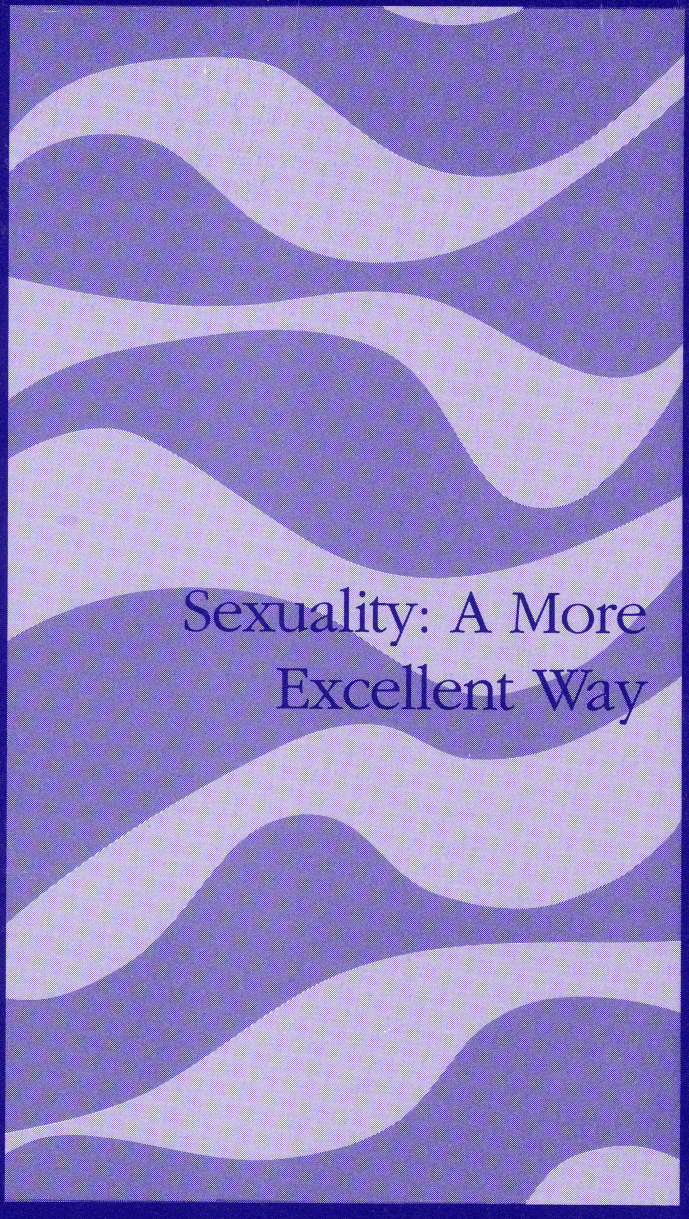
February 2003 Volume 30 Number 1



Sexuality: A More Excellent Way

CURRENTS
in Theology and Mission

Currents

in Theology and Mission

Published by
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

in cooperation with
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
Wartburg Theological Seminary

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CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION (ISSN: 0098-2113) is published bimonthly (every other month), February, April, June, August, October, December. Annual subscription rate: $15.00 in the U.S.A., $20.00 elsewhere. Two-year rate: $29.00 in the U.S.A., $39.00 elsewhere. Three-year rate: $42.00 in the U.S.A., $57.00 elsewhere. Published by Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a non-profit organization, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60615, to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. Printed in U.S.A.

CURRENTS is indexed in *ATLA Religion Database, Elenchus, IZBW, NTA, OTA, Religion Index I* (formerly *IRPL*), *Religious and Theological Abstracts*, and *Theologische Literaturzeitung.*

MICROFORM AVAILABILITY: 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, 105mm microfiche, and article copies are available through University Microfilms Inc., 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

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Sexuality: A More Excellent Way

The articles in this issue were originally lectures delivered at the Leadership Conference at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in February, 2002. That conference, arranged by Pastor Julie Ryan, invited speakers and their listeners to consider myriad questions dealing with sexuality "in a more excellent way." That way included examining sexuality in its wholeness, as gift and challenge as well as problem, and in a way that included us all. Hence, issues involving homosexuality, for example, are only tangentially treated here. Sex is part of everyone's vocation.

Luther, as I recall, lauded changing of diapers and common labor as locations for vocation. Sexuality too is our calling, which we fulfill simultaneously as saints and sinners, in private but with communal dimensions, and in a society saturated with sex, at once understanding everything and nothing about it. Sexuality is something we share with all humankind, but a more excellent way explores what sexuality might mean for the baptized. As our essayists unanimously insist, sexuality is both a spiritual and a physical experience . . . and then some.

Christina L. H. Traina explores the dimensions of sexuality in the city of God, weaving Augustine frequently into the picture. She notes that for a large proportion of ordinary Christians, some significant dimension of their history or present life departs in an important way from the church's traditional teaching on sexuality. Christianity at its best—in the cross and resurrection, for example—has affirmed the body, including its sexuality, and what might be called the theoerotic tradition has used sexual union as a metaphor for union with God. Sex can be sacramental, in which we experience the power and goodness of God, *but* it is not always an occasion for grace. The desires tied up with sexuality—pleasure, comfort, companionship—are real goods, but only God fulfills these needs perfectly. Sexuality has a vocational aspect: With whom, if anyone, is God calling me into a sexual relationship? Sin, too, permeates our sexuality as it does all human doings. We know that we will fall short, but we also know that God forgives all our weaknesses and mistakes.

Elaine J. Ramshaw provides a broad sketch of sexuality in Western civilization and notes that sexuality is problematic because it is multilayered, involves our imaginations, deals with the boundaries of the self, and exposes us to a high degree of vulnerability. But sexuality in all its complexity is also God's gift. She also urges us not to take sexuality with somber seriousness but

to indulge in healthy humor about it, with playfulness and imagination. What would you say if you were asked whether sex was problematic, God's gift, or a hoot?

Lee H. Butler, Jr. laments the dualism that splits off spirituality from sexuality in large parts of the Christian tradition. African spirituality at its best, on the other hand, finds no separation between the sacred and the secular. The Western splitting of spirituality and sexuality has had a devastating impact upon African American relationships, not just within their own community but also in their relationship to other communities. Our spiritual existence affects our physical existence, and vice versa. It is imperative that the fracture between our spirituality and our sexuality be mended, and such healing will help to restore our humanity.

Esther Menn notes that we share with our biblical ancestors a common capacity for love with a physical dimension. Both of the creation narratives introduce human beings as sexual creatures. Love and hate, manipulation and competition—even these may be part of marriage, as the Old Testament realistically notes. But the Old Testament also discloses the uglier aspects of sexuality, involving specifically male violence and human deception. To "know" one (in the biblical sense) is not always to love one. The influence of royal wives on their husbands' religious observances suggests the power that women exercised, even within the context of arranged political marriages. In general, the social and political significance of sexual relations is much more pronounced in the Bible than in our contemporary culture. The laws on sexuality are culturally specific to a time more than two thousand years ago, and they often demonstrate the enormous difference between the biblical world and our own with regard to sexual mores and legal prohibitions. At its core, our sexuality remains "strong as death, unquenchable as fire" (Song of Songs 8:6).

Robert L. Brawley observes that human sexuality can be either bane or blessing. This double potential makes all postmodern notions that we can simply replace repression with freedom and joyful innocence astoundingly deceptive. Paul called the Corinthians to live out their sexuality in a christological and pneumatological relationship with God and in a relationship with the Christian community. The way we live out our sexuality is not just a private matter but a concern of the entire community. A relationship with a Christian community that is consecrated to God limits our sexuality, but this relationship also sanctifies our sexuality.



A poem by **Kay N. Sanders** offers us an invitation to Lent. In her congregation, the palms from the previous year are burned in a fireplace on Ash Wednesday, gathered into a bowl, and then passed from person to person throughout the entire assembly. Each person is invited to dip a finger in the ashes and mark the cross on head or hand. The poem reflects on these solemn rituals.

St. Paul urges us to strive for the greater gifts and promises to show us a still more excellent way as he introduces his classic discussion of love in 1 Corinthians 13. For the last six decades or so I have been trying to understand sexuality—in general and my own variety. I have learned much, grown much, and still see only dimly. I would hope that these essays will push us all a little closer toward that graduate program where we will fully understand our sexuality "face to face."

Ralph W. Klein, Editor

Sex in the City of God

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It's not surprising that we Christians have trouble talking about sex. The public consequences of doing so are prickly enough that the church should applaud itself on even gathering to speak the word "sexuality." Our culture seems to find every mention of sex so titillating that speaking a nuanced word on sexuality and actually having it heard is nearly impossible. Especially when the church speaks on this topic, the media inevitably try to capture complexity in a phrase, invariably reporting only what they wanted to hear, or what they wish they had not heard, or what will make a story that is sure to attract lucrative advertisers. And that's when we work up the nerve to say anything at all about it. Talking about sex, as my 14-year-old daughter reminded me, is embarrassing. How many of us know more than a few people with whom we can discuss our sexual experience in any depth and detail, let alone feel comfortable sharing with a congregation or an adult-education group?

The first task, then, is accomplishing the considerable feat of refusing to give in either to embarrassment or to the tyranny of the sound byte. Beyond it lies the real project of constructive conversation. Here, I'd like to suggest a metaphor. In a culture that likes to buy its opinions ready-made, as if they were beds-in-a-bag on sale at the local department store, we must choose an almost inconceivably labor-intensive path: to quilt, experimenting with small bits of the fabrics of systematics, liturgics, theology, ethics, psychology, biblical interpretation, spirituality, sociology, and pastoral studies, laying them out next to each other like puzzle pieces to create our own complex and authentic pattern.

There are two important dimensions to this project. First comes the piecing. This is a logical and aesthetic challenge (remember the math puzzle: How many colors does a mapmaker need to ensure that no two neighboring countries on any map have to be shown in the same color?): to discover a design that incorporates each and every fabric appropriately, a design that cannot succeed if one of these fabrics is missing. It must be comprehensive.

Then comes the quilting itself. Quilting, as you may know, is ideally a community enterprise. There are two rules for this stage of the project. For a smooth result, work from the center in small increments, smoothing the extra fullness out as you go, so that there are no points of tension that will rip later, no bulges or lumps. And, for a pleasant day, trade stories, debate, reminisce, laugh, cry. Talk. At the end is the satisfaction of not only having created a work of beauty that is useful and almost indestructible but also of having formed an intimate and trusting community that will move on to other quilts on other days.

These are the challenges of the conversation on sexuality: to be balanced and comprehensive in our piecing, to begin in

the center, to talk, and to deepen the bonds of intimacy that will enable us to tackle this task and new tasks together. Painstaking? Yes. Sometimes nearly endless? Yes. Aching back, pricked fingers, stitches ripped out and redone, even a few blood stains? Yes. But we will, we hope, end up with an heirloom—a beautiful, strong, warm covering.

Invitation

A further obstacle to conversation about sexuality is that talk seems to turn instantly to all the old, rutted, tired, and tiring arguments that have led us to stalemates. These old routes by definition cannot lead us to the new destination of fresh insight and consensus! I invite you to lay aside questions about what to *do*—questions like "are homosexual relationships ethical?" and "what about sex outside marriage?" Answers to these questions can be faithful and meaningful only if they follow a discussion of basic questions about who we *are*—about our being as sexual creatures of God. What does it mean to relate sexually to another person? What exactly does married sexuality mean in a society of individual longevity, divorce, and "starter marriages"?[1] What is God's command for us as redeemed and sexual beings? and similar questions. As Rudolf Bultmann said, it's the indicative—our description of ourselves in faith—that yields the imperative—the command.[2]

First, we must suspend the contemporary assumption that sex is merely a private matter between me and my partner, if I have one. This notion causes two problems. First, it can make it seem that the only rules governing sex are the rules that govern relationships between equals. This obscures the fact that sex is also a social, economic, public matter that ought to be governed by rules of social justice just as much as by rules of intimacy. Second, if we say that sex is "all about" interpersonal relationship, then we lose sight of ourselves as individuals who are relating. We forget about the intersection of our sexuality with our psycho-spiritual sides and the inseparability of our sexual maturity and expression from our psychological development and our progress in the Spirit.[3]

For the same reason, we must resist the contemporary cultural reduction of sexual orientation to either heterosexual or homosexual, an assumption that makes the exclusion practiced by straight, gay, and lesbian people alike seem logical and acceptable. Heterosexuality and homosexuality are only two of a wide range of possible secondary expressions of basic human sexuality. Many people do not occupy either extreme but are trying to make their way in a world that demands that they choose between them.

We must also resist the tendency to define "having sex" as "vaginal intercourse." When pollsters ask "How many times a month do you have sex?" they usually mean "How many times a month do you participate in coitus?" The question is imperative but may not provide us with the information we really need. First of all, this assumption too is reductionistic. Our sexual lives, even in heterosexual marriages, in-

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[1] Pamela Paul, author of *The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony* (Villard Books) has documented the contemporary trend she calls "starter marriages," typically childless marriages entered by people in their twenties that last five years or less. See Jennifer Owens, "Where the Aisle Ends . . . ," in *The Chicago Tribune* (January 30, 2002, section 8, pp. 1, 8).

[2] Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 76–77.

[3] See Elaine Ramshaw's and Lee Butler's essays in this issue of *Currents*.

volve a great range of expression that is not limited to intercourse. Those of us who are parents of teens especially cannot forget that how you kiss and where you squeeze are questions fully as important as whether your genitals make contact. A friend of mine recently rewrote the old joke that begins, How can you recognize a neoconservative? The answer: A liberal with a teenaged daughter![4] The moral and spiritual meanings of all these kinds of sexual affection will never receive the attention they deserve as long as the only question we ask is, Did you go all the way? Second, as Patricia Beattie Jung, Mary Pellauer, and a number of other sexual ethicists have pointed out, the identification of sex with intercourse makes it axiomatic that men will have pleasure in coitus (erection is a precondition) and forgets that women often do not.[5] This forgetfulness generates all sorts of contradictory assumptions—for example, that "sexually active" women and girls approach intercourse with exactly the same expectation of pleasure as men and boys rather than for other reasons (like pressure or desire to please); or, conversely, that women who do seek pleasure in sex are "fast" but men who seek it are not.[6]

In addition to suspending old questions and assumptions, we must make systematic, explicit use of something we too often draw upon haphazardly and unthinkingly: the wisdom of our own honestly examined experience. Gathered in any Sunday worship service are centuries of ordinary lived sexuality. The best of it contains sensitive insights into genuine goods and ways to pursue and protect them; the worst of it contains mistakes and bad experiences that help us both to articulate boundaries with confidence and to be compassionate companions for others in their journeys.

Setting the context

One final important deterrent to the discussion of sexuality in the church is that as long as we do not probe too deeply, Christian congregations may look like relative refuges from a culture preoccupied and occupied by sex. For instance, a Search Institute study of 46,000 public school students found that teenagers who attend religious services at least once or twice a month are about half as likely to engage in at-risk behavior, including sexual activity, as those who never attend.[7] If active and "out" gays and lesbians are as rare in our churches as they are in the culture at large, they too seem a small concern: a recent study indicates that only about 1.3 percent of women and 2.4 percent of men report that as adults they have experienced homoerotic desire *and* had gay or lesbian sexual

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[4] Thanks to Stephen Pope, Boston College, for this quip.

[5] The original Kinsey data show that 10 percent of married women do not experience orgasm during coitus, and that by the twentieth year of marriage 24 percent of women reached orgasm during coitus less than 30 percent of the time (Alfred C. Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* [Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1953], 352, 408). For a more recent analysis, see June Machover Reinisch, Ruth Beasley, and Debra Kent, *The Kinsey Institute New Report on Sex: What You Must Know to be Sexually Literate* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

[6] Note that 95 percent of married men, but only 75 percent of married women, report "always or usually" achieving orgasm with their primary sex partners (Robert T. Michael, John H. Gagnon, Edward O. Laumann, and Gina Kolata, *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* [Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1994], 129).

[7] Carolyn H. Eklin and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, "What Role Can Churches Play In At-Risk Prevention?" *Source Newsletter* (February, 1992), http://www.search_institute.org/archives/tff.htm.

The people sitting in the pew cannot be as comfortable and settled in their sexuality as they seem to be.

relationships *and* identified themselves as homosexual or bisexual—though the numbers are much higher in urban areas than in rural.[8] 84 percent of mainline Protestant adults report having had sex with only one partner, or no one, during the last 12 months; this rises to 96 percent if we count married people of all backgrounds.[9] People who said their sexual activity was guided by their religious beliefs were significantly less likely than others to have had two or more partners in the past year.[10]

But before we sit back too comfortably, we should consider that this margin is almost negligible. In addition, 16 percent of the adults in our pews *did* have more than one sex partner in the last year. Other statistics should give us pause as well. Nearly 15 percent of women and 25 percent of men born between 1933 and 1974 report extramarital sexual affairs.[11] Whereas among those born between 1933 and 1942 almost 84 percent of men and 93 percent of women experienced intercourse for the first time in marriage, only 34 percent of men and 36 percent of women born between 1963 and 1974 married as virgins.[12] And about 9 percent of women and 10 percent of men report that as adults they have experienced same-gender desire, had same-gender relations, or identify as gays, lesbians, or bisexuals.[13] Many gays and lesbians "come out" in marriage. 23 percent of women and 4 percent of men report having been subjected to forced sex,[14] an abuse that we know makes it difficult to connect sex with love, fidelity, and tenderness later in life. And, naturally, even if the teenagers in our youth group are only about half as likely to have sex as their nonworshiping peers, the likelihood is still rather high that they do! Recent statistics suggest that 61 percent of men and 58 percent of women overall have at least one opposite-gender sex partner before age 18.[15] Clearly, for a large proportion of ordinary Christians, some significant dimension of their history or present life departs in an important way from the church's traditional teachings on sexuality.

In addition, recent cultural changes in the meaning and practice of marriage, the traditional locus of sexual expression, indi-

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[8] Edward O. Laumann, John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael, and Stuart Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 299; see interpretation of data on p. 293.

[9] Michael et al., *Sex in America*, 102–3. Note that 83 percent of people overall report the same degree of limitation: 77 percent of men and 89 percent of women.

[10] Laumann et al., *Social Organization*, 217.

[11] Laumann et al., 216.

[12] Laumann et al., 207.

[13] Laumann et al., 299. Demographics play an important role here: among residents of the twelve largest U.S. cities, 16.4 percent of men and 6.2 percent of women have had same-gender sex partners in their adult lives; in rural areas, only 1.5 percent of men and 2.8 percent of women have had same-gender partners (p. 304).

[14] Laumann et al., 336.

[15] This figure holds for persons born between 1963 and 1974 (Laumann et al., 329).

cate a profound need to reexamine traditional teachings on sexuality. Sex, marriage, and romantic love were thought to go together only in the last couple of hundred years; sex and childbearing were thought *not* to do so only in the last fifty or so years, and only in the last twenty or thirty years have a small percentage of women worldwide truly been able to exercise choices about when to have sex and bear children.[16] When we add these new, undigested cultural phenomena to the ordinary challenging passages of life such as adolescence, childbirth, menopause, illness (physical and psychological), and death of a partner that can throw a previously comfortable and unproblematic sexual life into a tailspin, we realize that the people who are sitting in the pew with or in front of us cannot be as comfortable and settled in their sexuality as they seem to be. Maybe we aren't either, or if we are now, we might not be next week.

The church is a place to gather under God's graceful wings, to find and read and hear and speak the Word of God together. This Word has been publicly opened for social justice, for liturgy, for the message of the gospel of grace; it has not been fully opened for all of us who are dealing with the mystery of our sexuality in silent solitude, including those who because of this struggle are milling around outside the church, feeling unwelcome, waiting for an invitation to come (or come back) in.

Thus our conversation must model itself on quilting in a second way: it must not only embrace all theological disciplines in all their wisdom and variety but also embrace all people in all their wisdom and variety. If we really believe that the kingdom of God comes to all, then we must be able to speak the Word to all in a liberating way. And if we really believe in the priesthood of all believers, we know that we can truly hear that Word—in all its richness and nuance—if all of us preach to each other. Only in this way can we create a quilt that is beautiful, strong, lasting, and large enough to cover all of us.

Theology: Affirming the body

Although many contemporary quilters go to fabric stores, traditionally quilts were made of sewing scraps and the salvageable parts of worn-out clothes: here a bit of mother's old Sunday dress, there a piece of father's stained shirt, over there a fragment left over from cutting out a wedding dress. Quilts, that is, were new and beautiful coverings created out of the pieces of old and sometimes cherished garments. Likewise, the theological observations that follow include nothing new or even comprehensive. Rather, they bring out a number of durable doctrines that the church might use in assembling a new vision of sexuality.

1. Incarnation, cross, and resurrection. Christians have two important justifications for celebrating the goodness of the physical world. The first is creation: Genesis 1 declares that at the end of the sixth day, looking over a brand new humanity, "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). According to this passage, embodied humanity is God's intentional—and crowning—creative achievement. And we are God's good creations individually, too, with our particular gifts and personalities, not just in the abstract: "You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps 139:13b–14a). God creates and blesses our

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[16] See Wanda Deifelt, "Beyond Compulsory Motherhood," in *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions,* ed. Patricia Beattie Jung, Mary E. Hunt, and Radhika Balakrishnan (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 96–112.



whole selves.[17] Nothing can erase this original and founding goodness.

But an emphasis on the goodness of our bodies does not take into account subsequent human sinfulness, especially our tendency to abuse ourselves and all of creation thoughtlessly. We need an additional reason to celebrate the goodness of embodiment. This is the incarnation, the moment when God chooses to enter the world in a human body: "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14). Traditionally Christians have been reluctant to think comprehensively about what this means.[18] But James B. Nelson reminds us that if we take the incarnation utterly seriously, Jesus must have been, just as we are, a "laughing, crying, sweating, eating, drinking, digesting, urinating, defecating, sexual, sensuous bundle of flesh."[19] The body is holy enough for God to inhabit, or holy because God has inhabited it; whichever path we take, the incarnation reaffirms the goodness of embodiment, including sexuality.

The Lutheran emphasis on cross and resurrection, often seen as body-denying, interprets the incarnation far more profoundly than traditions that focus primarily on the incarnation. The birth and life of Jesus do not tell us conclusively that embodiment is, at this point in sacred history, a good in itself. If God walks around in a body without sinning, that only confirms God's omnipotence. It is really the death and resurrection that commit us to the doctrine of the Incarnation. First, consider the theology of the cross. We think of Jesus' death on the cross as the highest sacrifice, the greatest gift possible. How much would that sacrifice be worth if the body were not more valuable than any other created good, or if Jesus were only "apparently" human? Jesus's death is a complete sham otherwise.[20] And second, consider the resurrection. Jesus rises from the dead and ascends to God, confirmation that our bodies are so integral to our humanity that through God's grace they become immortal. According to Luther, this immortality becomes ours in the Eucharist: our bodies become immortal when they eat eternal food.[21] The body is not a disposable "something extra" that weighs down the soul. We are united with God in our bodies, and only in our bodies.

We are united with God in our whole bodies. Just why the Christian tradition has had difficulty with this point, other essays

[17] See Matthew Fox, O.P., *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1983), and his critics; e.g., Loren Wilkinson, "Christ and the Land: Recent Books on Earthkeeping," *Sojourners* 19 (February-March 1990): 41.

[18] Quotations from Tom Driver, Joseph Blenkinsopp, and Norman Pittenger, in William E. Phipps, *The Sexuality of Jesus* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996), 12–13.

[19] James B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 195.

[20] See Martin Luther, "This Is My Body," *Luther's Works* 37 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 72.

[21] Luther, "This Is My Body," 71, 93–94, 118–19.

in this issue explain. Suffice it to say that contemporary prayers and hymns recognize and bless the parts of the body rather selectively. Frances Ridley Havergal's well-known hymn begins "Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee." It moves on to eyes, hands, feet, voice, intellect, and lips, in one version at least concluding that when I have dedicated all these parts of my body to God, my life will truly be consecrated "ever, only, all for Thee." Something integral to human experience is clearly missing here. It may not be surprising that Augustine, who experienced such profound distress over his own sexuality, would neglect to dedicate this dimension of himself to God. Even Paul, in his ambivalence, says we are to give "the greater honor to the inferior member" (1 Cor 12:24)!

But it was shocking to me, as a person in theory more comfortable with my sexual self, that it was not until I began the process of preparing this article that I noticed that I too have always neglected to offer this piece of myself to God in daily prayer. What a difference this simple act makes in my understanding of sexuality. Rather than being tidily boxed up and put in a corner to be pulled out when it does not bother anyone else, sexuality is an inseparable part of the self I dedicate to God—with more or less success—every day. It has led me to ask whether I let myself off the hook too easily, or dishonor my sexuality too gravely, when I explicitly withhold sexuality from my self-offering to God, and whether I too easily rush to judgment by assuming that people who seem to live their sexual lives differently than I have failed to dedicate themselves in this way.

2. *Christ, the bridegroom.* One well-kept Christian secret that can help us in the project of affirming and dedicating our sexuality is the theoerotic tradition, a tradition of prayer in which sexual union is used as a metaphor for union with God.[22] The allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs as a poem about love between God and the people of Israel or the individual soul is an obvious example. Many male and female mystics describe the soul—the bride—and Christ—the bridegroom—in a romantic relationship. In the language of mystical prayers and poetry, their romance of longing is consummated in a mystical union described in decidedly physical terms. Catherine of Siena speaks of the "fire of holy desire" and joy "in union and love's affection."[23] Mechthild of Magdeburg writes,

> O God, You abound with Your Gifts!
> You flow with love!
> You burn with desire!
> You melt in the union with Your love!
> You rest on my breasts, and I cannot exist without You![24]

In "God Caresses the Soul in Six Ways," Mechthild writes (in the voice of God speaking to the soul): "You are My pillow, My lovely bed, My secret resting place, My deepest desire, My highest honor. You are joy in My Divinity, solace to My humanity, a cooling brook to My fervor."[25] Margaret Ebner's description of God as lover is unmistakably erotic:

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[22] The term "theoeroticism" is the creation of Richard Kieckhefer.

[23] Suzanne Noffke, O.P., trans. and ed., *The Letters of St. Catherine of Siena*, vol. 1, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, vol. 52 (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1988), 207–8.

[24] Mechthild von Magdeburg, *Flowing Light of the Divinity*, trans. Christiane Mesch Galvani, ed. and intro by Susan Clark (Garland Library of Medieval Literature, Series B, vol. 72 (New York: Garland, 1991), 13.

[25] Mechthild, *Flowing Light,* 13.

Often, I felt such a strong, powerful grace from my desires that I thought I could not survive from one desire to the next. I felt the sweetest thrusts against my heart with the most powerful grace and sweetest movements, so that I thought my heart would fly to pieces from his raging love and would like to dissolve from his grace. But then he acted like a clever, knowledgeable lover and withdrew the turbulence from me so that my frail humanity could better bear it."[26]

It is unlikely that many ordinary, distracted Christians experience God in exactly this way. But we can take two lessons from the mystics nonetheless. First, as Ebner concludes, we can experience the presence of God not in spite of but through our sensuality. For Christ is "not a robber of the senses [but] an enlightener of the senses."[27] When she receives Christ's holy kiss, the sweetness of his grace fills and overflows her senses rather than dulling them. Second, the possibility of constructing such a metaphor depends on the goodness of the premise. The holy washing of baptism depends on the essential wholesomeness of ordinary washing; the holy eating of the Eucharist depends on the basic necessity of ordinary eating; the holy, orgasmic power of union with God depends on the foundational goodness of ordinary sexual pleasure. Contemporary authors acknowledge this relationship when they write about making love (as distinguished from simply "having sex") as an occasion of experiencing and appreciating the presence of God.[28]

3. Power of sexual desire. In addition, many great classical theologians, including Augustine, recognize and accommodate the human need for sexual relationship. Paul, Augustine, and Luther all recognize the incredible power of the sexual urge and see marriage as a structure for organizing it. Married people, Paul says, should not deny each other sexual comfort (1 Cor 7:3–5). He does recommend against marriage for those who feel able to live a celibate life, but only in order to remove the family obligations that make it hard to prepare for the impending return of Christ. He assumes that children and connected distractions inevitably result from marriage, but it is channeling of desire, and not procreation, that justifies the union.[29] In "The Good of Marriage," Augustine—although skeptical that we need any more people in the world[30]—prefers that married people have intercourse only when they want to procreate. But he nevertheless agrees with Paul that marriage is the solution for people

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[26] Margaret Ebner, *Major Works,* trans. and ed. Leonard P. Hindsley (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 125–26. See also passages on the divine kiss, e.g., p. 122. In the example above, to "desire" and to be "set afire" by "ardent love" puts Ebner immediately in mind of Christ's universal salvific love. What we would call the sexual character of the experience is transmuted into theology. Note that even Luther uses bride and bridegroom language, although in a different context and without the ecstatic dimension: Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), 60–61.

[27] Ebner, *Major Works,* 100.

[28] See for instance Rebecca Parker, "Making Love as a Means of Grace: Women's Reflections," *Open Hands* 3 (Winter 1988): 8–12. On this theme, and on mutuality and pleasure in sex, see Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex, And Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994); and works by Carter Heyward, Mary Pellauer, Susan Ross, James B. Nelson, Patricia Beattie Jung, and Cristina L. H. Traina.

[29] See also John Chrysostom, "How to Choose a Wife," in *On Marriage and Family Life* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 99–100.

[30] Augustine of Hippo, "The Good of Marriage," *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1955), chap. 9.

who cannot live a celibate life[31] and looks the other way when married people have sex when not seeking children. He asks, rhetorically and amusedly, "whom have we heard . . . saying to us that he never had intercourse with his wife except when hoping for conception?"[32] For Luther the urge for sexual connection is a product of God's command to be fruitful and multiply, and it is irresistible: God "creates them so that they have to multiply."[33] "Not one in a thousand" people born with the capacity to experience sexual pleasure can manage celibacy.[34] So insistent is Luther on that point that he recommends that a person whose spouse refuses sex get a divorce or take a lover.[35] Certainly Luther argues that intercourse is never without sin,[36] but this is true in the same sense that no human act is fully pleasing to God.

For these three authors, interestingly, sex and procreation become progressively tightly linked. For Paul, sex incidentally procreates, producing distracting children; for Augustine, procreation excuses sex (which he sees as irrelevant to companionship); for Luther, sexual desire is a product of God's plan for our ongoing propagation. This trend toward procreation deserves critical examination by others. It is worth asking with Augustine whether, in a world already strained to its limits, God intends us to continue multiplying. John Chrysostom, writing at about the same time, may have been prescient: he concluded that in a crowded world procreation could not be the point of marriage; prevention of fornication was argument enough.[37] In the end none of these authors values sexual desire and pleasure in themselves, but all recognize the desire for sexual union as inherent and see the need to construct an acceptable way to channel it. Luther even assumes that no one should expect to be celibate; rather, celibacy is a rare and unusual gift.

We can experience the presence of God not in spite of but through our sensuality.

In sum, our Christology (incomplete though it is), our spiritual traditions, and our theologies of marriage all point us in the direction of the goodness and inevitability of our embodied sensuality. It is these highly traditional insights, not "pop psychology," that inform contemporary affirmations that "sex is a wonderful gift from God, given to us for our enjoyment."[38]

4. Sacrament and liturgy. Another source of wisdom about the body is the liturgical tradition. One of the greatest insights of the Reformation was that God's ability to bestow grace in the sacraments does not depend upon human folderol and doodads. In fact, insofar as human beings become distracted by the project of producing, procuring, and arguing over "just the right ones," and as long as they are them-

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[31] Augustine, *Treatises on Marriage*, chap. 10.

[32] Augustine, *Treatises*, chap. 13.

[33] Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," *Luther's Works* 45:18. See also p. 19.

[34] Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," 21.

[35] Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," 33–34.

[36] Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," 39.

[37] Chrysostom, *On Marriage*, 85–86, 99.

[38] Herbert W. Chilstrom and Lowell O. Erdahl, *Sexual Fulfillment for Single and Married, Straight and Gay, Young and Old* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 152.

selves convinced that these things are necessary in order to receive grace, these objects actually prevent people from experiencing and understanding God's infinite, free love for us communicated in Word and sacrament. In this way European Protestant worship removed nearly all of the sights, smells, flavors, and textures of Roman liturgy and stripped itself almost bare, to the spoken and sung word.

Fast-forwarding to the twentieth century, we see a new impulse: the great insight of Lutheran liturgical renewal has been that while physical objects are not *essential* to the experience of grace, they can be helpful. We cannot imagine how to experience human love without embraces, without pictures, without the particular scent of our loved ones or memories of foods we have eaten together. This same sensuality can help us to anchor the presence, or immanence, of God, and also the transcendence, the "beyondness" that is so much larger than the objects we use to represent it.

Our family has two church homes, Lutheran and Roman Catholic. When we asked our youngest child in which congregation he wanted to prepare for Eucharist, he answered without hesitation, "At the Lutheran church, because there they use real bread, and at the Catholic church they just use those little round plastic things!" Physical objects, used reverently, provide an anchor for the "for you" that is characteristic not just of Eucharist and baptism but of the Word of God, read and preached in the community.[39] Thus we have the lectionary and the colors of the liturgical seasons; we have periods of light and darkness, feasting and fasting, presence and absence, simplicity and opulence; we have rhythms of alternating pleasure and deprivation and learn to find God in both. The great accomplishment of the ecumenical liturgical renewal has been to help us understand the difference between a sensuality that blocks out God and a sensuality that trains us to sense and respond more fully to the many modes of God's presence.

Likewise, though baptism and Eucharist are the only two Lutheran sacra*ments*, there is a growing recognition that other acts—in and out of liturgy—can be sacramen*tal*. This sword cuts two ways, both of which are helpful to a theology of sexuality. First, through sacramental events we may experience undeniably the power and goodness of God. These moments differ for all of us. For me they have included hiking alone in the Cascades, breathing in the smell of the pines at the very moment when the sun has warmed the trees just enough to release their scent; particular, magical meals shared with friends or family; childbirth; and prayer in which I imagine God enveloping me physically. These are moments of physical, psychic, and spiritual receptivity, moments in which we make ourselves open and vulnerable on every level so that physical sensations, emotions, and a sense of God's presence come rushing in on their own terms. Making love can be one of these events, and when it is it deserves to be called sacramental.

It makes sense, then, to ask, What are the parameters of a sexual experience that reveals the power and love of God? What does such a moment look like? Patricia Jung and many others have written eloquently on this subject, but it is a conversation we need to widen.[40]

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[39] On the particular character and power of the sacraments for the individual (as opposed to humanity in general or the congregation) see *Luther's Works* 36:348–49. Thanks to Elaine Ramshaw for this insight.

[40] See Patricia Beattie Jung, "Sanctifying Women's Pleasure," in *Good Sex,* 77–95.

The sword has a second edge, however. Unlike the sacraments, these events do not always "work," do not always become occasions of grace. Still, we would not say it was morally wrong for me to go hiking if all I got out of it was exercise and a good view; we would not say it was wrong for me to eat a meal in which I did not experience the power of communion (I hope not, as I think of all the stand-up bowls of cereal eaten while I unload the dishwasher or the sandwiches wolfed down in the car or in front of the computer!). Likewise, we wouldn't want to say that sex without a revelatory experience was wrong. There are, even within marriage, many other kinds of sex: sex that starts out as angry, silly, bored, or comforting, or as a release of tension.[41] We might want to consider the possibility that there are other kinds of good sex, beyond the sacramental, that there is nothing "wrong" with sex that does not reach these wonderful heights.

In a related vein, we would also be unwilling to say that I *must* go hiking, have a dinner party, have another baby, or have sex so that I can experience the divine, that I can't be fully human unless I'm in regular pursuit of peak experiences. In her article on sex as a moment of grace, Rebecca Parker also argues strongly that "sex is not the be all and end all of life," it is not "the only means of grace," and sometimes it "is not a rewarding or appropriate part of our lives."[42]

What are the parameters of good hiking, good dinners, good sex? When and how is it fitting to do these things, and when is it not? We need descriptions for all of them that allow moments of transcendence to be "something extra"—grace—rather than condemning moments without transcendence as "missing something essential."[43]

Theology of desire

Garrison Keillor Lutherans are used to the idea that if it's alluring, it must be evil. The idea that anything enticing could be good for you is suspect. Desire is frightening to Christians who are used to saying that only *agape*—unconditional, self-emptying love—is truly Christian. But desire is precisely what we find in Luther's forebear, Augustine, who embraced a theology of *eros*, of yearning after and possessing the good. In *City of God*, he outlines the difference between inhabitants of the City of God and the City of the Flesh. By God's design all people love erotically: all recognize things that meet their needs, all desire these goods, all seek to possess them.[44] The difference is that only citizens of the City of God recognize God as their greatest good and therefore desire to live for God. Citizens of the City of God do not refuse to pursue created goods, nor do they regard their bodies as

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[41] Thanks to Susan Ross for this observation.

[42] Rebecca Parker, "Making Love as a Means of Grace," in *Sexuality: A Reader*, ed. Karen Lebacqz with David Sinacore Gunn, The Pilgrim Library of Ethics (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 136–37.

[43] This is the difficulty with the ethics of John Paul II and others who believe that *every act of sex* must achieve the ideal of grace, of total self-gift and complete vulnerability. For a full treatment, see Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1981). And this is what is of value in evangelical theologian Stanley Grenz's notion that neither marriage nor sex is a means of grace, a source of power adequate to preserve a union; see Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 82–83.

[44] Augustine, *Concerning the City of God: Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson, intro. by John O'Meara (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), XIV:6–7, pp. 555–58.

evil;[45] it's just that they know that these things do not provide ultimate happiness. Inhabitants of the City of the Flesh, on the other hand, try to find ultimate happiness in created goods. The citizens of this city correctly believe that created goods participate in God, but they do not realize that only God, and not these created goods, can satisfy the basic longing of their souls.[46] Citizens of the earthly city are doomed to failure and unhappiness because they are "not living in the way for which [they are] created."[47] Transferring this insight to sex, we could say that most of the desires tied up with sexuality—pleasure, comfort, companionship—are real goods. But if we desire God above all we will realize that only God can fulfill these needs perfectly; living as if sex could do so is the sure path to frustration and unhappiness.[48] It's fine to desire a created good *if* we are clear about what we can and cannot expect from it, and in a sex-saturated and sex-obsessed culture it's easy to expect too much.[49]

Augustine's insights suggest that we ought to reflect more on our own desires so that we can figure out what it is that we really desire when we want sex. This in turn enables us to put sex in perspective, which loosens its power over us and frees us to use it constructively. There are moments when we feel keenly the bottomless emptiness, the void, the deep hunger, the God-shaped hole inside ourselves that we sometimes try to fill with people, or work, or food, or alcohol. Does sex have a role to play? It may, as long as we realize that it cannot fill the hole. My experience in my own marriage is that sex can confirm a deep bond of companionship, and it can help clear away the distractions that allow us to pretend that the void is not there or that some other person is causing it or that something other than God might fill it. It can help loving partners have the courage to face that emptiness together.[50]

Then there is the desire to complete a union with a particular person—mind, spirit, soul—with a union of the body: a keystone, a completion, a melting into one another in sacramental recognition of a deep union. And there is the desire to maintain that union, which can take on quite different shapes from day to day or year to year. A friend described this as the "strings of desire" that can bind us together in dry or difficult moments, allowing us to express love and experience connection even when words contradict love. We must not forget the desire to give delight—those incredible moments of grace when our happiness comes from having given joy to another. There is the fact that we can cultivate desire—feed it and tend it and keep it alive—in some cases to maintain a relationship and in other cases to sustain the hope or fantasy of one. There is the desire that frustrates Augustine, the desire of our bodies almost independently of our minds inspired by a look, a scent, or a touch. And finally there is the just plain physical ache for sexual release. How do we interpret these layers in our concrete lives?

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[45] Ibid., XIV:5, pp. 554–55.

[46] Ibid., XIV:13, pp. 571–74.

[47] Ibid., XIV:4, p. 552.

[48] See M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Traveled: The Unending Journey Toward Spiritual Growth: The Edited Lectures* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

[49] This is not, by the way, exactly what Augustine concludes; he is so uncomfortable with the involuntariness of sexual passion that he wishes married men could achieve the good of conception without sexual desire or pleasure (*City of God* XIV:16, p. 577). One might with fair confidence assert that many wives have approached this ideal.

[50] See for example Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas," *Praise* (New York: Ecco Press, 1974), 4–5.

Limits: vocation and sin

Desire and its satisfaction are not goods in themselves. How can we evaluate them self-critically? How do we preserve good reasons and forbid self-deceptive rationalizations?

One important technique for tempering, testing, and directing desire is to put it in conversation with vocation: What is God, through the community around me, enabling and inviting me to be and to do? This is a very different question, Luther implies, than the rule-bound query, What am I permitted to do? or even the personal-growth questions, What are my gifts and needs? Vocation, instead, is about the intersection of my abilities and personality with the community's needs. The question is, What has to be done, and how can I harness my talents to help? Luther is aware that this is a complex question. Serious attention to vocation can entail embracing very different roles that we imagine for ourselves. If your community needs judges, jailers, or even hangmen, and you are qualified, he declares, sign up![51] The point is not about grasping power but about taking responsibility for ourselves and for sisters and brothers both within and outside the church. How often do we ask not, May I act on my desire? but With whom, if anyone, is God calling me into sexual relationship? and what wonderful things can I contribute to the community and to other individuals by answering this call?

Finally, a Christian theology of sexuality must deal honestly with sin. The most important Lutheran contribution to the discussion—rooted in Augustine's convictions about our inability to desire God above all else—is that sin permeates all human doings equally. Sexual sin should not be singled out for special attention, and when it is, we ought to be highly suspicious that, in a sort of reverse idolatry, sex is being used as a decoy to distract us from other vices we would rather not examine. The great theologians know this. According to Eastern theologian Chrysostom, our great temptation and surest family wrecker is not sex but love of money.[52] Augustine may seem to worry endlessly over sexual lust, but his paradigmatic example of human disobedience is greed, theft of pears that he neither wanted nor needed.[53] When sex becomes the litmus test of morality, when we focus disproportionate attention on sexual sin, we do harm by omission. We sap the energy that we could use to identify and correct other injustices in the world around us and within ourselves. These injustices include the sin of "excusing" many of our sexual sins by categorizing

> There are moments when we feel keenly the bottomless emptiness, the void, the deep hunger, the God-shaped hole inside ourselves.

[51] Martin Luther, "Secular Authority: The Extent to Which It Should Be Obeyed," in *Martin Luther*, ed. Dillenberger, 374–75; and "The Freedom of a Christian," in Dillenberger, 65.

[52] Chrysostom, *On Marriage*, throughout, but especially 58, 68–69.

[53] See Martha Ellen Stortz, "'Where or When Was Your Servant Innocent?': Augustine on Childhood," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 84–85.

them as minor sins of weakness in the face of desire—rather like succumbing to a doughnut—when their deeper evil lies in exploitation, abuses of power, or idolatry. If we say only, My desire got the better of me, we avoid facing these other demons.

Overemphasis on sexual sin obscures other sins of the body and hides their relationships to each other. It prevents us from having to deal honestly with the sin of gluttony, for example. I am guilty of this sin daily. If I'm not overeating, I'm caring too much how food tastes, eating too high on the food chain, buying foods that were not organically produced, or putting my own desire for French Roast coffee ahead of others' need to eat at all. And this sin, over the course of my life, probably harms me and unseen neighbors around the world more than any sexual sins I've committed or will commit. Yet if we called a conference on the sin of gluttony, would anyone register? Would the press cover it? Unlikely!

But we also need to preach the comforting side of this doctrine: God asks that we first love and believe in God, and then that we live out our vocation in the world as well as we can. If we have this sort of faith, we can walk forward in that odd combination of humility and confidence: we know we will fall short, but we know that God forgives all our weaknesses and mistakes. The many friends whom I consulted emphasized this point strongly. One wrote, "For me, the greatest sin would be to turn my back on someone who needed [God's] touch. The person who needed to just talk, or needed a shoulder to cry on. A family needing transportation to visit a loved one . . . a child needing an adult to acknowledge them and give them hope. To love someone no matter what their background may be." Her point was not that her sex life was morally insignificant. Rather, she was pointing out that the sexual is only one of many realms in which we must manifest the love of God, and that the same faith and love that enable her to order her priorities in this way give her confidence that God has forgiven her weaknesses and missteps—sexual, and other. Luther is serious when he says that our "infirmities and offences" do not stand in the way of holiness if we truly love and follow Christ.[54]

Two postscripts

These meanderings reveal that most church discussions of sexuality are missing dimensions that are essential to a comprehensive Christian treatment of it. I will point out two, although there are many more. First, Augustine's belief that even "good" marital, procreative sex ought to be hidden away in the dark has probably contributed more than anything to the impression that our sexuality—unlike any other dimension of our humanity—is essentially private, immune to or isolated from all our other social, political, and familial connections. The great insight of recent philosophers and theologians is that even secret and non-procreative sexual expression has a social context and power implications: our sexual relationships reproduce the economic injustice, racism, homophobia, and sexism of the world around us. It is impossible to "mend" human sexual relating as if it were simply about private passions, immune from these larger powers. Thus the standard of sex in the City of God has to be the reign of God—not, as in Augustine's vision, merely the silencing of passion and desire, but the reign of justice. Augustine ultimately agrees. However much ink he has spilled on the shamefulness of sex, what truly irritates him is simply that sexual arousal is

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[54] Luther, "The Letter of Paul to the Galatians," in Dillenberger, 159–60.

the only involuntary function that appears when it is biologically unnecessary and that the will cannot discipline it into submission. The real root of sin is pride, with its very public, social manifestation in aimless greed and the desire to dominate.[55]

Indeed, it is worth reflecting upon whether pride, greed, and domination do not infect our sexuality much more profoundly than does the simple hunger for pleasure. Mary E. Hunt's pun, "just/ good sex," is a wonderful starting point for the discussion of sex's public dimension. To begin with, sex must be safe: from abuse, from disease, from fear of persecution, and from coercion. If it is not always physically gratifying, it must at least genuinely pursue pleasure, health, and wholeness. It must be community-building: our relationships must engender and nourish, rather than jeopardize, a love and creative energy that spill over into the community around us. Finally, it must create and model just relationships, partnerships between equals in which power is shared and renewed rather than used to control others.[56]

Second, to a degree human knowledge is cumulative; one generation can build on the achievements of the last. Nevertheless, neither denominational conversations nor any other human efforts to "get sex right" will ever reach a conclusion. Some kinds of wisdom have their own trajectory and life in each person. As Søren Kierkegaard says, if we want to learn complicated dances, we have to begin with simple steps;[57] neither dance theory nor other people's accomplishments can help us become good dancers. We know this about faith. We know it about moral psychological development. It has to be true about sexuality, which exists at the nexus of body, spirit, and emotion. A mature and faithful sexuality cannot be learned in a manual, whether it is *The Joy of Sex* or the Bible. Instead, we grow by living well: by listening to and being conscious of ourselves, by being accompanied, by thinking and talking, by praying, by learning how to love God, others, and ourselves authentically. Says Kierkegaard,

> What ever the one generation may learn from the other, that which is genuinely human no generation learns from the foregoing. In this respect every generation begins primitively, has no different task from that of every previous generation, nor does it get further. . . . This authentically human factor is passion, in which also the one generation perfectly understands the other and understands itself. Thus no generation has learned from another to love, no generation begins at any other point than at the beginning, no generation has a shorter task assigned to it than had the previous generation, and if here one is not willing like the previous generation to stop with love but would go further, this is but idle and foolish talk.[58]

Our life's goal is simply, by the grace of God, to learn to love.

Thanks to Amanda Downs, Avani Lodhavia, and Sandra Longfellow for research help; to Elaine Ramshaw for references; to the many friends whose good questions and observations shaped this essay, especially Karla Grimmett and Joan Kelly; to my husband, Bill Hutchison; and to our children, Kate, Maggie (who proofread), and David.

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[55] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.

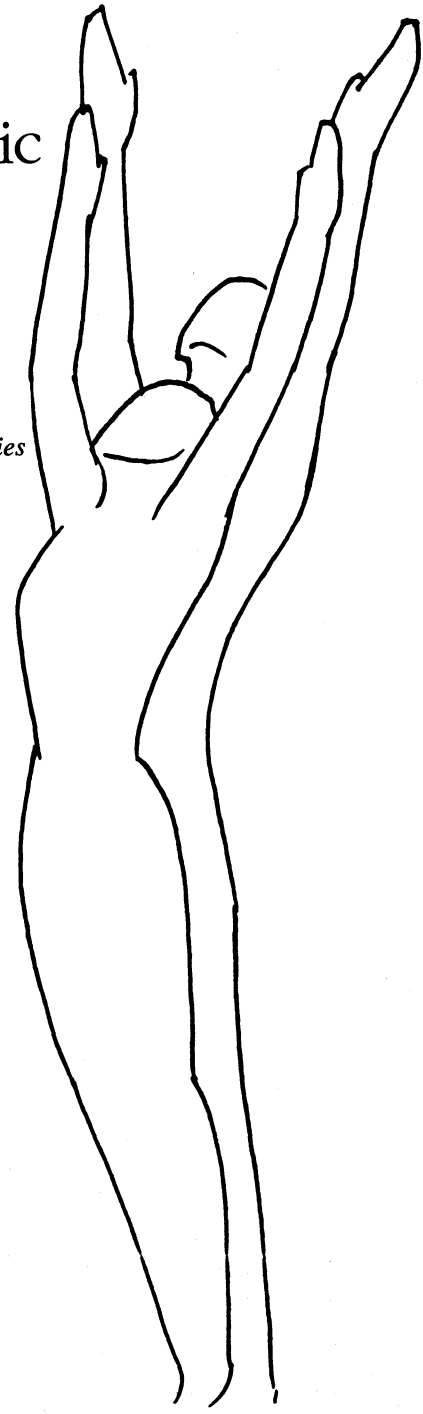
[56] Mary E. Hunt, "Just Good Sex: Feminist Catholicism and Human Rights," in *Good Sex*, ed. Jung et al., 171–73.

[57] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, in *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 56–57.

[58] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 130.

Sexuality Is:
(a) deeply problematic
(b) God's gift
(c) a hoot

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In 1970 several thousand Lutherans were surveyed, a representative sample of the then six million ALC, LCA and LCMS members in the United States. One of the questions asked them to say yes or no to whether Jesus "felt sexual attraction." 81 percent said no.[1]

I can't help but think of the parochial school teacher/nun's comment on astrology in *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You*: "We can tell that horoscopes are false because according to astrology Christ would be a Capricorn, and Capricorn people are cold, ambitious, and attracted to Scorpio and Virgo, and we know that Christ was warm, loving, and not attracted to anybody."[2]

How do we think about this response to the survey question? On one level, it reflects the general process of idealization. When we idealize people, admire them, or see them as heroes or saints, we tend to create an image of them that leaves out what Paul might call their "less honorable parts." It is broadly true across cultures that some degree of shaming is used in the process of socializing children regarding what they can and can't do or say or show in public. The fallout from this is that a certain taint of shamefulness attaches itself to normal, healthy human activities like peeing. When I was a child I once found myself wondering whether Jesus went to the bathroom. I knew he was supposed to have been a real human being and so he must have; but at the same time, I felt guilty even thinking about the question. This was confusing to me. Why did I feel guilty thinking about something I was supposed to believe was true? My answer today is that I felt guilty because defecation and urination were tinged with shame for me and therefore were unworthy activities for a perfect, sinless person. This may account for some of the 81 percent. While they would have to acknowledge (though perhaps with some uneasiness at the thought) that Jesus went to the bathroom, they were able to screen out sexual feelings entirely from their idealized image of Jesus.

Along with this general process of idealizing, editing out the less honorable parts, there is another factor: the longtime Western Christian suspicion that sexuality is per se sinful. The less honorable parts of the body came to be thought of as, to quote Monty Python, the "naughty bits." We can't think of Jesus as having had sexual feelings because sexual feelings are not only vaguely shameful (like farting) but also morally suspect. The need to deny Jesus' sexual feelings indicates the problem we have with our own. Given the heritage of negative attitudes about sex, it becomes very difficult for us to talk about God and our experience of sex in the same paragraph. If we do talk about God as the source of human sexuality positively construed, it's usually only a tamed, idealized, laundered sexuality.

Let me sketch two idealized pictures of God-given sexuality in Western Christian ethics: Augustine's version of sex in the Garden of Eden, and modern Protestants' view of sex in the context of loving relationship.

Augustine was basically Stoic in his psychology of the human passions; Stoicism was the default setting for psychological understanding in the West in his day. In Stoic thought, the problem with the passions (that goes for anger and grief as well as sexual desire) is that they overwhelm our reason. So Stoics believed we needed to control our passions with reason and willpower. (Men, of course, were much better at this than women!) Augustine, unlike some of the Eastern theologians, thought there would have been sex in the Garden if there had been no Fall. Sex in Eden would have been safely controlled by will and reason, undertaken to fulfill God's purpose of human reproduction. In the 1980s I told my classes, it was Yuppie sex: "I'll pencil you in for a meeting in bed tonight at 10:37." No getting carried away, no unruly pleasure that distracts from God's purpose (God's purpose, of course, is never simply pleasure). Since the Fall, according

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[1] Merton Strommen et al., *A Study of Generations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 367, #13.

[2] Christopher Durang, "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You," in *The Best Short Plays 1981*, ed. Stanley Richards (Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Company, 1981), 125.

to Augustine, sex is *always* tainted by sin. Even intercourse between wife and husband for the sake of producing a baby cannot escape the taint of concupiscence, which is overweening desire. Sex in Eden was a truly good gift of God, but it was a Stoically ideal version of sexuality, which you and I will never experience—and probably would never want to.

In the mid-twentieth century Christian ethicists struggled with an inherited tradition—strongest in Roman Catholicism, but influencing Protestant thought as well—of casuistic thinking about sex that had an impersonal act-focus. If you're doing an approved activity with the appropriate body parts in a legitimate relationship with pure thoughts for the right reason, then maybe you're not actively sinning. Many twentieth-century ethicists looked to replace this impersonal act-focused approach with a central concern for mutually respectful loving relationship. Sex is a gift of God for the purpose of deepening the bond of love and intimacy between a committed couple as well as for the purpose of procreation.

This is a great advance over the dominant traditional approach to sexuality, where any approval of sexual activity or feeling was guarded and grudging and partial. But it still only covers an idealized portion of our sexuality. There is much in a normal person's sexuality that is not about forming an agapeic bond. Even if we're talking about sexual play in a mutually loving marriage, this picture can have trouble accounting for what's going on in the couple's minds during the sex play. And, of course, there are plenty of people who never experience a mutually loving committed relationship in which to have sex that deepens intimacy. Is sexuality not a gift to those people?

Another problem with this picture of God-given sexuality is that it tends to be individualistic, focusing on persons and their relationships and leaving culture and society in a largely unexamined background. Like pre-twentieth-century Christian thought on sexuality, this more modern Western Christian approach is not serious enough about social context, the social construction of love and kinship, the realities of power.

So here's what we do: we create an unproblematic version of sexuality which we name as God's gift but which is frankly unrecognizable as our human experience. Social realities are ignored: the gender socialization that leads many men to feel they have to achieve and compete and leads many women to fake orgasm, the construction of relationship that makes date rape and wife abuse so common, the economics of using sexual and violent imagery to sell. The weirdness of our fantasy world is ignored and, too often, projected out onto less powerful Others. As some male theologians used to project the weird and dangerous side of sexuality onto women, seeing women themselves as sexual temptation, so we often project out what makes us uncomfortable in our sexuality.

African Americans are well aware of how the dominant white society has projected its fantasies onto them, seeing black men particularly as hypersexual and as sexual threats and seeing black women either as asexual mother/servants or as loose women. Other people of color get painted by projection as well: the Latin lover, the geisha. The groups most susceptible of all to the dominant group's sexual projections are groups that are defined by sexual difference, such as lesbians and gays, vowed celibate people, and persons whose gender expression doesn't fit the norm. Sure, I say, there's weirdness in human sexuality—it's in those weird people, over there. It's not in my fantasy life, not in what I imagine

during sexual play, not in what I find arousing. It's in the Gay Pride parade.

This, I would argue, is one of the reasons why there is so much pressure for a conference like this one to focus entirely on homosexuality. *Our* sexuality is not problematic; let's talk about the people who make sexuality a problem for us. LSTC is to be commended for resisting that pressure and maintaining that the conversation has be broader to be helpful, to have a chance of moving us all beyond polarization and ideologically stuck positions into dialogue characterized by respect for the other and humorous self-awareness.

So, let's start by acknowledging that *our* sexuality is problematic. What makes sexuality problematic?

First, it is many-layered. It is not just private, it is not just me and you, it is not just conscious, it was not invented by humans out of nothing, it is not discovered for the first time after puberty. Our sexuality has an evolutionary history. We are animals who evolved, and our sexual lives carry some of that history—not just the "lizard brain" of raw emotion and physiological response but also primate innovations such as female orgasm and the disappearance of estrus. Does the fact that female orgasm contributes little or nothing to reproduction say anything about the place of pleasure in God-given sexuality? Our sexuality has a personal history, starting at or before birth, with complex physiological factors influencing gender identity and the orientation of our desire, with sexual play to orgasm beginning in infancy, with the development of a deeply relational self and world. We have an unusually long childhood during which we are dependent on adults for nurture; this contributes to our unconscious beliefs about love and power, about our own and others' love-worthiness. Our sexuality has a social history.

Our sexuality has an evolutionary history, a personal history, and a social history.

Like other primates, we are creatures of society, where strong desires have economic uses and both contribute to and threaten social cohesion, and where gender is a distinction of key importance in structuring power. All these layers, evolutionary, social and personal, influence behavior, motivations, and meanings that compete and coexist in us on different levels.

Human sexuality is also problematic for the same reason it is transcendently wonderful: it is fundamentally about the imagination. This is what we mean when we say that the most important sexual organ is the brain. Both the best and the worst of humanness come from our symbol-making, naming, world-shaping imagination. This imagination itself is not entirely controlled by individual conscious choice. Our imagination is socially shaped; we get our repertoire of images from the society's imaginal world, though we also contribute to that world in turn. Many of our ancestors were not just unable to experience a mutually respectful loving relationship between a woman and a man with equal power; they were unable to imagine it. Even for us, society may constrain our ability to imagine a relationship of equal power as sexy. I am famous among my friends for The List, a list I keep of movies in which there is a romance where the man falls in love with

A great deal of what is said in the Bible about sexual practices comes under the heading of purity regulations.

the woman for her strengths—her courage, her wit, her intelligence, her physical skill—rather than primarily for her beauty and her dependence on him. This is a short list. The dearth of Hollywood images of what I might call feminist-friendly romance does not, of course, make real-life feminist-friendly romance impossible. In fact, several of the movies on my list are based on real life: *Annie Oakley*, and *Shadowlands*, and *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*. Yet the lack of movies where the man's love is as admiring as the woman's probably has an effect on the fantasy life of the moviegoer. Not to mention the lack of movie images of, say, cross-ethnic romances where ethnicity is not a big deal.

Another reason why sexuality inevitably makes us anxious is that it has to do with the boundaries of the self. Human cultures are all very concerned about defining boundaries—of the group, of the body/self. Purity concerns arise cross-culturally about food, about bodily excretions, about the bleeding of menstruation or of wounds, about sexual acts and sexual emissions, about giving birth, about dead bodies—things that cross the boundary of the body. The feelings about these matters can go so deep in us that it can be difficult to distinguish the severe gross-out we feel in reaction to impurity from moral abhorrence. Mary Douglas, demonstrating the principle that dirt is simply matter that is out of place, proposed the following thought experiment: Imagine spitting into an empty, clean glass until it is full of your saliva. Now imagine drinking from the glass. Most people are seriously grossed out by that thought. Douglas contends that it's because saliva, once it is outside the body, is culturally defined as dirt. What's interesting to me about this thought experiment is that we can't claim that there is anything unnatural or immoral in drinking our own saliva; we're doing it all the time. God intends us to drink our saliva. Our revulsion at the thought of drinking a glassful of it is an indication of the power of purity concerns, even in a highly sophisticated and rationalized society where purity regulations are far less central than they were, say, in ancient Israel.

A great deal of what is said in the Bible about sexual practices comes under the heading of purity regulations, especially the two codes in Leviticus. Because purity is not such a central concern of our religious systems today, and because what purity rules we live by are generally unarticulated and taken for granted, we tend to have difficulty understanding these codes. The food taboos of kosher laws make no sense to us; even Jews have tried to justify them by claiming that they originally were about hygiene, or trichinosis, or contagion. Actually, they were ways of defining the boundary of the group and distinguishing Israel from the Gentiles. When the purity codes condemn sexual practices, for instance, with one of the words translated as "abomination," we understand that as a word of moral opprobrium, because we're not used to such weight being explicitly placed on a matter of cultic purity. Bill Countryman, in his

book *Dirt, Greed, and Sex*,[3] has a clear discussion of the function of the Old Testament purity codes and the enduring traces of purity concerns around sexuality in New Testament texts. For our purposes here, though, it is enough to say that the anxiety about sexual acts or bodily emissions that cross or blur the boundaries of body or gender is a major factor in motivating both biblical and contemporary attempts to regulate sexual behavior.

Finally, sexuality is problematic because sexual activity with another person involves a high degree of vulnerability and thus risk of harm. We are at least partially naked, with parts of our body that are always otherwise covered revealed to another. We lose control during orgasm, which makes us even more physically vulnerable. We are vulnerable to the passing of disease through intimate physical contact. Women who sleep with men are likely to be aware that their partner has significantly more upper-body strength and that this is an advantage which many, many men have used to dominate and harm the women they sleep with. That knowledge is a vulnerability even when one trusts this particular partner absolutely. Men and women both, in different ways, are vulnerable to being deeply shamed by a partner's insensitivity or rejection. And both men and women in fertile heterosexual partnerships are vulnerable to having their lives profoundly changed by a pregnancy, with women bearing more of that vulnerability as the ones who may get pregnant, who may have to consider abortion, who may have to change their habits for the fetus's sake, who undergo childbirth at their own risk. All this vulnerability has many wonderful consequences in the setting of healthy relationships and supportive communities, of course. The gifts of deeper intimacy that come with loving sex are a direct consequence of shared vulnerability. At the same time, the inescapable vulnerability of sex is one of the reasons why this wonderful gift of God makes us so anxious.

So, let me review: Sexuality is problematic because it is many-layered, bearing in itself complex and self-contradictory levels of meaning from personal, social, and evolutionary history. It is problematic because human sexuality is a matter of human imagination. It raises anxiety because it involves the definition and the crossing of the boundaries of the body and of gender, and it raises anxiety because to act on our sexual feelings with another requires the risk of significant vulnerability. Note that all this is true even if sin were not to enter the picture.

If the first crucial task on the way to an adequate Christian view of sexuality is to acknowledge that *our* sexuality (not just other people's) is problematic, the second crucial task is to distinguish the problematic from the sinful. There is sin mixed up in much of the weird messiness of human sexuality, of course; but at the same time, I would argue that complexity is God's intent for human life. The many-layeredness of our experience, the permutations and leaps performed by our imagination—these are probably the grounds of our freedom.

Genesis 1 has influenced us to imagine God's creativity as bringing order out of *tohu v'bohu* and setting up a hierarchy with humans at the pinnacle. The book of Job has a very different take on creation.[4] As

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[3] L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

[4] What I say in this paragraph about Job's counter-priestly view of creation is the result of my having heard Diane Jacobson speak on the book of Job, in presentations such as her

the book of Job argues against the deuteronomic view that everyone gets what they deserve, so it also argues against the priestly view of creation as Order, where there's a clear separation between clean and unclean and a clear hierarchy with humanity at the pinnacle. In Job, the chaos-monster is made by God just as humans are (40:15); God swaddles it at its birth (38:8–9). The object lessons of the dumbfounding unknowability of creation are not "our friends the animals"—they are animals that are unclean and wild (with the sole exception of the horse, and the horse is envisaged not as a friend but as a vehicle of war). In Job, creation has no pinnacle. The humans slain on the battlefield appear in God's speech only as food for the vulture's babies (39:30). This is not a faithless or despairing view of humanity's place in God's world: Job is, after all, significant enough for God to show up and respond to his charge. It is, though, a faithful view of creation that accords better with a contemporary scientific view of creation than does Genesis 1. It sees the chaos-monster made as an integral part of the creative process, leaving room for chaos and randomness in the world as God intended it. And it is also more compatible with scientific views in that it is not anthropocentric.

Just as I would argue that Job provides a more adequate theodicy than the Deuteronomist, so I would argue that Job provides a view of God's creative process that is more helpful to a discussion of sexuality than that of the priestly writer. It is helpful particularly in distinguishing the problematic per se from the sinful. God made a problematic world, a messy world, with chaos built in. That in and of itself is not the result of sin.

So suppose I'm aroused by reading about a rape, or suppose I fantasize coercive sex when I'm having sex with my husband. This could be seen as personal sin, especially if I identify with the rapist. It could be seen as social sin; our sinful society eroticizes the act of overpowering and being overpowered. But maybe this egodystonic arousal is partly God's responsibility. Without conceding all truth to the sociobiologists, we can allow that there may be an evolutionary history to the sexual appeal of the show of power. Plus, all physical arousal is physiologically indistinguishable, so the thrill of fear is easily sexualized. The arousal of fear can heighten sexual arousal, if I am able to construe the situation sexually. Not only that, my first loves, my parents, necessarily overpowered me (though they also played with me in mutually respectful ways); that leads me to be able to imaginatively experience coercion as compatible with love. I see all of these factors as problematic, but I can see none of them as results of sin.

And what about being aroused by, say, seeing a person in uniform? Or by riding horseback? Or by just imagining riding horseback? Or by watching Denzel Washington or hearing Sean Connery in a movie? (You'll understand, I picked those two names totally at random!) None of this has much to do with mutually respectful, agapeic, committed relationships. Can we understand it as having anything to do with God? Only if we think God's interest is more in complexity than in purity, and in imagination and play as well as in other-directed love.

Given that God made a messy world, where chaos and randomness play as important a role as order, and given that God put us in the middle of the mess and not on top of it in control, it behooves us to develop a sense of humor about the weirdness of our sexuality. Not nasty humor, which shames the victim, but kind humor, which shares the shame, and by sharing it makes

light of it. In the church context, sexuality is generally all taken Very Seriously; there is no room for experimentation, even (or especially!) in youth, and little room for imagination. Sex still has to have a Legitimate Purpose, which can now be growth in intimacy within a committed relationship as well as the making of babies. We do not count pleasure itself as a legitimate purpose. No fun for the sake of fun. Of course there are moral issues galore in fantasy and games—but we shouldn't let those moral concerns take the fun out of our play (as we leach the humor from the Bible). The family-systems people see humorlessness as an anxiety symptom; the lack of kind humor is the sign of a sick system, where the anxiety is high. That's an interesting measure to apply to our attempts at sex education.

As the church has long been anxious about sexuality, it has long been opposed to the culture's ways of acknowledging the messiness of sexuality with humor. Merry Wiesner, writing on the history of weddings in Christian Europe, says that in the late Middle Ages both church and civil authorities tried to restrict the festivities around weddings, the church primarily because of moral objections to the lewd jokes, erotic songs, and other raucous behavior. Protestant civil authorities went even farther in their attempts to limit wedding celebrations; they "prohibited the reciting of obscene poetry, and forbade the guests to accompany the bride and groom to their marriage bed, a practice that had been the occasion of much drinking and joking."[5] Now, no doubt these festivities were often morally problematic, with alcohol abuse and sexist joking and some cruel humor. But the church needs to recognize that sexual joking is also a gift of God, a way of recognizing the weirdness of sexuality as something we didn't choose and can only laugh about, a way of sharing and defusing the shame, a way of allowing that after all we are not in control, and maybe God doesn't mean us to be.

In the church context, sexuality is generally all taken Very Seriously. Sex has to have a Legitimate Purpose. . . .

Along with a sense of humor, we need as church to develop our sense of play and imagination. I don't want to idealize play and imagination, here; again, this is the best and the worst of humanness. Play is about making and entering an imaginal world, where we can test out capacities and ways of relating we might use in the real world. We can also imaginatively construct alternate realities, where Jerusalem is at peace and the streets are full of playing children . . . or, as in Joseph's dream, where all my older brothers finally bow down to *me*. We don't pay attention to dreams any more, and we don't do much in church to nurture the imagination. We rarely help people develop the ability to pray with the aid of imagined pictures, or encourage them to draw a response to a biblical story, or get

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Luther-Northwestern Convocation Lecture (February 9, 1992), "Creation, Birth, and the Radical Ecology of the Book of Job."

[5] Merry Wiesner-Hanks, "Weddings," *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 266.

them to learn from children's imaginative worlds. There are not many positive images of playfulness in Christian tradition . . . but there is a strong thread of connecting Easter with play. There's the dance-cum-ballgame played inside the cathedral at Auxerre on Easter,[6] and the bishop of Chester playing egg-toss with the choir during the Easter services.[7] There's the legend of Mary handing out colored eggs to children for them to play with as she comes from the tomb with the news of the resurrection.[8] And for many of our children, there's Aslan, playing tag with Lucy and Susan on the morning of his resurrection.[9] Could we revive that connection, of Easter to play? Bring play inside the church at Easter? It may seem a long way from sex, but it's about body, and fantasy, and the safety to imagine, and the freedom to be silly even (especially!) in the middle of the sacred.

But let me end with something that's a little more clearly related to how we deal with sexuality in the church setting: the matter of sex education. Christine Gudorf, in *Body, Sex and Pleasure*,[10] argues that the purpose of most American sex education is to get kids to postpone sexual intercourse by teaching them the risks and dangers of sex. It does not talk about sex as exciting and intensely pleasurable. This is not honest about our experience of sex, nor is it accurate to theirs. In church-based sex education, we tell them their sexuality is a gift of God, but we don't suggest how that gift can be enjoyed this side of a possible future marriage. I'm not saying here that the way to do that would be to bless intercourse outside of committed relationships; rather, I think we need to start with a theology of pleasure, and a positive valuation of fantasy and solitary sexual play, and then talk about what sexual play with others entails. We also need to talk about the realities of relationship, about how respect and passion can and should coexist, about how jealousy is not a sign of true love but a warning sign of violence, about how boys and girls get boxed in by their respective gender expectations—boys pushing as far as they can, girls giving double messages and faking pleasure. We need to talk about these things with a sense of humor: I can imagine, for instance, having contests to come up with the funniest dirty joke that isn't sexist or demeaning. We need to critique the culture with them, looking together at the images in ads, arguing about

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[6] I learned about this from Katharine Gibson's story, "Apollon, A Gardener," in *The Easter Book of Legends and Stories*, ed. Alice Hazeltine and Elva Smith (New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Co., 1947), 130–45. It is also described briefly in a quotation from Yvonne Rokseth in *A Triduum Sourcebook III*, ed. Joan Halmo and Frank Henderson (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996), 424–25. Rokseth's discussion of various ancient traditions of church-based dance and play at Easter also tells of the eventual suppression of such customs by (my term) the Piety Police—a suppression reminiscent of the battle of the official church against rowdiness at weddings, noted by Wiesner. In the *Triduum Sourcebook III*, see also the mention of "paschal laughter" on p. 475: there was a tradition that on Easter preachers should, at some point in their sermon, make the people laugh.

[7] Venetia Newall, *An Egg at Easter* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 334. Said to have happened in the church as late as 1839; later the game was moved outside to the village green.

[8] A Yugoslav legend. *An Egg at Easter*, 215–16.

[9] C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 133.

[10] Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 52–54, 155–59.

which movies might go on The List. None of this is dealt with in most public school sex education, where, in an attempt to avoid contentious issues of values, they stick to biological facts shorn of all their personal and social context of meaning. If we can't talk about values in the church, where can we? And if we can't find a way to talk about values without being moralistic, how can we claim to be Lutheran? (Speaking of being Lutheran, when I have asked groups of church people what theological beliefs or values they think we should convey in sex education, almost never has anyone suggested grace. Whether this is because grace has to do only with salvation and not with daily life or whether it is because parents really don't want adolescent kids thinking about sex to be assured that God loves them no matter what, I leave to you to decide.)

It may well be, of course, that we can't do real sex ed in the local congregation, because there are only two kids, or there are no adults willing to devote time to learning how to teach this. So we may have to resort to retreats and camp programs for some kids. But somewhere, somehow, kids deserve from us more than warnings about sex-too-soon and yet another idealized picture of God-given sexuality that doesn't have room for the complexity of their experience or ours. God made a messy world, full of wild animals and uncontrollable weather and undeserved suffering and ecstatic pleasure and other stuff that doesn't fit into our idea of order. This is the world in which we have to meet our children, with honesty and imagination, with deep respect, with moral seriousness and the grace of humor to handle our anxiety.

God made a messy world, full of stuff that doesn't fit into our idea of order. This is the world in which we have to meet our children.

I hope, by now, I have made the answer to the multiple-choice question of my title clear. Sexuality is deeply problematic, it is God's gift, and it is a hoot. (d) All of the above.

The Spirit Is Willing and the Flesh Is Too: Integrating Spirituality and Sexuality

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Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.
—Matthew 26:41

When Christians are asked to think about body issues, they often settle for a dualistic anthropology. This has often resulted in an attempt to be disembodied. Through the ages, embodiment has been a very serious problem to the formation of a Christian identity. Like Jesus wrestling in the Garden of Gethsemane, we have struggled with this issue and whether it is better to be embodied or disembodied. This challenge sounds odd, but when you consider that most of our physical associations with the world are described in terms of the negative physical pleasures of life, it should be no surprise that our physical preference is disembodiment in order to make Heaven our home.

Within the United States of America, the challenges associated with the body and embodiment are often guided by a dualistic impulse to dissect life. Most of us have been socialized to believe that the best way to understand something is by cutting it open and looking at its internal workings. When we want to try to understand embodiment and the gifts of our creatureliness, however, the impulse to dissect is not for the sake of examination. On matters of the body, our impulse actually tends toward surgical extraction or amputation. Our preference for disembodiment often perceives our body to be unhealthy and flawed. Our dualistic impulse for dissection assumes that there is a dysfunctional component to our being that must be extracted and discarded. This is particularly true when we identify ourselves as sexual beings. Notions of sexual purity tend to mean adding to life through subtraction from life. As a result, we have dualized spirituality and sexuality in Christian living and have often extracted sexuality from our Christian identity.

Finding harmony

Many find it difficult if not impossible to conceive of opposites coming together to form a harmonious union. Even our characterizations of harmonious union support notions of irreconcilable differences. Consider the ways people talk about marriage. Our most common descriptions of holy matrimony reflect our difficulty in conceiving marriage as a harmonious union. Some of these descriptions express the tragic victimization that is embedded within human existence. Think, for a moment, about

the fuzzy math we use to describe marriage. We say things like "I was half and you made me whole" or we make reference to a spouse being the "better half." "I was nothing before you." "I am nothing without you." "Always keep a little something on the side that he doesn't know about." "I always try on a shoe before I buy it." And, because shoes wear out, "a five-year marriage is an old couple." When many people describe the vital features of a harmonious union using holy matrimony as the prime example, the picture that gets generated is often a function of our dualistic impulse.

It is far easier for us to split things and people apart than it is to maintain the integrity of wholeness. This splitting behavior means we are inclined toward a misguided understanding of union. Our ideas of union tend to be expressed through the language of subservience resulting from an emphasis on a fallen state of being. As we describe the roles of husbands and wives, the basic descriptions of holy and harmonious union rest upon sex and gender differences that emphasize superior/inferior ideologies instead of stressing equality and mutuality. Through a puritanical "rule of thumb," we promote disembodiment and beat the life out of one another in the name of Christian virtue. Ultimately, we tear our spirits out of our bodies as our way of declaring harmonious union. Rather than promoting a harmony based on what we have in common, there is a tendency to define harmony through a defensiveness based on separation, which in the end offers a false sense of security regarding holiness.

Consider the myth of Lilith. According to this apocryphal myth, Lilith was the first wife of Adam. Although their marital strife seems to be rather specific, the story has been interpreted to say that Adam and Lilith argued about everything. Believing the two of them to be equal, Lilith refused to be dominated in any way. But in the story, here is what actually breaks up the marriage: Lilith refused to be on the bottom during lovemaking. Because of Adam's lack of mutuality, Lilith left Eden. Angels of the Lord visited her, commanding her to return to Adam, and she refused. Her refusal resulted in her becoming the lover of many demons, the seducer of men, and the source of crib death. Among the many things to be concluded from this myth, this story suggests that equality is not an option, that equality is not what it means to be spiritual, and that a body without spiritual guidance is destructive. I wonder, can we imagine a harmonious union in the absence of dominance?

Let's consider that question in the context of the Gospel of Matthew and the Gethsemane narrative. Jesus is in the garden, separated from his disciples. He throws himself on the ground and begins to pray. He stops praying. He goes back to get some moral support from his disciples, whom he has asked to stay awake. Finding them asleep, he says, "Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Think for a moment of the variety of contexts in which you have heard or said, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." What meaning did you intend, or what was the intended meaning when those words were spoken by others? The context for this statement, at the very least, has something to do with Jesus' struggle within life as the necessity of his death drew near. While his statement suggests an awareness of death being imminent, a part of him was hesitant about actually "giving up the ghost." Our typical reading of this text, however, reinforces our notions of spirit power being more potent than physical power. We regularly conclude that spirit is superior to the body. This notion points to

an idea that if the spirit simply dominates the body, or if we simply separate ourselves from the body, then the condition of the body is of no consequence. But to emphasize such an idea encourages the escapism that is a natural defense mechanism when we are physically assaulted. In the midst of experiencing the ultimate violent violation of the human soul, we may separate ourselves cognitively and emotionally from our bodies in order to escape the horrors of the victimization. In other words, as the victimizer dominates the body, the victim leaves the body. But if this becomes our way of addressing life, that is, separating what we perceive to be our "selves" from our bodies in the midst of struggle, what does it really mean to achieve a harmonious union? Is separating our spirits from our bodies really living?

A question of humanity

This for me begs the question that the world has yet to answer satisfactorily: "What does it mean to be human?" What is it about this question that throughout the ages makes us ask, answer, and ask the same question over and over again? Scholars and laypersons of all varieties and disciplines have answered this question again and again, with the latest social hope being the human genome project.

I would like to suggest one reason for our failure to answer this question once and for all. I believe our struggle to answer it has to do with our division of spirit and body, of spirituality and sexuality. If we considered the two to be parts of the same whole, our understanding of the human experience and condition would be very different. The bifurcation of our being does not simply result in the fracturing of our individual selves, it ultimately results in the destruction of our lives as relational beings. In general, the life of the spirit seeks to bring union, and the body longs to be united to another. We, however, do not tend to see spirit and body as longing for and desirous of the same goal; that is, we do not tend to see spirit and body longing for, desirous of, hoping for the end of an isolated existence. Instead of the positive goal of union being attributed to both spirit and body, we have tended to attribute negative characteristics to the body without realizing that this results in the destructive functioning of the spirit. Attempting to answer the question "What does it mean to be human?" by dividing spirit and body means that a person will always emphasize one part over the other and ultimately declare that emphasized part to be superior to the other part.

The black body

Many of my opinions have been formed and informed by African American life. For the remainder of my discussion, much of what I will reflect upon has been framed by my views of Black life in America.

Although the dominant ideological split in America is mind-body, across much of African American culture the guiding paradigm for analysis is a spirit-body split. African Americans have an "anthropodical" (anthropos + theodicy) understanding of the body. That is to say, we have some peculiar ideas about our physical nature as an evil nature. The ideas we have about our own black bodies make it difficult for us to be "at home in our own skin." If we are not conscientious, our dark bodies can feel like jail houses of shame and ostracism.

America's relational systems are regularly described as colorized polar opposites. I know today we want to see ourselves as a unified nation committed to fighting against terrorism, but the very terms we use to describe our country characterize us as the Good fighting against the Evil in the

world. This fight is not seen as being merely temporal. This fight has been described to reflect the eschatological hope of the nation by declaring that God is for us and that choosing to not align with us is to stand against God. These contrasting positions, often depicted in black and white, symbolize life's eternal struggle of evil against good. Furthermore, these contrasting positions have become the defining features of God-human interactions.

In America, White and white bodies have been equated with God and good; and Black and black bodies have been equated with anti-God and evil. Hence, many of our relational dynamics are expressed as God versus evil. Even today, this is heard in our language of nationalism. The male body is considered weak when it is presented with the female body which is regarded as the evil seductress. Color and body together declare who is acceptable and can belong and who will always be rejected and outcast.

Furthermore, color and body also play a part in fantasy life. The body naturally stimulates the erotic senses, but color, among many other features of the body, exaggerates the erotic sensations through an identification of the exotic. There is a constructed sense that the exotic is more pleasurable than the "typical." As a result, black bodies are often thought to be at the extremes of sexual behavior and sexual pleasure. Through spiritual pronouncements based on racialized sexual differences, black bodies are frequently seen and experienced as the unholy, unclean incarnation of evil in America. Consequently, we African Americans sacrificially escape our bodies through an overspiritualization of our lives, trying to transform that which is unholy into the holy by separating our sexuality from our spirituality.

Spirituality and sexuality

African American spirituality, which is rooted in African spirituality, promoted our survival through generations of hard times by an insistence that we maintain our self-understanding as whole and holy human beings. Generally speaking, spirituality is the active integration of our humanity resulting in a singularly directed effort to be in communion with God and others. It is the human spirit moving and being drawn toward God's Spirit. African spirituality has a multilayered, communal understanding of reality. From this perspective, the world is filled with spirits, and God's Spirit is an inescapable presence in the world. Because God is in everything and everyone, the most mundane activity is regarded as a spiritual activity. This is why African spirituality declares there is no separation between the sacred and the secular.

Contrary to this guiding principle of African spirituality, spirituality and sexuality for many African Americans tend to be seen as separate and unequal. Spirituality is seen as superior and sexuality as inferior. When there is an attempt to describe spiritual poverty, most often the expression is causally related to sexuality. The poor in spirit are thought to be those who are the most worldly and sensual. This, I believe, has led to a denial of our humanity by separating our spiritual lives from our physical lives. If our spirituality instructs us to maintain holiness by maintaining wholeness, then we must maintain our spirituality and our sexuality as integrated components of our humanity. We cannot say "no separations" and act in ways that establish multiple separations and expect to be whole and healthy human beings.

Whereas spirituality and sexuality should always be considered parts of the same, single whole, they have been described and defined as unrelated parts. An

exercise I borrowed from a friend usually helps me to convey this point. The exercise is as follows: On a piece of paper, you are going to make two lists of words. For the first list, describe the feelings that communicate a positive worshipful experience. After giving people an opportunity to develop the first list, for the second list I ask them to describe the feelings of "afterglow" following lovemaking. What most people discover is that they use the same words to describe both experiences. Spirituality and sexuality are not only related, they have the same purpose as the end goal, that is, to integrate human persons with one another and with God through the harmony-producing activities of community.

The damage done by splitting

Life is most fulfilling when it is lived out relationally. Spirituality purports to unify all things, yet our Western practices have split our spiritual functioning into the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the mundane. This action has tended to result in an understanding of sexuality as profane and mundane. The splitting of spirituality and sexuality has meant the splitting of our lives. Rather than spirituality and sexuality being unified to overcome human isolation, we have separated them into independent functions with separate expressions. As a result, our desires to overcome human isolation move us to "pray" or "prey." Because we have been socialized to know that there are appropriate places for "praying" and different places for "preying," and never the twain shall meet, we have come to understand spirituality as the separation from the body, which has promoted the condemnation of sexuality. Within the spiritual world of our making, the body has taken on the description of everything evil, citing that no good can come from the flesh.

This splitting of spirituality and sexuality has had a devastating impact upon African American relationships, not just within the community but also as we relate to other communities. We have been regarded as being without religion, spirit, or morality, that is, without spirituality. Those who have viewed the African with contempt have thought our nature to be lustful, sensual, and animal, that is, uncontrolled sexuality. Historically, we have been seen as less than human and therefore not spiritual. While only some of us have believed these outsiders' opinions, all of us have been influenced by these opinions whether we believe them or not. Consequently, the splitting has had a negative influence upon our relational openness and intimacy.

For our spirituality and sexuality to be reunited, we must lift high the relational qualities of equality and mutuality. We must return to thinking on the individual, family, and community levels all at once rather than thinking of the individual, family, and community as single, unrelated parts. We are in need of healing to reunite spirituality and sexuality in order to restore our humanity. I see healing as the transformative process necessary for integrating the spirit and body and mending broken lives. Healing restores us to life by restoring us to relationship.

Mutuality is an essential part of the healing process. It says that our meeting ground, though it may not be common ground, is holy ground. Unfortunately, mutuality is still being avoided by choosing to argue about who is or should be on top. Should the patriarch be on top or should the matriarch? Should a man be over a woman? Should black be over white? Should the straight be over the gay? We fight to prove that a man cannot be a man if a woman is on equal ground. We are more inclined to promote hierarchical than mutual relationships. We have separated

aspects of life that should always remain together. The church from the community, the nuclear family from the extended family, and men from women, all these are separations upon which we have based our existence. We spend inordinate amounts of time trying to prove how different we are. We energetically seek to validate our ideas of one being superior to the other. These separations have divided our humanity. If we are truly going to live in peace with ourselves and others, we must become whole human beings again. If only we would spend as much time working to establish mutuality as we do in working to maintain a system of dominance!

Encouraging mutuality acknowledges that our spiritual existence affects our physical existence. It also means that our physical existence affects our spiritual existence. Those areas of our lives that have been fractured need to be integrated and made whole. The main fracture that needs to be mended for health is the split that has occurred between our spirituality and our sexuality.

Health and healing

In order for us to be wholly (holy) human, spirituality and sexuality must be reconciled. We will not be able to restore our full humanity if we maintain this split. The body has frequently been identified as what is bad, or, if not bad, at the very least as a hindrance to spiritual enlightenment and unity. There is an overwhelming tendency to encourage an absence from the body in order to have a holy experience with God. This condemnation of the body has been conflictive for Africans in America. Historically, we were reduced to being a bodily people only, and as such, seen as less than human and thought to be driven only by primitive desires. Our degraded bodies have been exploited in every way possible: for labor, for sex, and for science. Whereas spirituality has been the strength of our survival, rarely have we been seen as spiritual people.

To our advantage, we also have had another understanding of the relationship between spirituality and sexuality which points to the possibility for our healing. When we think of health issues, most everyone is aware of the intimate relationship between spirit and body. In those instances, many of the negative ideas we have about the body are removed. As a result, good health is understood to be when one is "of sound mind and body." That is, good health requires spirituality and sexuality to be together. Consequently, any time we encourage the spirit-body split, we encourage poor health by splitting spirituality and sexuality. When they are kept together, we are fully human and healthier.

> Spirituality is the active integration of our humanity resulting in a directed effort to be in communion with God and others.

Good health is a physical and a spiritual matter. When good health is challenged, healing is required to restore one to health. An unhealthy body is one that has experienced some sort of breakdown in one or more of the body's systems. An unhealthy spirit is one that has experienced

What does it mean to be a "living soul" if not the integration of spirit and body?

some sort of breakdown in the flow of life energy or the lines of communication between the person, God, and others. If the body is unhealthy, it affects the health of the spirit. If the spirit is unhealthy, it affects the health of the body. Healing restores the body and the spirit to a harmonious relationship. Put simply, healing is the process of being restored to a life of relationships. If we are going to obtain and maintain healthy relationships, we must first be healed.

Is the spirit willing and the flesh weak? I do not think that is the lesson we learn from the passion of Christ. The message that comes to us from the empty tomb is that the spirit is willing and the flesh is too! If the spirit is willing, the flesh must be equally willing. What does it mean to be a "living soul" if not the integration of spirit and body? Maintaining a hierarchical split between spirit and body diminishes our humanity and denies the gospel of the abundant life.

We know what it means to be healthy; but in order to achieve good health, we must be healed. If we continue to conduct "business as usual," the end result will be that the wounds of our relationships will go unhealed. We must mend the fracture that exists between our spirituality and our sexuality. Our healing will restore our humanity. It will restore our community. It will restore our families. Our healing will turn us toward each other and cause us to see one another, perhaps for the first time in a long time. Our healing will turn us into friends and lovers. It will turn the hearts of children toward parents and parents toward children. Our healing will make us whole and holy, spiritual and sexual, human beings.*

* For further study, see Lee H. Butler, Jr., *A Loving Home: Caring for African American Marriage and Families* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

Sexuality in the Old Testament: Strong as Death, Unquenchable as Fire

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Being sexual is part of being human, and the Old Testament quite frankly acknowledges this important aspect of our humanity. It unapologetically depicts men and women as physical and sexual creatures, not only as spiritual, rational, and moral beings, as we sometimes pretend when we are in our religious, Sunday mode. Just as all the other animals created alongside us on the sixth day in the Genesis story, we are acknowledged to be "flesh" (*bāsār* in Hebrew), with all of its appetites and aversions, its needs and desires, its abilities and limitations, its potential for good and for evil. Surveying what the Old Testament says about human sexuality can remind us that the more things change (and they certainly have changed a lot!), the more things stay the same. The cultural world and the social structures within which we express our sexuality today are substantially different from those of Old Testament times, and they are continuing to evolve at a rapid pace in our day. Still, all things considered, it is not so much our fundamental differences with our biblical ancestors that strikes us, but rather our common flesh, our common capacity for love with a physical dimension, our common desire to know and be known by another. These sexual aspects of our humanity are strong as death, unquenchable as fire.

Sexuality in creation

Sexuality is as old as creation itself. Both of the creation narratives at the beginning of Genesis introduce human beings as sexual creatures. The Priestly account in Genesis 1:1–2:4 stresses that humanity, created in the "image of God" for sovereignty over the rest of creation, consists of both male and female (Gen 1:27), and this sexual aspect of creation, along with everything else that God makes, is declared "very good" (Gen 1:31). Populating the world through sexual union is part of God's blessing for humanity when the earth is still new (Gen 1:28), and the command to "be fruitful and multiply"[1] is repeated after the devastation of the flood (Gen 9:1). Beginning already with the ancestral narratives, however, producing children is no longer presented as an imperative to fill the earth but

[1] All translations in this essay are New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

rather as a precious gift from God, often received after anxious delay. Reproduction ultimately is not a human accomplishment but remains under God's control, a point emphasized by the repeated motif of the barren ancestress, including Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and eventually Leah, as well as Hannah the mother of Samuel, and Elizabeth in the New Testament.

In the Yahwist's version of the creation story in Genesis 2–3, longing for companionship between the sexes emerges even more centrally as the fundamental theme. The essential problem is the loneliness of the first human, Adam ("Mr. Human" as the name resonates in the Hebrew account). It is worth note that although the identification of the original human as a male character signals the androcentric perspective of the narrative, it is nevertheless not as misogynistic as its history of interpretation would lead one to believe. Adam needs not only "help" that is above him, as God, our mighty "help," is above us (Exod 18:4), and "help" that is below him as the animals prove to be (Gen 2:20), but also "help" on his same level, the "helpe meet" in the KJV, which was demoted to a subordinate "helpmate" in some later translations. Since the companion is constructed from the side of the original human body that God formed out of the ground, man and woman are literally "bone of bone, and flesh of flesh," as Adam joyfully recognizes (Gen 2:23). His exclamation adopts an expression used elsewhere in the Old Testament to speak of kinship and political relationships entailing mutual obligations, such as those between Laban and Jacob, when the latter flees from his brother Esau to the safe haven of his uncle's home in Haran (Gen 29:14), or between David and all the tribes of Israel, when they come to anoint him king at Hebron (2 Sam 5:1). Because Eve, "the mother of all living," was originally part of Adam's own body, he clings to her to be reunited as one flesh, as all men after him cling to their wives, the narrative maintains (Gen 2:24).

Eve's desire for her husband is also noted, although later in the narrative within God's reprimand for human disobedience, where the complexity of their relationship is expressed (Gen 3:16). After the fall, their relationship becomes a hierarchical one. This etiological story recognizes the almost universal reality that women in cultures all around the world find themselves under the authority of men, whom, at least in some cases, they nevertheless love and desire. At the same time, it makes the radical statement that this reality is a perversion of the original order of things, not a mandate established in the order of creation. The mutuality between the sexes expressed in Adam's delighted recognition of Eve as his counterpart (Gen 2:23) and in their unguarded nakedness in each other's presence in the garden of Eden (Gen 2:25) is recaptured in the poetry of the Song of Songs, in which the lovers express their mutual attraction and possession of each other. As the woman explains, "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (Song 2:16).

Sexuality in Old Testament narratives

Ancestors in love. Although biblical narrative tends to be taciturn about what happened behind closed tent flaps, it is clear that our Israelite ancestors enjoyed sexual love within the context of their marriages. Sarah laughed when she overheard the three men telling Abraham that he would have a son, but not merely because she ridiculed the idea of procreation by senior citizens. This 90-year-old woman, who was in her younger days so beautiful that the Pharaoh of Egypt had taken her from Abraham to be his own wife, asks with delight, presum-

ably based on good memories, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" (Gen 18:12). The motif of the barrenness of the beloved matriarch suggests that women were cherished for their own attractiveness and character qualities and not only for their ability to have children.

The promised son born of this unexpected pleasure, Isaac (whose name itself means "he laughs"), found comfort after his mother's death through sexual intimacy with his young bride, Rebekah. The biblical narrator tells us of their meeting, after Rebekah has agreed to leave her family in Haran to marry Isaac, in one of the most romantic passages in the Hebrew Bible:

> Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us? The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death. (Gen 24:63–67)

Apparently it was easier to get married in those days. All one had to do was to have sexual relations, and all the better if it was in your deceased mother's tent! Isaac was so enamored of his attractive wife Rebekah that he apparently could not resist fondling or "playing" with her in public (Gen 26:8). (Note that "he plays" is another good translation for the name "Isaac.") This intimate behavior alerted the king of Gerar to the couple's marital relationship, so that he was able to warn his male subjects not to seduce Rebekah (Gen 26:9–11).

In turn, Isaac and Rebekah's son Jacob loved the beautiful Rachel, and found working off her bride price for seven years an



easy matter because of his deep feelings: "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" (Gen 29:20). After marrying Rachel's older sister Leah through his father-in-law's deceitful substitution of his elder daughter for his younger, Jacob is able to marry Rachel as well: "So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah" (Gen 29:30). The story of the younger favored and the older hated wife emphasizes the jealousy that can easily arise in matters of sexuality. By bargaining for bed time through a payment of some aphrodisiac mandrake plants that her son Reuben had found, Leah is entitled to meet Jacob when he returns home to tell him that he is sleeping with her: "'You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes.' So he lay with her that night" (Genesis 30:16). Love and hate, manipulation and competition—even these may be part of marriage, as the Old Testament acknowledges with its typical realism.

Same-sex friends. The patriarchs clearly loved the matriarchs (with the exception of the unfortunate Leah), and apparently the

matriarchs returned the sentiment, although the Old Testament is relatively tight-lipped about matters of the heart on both sides. Interestingly, two narrative treatments of same-sex relationships are much more forthcoming about the affections. The Moabite Ruth refuses to leave her mother-in-law Naomi, even though it means leaving her homeland and all that she has ever known:

Do not press me to leave you
Or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God my God.
Where you die, I will die
There I will be buried.
May the LORD do thus and so to me
And more as well,
If even death parts me from you. (Ruth 1:16–17)

Ruth's effusive profession of love and loyalty to an older woman is often read at Christian weddings because of its intensity of feeling and commitment. How different from the narrator's simple note that "He [Isaac] loved her [Rebekah]" (Gen 24:67). According to Naomi's neighbors, Ruth, who goes on to have a son with one of Naomi's deceased husband's kinsmen, is worth more than seven sons to her mother-in-law (Ruth 4:15), a high estimation in a culture that values sons.

Similarly, the biblical narrative emphasizes the love of King Saul's son Jonathan for David from first sight, both through a description of his internal state, "When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Sam 18:1), and through a portrayal of his behavior, "Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt" (1 Sam 18:4). Upon Saul and Jonathan's death in battle, David composes an elegy that strongly expresses his own feelings for Jonathan:

How the mighty have fallen
In the midst of the battle!
Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
Greatly beloved were you to me;
Your love to me was wonderful,
Passing the love of women.
How the mighty have fallen,
And the weapons of war perished!
(2 Sam 1:25–26)

It should be noted that in this context there is a political subtext, since both children of Saul—his daughter Michal (who becomes one of David's wives) and his son Jonathan —are depicted as loving David and thereby affirming his legitimacy for the throne at the expense of the Saulide lineage. Clearly this material is pro-David propaganda. This aspect aside, the biblical narrator does not apologize for nor condemn the emotional attachment expressed by the two men, nor does he present it as anything out of the ordinary. It should be recognized that neither pair of friends, Ruth and Naomi nor Jonathan and David, is depicted as sexually intimate. In fact, Ruth, Naomi, David, and Jonathan were all married to other people and had children with their respective spouses. The closeness of the relationships between the two sets of friends does show that deep same-sex attachments are not something new in human history. Indeed, judging from the expressions of feelings quoted above, one might think that emotional bonds between friends of the same sex were closer than between spouses. Whatever else we conclude, we might consider whether our contemporary expectations of marriage to provide our closest companionship are realistic.

Uglier aspects of sexuality. The Old Testament discloses not only the positive side of sexual attraction and activity but also its uglier aspects, involving specifically male violence and female deception. It is disturbing that scenes illustrating the power of sexuality for grave harm are generally portrayed more graphically than love scenes. This emphasis may emerge partly from prurient interest, but in any case, just as the Old Testament does not allow us to deny or forget our human sexuality, it also does not allow us to idealize it.

The Old Testament discloses not only the positive side of sexual attraction and activity but also its uglier aspects.

Rape is the subject of a number of biblical narratives. One of the most infamous is the Sodomites' attempted gang rape of the divine beings under the protection of Abraham's nephew Lot in Genesis 19. The intended male-on-male violent assault is thwarted by the guests' use of supernatural power to blind their would-be attackers, but the evilness and inhospitality of Sodom seals the city's destruction. To be true to its biblical source, the term "sodomy," which remains on the law books in some states, should be defined as violent homosexual gang rape of a foreign (or even divine) guest staying at a neighbor's house. With that definition, everyone should be against sodomy.

Two other horrific rapes of women deserve note. One of these is the brutal gang rape and murder of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19, which is modeled on the same basic narrative pattern as Genesis 19. This atrocity takes place in the city of Gibeah, Saul's ancestral home, and so the narrative may be considered an anti-Saulide polemic. The depravity of the act also serves as a prime example of the depths to which the tribes had sunk, when "every man did what was right in his own eyes," before there was a king in the land (Jdg 21:25 RSV). The outcome of this act of sexual violence is tribal warfare, in which the entire tribe of Benjamin is almost wiped out. A problematic arrangement allowing the abduction of wives for the remaining members of this tribe perpetuates the violence.

Another biblical rape involves incest. King David's son Amnon forcibly takes his half-sister Tamar, after luring her to his bed by pretending to be sick (2 Samuel 13). This narrative is part of the story of Solomon's succession to the Davidic throne through the disqualification of his older brothers, including Amnon in the wake of this crime. More important for present purposes is the loathing that Amnon feels for Tamar after he rapes her (2 Sam 13:15). Whether the rapid change from lust to loathing stems from his own guilt and shame or from aesthetic distaste from the experience is left open to interpretation. Whatever the case, the narrative cautions us that to "know" one in the biblical sense is not always to love one.

Each of these narratives, although horrific, condemns the violent behavior of predatory men in no uncertain terms. Deuteronomy aptly summarizes the seriousness of forced intercourse, in a law concerning the rape of an engaged woman in the open country where no one can hear her cry out, by comparing the crime to

murder: "The young woman has not committed an offence punishable by death, because this case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbor" (Deut 22:26). This perspective seems precociously insightful, in that it reclassifies rape as not merely an illegal sex act but as a violent, virtually deadly, crime against another person—a change of perception that has only recently been advocated in our own time.

The social and political dimensions of sexuality are especially clear in the Old Testament.

Because women generally possess less overt power, physically at least if not always socially, their manipulation of sexuality to the harm of another generally involves subterfuge. Potiphar's wife, for example, is unrequited in her desire for sexual attentions from Joseph, her husband's handsome employee, since he will not listen to his mistress's crude command, "Lie with me!" or even more literally, "Lay me!" (Gen 39:7, 12). She therefore uses the garment that she pulls off Joseph's body to convince her husband that his employee attempted to rape her, and Joseph lands in prison on trumped-up charges. In the long run, though, Joseph's unjust incarceration indirectly leads to his rise to second in command over all of Egypt; in prison Joseph meets Pharaoh's butler, who later recommends him as an interpreter of dreams to Pharaoh himself (Genesis 40–41).

Another unforgettable deceiver is Delilah, Samson's Philistine girlfriend, whose nagging accusations that he doesn't love her eventually lead the mighty hero to disclose the basis of his phenomenal strength, making him vulnerable to capture by Philistines (Judges 16). In this case, too, Samson's degradation leads ultimately to greater, although Pyrrhic, victory, because once his hair has grown out and his strength has returned he is able to pull down the Philistine temple upon himself and more Philistines than he ever killed in life. Unlike in classical Greek literature where the rage of slighted women precipitates the murders of husbands and children, there is relatively less expression in the Old Testament of a fear of women's misuse of male vulnerability within sexual relationships. In these biblical stories of deceiving women, even if in the short term things look bad for the hero, ultimately things work out for the best.

Sexuality and power. The social and political dimensions of sexuality are especially clear in the Old Testament. Sex had consequences, not just for the individuals involved, as our culture tends to assume, but for the larger community. These consequences included the creation of family lines important for inheritance, group coherence, and political alliances. Women who restore genealogies broken by tragedy and legal impasse are therefore applauded, even if they use deceptive and morally ambiguous means. Such is the case with David's ancestress Tamar (after whom David named his own daughter discussed above), who posed as a prostitute in order to sleep with her father-in-law and bear sons to continue the family line (Genesis 38).

Incidentally, Genesis 38 is another of those misunderstood scriptural passages

that has contributed to the Christian vocabulary of sexual sins. Onan, Tamar's brother-in-law, lent his name to "onanism," a term traditionally signifying masturbation—although it has become somewhat archaic now that disapprobation of the practice has diminished. Onan spilled his seed on the ground rather than fulfill his obligation to impregnate his sister-in-law Tamar in accordance with the levirate law, which holds a dead man's brother responsible for producing heirs on behalf of the deceased (Deut 25:5-10). The offspring Onan had with Tamar would legally be his elder brother Er's children, and as heirs of the eldest son they would inherit a double portion of the family's wealth, thus leaving less for remaining brothers, including Onan himself. What God saw as "evil" in Onan's *coitus interuptus* was his selfish refusal to meet his legal and social obligation, not the technical aspects of the sex act itself. An accurate definition of "onanism" based on Genesis 38 would therefore be one who withdraws before ejaculation when having socially sanctioned sex with his sister-in-law in order to produce heirs for her dead husband. This shows how much things have changed as far as the social structures within which human sexuality is legitimately expressed! There is no explicit prohibition against masturbation in the Old Testament.

But back to sexuality and power: The power of men was expressed in their sexual potency. Moses was celebrated for his unabated vigor until the day of his death (Deut 34:7), whereas David's impotence, demonstrated by his sleeping with his live hot-water bottle Abishag but never knowing her, signals the decline of the aging king (1 Kgs 1:1–4). Solomon's 700 wives and 300 concubines symbolize the power of his rule (1 Kgs 11:3), and his marriages with foreign women, including Pharaoh's daughter (1 Kgs 3:1), had political significance as well as religious consequences (1 Kgs 11:1–13). King Ahab's marriage with the infamous Jezebel was also a political marriage, since she was the daughter of the king of Tyre (1 Kgs 16:31–32). As in the case of Solomon's wives, Jezebel brought with her to Israel foreign worship, in this case of the Tyrian Baal, and she is therefore charged with metaphorically "whoring" after other gods (2 Kgs 9:22). The influence of these foreign wives on their husbands' religious observances suggests the power that women exercised, even within the context of arranged political marriages.

Sexual attractiveness to men was a power that women could use for positive purposes as well. For example, Esther became the Persian King Ahashuerus' queen through a beauty contest (Est 2:15–18), and from this position of favor, she is able to influence the king to save the Jewish people from destruction (Esther 7–9). In general, the social and political significance of sexual relations including marriage is much more pronounced in the Bible than in our contemporary culture of the individual.

Sexuality and Old Testament laws

A discussion of sexuality in the Old Testament would not be complete without at least a cursory look at some of the laws that attempt to channel and order sexuality for the welfare and purity of the community, as well as for the perceived good of the individuals involved. To a large extent, these laws are culturally specific to the Israelite culture of over two thousand years ago, although certainly many of them address the same, universally relevant issues that are treated in our legal codes, including incest, rape, and divorce. Although certainly the entire community has a stake in

sexual matters, the consistent privileging of the community over the individual (especially over the individual woman) in this legal material is hard to take. Speaking personally, my visceral reaction to many of the prohibitions and regulations make me realize how grateful I am for our relatively permissive society, whatever the remaining problems that need to be addressed. A few examples will illustrate the distance between the biblical world and our own with regard to sexual mores and legal prohibitions.

First, here is a law that makes a man who has illicit sex with a single woman still under the authority of her father take responsibility for his crime and compensate the father for the loss of a bride price:

> If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman's father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her, he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives. (Deut 22:28–29)

The woman whom we might consider the survivor of rape is not consulted in this case, although it should be acknowledge that the sense of the word translated "violated" includes intercourse with an unmarried daughter without the permission of the father or other male relatives, regardless of the woman's consent. Even with this qualification, this law offends our understanding of the independent legal agency of a woman to make her own decisions about sexuality and marriage after attaining a certain age.

There are laws intended to protect a woman from abuses of the disparity of power between husband and wife within Israelite marriage, such as this one preventing a husband's wrongful accusation of his wife for not being a virgin at their marriage, which if true would be grounds for stoning her:

> Suppose a man marries a woman, but after going in to her, he dislike her and makes up charges against her, slandering her by saying, "I married this woman; but when I lay with her, I did not find evidence of her virginity." The father of the young woman and her mother shall then submit the evidence of the young woman's virginity to the elders of the city at the city gate. The father of the young woman shall say to the elders: I gave my daughter in marriage to this man, but he dislikes her. Now he has made up charges against her, saying, I did not find evidence of your daughter's virginity. But here is the evidence of my daughter's virginity. Then they shall spread out the cloth before the elders of the town. The elders of that town shall take the man and punish him; and they shall fine him one hundred shekels of silver (which they shall give to the young woman's father) because he has slandered a virgin of Israel. She shall remain his wife; he shall not be permitted to divorce her as longs as he lives. (Deut 22:13–19)

This law has the noble purpose of protecting a woman's security in marriage, by ensuring that she not be arbitrarily rejected after her virginity is gone. Yet the thought of the wife's parents with the bloody sheet that they've kept since the wedding night, and of the elders of the town poring over it together is repugnant to the contemporary imagination, as is the ruling that the disliked wife shall forever remain within this difficult marriage.

Similarly, the laws concerning adultery reveal the difference between Israelite society and our own. Take for example this law from Leviticus: "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death" (Lev 20:10). Adultery in Israelite law is defined as sexual intercourse involving a married woman. Married men may have sexual relations outside of marriage, as long as they are not with a married woman. By contrast, married women are

restricted to their husbands, who control their sexuality for the establishment of his children's paternity. Today we have a broader ethical norm against adultery, which includes not only the wife's but also the husband's sexual relations outside of marriage, once again reflecting the difference in women's social status. In another way, however, we are more lenient, in that we do not impose the death sentence for adulterers.

If we were to examine more specifically what the Old Testament says about homosexuality, we could look at the law just a little further down in the same passage in Leviticus that prohibits, also on pain of death, a man lying with a male as with a woman (Lev 20:13). There is no doubt that the Old Testament laws work to keep the binary distinction between male and female present already in the creation stories in Genesis. There is also no doubt that Israelite society sought to channel male sexual energy into marriage, family, reproduction, and child rearing. Because Israel was a small minority population in the Ancient Near East whose survival depended on keeping its numbers up through reproduction, this strategy made sense. Polygamy contributed to the same goal. Rather than discuss the Old Testament law in Lev 20:13 in isolation to determine whether or not it has continuing authority, as is sometimes done, I would suggest that the oblique and more honest way of assessing its continuing relevance would be to study the Israelite laws on sexuality and family more broadly, to get a feeling for how different the culture within which these laws were operative was from our own.

I would also suggest that the Israelite and later the Jewish emphasis on "being fruitful and multiplying" could be contrasted with Christianity's broader range of attitudes toward the biological family and the importance of producing physical children. Things such as the value placed on virginity and celibacy in the monastic tradition, and the fact that Christians are not born but baptized, may suggest that we cannot uncritically adopt selected laws from an ancient culture very different from ours, but need instead to reason through the issue anew for our own time, for our own culture and church.

Concluding summary

From our quick survey, we have seen how the Old Testament portrays human sexuality as an important part of our common humanity, one of the powerful gifts of creation, one of the complicated moral challenges of living well, and one of the primal forces channeled by the structures and laws of society. Certainly we twenty-first-century Christians differ from the ancient Israelites, in our ideals and social norms, our understanding of the roles of men and women, our concept of the vocation of service to God and the neighbor, and our expectation of seeing the face of Christ in others. At its core, however, our sexuality remains "strong as death, unquenchable as fire."

Sexuality in Relation to God and the Christian Community

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Before his death Harry Reasoner interviewed a winsome prostitute on *60 Minutes*. After some frank and direct questions of whys, whens, wheres, and hows, he asked if she liked to kiss her clients. "No," she said, "it's too intimate." Then he asked if she thought she could ever have a new beginning, and reserve sex only for a committed relationship. Again her answer was "No. I have abused and misused sex, and I think it would be impossible for me to reserve sex for a committed relationship." Her predicament might be, to some lesser degree, the predicament of some of us in the generation after the pill and the sexual revolution.

The way many of us construe sexuality today is strongly influenced by representations in the public arena, especially television and films that are transcultural, so that similar representations of sexuality appear in Europe, Africa, or the entire Western Hemisphere of the Americas. There is simultaneously a postmodern character to this global representation in that the modern era is understood as a period when we repressed our sexuality, largely under the influence of Christianity, as if our repression were different only in degree from the Taliban obliterating the personhood of women by hiding females. The consequence of repression was that our sexual activity was burdened with guilt, and the postmodern era presumes liberation from such repression by substituting innocent play for the guilty burden. Before the postmodern perspective, if you wanted to know something about human sexuality, you might look at the Bible, or even and especially at Paul. With a postmodern perspective you turn to Hugh Hefner.

Sigmund Freud taught us about repression and guilt, and so the postmodern notion is to divest ourselves of repression and guilt by replacing repression with openness and freedom. But Francis Watson claims that the notion that we can divest ourselves of repression and guilt is a decided misinterpretation of Freud. Freud called attention to preconscious dimensions that impinge on our behavior but never dispensed with them.[1] Thus sexuality comes in only one form, namely, the form that produces conflict, anxiety, and guilt. Whatever the frictions at the level of the psyche, at a rather conscious level, conflict arises because the drive for self-satisfaction

[1] F. Watson, *Agape, Eros, Gender: Towards a Pauline Sexual Ethic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 107–19.

clashes with the drive to fulfill the needs of a partner.

Human sexuality thus has amazing powers for bane or blessing. Sex has an astonishing capacity for blessing in two becoming one. This is true not merely for the second chapter of Genesis and for Jesus in his interpretation of Genesis 2 when he discusses divorce in Mark 10, but also from a post-Christian position for Luce Irigaray, who asserts that sex as blessing does not occur *in* a relationship but *constitutes* the relationship. For her, each partner individually and the two together give birth to one another.[2]

But sex also has an astonishing capacity to be the bane of human existence. Instead of constituting a relationship, as when two become one, it may estrange, alienate, divide, destroy. Sex forfeits its ability to constitute relationships when it is wasted on commitments that do not exist, when it is abusive, when it produces wounded lives and broken hearts. This double potential for bane and blessing makes all postmodern notions that we can replace repression with freedom and joyful innocence astoundingly deceptive.

In view of the double nature of sex as bane and blessing, African theologian Emmanuel Katongole from Uganda decries what he calls the "condomization" of Africa.[3] Here is a bit of what he means. In 1999 in an Anglican church hall in Soweto, South Africa, I saw a poster that portrayed the New South African flag in the shape of a condom. Such a poster in a church implies that safe sex is Christian, patriotic, and innocent. With 25 percent of women aged 15 to 20 in South Africa HIV-positive, one ought to be concerned about a safe-sex campaign. But Katongole's objection is that behind the campaign lies the presumption that Africans are by nature promiscuous. He charges, however, that this construct of human sexuality is a global postmodern presumption that is a subtle imperialism in that it has dominated African identity from the outside.

Identity! I want to turn now to the identity the apostle Paul called the Corinthians to recognize in 1 Corinthians 6.

The mindset of our culture aims largely at sex education for youngsters in order to keep teenagers from making mistakes. Paul no doubt would have been pleased if his Epistle to the Corinthians could have helped teenagers avoid mistakes. But the sixth chapter is more for adults and adulterers. 1 Cor 6:9–10 is one of the texts at the center of debates about the ordination of noncelibate gays and lesbians in mainline denominations. The discussion hangs on the terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. I am referring to the Greek to make the point that we do not know how to translate the terms. Further, it is extremely difficult to correlate the terms with our current debate. For example, our understanding of sexual orientation and both the terminology and our understanding of homosexuality are developments of our time rather than of the time of the New Testament. Nevertheless, whatever *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* mean, Paul immediately says that the Corinthians are no longer a part of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God, even if some of them used to be (1 Cor 6:11). Because Paul says that the Corinthians were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, interpreters have often suggested that conversion and baptism had cleaned up the act of the Corinthians.

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[2] Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[3] Lecture at a conference on African biblical interpretation and theology, Hammerskraal, South Africa, 1999.

The difficulty is that Paul then immediately begins to deal with some sexual issues in Corinth. Apparently Paul was dealing with church members who consorted with prostitutes—probably sacred prostitutes. The issue was sex orgies in the name of pagan deities. The Corinthians who were involved had two arguments. First, ethics is not a matter of law. They probably learned that from Paul, and they developed a slogan from it: "All things are lawful" (v. 12). Second, sex is a natural drive like hunger, and they developed a slogan for that: "Food for the stomach, the stomach for food." They already intuited enough about psychology to take the stomach as a Freudian sublimation.

> Sexuality comes in only one form, namely, the form that produces conflict, anxiety, and guilt.

Paul's response is deceptively simple. It is about memory and membership—remembering and re-membering. Paul gives his reminder in a triadic form: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" (v. 15). "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" (v. 19). "You were bought with a price" (v. 20). This last sentence contains a divine passive. If expressed in the active voice it would be "God bought you with a price." The reminder of relationships is triadic: Christ, Spirit, God. Further, there is an enormous emphasis here on the Corinthian community. All of the "yous" are in the plural. In the case of the temple of the Spirit, body is singular and "your" is plural. That is, the corporate body of the Corinthian community is a temple of the Spirit. Paul calls the Corinthians to live out their sexuality in a two-pronged relationship—in a relationship with God, which the triadic form makes quite christological and pneumatological, and in a relationship with the Christian community, which is quite ecclesiological.

Such a notion of living out our sexuality in relation to God and the Christian community makes Paul astoundingly absurd for the radical individualism of the twenty-first century. To speak of consensual sex for him would mean first of all consenting to be a member of the body of Christ. Sex is not merely a private matter between two consenting adults. Yes, of course, it is one of the most private of privacies, and it should never be without consent. But believers also live out their sexuality in relationship to the life of the parish and in relationship with God. The way we live out our sexuality is not just a private matter but a concern of the entire community. The Christian community cares whether our sexuality is a bane or a blessing. Could we ever believe, however, that the consecration of a congregation to God would ever really have an effect on our sexual ethics? Perhaps we could!

Relationships in a community of believers dedicated to God make a difference. Randy Styers, who teaches at the University of North Carolina, worked for a furniture company the summer after his first year in college. He was back home in a small community north of Winston Salem, North Carolina, where he and his family were faithful members of the local Baptist church. His father Don was Chair of the

Board of Deacons, and Randy had played the organ in church since he was 14 and had preached in the church from time to time. In the same congregation there was one wealthy family among a host of middle-class families. The wealthy family owned a national chain of cafeterias. The daughter of the founders of the cafeterias decided she would redecorate her living room that summer, and she bought all of her new furniture from the store where Randy was working. Randy's boss gave him and three other men the job of delivering the furniture, but it was only part of the total order. Since Randy already had one year of college, he was in charge of the paperwork, which he took to the woman to sign. When she found out that they were delivering only part of her order, she hit the ceiling. She had expected to see her new living room in its final glory. Of course, in uniforms all people who deliver furniture tend to look alike, and the woman did not recognize Randy. She began to shout at Randy, to curse and swear. She was pitching such a fit that her mother came in to see what was happening. The mother did recognize Randy, and she said to her daughter, "What are you doing? Don't you see that this is Don Styers's boy, Randy, from the church?" Immediately the woman stopped ranting and raving, took a good look at Randy, and melted into her opposite—hushed, humble, apologetic. Relationships in a community of believers dedicated to God make a difference.

Paul saw things a bit differently. Had he been the mother, not only would he have reminded the daughter that Randy was from the church. He also would have said, "Don't you know who you are? You are from a community of believers that is consecrated to God!" Relationships in a community of believers dedicated to God make a difference. As a matter of fact, when the four furniture deliverers left, the woman tipped them each $20.

Outside of extremely rare exceptions, all of us are sexual beings. We are sexual beings as children. We are sexual beings before we are in relationships and after we are in relationships. Whatever our status, 1 Corinthians 6 emphasizes living out sexuality under the umbrella of relationships to God and to the Christian community.

What if, like the prostitute on *60 Minutes*, we have misused and abused the life God has given us? I frankly think it is difficult for us to reclaim our lives. When we have made life cheap, it is tough to give it value again. But the situation in Corinth was tough. Some of the members were participating in prostitution. It was too late to get them to promise chastity until mating with their life's partner. But Paul did not abandon them in their predicament. In fact, I think Paul would have good news for the prostitute on *60 Minutes*. He used the same solution that he used for abuses in the Lord's supper: remembering and remembering (see 1 Corinthians 10–11). Paul called the Corinthians to a Christian identity, to live out their sexuality as part of a community dedicated to God. If we are like the Corinthians, I suppose that Paul would tell us that relationships with a Christian community that is consecrated to God limit our sexuality, but these relationships also sanctify our sexuality.

Burning of the Palms

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Did you hear the wind of the spirit that night?
Did you see the tongues of flame?

Gathered 'round the hearth, this body
of Christ, we come, from old to young,
bringing our brittle palms of praise,
stored away since last year's parade
like a stack of good intentions.

All our hosannas and old hopes
flung into the fire,
gone up in smoke,
reduced to ash,

the mark of the cross
on our heads, our hands.

We leave in somber mood,
for we know the old, old story,
how we bless Him who comes
in the name of the Lord one day
and by week's end
crucify.

But still (*Did you hear*
the wind of the Spirit, did you see
the tongues of flame?)
we also know how the end
of the story is its beginning,
how God breathes

Into the ashes of old, dead hopes,
sends the wind of the Spirit
speaking in tongues
of flame
and we rise, creatures
made new.



Book Reviews

God, Evil, and Innocent Suffering: A Theological Reflection. By John E. Thiel. New York: Crossroad, 2002. xi and 179 pages. Paper. $19.95.

Thiel, professor of Religious Studies at Fairfield University, offers a theological alternative to traditional theodicies indebted to philosophical analysis. But, make no mistake: This is a tightly reasoned treatise. Thiel believes that traditional theories have failed to acknowledge the genuine innocence of victims. He wants a position that avoids the "Scylla of a guilty God," viewed as the cause or source of innocent suffering, or the "Charbydis of denying the common human experience of innocent suffering" (p. 55). In this regard, he is particularly critical of Augustine's supposition that no one suffers innocently since all are born into sin. Also, he criticizes the postmodern tendency to affirm that God, while involved with the well-being of the whole cosmos, is not providentially involved particularly in the affairs of the individual. Hence, he is critical of the perspective that sees death as a penalty as well as the "providential" explanation that seeks to align divine love with justice with the affirmation that in death "God calls someone to heaven." For Thiel, God is ever at odds with death (p. 86).

Thiel wants his perspective on evil to be guided by three commitments. First, he affirms the traditional view of eternity and the absoluteness of the divine perfections. Second, he notes that the injustice of innocent suffering is an undeniable and tragic moral fact of life. It is not to be denied by attributing all suffering to human guilt, or by transforming it into a meaningful vehicle of moral development, or by removing innocent suffering from the scope of divine providence. Third, he rejects the view that God is the cause of suffering either by permitting the evil victimization of some or by willing suffering through natural means. God neither permits, nor wills, nor causes any kind of suffering or death at all (p. 59).

For Thiel, God's presence in the universe testifies to the guilt of those who perpetrate evil and offers solidarity with victims (p. 131). Evil exists, in part, not only because of the deeds of perpetrators but also because God is self-restrictive in this world. Thiel affirms that God lets the otherness of creation with respect to God be taken seriously. Evil disrupts the goodness of this freedom. Thiel appeals to Luther's notion of promise in order to affirm God's solidarity with suffering.

Thiel's is a fresh, crisp, thoughtful approach to a longstanding issue. It is to be welcomed by theologians, pastors, and church leaders.

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Where Was God on September 11? Seeds of Faith and Hope. Edited by Donald B. Kraybill and Linda Gehman Peachey. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002. 216 pages. Paper. $10.99.

After September 11, 2001, profound religious questions loomed especially large—questions about God's presence, about evil, about bad things happening to good people. The essays in this book reflect the authors' struggle with faith and search for meaning following 9/11. The editors feel that these essays offer "seeds of faith and hope" and the promise of a better world.

The authors of these varied essays are men and women from a broad range of theological perspectives, denominations, and social locations as writers, professors, family members of victims, leaders in peacemaking organizations, and people from different parts of the world.

Essays are focused around seven general chapter titles: God Amid the Terror? Jesus and the Way of Peace; Revenge, Justice, or Forgiveness? Will Violence Bring Peace? Voices from Our Global Family; Citizens of Two Kingdoms;

and Another Way of Responding. While questions are raised about God's presence amid suffering and how Jesus may be a model for our response, the ultimate theme is that of a Christian necessity to respond with nonviolent peacemaking efforts, especially since following Jesus and the gospel imperative to peace may very well be difficult as we live as citizens both of God's kingdom and of a particular nation.

Though specifically related to the events of September 11, this book is a useful resource for a Christian response to violence and suffering. It is quite approachable, moving from chapters focused more on comfort and faith to chapters focused more on response and action. The wide variety of thoughts and perspectives enhances the themes presented. Yet, I am not sure that this book would be quite as approachable to someone not inclined to agree with nonviolence as central to Christianity or for those who see no conflict between Christian faith and nationalism or patriotism.

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Who Is Jesus? History in Perfect Tense. By Leander E. Keck. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000. 207 pages. Cloth. $24.95.

Give a piece of Scotch tape to an infant and the youngster cannot get rid of it. It will pass from one finger to another, to the thumb, then to the leg, and back to the fingers—always sticking somewhere. The intersection of the historical Jesus and theology is Leander Keck's piece of tape, and we are all enriched because it sticks to him.

Keck's published interest in the intersection of theology and historical-Jesus research spans four decades, and no one brings a more informed perspective to "theological reflections on history—on those aspects of the Jesus of history that are central to his continuing significance" (p. x). Readers familiar with Keck's *A Future for the Historical Jesus: The Place of Jesus in Preaching and Theology* (Abingdon, 1971) will welcome *Who is Jesus?* as a fresh reflection, born of continuing devotion to the issue at hand.

The subtitle, "History in the Perfect Tense," indicates the nature of this book. The metaphor is grammatical: A verb in the perfect tense refers to action completed in the past that has ongoing impact in the present. Throughout this "theological reflection on history" (p. x) Keck is in conversation with biblical scholars and with theologians. The weight of the conversation shifts from the former to the latter as the book progresses.

Who is Jesus? is in five chapters. In chapter 1, "The Presence of the Past," Keck sketches the task of historical reconstruction. Keck affirms that "the Jesus of history differed from the Jesus of the gospels" (p. 19), but he rejects the notion that difference equals distortion. As becomes clear in the latter chapters, Keck is more apt to emphasize continuity than discontinuity between the two.

Chapter 2, "The Permanent Particular: Jesus the Jew," presents both the clearest advance in Keck's reflections over *A Future for the Historical Jesus* and his opening salvo against popular Q-based reconstructions of the histories of Jesus and early Christianity. The scandal of Christian theology, of Jesus' particularity, Keck argues, must be considered in view of Jesus' Jewishness. This is a not an original critique of Q-based profiles of Jesus, but Keck does present the case clearly and coherently.

Chapter 3, "The Embodied Future: Jesus the Teacher," provides a summary of Keck's position vis-à-vis Q. Yes, there was a Q; but no, to construct the Jesus of a presumed earliest stratum of Q is hardly convincing. "The confidence with which today's 'Q people' reconstruct the past on the basis of inference and assumption is remarkable" (p. 67). The primary question of this chapter is that of Jesus' understanding of the kingdom of God. The question is pivotal to any assessment of Jesus of Nazareth and of Jesus' ongoing significance, because Jesus undertook "to so announce and embody the imminent coming of God's kingdom that those who believed him would already change their lives to reflect the character of God's reign actualized" (p. 108). Keck's ultimate object of inquiry is Jesus' God.

Thus, "the real question is . . . whether [Jesus] was right about the God whom he imaged as king and father" (p. 112). Preachers will find this chapter a particularly fruitful source of stimulating and exegetically sound sermon seeds on Jesus' message of the kingdom and on Jesus' relationship to God as "Father."

Chapter 4, "The Fractured Prism: Jesus' Death and the Living God," explores the significance of Jesus' death by execution for understanding God. Keck continues his practice of popping popular balloons: "There is no evidence that Jesus explicitly connected his arrival [in Jerusalem] and the temple act with the coming of the kingdom—i.e., that he saw these events as hastening its coming" (p. 121), and "There is no evidence that his first followers developed a Jesus-shaped understanding of God on the basis of his words alone" (p. 127–28). In the end, Keck appeals to a "Golgotha hermeneutic." That is, Jesus' death, and particularly the manner in which he died, redefines messiahship and reveals the God who remains faithful to those whose defining moral characteristic, like Jesus' defining moral characteristic, is self-denial.

In the final chapter, "The Authorizing Judge: Jesus in the Moral Life," Keck takes up Jesus' role as judge and the impact that role should have in the moral life of the Christian. Keck constructs the argument that, while much can and should be said of Jesus' teachings, those teachings cannot be lifted out of the particular situations in which they were uttered. Disembodied teachings are distorted teachings. Though Keck does not use the categories of speech act theory, he argues in effect for the necessity of accounting for the elocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of Jesus' speech acts, rather than distilling out something solely from the locutionary dimension. Consequently, an abstract entitled "Jesus' teachings" cannot serve as a guide to moral life. Jesus himself, Keck concludes, is the warrant for moral life and the judge to which all are accountable.

I find Keck's call appealing, yet frustrating. How does one reckon with "Jesus himself," as Keck puts it? Keck says, "It is the deliberate, persistent appropriation of Jesus into the moral life so that he becomes its internal compass and criterion of the doer and the deed. When Jesus' word and way are assimilated, he becomes 'habit forming'" (p. 166). But isn't this internalization process still vague, lacking criteria for successful assimilation? Keck acknowledges the problem: "To what extent is it Jesus or an imagined Jesus who is being assimilated?" (p. 167). Yet Keck never spells out his methodology for sifting what is genuine from what is secondary. In this regard, the work is akin to the widely acclaimed *Jesus: A New Vision* by Marcus Borg (Harper San Francisco, 1991) and *The Jesus I Never Knew* by Philip Yancey (Zondervan, 1995).

For traditional Christians, whose primary interest is the continuing significance of Jesus, *Who is Jesus?* may not adequately incorporate the claim "Jesus is alive." Nevertheless, this book is going to be more valuable to the practicing pastor than most historical-Jesus fare, not because it is less scholarly than the others—it is not—but because it goes where the pastor's study of Jesus has to go, namely, to the potential influence of Jesus on the lived life of today's believer. Moreover, because Keck does not reduce Jesus to a one-dimensional caricature, this work ought to be read as well by every senior seminarian and teacher of the New Testament.

Read *Who is Jesus?* with an eye toward future issues for ministry. Keck has been ahead of the pack before.

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Communication and Reconciliation: Challenges Facing the 21st Century. Edited by Philip Lee. London: World Association for Christian Communication and WCC Publications, 2001. Paper. $15.95.

Philip Lee is a senior staff member with the World Association for Christian Communication. This book is one of many in the field of communication across cultures.

This book, a collection of essays by authors of different social locations, intends to explore the complexities of communication as it works toward reconciliation. Its working definition of communication includes interaction between individuals and groups in order to understand the

role that twenty-first-century media play in forming and shaping biases. The authors also exhort the church to participate in both education and actions of reconciliation.

The first essay, "Culture of Dialogue," argues that in all cultures communication and relationships are inseparable and that dialogue is understood as a mode of communication toward reconciliation. There are two important parts of dialogue—developing mutual respect between all parties especially in a pluralistic environment where communication can appear as domination and listening and learning in order to understand the culture that grounds an individual and thus establishes his or her viewpoint.

In the essay "Communication, Reconciliation and Religion in America," the author develops twelve theses about parts of U.S. culture that is destructive to reconciliation across cultures. They focus in the areas of democracy, media, and religion and how they affect the global community. One of the problems of communication ethics is that the communication industry can influence how a story is perceived, by how it is presented. That is, rarely is there room for the voice of all to be heard.

There are chapters that treat the Argentinian dictatorship, the first Nations People of Canada, and the communist rule in Estonia in detail. Another specific area is communicating disability as a human-rights issue. The root of this issue rests in the lack of conversation within politics that recognizes the needs of the disabled.

This book provides alternate views of communication and challenges Western churches to embrace postures that will bring about reconciliation and a forgiveness that is validated by acts of remorse that change behavior and transform social order.

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Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary. By Gail Ramshaw. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002. 477 pages. Cloth. $35.00.

Fish and family, mountain and city, body, light and treasure. These are, like melodic lines in a symphony, motifs resounding throughout Scripture. They form the basic grammar of what C. S. Lewis described as "the language which religion naturally speaks." Increasingly, however, this imagery is a foreign language to many people. With this book, author Gail Ramshaw has done the church valuable service, creating a "primer" for forty images that appear in the Revised Common Lectionary.

Ramshaw's presentations are scholarly and searching, going beyond the "romance" of evocative symbols to analyze their liturgical use. Beginning with historical perspective on the origins and development of the lectionary, the balance of the text explores individual images in great depth. Insightful work under headings such as "Sacrifice" provides the raw material necessary to make informed choices about imagery that has become controversial. The "Family" entry is an example that shines. Ramshaw first attends to historical distinctions between contemporary and ancient families. Then, she demonstrates that sister/brother, father/mother (and related images of adoption and inheritance) function as metaphors in both Testaments. This is invaluable background with which to approach Father-Son images for God and Jesus in a pastoral context.

Forty images comprise the book; dominant images gather clusters of related themes into their orbit. The entry "Outsider" includes alien, foreigner, leper, and uncircumcised in its text. Such breadth makes it possible for the author to demonstrate how a central motif captures new ideas. But at times that very breadth clutters the entry, diluting its focus. The "Body" heading, for example, makes for a dizzying interpretive tour of bread-as-Body in the theology of the Eucharist.

A review of this book is incomplete without mention of its exquisite design. The imagination is awakened by multiple layers of material, which turn the images at different angles: devotions, hymns, and liturgical fragments are included in each entry. The investment in design features is more than cosmetic; it affects the way the reader will experience the text, making this a book to cherish.

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Literary Companion to the Lectionary: Readings throughout the Year. Edited by Mark Pryce. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002. xiii and 143 pages. Paper. $17.00.

Each week, the lectionary gives Christians common Scripture readings to ponder in worship. The words of the texts bring Christians together in the Word of God.

Mark Pryce's *Literary Companion to the Lectionary* gathers poems and prose that may inspire new insights and nourish renewed engagement with the Bible readings in the *Revised Common Lectionary*. For each Sunday, principal feasts, and some holy days, Pryce chose a short poem or prose selection that shares a theme with readings assigned to that day. Pryce's intent is that the poets' words of thanks and praise, despair and sorrow, or wonder and awe may spur meditation, shape prayer, and stimulate critical thought about the Bible.

Pryce's selections include poems and prose spanning the history of English literature. Some selections rise specifically from the writer's engagement with the designated biblical text, and some selections have a tenuous connection with the text. Both kinds of selections fulfill Pryce's purposes. Particularly noteworthy choices are Cynewulf's Anglo Saxon "Ascension" for Ascension Day, William Langland's "The Vision of Holy Church" for Proper 17, Emily Dickinson's "Unto Me?" and "The Blunder is to Estimate" for the Third Sunday of Easter, D. H. Lawrence's "Future Religion" for Maundy Thursday, and W. H. Vanstone's "Morning Glory, Starlit Sky" for Christ the King.

For this literary companion, Pryce follows the *Revised Common Lectionary* as revised and adopted by the Church of England, including "Special Provisions" for some Sundays. North American readers may find occasionally that the texts Pryce uses are not those assigned for their churches' worship or that Sundays carry different names.

Also distinctly English is the preponderance of English authors. While Pryce has selected a few North American, African, and European writers, most authors are English.

For those who use the lectionary to plan worship, write sermons, or shape their devotions, Pryce's book will be a useful resource. The beauty and wisdom of the English literature Pryce has chosen make the selections stimulating companions for the lectionary's texts.

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Confession: Doorway to Forgiveness. By Jim Forest. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002. xvii and 161 pages. Paper. $15.00.

Jim Forest, an Orthodox Christian, has written several books in the area of spirituality as well as books about Thomas Merton.

Forest works to revitalize the importance of private confession as a sacrament or spiritual discipline in the lives of all Christians: "The purpose of this small book is to help revive confession where abandoned or neglected, to help the reader prepare a better confession, and to help those who hear confessions better serve as Christ's witness, taking care not to impede the sacrament's healing strength" (p. ix).

Confession includes a brief historical summation of the developments and changes in the sacrament and practice of confession, including a present-day understanding. (This summation presumes that the reader has a fair understanding of religious history, particularly Orthodox and Roman tradition.) Using an excellent anecdotal storytelling style, Forest goes on to portray the concepts of sin, confession, forgiveness, and absolution and includes actual confessions sent to him. Forest reminds the reader that by renewing this practice, not only are our sins forgiven but, more important, we return to an understanding of our dependence on God and a renewal of our relationship with God.

This book has excellent illustrations for preaching on the topics of sinfulness or forgiveness. It includes a suggestion of the use of icons in confession. It also is a helpful guide in understanding the feelings and emotions associated with confession.

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No Difference in the Fare: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Problem of Racism. By Josiah Ulysses Young III. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998. xiv and 178 pages. Paper. $22.00.

Young, professor of systematic theology at Wesley Theological Seminary, in this book focuses on Bonhoeffer's theology as an antidote to racist attitudes and ideologies. His most important contribution is that in Bonhoeffer's view of genuine community there are no second-class citizens and thus "no difference in the fare" aboard the "train" of the church. Indeed, "Christians . . . given the supralapsarian implications of . . . the claim that Jesus Christ is 'the new humanity itself,' celebrate life, together. Being in Christ, as *sanctorum communio*, was for Bonhoeffer the totality of humankind, in proleptic realization" (p. 85). Thus, racism, in this view, is "egocentricism" (p. 68), denying the vital, diverse community that can be grounded in Jesus Christ. Indeed, Christian community is knit together by differences between people as part of its own very fabric. This community "is nonexistent without alterity. God forbids ordering existence racially" (p. 16). Hence, the traces of residual existentialism in Bonhoeffer's personalistic "I-Thou" construal of relationships "includes otherness" (p. 60). Hence, "the individual is . . . the self-conscious and self-active person, which is the presupposition for ethical relevance. And the race is understood as consisting of such persons. Whether they be Jewish, Aryan, black or white is not important. Black, white, Jew, Aryan are adjectives—epiphenomena—that are irrelevant to each I and each Thou—to the 'original community of love'" (p. 68).

The book is artistically written, with references to old African-American spirituals, when appropriate, to help shed light on a topic. Bonhoeffer's theology is positioned with respect to both African-American and African thinkers. Also, Young interweaves Bonhoeffer's life story—from his early relation with the Abyssinian Baptist church while a student at Union in New York in the early 1930s to his eventual martyrdom—with his attitudes about persecuted minorities, such as the Jews in Nazi Germany, and his theological commitments, in order to give Bonhoeffer's thinking a contemporary voice. Lutherans will find it interesting that he exposes racism as a form of the "bondage of the will." "Which white supremacist would not smirk at the claim that he has no free will, that God has determined whether he is truly God—and that he does evil when he thinks he is doing good?" (p. 121).

The interweaving of history, theology, spirituals, and contemporary thinkers is remarkable and thoughtful. This book is a pleasure to read.

Mark Mattes

Consolation in Philippians: Philosophical Sources and Rhetorical Strategy. By Paul A. Holloway. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 112. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xiii and 208 pages. Cloth. $55.00.

The literary genre of Philippians is a major topic in Pauline studies these days. Some hold that it is a letter of friendship, others offer different analyses. Paul Holloway makes a new proposal, calling it a letter of consolation (ἐπιστολὴ παραμυθητική, p. 1).

He structures his work in two major sections. Part 1, "Literary and rhetorical contexts" (chaps. 1–3) prepares for the more detailed discussion of the letter's consolatory aspects in Part 2, "Consolation in Philippians" (chaps. 4–7). Holloway argues for the literary integrity of Philippians against partition theories, then discusses the rhetorical situation of the letter, and concludes the first section with a discussion of the consolatory genre. He holds that the Philippian Christians were discouraged, disturbed by the news of Paul's imprisonment (p. 45). There is also the problem of disunity, as 1:27, 2:1–4 and 4:2–4 make clear. Paul recognizes a lack of knowledge on their part.

Holloway defines consolation as "the combating of grief through rational argument" (p. 58). He distinguishes consolation from sympathy; consolation includes "exhortation to acceptable and responsible behavior" (p. 64) and thus has moral aspects to it, developed in different ways in different philosophic theories. Two

important modes of argumentation in consolatory texts are (1) the distinction between things that matter and those that do not, and (2) the "disposition of joy which characterized the true philosopher in both good times and bad" (pp. 74–75). Holloway documents his description liberally from Graeco-Roman writers.

Holloway discusses Philippians' use of consolatory motifs in four major sections: 1:3–11; 1:12–2:30; 3:1–4:1; and 4:2–23. He argues that joy (χαρά) is the dominant motif of the letter. In 1:3–18) Paul uses many of the consolatory arguments: "the distinction between things that matter and those that do not" (1:9), misfortunes actually advance the things that really matter (1:12–18), "hardship enhances one's reputation" (1:13) and makes one an example for others (1:14), and that one experiences joy in the middle of hardships (1:18). Holloway finds such use of consolatory arguments throughout the letter.

Holloway's work is helpful in calling attention to aspects of language. But he omits some significant motifs in Paul's letter, which may moderate the consolatory nature of the letter, e.g. the impressive pleading for unity in 1:27–2:4 [11] and 4:2–4. He makes little use of the political character of some of Paul's language (in 1:27, 29–30) and in the use, for example, of ἐντίμους and λειτουργίας in 2:29–30 about Epaphroditus. Still, it is an impressive piece of work; every interpreter of Philippians will have to consult it.

Edgar Krentz

Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church's Response. Edited by Dieter Hessel and Larry Rasmussen. Fortress Press, 2001. 272 pages. Paper. $20.00.

Earth Habitat is an ecumenical work that falls under the category of religion and ecology. This book is a collection of essays from nineteen different authors focusing on the major themes of the Ecumenical Earth Conference on justice, ecology, and church held at Union Seminary in New York. The authors focus on three questions: How can Christianity and Christian churches rethink themselves and their roles in light of the endangered Earth? What Earth-honoring elements does justice-oriented Christianity have to contribute to the common good? How can communities and churches respond creatively and constructively on a local level to these vast global forces? The authors speak of Eco-justice or habitat Earth as where the church and the community work together to "designate the kind of partnership required for the pursuit of Earth community by Christian believers" (p. 6).

The authors in this collection speak not only of justice in terms of the environment but also justice of the creation of Earth. This is done by taking the traditions of Christianity together with Scripture and revaluing nature and culture together to prevent destruction and sustain peacefulness. For example, James Cone in a chapter entitled "Whose Earth Is It, Anyway?" claims that "people who fight against white racism but fail to connect it to the degradation of the earth are anti-ecological" (p. 23). Cone goes on to say that this fight for justice cannot be segregated but must be integrated with the fight for life in all its forms. He also states our indebtedness to ecologists who have sounded the alarm about the earth's distress through an awareness that humankind has the knowledge and power to destroy all life, either with a nuclear bomb or by slowly poisoning the land, air, and sea. Cone concludes his section with the links between the earth's crisis and the crises in the human family.

Hessel concludes the book with an "effort to share normative common ground." He includes solidarity with other people and creatures in Earth Community, ecological sustainability, sufficiency as a standard of organized sharing, and socially just participation in decisions about how to obtain sustenance and manage the common good.

The authors raise many new issues, not only ecological but also theological. They remind us that Eco-justice needs to be a new vision with strong ecumenical roots.

Brian Hooper
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Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels. By Richard Bauckham. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002. 368 pages. Paper. $24.00.

In this interdisciplinary work Richard Bauckham uses ancient Christian history, New Testament scholarship, Christian theology, and feminist critique of Scripture to examine the four Gospels with a special focus on the women mentioned in the texts—fifteen women in the four canonical Gospels and three women from the Old Testament included in Matthew's genealogy. For each text he gives a clear structure and outline of the material including a description of the text and the various questions different biblical scholars have asked. In many places helpful charts are provided about family trees and structures of biblical texts. The essays are eclectic, ranging from andocentric to gynocentric perspectives.

By taking into account previous scholarship and different interpretations, the author looks at biblical texts about women, avoiding "one-issue-exegesis" such as the issue of patriarchal oppression. According to Bauckham, the texts are not ideologically neutral, but they need to be examined without assumptions and with an openness to see them as "innocent until proved guilty" (p. xv). Thus in the texts' own particular integrity we may be surprised to discover something new and unique. Although the book uses the feminist critique of the texts, the primary focus is on literary and historical critical studies.

The questions that the author raises and his theological and exegetical observations are helpful for those who want to study more deeply the biblical texts or prepare for sermons and Bible studies. Looking at women as individuals who have voice and importance rather then as victims of a patriarchal society in need of defense is a refreshing voice in today's biblical scholarship.

Viktoria Halmagyi
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The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against. Edited by Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. 192 pages. Paper. $18.95.

Andrew Sung Park, Professor of Theology at the United Theological Seminary, and Susan L. Nelson, Professor of Theology at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, have coedited this collection of nine theological papers that examine the doctrine of sin from different perspectives of those who have been sinned against. With Augustine's development of the doctrine of original sin, the salvation offered to us through Jesus Christ became one of forgiveness of personal sins, and thus the emphasis has been on the sinner and not the sinned-against. The scriptural basis for this reexamination is plain: the ministry of Jesus Christ was directed toward those who were sinned-against. These are the marginalized and powerless people who were subjected to the laws and regulations that were aimed at keeping social power in the hands of a few elite. In this book, each author gives the ramifications of the church's doctrine of sin and reasons why this doctrine needs to be reexamined and reinterpreted.

The nine papers cover much ground in examining the "other side of sin." Walter Brueggemann examines the doctrine of retribution found in the Old Testament. Andrew Sung Park introduces the Asian concept of *han*, which represents the deep wound of the victim "that festers from within" (p. 14). Justo L. Gonzalez looks at sin as alienation. He rejects its authoritarian and hierarchical expression and examines the gospel's reverses of hierarchy in showing favor to the least. Susan Nelson explores the shame that comes to the victim of sin, reminding us that reconciliation requires more than repentance and forgiveness, but also a "balm" for the broken heart. Ched Myers' article centers on the consequences of addiction, viewing it not simply as individualistic sin but one that encompasses the social and cultural environment that fosters it. He applies his view to arguably the most common type of addiction today, commercialism. Theodore Jennings reconstructs the

doctrine of sin. Marie Fortune distinguishes between sin-as-disobedience and sin-as-harm-done-to-another, so that the abused can be empowered to know that God sides with the victim. Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore wrestles with how to resolve today's world of is fear, born of violence and terrorism, without falling into sin. Ruth Duck writes of how liturgy can be used to minister to those who are victimized through the use of lament, services of healing, and preaching for.

Why do we need another book on the subject of sin? It reminds us that our usual understanding of the doctrine of sin is neither simple nor all-encompassing. It cannot be about the status quo. The doctrine of sin must challenge those of us who occupy positions of authority and interpretation on behalf of the church.

Randy Willers
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Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music. By Mark Allan Powell. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002. 1088 pages, with CD-Rom. Paper. $29.95.

Mark Allan Powell, professor of church history at Trinity Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, has compiled a remarkable amount of interesting, sometimes helpful, if not revealing information in this hefty volume. Persons and performing groups connected in one way or another to the contemporary Christian music scene constitute the grist for approximately 1,900 cross-referenced entries, all presumably written by the author. They are prefaced by an introduction and followed by a concise but useful glossary (in case the reader needs help with labels such as ska, death metal, or new jack swing). An index of entries concludes the book. The accompanying CD enables one to download all the entries (Windows 98 or later or Macintosh OS 8.0 or later required) and provides helpful links, Web sites, and some musical excerpts.

Both as adventure and informative exercise I serendipitously chose an entry, "Adam Again," heretofore unknown (which may be more a commentary on my listening habits than on the actual profile of the group) in order to discover the tone and character of the volume. Material on Adam Again contained nineteen boldfaced references, including some of the "greats": Amy Grant, Crystal Lewis, Lost Dogs, The Swirling Eddies, Marvin Gaye, and Ladysmith Black Mambazo, all of whom have their own entries. In the case of Adam Again the moniker refers to a group, the members of which according to the established pattern are mentioned up front, followed by the ensemble's more popular albums and Web site. Reading on, we learn that the group centers in its spokesperson, Gene Eugene, who, the author notes among other bits of information, "was reticent in interviews and private about his personal life" (p. 23) and who played Vince Blaine in the movie "Gidget Gets Married." Powell opines that "what made the songs Christian was no more (and no less) than the fact that self-declared Christians wrote and sang them" (p. 23).

The Adam Again adventure takes us to Crystal Lewis. We are informed that her sound is "often likened to that of other R&B-inflected white women" and that "the media has not failed to notice her fashion-model good looks, which have improved with age and confidence (blonde hair and leather pants both served as wise career moves)" (p. 525).

Some entries in the book I recognized even with limited knowledge of the genre: Amy Grant, Ray Repp, John Ylvisaker, U2, and the Indigo Girls, about whom I first heard from the proud father of Emily, colleague Don Saliers.

Powell's love of this music shows on nearly every page. "I regard the persons in this book as amateur theologians whose perspectives and insights on life and faith are every bit as valid as those of any Harvard professor or Rhodes scholar" (p. 8). At the same time, he does not dodge issues that surround this music's production and use. For instance, he notes that definitions are hard to come by. His attempt at something substantial slips unfortunately into a solipsism: "Contemporary Christian music is a music that appeals to self-identified fans of contemporary Christian music on account of a perceived connection to what they regard as

Christianity" (p. 13). Something more useful comes as an aside as he ventures that "we're talking about Christian pop music, loosely defined" (p. 12).

A page full of quotes at the beginning of the volume is meant, one must assume, to pave the way for those a little hesitant to partake of the enthusiastic reviews that follow. But the list begs a critical touch. From St. Francis we read "Preach the Gospel. Use words only as necessary." This about a genre of music that is chiefly text-driven? Then from Luther there is this well-worn comment: "Why should the devil have all the good music?" The question might be, all things being equal, Who is the devil in this context, and what is "good?" Luther wrote much about music. In his preface to a collection of motets for the church year published in 1538 by Georg Rhau Luther praised its contents and went on to warn against those whose "perverted minds prostitute this lovely gift of nature and of art with their erotic rantings; . . . so that these bastards purloin the gift of God and use it to worship the foe of God" (*Liturgy and Hymns*, in *Luther's Works* 53 [American ed.]: 324). Luther's support for any kind of contemporary music can be called upon only *very* carefully. So how does one go about evaluating this phenomenon called Contemporary Christian Music?

Powell begins to lead us in some productive directions. He concludes his introduction with a theological postscript (p. 17) in which he points out that this subculture-like music has its roots within fundamentalism with strong ties to the Jesus movement of the late 60s and early 70s (p. 10). "Thus the image of Christianity expressed in most contemporary Christian music differs from that of historic and global Christianity in key ways." Among those he lists (1) personal private relationship with Jesus, (2) literal reading of Scripture, (3) personal morality, and (4) sentiment and piety. I am glad that Powell has the courage to make these observations, for he helps us to understand why large segments of the church find the texts of this music out of sync with a faith rooted in a lively interchange with the Word and in a dynamic love affair with the Christ revealed at the table.

By his own admission Powell writes as an outsider, a "theologically informed researcher and reporter" (p. 8). In part he was motivated to write because he discovered that this music is relatively unexamined and in some respects marginalized. That may be changing, however. The week after I received this book for review the Arts and Entertainment section of the Sunday *Chicago Tribune* (September 1, 2002) featured Christian music with a lengthy article entitled "The Faith Factor" by Lou Carlozo. The author describes how Christian musicians have found success beyond the Christian music world. Such success is eventuating in no small amount of inner conflict among the performers. More significant than this kind of reporting is the host of musical historians and ethnomusicologists who from many perspectives are investigating the whole enterprise of popular music; see, for instance, *Origins of the Popular Style* by Peter Van der Merwe (Clarendon, 1992); *Music at the Margins* edited by Deanna Campbell Robinson (Sage, 1991); and *Popular Music in Theory* by Keith Negus (Wesleyan University Press, 1997). In addition, two journals have addressed the subject in recent issues: *Popular Music* (Vol. 19, 2000) and *Journal of Popular Music Studies* (Vol. 13, 2001).

Like other musics for the church, contemporary Christian music needs sober-headed scrutiny. The ingredients for such work come from the disciplines of both theology and music. They will include taking our cue from some of the materials listed above, matters of liturgical function, musical rhetoric (how does music mean?), the dynamics of musical expression, the meaning of audience, the physical/biological dimensions of performer and listener, industrial/economic factors, identities, and geographies.

Powell offers us a closer look at personalities in the Christian music scene that is entertaining and informative. He is also, perhaps unwittingly, inviting a far more critical study of a musical movement that has captured the hearts of many in the church and that may in fact offer an accurate measure of the typical person in the pew—whether we like it or not.

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Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation. By Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001. 229 pages. Paper. $20.00.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a leading scholar in feminist biblical interpretation, is the Krister Stendahl Professor of Scripture and Interpretation at Harvard Divinity School. According to her, "this book does not just want to answer the question of 'how to exegete' or 'how to read' the bible. Rather, it is concerned with the question of how to *interpret* the bible from a feminist perspective and in an emancipatory way" (p. 17).

This book seeks to not only deconstruct and challenge, as Schüssler Fiorenza states, the "malestream" of biblical interpretation but to then also give a method of reading and interpreting biblical texts that is liberating not only for women but also for those marginalized throughout the world.

Schüssler Fiorenza's central theme is to understand wisdom/Wisdom and to use its concept in biblical interpretation. This means, according to Schüssler Fiorenza,

> Wisdom is a state of the human mind and spirit characterized by deep understanding and profound insight. It is elaborated as a quality possessed by the sages but also treasured as folk wisdom and wit. Wisdom is the power of discernment, deeper understanding, and creativity; it is the ability to move and to dance, to make the connections, to savor life and to learn from experience.... Wisdom, unlike intelligence, is not something with which a person is born. It comes only from living, from making mistakes and trying again and from listening to others who have made mistakes and tried to learn from them. (p. 23)

Using wisdom/Wisdom to interpret biblical texts is the practice of learning, seeking, questioning, understanding, erring, and succeeding. Her use of a dance metaphor to describe one's commitment to the biblical text encourages this concept of wrangling with the text.

Throughout my reading of this book, I had to constantly keep the phrase "in the way of wisdom" in the back of my head, or I would get lost in the academic methodology for deconstructing and then reconstructing a methodology for biblical interpretation. It is a practice that truly will *not* allow for the empowerment of the powers of domination in either the text or the tradition of interpretation.

Her focus upon a radical democratic reading of the text, meaning that the text is never to be read alone or only with people from similar social locations, speaks to the author's recognition that she comes from a European, upper-middle-class, academic setting in which wo/men are marginalized, but certainly not to the extent of other wo/men in the world. It is because she recognizes her inability to divorce herself from her identity that she rather than subtract from herself, advocates adding other voices. In addition, she speaks of women using the term "wo/men" to illustrate the non-unitary status of wo/men. These concepts alone are reason to read the book!

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A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World. By Marva J. Dawn. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000. 385 pages. Paper. $19.00.

Marva Dawn (Ph.D., Christian Ethics and the Scriptures, University of Notre Dame) is a Lutheran theologian, well-known speaker, and widely published author. She works with Christians Equipped for Ministry and is adjunct professor of spiritual theology at Regent College.

In *Royal Waste* Dawn "intends to counteract the current push for worship to be means by which people are attracted to God . . . [for] worship is idolatry unless it is a total waste of time in earthly terms, a total immersion in the eternity of God's infinite splendor for the sole purpose of honoring God" (p. 11).

Yet, it is for the world as well: "Much of this book is written to counteract the claim that we should make our worship services as much like the culture as possible to attract people to Christianity. My thesis is that the world needs us instead to waste our time royally in worship and, consequently, to be Church, a people different from the world and thereby prodigally offering the gifts of the extravagant splendor of God.

Genuine worship of God will send us out for the sake of the neighbor" (p. 323).

Not only does worship appear to our culture to be a waste of time; it is even a waste in God's eyes, because doing it well does not gain us anything. Colossians 3:12–17 is the cornerstone of this book. From 3:12, we are "chosen ones of God, holy and beloved." "God is the one to choose, to call, to sanctify, to grace us" (p. 13). From Col 3:17, we are to "do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." And so, "we waste our time so that others in the Christian community can be more profoundly immersed in the Word, can become more deeply formed, can more thoroughly join us in praise. . . . [We] instruct, educate, nurture, cultivate, rebuke, exhort, discipline, warn, delight, enlighten, edify, develop" (pp. 15–16).

And that is exactly what Dawn does—instruct, educate, nurture, etc.—to make her points. She uses nine sermons interwoven with twenty-one chapters, each of which could stand alone as commentary on a particular worship issue (which makes this review hard to write!). She begins and ends with the postmodern world, our culture and its challenges. In between are essays on God as center and on "being church" as building community, forming character, and making choices.

She not only draws heavily on Scripture; she illuminates it, and uses hymnody and prayer as well. She uses Hebrew and Greek, early church history and Martin Luther, contemporary church and secular authors, humor and satire, lists, stories, and poetry. Her style is very accessible. She is in fact engaging in conversation with first-time readers and "people in the pews" of all ages, as well as with the denominational leaders, columnists, conference attendees, pastors, and musicians who read her first book on worship and gave critique and/or asked for more of the same.

She addresses all the worship questions that confront congregations, pastors, and musicians. For instance, she fights against the limiting terms "contemporary" and "traditional" in worship ("Worship is Not a Matter of Taste," 186–93), concluding that "decisions about worship need to be grounded in the Revelation, in the wisdom of the Church through time and space, in tradition and community, and in the new winds of the Spirit" (p. 192). She also discusses the confusion between evangelism and worship, giving at least preliminary answers to the top twelve reasons we aren't willing to talk about our faith outside of our congregations ("Don't Let the People Cop Out of Witnessing," 120–34). Another example is that she works through the hymnals-vs.-screens question ("In Praise of the Harder Way: Musings on Continuity, Ephemerality, Change, and Faithfulness," 285–95), including practical lists and ways to open the discussion in the congregation.

I agree with her reading of Scripture, culture, the church, and of what worship can be in and for the world. This very helpful resource takes the "worship wars" out of the realm of emotion and personal/congregational tradition and sets them squarely in the Word and the world. I have already used her insights in sermons, meetings, confirmation, and Sunday school.

Robin Brown
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Preaching John. By Robert Kysar. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002. 252 pages. Paper. $18.00.

Robert Kysar, an ELCA pastor and Bandy Professor of Preaching and New Testament Emeritus at Candler School of Theology, is a prolific writer, particularly on the Fourth Gospel.

This book is dense with academic and homiletic insights. Kysar melds the historical-critical method of study, as well as current scholarship including form, literary, and liberation-theology criticism, with the art of preaching. What emerges is a rich view of John that is filled with paradox, surprises, and controversy. Far from shying away from these things, Kysar implores the preacher to embrace these ambiguities and paradoxes as grist for the preaching mill.

Through philological, historical, and literary study, Kysar discusses major themes of John. He begins by cautioning the preacher (or reader) to struggle with experiencing the gospel apart from deep-rooted Pauline theology. The

implication is to see the gospel as an event written for a particular group in a particular context. He supports the current scholarship that John's Gospel was written "soon after a small community of messianic Jews were separated from their synagogue but went on disputing the question of who Jesus is" (p. 44). Kysar then unpacks major themes in John, including paradox, sin and evil, faith and salvation, and Christian hope, in light of what this particular community would have understood those things to mean for them. He concludes each major section with sermons that discuss and give examples of how a contemporary preacher might struggle with the same issue today.

There are two major elements of this book that I would lift up. First is Kysar's understanding of Christ: "Christ's identity is forever a mystery that we need not try to solve" (p. 48). Considerable time is spent discussing the imagery and rich symbolism in John, and Kysar excels in holding paradoxical terms or ideas in tension. This is one of the great gifts and challenges of the book. He engages the preacher at every turn, demanding that we hold ourselves responsible to the text. If the text is ambiguous, why should we feel that it is necessary to preach something definitive?

Second is the "inclusion of the excluded." Kysar devotes a chapter to discussing both the passages that are included in the Revised Common Lectionary and those passages that are left out of the lectionary. Again, this supports Kysar's thesis that one must consider the whole of John when preparing to preach John. This section, as well as its format, is extremely helpful for preachers who map out sermons and link lectionary readings together in cycles.

Some may find the dense historical-critical or philological sections intimidating, yet Kysar gives ample time to inviting the preacher to struggle with contemporary implications for the texts. I understand this as an indispensable work for not only reading John but for the art of preaching in general.

Katrina Holland
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Briefly Noted

F. Dean Lueking, Pastor at Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, Illinois, for 44 years, describes the challenges, changes, joys, and trials of that ministry in ***The Last Long Pastorate: a Journey of Grace*** (Eerdmans, $20). In those years he was an active participant in the doctrinal controversies in The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod that led to the parish leaving that church, going through a long lawsuit that went all the way to the Supreme Court. He describes his growing ecumenical activity both locally and internationally and the parish's developing involvement in social issues and the establishment of support groups of various kinds. This brief note does not do justice to the interesting story, which is ultimately a statement showing the advantages of a long-term ministry—provided that the pastor is open to change and growth, while firmly grounded in the gospel as is Lueking. I was fascinated enough to read it at a single sitting (Lueking was a seminary classmate). An interesting read, it will fascinate any parish pastor. *Edgar Krentz*

Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg have updated ***The Bible in Modern Culture*** (second edition; Eerdmans, $26) by adding three chapters on Adolf Schlatter, Paul Ricoeur, and Brevard Childs, which supplement the slightly revised chapters on Spinoza, Reimarus, Schleiermacher, Strauss, F. C. Baur, von Hofmann, Troeltsch, Machen, Bultmann, and Käsemann. Since each chapter sets the stage by describing issues raised by other theologians, when the introductory chapter on "The War of the Worldviews" and the conclusion, "Two Traditions of Historical Criticism," are added, the volume serves as a history of biblical interpretation told through analyses of major figures in that history. It is an interest-

ing and stimulating read, as each chapter anchors the account in the life story of each interpreter. There are extensive notes, which provide bibliographical references—though it would help the reader if there were a bibliography appended to each chapter. The seven-page index of names gives an idea of the rich treatment. The authors provide a good introduction to the issues at stake in the critical interpretation of the Bible, without discussing some contemporary issues such as postmodern interpretation, reader-response criticism, feminist interpretation, and the like. This deserves wide reading. *EK*

The Pentateuch: An Annotated Bibliography. By Kenton L. Sparks (Baker, $16.99). Into each life a little manna must fall, and this gem provides short and clear abstracts of 714 articles (and some books) dealing with the Pentateuch. Students will soon learn which articles deal with topics of interest to them, and one could read these abstracts straight through just to find out what has been going on. Somehow S. missed my colleague Esther Menn's 400-page treatment of Genesis 38, but, other than that, he deserves a standing ovation. This is the ninth volume Baker has published in this bibliographic series. *RWK*

Theologies in the Old Testament. By Erhard S. Gerstenberger (Fortress, $30). The plural "theologies" is central to the thesis of this series of lectures, originally delivered in Germany and Brazil. S. denies therefore that there is a "center" or even a unity in the Old Testament, and he traces out the contexts of that faith in family and clan, village and small town, tribal alliances, the monarchical state, and the confessional and parochial communities of the exile and beyond. Not surprisingly, S. envisages theologies today that are ecumenical and contextual, transcending in a sense the limits of Judaism and Christianity. S. has been a close observer of the role (or lack of it) of women in the Bible, and these lectures are peppered with asides that are controversial and worth the price of admission. Items: "The exchange of ideas between married couples is said on average still to claim five or six minutes a day." The family "has degenerated into a limited place of reproduction and . . . a repair shop for burdened solitary fighters." "The way in which some church statements still regard the family as the only valid norm for human social life is pure wishful thinking." Expect to be challenged on the history of Israel's religion and on the task of church leadership today. *RWK*

The Israelites. By B. S. J. Isserlin (Fortress, $23). This work begins with the rise of Israel in the late thirteenth century and ends with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. Part 1 deals with geography, the origins and affinities of the Israelites, their history, and their social structure. Part 2 describes Israel's material culture—towns, agriculture, trades, economy, and warfare. Part 3 is entitled "The World of the Spirit" and recounts what we know of the Hebrew language and Hebrew inscriptions, religion (with most attention to sanctuaries and cult practices), and representational art. Isserlin has directed archaeological excavations in Israel and elsewhere in the Mediterranean basin, and he includes numerous black and white photographs in the text. *RWK*

Introduction to Prophetic Literature, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel. By David L. Petersen, Gene M. Tucker, Christopher R. Seitz, Patrick D. Miller, Anthony J. Saldarini, Kathleen M. O'Connor, and Katheryn Pfisterer Darr (Abingdon, $75). This hefty book (1,612 pages) is Volume 6 in the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Series and brings the Old Testament section of that series to completion. As with all previous volumes, the NIV and NRSV are printed at the head of each pericope, and then the commentators provide both exegesis and hermeneutical/homiletical helps. While the commentators on the major prophets and the other works do not provide extensive philological or text-critical remarks, the editors did provide them much more space than one would expect in such a commentary series, and the scholars who wrote on these prophets are well-known figures who have published extensively on these books before: Tucker (First Isaiah), Seitz (Second and Third Isaiah), Miller (Jeremiah), and Darr (Ezekiel). The old literary-critical questions about authentic words, secondary passages, etc., have retreated into the background, almost to the point of disappearing,

and pastors and other church leaders will welcome the exposition of the present state of the text and the hermeneutical bridges between then and now offered by these commentators. (Those who hunger for more detailed work are referred to the commentary recommendations on individual books on my website at http://www.geocities.com/ralphklein2001.) Petersen's introduction provides an authoritative inventory on where prophetic research is going today, and the commentaries on Jeremiah-related works (Lamentations by O'Connor and the two apocryphal books by Saldarini) are also well done. Church libraries and pastors should plan on including all twelve volumes of NIB in their holdings. *RWK*

Commentary on the Torah. By Richard Elliott Friedman (HarperSanFrancisco, $50). F. is well known for his bestselling *Who Wrote the Bible*, a breezy and somewhat anachronistic introduction to J, E, D, P. Now F. provides the Hebrew text and his own very fresh translation of the Pentateuch and a brief and lively commentary on the Torah as a whole, without distinguishing pre-canonical authors or sources. Hence he now tries to show how united the whole Torah is and attempts to relate it to life. In writing this commentary F. attended weekly study sessions for laypersons on the weekly reading of the Torah. He interprets and sheds light on individual words and passages but also strives to show how essentially connected all of it is. His translation makes a number of bold moves: contractions are used in conversations (God to the snake: "You'll go on your belly") but not narratives; use of the possessive case (Moses' house); retention of "and" or alternatives at the beginning of most verses; use of italics or exclamation points to translate the infinitive absolute. You'll laugh, sometimes scratch your head, but often say, "I never detected that insight before." *RWK*

Numbers 21–36. The Anchor Bible 4A. By Baruch A. Levine (Doubleday, $45). This completes the commentary on Numbers for the Anchor Bible. In addition to some rather esoteric material (the second census, the daughters of Zelophehad, the festival calendar, the route to the promised land, and the tribal territories), this part of Numbers also contains the story of the brazen serpent, the Balaam account, and the sin at Baal Peor. L. includes a long discussion of the early eighth-century Balaam inscriptions from Deir 'Alla (just east of the Jordan River). Written in Canaanite or another Northwest-Semitic language, these incomplete and somewhat obscure inscriptions report a vision experienced by Balaam the son of Beor. Despite their mythological character (a goddess is mentioned and Balaam uses magic), L. concludes that the inscriptions are possibly of (heterodox) Israelite authorship. The community that produced them may have worshipped both Yahweh and El. M. dates the biblical poems of Balaam to the early ninth century, about a half century before the inscriptions. The message of the Baal Peor incident is that living in Transjordan leads to idolatry; L. rejects an orgiastic understanding of the passage. RWK

Mesopotamia and the Bible. Edited by Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Baker, $29.99). The fourteen essays in this book deal with the light shed on the Bible by the archaeological discoveries, primarily textual, of the last two centuries. "Mesopotamia" is understood broadly and includes portions of Syria that had cultural similarities to the Mesopotamians in antiquity. The articles are provided with voluminous bibliographies, and they draw measured conclusions about the ways in which Ancient Near Eastern studies have and have not benefited biblical scholars. Ugarit, for example, has shed invaluable light on Yahweh by its record of the Canaanite god El, but ideas of death and the afterlife at Ugarit are now seen as offering little help for understanding the Old Testament's views on these matters. The thirteen authors record scholars who have made major breakthroughs as well as those afflicted with parallelomania. *RWK*

ETZ Hayim. Torah and Commentary. Edited by David L. Lieber and others (Jewish Publication Society, $72.50). This annotated Bible has been produced by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and features stellar names like Chaim Potok, Nahum M. Sarna, Baruch A. Levine, Jacob Milgrom, Jeffrey H. Tigay, Harold Kushner, and Michael Fishbane. It offers the

Hebrew text and English translation (JPS version) of the Pentateuch and the related liturgical readings from the Prophets (Haftaroth). Three sets of comments are printed on each page: standard historical and philological notes; gleanings from ancient, medieval, and modern midrashic theological reflections; and ethical advice for today's Conservative Jews. In addition there are 41 essays on aspects of biblical life, religion and law, worship and ritual, and text and context. The commentary is reverential but not apologetic and recognizes that some issues like slavery or the command to kill the Canaanites must be reinterpreted by later generations in light of principles of equity and justice that are central to the Torah. Christian readers too will profit greatly from this Bible. *RWK*

Hebrew Bible Slide Set. Edited by Mary Joan Winn Leith and Michael Coogan (Biblical Archaeology Society, $119.50). The 139 slides in this collection are accompanied by a 72-page caption booklet written by the editors. The quality of the photography is very high, and many of these pictures have appeared previously in the *Biblical Archaeology Review*. The slides are correlated with books of the Bible (34 with the Pentateuch; 46 with the book of Kings) but of course can be used to understand other aspects of ancient Israelite society as well. The captions describe the date and significance of the object portrayed and provide ample interpretation of how the slide helps us to understand some aspect of the Old Testament. This is the eleventh such slide set published by BAS, eight of which are now included on a CD-ROM entitled "Biblical World in Pictures" that sells for $149.95. RWK

Deutero-Isaiah. By Klaus Baltzer (Fortress, $78). B., longtime professor at Munich and famous for his earlier work on covenant in the Old Testament, believes that Isaiah 40–55 should be classified as a liturgical drama, which was performed for a largely nonliterary public. B. divides the text into six acts framed by a prologue and an epilogue. The so-called servant songs appear in acts 1, 4, 5, and 6. B. departs from the majority of scholars in identifying Jerusalem as the place where the book was composed, but he holds that the book was performed for the exile group in Babylon, heralding Jerusalem as a place of pilgrimage. The author of the work is unknown, but authorship was probably a group effort anyway. B. also proposes a radically new date, 450–400 B.C.E., rather than the usual 547–540 B.C.E., and sees important continuities between this book and the book of Nehemiah. B. understands the "servant" as a call to *imitatio* of his virtues: renunciation of renown, readiness not to repay evil with evil, avoidance of violence and deception, and intervention for others. While many will question the overall hypotheses about genre and date, all will profit from this learned philological and exegetical contribution to the Hermeneia Commentary series that has been ably translated by Margaret Kohl. *RWK*

The Complete World of the Dead Sea Scrolls. By Philip R. Davies, George J. Brooke, and Philip Callaway (Thames & Hudson, $34.95). It is now 55 years since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls—800 documents from eleven caves—and the five chapters in this lavishly illustrated book (216 illustrations, of which 84 are in color) report the conclusions scholars have come to—and still argue about. The authors tell about the discovery of the scrolls, describe the various Judaisms that were alive at the time the scrolls were written, and discuss what has been learned (more or less) from the excavation of the Qumran community. They list what was found in each cave and provide an introduction to all the major writings. Finally, the authors assess the meaning of these discoveries and attempt to identify who wrote these scrolls. Many scholars now believe that the majority of the scrolls were *brought to* rather than *written at* Qumran. The scrolls contain the seeds of elements that reemerge in both Christianity and rabbinic Judaism and help us to understand the relationship between these two religious systems. This beautiful and relatively inexpensive book contains competent essays in relatively short and digestible chunks. *RWK*

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Preaching Helps

The Resurrection of Our Lord—The Day of Pentecost, Series B

Life as Miracle

Under the title *Life Is a Miracle* (Counterpoint, 2000) Wendell Berry has published what he calls "an essay against modern superstition." The superstition that is the target of his pen is the popular scientific orthodoxy that "science is entirely good, that it leads to unlimited progress, and that it has (or will have) all the answers" (p. 24).

Berry heaps scorn on the notion that science has or soon will have all the answers. His basic objection is the modern scientific habit of thinking that "every mystery is a problem, and every problem can be solved." In the face of genuine mysteries, popular scientific orthodoxy rejects the stance of deference or respect, to say nothing of reverence. No, like Sherlock Holmes the scientist is the great detective pursuing "the answer." Many problems are indeed solvable, but "when a scientist denies or belittles a mystery that cannot be solved, then he or she is no longer within the bounds of science" (p. 27).

In this book, as in all of his work, Berry is concerned about our use of language. He bemoans the way so many of us, when talking about our world, use language that fails "to convey any respect or care or affection or devotion" toward it. Modern science has steadily and relentlessly engaged in a process of "reclassification of the world from creature to machine" (p. 8).

Once we begin to conceive of the world as machine rather than creature, our attitude toward creation undergoes a not-so-subtle shift from one of reverence to one of understanding. Our relationship to our natural environment changes from that of steward to that of absolute owner, manager, and engineer (p. 8).

Berry bristles at the notion that the world is a machine. He quotes some lines of Edward O. Wilson's book *Consilience.* Wilson writes, "People, after all, are just extremely complicated machines," and says that we are all of us "organic machines" and "an organism is a machine." While admitting that "this machine business" may once have had some usefulness as a metaphor, Berry fears that Wilson speaks for too many of us in *equating* world and machine. "If we are to

assume that our language means anything at all, then the world is not a machine, and neither is an organism. A machine, to state only the greatest and most obvious difference, is a human artifact, and a world or an organism is not" (p. 46).

Against Wilson and those who think like him, Berry hurls the accusation that their thinking is deterministic, materialistic, mechanistic, and reductionist.

Berry takes the title of his book from words of Edgar spoken to his father the Earl of Gloucester in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Edgar says to his despairing father, "Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again." That line, says Berry, "calls Gloucester back—out of hubris, and the damage and despair that invariably follow—into the properly subordinated human life of grief and joy, where change and redemption are possible" (p. 5). For Berry, life is a miracle and a mystery, not a puzzle to be solved but a gift to be received in a "properly subordinated human life of grief and joy."

Berry ponders the meaning of knowledge and raises the question whether there is not such a thing as "unexplainable knowledge." He cites the lament of Lear holding his faithful daughter Cordelia dead in his arms, the lament of David upon hearing that his son Absalom is dead, and the lament of Robert E. Lee at the end of the battle of Gettysburg. Their cries from the depths (and Berry quotes them) "certainly express knowledge . . . but the knowledge they convey cannot be proved, demonstrated, or explained." These terrible utterances are not "information."

He continues by saying that statements of religious faith are similar to these lamentations. He quotes Job's famous cry of confession, "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth" (19:25–26). Job can offer neither evidence nor proof to support his passionate conviction. But even in the absence of anything even vaguely resembling scientific proof, Job dares to call his conviction "knowledge." Berry concludes, "A great many people who have read these verses have agreed; they too have *known* that this is so" (p. 97).

Berry is expansive where he finds much modern science to be reductionistic. "The walls of the rational, empirical world are famously porous. What come through are dreams, imaginings, inspirations, visions, revelations. . . . Beyond any earthly reason we experience beauty in excess of use, justice in excess of anger, mercy in excess of justice, love in excess of deserving or fulfillment. . . . We have known evil beyond imagining and seemingly beyond intention. We have known compassion and forgiveness beyond measure " (p. 100).

This book of Wendell Berry's set me to thinking about the vocation of the preacher in the Easter Season—and at every season. Why would any preacher

want to travel the way of the Jesus Seminar? The members of the Jesus Seminar seem intent on carrying on a mission of "scientific" debunking, as they rewrite the story, insisting that there was no burial by friends but instead an unceremonious dumping into a mass grave for common criminals and so no tomb to be discovered empty, no women coming to a tomb to anoint his body, no angelic messengers at a tomb, no falling at his feet outside a tomb. And at the other end of the spectrum are the fundamentalistic apologists, who love nothing more than to heap up arguments designed to "prove" that he really rose from the dead. Is either of these paths really helpful in encouraging people to live a "properly subordinated life of grief and joy"?

I think Berry points us in a better direction than do the Jesus Seminar and all the argumentative fundamentalists. Berry thinks hard about what it means to be a human being, and in doing so he offers what is very close to a description of the preacher's task and calling in the Easter Season: bring hearers into the presence of the Great Mystery that surrounds us, so that our sense of an "excessive" beauty and mercy and compassion may be renewed and we may be healed. Nothing less than that is what happens when the preacher tells the story not woodenly or literalistically, neither suspiciously nor argumentatively, but with reverence and awe, dwelling in loving fashion on all the details, speaking from head and heart as one struggling and believing human being to others.

Helping us in the task of reading the texts and letting the texts read us is **Bruce Modahl**, Senior Pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in River Forest, Illinois. Bruce is a 1977 graduate of Christ Seminary–Seminex. He earned a Master of Theology degree in homiletics from Princeton Theological Seminary and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. His sermons and sermon studies have been published in numerous periodicals, most recently in *Sundays and Seasons* and in *The Christian Century.*

Thanks to Bruce for sharing his heart and mind with us in these pages, and a Blessed Easter to all who preach good news week in and week out.

Yours,

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P.S. Our apologies for somehow getting all the dates wrong for the Lenten Season. We trust you preached good news week after week in spite of our chronological shortcomings! RHS

The Resurrection of Our Lord
April 20, 2003

Acts 10:34–43 *or* Isaiah 25:6–9
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
1 Corinthians 15:1–11 *or* Acts 10:34–43
Mark 16:1–8 *or* John 20:1–18

The resurrection of Jesus turns everything on its head. Since that is so, perhaps for one Sunday we could turn the lectionary upside down and begin with the Gospel reading. Or, since that is the last to be read, the preacher can begin here.

The opening scene in Mark 16 is familiar from the other Gospels. The Sabbath is over. It is early on the first day of the week. The four Gospels do not agree on the names of those who came to the tomb or the number of them. They all agree the first comers were women. They all put Mary Magdalene graveside. The women speculate on the stone and who will move it for them so they can anoint the body. The gravestone is no obstacle: a heavenly messenger has invaded the tomb. It is a young man dressed in white. Is there any connection with the "certain young man" of 14:51 who was following Jesus at the time of his arrest? The women see him seated on the right side of the tomb. Is this an indication of where Jesus' body had been laid or where Jesus was now, at the right hand of God the Father?

A heavenly messenger has invaded the tomb, and the tomb has been emptied of its dead contents. The heavenly tomb raider tells them, "Do not be alarmed." The messenger says what all of God's messengers will announce this Easter Sunday: "He has been raised. He is not here in the tomb. Go and tell." These first eyewitnesses went, but that is the only part of the angel's command they obeyed. They went, but they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

That is no ending. Was the final page of Mark's Gospel somehow lost? Some have speculated as much. The yearning for a more satisfying ending is evident in words appended in brackets after 16:8. Most versions of the Bible offer 'The Shorter Ending of Mark" and 'The Longer Ending of Mark." The Shorter Ending flatly contradicts verse 8. If it is authentic we would read, ". . . they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter."

The longer ending seems to gather up the endings of Matthew, Luke, and John and shuffle them together in a summary that is dealt out with some new and alarming details about snake handling and poison drinking.

I think Mark intended to end his Gospel with verse 8. I also think Mark knew this was not really the ending. The story continues. The women obviously did go and tell; if not, there would be no one in the pews come Easter morning, and we would not be standing up to announce, "Christ is risen!" Had they not spoken, there would have been no Book of Acts and no letter to a church in Corinth. Luke would have had no story to tell, and Paul would have died as Saul back in Tarsus.

The women did speak. The first and second readings tell us some things about the consequences of Jesus' dying and rising for the next generation of speakers and hearers. In the reading from Acts Peter takes up the proclamation the women repeated from the angel. All the elements are there: Fear not. Christ has died; Christ is risen! We are commanded to go and tell.

Peter says he now understands that God shows no partiality. Christ's dying and rising is for all fearers of God (beginning, don't you suppose, with those fear-struck women who ran from the tomb). The alter-

nate first reading from Isaiah 25 would be good background material for this text. What the prophet foresaw is fulfilled by Peter at table in the home of Cornelius. Isaiah 25 comes from a time when the people were looking for the fulfillment of God's promises in the daily slog. God took their chin in the palm of God's hand and forced their eyesight from the mud at their feet. God lifted their gaze up and out to the horizon for the time when God would set a table of plenty for all the nations of the earth, swallow up death forever, and wipe away the tears from all faces. Peter has the same vision and acts it out when he sits down to eat with Cornelius. We have our eyes focused on the same vision and likewise act it out in the Lord's Supper.

In the second reading Paul also repeats the proclamation the women passed on from the angel. The people of First Church Corinth are a gifted people. They have claimed bragging rights over their spiritual gifts. If you've ever listened to parents talking about their gifted children you know how that sounds and to what it can lead, namely one-upmanship, squabbling, and divisions. Apparently one gifted group was put off by the notion of physical resurrection. Spiritual resurrection they could buy. Paul takes their chin in the palm of his hand and lifts their eyes to the cross. He repeats the proclamation through which they first believed. "Christ died for your sins, so fear not," Paul tells them. "Christ was raised a fleshy resurrection for us fleshy ones. He called me to go and tell."

The readings from Acts and 1 Corinthians provide the missing ending for Mark 16. But the story has not yet ended. Our own lives in Christ are the latest page in the Gospel account. But still this is no ending. The page missing from the end will not be provided by the next generation. They too will repeat the elements of the proclamation the women repeated from the angel, "Christ has died; Christ is risen." But that is no ending. The ending that satisfies will be written when Christ comes again.

Second Sunday of Easter
April 27, 2003

Acts 4:32–35
Psalm 133
1 John 1:1–2:2
John 20:19–31

In the Prayer of the Day we ask God to help us "show the power of the resurrection in all we say and do." It is the same hope John expresses at the end of the Gospel reading. He has recorded all these things, he says, so that we "may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing [we] may have life in his name."

What does "life in his name" look like in real time? How does the "power of the resurrection" show itself in what we say and do?

In those heady first days following Pentecost, Luke (the author of Acts) tells us life in Jesus' name produced unity of heart and mind among the believers. Their spiritual unity became incarnate. It took on substance. It led them to hold their property in common so that "there was not a needy person among them." How does the power of the resurrection show up in the care we take for the needy of our community and world? What does life in Jesus' name mean for our stewardship of our "goods and services"?

The power of the resurrection showed itself when they testified with power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. We heard that powerful testimony from Peter and John in prior chapters of Acts. The authorities

were much annoyed and arrested them. These authorities were astonished at the power of their words, because Peter and John were just ordinary men. They ordered them to stop speaking. They refused. The authorities threatened them again and then let them go. Wasn't this the same council before which Jesus stood to a much different outcome?

The power of the resurrection shows itself in the declamation of John the letter writer. He leads off his letter by repeating the declaration first heard from the angel's lips and then from the mouths of the women and then from Peter and John in Acts and then from Paul and now from us. His purpose in declaring is that his readers may have fellowship with him and his congregation. Here is repeated the unity-of-heart-and-mind theme from the first reading. More is involved than fellowship on a human scale. This is the fellowship not of lodge members but of the church. The fellowship of the church puts us in company with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

"We are writing these things," he says, "so that our joy may be complete." The power of the resurrection produces fellowship with one another and with God. That is what makes for joy in our new life in Christ.

After four verses John comes to the content of the declaration. God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. We walk in darkness and need transfer to the realm of light. That transfer comes on Jesus' coattails. It comes by his dying and rising. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Moreover, he is our advocate with the Father when we continue to flirt with the darkness and stray into the shadows. Jesus is our defense attorney. If we take seriously what we say about resurrection and ascension, that means there is one who became like us in every respect in heaven's throne room. We have an insider pleading our case and taking up our cause.

He must take up our cause every day, because every day we need a transfer out of the shadows to which we stray and into his realm of light. That transfer takes place by confession and forgiveness. Our walk in the light is not slow-but-steady progress. It is not the case that every day and in every way we are getting better and better, sinning less and less. Our walk in the light is marked rather by return—return to the waters of baptism. Every day we live in the power of our baptism and in its dying-and-rising rhythm by confessing our sins and hearing the words of forgiveness.

John says in his first letter that life in Christ looks and sounds like the confession of sins. In the Gospel reading John says resurrection-power showing looks and sounds like Thomas's confession of faith. In fact, the confession of sins is premised on the confession of faith. Without the confession of faith we are bound to rationalize our actions, excuse our sins, and dodge the law's accusation. We are by nature Artful Dodgers (for those who remember that character from the musical "Oliver"). When we know Jesus as "my Lord and my God" we are confident of God's forgiveness. Then we can confess the truth about ourselves. With this twin confession we live by the grace of God and so show and tell the power of the resurrection in our lives. We pass that forgiveness to others. Jesus authorized us to do so and gave us the power to do so with his own Holy-Spirit breath. Forgiveness is the power that transforms us.

Third Sunday of Easter
May 4, 2003

Acts 3:12–19
Psalm 4
1 John 3:1–7
Luke 24:36b–48

If you want to know what the people are staring at and wondering about in the first reading you have to read from the beginning of chapter 3. A certain man, lame from birth, was a fixture at the temple gate named Beautiful. Friends carried him there daily to beg for alms. His twisted body marred the beauty of the site. However, people were accustomed to seeing him there. Some were accustomed to passing him by. Others were accustomed to tossing a few coins his way.

He called to Peter and John as they passed by, "Do you have something you can spare to help me?" He was thinking money. He got more than he bargained for. Peter responded, "Silver and gold have I none, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk." And he stood up and walked. Isn't that beautiful? And he clung to Peter and John, the text tells us. He clung to them. Another beautiful sight. That's what attracted a crowd. That's what the people are staring at and wondering about in the first reading.

Peter also wonders. He wonders why they are doing that. But I'd like to know why Peter questions their stares and their wonder. Maybe it is the "at us" that Peter questions. They should stare and wonder, but not "at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made this man walk." Peter immediately points beyond himself and John to the very God these people have come to the temple to worship. This is not some strange and esoteric new religion. This is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of their ancestors. Peter further points to Jesus, the one whom God glorified by raising him from the dead. This is the one whose "name itself has made this man strong."

Peter points at the crowd as he makes the accusation, "You killed the Author of life." But then he points back to God saying, "God raised him from the dead. Furthermore, in this way God fulfilled the scriptures." And then he gets to the point for his hearers—what it means for them, what it points them to—"Repent therefore and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out."

Jesus is the point. Luke has been making this point since chapter 1, verse 1. Peter and company got the point. We hear about that in the Gospel reading. The risen Lord appeared to the disciples and opened their minds. Minds need opening. "Some are so closed-minded their ears touch" was the saying of a favorite teacher of mine. But the gospel does not come naturally to any of us. We must hear it, and those of us called must preach it. Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, to understand that he is the point of the law, the prophets, and the psalms. This was his same mission on the Emmaus road. On the road and at supper he opened the Scriptures to them and opened their eyes to see what he was opening to them. The Scriptures point to him and are understood through him.

He makes clear that such understanding and fulfillment are through him precisely as the crucified and risen Messiah. Look at my hands and feet, he says. They didn't see those telltale marks on the Emmaus road or at the Emmaus supper table. He makes sure that they see them now. And he is not some apparition, as they first fear. Ghosts don't eat leftovers from the dinner table. This is a real body, Jesus' real body, that they recognize.

There is continuity and discontinuity in the resurrected body, as there will be in our

resurrected bodies as well. Description defies our language, for our language is part and parcel of the reality it describes, a reality bounded by sin and death. Jesus' resurrection speaks of a whole new realm where the boundaries of sin and death are no more. Reading the endings of the Gospels, we can hear the writers strain for the language to describe what they have seen or what has been reported to them.

Jesus' body is the same. It bears the scars of the crucifixion. They recognize his features. He eats and drinks. Yet there is a difference. The resurrected Jesus appears out of thin air. He comes through locked doors, as in John's Gospel. Disciples don't always recognize him. There is continuity and discontinuity. Paul says in 1 Cor 15:44, "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." The discontinuity comes in the transition from physical to spiritual in the resurrection. But after the resurrection it is still a body.

Luke says that at first the disciples were disbelieving and wondering in their joy. Luke also said that they fell asleep in the garden of Gethsemane because of their grief. The resurrected Jesus goes to work on these joyfully disbelieving and wondering ones to open their minds to understand the Scripture. He works on them much the same way he worked on Thomas and the other disciples in John's Gospel. The two accounts have many similarities. Finally, he authorizes them to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. That is the beginning Peter and John are making in the first reading for this day.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 11, 2003

Acts 4:5–12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16–24
John 10:11–18

Jeremiah Wright once pointed out in one of his sermons that sheep get lost "six feet at a time." Their eyesight is so poor, he said, that they can see no farther than six feet in front of them. They graze in the grass and see something greener up ahead, six feet. They see something greener yet, six feet. See another green patch, six feet. Six feet by six feet by six feet, the sheep get lost, straying from the flock and the shepherd.

Likewise, he said, we get lost a little bit at a time. Wright cited a string of examples by which we wander away bit by bit. With each example, Wright stepped another six feet away from the pulpit—until he was out the side door of the church.

Sheep get themselves lost in multiples of six feet, unless of course a wolf snatches and destroys them suddenly.

The wolves I know are most often in sheeps' clothing. They look attractive, even helpful. Daniel Erlander has helped me spot the wolves. In his booklet "Let the Children Come: A Baptism Manual for Parents and Sponsors" he calls baptism "Storied Waters." He says, "Every human being is shaped by some story. . . . To be baptized is to be plunged into the greatest story. . . ." We tell those preparing for baptism that baptism makes them part of God's own narrative of salvation. Baptism edits their story into God's story.

There are other stories that seek our lives. They look and sound good. Erlander cites the North American story of rags to

riches. We add other examples from our culture and invite those preparing for baptism to offer their own. What are those things that look like blessings but end up as curses in our lives? These are the wolves in sheeps' clothing.

The identity of the hirelings is obvious from Jesus' prior encounter with the Pharisees over the man born blind. At this point in John's Gospel he is using the term "Jews" or "Judeans" for those who are opposed to Jesus. That reflects perhaps a situation of animosity between Jews and Christians in the communities where the churches under his influence were located. Robert Kysar suggests that the "other sheep not belonging to this fold" refers in John's context to other Christian communities that were not a part of the Johannine circle of congregations.

Who are the 'hirelings" among us? As I try on various roles described in this account, I wonder if "hireling" describes me. Are we pastors mere hired hands who cut and run when the going gets tough? When wolves of financial problems or staff problems or problems with one group or another arise, do we look for a way out, not of the problem but an exit for ourselves? Do our charges sometimes look to us less like a flock of sheep than a pack of wolves?

I am not the Good Shepherd. Jesus is. If sheep get lost six feet at a time, that is how the Good Shepherd finds them. But the Good Shepherd's six feet is vertical. The Good Shepherd's six feet is the six feet of the grave. The Good Shepherd's six feet takes him the whole distance a person is separated from God. The 6' x 6' x 6' x 6' horizontal wandering ends finally in the grave's six feet.

That is why it is good news that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. In ordinary terms, if the shepherd dies defending the sheep they are no better off than with the hireling who ran away. The Good Shepherd in his death, however, takes on the one Paul identifies as the greatest enemy. And in death Jesus brings God to those who are as far from God as they can get. Jesus descended into hell and so brought God there.

We are not the Good Shepherd. We are subshepherds of the Good Shepherd. Since Good Shepherd Sunday falls on Mothers' Day this year, why not look to mothers and to mothering qualities for those actions that cross out the actions of the hireling?

I know many who counsel that for the church it is the Fourth Sunday of Easter and the Lord's Day, not Mothers' Day. Why should time invade the cathedral? Certainly, some church observances are thick with sentiment that borders on maudlin. The special flowers and accolades lean toward deification.

I am further aware of nonliturgical hazards. There will be some present who were abused by their mothers. Present also will be those who are not mothers. Some of these long for husband and family. Some have not been able to conceive or adopt. The children of some of those present in worship on Mothers' Day will have preceded them in death. Others will recently have buried a mother. With so much potential for hurt and slight, perhaps the safest route would be to limit acknowledgment of the day to one of the petitions of the prayers.

On the other hand, Luther calls parenthood the highest office. He says we should bestow the bishop's mitre and staff upon mom and dad. That would make a more impressive display than some old carnation. Mom fills the church on her day. Ask mothers what they want on Mothers' Day and a good portion of them reply, "to go to church together." The job of subshepherds of the Good Shepherd is to pass the faith along and to nurture its growth. Subshepherds of the Good Shepherd defend their charges much

like mothers defend their offspring. Have you ever seen a mother cat come after a dog who has wandered too close to her kittens? There's nothing sentimental about that scene.

Do not all the hazards present opportunity for proclamation? It is a tender time. The bruises many bear cause them to respond with sighs of relief to the healing balm of the gospel.

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 18, 2003

Acts 8:26–40
Psalm 22:24–30 (25–31 NRSV)
1 John 4:7–21
John 15:1–8

In Luke 24 the risen Jesus opens minds so they can understand the Scriptures. He opens the Scriptures to point out where he shows up in them, from Moses to the prophets. In Acts the apostles continue this work of opening Scripture and opening minds. That's not a bad description of the preacher's task. It is in fact the calling of all the baptized to open minds and open Scripture to Jesus Christ.

In the first reading Philip runs alongside the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the queen. The official is reading the prophet Isaiah. He admits that he does not understand what he is reading. Philip vaults into the chariot and points Jesus out in the text. Properly catechized or not, the eunuch stops at the first oasis and asks Philip to baptize him.

In terms of the Gospel reading, Philip is the vinedresser, the vinegrower's agent. He grafts the eunuch into the vine. In her poem "Long Barren" Christina Rosetti writes, "O Rose of Shar'n, O Thou my Living Vine/ O sturdy Cedar, David's Son divine,/ O graft me close, enwrap my withering stem/ Lord, help me grow, instill new life within!"

So grafted, the barren one, this eunuch, will produce fruit. It will not be the fruit of children that would bring him glory as a father. It will instead be the fruit of love and faith from being grafted into Jesus.

Grafting is not the vinedresser's only job. Pruning also falls in the vinedresser's job description. We don't read of any pruning work that Philip performed on the eunuch. Surely there will be plenty to prune in time to come if the eunuch is to produce good fruit.

The story of Philip and the eunuch shows us that it was a good time to be the church, those years right after Jesus' ascension. It didn't look like it. Stephen was executed by the mob. Believers were expelled from Jerusalem (8:1). They had been nestled safe and secure in the Holy City. In spite of injunctions to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, human nature being what it is, those early believers probably would have been content to stay put. Perhaps they would have funded a little preaching station in Galilee, maybe start up a mission congregation in Antioch of Syria. Probably not much more. Then they ran afoul of the authorities in Jerusalem and had to get out of town fast. The believers scattered. The book of Acts does not record any complaining about it, no account of anyone bemoaning their fate. No doubt some did. They were separated from family, homes, and jobs. Schooling for their children was interrupted. But none of that gets recorded. What does get recorded is that those who were run out of town proclaimed the good news along the way and in all the places where they took refuge, places they ordinarily would not have gone. Who would go to Samaria if they didn't have to, if it wasn't a good hiding spot? These refugees proclaimed the good news to Samaritans. Sa-

maritans believed and were baptized.

And Philip hopped a ride with the official of the Queen of Ethiopia who was on the road home after a diplomatic mission. Ethiopians were of a different color and culture. In all likelihood the Apostles would have taken the gospel many places before venturing to Ethiopia. This one now was in Christ along with the other believers. As a eunuch he was excluded from the inner parts of the temple. He was damaged goods and not fit to come into the presence of the Perfect. Whatever it was that made him a eunuch would have pruned him also from Israel's vine had he been a son of Israel. By baptism he is grafted into Christ along with all the other baptized. With them he is bold to stand in God's presence.

From this account of Philip, Acts turns back to the story of Saul, whom God transformed from enemy to apostle, changing his name from Saul to Paul to mark the transformation. Paul went out and transformed more enemies into friends. It didn't look like it, but it was a good time to be the church.

Now is a good time to be the church. It doesn't look like it. We live in the "post-Christian" era. In the post-Christian era the stores are open on Sunday. Youth soccer has games and practices Sunday mornings. Christmas break is "Winter holiday." Easter vacation is "Spring break." In a figurative sense we too have been scattered. We have lost our place of privilege in the capital city. There has been a lot of complaining about it, a good deal of bemoaning our situation. None of that will change things back to the way things were. What will be recorded, remembered, and celebrated is how we proclaim the good news along the way and in the hinterlands to which we have been scattered, to the Samaritans and Ethiopian court officials and Sauls of our day.

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 25, 2003

Acts 10:44–48
Psalm 98
1 John 5:1–6
John 15:9–17

The psalm for today begins "Sing to the Lord a new song." The psalmist commands the new song because God has won the victory and made it known. The new, however, does not mean forgetting the old. One of the reasons for the new song is that God remembers his mercy and faithfulness for his people.

The new thing, according to the first reading, is that God's people now include Gentiles. And it is not any old Gentile but a Roman army officer and his household. And it is not a Roman soldier recruited from the local population but one from far away Italy who is included. Luke tells us that "the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word." That is the language the Bible uses for the champions among God's people. The Spirit of the Lord falls upon people like Gideon, Samson, and Saul, who then lead armies that fall upon the enemies of God's people. Now that same Spirit falls upon one the people of God had called enemy.

The militaristic imagery continues in the second reading. John writes about the "victory that conquers the world." This victory and conquest are not about armies, however. Rather, "whatever is born of God conquers the world." Jesus is born of God. So are we who believe Jesus is the Son of God. The commandment to love is also born of God and is how our faith conquers the world.

One would think that the Gospel readings for the Sundays in the Easter season would all report on Jesus' resurrection ap-

pearances. The first two do, but from then on these Gospel readings take us back to the upper room on the night of Jesus' betrayal. We look at the old through the lens of the new. Whether Jesus' words or our personal history, they take on new meaning when viewed through Jesus' resurrection. We sing a new song to the Lord.

Jesus' upper-room instructions to his disciples in John's Gospel and the logic of 1 John are circular, and maddening to linear-logic types like me. The effect on me is a bit like reading a software instruction manual. Pick a paragraph at random. "Choose Save As from the file menu. Replace the name in the File Name edit boxes by typing Launch Party Letter, and click Save. Word creates a copy of the file, closes the original ChillFill letter and changes the file name in the title bar to Launch Party Letter."

Based on that information, are we ready to try it ourselves? No. What would help? A picture. And most of the manuals have a picture or two for each section. But even if we can get our computer screen to look like the one in the book, then what? What would help now? Somebody to show us. Some nice lady says, "Get up and let me sit in your chair. You watch. I do this and move the cursor here and click and do this and this."

Even that is not enough if I'm expected to remember what she did and do it myself. I've got to get back in the chair. This person now stands behind me, looking over my shoulder. She reminds me when I get stuck and guides me in making corrections when I go astray. After I get the hang of it, the instructions on the printed page suddenly make sense. If I ever forget a step or need a refresher, I can refer to the manual and it straightens me out. In fact, when I read the instructions I almost hear them in the voice of the person who showed me.

When I first read the second lesson and the Gospel I had the sense that John was talking in circles. He says, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments." And what are his commandments? He spells out just one. He quotes Jesus saying, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have love you." So there we have it. We abide in his love if we obey his commandment. And his commandment is that we love. He is talking in circles.

But what if? What if this is really straight talk, sensible talk, and the linear stuff we take for granted, the linear logic that moves us from point a to b to c, is actually what gets us nowhere?

For this talking-in-circles logic Jesus also give us diagrams and pictures. We study them in Scripture. The diagrams and pictures Jesus give come often in the form of stories. But that is not enough for us to get the hang of it. So Jesus says, "Watch me." And he demonstrates the logic for us ultimately by dying and rising. Then he says, "And now you. You love one another the way I have loved you." "Me?" we say. "Yes, you." And he is right there with us by his Holy Spirit, standing behind our chair, at our side, tugging at our sleeve. He says, "Move this way and this. No, wrong move. Back up. Say you're sorry. Try again. Remember what Jesus said. You're forgiven. Take him at his word and at his deed. Go ahead now. Be confident." We get the hang of it after awhile. Then we go back and read passages like we have from John. We read them from the Easter side of the cross and they make a certain sense. They don't make sense as that old logic of ours. But then, they are not describing the same reality. This circular logic is a theo-logic, encircling us with the love of God and making us a part of that encircling movement. This theo-logic is an ever-expanding circle draw-

ing others in. This theo-logic ends up being the straight talk, the talk that gets us somewhere.

Seventh Sunday of Easter
June 1, 2003

Acts 1:15–17, 21–26
Psalm 1
1 John 5:9–13
John 17:6–19

The reading from Acts comes in the lull between Jesus' ascension and Pentecost. Verse 12 informs us the eleven disciples "returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet . . . [and] went to the room upstairs where they were staying." It was not a time of inactivity. It was a time for inreach. The time for outreach would soon come, but just now it was time for inreach. They devoted themselves to prayer. Beginning with the first verse of the reading appointed for this day Peter preaches to those who believe. He is preaching to the choir, as we say. If we can trust Luke's headcount, it must have been a mighty big upper room, or they have rented the Elks Lodge down the street to accommodate the 120 of them. Peter continues to do what Jesus did on the Emmaus road and in the upper room the night of his resurrection. Peter explains the Scriptures to them. He explains them, however, not as these Scriptures attest to Jesus but as they regard Judas. What Judas did was foretold by Scripture and had to be fulfilled.

There is much speculation about what motivated Judas. A variety of opinions are offered by plays and novels such as "Jesus Christ Superstar" and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and movies like "King of Kings," "The Shoes of the Fisherman," and "The Greatest Story Ever Told." Most of these can still be seen on TV during Holy Week. We are warned away from psychologizing Judas' motives, importing modern categories and concerns back on a text and a time that did not know about such things. But we can't seem to help ourselves. Was he trying to force Jesus' hand to bring about the kingdom of God? Did he think that if Jesus continued Rome would intervene and destroy the nation? Was he just greedy? The Bible simply says Satan entered him (John 13:27). Nevertheless, John sees it as part of God's plan (John 13:31–32). Luke wants to make sure we know none of this is arbitrary or happenstance. It was all foretold in Scripture. God is in control.

Under God's control the disciples devoted themselves to inreach: prayer, preaching, Scripture study, and filling out the ranks. They filled the vacancy, the unexpired term left by Judas. This they did by a combination of careful consideration and casting lots. Both elements continue to be present, it seems, when church assemblies choose leaders. What underscores the disciples' decision-making process is the appeal to reason and trust in the Holy Spirit to make good of their choice.

These disciples will soon be called from inreach to outreach. The Holy Spirit of God will call them and empower them to testify to the world. That testimony is John's concern in the second reading. Testimony is the vehicle the Holy Spirit uses to create faith in us. Those who believe, John says, do not have human but God's testimony in their hearts. God's testimony is that God gave us eternal life and this life is his Son. So, how do we know we have eternal life? We have such confidence, John says, because we believe in Jesus Christ. He writes to impart such confidence. That is reason enough to preach as well.

Jesus' high priestly prayer goes on for far longer than the fourteen verses that we have in the Gospel reading. Jesus sounds

worried in this prayer. We might expect him to be worried for himself. He knows that his arrest and execution are about to take place. But he doesn't worry about himself. He worries about his disciples. What will they do without him? It is the prayer pastors hear sitting at hospice bedsides. Those dying do not worry about themselves. They worry about those they leave behind. It is also a parent's prayer. "Dear God, these children you gave me are growing up, and I can't be with them to take care of them all the time. You, please protect them. Keep them safe as they travel. Bring them back in one piece. Guard them from any who would hurt them and take advantage of them. May they remain faithful and believers in you in the face of all the world throws their way." That's how parents pray.

This worried prayer is not fatalistic or anxious. One author referred to a woman "worrying" her rosary beads as she prayed. This prayer is that kind of worrying. Jesus' worried prayer forges a link to God. He links his disciples to God by praying for them in their hearing. That is an important detail for us who wish to pass on the faith. Jesus' worried prayer forges a link to God that will anchor them as he sends them out. The disciples will hear his words whispered over their shoulders and echoed in their heads. The Holy Spirit will remind them.

Jesus' prayer suggests that some inreach is necessary before outreach and at appropriate intervals along the way. Some inreach is necessary so that the Holy Spirit will have something to remind us of. We send out our youth with spiritual formation that has stopped at age 13 or 14. Their religious vocabulary and understanding is at a level that is inadequate for the challenges thrown at them in the world. We need to provide those we send out with a biblical and theological understanding of the world and their place in it. We cannot do so unless we have it ourselves.

The Day of Pentecost
June 8, 2003

Acts 2:1–21 *or* Ezekiel 37:1–14
Psalm 104:25–35,37 (24–34, 35b NRSV)
Romans 8:22–27 *or* Acts 2:1–21
John 15:26–27; 16:4b–15

When Jesus ascended to the right hand of God the Father, he completed the course he began when he took on human flesh. The circuit is now complete. And when the circuit is complete, power is unleashed.

The reading from Acts tells the story of the first Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples with the power of a violent wind and of fire. The Spirit empowered them to speak in other languages. The division among people that began at the tower of Babel is now reversed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Peter, not many days before these events, was afraid of his own shadow. He denied to a servant girl that he knew Jesus. Now the Holy Spirit rests upon him and he stands up in front of a crowd and boldly proclaims Jesus Christ.

The psalmist praises God for the creation, saying, "You send forth your Spirit and they are created; and so you renew the face of the earth." The Holy Spirit is the power of creation, says the psalmist.

Paul says the Holy Spirit is the power of new creation. "The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now," he says. We too "groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies." The Holy Spirit is midwife interceding for us. The Holy Spirit ruminates within and about us with sighs too deep for words.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus describes the power unleashed by his ascension as the sending of the Advocate. The Holy Spirit advocates Jesus' case and cause to us just as

Jesus advocates ours in the heavenly throne room. The Advocate testifies on Jesus' behalf and guides us into all the truth. We are called to testify to Jesus and guide others to the truth. The truth is Jesus Christ.

Richard Schaull in the *Journal for Preachers* (Pentecost 1998) tells the story of a renowned German theologian who went as a guest teacher to a seminary in Latin America. He was there for a couple of weeks giving lectures. These lectures were on a variety of topics, having to do with theology and Scripture and ethics. No matter what the topic, he closed each lecture with a strong evangelical statement. "We know we are sinful human beings. We have fallen short of the glory of God," he said. "Jesus came into the world to bear on the cross the weight of our sin. By his death and resurrection God gives us forgiveness and salvation. We know at our death God will take us to heaven." He gave the classical Lutheran statement on justification. "We are justified, made right with God, by God's grace, God's gift, through faith in Jesus Christ."

The students attending his lectures were unsatisfied. Everywhere this professor went in Europe and North America he received rave reviews and standing-room-only audiences, but not in this school in Latin America. The dissatisfaction of the students went unvoiced until nearly the end of the professor's stay with them. Finally, during the question-and-answer period at the close of one of his talks, one of the students rose and said, "What you tell us is all very well and good, professor. But isn't there more?"

The professor was truly puzzled. "But what more could there be?" he asked.

The more that there could be, the more that there is, is the power unleashed when Jesus ascended to the right hand of God to rule. With his ascension he completes the circuit. We sing about this circuitry in the Advent hymn "Savior of the Nations, Come" (*LBW* #28), "God the Father is his source, Back to God he runs his course; Down to death and hell descends, God's high throne he reascends." (See also stanzas 5 and 6.)

When the circuit is complete, power is unleashed. Even those of us with a rudimentary knowledge of electricity know that. The power Jesus unleashes is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one connecting us to Jesus' resurrection. Holy Spirit power is resurrection. Holy Spirit power is new creation. Power is the "more" that those Latin American seminary students thought was missing from the words of that theologian.

What sort of power is this? Those seminarians knew about power. Their government was composed of thugs who specialized in death squads and disappearances. Power was in the hands of a few obscenely wealthy families. Is this the power we find missing? The same kind of power, only used in reverse, blow for blow, until good triumphs over evil?

In our sermon on this day we might spend some time examining how power is used by God. We can cite plenty of evidence of God using coercive power. But the power God manifests at the cross moves death's boundary stakes and inaugurates a new creation. Paul Scherer did a little twist on the hymn, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!" According to him the song should read, "Blessed disturbance, Jesus has me!" The Spirit of God is the power of the new creation on the loose, disturbing this old realm, even these old hearts and minds and lives of ours. Where do we look for the transforming power of the Holy Spirit? The cross gives us the clue. Paul says, wherever we hear groaning or see the evidence of a groaning creation, look there for the power of the Holy Spirit. It does not happen at the places we are strong or think we are strong. It happens at the groaning places. That's where the power of the Holy Spirit comes through.

Responses
are welcome!

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