it seemed to be saying that we get to heaven by our own skill at climbing, as if we don't need God's grace since we can get to the top on our own. That's not Benedict's view. He says, to the contrary, that each of us has a ladder given to us by God—our ladder is our own humanity, and

> Being human has something to do with remaining fascinated, with having a mind attuned to wonder.

the only way any of us can meet God is by means of our own personal ladders. The ladder is our life, given to us by God.

Perhaps we can place Benedict in that Danish tradition, too. Fylla tells us that in your last days here in Circle Pines you said you weren't going away to heaven, because you had already been living in heaven, living your life in the community God gave you, beginning with the family. Human first, in family first, and then God's heaven.

Of course God wants us to be fascinated and curious and playfully excited about these lives we've been given, about the "human first." I remember that famous trip we took together in 1997 to the Grundtvig conference in Koege, Denmark, and then to Paris and Chartres. Fascination—remember how far and long we walked in that unusually scorching Danish summer heat to find Grundtvig's grave outside Koege? But we wouldn't give up—and we were never sure we really found it! Fascination—with Notre Dame, with Chartres, with the Louvre, and with the River Seine, the flower markets, the outdoor bistros. You were fighting the gout then, and when we returned home you lost your eye to cancer. But your childlike delight trumped all that; it took your body, as it was, to places it had never been before. As if you were saying to that bad eye, "You had better take this in while you have the chance."

Talk about childlike delight—the unforgettable homemade marathon Easter Vigil ritual we devised in the 1970s. That would be tonight, Axel. I remember that late at night we struck the light and recited our baptismal vows in our front room on 54th Place, Bill Lesher holding the homemade cross and punching the nails in it, and then we did the Danish greeting of the Christ with the rising sun at the Lake Michigan shore, and then the festive Eucharistic breakfast, in the community of joy, at the Kildegaard mansion on Greenwood Avenue. It is necessary, you wrote me in February, that we be children, with a capacity to play, if we are to enter the kingdom of God. That Easter morning, we were reveling in the kingdom, weren't we? Easter vigil services were rare in Hyde Park in those days, and now there are many—but the children don't play with the abandon we enjoyed thirty years ago with the Kildegaards.

As you note, Brian Swimme takes our vision and our lives to the widest possible dimensions of fascination, delight, and community together, what you call "the cosmological dimension of community and the Body of Christ"—the cosmic view of this human first, then Christian, I would add. This humanity, our ladder, has cosmic dimensions, because it is created in the cosmos. In his little book *The Hidden Heart of*

the Cosmos (Orbis, 1999) Brian quotes the South American Indian teaching "that to become human, one must make room in oneself for the immensities of the universe" (p. 108).

Make room in oneself for the immensities of the universe. You tied this in with Brian's comments about the nothingness that is the womb of possibility. He calls this the "all-nourishing abyss." In whatever ways we talk about the universe, it is not dead matter. It has given us life, it is mystery, and it is dynamic; it is a life-giving womb. God created us as individuals and as community in that nourishing mystery. Brian writes that our science, as well as our experience, tells us that we are in contact in our own unique way with the Great Power that gave birth to the universe fifteen billion years ago and that continues to be involved with giving birth in every interaction throughout the universe today. That which gave birth to the universe is giving birth in this moment as well (p. 104). He adds a stunning punch line: "each child is situated in that very place and is rooted in that very power that brought forth all the matter and energy of the universe" (p. 104).

In your letter, you mentioned the loss of your little dog of sixteen years, Uffe. You wrote that Uffe "was also part of the great divine cosmos and continues to be so." Not only each of us, each child, but the whole creation.

In a way that is difficult for us to understand if we cannot break loose from an older, outmoded, view, our science tells us that there is no single center of the universe, but rather every point is the center. Each of us stands, so to speak, at the center of the universe, and from where we stand everything is expanding out from us in every direction. The center of the universe is truly wherever we are standing. Brian writes, "We exist then at the very origin point of the universe, because every place in the universe is that place where the universe flared forth into existence" (p. 89).

The "human first, then Christian" is the human who stands at the origin point of the universe, the human that is situated in the very power that brought it all forth. On the 24th of February you were fascinated by these ideas, and you recognized that they were akin to your own faith. Of course, you knew that you were not only affirming your Grundtvigian Lutheran tradition, you were thrilled that it was being expanded into cosmic dimensions by this Catholic scientist of the Spirit that you had encountered.

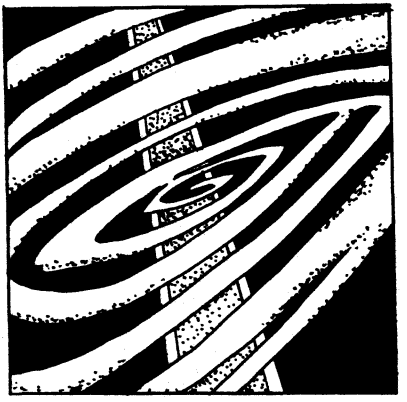
In your letter, you correlated this abyss or womb of the universe with Grundtvig's hymn "With the Word all things began, Life on ocean, Life on land." You asked, "Is this abyss compatible with the opening of John's Gospel?"

I think it is, Axel, and if this letter has a text it is the first verses of that Gospel:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What came into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1–4, 14)

This life that came into being from the abyss that is the Word of God is not only some long-ago and far-away life, it is us, each one of us, and it thrilled you to have that said. You made room for the immensities of the universe in your very own self when you made room for the immensities of St. John's Gospel.

You heard Brian's call to play in a cosmic mode, because that is what you always did. He speaks of "Cosmology and



Ecstasy." We cannot really know or understand the universe from which we are born unless we can play, ecstatically. Looking at the cosmos as life-giving calls forth "a deep zest for life, for it produces the psychic energy necessary to begin each day with joy. In the process of cosmological initiation . . . the pain of loneliness and isolation is replaced by the joy of bonded relationship" (p. 36).

A cosmic zest, a cosmic sense of community. Science and theology will not get us to that point, cerebration is not enough. Playfulness, ecstasy, is required. As you wrote, it is necessary indeed to be children in order to be in the kingdom that God has created.

It would take an Axel Kildegaard to see that there is a direct line from the opening of St. John's Gospel to the science of the cosmos and to the playful fascination of the children who inhabit the kingdom of God. For a century or more, your tradition of Grundtvigians has been known as "the happy Danes." We knew that included singing, folk dancing, the joy of life, also aquavit and Gamle Dansk. You didn't tell us soon enough that it was a cosmic happiness and playfulness. But very late in your life you did write to me about that.

I don't play as well as you do, Axel. That doesn't mean you were a poor teacher, only that it still hasn't taken in me as I wish it would. However, that last letter of yours will not disappear from my consciousness. I still have hopes, in my seventy-first year, that I can learn to be a truly playful child in the kingdom of God.

And I will tell you this, dear Axel—I will get even more out of Brian's sermons this summer because of your letter.

I'm closing this letter, as you closed yours to me, my friend. You put it in capital letters,

AS EVER,
Phil

Written for the funeral of Axel Kildegaard, 19 April 2003. This is the manuscript from which the sermon was preached; it is not the sermon itself, since it took its own oral directions.

Help. Thanks. Wow!

Nis Kildegaard
Circle Pines, Minnesota

My Dad taught me to be suspicious of anyone who couldn't take a joke about his religion.

Thinking back on my own arguments about churchgoing with Dad, I'm reminded of this conversation between a mother and her reluctant son, who says, "Mom, I don't want to go to church today."

The mother says, "Oh, son, I really think you should."

"But, Mom," he says, "I don't think anybody likes me there, and I don't want to go. Give me three good reasons why I have to go to church."

"Okay. First, I'm your mother, and I want you to, and you should be obedient to your mother. Second, Sunday is the Lord's day, and you know what Jesus said about giving unto the Lord what is the Lord's. Third, you have to go to church because you're the pastor!"

My Dad was serious about his religion, but he was never grim. Just this week, Mom told me a story about Dad that I'd never heard before. During his years as a parish minister, Dad was asked to do the funeral for a man who'd spent his career as a professional clown, and his family wanted him laid to rest in the full clown regalia—the polka-dot suit with the ruffles, white face, big red rubber nose. So Dad goes to meet with the funeral director to review the family's requests, and this guy refuses—he says it's undignified and he won't do it. Dad thought it was a great idea, and he was just so mad at that guy for refusing.

Dad was always sad when he saw the Bible reduced to a set of stories taken literally. He called it idolatry, worshipping the Bible instead of God. Dad was blessed with a searching mind and a penetrating intelligence, and he didn't think God intended us to check them at the coat rack before coming into this holy place. He'd say, How can people take these wonderful stories that have been distilled over countless generations, these stories that say such profound things about what it means to be human—and approach them as if they had the same sort of truth as a grocery list or this morning's newspaper?

Dad had the courage to be comfortable with all the uncertainties and mysteries—he didn't need to reduce them to simple doctrines. I remember him saying to me many years ago, "When you meet a person who's absolutely, positively sure about their faith, run the other way." Just this year, he told me, "Early in my life I used to begin sentences by saying, I believe that. . . . Now I find myself beginning sentences by saying, I believe in."

Dad loved the example of the Native American wise man who always began telling his tribe's creation story by saying, "Now, I don't know if it happened this way or not—but I know this story is true."

Dad was very much put off by what he called piety—the religious impulse that takes us away from this wonderful life

instead of deeper into it. Dad had a strong reaction against the idea that religion was a part of life that plays out only in the vertical dimension of the individual, alone, communing with God. For Dad, the important dimension was the horizontal one—the one that connects us all to each other, the body of Christ. Dad came out of the tradition of N. F. S. Grundtvig, the great Danish theologian who so famously declared himself human first and Christian second. Grundtvig was also a poet who wrote some of our tradition's most beautiful hymns celebrating the gift of life. Dad admired that greatly. This week, reading his essays, I found this observation: "There is a possibility that poetry is the purest and most authentic form of the human word to convey truth."

In the letters that came from so many friends during these past weeks, one theme has emerged again and again—and it has to do with Dad's rare combination of gifts. Such a powerful, searching, courageous mind, and yet so grounded in this life—teacher, counselor, friend; husband, father, grandfather.

In his day job, Dad was a theologian—it's a bit of a weird way to make a living. (I remember, as a kid, having all sorts of trouble explaining what he did to my friends.) When you work at the widget factory, you can point to the big pile of widgets that wasn't there yesterday and say, Look, that's what I did today. But in Dad's case, the product he cranked out over the course of a long career wasn't widgets, it was people. You can see it in the generations of good pastors who count Dad as a mentor, and I think you can see it in his own children. Dad was a man of God, and like God, he didn't make junk.

G. K. Chesterton reflected, in the last chapter of his autobiography, that he could divide all the people he'd known into two categories—those who take life for granted, and those who approach it with a sense of gratitude. This, he said, is what makes all the difference. Dad lived his life from a profoundly grateful stance. And the very center of his joy and sense of gratitude was his marriage.

During their engagement, more than sixty years ago, Mom became seriously ill, and a few weeks before their wedding, her doctor took Dad aside and told him she had perhaps three years to live. The doctor was wrong—what he should have said was: "Your bride is fine. You've got sixty years." But as it turned out, my parents always felt that this awareness of the preciousness of their time together was a great gift.

A favorite family story:

When Dad had a sabbatical year in 1962, he and Mom took the four of us children to live in Europe, and we spent a summer in Bavaria, in the foothills of the Alps. One day we went walking along an ancient Roman road in the forest. Up ahead, Dad spied a little bridge across a gully, and he ran and hid underneath. When I came to it, he called out from underneath in his scariest Ogre voice, "Who's that walking across my bridge?" I knew it was Dad, and I knew the story of the Billy Goats Gruff, and I played along.

Siri and Lise played along, too, until finally it was time for my baby brother, Arne, to cross that bridge. When Dad finally jumped out, Arne was so surprised that it wasn't the Ogre. Arne wasn't scared, mind you, just surprised. And when we asked him about that—why wasn't he afraid?—Arne said, "I know how that story ends."

Dad was unafraid, too, because he spent a lifetime thinking about his world through the lens of this wonderful Christian story that's playing itself out now in Holy Week, and he understood how the story ends.

In his last night with us, Dad wasn't in the mood for small talk, because talking was hard work for him just then. During one of my sessions sitting with him, he said to me, "So many people confuse prayer with words." I've been mulling over that remark, and I think it's entirely wonderful. Looking back now on Dad's life, I can see how the whole of it embodies a sort of prayer, in the very best sense of that word.

On the morning Dad died, when the guys from the Minnesota Cremation Society came to carry away this empty vessel that had contained him for 85 years, my sister Lise ran out into the yard and organized the grandchildren along the sidewalk where the two men would go with their package wrapped in its purple cloths. As the men went by, they all did the wave for Dad, and they hooted and hollered—"Way to go, Bedstefar! Great job! Wooo-hooo!"

It was amazing. I honestly don't think the cremation society guys had ever seen anything like it. I honestly can't think of anyone who deserves it more.

Many years ago a friend of mine, an author, was hired by Random House to compile a book of children's prayers from all the cultures of the world. At first it seemed an impossible project. But quite early on, as she worked with the prayers, she found that she needed only three little boxes for all the index cards she was compiling. Each box had its label: Help. Thanks. Wow!

Dad was unafraid, because he spent a lifetime thinking about his world through the lens of this wonderful Christian story . . . and he understood how the story ends.

So: I could tell you great Dad stories all day, but I'm about done. Writing up these notes, I considered ending these remarks by asking Lise to come up here and lead us all in doing the wave and shouting Woohoo! But instead, I'd like to ask you to join me in a little prayer.

Help.

Thanks.

Wow!

Amen

Preaching Helps

Second Sunday after the Epiphany—Fifth Sunday in Lent, Series A

A Trip through the Mountains

This set of Preaching Helps takes us on a trip through the mountains. We begin our journey at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, with a call to repentance and the calling of disciples. We pause on a mountain to hear the most "blessed" part of a sermon. Then, with Peter, James, and John, we follow Jesus up the mount of transfiguration. From this summit of light we quickly descend to a valley of ash. Then it's a slow, steady trek. We'll wander through the wilderness of temptation and a valley of dry bones. Our traveling companions are some of the Bible's best: Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Nicodemus, who are all on journeys of their own. We will pause to rest by a well and be refreshed not so much by the water as by the woman we encounter there. We will watch as a man born blind comes to sight and a man dead and gone comes to life. And we will wind up poised to climb another hill, this one crowned with a cross.

Our guide for this trip through the mountains is **David L. Nevergall**, pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Elmore, Ohio. David has served the people of Grace for the past ten years. A 1994 graduate of Trinity Seminary, David enjoyed a career of nearly fifteen years in advertising and marketing communications prior to entering seminary. Sometime during those years, I came to know David in Fairport, New York, where I served as one of David's pastors. I recall publicly praising David's voice as he sang the Easter Proclamation at our Easter Vigils and privately cursing David's questions—probing questions asked at an early-morning Bible study when I was scarcely awake. David reports that he has "one wife (Karen), two college-aged sons (Michael and John), and one yippy schnauzer who likes to bark at parishioners." I am glad these years later to turn to David for answers to what Scripture means for preaching.

As I made this trip through the mountains, I noticed that the song I sang changed. "Brightest and best of the stars of the morning, dawn on our darkness and lend us your aid" (*LBW* #84) gave way to "Beneath the cross of Jesus" (*LBW* #107). I found myself longing for "a home within the wilderness, a rest along the way." I found myself mindful that, while God's grace is free, faith can be hard. So often, we preachers want our hearers to *do* something in response to

our sermons. We look for change, for growth, for things to be different. But Paul reminds us that trusting, believing, and having faith was the first and most important thing Abraham did. Moses and Nicodemus reveal to us the strong forces that want to counter our faith, whether those forces are at work in the people around us, in the voices within us, or in the institutions that order and govern our lives and our world. A man born blind shows us that it can be costly to see with eyes of faith. And both a woman at a well and a woman at a tomb teach us that trust transcends what we know to be true.

In his thought-provoking book *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* my friend Chuck Campbell offers valuable insight into the forces that resist faith. Campbell argues that the powers and principalities of the world aggressively act in subtle but deadly ways that shape human life today and provide the context for Christian preaching. The New Testament writers capture a sense of the multiplicity and omnipresence of these powers, which impinge on human life from every conceivable angle. The powers work through concrete, material institutions, structures, and systems to rebel against God by making idols of themselves and placing their own desires above God's purpose for humanity and creation. The powers use tactics including negative sanctions, rewards and promises, isolation and division, demoralization and diversion, surveillance and secrecy, language and image to secure their own survival, dominate humanity, and bring chaos to the world.

Campbell presents preaching the Word of God as a critical act of nonviolent resistance to the work of these destructive powers. Preaching as an act of nonviolent resistance is central to both Jesus' own preaching and our proclamation of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Campbell suggests that preaching is a way the faithful engage the powers as communities of resistance shaped by a distinctive worldview and specific practices and virtues.

And so the mountains on this journey are more than geographic. They are the ups and downs of life with God and of daring to use our words to proclaim what that life means. Perhaps the most we can hope for is that we trust God enough to take another step. Then again, that's a lot!

Craig A. Satterlee
Editor of Preaching Helps
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
csatterl@lstc.edu

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 16, 2005

Isaiah 49:1–7
Psalm 40:1–12
1 Corinthians 1:1–9
John 1:29–42

First Reading

Isaiah's servant songs challenge the established belief that God would raise up powerful warrior kings to exalt Israel among the nations of the world. Instead, God will use Israel as a bruised reed or a dimly burning wick to bring light to the nations. This servant song consists of three sections: the servant is called and equipped by God (vv. 1–3), the servant despairs over apparent failure (v. 4), and the new mission from Yahweh (vv. 5–6). The servant's only weapon is "a mouth like a sharp sword."

In response to the servant's lament that the servant has labored in vain to gather Jacob and Israel back to God, God expands the scope of the servant's work from Israel to the nations, because God's salvation is no longer limited to Israel but will stretch to the ends of the earth. For this reason, the servant announces, "Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!" God's glory will be measured by the salvation of all rather than the political standing of Israel.

The psalm moves in the direction of God's expanding salvation. The psalmist recalls waiting patiently on the LORD, who heard the psalmist's cry, "drew me up from the desolate pit," and "set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure." The psalmist then sings a new song to God, whose wondrous deeds and thoughts toward us are too numerous to count. The psalmist sings this song of God's love and faithfulness to the great congregation.

This Sunday begins a series of second readings from 1 Corinthians 1–4. It seems that the Corinthians believed that the Holy Spirit is revealed in gifts of powerful speech and wisdom that can be measured according to human standards. Here Paul contrasts human wisdom, which the Corinthians value, with the paradox of the cross and the lowliness of the apostle. This passage consists of the greeting (vv. 1–3) and the thanksgiving (vv. 4–9). In the greeting, Paul establishes his credentials by asserting the divine basis of his apostleship. Paul also reminds the Corinthian congregation that it belongs to those in every place who call on the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul's repeated references to God and the Lord Jesus Christ remind the Corinthians that God's gift of salvation is the heart of Christian living.

John's account of the baptism of Jesus provides no baptism. Rather than standing with Jesus in the water, John bears witness to Jesus from a distance. John tells those around him that Jesus is lamb of God, expected messiah, and the Son of God. John then describes the divine sign that revealed Jesus to him (vv. 29–34). John's testimony compels two disciples to follow Jesus (vv. 35–42). Andrew then goes to bring Peter, his brother, to Jesus. Both the testimony of John and the action of this disciple declare that witnessing to the truth about Jesus is essential to faith.

Pastoral Reflection

Hearing about Jesus makes people curious. People want to experience Jesus firsthand, to experience Jesus for themselves.

If you could ask Jesus one question, what would you ask? Most of the queries I contemplate begin with the word Why . . . ? Today, two disciples get that chance to ask Jesus a question. Jesus looks over his shoulder at John's two disciples who follow him

and asks, "What are you looking for?" What do you want? What is your question? What do you seek?

I am amazed at the disciples's answer. They could have asked the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world anything they want. These two choose "Where are you staying?"—a question that does not lead to an answer. Besides, John's Prologue gives the answer: Jesus pitches a tent, stays, with us. But Jesus seems to know that these disciples seek relationship rather than information or explanation. So Jesus offers an invitation. Jesus says, "Come and see!"

In our day-to-day living, that's what we want to know as well. "Jesus, where are you staying?" Jesus, are you staying with me? And Jesus answers, "Come and see."

Where do we look for God? Isaiah tells us that God will not be found inside the lines that we draw, the borders that we set, or the walls that we build. Paul reminds us that God will not be found in gifts and accomplishments measured by human standards. God won't be found in spectacle, miracle, or undeniable success. That's not the way God chooses to work.

Jesus invited us to come and see Jesus. And we see. We see that the Word made flesh, the One baptized at the river, becomes the healer of the sick, the friend of the outcast, the herald of good news to the poor. Jesus stays with us. Even in pain, even in humiliation, even in rejection, betrayal, denial, destruction, and death, Jesus stays with us. That's what it means to be "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." That's what it means to "baptize with the Holy Spirit." In Jesus, God stays with us, no matter what! CAS

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 23, 2005

Isaiah 9:1–4
Psalm 27
1 Corinthians 1:10–18
Matthew 4:12–23

First Reading

The appointed passage from the prophet Isaiah (9:1–4) is part of a larger section concerned with the Immanuel sign given to Ahaz and the coming child's impact upon Judah (7:1–9:7). Verse 9:1 (8:23 in the Tanakh) forms a link between the prophet's rejection of idolatry in favor of waiting for the LORD and the consequence of the LORD's deliverance to be affected by a future ruler, perhaps Hezekiah or Josiah, as announced in the oracle of the coming king.

The mention of Zebulun and Naphtali as those brought into contempt may be linked historically to their acquisition by Assyria in 733 B.C.E. These small tribes, traditionally among the least significant of the Twelve, stand in heightened contrast to the emerging power of Assyria in the wake of the collapsed Syro-Ephramatic coalition. Their later redemption, as the future ruler brings light and deliverance, making glorious all of Galilee, is a theopolitical event that raises hopes for the reemergence of a unified Davidic kingdom. (Ah! The good ol' days!) Hence, the celebration in the oracle that follows, akin to the joy of a bountiful harvest and lustful abandon at the spoils of war, examples of the safe and abundant life enjoyed by God's people as their oppressors are defeated—a point reinforced by the recollection of their deliverance from the Midianites under the leadership of Gideon.

In Psalm 27, we are treated again to the

language of light, salvation, and deliverance from enemies in the form of confession and petition. The portion appointed for this day (vv. 1, 5–13 *LBW*) begins with the central premise of faith—unmitigated trust in the LORD. This is followed by a first petition that the psalmist may enjoy the protection of dwelling in Zion, acknowledging that the safety the psalmist seeks is in the LORD's presence. The psalmist's offering in exchange for this safety is the gift of praise. The second petition (incomplete) promises the psalmist's diligence in pursuing God's favor and the psalmist's confidence in God's continued help.

Paul writes to the Corinthians (1:10–18) with grave concern for their unity in Christ. A diverse community of faith since its founding, divisions are now manifest along the lines of those regarded as the teachers of the gospel. So Paul rehearses his list of who belongs to whom and questions the name in which the Corinthians were baptized, and not without a little humor concerning his own baptismal practices. More to the point, Paul regards the power of the cross as the central and unifying explication of God's work in Jesus Christ. The Corinthians must understand that nothing else—especially not the identity of a teacher or baptizer—can divide the people from their common heritage in the power of God made evident in the foolishness of the cross.

It has been suggested that Paul's limited initial success and the persecutions he endured in Philippi, Thessalonica, Beroea, and Athens (Acts 16–17) lie at the root of Paul's radical concern for the unity of Corinth. If indeed Paul arrives at Corinth exhausted from his conflicts with the synagogues and the intelligentsia, his exclusive focus on "Christ and him crucified" (2:2) is understandable as the core of his proclamation and consequently as a challenge to any community of believers that might be tempted to seek its identity in some lesser place.

For purposes of our analysis, the lesson from Matthew 4:12–23 is divided into two sections. The first part provides both context and message for the beginning of Jesus' public ministry; the second part recounts the calling of Jesus' first disciples.

The trigger for these events is the arrest (literally, the "handing over") of John, Jesus' forerunner and baptizer. Jesus withdraws into Galilee in a move that could initially have been interpreted as running for the safety of home, except that Jesus does not remain in Nazareth (the hometown cited as Joseph's choice in 2:23). Instead Jesus settles in Capernaum, a fishing village along the Sea of Galilee. Matthew interprets this move in light of Isaiah's pronouncements that those regions, Zebulun and Naphtali, which were first to succumb to the darkness of Assyrian bondage (see above) would be the first to celebrate the coming of God's saving light.

It is helpful to remember, too, that Galilee is not an exclusively Jewish territory but a place whose mixed population reflected its nature as a crossroads of the eastern Mediterranean. Amidst this diversity Jesus begins to preach: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." These words repeat John's earlier proclamation (3:2) but are spoken now to an audience that is potentially much broader. Robert Smith sees this as "prefiguring the universality [Jesus] would later proclaim" (*Matthew: Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament*, 69).

The content of this proclamation includes a call to μετανοεω. More than a mere changing of the mind, this is a call to reconsider the direction one is headed. This imperative is followed by an indicative: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." In pairing this proclamation with the refer-

ences to Isaiah, Matthew seems to indicate that this kingdom presence is realized in Jesus, a claim further explicated by the teaching and healing ministry that Jesus undertakes and ultimately revealed in Jesus' death and resurrection.

In the calling of Jesus' first disciples we see an immediate reaction to this proclamation. While it was the practice for students to seek out noted rabbis with whom to study, here Jesus turns the tables and approaches those whom he would call—fishers who leave behind their vocation and sons who leave behind a father. Both calls are deeply significant, because vital relationships are severed for the sake of new vocation and new family. The overwhelmingly positive reaction to Jesus continues as his ministry in Galilee unfolds in continued proclamation, teaching, and healing.

Pastoral Reflection

The folks in the congregation I serve are good people who come to church—many of them quite faithfully—to give thanks and praise to God and to find strength and inspiration for the living of these days. They are also a broken and vulnerable people (much like their pastor) who are lured and sometimes seduced by myriad lesser gospels that likewise promise strength and inspiration for the journey. They know what it's like to work hard to get what they need and want, and they're not afraid of that hard work. They also know what it's like to fail and to be deceived, sometimes even to the point of despair and cynicism.

So it is with care and a good bit of tenderness that I call them to repentance. Not a revivalist preacher by style, I find myself leaning toward the indicative in Jesus' proclamation first so that the possibility of the imperative might become evident. Good news! The kingdom of heaven is at hand in the person of Jesus. Good news! Our God not only keeps promises but stoops to keep them by knowing our sickness, our struggle, our darkness . . . even to the point of death on the cross, which marks us all. Good news! Here is light and illumination for a way of life that delivers us from the bondage of the anxious, acquisitive self. Good news! Here is something that is worthy of the turning of human life and ambition . . . that repentant turning itself a gracious gift of the one who is God's kingdom come near to us. "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, land of Elmore on the road to Toledo . . . the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. . . ."

But to leave the proposition there would do both the people and the texts a disservice. For like the first disciples whom Jesus called and those who came after them through their proclamation and the work of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled by Jesus' calling to lay aside our old understandings of human purpose and to follow after Jesus with renewed vocation. The fishers of old dragged their catch from life in the sea to death on the shore—a kind of reverse baptism, if you will. As Jesus' disciples in this generation, we continue to draw in the nets, bringing those who are caught up in the proclamation of the good news to the death we all share in Jesus' cross and the new life which is ours in Jesus' resurrection. More good news! We who often find ourselves lost and defeated have been remade in Christ's image to share the work that he began—to be bearers of light and hope to the dark places of our age.

Here is a call worth applying our God-given energies and skills to, and not simply for our own sake but to the glory of God and for the continuing deliverance of this whole creation from darkness into light, from death into life. DLN

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 30, 2005

Micah 6:1–8
Psalm 15
1 Corinthians 1:18–31
Matthew 5:1–12

First Reading

There is a crisis in the house of the LORD! If indeed Micah speaks in Jerusalem as a contemporary of Isaiah, he lives in violent and uncertain times. Israel and Judah, divided and often in armed conflict with each other for nearly two centuries, have weakened themselves to the point that Assyria is able to lay siege to the northern capital of Samaria and in three years crush it. Only God's intervention to incapacitate Sennacherib's armies temporarily saves Jerusalem from the same fate. The prophet from Moresheth understands how to interpret these events and, in a mix of threat and promise, lays before Judah the word of the LORD.

This most memorable passage (Micah 6:1–8) constitutes the first of four final pronouncements with which the prophet's work is closed. Here, in dramatic dialogical fashion, Micah describes what amounts to a cosmic courtroom drama in which Yahweh's people are summoned to give account of themselves. The "covenant lawsuit" setting is similar in format to Micah's opening pronouncement (1:2–7) except that here the trial takes a different turn. Yahweh pleads his case before a jury that consists of the cosmos itself, recalling for Israel in the presence of these witnesses the saving nature of the relationship to which God alone remains faithful, and in an impassioned speech (vv. 3–5) rehearses the history of God's stubborn grace.

The fact that the LORD would intervene to bring the people out of Egypt and deliver them from their bondage speaks implicitly of a commitment already made to these people as God's own. In reminding Judah of the prophets Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, Yahweh also brings to mind the nature of their calling as those who are sent by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Indeed, the memory of what God has done is still so fresh in the minds of the people that God need do no more than merely mention King Balak and Balaam without explanation. Likewise, "what happened from Shittim to Gilgal," likely an allusion to the crossing of the Jordan, is offered in the briefest of terms. In other words, what the people of God know is not at issue. Their willingness to render themselves obedient to this God is precisely the issue.

The peoples' response to Yahweh's pleading (vv. 6–7) is purely cultic and stated in extravagant terms: massive burnt offerings, huge quantities of sacred oils, even the offering of firstborn children (perhaps a slap at those who participated in such grisly practices). But the prophet, speaking on God's behalf, offers an ethical determination of true righteousness. In words that echo Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, the people are adjured to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly" with their God.

What characterizes those who live with God? Psalm 15 continues Micah's theme by further expanding on the ethical and relational nature of righteousness. There is a clear sense of right and wrong in these verses and a promise of God's steadfastness for those who follow this way of the LORD.

In 1 Corinthians Paul proclaims the message of the cross as the basis for unity in this divided congregation. But it is a message that will confuse those who seek to understand God's activity on the basis of the usual human standards. Paul, quoting Isaiah 29:14b, throws down the gauntlet against a

reliance on rhetoric or stubborn rationality. While Paul does not undermine the gift of authentic wisdom that comes from God, Paul challenges the arrogant and willful misuse of that wisdom, which would separate humankind from the God who gives it. So it is that the Good News may be comprehended not by religious signs or rational argument but only in the foolishness, the scandal, of the cross of Christ. It is here, separated from our own ability to do anything but gape in awe, that we meet the power of God to save the world in weakness.

And this, Paul argues, is obvious from the divine point of view as witnessed by the congregation itself, a ragtag collection that consists mostly of the poor and the overlooked of his age. What God began in the work of Jesus Christ God continues in the calling and gathering of a community of foolishness and weakness. These people, who don't even really exist under the world's demanding gaze, are made to count by this same foolishness of God. The playing field of human experience is leveled by the cross so that none may stand by, let alone boast in, their own power. The only source of life for this common humanity is in Jesus Christ. The unfolding of God's wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption are concepts that Paul will explicate further in the letter to the Romans (yet to be written). For now, Paul cites Jeremiah (9:23–24) that the locus of all our boasting be in the LORD.

The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12) stand at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, often cited as the first of five major teaching sections in Matthew's Gospel. This fact has led some commentators to suggest that Jesus, here teaching from the mountainside, is to be understood as a new Moses. As part of a successful preaching, teaching, and healing tour throughout Galilee, the writer notes that great crowds were following Jesus (4:25). Also note that the crowd was not specifically Jewish, consisting of followers from Galilee, the Decapolis, and across the Jordan as well as from Judea and Jerusalem. Indeed, Jesus' fame is widespread.

Seeing the crowds, Jesus "went up the mountain." This wording parallels Moses' ascent of Sinai in Exodus 19:3 (LXX). Jesus assumes the customary sitting position of the teacher, and his disciples come to him. Thus, although the human context for these pronouncements is the crowd, it appears that Jesus' teaching is addressed specifically to his disciples.

The notion of "blessed ones" is broader than human contentment or happiness but indicates the recipient of divine favor. Those so favored are seemingly divided into two groups: the unfortunate and the virtuous. Briefly on each:

- "the poor in spirit" (Matthew alone adds this distinction) might be interpreted as the humble and unpretentious as opposed to those whose charisms have led them to arrogance;
- "those who mourn" may well not be limited to the suffering of death, illness, and the humiliation of Jesus' contemporaries by the Romans but also those who grieve the sinfulness of a fallen humanity;
- "the meek" may also be translated as "the gentle"—an aspect of Jesus' self-identification as evidenced by his invitation (11:29) and his entry into Jerusalem (21:1–10).
- "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" speaks to more than the justice of a level playing field for humankind, to the final indwelling of God when the creation is made whole;
- "the merciful" is a reminder that the fullness of God's intent is found wherein those who have the means for human livelihood and encouragement are engaged in compassionate relationship with those who need them;
- "the pure in heart" bespeaks a single-

minded devotion and subjugation of the human will to the divine;
• "the peacemakers" work beyond the mere cessation of human conflict, striving for the greater reconciliation that transcends old boundaries and arguments so that both parties may be laid open before God (6:23–24);
• "the persecuted for righteousness' sake" stand in a long line of the prophets and the pious who have borne the consequence of co-identity with the will of God.

So in all of these we see not only what the disciples will suffer for their following but also what Christ himself will undergo. In the more direct language of the ninth beatitude ("blessed are you . . ."), those gathered close to Jesus are given (already in the fifth chapter) the interpretive tools necessary to understand the context and the ultimate meaning of Jesus' suffering as well as their own.

Pastoral Reflection
Rejoice and be glad? Jesus has got to be kidding. Where is there room here for the religiously successful, for those of us who know the appropriate protocols for pouring out rivers of oil (I'm sure there must be one!)? We work at dazzling the crowds with our magic and our metaphor, filling our buildings (if not our people) with laughter and wonder. Oh, if we only had a bigger marketing budget for the church and a brighter digital projector and cup holders on all of the seats and a 64-foot röhrflöte on the organ that would really rattle the rafters.

But no. Jesus reminds us that our visions of what it means to be successfully faithful pale beside the divine favor poured out on those who have no place to turn except to God, which, of course, is all of us. We just don't have the courage to admit it, and so we find ourselves enslaved to the proposition of manufacturing an alternative universe in which Jesus commands our attention from a T8 rather than from a cross and calls us to the spectacular and the extravagant rather than the mundane business of justice, kindness, and humility before God.

Much as we would like it to be the case, our pretense cannot disguise our situation. It is only when we are able to admit who we are—a motley crew not unlike Paul's collection in Corinth—that we are at last enabled to understand how deeply we need a God who blesses the poor, the mournful, the meek, and the hungry. It is there, in our need, that true discipleship becomes possible quite apart from the arrogance of our striving. And it is there that we meet Christ himself, realizing with a gasp and an instinctive hesitation that he speaks to us and speaks of himself when he says "Blessed are you."

Rejoice and be glad . . . in the face of persecution and evil? Absolutely! For it is Christ himself who will bear first all that evil can weigh against righteousness. And nothing worse will happen to us than happens to him. Thanks be to God. DLN

The Transfiguration of Our Lord
February 6, 2005

Exodus 24:12–18
Psalm 2
2 Peter 1:16–21
Matthew 17:1–9

First Reading
This particular sojourn for Moses on the mountain of God (Exodus 24:12–18) comes at the conclusion of the first part of the great theophany at Sinai during which the Covenant is made with Israel and the Decalogue and the book of the Covenant are given.

Some scholars have suggested that these verses are a conflation of two traditions, the Elohist in verses 12–15a and 18b and verses 15b–18a of Priestly origin.

Perhaps more important to our task is the nature of the appearing of God on the mountain. Traditionally, our portion of the text is identified, along with the ratification of the covenant and the celebratory meal in the presence of God, as the closing scene in the first act of the great theophany. But the argument could be made that this subsequent ascent of Sinai introduces the next major section of the Sinai experience—the granting of instructions for the building of the sanctuary, the preparation of its furnishings, and the consecration of its ministers. The description of "the cloud" and "the glory of Yahweh" as the means by which God is present corresponds to the tabernacled presence of the Lord, which will soon fill the newly built tent of meeting (40:34–35) and will later take possession of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:10–11). It is the same phenomenon that Ezekiel describes as leaving the temple just before the fall of Jerusalem and later returning to reestablish God's presence there.

To the watching Israelites, the "devouring fire" of God's presence is a fearful sight into which Moses walks, being summoned by God to enter on the seventh day (perhaps signaling the completion of a time of preparation). As Moses remains unseen on the mountain for an indefinitely long period ("forty days and forty nights"), the Israelites below come to assume the worst and prevail upon Aaron to make them an idol to worship (chap. 32). Being within sight of the phenomenon of God's appearing does not guarantee faith or an appropriate interpretation of the meaning of that presence.

Psalm 2 declares the primacy of Israel's king before the nations of the world. This claim is made not on an historical basis but on a theological one with the assertion of God's fatherhood and anointing for the messianic ruler of God's people. By extension, all the kings of the earth are thus subordinate to Israel's king. They may desire rebellion against Yahweh and the anointed one but are not capable of anything more than terror at the fury of God's rebuke. One note: the locus of the mountain of the Lord is changed from Sinai to Zion. It is here that all the peoples of the earth are called to gather in fear and trembling.

For his part, the anointed one of God is granted absolute authority over the nations (which are already assumed to be God's possession). According to James Mays (Interpretation, John Knox Press), this is the only psalm in which all three royal titles are present—king, son of God, anointed one. If indeed it was used as part of the installation of the king, this would affirm for his court and his people the extent and foundation of his authority.

Speaking with apostolic authority, the author of 2 Peter seeks to assert the primacy of early catholic teaching in the post-apostolic church. Scholars disagree about the nature of the opponents whose teaching raised the need for this letter. Perhaps they were early Gnostics whose mythological systems would occasion the reference in 1:16. This would likely date the book to the early second century, well after the death of Peter in 65–67 C.E. Others contend that, with the passing of the first generation of Christian believers, the eschatological urgency that so influenced the early church was lost. In its place there grew a dangerous ethical libertinism that threatened the moral and social fabric of the emerging faith. Many holding this view date the book as early as 60 C.E. but more likely in the last decade of the first century.

Our passage is introduced by the writer's need to remind the readers of his testimony

before his impending martyrdom. It is followed by an acknowledgment of the presence of false teachers within the community and the judgment that awaits them. In between, the author claims to be an eyewitness to the transfiguration. Interestingly, the synoptics do not specifically mention God but simply a voice from the cloud. Here the author interprets for us that voice as God the Father and the cloud as Yahweh's transcendent glory—not by citing specifics from the Old Testament but by reiterating the understanding already current in first-century Christianity. The "holy mountain" here is obviously not Sinai and likely not Zion, but the mount of the transfiguration, which becomes their antitype.

As the words of the prophets are thus confirmed in the revealing of Jesus on the mountain, so the early church is called to faith in the orthodoxy that stems from such witness and interpretation. Rather than abandoning their expectations, believers are called to trust that the glimpse of Jesus' glory in that moment portends his return in glory at the parousia. This understanding is the bright focus of their hope that must not be diminished by the counterclaims of the various false teachers and preachers who have arisen among them.

Matthew's presentation of the transfiguration (17:1–8) comes six days after Jesus' first prophecy of his passion, death, and resurrection and is located on a high but unnamed mountain, variously proposed as Mount Tabor (in Galilee) and Mount Hermon (near Caesarea Philippi; see 16:13). Matthew's account differs from Mark and Luke in that Jesus is more distinctly presented as the new Moses, characterized by Jesus' meeting with God on a new Sinai after which his face shines (Exod 24:15–18). Jesus meets with two other biblical figures, Moses and Elijah, both of whom experienced revelations on Sinai and who personify the Law and the Prophets, which are now brought to their fullness in Jesus.

Only three disciples are present with Jesus on the mountain—Peter, James and John. The reference to six days may parallel the time that Moses waited on the mountain to be received by Yahweh and could thus place this incident on the seventh day, even as Moses entered God's presence on the seventh day. The prediction of the cross frames this event (16:21, 17:9).

Nonetheless, for one brief moment Jesus' deeper glory overwhelms his humble, human bearing so that the disciples may grasp the fuller identity and authority of Jesus. Peter's declaration of wonder and desire to enshrine the experience unintentionally places Jesus on the same level as Moses and Elijah, indicating that the full significance of this event in the light of Jesus' predictions of his death and resurrection had not yet become apparent to even Jesus' inner circle of followers. So the voice from the cloud, clearly an interpolation of God's presence, interrupts in messianic language that affirms Jesus' place as authoritative Son of God. Terrified, the disciples fall on their faces, an appropriate position for worship. But, standing at Jesus' invitation, they find that only Jesus remains, the one to whom they are commanded to listen. It is often proposed that the inclusion of v. 9 in this pericope is necessary so that the event itself will not overwhelm the remainder of Jesus' earthly ministry or impede Jesus' journey to the cross.

Pastoral Reflection

I am intrigued by the shifting location of the mountain of God. We encounter it first in Sinai's desert, then in Jerusalem, then in Galilee (or Lebanon, take your pick). The question becomes: Where might we next encounter Yahweh's glory? How will we be surprised, indeed driven to our knees, at the

bright majesty of God's appearing?

My beeper went off a little after 1 a.m. It was December, the middle of Advent, which means that there was Christmas music on the radio during the drive into the hospital. Making my way to the neurosurgical intensive care unit, I was greeted by a very somber charge nurse who informed me that things were not going well at bed 4. The thirteen-year-old girl who lay there, full of tubes and surrounded by all that technology could muster in her defense, had collapsed at her school that afternoon. Taken to a small, local hospital, it was determined that she had suffered a significant "bleeder" on her brain. She was flown to the large, urban medical center where I worked in the hope that the surgeons there could rein in the damage and save her life. That was not going to happen.

The girl's mother and her aunt were sitting at the bedside. I did not want to go into the small space allowed for their suffering, not because I didn't wish to interrupt them but simply because I was afraid. I was afraid of my own ignorance. I was afraid of what they might ask me to do or say. I was afraid of my own vulnerability in the face of their potential anger. But chaplains walk into such situations, and so I did.

I was not surprised by the greeting I received. The aunt was overwhelmed with grief and hurt, and in no uncertain terms laid out before me her refusal to accept what she understood to be God's horrific intervention into this young girl's life. How dare the Almighty steal away this precious one from her family and friends? And she wept; and so did the child's mother; and so did I.

We sat without words for a long time. When finally I had summoned the courage to suggest that we pray together, the girl's mother took my hands, grasping them fiercely. Between her words and mine we commended the child into the care of the One to whom she had always belonged. We prayed for strength in the midst of wrenching loss and hope for a resurrection life that could transfigure even death itself. Our amens spoken, the mother looked at me and smiled.

There was no cloud or bright, fiery glory in that moment. But there was the shining face of this woman. Her tears were a dazzling testimony to both love and faith. In that room, the authority of God was not merely a theological exercise or a claim to be made against the enemies of this life and preached in the orthodoxy of the church. The authority of God was a living certainty that the one who fulfills all the promises of God stands at last even as Lord over death itself. And in Christ's power, we could go out from that little room to live amid the idols and sufferings of this world in hope.

The girl died shortly before sunrise. When her mother kissed her finally goodbye, her tears remained on the child's now quiet face. So, too, did the glory of the one who had received her home. And there again is the mountain of God . . . the place of Yahweh's appearing, of Jesus' glorification. It is the cross-crowned place named Calvary, where at last in the revelation of Jesus we, too, are transfigured from death into life. DLN

Ash Wednesday
February 9, 2005

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17
Psalm 51:1–18
2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

First Reading

While the scholars disagree as to a precise date (somewhere between the 9th and 3rd centuries B.C.E.), the writings of the prophet Joel are set within the context of a specific event. A plague of locusts, perhaps extending beyond more than one growing season, has devastated the agricultural economy of Judah to the point that there is nothing left even to make appropriate sacrifices in the Temple. In the midst of this natural disaster, the prophet announces that there is more at work than hungry insects. This natural phenomenon must be understood as a declaration of Yahweh's judgment against the nation. We begin our reading with a cry of alarm raised across the land that the great and terrible day of the LORD is at hand. Like a mighty army, the locusts are assembled on the horizon and will be unleashed across the countryside at Yahweh's command to bring destruction that is beyond memory.

In the midst of this terror, none other than Yahweh cries out to the people, pleading for their return not just in cultic or symbolic ways but with the rededication of their whole lives to God. Indeed, the prophet promises God's mercy and suggests that restoration is not so far off, that the land and her peoples will once again produce the good things necessary for life and the faithful practice of the cult.

There is but one thing to do: summon the entire community to fasting and prayer so that Yahweh's mercy may be poured out upon the chosen people. This is done not only for the relief of Judah but also for proof to the nations who would deride Israel for her faith. Thus even disaster and loss become a means by which God's power, mercy, and grace might be made manifest.

If Joel provides the summons for repentance, Psalm 51 provides the liturgical language. The form is that of a personal prayer of contrition, linked historically to David on the occasion of his repentance following Nathan's confrontation of the king for the murder of Uriah and the affair with Bathsheba. It is the fourth and likely the most well-known of the seven penitential psalms, of which Luther declared "Here the true doctrine of repentance is set forth before us" (*Luther's Works* 12:305). The confessional language is stunning in its clarity: "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." There is no evasion. God is acknowledged as pure and upright; humankind is born a broken species. Yet God's victory over sin is shown in mercy and in the power that penetrates to transform human willfulness. It is a creative act in which a new human heart is made for joy and thanksgiving and praise.

Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth is often understood to be a compilation of at least three and perhaps four distinct writings, spanning a two- to three-year period in the middle 50s C.E. and edited into one unit sometime in the first decades after the apostle's martyrdom and before his letters were widely circulated, approximately 75–80 C.E. The portion assigned for Ash Wednesday comes from what would have been the last of those letters. It is believed to have been written from Ephesus in late autumn or early winter of 55 C.E. That the letter is of Pauline authorship is not disputed.

Paul's struggle with the contentious community at Corinth is grounded in his opposition by a band of "super-apostles"

who have argued (somewhat successfully) against the validity of Paul's own apostolic credentials. Paul counterattacks with great vigor, chiefly in an earlier letter preserved for us in 2 Corinthians 10–13. By the time this final letter is written, however, Paul's tone is decidedly gentle. Paul's language is now characterized by the themes of hope, encouragement, and reconciliation.

The reconciliation of which Paul speaks is possible only through the action of God in Christ Jesus. God made Jesus to be at one with a sinful humanity so that through his obedience we might be transformed into righteous ones before God. This promise comes, however, with a certain eschatological urgency. Paul understood himself to be alive during a short intermediary period between Christ's resurrection and his final appearing. This time was given for the purpose of conversion, a gift to which Paul urges the Corinthians to respond. Paul points to his own steadfastness in the midst of suffering and trial for the gospel; in all these things Paul is sustained by the very power of God, the promise to all who follow Paul's example.

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21 continues Jesus' instructions to the disciples from the Sermon on the Mount. If we subscribe to the theory that the sermon is composed of three distinct segments, our portion comes from the second of these segments, in which Jesus lays out the moral demands of participation in the cult. It is modeled on the prevalent notions of Jewish piety, which understood individual moral response to God as borne principally in almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. These disciplines are not rejected by Jesus but reassessed in terms of the integrity of their practice.

The admonition in 6:1 applies to all three. Genuine piety is honest about who it is trying to impress and focuses solely on actions by which God (not the practitioner) is glorified. The foil for Jesus' pronouncements is called hypocrite. Although this word is commonly translated as "actor," it is presumed in these verses to extend that sense to one who is a spiritual pretender. Hence, almsgiving is not to be done with announcement, for the sake of human admiration, but with such discretion that even the left hand is unaware of the right hand's generosity. Prayer is perhaps modeled after Daniel (6:11), who returns to the privacy of his room in order to pray and give praise. Likewise, those who fast should strive to make no public display of their deprivation.

In each case, the reward sought by public piety is public recognition. Such transitory acclaim is not the goal of the true disciple. Rather, Jesus adjures them to seek a heavenly treasure that, although it cannot be grasped or understood by the usual human standards of success, is nonetheless indestructible. It is finally a statement about the priorities we set (consciously or unconsciously) for our religious practice . . . the satisfaction of self or the satisfaction of God.

Pastoral Reflection

We live two lives—what people see on the outside and what's really going on inside. In school we learn what outward signs will please the teacher: Don't punch your neighbor and stay awake. On the job we learn to put up a good front whenever the boss happens to stroll by. In our conversations in the narthex, we learn to smile and nod and thank the preacher for the sermon even if we didn't understand a thing. As if donning masks, we style our hair, choose our clothes, hone our body language to impress those around us. Over time, we learn to excel at hiding away any truly serious problems, maybe even from ourselves. And because most people tend to judge by outward appearances, it's relatively easy to fool them. If you doubt

that, just watch the news the next time a mass murderer is arrested. There will be an interview with at least one neighbor who was convinced that "he was such a nice young man."

Lent is the season in which we get to address that outside/inside disparity; it's a time to recall and renew our baptism, to let God's creative and transforming mercy wash us clean indeed. It's a season to rejoice that God is not fooled by our appearances. We cannot fake behavior in order to impress God. God knows that in all of us lurk some terrible secrets, dark smudges on the otherwise happy faces we would put before each other and the world.

The good news is that God does deal with our sinfulness, our hypocrisy. God has already dealt with it in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That's why the dark smudges on our foreheads are worn in the shape of a cross. For in it we are reminded that the way has been opened between earth and heaven, trading pretense for humility, pride for compassion, despair for hope, death for life. God has seen past our masks and our makeups and has chosen to love us anyway with a mercy so wide, a grace so deep, that pretending is no longer the necessity we always assumed it was. DLN

First Sunday in Lent
February 13, 2004

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12–19
Matthew 4:1–11

First Reading

In this older of the two creation accounts Yahweh settles the human creature in a paradisiacal garden where there is provided not only everything needed for physical life but also a place and purpose within the created order: "to till it and keep it." The command to avoid the tree of the knowledge of good and evil speaks to a privilege that God preserves for the divine. The knowledge, which the tree ascribes, is not omniscience, which fallen creatures certainly do not possess. Neither is it moral discrimination, which, as sentient beings, humankind possessed already prior to the fall. Rather, it is "the power of deciding for himself what is good and what is evil and of acting accordingly" (*The New Jerusalem Bible*, ed. Henry Wansborough [Doubleday, 1973]). To disobey God and eat of the tree stakes a human "claim to complete moral independence by which man refused to recognize his status as a created being" (ibid.). There is a drastic consequence for such behavior: death (2:17) or at least the "pain of death" (3:3).

The serpent that beguiles the woman into eating the fruit is generally interpreted to be an embodiment of all the forces that oppose both God and humankind, although a specific correlation between the serpent and Satan does not appear until the later Old Testament writings and throughout Christian tradition. It is a logical conclusion to draw, however. The serpent first tests how the woman understands God's command, then challenges that understanding with an appeal that transcends the limits of creaturehood: "You will be like gods." A subtle simile that yet makes no substantive promise for change in the human condition is enough justification for disobedience. Subsequent to eating and sharing the fruit, the man and woman find themselves aware of the vulnerability of their condition and, in the first consequence of their sin, work to hide themselves from each other and from God.

Although routinely included in lists of the seven penitential psalms, Psalm 32 is also considered a psalm of thanksgiving,

and indeed, in some circles considered more a lesson in the practice of penitence than an actual psalm by form. Its structure opens with a rehearsal of the benefits of God's forgiveness. Verse 2 is quoted by Paul in Romans 4:6–8 as support for his argument that God credits righteousness solely on the basis of faith. This is followed by a description of the burden of guilt, the power of confession, and the resultant relief that God's mercy brings. The psalm closes with an extended testimony to those who would learn from the psalmist's experience. As a response to the Genesis reading, it reasserts the primacy of trust in God versus the willful disobedience of humankind.

The logic by which Paul parallels Adam and Christ is central to the notion of original sin as developed by Augustine and others. But it is hardly the primary focus of these verses (5:12–19). Instead, the Genesis text of temptation and fall and the Gospel texts of temptation and triumph form the background for Paul's commentary. By postulating death as the result of the sin of Adam, the apostle argues for the universality of sin by evidence of the universality of death. All since Adam have died; therefore sin has reigned in all since Adam, and further, all in sin and death are cut off from God. Conversely, the resurrection of Jesus is evidence of the triumph of perfect obedience to God (something that Adam could not accomplish) and results in life and righteousness before God. Christ has undone what Adam did, and the choice for humanity could not be starker.

Christ's victory, however, is not yet clearly evident. So the role of faith is to sustain those who believe that what God is accomplishing by grace in Christ Jesus is sufficient and will be revealed in the final day.

The spirit of God, which guided the prophets and leaders of Israel, takes Jesus into the wilderness. Fasting as a cleansing for the receiving of God's word and as a sign of devotion to God's demands is a comprehensible discipline within first-century Jewish practice. There is also a parallel for this with Moses (Exod 34:28). Israel's own forty-year sojourn is clearly in Matthew's mind as he describes the time frame for Jesus' experience. So, too, are Israel's struggles with obedience to God. Like his ancestors, Jesus faces hunger and the temptation to seek sustenance apart from God. Jesus is lured to substitute the acclaim of religious spectacle for humility and true devotion. Finally, Jesus is transported to that place from which all the nations of the world can be seen (another Moses parallel to Deut 34:1–4?) and promised, albeit by the father of lies, lordship over all the kingdoms of the earth in exchange for allegiance. In each case, Jesus (with Moses still seeming to look over his shoulder) dismisses the devil's empty promises with the words of Deuteronomy. But more: Jesus' contentions with the devil make plain the kind of messiah he will be . . . one not molded by the usual notions of power but whose true authority resides in a steadfast focus on the will of God.

An aside: The fact that the devil also knows the scriptures should give us some cause for concern over the popular bibliolatry of our age.

It is noted that, in Matthew's rendering of this passage, the devil's temptations seem to work in a widening sphere of influence, focused initially on Jesus' personal needs, expanding to his place within the faith of Israel, and extending finally to the boundaries of the created order. Finally, with the temptations finished (no mention of a later "opportune time" as in Luke), Jesus is attended by angels, perhaps as messengers of God's mercy upon the Son of God.

Pastoral Reflection

At the local superstore where we do most of our shopping, I can pretty much guarantee that by this first week of Lent the Easter candy will be widely available. That's welcome news for me. I just love those little foil-wrapped dark chocolate eggs. In fact, it's the best time to buy before the selection gets all picked over. Never mind that it's the first Sunday in the Lenten season. It's the perfect time to satisfy my sweet tooth. Or could there be a reason to hold off bringing this stuff home? Could it be valuable to deprive myself of even something as small as a chocolate egg?

In the wilderness, Satan confronts Jesus. He sets forth a number of proposals, things for Jesus to consider here at the outset of his ministry. Notice that not only does everything Satan ask have a religious connotation; everything Satan proposes is "good." Bread, after all, is good. Think of the impact on world hunger if we had the capacity to turn stones into bread. Satan's suggestion that Jesus throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple is weird, sure, but still might be helpful. Wouldn't our witness in the world be easier if we had some irrefutable, visible, undeniable evidence to bring before those who demand to be dazzled? And isn't political power—the power to force social change, to enforce the ethical demands of the kingdom—a good thing?

The reason it makes so much sense to us (at least at first blush) is that we are a pragmatic, utilitarian people. If you are the Son of God, Jesus, turn these stones into bread, give us a sense of inner peace, help us make it through the week, keep my children chaste and pure, fix my marriage, help me with my financial problems, unwrap these little chocolate eggs . . . and then we will worship you.

And Jesus said, "No." (Thank you, Jesus.)

When the Lord quotes scripture to the devil, he quotes from Deuteronomy, the book of Israel's laws, the Ten Commandments for everyday life. Here's a clue: This God has expectations of us. Demands. We believe that this God cares about us, that this God does meet our needs. Yet we also believe that this God changes our needs, gives us a perspective on life and what is truly important that we would not have if we were not serving this God. Which means that the life to which we are called as Christians is a lifetime spent learning to pay attention, learning to ask "What does God want from me?" The answers we gain may lead us to be faithful in ways that we had not considered, to be God's people after a fashion that doesn't start with me first.

We know, of course, where this temptation story leads, and it is not to the fulfillment of Jesus' every desire, not in spectacular success. It leads to the cross, with Jesus doing what he did out there in the wilderness—commending himself and his life into the Father's hands.

And where else would we go? Satan's promises of practical power, in the end, all fade away to nothing precisely because they are built not on eternal things but on passing human fancies. Like Christ, we are called to lay aside our personal agendas in favor of what God has in mind for the world, and to lay aside our way of doing things in order to walk God's way—the way of the cross, a way that recognizes the reality of our human frailty and sinfulness but does not abandon us there.

Jesus' rebuke of the devil in the wilderness is a recognition that there are no shortcuts to eternity. There is no easy, painless way to accomplish God's kingdom work. Rather, Jesus is called to walk fully in the human experience of life and death in order to redeem those things for God's purposes. And we are called to follow, to have faith

that where Christ has gone to redeem and restore, we go now to live. We don't have to leap from one candy bowl to the next in order to feel good. Rather, we can listen for God's will, walk the walk of Jesus' own self-giving love, and be secure in the knowledge of the presence of God's holy and guiding Spirit with us every step of the way. Even in the wilderness. DLN

Second Sunday in Lent
February 20, 2005

Genesis 12:1–4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1–5, 13–17
John 3:1–17

First Reading

Genesis 12 marks a shift from primeval history to the stories of the patriarchs. Abram, son of Terah, husband of Sarai, father of Ishmael and Isaac, is the first of these and, as such, the founder of a new people borne out of faithful response to the promise of Yahweh. The primary source for the introductory material on the patriarchs is the Yahwist, although some harmonization and other editorial work have been done by the Priestly tradition. We are introduced to Abram in 11:27, along with his brothers Nahor and Haran, the father of Lot. Nahor and his wife Milcah would later be identified as the grandparents of Rebekah. And it is announced, even before Abram's call, that Sarai is barren.

The family home is identified as Ur of the Chaldaeans, a city in lower Mesopotamia. (The reference to the Chaldaeans is seen as evidence of a later editor modifying the Yahwistic original for readers in the neo-Babylonian period.) We are told that it was originally Terah's intent to take part of his family and move to Canaan. However, upon arrival in Haran (an area that the Yahwist seems to indicate is the family home), Terah and his clan settle down. This original migration is thus disputed by some scholars. But there were significant religious and commercial relationships between Ur and Haran at the beginning of the second millennium B.C.E., so such relocation is not out of the question.

The call of Abram consists of demand and promise. The demand of God (12:1) requires separation from whatever family, social, religious, and economic ties Abram had accumulated by his establishment in Haran. The risk in stepping away from these attachments should not be minimized; they were understood as the basis for the survival of the clan. Letting go of them is the first act of faith that may be attributed to the patriarch. The promise that God gives is threefold. There will be a homeland; there will be descendants sufficient to people a great nation; there will be participation in the divine purpose as Abram becomes the means through which God's saving grace will bless all the families of the earth.

Psalm 121 is the second in a series of songs of ascent (Psalms 120–134) thought to have been sung by pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for the great feasts. In our appointed song, Yahweh is celebrated as Israel's trusted guardian not only for the road to Zion but for the road of life's journey. Indeed, it is not clear to which hills the psalmist lifts his eyes. This opening proposition may be an expression of concern about the brigands and thieves that could well await the traveling party making its way to Jerusalem. Or it may be that in thanksgiving, those approaching Jerusalem have fixed their eyes at last on Mt. Zion. In either case, the thesis of the psalm is stated with confidence that our help is firmly in God's hands.

This introduction is followed by an

elaboration of the premise in three parts. The one who keeps Israel will not sleep on the job; Yahweh is actively engaged with the people who have been chosen. God is the shade under which we are protected from sun and moon, perhaps to be interpreted as protection from those who worship the heavenly bodies as deities and thus disparage Israel's devotion to the unseen Yahweh. Finally, God is celebrated as the author and sustainer of human life within whom all our walks and ways are sheltered.

In Romans 4, and on the heels of his argument for righteousness as a result of grace received through faith, Paul brings forth Abraham as an example. This citation is powerful for two reasons. First, Paul argues that the righteousness usually attributed to Abraham as the result of his steadfastness in trial and in the keeping of the covenant doesn't reach back far enough into the scriptural record. Abraham is accounted righteous before God on the basis of the trust that compels him from Haran to Canaan. This is long before he was circumcised (Genesis 17) or tested (Genesis 22). Second, as the bearer of God's blessing to all peoples, Abraham's model becomes normative for those who are his children, i.e., those who share his trust in God. That trust is imputed as righteousness by God who seems unwilling to separate one from the other; those who respond in faith are declared righteous by God and thus are. This providence is a gift of God that cannot be earned and therefore cannot be a vehicle for human pride. Thus, the law by which righteousness had traditionally been measured is, in fact, preceded by and rests on faith. Its sole purpose is to serve as a measure by which the extent and nature of sin may be known and so cannot be salvific. Paul closes this portion of his argument with a reminder of who we're dealing with here. Remember, Paul seems to say, that the foundation for this grace is the same God who brings the dead to life and calls all creation into being *ex nihilo*. What may be outside the scope of human ability is obviously not beyond the possible for such a One as this.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. This conversation under the cover of darkness, a motif that fits well within the symbology of light and darkness employed throughout the Fourth Gospel, is a sign of both the secrecy that this Teacher of Israel wishes to maintain and of the ignorance and misunderstanding in which he operates. Nicodemus professes to know that Jesus is a great teacher sent from God but cannot yet comprehend the nature of that teaching or how it will be embodied by Jesus in his lifting up from the earth.

Listening in on the conversation that takes place between Jesus and Nicodemus, one is struck by how little they seem to actually communicate. Obviously we are not tuned into an historical dialogue; indeed, some scholars suggest that Nicodemus is little more than a literary contrivance by which the author allows Jesus to make theological pronouncements—in this case, rebirth into the coming reign of God and the nature of Jesus' own mission. It could be argued that the heart of the material before us is either a homily by the evangelist or a confession of faith from some early catechetical material (note the use of plural pronouns in v. 11). That does not discount, however, the possibility that Nicodemus did exist. The name is certainly well attested among first-century Jews, and it is likely that Jesus had won some hesitant following even among the ruling class.

A few additional observations: John's propensity toward dualism is evident in the comparisons between flesh and spirit, earthly things and heavenly things, and the ascending and descending of the Son of Humanity. Verses 14–15 argue for the necessity of

Jesus' saving death by reference to Moses' use of the bronze serpent (Numbers 21). This Old Testament symbol gives way to God's broader purpose in Christ, that all the world gain eternal life through faith in Jesus. Finally, this is the first in a Lenten series of conversations with Jesus as we journey through John's Gospel during this season. While these incidents are inherent in the structure of the evangelist's writing, they may also offer the opportunity for some additional, intentional study with the congregation during this season.

Pastoral Reflection

Hey, Abe, how'd you like to hit the road;
See the world from a whole different
point of view?
Hey, Abe, how'd you like to be the guy;
You and Sarai be the couple that I'm
workin' through?

All you got to do is open up your heart,
and let the Spirit lead the way.
Then together we can make another start,
and give the world a brand new day.

Hey, Nick, how'd you like to let it go;
Crawl out from under all the weight
you haul around?
Step back and let the cooling breezes blow;
Look up and see a new tomorrow
comin' down!
All you got to do is open up your heart,
and let the Spirit lead the way.
Then together we can make another start,
and give the world a brand new day.

For God so loved the world
he gave his only Son,
And the blessing promised long ago
through Abram's race is won!

Hey, you, what ya' doin' with your life?
Are you ready to believe in somethin'
truly great?
Jesus came to claim the world
the Father loves;
Now our sin can never God and humans
separate.

All you got to do is open up your heart,
and let the Spirit lead the way.
Then together we can make another start,
and give the world a brand new day.

(to be sung as a shuffle, at a comfortable, walking tempo . . . B^b major.) DLN

Third Sunday in Lent
February 27, 2005

Exodus 17:1–7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1–11
John 4:5–42

First Reading

The miracle of water from the rock is also reported in Numbers 20:1–13, although the location in that text is in the region of Kadesh. Rephidim, the site in Exodus, is the last stopping place of the Israelites before they come to Mt. Sinai. It is also the location of the defeat of the Amalekites, even though this opposing tribe was thought to live much farther to the northeast in the Negev near Mt. Seir, and the place where Jethro, Moses' father-in-law and the priest of Midian, comes to offer his advice on the administration of the people.

The precise location of Rephidim is a problem related to the location of Mt. Sinai itself, an issue that is exacerbated by details in the text. If Israel engages the Amalekites in the wilderness, some argue for a more northerly location for Mt. Sinai, perhaps at Mt. Seir or another location closer to Kadesh Barnea and consequently a more northerly location for Rephidim. If Israel is close

enough to receive Jethro from Midian, it has been suggested that Sinai should be located across the Gulf of Aqaba in a region of northwestern Arabia known to have experienced volcanic activity in historic times (thus providing a reasonable explanation for the smoke and fire of the great theophany in Exodus 19ff.). Nonetheless, the traditional location for Sinai at the Jebel Musa near the southern tip of the peninsula continues to be accepted as the most likely site given what is known about ancient trade routes through these wilderness areas. That being the case, Rephidim is supposed to have been either at Wadi Feiran or more likely Wadi Refayid.

The miracle itself comes in response to the incessant complaining of the Israelites about the lack of available water. Moses takes their concerns and the fear for his own life to Yahweh, who instructs him to strike the rock. When Moses does so, water comes forth, and the people's thirst is quenched. In recognition of the incident, Moses renames the place Massah ("testing") or Meribah ("contention"). Israel is later reminded of what happened at that place (Deut 6:16; 9:22; 33:8) and warned not to likewise test Yahweh. Rabbinic tradition insists that the rock followed Israel throughout its wanderings, based on an interpretation of 17:6 in which Yahweh promises to stand before Moses on the rock at Horeb (Sinai). Paul later picks up this image in 1 Cor 10:4 as evidence of the preexistent Christ already active in Israel's history.

Psalm 95 is most familiar to us as an invitatory. It is, in fact, more than an entrance hymn, also containing a word of God to the assembly. Beyond the summons to praise in verses 1–2, two theological claims are made. First (vv. 3–5), Yahweh is a great king above all gods, not an allusion to nonmonotheistic Judaism but recognition that the world in which this hymn was composed was rife with many deities in many cultures. Second (vv. 6–7a), Israel recognizes that it owes its very existence as a people to this God who is not only Creator and King over all but reigns over them as leader, sustainer, and provider.

Verses 7b–11 are Yahweh's words to the assembled congregation and draw directly upon our Old Testament reading for their force. It is a warning that what happened at Massah-Meribah must not happen again, lest this current generation also find itself condemned to wilderness wandering and unable to enter the promised rest of God; this concept is later explicated in Heb 3:7–4:13. James Mays (Interpretation: Psalms, John Knox Press) suggests that liturgical use of this psalm may well have included a reading of the First Commandment following so that, indeed, the assembly might hear today and heed Yahweh's call and claim to primacy over them.

Having elaborated his case for grace through the example of Abraham (Romans 4), Paul turns to the life of the present believer and argues for the results of justification in contemporary experience. Romans 4:23–25 provides the outline; 5:1–11, our text, builds on that outline.

Paul argues that we share Abraham's righteousness because we come to God in precisely the same way—through faith. The outcome of this righteousness is peace with God and a hope grounded in the love of God poured out through the Holy Spirit, a hope so strong and resilient that even those things that assail us in this life can do no more than strengthen it. The proof and seal of that love is the death of Christ. Like God's justification of Abraham before he was circumcised or tested, so also Christ's death precedes the actions of any person toward righteousness. It is, rather, God's action in love that claims us before we were even lovable.

Therefore, our salvation is certain. Since Christ died that we might be reconciled to

God, Paul argues that, through Christ's resurrection, we will be made whole and delivered into life; we need not fear further judgment. This act of love on God's part in Christ Jesus forms the foundation for our confidence in God.

Water and meetings at wells are not a new device invented by John. Abraham's slave meets Rebekah at the well (Gen 24:14), and likewise Jacob meets Rachel (Genesis 29). Moses, exhausted by his escape from Egypt, pauses to rest by a well and there assists Reuel's daughters with the watering of their flocks. In an arid region of the world water plays a significant role, often symbolizing the life that God gives. Later interpretations will expand this meaning to include the life given by God's wisdom and by the Torah. And in the New Testament, water becomes a symbol of the new life poured out by the presence and power of God's Holy Spirit. To attend to the source of this living water and to submit oneself to its refreshment is at least part of what it means to be engaged in proper worship. That is certainly true in the appointed passage.

There may be some contextual value in supposing the morality of the woman who comes to the well and finds an exhausted Jesus. That she is there at midday; that she is a Samaritan; that she is many times married and now living outside those blessed bonds; that, simply, she is a "she," makes for an interesting argument that the primary purpose of the passage is to show Jesus' willingness to cross any boundary to seek and save the lost. But suppose we allow the woman, in all her brokenness and femininity, to represent the Samaritans as a group, much as we would allow Nicodemus to speak for all those observant Jewish leaders who are puzzled by Jesus. If we do that, this dialogue becomes a reasonably seamless discussion about the thing that most decisively separates the Jews and the Samaritans: worship of the one true God. The woman, like Nicodemus, comes as a seeker, as one who thirsts deeply. She desires never to thirst again but has thus far found no adequate quenching at the well of her ancestors. The husbands that Jesus summons forth from her may well be a reference to the fivefold origins of the Samaritans (2 Kings 17:24ff.) and their syncretistic worship practices.

Jesus invites her to consider that true worship is not bound by place, be it Gerazim or Zion, but is found in the activity of the Spirit within the human heart, a spirit that flows like living water. Jesus reveals himself to the woman as the one who can indeed speak and act as the anointed one of God, who is able to answer for the division between Jew and Samaritan. She no longer needs her water jug in order to be satisfied; that comes in allowing the living water of Jesus' words to flow through her to her neighbors to such extent that Jesus is acclaimed again as Savior of the whole world.

Pastoral Reflection

As I speak on a day-to-day basis with the folks here at Grace, as I come to know their needs and their fears, I am able to understand a little more each day the struggles and the uncertainties they face. When they show up on Sunday morning or in weekly Bible studies or at youth events, it is because they are thirsty. It may not be a conscious thought. We may not be able to name the nagging at the back of our throats, but it is there nonetheless. There is the need to find a deeper meaning in life, a reason to go on living, or some purpose for just getting out of bed in the morning. We scour the landscape of our needs and our feelings and trudge to church with our jars and buckets, hoping to get filled up with at least enough to get us through the week ahead.

The trouble begins when we realize that in our yearnings we human beings are liable

to latch on to something that is merely what we think we need. Dangerous. Often our needs and our desires deceive us. Often we are the last ones to know what is truly salutary.

For all its strangeness, our human thirst and feeble attempts to quench it make this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman a most hopeful story. She is simply minding her own business, trudging out to get the water, the sustenance, she needs at the well. And who is waiting there? Remember, she didn't ask for him—at least not directly. She wasn't looking for a definition of living water. And yet Jesus speaks to her of things she could not know until she met him. Jesus tells her of the availability of a treasure she didn't even know she was looking for.

That's the way Jesus often comes to us —not as a projection of our needs but as the one who addresses us at a level even deeper than the needs we knew we had. Jesus seeks us out before we ever go to the trouble of looking for him. That is grace.

But more: Jesus invites us to lay down the burden of all our endeavors to find refreshment. Christ knows our infidelities and the foolishness of our pursuits, and it doesn't matter. All these old burdens can be set aside so that what we are left to bear is the joy of finding the One who is for us. DLN

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 6, 2005

1 Samuel 16:1–13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8–14
John 9:1–41

First Reading

The initial focus in this account of the anointing of David is not David but Samuel. Samuel continues to grieve over the mess that Saul has become, to the point that Yahweh tells him sternly to take up the accoutrements of his prophetic office and be about the business of anointing Israel's new leader. Samuel goes reluctantly and with the fear that Saul will hear about his treason and pursue him to kill him.

But Samuel does not yet understand what God is up to with the family of Jesse of Bethlehem. Upon arriving, Samuel himself is greeted with fear; the village elders assume that he is the bearer of judgment or difficulty for this poor "suburb" about an hour's march south of Jerusalem. Quite to the contrary, Samuel invites them (and the clan of Jesse in particular) to the sacrifice that God has commanded. But what does a king look like? Conscious of the task for which he has been sent, Samuel keeps watch for the right candidate among the seven sons of Jesse. In the process, he repeats a misconception foreshadowed in 1 Samuel 9, that a king must look like a king (tall, handsome, etc.). Thus, when Samuel sees Eliab, the elder son, he assumes him to be the chosen of God. But Yahweh has a different standard in mind, one that sees to the heart of the person rather than mere outward appearance. The boy David, summoned from his duties with the flock, is the one to be king. Once anointed, the Spirit is poured out upon him from that day forward. David is soon pressed into Saul's service as musician and eventually armor bearer. Samuel returns to Ramah, a town in the hill country of Ephraim, which is his birthplace, residence, and eventually the site of his burial.

Psalm 23 begins in metaphor ("The Lord is my shepherd") and continues as an exposition of that theme. The poetry of the psalm defies complete understanding. We are not able to discern whether or not it is composed as an expression of the liturgical life of the community or as the experience of

the spiritual life of the psalmist. It is not clear whether the Hebrew verbs are to be translated in present or future tense, thus it is unclear whether to construe the psalm as a celebration of present reality or a statement of hope for the future. It is, however, a clear confession of confidence in the divine shepherd, borrowing both the royal and the pastoral implications of the metaphor as evident in Israel's history.

Mays (Interpretation: Psalms) suggests that the exposition is "connected to the language of Israel's testimony to its salvation in the exodus." Israel does not lack during its wilderness wanderings. The people are led in paths of righteousness like a flock (Exod 15:13). Israel is given the promise of God's presence and protection throughout their journey. God sets a table of manna and quail and water from the rock before them in the wilderness. And, finally, goodness and loving kindness mark the relationship between God and the people whom God leads into a promised land. Mays further comments that the place of Psalm 23 at Christian funerals is especially appropriate in that it celebrates in words of trust the eschatological reality of eternal life with God in the face of the final enemy who has not yet been destroyed for us. Through the eyes and words of the psalmist, we see what is to come for all the faithful.

The letter of Paul to the Ephesians may, indeed, be a letter written late in the apostle's career to all the churches of the Lycus valley among whom it was widely circulated. Scholars generally date it to the years of Paul's imprisonment in Rome, 61–63 C.E. It is concerned with the mystery of salvation and the supremacy of Christ as well as reconciliation between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Our particular passage is a part of an exhortation calling the believers to a new life in Christ and is rich with the imagery of light and darkness. Walter Taylor (Augsburg Commentary: Ephesians) suggests that verses 8–14 are part of a response to Paul's warning in verse 6 to beware of those who would deceive the believers with empty arguments that might lead them into the salacious behavior defined in 5:3–5. As baptized believers, they are children of light and meant to reflect the light that is Christ ("you are light in the Lord") to the world around them. Our text closes with what many scholars believe to be a quote from an early Christian hymn celebrating the resurrection, although influenced by Isa 29:19 and Isa 60:1.

The healing of the man born blind continues the pattern we have seen in Jesus' conversations throughout the Gospel—a focus on a symbolic element and an extension of that element around which the evangelist's theological propositions are framed. With Nicodemus it was wind and spirit; for the woman at the well it was water and worship. Here in John 9 it is light and sight . . . or, rather, the ability to see clearly the purposes and workings of God.

The disciples see a reason for the man's blindness in the traditional understanding of the relationship between sin and suffering. The neighbors literally do not believe their eyes that this one might be the same man. His parents are blinded by their fears of separation from the community. And the Jewish leadership cannot accept the man's newfound sight without accepting the ability of Jesus to perform such a significant sign. Therefore, they can accept neither. All of them are blind by virtue of their unwillingness to let the light of God in Christ inform and illuminate the miracle that they experienced. In a fitting, if not disturbing, end to the saga, the man who was formerly blind makes the confession of Jesus as Lord even though it means for him that there is no other refuge in this world but the

one before whom he falls in worship. Is this indeed the price of our own illumination?

Pastoral Reflection

It starts, I suppose, when we are children, and there is a broken window or trampled flowers or stolen cookies . . . and Mom wants to know who did it. "I want an explanation," she demands, and rightfully so. It teaches us responsibility when we have to explain that it was really our little sister who broke the window, trampled the flowers, and ate all the cookies. With a little luck, that's that. The deed is done; the guilty caught and punished; justice is satisfied.

Would that it always worked so easily. But assigning responsibility is generally more complex. The simple justice we long for eludes us. We begin to worry that the line that separates our lives from chaos and unpredictability is dangerously thin. When things go wrong, it's not just about shattered glass; it often means a shattered world. And immediately, almost reflexively, we begin looking for more than an explanation. We look for someone, something, to blame, to take responsibility for the upset of our lives, our hopes, our dreams.

A good example might be the aftermath of September 11. The events of that day tore apart our expectations (our delusions, some would say) about our own security. Immediately folks began pointing fingers, and the likely causes included everything from abortion doctors to Islamic zealots. We've probably all seen the same thing happen in hospitals and at sick beds. If we could only name the disease, we could blame the disease, and we could take some control over it. If we just get an explanation, if we know who to blame, we can assure ourselves that it's someone or something else that's broken and we're going to be OK. The world isn't really as out of control as it seems. Thus our balance is restored, however fragile that balance may be. It's a bit like sweeping the evidence of our brokenness under the rug of our consciousness and choosing to believe that we're still in charge.

That's what the disciples are up to in the Gospel lesson appointed for this day. "Who was it, Jesus? Huh? Who sinned that this man was born blind? His mom, his dad, maybe even he himself before his birth?" And in pointing the finger, or fingering the guilty, we know we're really OK. What Jesus is supposed to do is to say that one or the other did it so we know who is really in trouble, and then go ahead and heal the man just because Jesus is Jesus and he's a nice guy who does stuff like that.

Except that Jesus doesn't do stuff like that. First of all, Jesus refused to indict anyone in this blinding, because it ultimately doesn't matter. The man is blind. That's all there is to it. And if we could identify the crime and the criminal the man wouldn't need a savior; he'd need a lawyer and a judge and enough savvy to save himself. There is no gospel in assigning blame.

Avoiding (or dismissing) the blame game, Jesus simply heals the man. Jesus goes toe to toe with the forces that keep this man born blind from seeing, and Jesus defeats them . . . as if the glory of God is evident in the working of grace regardless of who's to blame.

Please note that in these few verses we are given a whole new perspective on dealing with suffering and hurt. Please note that in Christ, accusation is replaced with acceptance and explanation with encounter. You know the old proverb about how when you point your finger accusingly at someone, you're really pointing three fingers back at yourself. Well, here Christ bids us trade that gesture of blame for the outreach of healing, which is just what he does. Christ touches the man's eyes and opens them to sight and to faith. And so Christ touches our hearts

with the word of grace and opens us to new life. Jesus invites us to trust that, regardless of the cause of human suffering and sorrow, there is really only one solution: the saving, healing, merciful grace of God in Christ Jesus.

We, the body of Christ, are invited to mimic our Lord—to be the healing, enlightening touch of God in a hurting world. Then, as it was in the life of a man born blind, Christ's glory will be seen, and the man's joy can be shared—at least among those whose eyes are opened to see anew in God. DLN

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 13, 2005

Ezekiel 37:1–14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6–11
John 11:1–45

First Reading

With the exile of Judah to Babylon and the eventual destruction of Jerusalem, the traditional understanding of the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel came to an end. The armies of Israel's enemies and the hardships that accompanied them to their new homes by the River Chebar taught the people that Zion was not inviolable and that their security could not be measured by the usual standards of human force or mere religious boast. The reason for this destruction was not that Yahweh was untrustworthy and capricious but rather that Judah was faithless. Indeed, throughout the first 24 chapters of the book, the prophet is called to speak of nothing but the consequence of Judah's unfaithfulness in their present experience of exile.

But with the announcement of the destruction of Jerusalem, the prophet is given a new message to speak: words of restoration and hope. There is a review of the failures of Judah's leadership and the promise that God himself will take charge of the flock through the appointment of one to rule like David. And, in addition to reestablishing the monarchy, Yahweh promises to restore the people themselves to new life.

In the Valley of the Dry Bones (37:1–14) it is clear that God alone makes the difference between life and death. The prophet sees a vision of a valley filled with dry, bleached bones. Twice prior to this experience, the prophet has indicated that his visions take place in a valley (3:22–23; 8:4). While it is unlikely that the prophet is describing a specific geographical location, it is quite likely that he was witness to the human destruction that accompanied the journey and time in exile. When God asks Ezekiel whether or not these bones can live, his response might be humorously interpreted as throwing the answer back to God. But it also further illustrates that the cause and occasion for Judah's resurrection as a new community is entirely within the knowledge and power of God. The prophet stands both helpless before and ineffective without Yahweh. Only the breath of God, summoned as the prophet is instructed, will be effective in raising these dead into a huge army. And, indeed, with the clattering of bone on bone, that is precisely what Ezekiel sees.

But there is not yet life where the Spirit of God has not yet blown. Calling forth that breath is a calling forth of the *ruah* of God—the very breath of life that fills all living things. And the promise becomes clear: God is the difference between life and death, and it is Yahweh's desire to raise and restore Israel yet again.

Although usually identified as a penitential psalm, Psalm 130 is also clearly a song of hope. *De profundis* of the experi-

ence of human sinfulness, Yahweh is implored to listen. The psalmist confesses the magnitude of wrongdoing, which merits only God's condemnation, and yet confidently declares that God's chief purpose and strength is to show mercy.

Verses 5–6 are a personal statement of faith, trust, and commitment; there is no hope besides the Lord. By extension from this personal experience, the psalmist implores all of Israel to share that hope. God's generous redemption means the saving freedom of Israel.

The transformative power of God's Spirit within the life of the believer is at the heart of our Epistle reading. Drawing on the example of Ezekiel, Paul is convinced that "the flesh" is unable to stand in harmony with God's intentions by its own accord. It is only through an infusion of the Spirit, indeed Christ's own power, that humanity may come to obedience before God. There is great joy in these verses, as the apostle reminds his readers that they are no longer enslaved to the flesh but are indeed inspired by Christ.

The promise at the root of this joy is in the resurrection, which the believers share with Christ. Those who were dead in the flesh are now alive in Christ, having breathed in the Spirit of God that is able to call forth new life to our mortal bodies. This is the life of the eschaton already present in the midst of a broken and rebellious world, the sign of God at work among those who believe.

Wind, water, light, and now life . . . these four weeks through John's Gospel have moved us ever closer to both the final confrontation which will take Jesus to the cross and the final revelation of the saving mission which is his.

The raising of Lazarus, the last and most profound sign except Jesus' own resurrection, begins with the same misunderstanding that characterized Jesus' other signs. The disciples are convinced at first that Lazarus is only sleeping and does not merit the dangers of a trip to the environs of Jerusalem where Jesus was recently the target of the anger of the Judean leadership. When Jesus explains that Lazarus is dead and that his death will strengthen their faith, the disciples will go only reluctantly, still convinced that their own deaths will be the result.

Likewise, at the beginning of his encounters with Martha and Mary, Jesus is met with the anguished question of his absence when his friend needed his healing powers the most. Martha seemingly hesitates to ask for the greatest miracle of all, her brother's raising, but confesses her belief that it is within the power of Jesus to accomplish. When at last Jesus reveals himself to her as the resurrection and the life, which she seeks for her brother, Martha confesses Jesus as the Christ and in so doing confesses also the proleptic victory of Jesus over death for all believers.

As Mary leads Jesus to the tomb, we are given a glimpse of his own emotional response to the death of his friend; Jesus weeps for this one who loved him and has now suffered death. It is the occasion for disagreement about Jesus among those watching who have come out from Jerusalem. Some see it as a sign of his grief, while others complain about Jesus' poor sense of timing in not coming to help his friend. In any event, the stone is rolled away from the tomb, over the protests of Martha who is concerned that "he stinketh" (KJV), and Jesus addresses the Father in the confidence that his prayer and the act that is to follow will indeed strengthen the faith of all those at hand.

Lazarus is summoned forth from the tomb, a foreshadowing of Jesus' own steps from death into life. And at Jesus' instructions Lazarus is unbound, no longer to be

contained by the grave. Lazarus is free, while in the same moment Jesus' fate is sealed. This final demonstration of the power at work in him cannot be allowed to go unaddressed, especially because of the effect it is having on the crowds who have witnessed this miracle.

Pastoral Reflection

What time is it? That's easy! Just look at your watch—the most direct and practical way to come up with an answer, and likely the first one we would consider; and why not? Our lives are run by the clock. We pull out our PDAs and our calendars and our day planners in order to order our lives. We are a busy people with jobs to get done, appointments to keep, and expectations about late and on time to live up to. Mary and Martha, I think, would understand this answer to the question. You can hear it in their accusation of Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here . . . if you had only been on time . . . Lazarus would not have died." Don't you know what time it is?

Or maybe we would answer the question this way: It's time to do what we know needs doing. In addition to running our lives by the clock, we're also used to running our lives by our values and the choices those values lead us toward. One example is an ad slogan from a few years ago: "It's Miller time!" There's one expression of what really demands our attention: our principles. But we also find this answer to the question here in John 11. Early on, Jesus' disciples try to dissuade him from returning to the area around Jerusalem. After all, the last time Jesus was there the Judean leadership attempted to have him stoned to death. Jesus, however, will not be turned aside. So Thomas, whom we usually remember only for his doubting, tells his brothers, "Let us go with him, that we may die with him." In other words, it is time for the courage of our convictions, time to do what we know to be right. It is interesting that at the other end of this story the priests and the Pharisees will make a similar determination, deciding that it's time for Jesus to die rather than to risk the fate of the whole nation.

But there is yet another way to answer this question. Martha is the one who leads us in this direction, though I'm convinced that Martha doesn't truly understand what she said. In a rather caustic response to Jesus' assurance that her brother will rise again, she says (in effect): Yes, I understand that my brother will rise again. But that won't be until the last day, the day when God comes among us to deliver us at last. What good does that do me now? I have lost my brother!

And Jesus replies to her: "I am the resurrection and the life." In other words, "Martha, do you not know what time it is? Here, in my presence, it is already the last day." And then, to make tangible the promise he has spoken, Jesus commands Lazarus to come forth from the stench of the tomb and commands those who had gathered to mourn to unbind him and let him go.

One week later, Jesus himself will enter the tomb, the time of his death about 3:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon at the beginning of spring. The cause of Jesus' death is that it was time to get rid of this threat to the status quo. But that's not where the story ends. For it is also time for the glory of God to be revealed to the world. It is time for the last day to break into the present day so that we might find hope and purpose for all our days.

What time is it? In Jesus' presence, it is God's time for saving—and our time for living. DLN

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