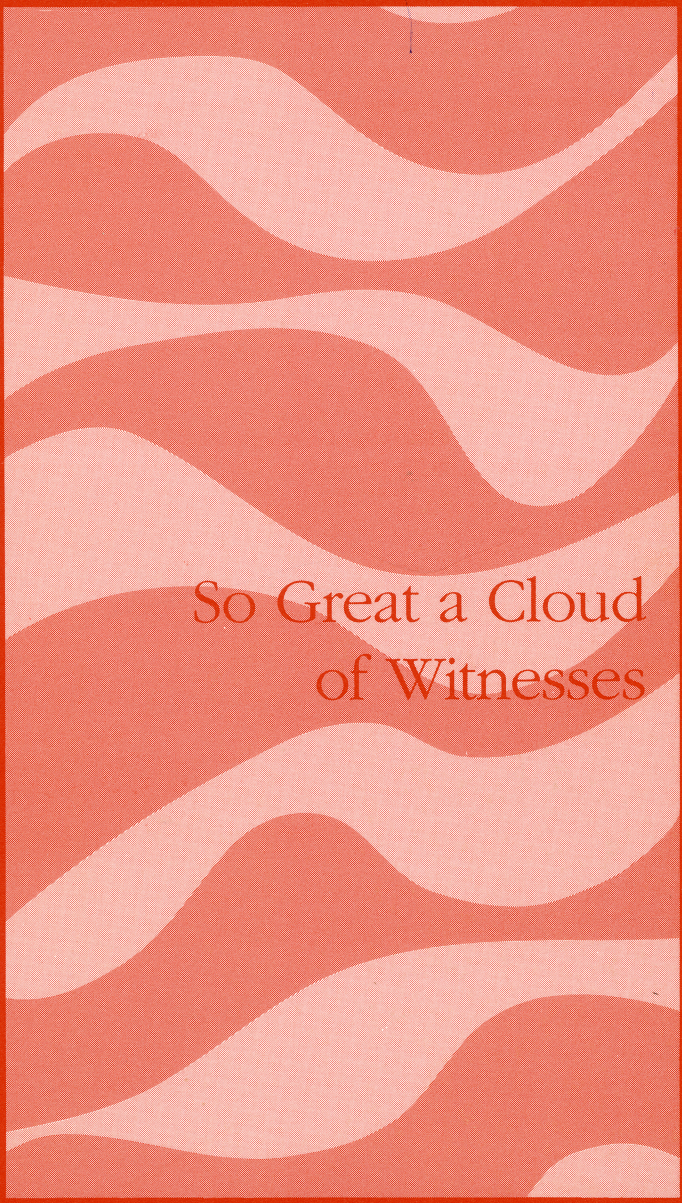
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So Great a Cloud of Witnesses

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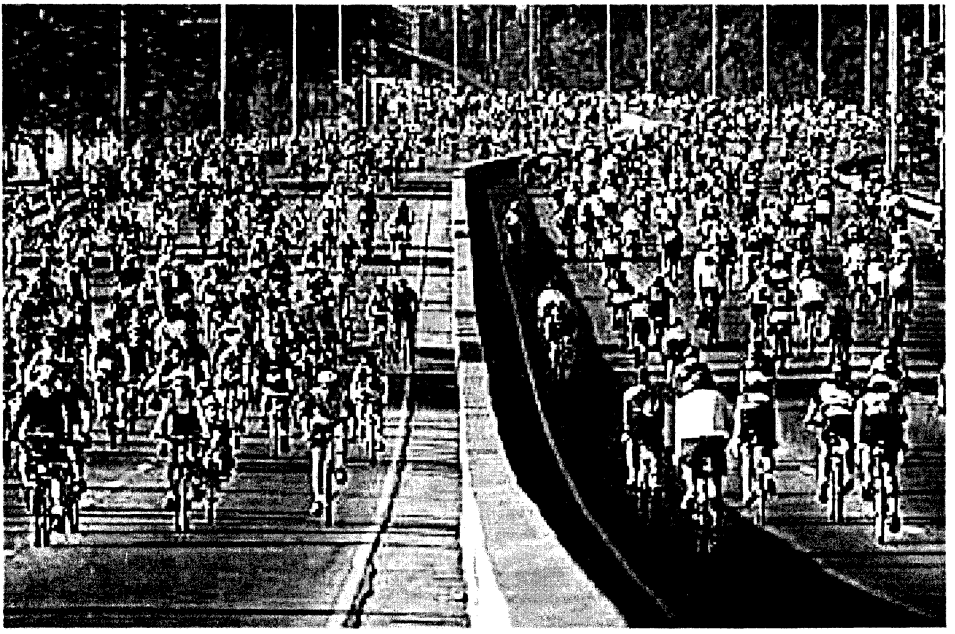
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So Great a Cloud of Witnesses



Recently we got up very early to bike up and down the thirty miles of Lake Shore Drive, which the mayor had conveniently shut down from 5:30 to 9:30 a.m. For about three hours we were surrounded by a great cloud of some twelve thousand witnesses, of all ages and sizes, who proved that if you shut down the Drive from automobile traffic, "they" will come. I didn't see Moses or Miriam, Hannah, Elkanah, or any of the other ancient worthies. Who knows whether any of that motley crowd had conquered kingdoms, administered justice, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, won strength out of weakness, or put foreign armies to flight? Hey, in my T-shirt, shorts, and helmet, who would have guessed that I was editor of *Currents* and not just a late-middle-aged biker wanna-be?

The five writers in this issue are part of that great crowd which over the years gives us new perspectives, tells the story from their point of view and their experience, and helps us to see that those who are with us are more than those who are with them (2 Kgs 6:16). Every time a new crop of students shows up at the seminary I remind myself that the vast majority of them come because they have seen in the likes of you a job, a task, and a calling worth spending their life on.

Dana L. Robert points out that since the time of Jesus women have carried out missionary vocations. In the early twentieth century missions was the largest grassroots movement of American women, and the face of Western mission in the two-thirds world has been predominantly female for 120 years. In societies with strict gender barriers, only women could reach other women. Although some male authorities opposed the advent of the "woman's missionary movement," by the end of the nineteenth century women had proven their worth: mission work became the proving ground for women in ministry. The woman's missionary movement did more to increase ordinary Christians' awareness of women's rights than any other force in the early twentieth century. The growth of Christianity in the two/thirds world today should be analyzed as a woman's movement. The activity of church women in Zimbabwe demonstrates the continued relevance of the traditional aspects of women's missionary work. Statistically speaking, world Christianity is a woman's movement. Over the past decade the climate for missionary women has worsened in some of the most mission-minded churches (e.g., the Southern Baptist Convention). In 1990, the Convention asserted that the primary role of missionary wives was to be homemakers. The fundamentalists in the SBC have failed to notice that commitment to mission concerns declined in those mainline denominations that stripped their women's organizations of power before World War II. Gendered mission theories that focus on women are still relevant in the world today. The vast growth of Christianity in recent decades is largely a female phenomenon. But gospel bearers still face gender barriers. How can we, in a growing world Christian movement composed mostly of women, make sure that the Good News of Jesus is truly good news for women in the world?

John P. Nordin discusses Psalm 73 and the pain it expresses about injustice and unfairness. The author cites a number of situations today in which the arrogance or conspicuous consumption of the wealthy causes pain to the rest of us. Rather than being punished for their sins, the wicked seem to be pain-free, sleek, and free from trouble. There is a strong tendency for interpreters of this psalm to turn away from the indictment raised by the psalmist and focus only on their own guilt or failure to trust God. But true wisdom is found by the psalmist in returning to the sanctuary of God's presence. Only by leaving the world of the wealthy wicked can one understand that world. The psalmist discovers in God's presence that the feet of the wicked are set in slippery places—their success will not last, and the psalmist realizes for what cheap benefits she or he was almost willing to give up on God. Nothing, not even death, can separate one from the love of God. God does not rebuke the psalmist but offers empowerment. With new vision gained in God's presence, the psalmist—and we!—can venture back into the world to speak to the powerful

and to those who envy them. The psalm warns that envy of the wealthy can contaminate our passion for justice.

Antje Jackelén brings her experience as a European female, parish pastor, and systematic theologian to the question of (homo)sexuality. She cites the reactions to a number of cases in Scandanavian Lutheran churches in which gay or lesbian persons are serving in ordained ministry. While employers in Sweden cannot ask employees about their plans for becoming parents or their sexuality, she concedes that Swedish society is "fairly sexualized." The Swedish bishops have recommended that the church bless "registered partnerships" (homosexual unions) as an act of pastoral care. In March of this year, a church document states clearly that gay and lesbian persons can be ordained. Despite much research, science cannot answer our questions or solve our dilemmas with regard to homosexuality. Complicating all of these questions is the tradition of *Leibfeindlichkeit*—hostility toward the body—that the church has carried around as ballast for centuries. Augustine identified sin with sexual desire and combined biology with the notion of original sin. Luther, an Augustinian monk, broke with Augustine's views on sex and marriage. The incarnation of Jesus suggests that we should accept our own corporeality: we exist in, with, and under our body. If God in Jesus Christ was willing to stay "in the messy middle" of life, why shouldn't we?

In March, 2001, **José David Rodríguez, Sr.,** delivered the Evaristo Falcó-Esteves Lecture, the parallel in the Lutheran Hispanic community to the Hein-Fry lectures. The church, in his telling, is not an added-on factor but an essential element of the Christian message. The church is a sign and first fruit of God's kingdom. Luther challenged the disproportional value given the ecclesiastic institution, placing it always under the sovereignty of God's word. He translated the word *ekklesia* as *Gemeinde*, because he felt that German word clearly expressed the dimension of communion presupposed by biblical ecclesiology. The church is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the word of God. The church is an *ecclesia mixta,* consisting of both the church of faith and the empirical church. Today's global context demands an ecclesiology faithful to its catholic substance but relevant to the postmodern era in which we live today. Catholicity implies a creative continuity with a dynamic heritage that continues to be enriched during the course of history. Faithfulness to the gospel should never be understood as a break with catholicity. Luther conceived of the church as a hospital for those suffering bodily and spiritual illness. The church will achieve a fruitful ministry in today's society when it continues to exert critically, but always in solidarity with all human beings and the total human being, its commitment to promote the wholeness of life.

David Newsom reflects on the deep grief of a young couple mourning the death of a child as it is portrayed in a poem by Robert Frost, and he also considers our country, wracked with an insatiable desire for self-improvement *and* for cheating death. The death rituals of our society's traditional Christian faith are still there beneath the surface structure of our society, but in many knots of the culture these rituals no longer matter. What happens when the language and actions of our traditional Christian funeral rites begin to fall on deaf ears and cold hearts? Faith is still the hope for things unseen, and such hope can be detected, dimly or briefly, within the last lines of Frost's poem.

Toward the end of our thirty-mile bike trek, when the hot sun was breaking through the clouds and my legs were reminding me of their far greater capacity many decades ago, I was lured on by the hope of free Gatorade and granola bars at the end of the line and by the cloud of 11,999 other witnesses to human fitness and adventure alongside of me. I persevered.

The writer to the Hebrews knew that we all are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses to faith and that we are lured on by that pioneer and perfecter of the faith, Jesus, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross and "all the rest." Already across the finish line, at God's right hand, Jesus is whipping up a messianic banquet for all of us wanna-bes—and giving us weekly, sometimes even daily, foretastes of that feast to come.

Surrounded, in mostly "cloudy" Chicago,

Ralph W. Klein, Editor

Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers: Issues for Women and Mission Today

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Scherer Lecture 2002
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Since the times of Jesus, women have spread the gospel message of his life, death, and resurrection. Upon meeting Jesus at the well, the Samaritan woman ran and told her neighbors that he was the Lord. The women at the tomb were the first to learn of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus' supporters in life, became the "Apostle to the Apostles" as she spread the news of his victory over death. In the Book of Acts, we see that Priscilla gave theological instruction to the convert Apollos, who subsequently became an important evangelist. Consecrated virgins, widows, and female martyrs were some of the most important witnesses to the gospel during the first few centuries of the church. Even in periods of history in which women have been discouraged from engaging in mission and ministry, the memory of early women's mission work lingered on in Christian legend. One legend told of Mary and Martha of Bethany, sisters of Lazarus and close friends of Jesus. In the Bible we read of how Martha waited on her guest while her sister Mary sat listening to his words. The story spread that after Pentecost the two sisters sailed across the Mediterranean Sea and became missionaries to the Gauls. Both sisters publicly preached the gospel. Then Martha settled into pastoral ministry and even fought a duel with a man-eating dragon. Mary gave up public preaching and became an anchoress, living a life of prayer and "meditation in a remote cave."[1] Although the story of the missionary travels of Mary and Martha was a legend and not "history" in the modern sense, it nevertheless points to the neglected reality that women have enacted missionary vocations since the time of Jesus.

In the history of North American Christianity, mission work was the major way in which twentieth-century women engaged in ministry. In the early 1900s, over three million lay women belonged to more than forty different denominational missionary societies, thus making missions the largest grassroots movement of American women. Around the time of World War I, the United States overtook the United Kingdom as the largest provider of Protestant foreign missionaries in the world. This expansion of

[1] Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 61.

the American mission force in the early twentieth century coincided with an increase in women missionaries, so that by 1916 women constituted 62 percent of the American mission force.

Yet despite their precedents in Scripture, Christian tradition, and their role in the expansion of Christianity over the last century, the issues around women in mission remain neglected and misunderstood in the churches today. In missiological reflection on such issues as church growth and contextualization, little attention is paid to the mission theories and contributions of women. Appalling ignorance of their own mission legacy characterizes mainline churches today. In theologically conservative denominations, the roles of women in mission remain lightning rods for dissent over the larger role of women in church leadership.

A single lecture is not sufficient to give a systematic overview of the multitude of complex historical, theological, and social issues involving women and mission. I therefore content myself with exploring several current situations as entres into the maze of issues raised by my topic in the hope that these examples will open bigger issues that can be further discussed.

The continued relevance of a gendered tradition of mission theory

In August of last year, the Taliban arrested sixteen Afghans and eight Western Christian workers and charged them with proselytization. Under Sharia, or strict Islamic law, conversion to Christianity has traditionally been punished by death, and even sharing the Christian faith is forbidden. The eight foreigners worked for Shelter Now International, a German relief agency that builds homes for the poor. Before putting the relief workers on trial on September 4, Taliban authorities showed off their evidence, including Christian literature, video and audio tapes, Bibles translated into local languages, and the book *Sharing Your Faith with a Muslim.* The Taliban closed the children's school being run by Shelter Now International. A pro-Taliban newspaper accused the relief agency of being a "western plot against Islam," and schoolboys in the streets of Kabul shouted "Death to the beardless ones, the Christian missionaries!" Accusing all Christian relief agencies of proselytization, and even the United Nations World Food Program of being a Christian front, the Taliban closed the three Christian relief and development organizations who were working in the country. One group they shut down was the International Assistance Mission, which had been working in Afghanistan for more than thirty years.

The events of September 11 intervened in the trial of the eight foreign Christian workers. They were finally rescued by U.S. helicopter under harrowing circumstances. When the press asked the two Americans, Texans Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry, if they had been guilty of proselytization, the women replied that they had been guilty of perhaps 20 percent of what they were accused. Although their primary work included assisting Afghan widows and children with basic needs, they had visited an Afghan family in their home and showed them part of the Jesus Film in their own language.[2]

Western commentators have failed to appreciate the significance that six of the eight arrested Christian relief workers were women. What the Western press does not

[2] An evangelistic tool, the Jesus Film had been translated into 712 languages and viewed by over 4 billion people as of January 1, 2002.

realize, or many Christians for that matter, is that the face of Western mission in the two-thirds world has been predominantly female for 120 years. The education and medical care of women and children has been one of the major achievements of Christian missions. It is not surprising that when the Taliban came into power in Kabul in the 1990s they closed down the work of the International Assistance Mission for the education and training of women, for the equality of women in the home and the advancement of women in society have long been the centerpiece of Christian women's missionary work.[3]

The arrest of the Shelter Now relief workers provides us an opportunity to look at the history of what was called "Woman's Work for Woman" and examine where it is today. "Woman's Work for Woman" was the first gendered mission theory, and it provided a unique rationale for the mission and ministry of women in the nineteenth century. In Protestantism, typically only men could be preachers. In Catholicism, only male priests performed the sacramental ministry at the heart of missionary expansion. But in both forms of Christianity, it became apparent that women were an essential part of mission work because in societies with strict gender barriers, only women could reach other women, converse with them, visit in their homes, and provide them with medical care.

Based on the idea that women were enjoined by the Great Commission to "go teach," even if they were not allowed to "go preach," the first Protestant missionaries to leave the United States in 1812 included three women as the wives of the male missionaries. Despite a high mortality rate in childbirth, missionary wives quickly became an invaluable part of the Protestant mission force, because they not only provided companionship for their husbands, but they opened schools for girls, adopted orphans, held female prayer meetings, and mastered the spoken language of the marketplace more quickly than their studious husbands, who were busy translating the Bible and planting churches. Although American Catholic foreign missions started at a later date than did Protestant missions, Catholic Sisters quickly became indispensable to Catholic missions, especially in caring for orphans, nursing lepers and other chronically ill, and opening parochial schools.

In the 1850s, British missionary wives in India made a missiological breakthrough that was comparable in importance to the discovery of so-called "unreached peoples" in the 1970s. The wives realized that upper-class women in Hindu, Muslim, and Confucian families were not allowed to leave women's quarters. Unless women could be mobilized and financed to devote themselves to household visitation, the churches of India and China would remain entirely male and the gospel message would not become part of the family structure. If mothers could be reached with the gospel, Christianity could become central to family life and thereby transform the larger society. "Woman's Work for Woman" meant that Western women should educate non-Western women in efforts both to create "Christian homes" and to raise the status of women in society by proving that women were intelligent beings who could learn to read, become medical doctors, and so forth.

By the early 1870s, women in the Congregationalist, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches had founded their own

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[3] For an overview of the missionary work of American women, see Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997).

independent mission societies to send unmarried women missionaries. Some male clerical authorities opposed the advent of what was called the "woman's missionary movement." By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the pioneer unmarried female missionaries in Asia had proven their worth by opening schools for women, training non-Western women to become nurses and doctors, conducting social work and home visitation, caring for the leprous and handicapped, and conducting itinerant evangelism. The motto "Woman's Work for Woman" provided the first widely embraced motivation for allowing women in ministry, albeit as missionaries rather than pastors of churches. Mission work became the proving ground for women in ministry. It is no coincidence that when mainline denominations began ordaining women in the mid-twentieth century, the first women ordained in the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches were former missionaries. It was also no coincidence that the first woman to be elected head of a major denomination was Helen Barrett Montgomery in 1922. When Montgomery became head of the American Baptists, she was elected because of her leadership, both as chief theoretician and officer, of the vast network of denominational women's missionary societies.

The woman's missionary movement continued as a major force in the Protestant denominations until limited by changing gender perceptions and the fundamentalist-modernist controversies in the 1920s and 1930s. But before the gender-separate women's missionary societies were driven out of business by male-dominated church structures, the woman's missionary movement had begun a number of colleges and medical schools in Asia, had run a highly successful mission study series for women in local churches for forty years, and had



launched the World Day of Prayer that united Christian women all over the world and raised money for indigenous, ecumenical Christian literature for women and children.[4] Angelyn Dries argues that within American Catholicism the ideology of "Woman's Work for Woman" continued to encourage the varied ministries of lay women throughout the twentieth century, even after it fell out of fashion in Protestantism.[5]

While gender separatism lost favor in the secularized West, it remained a potent force in more traditional areas of the world. In traditional Muslim societies, in particular, gender separatism remained the norm throughout the twentieth century. The women of Shelter Now International may not have realized it, but in their work in Afghanistan they were following a script out of the old woman's missionary move-

[4] See Robert, *American Women in Mission,* chap. 6.

[5] Angelyn Dries, "American Catholic 'Woman's Work for Woman' in the Twentieth Century," in *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers: Missionary Women in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Dana L. Robert (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

ment: home visitation, the education of children, and the resourcing of restricted female populations. While not considered part of the feminist movement because it did not take political stances, the woman's missionary movement undoubtedly did more to increase ordinary Christians' awareness of women's rights than any other force in the early twentieth century.

What often strikes me is how analysis of women's roles in the world mirrors the kind of analysis first put forward by the woman's missionary movement in the late nineteenth century. In the Fall 1990 special issue of *Time* magazine, "Women: The Road Ahead," the writers targeted discriminatory practices against women today—dowry burnings in India, female abortion and infanticide in China, female genital mutilation in Africa. This issue of *Time* could have come directly from a woman's missionary magazine a century ago, with the important difference that the solution is now seen to be legislation rather than conversion to Christianity. Although only a naive person today would argue that conversion to Christianity is an automatic solution to discrimination against women, the missionary women of a century ago were on to something in recognizing that changes in worldviews are required to improve the world for women. These changes require a philosophy of individual human worth, as found in Christianity. Treating women as beings of individual worth requires educating them and providing medical care to demonstrate the worth of women's bodies. While with the advantage of hindsight we can identify the paternalism and assumptions of Western superiority that plagued "woman's work for woman" before World War I, the movement's belief that worldviews must change to make room for women's opportunities is something that many people would agree with today.

The gospel stands for the liberation of all, including women. Yet the secularization of Western society has blinded us to that fundamental fact. An American woman called me a few years ago who was trying to fight female genital mutilation in Mali by writing anti-mutilation lyrics for African rock groups. When I asked her if she had contacted missionaries about her project, her reaction was that she didn't want to do that because they were trying to change people's beliefs, and she was against that. This woman did not recognize that she herself was trying to change people's worldview and culture, though from a secular perspective, or that missionaries had been opposing female genital mutilation for a century and had already made significant inroads against it within Christianity. A secular framework for understanding women's issues can blind us to the deep issues of worldview that previous generations of missionaries took seriously. Our commitment to the gospel means that we must proclaim that the Good News is relevant to women's lives. Whatever we might think of the naivete of the women in Shelter Now International, their conviction that worldview and the treatment of women are linked has always been intrinsic to the missionary work of women.

The role of women in the expanding world church

The nature of growing Christianity in the southern hemisphere indicates that women are taking a leading part in what is probably the greatest expansion of Christianity since the conversion of Europe. Today, 43 percent of the Christians in the world live in Africa and Latin America, a dramatic change in the Christian population that has occurred since the middle of the last century. At least 70 percent of Christians in African

Indigenous Churches are women; 70 percent of house church members in China seem to be women; and Latin American Pentecostalism is growing fastest among women, who typically bring their men into the church rather than the other way around. Even as Catholic religious congregations are having trouble attracting North American women, they are being filled with women from Latin America and Africa. The growth of Christianity in the two-thirds world today should be analyzed as a woman's movement. In the evangelistic leadership of non-Western women we can see the continued relevance of a gender-based approach to mission.

As part of my research into the meaning of mission for women worldwide, I am trying to understand the missionary role of women in the growing churches of the southern hemisphere. As part of a cooperative research project on African initiatives in Christian mission in southern Africa, I have been analyzing data from interviews undertaken over the past few years with church women in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. The women interviewed were from two mainline denominations, the Reformed Church of Zimbabwe and Roman Catholicism, as well as from several indigenous African denominations—Zionists, Apostles, and others. Although the analysis is at a preliminary stage, it is fascinating to see how the goals of the woman's missionary movement have been contextualized by women in the Reformed Church of Zimbabwe, which is the strongest historic Protestant church in the area. Married women in the church organize themselves into the Mother's Union, led by the pastor's wife. They hold midweek preaching and prayer events as well as send their best preachers on evangelistic crusades from Fridays until Sundays. They run income-generating projects with which to support widows and orphans in the larger community, a common and tragic problem in this day of AIDS. They raise money to pay school fees for their children. The Mothers' Union holds conferences for girls, giving them biblically based and culturally appropriate teachings about marriage and childrearing.

What particularly interests me is how the Reformed women draw upon the roles of the Marys in the Bible—the virgin Mary, to argue that a girl's self-worth is not based on having a man; Mary the Mother of Jesus, to underscore the importance of being patient with one's children; and Mary Magdalene and the women at the tomb as the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection and a justification for women to be preachers. One woman interviewed mentioned the biblical model of Dorcas, or Tabitha, whose service was valued by other women. What has powerfully struck me is the similarities between the work of the Mothers' Union and the social outreach of widows in the early church; many MU members are themselves widows because of AIDS. The Mothers' Unions are the main groups involved in outreach to the poor, the theological and moral education of girls, and the care of the sick. Many also encourage women to preach. The activity of church women in Zimbabwe demonstrates the continued relevance of the traditional aspects of women's missionary work—women acting as pastors to women; concern for educating girls in self-respect, Christian virtue, and academic subjects; evangelistic mission through the means of preaching, house visitation, charity, and modeling the Christian home. Another way in which the Zimbabwean Reformed women show their continuity with mission Christianity is in their support for monogamous marriage. They not only oppose polygamy as unfair to women, but they oppose such traditional practices as public examinations of girls for virginity,

The missionary role of women in the African churches is consistent with their role as wives and mothers.

believing that it discriminates against women by a double standard for male and female conduct.

Not all African Indigenous Churches have Mothers' Unions. The Apostles of Johane Maranke are probably the most patriarchal of all the churches in which I have conducted interviews. They practice polygamy, conduct virginity examinations of unmarried girls, and do not allow women to speak in the church. They do, however, have an office of female prophet, who is a healer. Although she is not allowed to lay on hands as do the male prophets, she prays with the women, injects them with holy water, and counsels them. She also works with women on issues of barrenness and childbirth. The role of female healer is a missionary role. Many women Apostles indicated that they joined the church because they were healed of barrenness or other problems. In a subsistence economy, among illiterate peasants who are struggling to survive, the healing ministry of the church is a major reason why people join. Healing can occur because needy people are embraced by the community and treated in a ritual manner for their ailments. The Zimbabwean Zionists, in fact, have healing colonies in which the needy are welcomed to live for extended periods of time near the prophets, who act as both counselors and physicians. Influence of the Western missionary movement can be seen in that such healing communities are often called "hospitals."

The missionary role of women in the African churches is consistent with their role as wives and mothers. When one asks women about their theology, they usually talk about their relationship with their husbands and children and the state of their homes. One woman after another justifies her involvement in Christian outreach because it strengthens the home. They judge the church by the kind of relationships they see modeled in the homes of church members. Just as American women in the late 1800s used the ideal of the Christian home as a starting point for mission, the African women of Masvingo Province today use a Christian vision of the home as the source of their evangelistic power.

Anthropological studies of church women in other parts of the world are also finding a gender-specific approach to church recruitment and outreach. In her study of women, religion, and social change in Brazil, Carol Ann Drogus concludes that gender affects the way liberation theology has been received by Catholic women.[6] To her great surprise, when she studied the impact of liberation theology on women in Base Christian Communities (BCCs), she found that ordinary women worked for social change because of their common interests as mothers. Despite all the talk about the class basis of the "people's church" in Latin America, Drogus found that women's self-identification as mothers was actually the glue that held together the BCCs. While

[6] Carol Ann Drogus, *Women, Religion, and Social Change in Brazil's Popular Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

men used the BCCs as stepping stones to political activity, the women used them as support groups for female nurturing activities. Even when engaged in social movements for day care and better sanitation, women from BCCs saw such involvement as an extension of their role as mothers. Yet outsiders saw it as evidence of class consciousness or liberation movements.

In a study of gender and evangelical conversion in Colombia, Elizabeth Brusco found that women who became Pentecostals did so not in order to have larger roles in society but to elevate domesticity so that men became more attached to their families.[7] In a urbanizing society in which the traditional family was losing its role, conversion to evangelical Christianity helped strengthen the household by encouraging the male to give up drinking, smoking, and extramarital affairs that all took valuable resources away from the children. Reforming gender roles through conversion meant reforming male ethics to bring them in line with family needs. In other words, conversion to evangelical Christianity weakened *machismo* and strengthened the power of women in relation to their husbands. Evangelical households eat together around a family table, go to church together, and confer with each other over major decisions. Brusco concludes that Colombian evangelicalism is a "strategic women's movement": it raises the status of women by making the family the center of the man's life.

What can we conclude from the history of women in mission and from these groundbreaking studies of gender in the world church? As we celebrate the growth of Christianity in the non-Western world today, we see clearly how supposedly old-fashioned "women's work" remains important to the spread of Christianity around the world. Through ministries of healing and hospitality as well as direct evangelism and mothers' organizations, the outreach of Christian women is a major way in which women and their families are attracted to the church. Statistically speaking, world Christianity is a woman's movement. While cultural contexts differ, in each culture women have found ways of reaching out to other women. When we ask the question why the world church seems to be predominantly female, we are not just making a sociological observation. We are actually raising the profoundly important issue of gender-based approaches to mission.

Gender barriers: The roles of missionary women as a site of struggle in theologically conservative churches

Some years ago when I began doing research on the subject of women and mission, I interviewed women missionaries and leaders from a range of denominations and ecclesial traditions including United Methodists, Assemblies of God, Southern Baptists, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Roman Catholics.[8] I heard the common lament that it was far harder for a woman to get an appointment as a missionary than it was years ago. I started hearing disturbing stories—an unmarried woman in a Protestant mission in Latin America denied advancement because the North American males said there was no cultural model for

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[7] Elizabeth E. Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

[8] See Robert, "Revisioning the Women's Missionary Movement," in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Nineties*, ed. Charles Van Engen, Dean Gilliland, and Paul Pierson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

unmarried women in Latin American societies, conveniently forgetting the roles of Sisters and the model of Mary in Roman Catholicism. I heard stories of Catholic Sisters ejected from their mission posts by bishops who rejected their work with poor women as too radical. I heard stories of missionary women being denied pensions or study leaves routinely granted their male colleagues. In my own denomination, the United Methodist Church, I heard stories of bureaucratic or clerical tendencies to stifle the representation of lay women in the mission structures of the church. And yet these complaints were shared in whispers because nobody wanted to damage the mission of the church. All of the missionary women I interviewed believed in the church, wanted to be part of it, and didn't want to rock the boat for fear of damaging the mission of the church and hurting their own reputations.

But over the past decade, the climate for missionary women has worsened in some of the most mission-minded churches, as fundamentalist takeovers have eroded even the modest amount of independence previously afforded to missionary women. Between the 1920s and 1950s, the Presbyterians, Southern Methodists, Episcopalians, and other denominations dismantled their women's mission organizations. Women had no voting rights to oppose such maneuvers. Lest one think that we have learned from history, today in the Christian and Missionary Alliance and the Southern Baptist Convention women are going through the same kinds of processes that disempowered the mainline missionary women of past generations.

A couple of years ago I held a series of seminars at Boston University on women and mission in the twentieth century. The research stimulated by the grant uncovered some fascinating trends. Several of the studies uncovered the largely unnoticed work of missionary women in training the first generations of pastors in non-Western churches. In 1920s China, for example, a group of Western missionary and Chinese women revivalists stimulated the male leadership that gave birth to the indigenous Chinese churches of Watchman Nee, Witness Lee, John Sung, and others. The founder of the Latin American Biblical Seminary, the major ecumenical Protestant seminary in Central America, was a missionary wife who started a small school for girls in her home. In the Presbyterian McBeth Mission in Idaho, three generations of unmarried women trained far more Native American pastors for ministry than male authorities did after they shut down the women's work. My own mother-in-law, a missionary in Rhodesia for decades, conducted all the linguistic training and provided spiritual counseling for both the European and Shona pastors. One of the interesting trends in twentieth-century mission work by women was the degree to which they were mentors and teachers of the emerging leadership of non-Western churches.[9]

But another historical trend uncovered by researchers was that powerful forces worked against these women in their own lifetimes. Despite the considerable accomplishments of missionary women as "Gospel Bearers," in some quarters they still face overwhelming "Gender Barriers." In theologically conservative denominations today, the role of the missionary woman has become the site of struggle over issues of women's rights in the church, because involvement of women in mission has often created the precondition for women to fill the role of pastor. In efforts to oppose what

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[9] These studies are mentioned in my book *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers*.

they perceive to be an anti-family feminist movement, male leaders in some churches are throttling century-old traditions of female mission leadership. In so doing, they are throwing out the baby with the bath water.

Let me share with you some of what is going on in the Southern Baptist Convention. My comments on the Southern Baptists stem partly from my own research and partly from that conducted by Catherine Allen, former Associate Executive Director of the Woman's Missionary Union of the SBC and President for five years of the Women's Department of the Baptist World Alliance. The Southern Baptists send the largest number of missionaries of any American mission sending organization, around 5,000. The major source of financing for their missionaries is the annual Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, collected by the women of the Woman's Missionary Union in the name of the pioneer female China missionary, Lottie Moon, who died of malnutrition a century ago. The Woman's Missionary Union is an auxiliary to the SBC. Not only has it provided much of the money for missions, but it has always produced the Sunday School materials for mission study and has run youth organizations to encourage missionary commitment. With 1.5 million members in the mid-1960s, it was the biggest women's organization in the country. While the WMU has maintained a singleminded focus on missions, it has nevertheless been the major route to leadership for women in Southern Baptist life.[10]

In 1978, in response to the growing numbers of SBC women attending seminary, leaders of eleven SBC agencies held the first and only churchwide consultation on the role of women in church-related vocations. The missions leadership at that consultation provided the backbone of support for women in ministry, including the possibility of ordination. But the next year, doctrinal conservatives in the SBC began to stack the boards of trustees of various SBC organizations. Allen believes that the concerted effort of fundamentalists to take over the Southern Baptist Convention must have been partly related to the growing acceptance of women in ministry by the missionary wing of the SBC. As the fundamentalists gradually took over the Convention, they began passing legislation against the ministry of women. In 1984, theologian Carl Henry introduced a resolution indicating that women were to be under the authority of men, that women's roles in public prayer and prophecy were different from men's, and that women should be excluded from pastoral leadership "because man was first in creation and the woman was first in the Edenic fall." Passage of Henry's resolution quickly led to restrictions on the funding of women missionaries by the Home Mission Board. A crackdown against ordained Southern Baptist women began, and the Home Mission Board withdrew its financial support for any woman in a pastoral role, including chaplaincy positions.

Male leaders in some churches are throttling century-old traditions of female mission leadership.

[10] Catherine Allen, "Shifting Sands for Southern Baptist Women in Missions," in Robert, *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers.*

Also in 1984, moderate Southern Baptists began meeting to oppose the increased control sought by the fundamentalists. Many of the moderate men had warm relations with the WMU. When the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was founded as an alternative to the SBC, one of its nonnegotiables was its support for the ministry of women. Stories began circulating about the failure of the SBC to reappoint women missionaries, especially to traditional "woman's work" areas like social work, women's education, and nursing. As the WMU began providing mission literature to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, it was attacked as a traitor by the SBC. The chair of the SBC trustees even called the WMU an "adulterer." Even as rank-and-file Southern Baptists sent letters and petitions in support of the beleaguered WMU, the Foreign Mission Board of the SBC tried to secretly copyright the name "Lottie Moon Christmas Offering" (foreign missions) and "Annie Armstrong Easter Offering" (home missions) without consulting the women. When the WMU found out about this disgraceful move in 1995, the SBC backed off on the condition that the women's mission organization license the name exclusively to the SBC. In other words, any money for missions collected by the women had to go to the official projects of the SBC. As the bickering between the WMU and the SBC continued, polls showed that Southern Baptists were losing some of their strong commitment to Christian missions.[11]

This painful story of the crippling of the Southern Baptist women's mission organization has many other pieces—the closing of the Carver School of Social Work; the elimination of women from all teaching positions in Southern Baptist seminaries; the redefinition of mission to evangelism in such a way that eliminated historic ecumenical relationships and women's work; structural reorganization to take away the WMU's role as curriculum provider to the SBC, and so on. Among the results of these struggles, according to Allen, has been a reduction in missions interest among women and the loss of leadership roles for women in the SBC. In 1990, the Convention asserted that the primary role of missionary wives was to be homemakers.

All over the world, non-Western branches of the WMU have lost their funding. Even though females make up two-thirds of Southern Baptist membership in most countries, the leadership of the SBC mission board now says privately that their goal is to reverse the proportion and make the church predominantly male. As an historian, I find the stance of the SBC toward women's leadership in missions to be based on ignorance of both the legacy of women's mission work in the SBC and the leadership of non-Western women in Southern Baptist churches around the world. WMU women in Nigeria, for example, have chastised the SBC for its mistreatment of their American sisters. The fundamentalists in the SBC have failed to notice that commitment to mission concerns declined in mainline denominations that stripped their women's organizations of power before World War II. Women do not care to be nameless collectors of funds for a cause in which they have no say. They will rather vote with their feet and become involved in other activities. The shortsighted ignorance of the SBC

[11] See Allen, "Shifting Sands," for details on this situation. In response to the strangulation of the WMU, leading Baptist women, including former WMU officers and ordained women, launched GlobalWomen on December 13, 2001, as a woman's mission-sending agency dedicated to women's work in mission. This new venture for Southern Baptist women has been opposed in the Baptist Press and by denominational officials.

leaders about mission was revealed to me when I read an interview in *Christianity Today* of Al Mohler, the militantly fundamentalist president of Southern Seminary. In it Mohler stated that the history of Christianity showed that there had never been a great missionary who was not a Calvinist. I would have to counter Mohler and say that there has never been a great missionary in the history of the church who was a pure Calvinist! Mission work is predicated on the idea that people are free to choose their own religious affiliation, not that they are predestined to be saved or damned without recourse to their own free will.

As the Southern Baptist example shows, some conservative evangelicals today have downgraded women's ministries out of reaction to secular feminism. The fear of women's ministry in certain circles has become so high that they are trampling on a noble tradition of missionary service. Whenever there are big theological disagreements, or so-called culture wars between conservatives and liberals, women's work gets caught in the crossfire. Here I would like to point out World Vision as an exception to this disturbing trend. Its research director, Bryant Myers, has been applying gender analysis to the current missionary task and arguing that the unreached cannot be reached, especially in Muslim countries, unless women's ministry is taken seriously. The irony of the reactionary stance in the Southern Baptist Convention is that it comes at a time when the growing Christian population in the southern hemisphere consists of at least 70 percent women.

Conclusions

I have tried to show from three sets of examples that (1) gendered mission theories that focus on women, both as individuals and as members of families and societies, are still relevant in the world today; (2) the vast growth of Christianity around the world in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is largely a female phenomenon, stimulated by women reaching each other with the Good News in ways that impact their daily lives; and (3) gospel bearers are still faced with gender barriers. In some churches today, the leadership of missionary women has become the catalyst for struggles over women's rights in the church.

As we look ahead, the subject of women in mission raises other missiological questions that need further research:

1. What is the nature of contextualization in relation to women's issues?

2. Is mission leadership essentially a lay function that becomes weakened once women are ordained, even though missionary women have laid the groundwork for ordained women in ministry?

3. Are there common, gender-based models of mission that cut across cultures?

4. What is the most fruitful kind of relationship possible between missionary women from different continents, despite the legacies of neocolonialism and economic injustices in the world today?

5. How can we, in a growing world Christian movement composed mostly of women, make sure that the Good News of Jesus Christ is truly Good News for women in the world?

As we move into the twenty-first century, let us affirm the kind of holistic women's vision for mission that anticipates the reign of God, in which all are "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28),

"There is Nothing on Earth That I Desire": A Commentary on Psalm 73

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Psalm 73 is often grouped with Job and Psalms 37 and 49 and classified as a wisdom psalm. The psalm certainly offers wisdom about the problem of evil, yet it has its own perspectives that separate it from the other texts. Psalm 73 vividly presents a petitioner suffering not from physical pain but from the pain of observing injustice, a pain our interconnecting world can press on us more and more each day. Walking through the text with the psalmist we are shown the ineffectiveness of typical responses to this situation and how a return to God is able to give us effective words to confront the world.

1–2 *Truly God is good to the upright. . . . But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled.* Psalm 73 begins with a confident verse, followed immediately by the statement of a problem. How should we see this beginning? To some extent, this depends on how one views the setting of the psalm as a whole. Psalms are generally assumed to have been used in the worship of ancient Israel. This is in tension with the obvious way many psalms are written in the first person and present themselves as personal statements.

Interpreters' efforts to find a specific liturgical setting for this psalm in the thanksgiving festival (Kraus), the Covenant Festival (Weiser), before the Autumn Festival (Goulder), the New Year Festival, or a Royal liturgy (various earlier writers) seem not to be productive of insights for appropriating the psalm now. Nor is Luther's approach all that useful. He casts the whole psalm as a debate, where in verse 1 the author declares the proposition to be defended. This way of looking at the text detaches the psalm from any life situation.

For this analysis, I largely bracket out the original context of the psalm and explore instead what the text itself conveys about the human situation, and then seek to enter and explore that situation.

3 *For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.* Verses 2–12 state the problem, which is both the evil actions of others and the despair those actions produce in the psalmist. Numerous psalms describe the physical pain of the psalmist, but here the speaker is not being harmed directly. In the context of verse 3, the "plague" of verse 14 is psychological and the health failings of verse 26 are conditional statements about the future. The psalmist's pain comes from seeing injustice and unfairness, an unfairness that drives the speaker to distraction.

Who are the people causing the psalmist envy? They are those who are prosperous, wicked, and arrogant. Not all wealthy are wicked and not all wicked are wealthy; the focus is the particular form of wickedness in which the wealthy can engage. With wealth comes privilege, and with privilege comes arrogance. With arrogance comes a sense of entitlement to make decisions whose consequences to others can be ignored. The next verses tell us more about this group.

4 *For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.* Go some place where the wealthy congregate. They do look sleek: you can tell wealthy persons by a certain shine, even if their bodies do not conform to the fashion ideal. Watching them can make you feel like a ragged barnyard cat eyeing the house pet.

5 *They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people.* The wealthy have a maid, a tax advisor, and a lawyer to ease the stress that others must face alone. The criminal justice system, the banking system, and the medical system all treat the wealthy differently.

The people described in verses 3–5 are those who get to cut in line, have VIP areas for their exclusive use, and get priority over the rest of us. They are the opinion leaders who gain ready access to the media and have their words studied and analyzed even when they know little about the topics they comment on. They move from lobbying to government to prestigious law firms and back again. They are the people who know people, who get jobs without the formal requirements, who get promoted even after failing. Walter Brueggemann suggests that they can include the middle class. "They are people who take easy, happy trips to the beach and come home suntanned. They are untroubled and seem to have no hang-ups with 'middle-class morality' . . . . They engage in self-care and self-love to the point of self-indulgence. They live for themselves, and they evoke resentment from those schooled passionately in the care of the neighbor, who are exhausted and perhaps 'burned out'" (*The Message of the Psalms* [Augsburg, 1984], 117). The speaker "sees" all this; not everyone does. Seeing evokes resentment.

6 *Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them like a garment.* As this section advances to verses 6–8, a new note comes to the fore. Up to now the psalmist described the privileges of wealth. Now the emphasis becomes the deleterious effect on others of the use of wealth. There is a violence about being very wealthy: they spend a thousand here or funnel a million there and affect the lives of many without thought. They close a plant or sell a store because it increases their return a percentage point, and they ignore the devastation and dislocation it generates.

7 *Their eyes swell out with fatness.* Many disparate translations have been proposed for this verse, and this rendition in the NRSV is in the mainstream. But what does it mean? Augustine noted that beggars steal because they are hungry, but rich people have plenty and still plunder the things of others. Our divergent attitudes to grasping by the poor and the rich are worth pondering. A corporation bullying a city to use its power of eminent domain to throw scores out of their homes is just "business," maybe even thought to be justified on the basis of economic progress, but a poor thief taking something for sustenance from one home is considered a moral degenerate. We hold conferences to debate the mystery of why poor and lower-middle-class people commit crime but express little interest in the

real mystery: why one with more money than they could ever spend nevertheless tries to gain more at the expense of others.

8 *They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.* The imposition of a luxury tax on yachts was said by a national commentator to be an attack on working people because, if imposed, the wealthy will sell their boats and eliminate the jobs of cleaning and servicing them. There is a "lofty" and "arrogant" (v. 3) quality to some of this sort of economic analysis which assumes that minor inconveniences to one group cannot be borne and so another group with less money will just have to endure severe pain.

A company collapses amid exposure of fraudulent activity; leaders pocket millions, while ordinary workers lose a lifetime of pension contributions. Amid the conflicting perspectives will be a strand of lofty analysis by the friends of the "wealthy wicked," claiming that the destitution of ordinary folk is an essential aspect of keeping the economic system functioning at maximum flexibility.

9–10 *They set their mouths against heaven. . . . Therefore the people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them.* Here the psalmist is pointing to something that rubs salt on the wounds. Not only is there an inner circle of "the wicked," an inner circle that abuses those on the outside, but those outside the circle of the wicked admire and praise those inside it.

The lifestyles of the rich and famous, where they eat and who they eat with, are always popular. Their houses and cars fascinate us. Even their used clothing becomes the object of intense study and desire by the crowd. And it is even more intriguing if there is a scandal or wrongdoing.

Those who organize for justice are regularly driven mad by the willingness of rank-and-file people to vote and think against their own interests, giving allegiance and support to the very people who take money from them. It is equally infuriating to have pervasive injustice treated as entertainment. This verse shows that the psalmist is not simply envious, for the writer cannot find any comfort in joining the chorus of those who admire wealth. It is the injustice of the whole system that provokes anger. The wicked commit the sins of "arrogance" (v. 3), "pride" (v. 6), "violence" (v. 6), grasping (v. 7), "scoffing," "malice," "oppression" (v. 9), and the idolatry of turning against God (v. 10). But rather than being punished for these sins, this group is pain-free, "sleek" (v. 3), and free from the trouble (v. 5) that others must endure. It is a mockery of all that God demands.

12 *Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.* The rich get richer, the poor get poorer. Or, as the rock group U2 put it in a fine example of Hebraic parallelism, "the rich stay healthy, the sick stay poor." This verse would seem out of place after verse 10: having turned from describing the wicked to those who envy them, the psalmist seems to be going back to the former subject again. This section seems to say that nothing is going to change. What has "always" existed will continue to exist.

Verses 2–12 contain social analysis and do not reflect a private religious crisis. Or rather, they are a social analysis that leads to a religious crisis, as the next verse begins to reveal to us.

13 *All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.* The psalmist's cry becomes our own. Did it do any good to walk away from a high-paying job to do God's work? Do I get praised for my sacrifices? Where is the benefit prom-

ised for my tithing? And what good does keeping my hands and nose clean do? Does a moral purity really help?

The psalmist knows that "no good deed will go unpunished." Nice guys finish last. Be gentle, helpful, and generous, and you get taken advantage of by everyone. Do not seek your own advantage, and no one seeks it for you. Turn the other cheek when evil is done to you, hoping that another will defend you, or at least comfort you or recognize your virtue, and it will just be assumed that you must have been guilty. Honesty was once said to be its own reward, but now that would gather only a bitter laugh.

15 *If I had said, "I will walk on in this way . . ."* 16 *But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task,* In every generation, those who have an acute vision of injustice are pained by what they see. Consider Habakkuk. That prophet poses the same "how long?" to God, wondering how long God will delay justice. The difference is that Habakkuk isn't crushed yet. He demands that God supply an answer, an answer that will be voiced by Habakkuk himself, and the prophet is quite prepared to outwait God. This psalmist, more like Jeremiah, has broken under the pressure.

There are additional dimensions of the psalmist's pain. Assistance cannot reliably be found among others outside the charmed circle, as they can be lusting after a way inside (cf. v. 10) or deny that there is a problem at all.

Nor can comfort be found from those who interpret the psalm. Almost all interpretations of this psalm that I have encountered view the psalm primarily as a story of a person who was "tempted" or who "doubts" until set right. There is a strong tendency to turn away from the indictment made by the psalmist and focus on describing the writer as guilty: guilty of a lack of faith, guilty of envy, guilty of a failure to trust God. Exegetes typically note the psalmist's critique of society, even acknowledging its validity, but then essentially ignore that fact as they interpret the psalm. The emphasis is then on the guilt of the psalmist, a weakness we can critique and feel superior to.

In every generation, those who have an acute vision of injustice are pained by what they see.

Of course, it is tempting to tell the person in the situation of the psalmist to "buck up" spiritually. Pray harder, trust more, leave it to God, don't worry. But in this context, these undoubted virtues turn out not to have a virtuous effect. When these exhortations are aimed at one like the psalmist by people who ignore the injustice, or who have some hope or experience of prospering, it adds to their burden. Work hard, and you will succeed someday. It will all turn out right (financially) in the end. Those wealthy people were poor once too and they worked hard for their money and so should you. These words of "help" trivialize the problem and by implication trivialize the psalmist's pain. They reduce the cry for justice to personal psychology: a complaint against the wealthy made by one who isn't wealthy.

Such advice is usually well meant, offered by middle-class people who aren't that uncomfortable and thus can afford to be

This cry of injustice comes from a person who truly believes in God's sovereignty; that is why the injustice seems so intolerable.

philosophical about the extremes of injustice. However, this response to the psalmist can also be made for tactical reasons. It is a technique of those in power to respond to attacks on their use of power as if the real issue were the psychological dysfunction of those making the attack. The person is "angry," has a "problem with authority," or is "unable to come to terms with disappointment about their life." And, those making the prophetic attack on the powerful often do have psychological issues exacerbated by their painfully acute vision of injustice.

So there is a parallel between this psalm and Job, but not one totally inside the text. Interpreters of this psalm risk taking on the language and role of Job's alleged friends, insisting that if the psalmist suffers, there must be a sin to confess.

People in the situation of the psalmist soon realize they are left to their own devices. Puzzling out the meaning of the universe and God's plan for it is indeed a "wearisome task" when done alone.

Of course, the psalmist is going to be pointed to a new perspective but, just like Job, the direction must come from a source with credibility, a source that both sees the injustice and sees beyond it.

17 *until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.* As Luther slyly observes in his analysis of this verse, since God is everywhere, "going into the sanctuary" cannot possibly be about changing physical location. The movement is that the psalmist has returned to God.

Because this psalm did begin with a note of affirmation, it may not be too much to assume that this journey is one of return. This cry of injustice comes from a person who truly believes in God's sovereignty; that is why the injustice seems so intolerable and why God is addressed so insistently. The psalmist is returning to a more intimate connection with God previously experienced.

And how do we return when we have lost the emotional connection with God? Here is where the mind can remember what the heart no longer feels. For each of us, out of the varieties of religious experience, there is something that mediates God's presence to us. Not, to be sure, in any mechanical fashion, nothing we can manipulate to our benefit. But there are places, moods, actions that bring a return by reducing our barriers to what God is always trying to tell us. For one it may be a cathedral service with all the trimmings, for another monastic spirituality, for another service to others, for another eerie music and candle light deep in the night, for another sinking deep into the Scriptures until the daily world is invisible.

The wisdom of this psalm is this: you cannot understand the world while in it. Wisdom is found in returning to the sanctuary of God's presence, and, paradoxically, it is only by leaving the world that you can understand it.

18 *Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.* And what does one see in the sanctuary? Once more in

touch with the God of all space and time, you are lifted, like Job, to see the wider world beyond your limited circumstances. You know that a thousand years hence, no one will care that someone had a better car than you and that generations of the privileged will have risen and died. The Pharaoh who oppressed a people, the tyrant who holds sway over a province, the wealthy who get what they want, the boss who terrorized the office—all are dead and forgotten, even their names seldom remembered.

21 *When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,* 22 *I was stupid and ignorant.* And in the sanctuary of God's presence our readiness to give up on God embarrasses us. Was I really ready to throw away God's plan for my life for a few thousand dollars? Was my commitment to justice so shallow I'd have given it up for new clothes? The joke goes: If you're going to sell your soul, at least get top dollar. When we have entered again into God's life we are chagrined by how small the rewards were that had tempted us. We are also rebuked by the absurdity of our ego. Were we going to change the world all by ourselves?

23 *Nevertheless I am continually with you.* The great "I am with you; I will be with you" that runs from the burning bush to the ascension to Revelation is spoken again. In whatever is our sanctuary, in whatever place we experience God's presence, we get a foretaste, a sacrament of God's presence, that we carry with us in those times when we cannot feel God.

And it is only this presence that works. We've seen how others fail the psalmist and how the psalmist cannot work it out alone.

24 *You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honor.* This verse has occasioned discussion because it appears to suggest that the psalmist expects the life to come. Other translations suggest this meaning more strongly: "take me into glory" (NIV), for example. Some commentators, invoking the principle that ancient Judaism had no conception of heaven, doubt that the verse refers to the life to come and observe that God's "glory" is more often described by the Old Testament to be on the earth than above it. Tate in particular is helpful in dissecting the assumptions that "afterward" should be taken to mean "after death," "take me" to mean "take me up," and "glory" to mean "heaven."

Tate and Kraus suggest a third possibility between the two extremes. Given that the psalmist's problem is solved by recognition of God's presence, aware of how experience of that presence dissolves all earthly problems, the writer is bold to suggest that not even death can separate one from the love of God, even if no specifics on how that will manifest itself can be proposed. The crisis of the psalmist was a crisis of life and death: About to give up all hope, then saved from a fate worse than death, why should death erode this hope and presence?

25 *and there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.* 26 *My flesh and my heart may fail. . . .* The psalmist had been envious, but after the encounter with God, envy is gone. House, goods, and fame may be taken or never obtained, but the psalmist is content.

Reference has been made to how commentators focus on the sin of envy as a lack of faith—an interpretation I reject. Given this direct evidence of reorientation from envy to dispassion, were the critics right all along?



The question then becomes one of understanding the exact direction of the psalmist's reorientation. Job too was flattened by God, only to hear God praise him for doing what is right. God's revelation to Job is not rebuke but rather that special form of exhortation a teacher administers to the one student in the class who could be great but isn't being great right now. This word is intended to empower a stuck person, not silence them.

28 *But for me it is good to be near God, I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell of all your works.* Verses 25 and 28, which could be generic praise, acquire a specific focus within the context of this psalm. In this psalm the invocation of the common biblical notion of refuge would seem to be less about a hiding place than a base of operations; a place within the sanctuary of God's embrace to be reminded of what is important and real. That is suggested by the apparently odd coupling of retreating into isolation ("making refuge") with "telling," which I suggest will not be private praise but telling in the world.

In the world one sees injustice, but in the sanctuary one also knows what fate awaits the unjust. With that corrected vision, one can venture back to the world with something worth telling.

Which of God's infinite works will this psalmist tell? The psalmist seems unlikely to speak about how all is ordered under heaven and how we should be content with how things are now; more likely it will be about God's justice, God's judgment, God's holiness, and God's demand of how we are to treat the neighbor. This particular speaker now desires nothing on earth—not wealth, not power, not influence. The psalmist had to be emptied of that envy to be enabled to speak to the powerful and to those who envy them.

The human situation of this psalm is as firmly rooted in contemporary society as in ancient Israel. Many who are in position to be prophetic empty their proclamation of power because of their evident desire for the baubles of wealth. The psalm confronts us about our envy of wealth that contaminates our passion for justice and leads to despair as we are squashed into silence by the dizzying accumulation of wealth and by those who defend it as normal.

The psalm's message is both specific to this situation and universal: Return to God. Return, again and again, not to be silent but for the power to say what is important in an unjust world.

(Homo)Sexuality—Perspectives from Church, Society, and Theology

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How does one's particular discipline and personal perspective inform one's view on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered) questions?[1] My professional interest is systematic theology, and my personal perspective has been formed by my life context as a northern European female, my call to the ordained ministry, and sixteen years of work in several parishes. My remarks here focus primarily on how my context has informed my discernment concerning the issue of homosexuality and the church's response.

We usually rely on four sources in the doing of theology: the Bible, tradition(s), experience, and reason. For this discussion, I leave a more critical examination of Scripture to my colleagues who are exegetical experts and who are making other presentations in this series. Hence, I begin with experience and then proceed to say something about traditions and reason.

To begin with, I invite you to share four experiences from the Scandinavian Church context. In June 2000, Jens Torstein Olsen was appointed pastor of an Oslo parish. It would not have been a case for media investigation had not Torstein been living with his gay partner and had the national Church Assembly not decided, in 1997, that persons living in a homosexual partnership were not eligible for pastoral ministry. Obviously, the bishop of Oslo and the council of the diocese ignored the decision of the Assembly. Some people turned to the minister of church affairs in protest. However, the minister supported the Oslo bishop and thus actually precipitated a conservative reaction: The protest against politicians' ambitions to press the church into a more liberal direction encouraged all those who opt for the "careful way" and who argue that moving too fast will result in an irrevocable division of the church.

Siri Sunde received a call in 1996. Being lesbian, she had promised her bishop, Rosemarie Köhn (the first female bishop in Norway), to live in celibacy. However, a year later she broke her promise. The bishop requested that Siri ask for a leave, which she did. Two years later the same bishop asked Siri to return to her ministry.

Felix Egregren is 28 and living in Sweden. Two years ago, he entered into a registered partnership with Ulf. Registered

[1] This address was delivered at the first of several Thursday evening "Soup and Speakers" meetings during the Winter Quarter 2002 that were arranged to discuss issues of sexuality at LSTC. Special thanks to Paul Elbert, who transformed this from a lecture manuscript into a readable text.

partnership is the technical term for a relation between partners of the same sex that has been registered by the civil authorities, similar to the registration of heterosexual marriages. Felix is a parish pastor in the Swedish countryside. He said that he seriously considered becoming a monk before he realized that he was trying to escape from himself and his own identity. In his parish, it is common knowledge that he is living with another man. Felix does not believe in the myth that you must live in a large city in order to live as a gay or lesbian. People certainly talk behind one's back (they always talk about pastors!), but he reports that no one has shown any open animosity toward him or his partner.

Ulf Lidman is 38. He is a pastor in Gustav Vasa, a city parish in Stockholm. Unlike Felix, he realized early in his life that he was gay. At the age of 16 he experienced a conversion and settled in a Free Church. The gay world and Free Churchism were two worlds that never met. He led a double life and felt relieved when somebody saw through his game of hide-and-seek, saying, "you are gay, and you are having a difficult time. I know that, for I have been through this, too, but God healed me." Ulf came out and received enormous support from teachers and fellow students at the Bible school he was attending. They cared and they prayed—for Ulf to be healed from what they understood to be the disease of homosexuality. And he felt healed. He met Maria. They married and had children. The couple worked for "Youth with a Mission" in Amsterdam, where Ulf again was confronted with the gay culture. "I saw this as God's vocation to try to convert gay people." He wrote a book about how God had saved him from homosexuality. As time went on he started to work with AIDS-infected people. And that made the whole charade crack. He could no longer lie to himself. The crisis was immanent. Maria and Ulf decided to divorce, as Ulf puts it: "in order to give each other freedom to love and be loved as those we are." He studied theology and was ordained. The book he had written is no longer available. Yet, he still meets people who tell him how they felt hurt by the message of that book. On the other hand, he still gets calls and letters from those who now regard him as a traitor, because, as he says: "in fundamentalist contexts, principles are more important than people." But he also recently received an award from a gay culture organization because among other things he provides rainbow services (services especially addressed to the LGBT community) once a month. His ministry on behalf of the church is directed toward "homosamhället," homosociety.

These are all examples reported by *Kyrkans Tidning*, the weekly national magazine of the Church of Sweden.[2]

Observations concerning Swedish society

On January 4, 2002, the Norwegian Minister for Finance (the equivalent of the Secretary of the Treasury), Per Kristian Foss, entered registered partnership with his male partner at the Norwegian embassy of Stockholm. In the news he is reported to be the first state secretary in the world to be married to a person of the same sex. In Sweden,

[2] The information on Jens Torstein Olsen and Siri Sunde is from the article by Elisabet Sandberg, "Homosexuell präst vållar strid i Norge," *Kyrkans Tidning* 31–32, 2000. On Felix Egegren see Barbro Matzols, "Felix valde partnerskapet—övergav tanken på celibat," *Kyrkans Tidning* 33, 2000. Concerning Ulf Lidman see Lars Rindeskog, "Prisad präst ger homokulturen plats i kyrkan," *Kyrkans Tidning* 33, 2001.

registered partnership has existed for several years (long enough to have occasioned divorces of such partnerships), very similar to traditional marriage registration. Such same-sex registration approval was preceded by much discussion. One of the seemingly less serious questions raised—why do they want to marry when "everybody else" lives together without being married?—revealed a deep significance of marriage as a symbol. Whereas you can become married either at the town hall or at church, it is required that you register your partnership at the town hall.

Generally speaking, privacy is an issue of relevance if one wants to understand the Swedish situation. Employers are not allowed to ask a woman or a man who applies for a job whether she or he intends to have children and thus have potential to be granted statutory parental leave of absence for a year or so. Nor are employers to ask about the applicant's sexuality. This applies to pastors, too. Sex is private. On the other hand, Swedish society is fairly sexualized. Sex is talked about. Sexual activity is advocated. Sex instruction is mandatory in Swedish schools from an early age. By the time students are approximately 12 years old they will usually have received free condoms at school at least once. There are people, myself included, who have difficulty understanding, however, why it should be taken for granted that children in their early teens should be sexually active while one has to wait until age 20 to be allowed to buy a bottle of wine. While no official discrimination is permitted, statistically nonheterosexual people report experiencing more structural, physical, and cultural harassment and violence than their heterosexual counterparts.

Currently, a burning issue is that of adoption. Should homosexual couples be given the legal right to adopt children? For a long time the answer tended to be No. The strongest rejection came from children's-rights organizations. The reason: adoption is hard enough as it is. Adopted children tend to be overrepresented in certain statistics, such as crime and mental health problems, which may be connected to the fact that adopted children in Sweden usually come from countries and cultures far away, making their struggle for identity during adolescnce a particularly hard one. The churches also said No, or at least, Not yet. Their concerns tended to center around the issues that there are already many children that grow up in various forms of non-heterosexual families. This requires an openness to a redefinition of what a family is. Why is it so important to homosexual couples that they have the opportunity to legally adopt? Many children are actually living together with nonbiological parents without being adopted. Is it a statutory right to have children? Is there a conflict between child rights and adult rights? In reality, adoption by homosexual persons is often about adoption of a partner's children, which means it is an issue of legalizing a

Non-heterosexual people report experiencing more structural, physical, and cultural harassment and violence than their heterosexual counterparts.

family structure already in practice. Very recently, the Swedish government suggested that homosexual people be allowed to apply for examination to become adoptive parents. It is also expected that a proposal to grant lesbian couples the right to have assisted procreation in public health care will follow soon.

Observations concerning the Swedish church

What, then, would the church do with homosexual couples that asked for a blessing of their partnership? The bishops convened and constructed a recommendation: the blessing of registered partnership was to be regarded as an act of pastoral care. This "middle ground" defused a potential debate as to whether a church should be used for such a ritual or not, and it also assured that no public ritual would mirror that of a heterosexual wedding. The result has been that a number of blessings have been conducted—and quite a number of them have, in fact, closely resembled the rites of marriage. Pastors are not obliged to conduct these rites, and consequently some do while others do not. Would clergy in the Church of Sweden officiate at a gay or lesbian marriage? In other words, would they go so far as to demonstrate in praxis that there was no difference whatsoever between heterosexual and homosexual marriage? An opinion poll from the Fall of 2000 showed that 55 percent responded "definitely not," 20 percent said "perhaps, under certain conditions," and 24 percent indicated "mostly yes."[3] Among those who responded "yes," some referred to the Lutheran view that marriage is a social contract in the first place. It is not a sacrament but a blessing of two people who love each other and have decided to promise faithfulness to each other. Others argued that a specially designed rite for homosexual couples was a kind of discrimination. (This reaction in particular reflects a dilemma many recognize on a personal level: Should one claim respect as being different or as being like anybody else? Introducing or "outing" oneself as LGBT is honest but tends to close doors that might have remained open. It overemphasizes the role of sexuality in the division of people into groups. Remaining quiet and only revealing it once others have started to accept one as "normal" is dishonest and hides an important part of one's identity thereby confirming the individual as a problematic issue.) Opinions among laypersons differ widely, of course. There are those who are disappointed that the church chooses to act too slowly. And there are others who are convinced that the Church of Sweden is no longer a Christian church.

On March 1, 2002, the Theological Committee of the Church of Sweden presented a new conversation document on "Church and Homosexuality." The committee does not present any concrete proposal concerning church weddings for homosexual couples but discusses a number of possibilities. However, it states clearly that gay and lesbian persons can be ordained and that the right to adopt children should be independent of sexual disposition.

Does science have the answer?

There is no question that discussions about sexuality have been and will continue to be painful for those who are deeply involved with the issue. Unfortunately, the one and only good solution just does not show up. Yet, if God does not favor us with a clear

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[3] Martin Larsson: "Vigseln som delar kyrkan," *Kyrkans Tidning* 47, 2000.

answer, maybe *science* will? Underneath many of these long discussions there has been a longing for science to solve the problem—to provide the answers so desperately desired. Is homosexuality "natural" or not? Is it genetic?

As far as I can see, those who hoped for scientific answers entertained mainly three kinds of expectations:

1. There is nothing in the genes. Hence, homosexuality is only "unnatural" behavior that should, and can, be corrected. The individual maintains personal responsibility, and homosexuality remains a matter of sin. The literal reading of particular scriptural texts opposing homosexuality is correct. This expectation was certainly prevalent in Ulf's Bible school.

Both science and experience, though, contradict this position. Scientific research seems to affirm that there is a genetic component (although not a very simple one), and the examples and counterexamples call the theory of genetic absence into question.

2. It is all in the genes. Homosexuality must be accepted as natural. The Bible is mistaken, because the writers, of course, did not know better. Advocates of full equality might have rejoiced.

But, is this really an argument? Do we accept everything and deem it "good" because it has a genetic connection? Breast cancer seems to have such a genetic component, as does aggressive behavior, yet we accept neither as "good" and spend much time and resources in correction. The genetic argument does not take the burden of dialogue, decision, or action from us.

3. It is partly genetic and partly acquired. Would we then try to distinguish genetically acquired from environmentally acquired homosexuality? In other words, would we affirm the genetic and attempt the unlearning or the discouragement of environmental homosexuality? (Certainly this reminds us of the "treatment" of left-handedness. Earlier, correction was attempted by force. Now we can test to determine how deeply rooted a child's left-handedness is. If it is superficial, one can encourage change for the convenience of the right-hand.) Some have suggested that there is a period in adolescence when both homo- and heterosexuality are equally possible. The argument proceeds that too much benign neglect would make some people incline toward homosexuality, which would inconvenience both the individual and society. Therefore, proponents suggest active tolerance but not encouragement. Others find this cynical and respond with a certain bitterness. This theory does not hold, they argue, in that nobody becomes homosexual for pleasure. It is still too difficult to live as LGBT person, and still far too much sacrifice and suffering are required.

Although this is a simplified reference to science, it shows that science is of interest and should be consulted. However, science does not, nor cannot, answer our questions or solve our dilemmas. It does not excuse us from taking seriously our efforts to rigorously consider our questions in theology, ethics, liturgy, pastoral care, and church order.

Theological perspectives

We need a comprehensive sense of sexuality and the dynamic it possesses throughout all of life's ages. We also need a comprehensive understanding of love in all its aspects and expressions. Moreover, we need a critical view of the tradition of "Leibfeindlichkeit" (hostility toward the body)—part of the ballast the church has been carrying around for centuries. This tradition expresses itself in statements that the body is inferior to the soul, that matter is inferior to spirit, and that nature has to be

subjected, cultivated, and refined in order to be acceptable. In a sense, this is right, because much of our appreciation of nature—our own and that which surrounds us—is based on the fact that we actually have subdued nature, and we all daily affirm the necessity of culture and education. Our own experiences inform us of the necessity of controlling and refining our impulses and the effort expended in those endeavors. But does that mean that the mind/soul/spirit (or however we name it) is the essential human over against the body? Does that suggest that pastors should count souls instead of people? Does this recommend a tradition of bodily neglect and a sort of spiritual reductionism?

Augustine's identification of sin with sexual desire and his combination of biology and original sin is not the most helpful one.

It is common to point to Augustine as the individual most responsible for this particular journey of thought. This brilliant Church Father to whom we owe so much did not get it quite right with embodiment. Maybe we would speak differently today if Augustine had clearly affirmed that the *imago Dei*, the being created in the image of God, included embodiment, corporeality. Instead we are left with Augustine's Confessions from the late fourth century. It is in many ways a marvelous book, but I am afraid that his identification of sin with sexual desire and his combination of biology and original sin is not the most helpful one. Recent theology, however, moving from ontology in the description of *imago Dei* to the process of imaging God potentially shared with the rest of nature, indicates another possible thought journey.[4]

Jostein Gaarder, a Norwegian writer, has illustrated the problem we inherited from Augustine in a creative way.[5] In 1996 he wrote a novel about a fictive discovery of a very special document, a letter to Augustine, then highly respected bishop of Hippo Regio in Northern Africa. This letter was written by Floria Aemilia, the woman whose name Augustine did not mention but whom he had lived with—unmarried—for a number of years before his conversion. It was with her that he had a son whom he named Adeodatus ("he who is given by God," but to whom Augustine refers as "the fruit of my sin"). Floria Aemilia was poor. Augustine's mother, Monica, however, had arranged for a good marriage for her son which required waiting for the chosen girl to reach the appropriate age. In that it was indiscreet for Augustine to share both table and bed with another woman, Floria was sent back to Africa from Italy without her son. Years later she supposedly writes this fictive letter. In it she recalls the joys of their life together, reminds Augustine of how he rejoiced in erotic love and how they lived in partnership. She also blames him for having been seduced by abstinence. She

[4] See for example Ruth Page, *God and the Web of Creation* (London: SCM, 1996).

[5] Jostein Gaarder, *That Same Flower: Floria Aemilia's Letter to Saint Augustine*, trans. Anne Born (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998). (Norwegian original: Vita brevis, 1966).

exposes his animosity toward everything connected to sensual pleasure, from good music to the smells and taste of lovely food, as a form of idolatry. Her summary of the tragic in Augustine's thought would be: Seduced by his own ideals and metaphors, Augustine sacrificed love and women on the altar of the church.

Martin Luther, as an Augustinian monk, inherited this tradition. Yet, he did not accept the medieval sexual ethic. He "excoriated repression of the sexual drive in the service of higher perfection." He "wanted to liberate the Christian faith from this distortion: he could not accept the oppression of people down to their most intimate moments and warned of its devastating effects on society."[6] Hence, he promoted marriage and created himself the paradigm of the Protestant pastor's family, a cultural institution that may not seem ideal to everybody in our day but definitely had a liberating and very progressive dimension to it in those days. Matrimony "is a 'divinely noble business,'"[7] as Luther said.

Luther's theology of creation did not separate "high" and "low" in human beings from each other. It did not divide instincts from reason, body from mind (see Luther's explanations of the First Article in the Small and Large Catechisms). In his view, the Fall had affected "the conjugal act as much as it had man's highest intellectual achievements."[8] Luther's binding "higher" and "lower" powers together was something new for his time. "The surprising element—one still highly offensive in the sixteenth century—was the assertion that sexual drives were a divine force or even God's vital presence."[9] In Luther's view, "God's power is not confined to marriage; it is already present in the sexual instinct. Marriage is simply the right way to use it."[10] Essential to Luther's theology was the connection of the Word of God with corporeality. He saw monastic vows as a vitiation of body, the senses, and sensuality, and he vehemently rejected this because it denied what God had created a human being to be.[11]

How does this translate into today's situation? Beyond the limits of heterosexual marriage, we must take into account societies that are very different, family structures that are changing, and a relation to the body that is different. In all this, it is good to remember that at the very center of Christian thought is the Incarnation. God incarnate is a Jesus who was hungry, who cried, who enjoyed getting a massage and the scent of beautiful aromatic oils, and who was thirsty on the cross. How would this allow for anything else than applying Lutheran terminology to our own corporeality? We exist in, with, and under our body.

What might we wish to think of when we translate incarnational theology into our situation? Certainly there is the struggle against hypocrisy. Being human is about partnership with persons, not with parts of

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[6] Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 272.

[7] Oberman, 272.

[8] Oberman, 273.

[9] Oberman, 273.

[10] Oberman, 274.

[11] To exemplify this further, Oberman refers to the conclusion of Heinrich Seuse Denifle from 1904 that Luther's lust was one of the main causes of the Reformation, which shows what a disgusting thing this all is! (pp. 275f.) Oberman emphasizes instead that the "lustful Luther deserved to be read and understood without the monkish priggishness of so-called cultivated citizens" (p. 276). And a quote from Luther's letter to Spalatin (p. 276) proves that Luther found natural what others who call themselves cultivated might feel inclined to deem nasty.

them. It is about whole persons and not about issues we may think define the other. Theoretically this seems self-evident; in reality it needs to be said again and again. What should be obvious often is not. Hence, we need to claim the obvious, and we need to affirm our will to touch and be touched by otherness. Wishing to fill both these needs is a mark of a Christian. Claiming the obvious and willingness to touch and be touched by otherness is a strategy that applies in all those occasions where there may exist an unbalance of respect, for example as women among men, as theologians among scientists. . . . To conquer what should be obvious and self-evident, but for some reason is not, is a task worth the effort. Surely it prevents bitterness, the cultivation of martyrdom, or a victim identity in those who are or feel offended. Offenders need to be troubled by the obvious and touching presence of those they would prefer not to see. We all need to be troubled by the fact that—in Rita Nakashima Brock's words—"We are all, or at least most of us, both conscious agents and victims enmeshed in the same systems of violence and oppression that afflict us all."[12]

The will to touch and be touched is in line with an understanding of theology as a critical and self-critical reflection with a radical openness to discover otherness. This does not work without the will to actually cross borders and accept all the anxiety one has to deal with every time one confronts such a border. Isn't this what Christianity is all about? Incarnation—the crossing of a border between the divine and the human, God becoming human—the unbelievable immigration! And what a tough time the early church had to get this somewhat straight, to understand that God crosses borders and touches us. What troubles they had to arrive at the solutions we learn as the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian formulas. No wonder that for them, and for us, Christian identity is task rather than starting point. If God in Jesus Christ was willing to stay "in the messy middle"[13] of life, why shouldn't we?

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[12] Rita Nakashima Brock, "Losing Your Innocence but Not Your Hope," in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1993), 30–53 at 46.

[13] Brock, "Losing Your Innocence," 47.

The Church: Sign and First Fruit of the Kingdom

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These reflections emerge from a pastoral perspective. My point of departure is the ministry of the church in which I have been involved for the last fifty years, as both pastor and seminary professor. My foundational criterion of discernment is the one to which the Gospel of John points: the Truth revealed in Jesus Christ, who shapes the lives of all those who *belong to the truth.* It is in the living faith of those *who continue in Jesus' Word* as faithful disciples, the ones who *practice the Truth,* and not in the sphere of abstract thought, that genuine Christian theology verifies itself. This is another way of affirming that the final norm of my theological perspective is no other than the Word of God received in faith.[1]

Another assumption is my conviction that this reflection is shaped by the contributions of the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century to the Christian faith. I approach this spiritual heritage in the critical and constructive fashion of the scientific method. While it is impossible to reproduce today the conceptual formulations constitutive of the Reformation Era, conditioned by its context and historical setting, my perspective derives its fundamental impulse from the basic intuitions of Luther and his followers as I have appropriated them in my present historical context.

Today, transcending extreme expressions of controversies that shattered the church in the past, I believe that confessors, particularly Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and other Christians, are able to acknowledge and accept—always in fear and trembling—what Jaroslav Pelikan considers *the tragic necessity of the Reformation* as a movement of evangelical renewal not outside but inside the church universal.

My perspective has also been enriched by the contributions of the ecumenical movement, prompted first by the work of the World Council of Churches and the Second Vatican Council. Now it is possible to maintain a fraternal and creative dialogue, which may produce the unity of all believers under Christ's sovereignty. I hope in prayer that this occasion comes as a sign of the imminent Parousia, in the context of history.[2]

One of my main concerns is that the ecclesiological understanding presented may be faithful to the structural elements of the Lutheran tradition as described by Paul Tillich and Jaroslav Pelikan when they depict its ethos as the intimate relationship between Catholic substance and Protestant principle.

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[1] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *La verdad os hará libres* (Lima: CEP, 1986), 147.

[2] Karl Barth was skeptical about this possibility.

The communion of faith lives from, and toward, the future in the present time.

Thus, the church is not an addition to but an integral part of the gospel. Since the early times of Christianity there has been a community of the faithful, known sometimes in the apostolic age as *those of this way* (Acts 9:2),[3] where the believers come to faith and are nurtured in their spiritual life in order to become witnesses of the gospel of the kingdom. In the post-apostolic period, when the Christian community needed to express the content of faith in a more articulated way, it used several formulas or symbols in which there are specific references to the church. In the third article of the most ancient creed they affirmed, *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Church*[4] . . . . Later confessions like the Apostolic Creed alluded to the community of saints as the context of faith, life, and Christian witness. All this leads to the conclusion that the church is not an added-on factor but an essential element of the Christian message.

Some scholars have questioned the assumption that Jesus intended to create a church, since the core of his message was focused on the kingdom of God.[5] A prominent European Roman Catholic writer affirmed that Jesus came preaching the kingdom and its consequence was the emergence of the church.

I am seeking to articulate the proper relationship between the community of faith and the kingdom of God. I take seriously the proclamation of the coming kingdom as the very core of Jesus' gospel (Mk 1:15). In prayer I ask for the manifestation of God's rule with power and glory, present in the Lord's life, word, and work and as a sign and first fruit in the life and mission of the communion of the faithful. But the kingdom's fulfillment belongs to the eschatological dimension, God's absolute future. In the meantime the church, like the rest of creation, lives in earnest expectation of the full universal redemption (Rom 8:19–22). The communion of faith lives from, and toward, the future in the present time. This biblical perspective helps us discern that the kingdom of God is the hermeneutical key that unfolds the deepest meaning of life and history for the church and for humankind as a whole.

In my estimation, the theology of the Reformation makes the proper distinction–not the separation—between the church and the kingdom of God. As Professor José Míguez Bonino observes, in the evangelical or Protestant perspective the church is relativized:

> It does not mean slighting the reality and mission of the Church. . . . It means looking at the Church in terms of its relation to its reason for being and its finality. . . . The global horizon and the ultimate point of reference for the Christian faith is not the Church, but the Kingdom of God. The Church is relative to that horizon. . . . In that sense the Church is relativized.[6]

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[3] Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

[4] J. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York: Longmans Inc., 1972), 83–99.

[5] Albert Loisy, *Gospel and the Church* (Promethean Press, 1988)

[6] José Míguez Bonino, "Cuestiones eclesiológicas fundamentales, punto de vista protestante," en *Teología de la liberación y*

The Roman Catholic ecclesiology expressed at the Second Vatican Council seems to point in this same direction. This does not mean that I ignore the fundamental differences that continue to exist between the Roman Catholic and Protestant ecclesiologies after this Council. The dogmatic constitution of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) declares,

> The Church . . . receives the mission to proclaim and establish among all nations the Kingdom of Christ. She becomes on earth the initial budding forth of that Kingdom and, with all her strength, hope and desires to be united in glory with her King.[7]

Ignacio Ellacuría, a Latin American theologian who suffered martyrdom in El Salvador, was more explicit stating the distinction between church and kingdom:

> It is necessary to separate Church and Kingdom so that the former may be seen over and over molded by the latter, for the Church to be freer from its *world's rendition,* through an authentic *conversion to the Kingdom.* The Church should have a center beyond and outside herself, a horizon that transcends its institutional borders to guide her mission and direct her institutional structure. That center and horizon cannot be other than the one it had in Jesus evangelization: the Kingdom of God.[8]

Following the perspective of the Protestant Reformation and the contributions of contemporary Roman Catholic theologians who take seriously the Second Vatican understanding of the church mentioned above, I see the profile of an ecclesiological view that can be expressed in the following proposition: *The church is a sign and first fruit of God's kingdom.*

The notion of sacrament, when used to describe the church in the Second Vatican statement, is closely related to the Latin translation of the biblical term *mysterion.* The letter to the Ephesians states, "That in the dispensation of the fullness of time [God] might gather together in one, all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth" (1:10).

The church, built on the foundations of apostles and prophets, has an important role in this divine purpose. God intends that this mystery be made known by principalities and powers in heavenly places through the church, "According to the eternal purpose that [God] realized in Christ Jesus" (Eph 3:10–11).

It is necessary to emphasize at this point that with the notion of the church as sacrament, the Second Vatican Council transcended an ecclesiological perspective that dominated Roman Catholic faith and practice. Gustavo Gutiérrez argues,

> To call the Church a visible sacrament of the saving unity is to define it in relation to the plan of salvation, whose fulfillment in history the Church reveals and signifies to the human race. . . . The Church can be understood only in relation to the reality which it announces to human kind. Its existence is not *for itself,* but rather *for others.* Its center is outside itself, it is in the work of Christ and his Spirit. It is constituted by the Spirit as *the universal sacrament of salvation.*

One of the main contributions of the Protestant Reformation was the recovery of an ecclesiological understanding more faithful to the biblical message. Luther questioned the tendency to see the church as the center of the Christian faith. In this way he

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comunidades de base, ed. Sergio Torres (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1982), 168.

[7] *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, American Press, Associated Press), 18.

[8] Ignacio Ellacuría, *Conversión de la iglesia al Reino de Dios* (Santander: Editorial Sal Terre, 1984), 13–14.

challenged the disproportional value given the ecclesiastic institution, placing her always under the sovereignty of God's Word. In Luther's perspective, even the candid understanding of a small child gives us a more appropriate discernment on this matter: "for thank God, a seven year old child knows what the Church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd."[9]

For Luther, the constitutive elements of the church are the community of believers and the Word of God. This emphasis on the church as the community of the faithful is an important element in the ecclesiological understanding of the Lutheran Reformation. Structural elements such as rites, order, and so on are in principle subject to revision and reform. They are relative to the conception of the church as the communion of believers, called and gathered by the Holy Spirit, through God's Word. When Luther translated the New Testament from its original language to the German vernacular, he used the term *Gemeinde* instead of *Kirche* to translate the Greek word *ekklesia,* because *Kirche,* the German word for church, suggested a more hierarchical and institutional structure. *Gemeinde* stands more precisely for the dimension of communion presupposed by the biblical understanding of ecclesiology. Luther's conception of the church as people, a human community, serves to emphasize that the core of its identity derives from God's Word. For Luther,

> the Gospel comes before the bread (the Lord's Supper) and Baptism, as the unique, certain and noble sign of the Church, since it is conceived, formed, nurtured, born, instructed, shepherded, clothed and ornamented, strengthened, prepared and sustained by the Gospel. In a simple word: All the life and substance of the Church are in the Word of God.[10]

Since the church's life is not in itself but rather stems from its relationship to Christ, its center is the living and saving Word of God. In this sense it seems relevant to see the church as the sacrament of salvation (as *Lumen Gentium* declares), or a sign and first fruit of the kingdom (as I suggested earlier in this study). It seems valuable in this context to point to Augustine's assertion, quoted by Luther in the Large Catechism: "*Accedat verbum ad elementum at fit sacramentum* This means that when the Word is added to the element or the natural substance, it becomes a sacrament, that is a holy thing and sign."[11]

Without the Word, the water we receive in Baptism is simple water, not a baptism of regeneration. In a similar way, the elements used in the Lord's Supper without the Word would be common bread and wine, not the sacrament of the communion of Christ and his people, and of one with the other through Christ, at the Eucharistic assembly. In this sense, without the Word of God there is no church at all, because "The Church is . . . determined by the Word of God. Without the Word, the Church would be community, but not the Christian and holy community; people, but not people of God. On the other hand, where the Word of God is, there stands the Church. . . ."

At times the understanding of the church has been misconstrued in the same way that the sacraments have been misunderstood. Contrary to the biblical witness and the

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[9] Martin Luther, Smalcald Articles, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 315.

[10] W.A. 7, 721, quoted by Walter Altmann in *Confrontación y liberación: Una perspectiva latinoamericana sobre Martín Lutero* (Buenos Aires: Vox Evangelii, 1983), 85.

[11] *The Book of Concord,* 438.

opinion of the early Christian leaders, Baptism and the Eucharist have been conceived in a magical and mechanistic fashion. They have also been perceived as mere signs with no real relationship to the process of regeneration and salvation. In both of these cases the vital and dynamic meaning of the sacraments has been entirely lost. In terms of the church, people tend to fall in either of two extreme positions. For some, the church is so closely related with the core of faith that it leads to its conception as a perfect society, ontologically identified with God's kingdom. For others, the church is defined as the sum of individual believers, losing sight of the biblical notion of the *koinonia* of the faithful.[12] In contrast to these excessive positions I stand with Luther in his contention that the church "is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God."[13]

While the church is not the core component of faith, it surely cannot be understood as peripheral or a mere addition to the gospel. Inasmuch as it remains faithful to the Lord—as creature and servant of the Word—the church becomes a sacrament of the kingdom, that is, a sign and first fruit of God's reign. The sacrament in Christian theology is an efficacious sign of salvation. It proclaims and realizes that which is signified. In the church's bosom believers are baptized, incorporated into Christ's body, strengthened in faith and communion with the Lord. Christ is present in the Christian community in the power of the Spirit through the Word—the *viva vox evangelii*—and in Baptism and the Eucharist, the visible forms of the Word. The church is both sign and instrument of God in building the kingdom on earth.

To be sure, the Second Vatican Council places the church in a quite different horizon from its dominant expression in the Roman Catholic tradition. Yet Gutiérrez expresses his own reservations concerning the conciliar statements on the nature of the church:

> The Council did not place itself totally in this line of thinking [pointing to the kingdom of God as the global horizon of Christian faith]. Many of the texts still reveal the burden of a heavy heritage; they timidly point to a way out from the turning of the Church to itself, without always accomplishing this.[14]

I believe that Christ is the sole foundation of the Christian community, and the church is called to reflect the Lord in her life, work, and word. In this sense it is legitimate to refer to the church as an efficacious sign of salvation and an initial budding forth of the kingdom. Yet, it is important to consider the Lutheran dialectic between the *ecclesia abscondita* (the hidden church) and the *ecclesia revelata* (the revealed church), that is, between the church of faith and the empirical church. In the Reformer's view, it is not a question of two separated entities but of the same church that is an *ecclesia mixta*, simultaneously holy and sinful. By the Word of God received in faith the church becomes the communion of saints, but the church itself is always the community of sinners (Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels*). The mystery of divine grace manifests itself in the fact that in the power of the Spirit acting through the Word, this sinful community is also the holy community in whose bosom the believers receive forgiveness of sins, salvation and life abundant. This fact confirms that the community of faith is a sacrament of salvation, a sign and first fruit of the coming kingdom.

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[12] In the early Christian creeds this notion was translated as the "communion of saints."

[13] *The Book of Concord,* 416.

[14] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973).

It is God's Spirit who makes possible that in the imperfect and sinful face of the church, the beauty of God's holiness be manifested. The same happens in summer in the mountains of Puerto Rico when the sun goes



down and the sky becomes beautifully colored. This exceptional chromatic beauty is the consequence of the refraction of the sun's rays in the sediment of dust and dirt.

In the effort to continue Luther's legacy today it is important to realize that the Reformer's view was strongly influenced by the perspective of Christendom characteristic of his time. Its concept of *Societas Christiana* is no longer relevant to us. This is made evident in Luther's argument for the persecution of Anabaptists, which consisted of an old legislation from the Justinian Code, penalizing the practice of the baptism of adults who had already received baptism as infants. Luther believed and taught that in this case they were not persecuted on account of their faith but for violating a political ordinance. By the same token, Calvin justified the prosecution and death of Miguel Servet for his denial of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, a *crime* condemned by the *Societas Christiana.* Luther's and Melanchthon's attitude toward missions revealed a thought pattern formed by the world view of Christendom. Both reformers believed that the Great Commission concerned only the apostolic period and had already been fulfilled. For Melanchthon, according to González, the dissemination of the Christian message was the responsibility of civil authorities.

Today we live in a different world. Ours is a secular, plural and pragmatic world where the ideals of the *Societas Christiana* no longer prevail. A different system of values and worldview impact our understanding of both our reality and our faith. The Western human being is losing the role of the subject of world history. Today we take seriously the role of other ethnic groups, other cultures and world images that were dismissed by the imperialism of the West, of which the church had also been a part for centuries. This is the perspective from which I approach the spiritual heritage of the Reformation. Today's global context demands an ecclesiology that keeps itself in historical continuity with the catholic and apostolic leadership of the church, renewed by the evangelical intuitions of Luther, Melanchthon, and other reformers, and relevant to the postmodern era in which the universal Christian community lives and witnesses its faith.

One of the fundamental marks of the church that this ecclesiological understanding forces us to rethink today is the dimension of catholicity (Catholic substance and Protestant principle are the two structural elements of our spiritual heritage). For Hispanic Lutherans, of utmost importance is the provocative dimension of catholicity explored by both Justo L. González, a Cuban Methodist pastor and professor of church history, and Virgilio Elizondo, a Mexican American Roman Catholic priest and scholar. González provides a definition of catholicity that creatively retrieves the con-

tributions of the post-apostolic era.[15] Transcending an abstract universalism, he explores the legitimate contributions of diverse expressions of Christian teachings, provided they remain *according to the whole.* The catholicity depicted, rather than demanding uniformity with a fixed and static tradition, establishes a creative continuity with a dynamic and dialectical heritage that continues to be enriched during the course of history. This vision of catholicity not only tolerates but demands a diversity of particular expressions in the same way that the gospel, while a unique witness to the gracious initiative of God for the redemption of creation, expresses itself in a plurality of faithful witnesses.[16]

In his prologue to González's book *Mañana,* Elizondo elaborates with great discernment the content of an Iberian American Catholicism.[17] For him, this is an essential mark of a Hispanic/Latino ethos different from the official and dominant expression of European and North American Roman Catholicism.[18] This Iberian American Catholicism received its strongest influence from the evangelical humanism of Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros rather than the dogmatic traditions of both Trent and the Protestant Reformation. It was further enriched by the mystical traditions of Spain and the spirituality of Native American peoples. Out of this creative synthesis developed a mestizo Christianity that is affirmed and survives in Latin American popular religion.

This catholicity described by Father Elizondo transcends the European controversies characteristic of the Protestant Reformation and the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation. It has the potential for a genuine renewal of both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, including the charismatic expressions in both religious traditions.

In my estimation this suggestive analysis may be further enhanced with the dialectic of Catholic substance and Protestant principle. These categories may help define not just the genius of Lutheranism but the very core of Christianity. The catholic dimension emphasizes the inclusive and universal character of Christianity as a whole. The Protestant principle, or what I prefer to call the Evangelical content,[19] becomes the controlling standard to safeguard the catholic dimension from a dangerous temptation to distort the gospel content with foreign and contradictory elements. In this sense the Evangelical principle becomes the true foundation of catholicity. Faithfulness to the gospel should never be understood as a rupture with catholicity but as the principle of renewal, integration, and unity within the church universal.

The Evangelical principle will help discern the legitimacy of the diverse expressions of the Christian faith provided that they remain *according to the whole,* thus, faithful to the apostolic confession of faith, shaped by a trinitarian structure, an evangelical foundation, and a Christ-centered emphasis. This ecclesiological view is conceived within the horizon of an evangelical catholicity. For me this view

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[15] González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Round Table* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 18ff.

[16] Without such diversity of expressions, the church tends to crystallize its faith through dogmatic abstract and static teachings, losing the creative dynamism characteristic of its early development.

[17] González, *Mañana: A Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 9ff.

[18] Or, for that matter, a European or North American Protestantism.

[19] Centered in the apostolic kerygma, which points to Jesus' life, word, and work.

strengthens the notion of the church as a sign and first fruit of God's kingdom.

The community of faith is not a religious elite separated from the rest of the world and indifferent to human history. It is rather a community that stands as a sign of salvation (a symbol of God's secret plan) already actively present in the texture of human history, moving toward its complete manifestation in the fullness of time. This benevolent plan, called by the letter to the Ephesians "the mystery of God's will," is no other than the kingdom of heaven proclaimed by Jesus since the initiation of his ministry in Galilee. The church is sign and first fruit of this divine project in history. Or, as Gutiérrez would argue when he refers to the church as a sacrament,

> In the sacrament the salvific plan is fulfilled and revealed; that is, it is made present among humans and for humans. But at the same time, it is through the sacrament that humans encounter God. This is an encounter *in history,* not because God comes from history, but because history comes from God. The sacrament is thus the efficacious revelation of the call to communion with God and to the unity of mankind.[20]

This means that the church cannot be reduced to God's kingdom, because the latter stands for God's universal plan encompassing the whole creation. In other words, it cannot be confused with the community of believers nor any other specific historical project.[21] To be sure, the church needs to be vitally related to God's saving plan for the whole created world, otherwise it would be reduced to a sort of secular institution, promoting the self-interests of religious elites.

A final consideration in this study is to explore the relevance of this ecclesiological view in responding to the challenges of our contemporary world. For me, this renewed view of the church provides an important contribution for healing the various dimensions of brokenness characteristic of today's world. From its very beginnings the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion played an important role for the Christian community. During apostolic times Baptism was understood as the washing of regeneration, and Holy Communion was considered by one of the Fathers of the Ancient Church as "medicine of immortality" (Ignatius of Antioch in *Epistle to the Ephesians*). These suggestive images referred to the gospel promise of life and health for all who suffered body and spiritual illness in need of healing. In line with this thought it is important to stress that the role of the church in this world is that of a healing community.

Walter Altmann reminds us that Luther conceived of the church as a hospital for those suffering body and spiritual illness. The community of the faithful is called to help the needy and support those requiring protection. This image suggested by the reformer is based on the Pauline notion of the church as the body of Christ. The members of this body are responsible for the well-being of each other. The Christian community needs to take care of the weak, the sick, and the poor in obedience to its vocation to have a faith active in love. The proper role of the church in a broken society is not the one of a religious elite pronouncing anathemas against sinners with the spiritual arrogance characteristic of the Pharisees. The calling of the church as sign and first fruit of the kingdom is to follow Christ's practice of walking in the shadow of the cross; that is, establishing solidarity with those suffering in body and soul the tragic

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[20] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation,* 146.

[21] Míguez Bonino, 146.

consequences of AIDS, the victims of domestic violence, those excluded from the present social and economic social order, and those facing persecution, imprisonment, or death for their commitment to justice and peace for their fellow citizens.

The church as sign and first fruit of God's kingdom is called to carry out its ministry and mission in obedience to Jesus Christ, opening itself to the urgent needs of men, women, senior citizens, and children of our society. The individual and collective alienation of our people calls for a ministry in solidarity with the poor, the sick, and the needy. Jesus' ministry was not primarily aimed at the healthy but the sick, the excluded. Our Lord called all of them urgently to open themselves to God's kingdom.

Today, Jesus calls the church to follow his evangelistic paradigm to penetrate the diverse spheres of our collective life as a ferment to transform, from the inside, the political debate, the economic relationships, and the social dynamics. In all these sectors we notice a growing deterioration of human life. It seems that human beings created in God's image are subject to being reduced to objects of manipulation.

The church will achieve a fruitful ministry in today's society when it continues to exert critically—but always in solidarity with all human beings and the total human being—its commitment to promote the wholeness of life. It is then that the church will be centered and charged with the power that characterized Jesus' ministry when initiated at Galilee, announcing a message with authority: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news (Mk 1:15).

Christian Ritual and the Meaningful Language for Loss

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In his poem "Home Burial," Robert Frost uncovers layers of pain in a young marriage and explores with stunning effect the depths to which human grief can descend when faced with unimaginable loss. As the poem's scene unfolds—like a one-act play told in a single, violent burst of energy—the movement and the motion is steadily downward.

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder
at some fear.[1]

As the poem progresses, the story is filtered through this woman, whose first impression on us is reminiscent of Lot's wife, perpetually caught in a moment of looking back, frozen for all time in a pose of regret, and loss, and fear.

There has been a death in the house, and the young married couple is presented to us in the grip of their mourning. It seems their baby has just recently died. The cause of this premature death is never disclosed, but enough information is given to understand that the couple lives in a rural setting, and the husband has only recently come inside from digging the child's grave, his shoes freshly coated with the deep, clay-like mud, and the spade standing "up against the wall / Outside there in the entry."[2]

The husband and wife in the poem are at an impasse. Their relationship seems, at this moment in their life together, to be as cold, empty, and lifeless—as dead, in fact—as their baby who now lies dead in the ground. They are completely unable to connect with each other on any semblance of sympathy or humanness. As a result, there are two kinds of dealing with the overwhelming weight of sadness on display within the poem: the man chooses to hide his emotions and steadfastly to work his way back toward life, while the woman, overcome by her feelings of loss and anger, chooses instead to remain in mourning.[3]

Joining her midway on the stairs, the man looks out the window to see what it is that catches his wife's eye, causing her to look back over her shoulder as she makes her way down the staircase. It is then that he sees, at least partially, the depth of her grief:

"The wonder is I didn't see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wonted to it—that's the reason.
The little graveyard where my people
are! . . ."[4]

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[1] Robert Frost, "Home Burial," *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), lines 1–3.

[2] Frost, "Home Burial," lines 87–88.

[3] Jeffrey Meyers, *Robert Frost: A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 49.

[4] Frost, "Home Burial," lines 20–23.

And then his attention turns, quite literally, to the heart of the matter, eliciting from her a scream of protest, both to her husband and to death itself:

"But I understand," [he said]: "it is not the stones,
But the child's mound——"
"Don't, don't, don't don't," she cried.[5]

The woman's plea to her husband is touching in its anguish, and the repeated command of the word "don't!" creates an honest urgency, as well as the pitiful impression of a sad and lonely woman trapped in the emptiness of her grief, desperately bounded by the echo of her cry.

In many ways, then, the embittered and confused plight of Frost's young couple in "Home Burial" and the terrifying dilemma confronting their relationship as husband and wife points to an even larger problem within contemporary American society at the turn of the twenty-first century. In its current predicament, the United States stands posed as the strongest and wealthiest nation in the world, and yet in many ways it is home to the most maddeningly fragile and insecure people on the planet. In what would seem quite possibly the greatest irony of the modern age, today's America—adrift in a culture of almost limitless affluence and success—is, more than ever perhaps wracked with an insatiable desire for self-improvement, and for turning back the clock, and for cheating death.

Death haunts us. To a society that can almost quite literally "have it all," death remains the one thing we don't want. It is to us the inexplicable and inescapable reality of our lives, the promise that the ride is going to end, and always, it would seem, too soon. Death stubbornly remains the great equalizer, though as a society we wish it were not so and would pay almost any price to stave off the inevitable threat it poses.

On the other end is "religion," or, to put it in the more accurate yet nebulous terms of today's society, "spirituality." Our cultural quest to find the secrets of everlasting life has led to an explosion in the past twenty years of a tangled mess of holistic medicine and ancient Eastern religious practice that makes an unfortunate mockery of both traditions.

In 1969, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, in her seminal study, *On Death and Dying*, saw the beginning of what we are faced with today—a death-fixated culture in danger of losing its traditional spiritual core, leaving us as empty and bereft and as lacking in fellowship as Frost's sad husband and wife in his poem. Kübler-Ross described the situation as she saw it thirty years ago:

> Paradoxical as it may sound, while society has contributed to our denial of death, religion has lost many believers in a life after death. . . . While the religious denial, i.e., the belief in the meaning of suffering here on earth and reward in heaven after death, has offered hope and purpose, the denial of society has given neither hope nor purpose but has only increased our anxiety and contributed to our destructiveness and aggressiveness. . . . The belief has long died that suffering here on earth will be rewarded in heaven. Suffering has lost its meaning. . . . But with this change, also, fewer people really believe in life after death. . . . And if we cannot anticipate life after death, then we have to consider death. If we are no longer rewarded in heaven for our suffering, then suffering becomes purposeless in itself.[6]

The situation, it would seem, is bleak. But what, exactly, is the situation? Is the

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[5] Frost, "Home Burial," lines 27–30.

[6] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1969), 15.

spiritual plight of our times really as bad as we might imagine? What, finally, is left in a nominally Christian society such as ours? And what is it we are missing?

The answer we're looking for might be found in both the presence of and the absence of a unifying language that speaks the words of comfort to us when we feel discomforted in a time of need. It might be found in both the presence of and the absence of a unifying order of actions that convey an overriding sense of peace for us when peace seems like the furthest thing from our minds. It might be found in both the presence of and the absence of a unifying set of symbols that works inside us and brings a message of hope when we feel our lives and times are most hopeless.

People need ritual, and ritual needs people. It is impossible, in some ways, to tell which comes first.

The answer might be ritual, in other words. Ritual by itself does not necessarily imply "religion" or "worship," although very often that is the misconception. The terms "ritual" and "liturgy" are often mistakenly interchanged, as well. Though it is true that ritual coexists with the ideas of both religion and worship, and while it is equally true that it shares many of the same facets as liturgy, it is a mistake to so casually interchange the terms. They all are closely related, but they are not the same.

In one sense, ritual might be considered the mythic substructure existing beneath the ordered surface structure of our society's traditional Christian worship—beneath, in other words, its liturgy. "At its root, the word 'liturgy' simply means 'the work of the people,'"[7] and underneath this sense of community at work lies the deeply embedded strains of what all the work is for. This is ritual. All of human life is structure, and the function of ritual is to give some sense of form to this structure, "not in the way of a mere surface arrangement, but in depth."[8]

People need ritual, and ritual needs people. It is impossible, in some ways, to tell which comes first. By its very nature, ritual exists within the presence of a shared fellowship; it implies the presence of community. Ritual could be said to create this sense of community, in fact. And yet, ironically, it is this sense of community, this presence of shared fellowship, that serves as the very lifeblood for the existence of ritual.

> Ritual . . . is a basic human language rooted in [our] social nature and pervading [our] social environment. . . . Not only is ritual habit forming, it is power laden. We are also immersed in it—to such an extent, indeed, that it takes an extraordinary degree of perception even to note its presence, much less to analyze its influence on us. This presence and its effects are nonetheless real. . . . Ritual is not a need . . . that may or may not be retained but an inevitability coextensive with [our] social nature.[9]

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[7] Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 250.

[8] Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (New York: Bantam, 1972), 43.

[9] Aidan Kavanagh, "Introduction," in *The Roots of Ritual*, ed. James D. Shaughnessy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 7–8.

But we must return to the original question of what it is in our society that is both present and absent that contributes to the general loss of comfort, or peace, or hope in the face of our mortality. It could be argued that our society's essential and traditional Christian death rites are firmly embedded in our cultural subconscious. The rituals are, in fact, alive and well. They are strong. They resonate within our ever-changing, multi-ethnic, multimedia-obsessed culture. The death rituals of our society's traditional Christian faith are still there to be found beneath the entangled surface structure of our society, but for whatever reason, in many knots of the culture the rituals no longer seem to matter. The language these rituals speak is not, very often, a language that anyone wants to hear or that even makes sense to anyone anymore. The actions these rituals embody often come across as forced or cloying to those they are trying to comfort. And the symbols they employ too often seem empty and meaningless to those for whom they are meant.

What has gone wrong with our culture's traditional Christian death rituals? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps it is like trying to answer the question posed earlier of which comes first, community or ritual. Did our existing rituals' slow demise into ineffectiveness conversely affect our culture's growing sense of malaise in the face of death, or did our culture's descent into uneasy despair provide the impetus needed for doubting our rituals' foundational transforming power?

What we see depicted in Frost's insightful and incisive poem perhaps cuts deeper and closer than most of us would like. Within his portrait of a formerly loving relationship failing beneath the crushing weight of grief, we see, perhaps, more of ourselves at the beginning of this new century than we care to admit. It is a damning indictment of our current cultural affairs, certainly, but Frost's poem is also a mirror held before us, reflecting the framework of our traditional Christian community in all of its inherent strengths and weaknesses.

For nowhere, perhaps, can the roots of our Christian faith be more exposed and laid bare than at our most elemental and human moment—the moment of loss, and of grief, and of confronting death. This moment in our lives as believers tests all that we believe.

The role of ritual at such a moment is of incalculable worth. Throughout our history, humankind has employed ritual behavior to deal with its most critical moments. "Ritual is concerned with relationships, either between a single individual and the supernatural, or among a group of individuals who share things together."[10] As such, then, the role of ritual is practically unavoidable. While it is generally agreed that ritual exists as a purely human construct, it is still undeniably a construct that has worked its way into our collective-unconscious, residing, again, in a distinctly mythic realm. "Myths are the mental supports of rites; rites the physical enactments of myth."[11]

And at the time of great loss the myth of the rite is needed perhaps more than ever. Within the rite itself, and the mythic intonations ringing throughout it, we find the shape and the definition of our loss. The presence of the ritual at such moments acts as a purgative. In time, from deep inside the constructs of our traditional death rituals, we can grow to find meaning in our sense of grief. Our pain is not purposeless if the ritual is allowed to work within us.

In his study *The Language of the Rite*,

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[10] Margaret Mead, "Ritual and Social Crisis," in *The Roots of Ritual*, ed. James Shaughnessy, 89.

[11] Campbell, *Myths to Live By*, 45.

Roger Grainger made these trenchant observations about the essential role ritual plays in the unavoidable "crisis moments" of our lives:

> Each crisis in our life has its appropriate and time-honoured ritual. What seems to be a defence against experience, a mere game played in order to distract us from reality, is a way into reality's very heart. . . . Perhaps the principal function of the rite is that of allowing intellectually "impossible" things to happen. What cannot, dare not, be thought, is somehow acted. Fear is the reason for ritual. But somehow the rite contrives to take fear into itself and make it work for truth, and, eventually, for acceptance. Relationship—love—is the only answer to fear; but in certain circumstances, particularly those involving some kind of critical confrontation, relationship seems impossible, either for intellectual reasons . . . or for emotional ones. . . .[12]

Grainger could just as easily be describing the situation in Frost's poem. We see depicted there the dilemma of our modern lives. What happens in a relationship devoid of communication, or love, or human sympathy in the crisis moment? Could the existence of "relationship" in such an instance even be called into question? And if it is true that relationship can't exist in such a hostile and unfeeling environment, how can "community" ever become a reality? And if it is true, as surmised, that where there is community there is ritual (and vice versa), then it is obvious that ritual cannot help but be absent and therefore completely ineffective at such a necessary moment.

What happens when a community, for whatever reason, lacks the power of its essential death ritual? What happens when the language and the actions and the symbols of our traditional Christian funeral rites lose their hold on us and begin to fall on deaf ears, eyes, and hearts? What happens when the message of "life after death" can no longer be heard over the din of competing voices, and music, and the incessant, metallic *ping* of video games?

The result, as can be witnessed in Frost's poem as well as in any of today's headlines, is a general sense of unease—of fear, anxiety, confusion, and panic. What results from the felt absence of adequate community and ritual is, very often, anger, isolation, and a growing sense of "No one can possibly understand how I feel right now." What happens finally in such a self-involved society grappling to stay above the flood of its grief is the inevitable desire for dissension, estrangement, and separation, making such notions as fellowship or community nothing but distant, utopian dreams.

> The Christian funeral is a service of worship and should involve all those present. . . . The pastor's ministry to them is to lead the bereaved into and through the rites of the church where the voice of the Gospel can be heard with healing power and clarity. . . . The Burial of the Dead is a celebration of the passage through death to new life, where Christ has led the way. . . . In an effort to be positive and to emphasize the victory of the resurrection, the pain and loss of death must not be minimized or ignored. Both must be held in balance. The bereaved need to confront and accept the loss of the deceased as well as be given hope. . . . The fuller understanding of death recognizes these feelings of grief and desolation and gives them expression, but it also moves beyond them to a confident hope. . . . The congregation needs to be encouraged to support the bereaved not only at the time of the funeral but also as the bereaved return to the duties of their lives. . . .[13]

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[12] Roger Grainger, *The Language of the Rite* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), 108–9.

[13] Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, "Burial of the Dead," *Manual on the*

Death is, and quite probably always has been, humankind's greatest fear. We don't want to die. We don't want our lives on earth to end. Even in our darkest moments, we dare not contemplate what our last moments will be like. Our final words. Our last breath. The closing thought that flits through our mind at the end. What will we see just before our eyesight fades? And who will be there with us? Anyone? Or will we die alone? And in what manner will we die? Will it be a sudden, catastrophic event? Will it be the slow, painful descent of a terminal disease? Maybe death will come for us naturally, easily, almost as if slipping off to sleep.

"Every good death . . . is itself an utterance and a conclusion."[14] And however true that may be, the question then becomes: an utterance of what? A conclusion to what? "Death is still a fearful, frightening happening, and the fear of death is a universal fear even if we think we have mastered it on many levels."[15]

But does this knowledge—or can it, even—override our innate sense of dread and fear at the thought of death? Can the rituals still maintain their hold on us, or are they as dead as the lifeless body they celebrate? Is there, finally, no hope for fellowship or community in the midst of our modern culture?

Perhaps things are not as bleak as they seem. For the rituals are still there, undoubtedly, and human nature, being what it is, will always have the need to reach not only in, but also out, and finally up. Nowhere in all of our latent Christian traditions, perhaps, is this hope for ultimate communion stated with such dramatic clarity as it is in Paul's Letter to the Romans:

> Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:35a, 38–39 NIV)

In many ways, what was true for Paul in his day is still true for us in our own. Faith then is, essentially, faith now; and if it is true, indeed, that faith is "the hope for things unseen," then such an element of hope—a hope for love, and for meaning, and for simple, human connection in the moment of loss—can be seen, of all places, however dimly or briefly, within the closing lines of Frost's poem, "Home Burial." It is a glimmer, faint at best, of the possibility of ritual's transcending power. But it is there. And just as quickly as the moment comes, it is gone, or ignored, or set to the side, if only for a time, awaiting its moment to rise again:

"Amy! Don't go to someone else this time.
Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs."
He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
"There's something I should like to ask you, dear."

"You don't know how to ask it."

"Help me, then."

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.[16]

Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), 356, 364.

[14] Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1955), 264.

[15] Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 5.

[16] Frost, "Home Burial," lines 39–45.

Book Reviews

Jesus Christ in History and Scripture: A Poetic and Sectarian Perspective. By Edgar V. McKnight. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999. xiv and 332 pages. Paper. $20.00.

Edgar McKnight, Professor Emeritus of Religion at Furman University, is a Baptist who teaches at a Baptist University. His book began as a series of lectures at the First Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina, where, he claims, some members were aware of their roots in the Radical Reformation. He uses the sixteenth-century Radical Reformation as an example of how biblical interpretation ought to be done. Proper interpretation expands the meaning of the text, because the text itself constantly means more than what the author intended. Furthermore, readers come at the text from differing perspectives and out of a variety of contexts (time, place, and culture). The church that grows will neither freeze the meaning of the text nor standardize any given reader's interpretation.

The heart of McKnight's book consists of (1) a short survey of critical methods in New Testament study; (2) a history of the philosophical bases for biblical criticism and interpretation; (3) a survey of hermeneutical options; and (4) the influence of philosophical and hermeneutical considerations on the quest for the historical Jesus.

Put simply, historical criticism has validity because the biblical faith depends on the revelatory nature of history. Since it is historically based, criticism cannot destroy the Christian faith. Yet historical criticism cannot find the "real" Jesus, nor can theologians state the true faith. For the Christian faith, and the church, to grow it must have a stance from which it can allow for critique of the biblical text and at the same time criticize the methods of those who do the criticism. Likewise, Christians must question traditional faith assumptions but at the same time critique the presuppositions of those who raise such questions. McKnight speaks of such a stance as a metacriticism that does not allow for any "final, positive results."

The readers of the biblical text will make the "this" of their present situation the "that" of the Bible. The present-day church understands itself in terms of the ancient text. On the other hand, "then" is "now." That is, the church of the New Testament creates and informs the church of today. In neither case, "this is that" nor "then is now," is the community of believers thwarted by historicism or dogma. McKnight thinks of this dynamic, expansionist reading of the New Testament as poetic (literary) rather than historical or dogmatic. As examples of metacritical hermeneutics McKnight briefly reviews feminist and sectarian New Testament interpretation.

In his last two chapters he reflects on what was right in Anabaptist hermeneutics—reading the biblical text seriously, but finding themselves in the text in ways other than the doctrines and traditions of Catholics and Protestants. Anabaptists broke with such dogmas as the right of the rulers (Rom 13:1–7) and such individualistic doctrines as personal salvation (Rom 1:16–17). The impact of such a metacritical stance has been enormous on Western Christianity, especially in the United States (for example, the separation of church and state, p. 296).

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Hebron Journal: Stories of Nonviolent Peacemaking. By Arthur G. Gish. Scottdale, PA, and Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 2001. 301 pages. Paper. $17.99.

Reading this book underscored the significance of our time with Pierre Shantz, a member of the Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT) in Hebron (West Bank), when he escorted my Holy Land Study Group around this ancient city one day in January 2000. The climax of that day was a

heartrending visit to the Beqa'a valley where two houses of Atta and Rodeina Jaber had been demolished by Israeli soldiers.

In journal format, Arthur Gish, a longtime American peace activist, describes his experiences as a member of the CPT in Hebron for two or three months annually (except 1998) from December 1995 until January 31, 2001. The CPT participants, usually three to six in number, reside in Hebron's city center at the invitation of the mayor's office and are pursuing "an experiment in nonviolent peacemaking" (p. 23).

In many respects, the tense situation in Hebron among Palestinians, settlers, and Israeli soldiers is a microcosm of the current conflict in the Holy Land. 120,000 Palestinian Muslims live in Hebron as well as a few hundred Jewish settlers in four parts of the center city protected by 1,200 Israeli soldiers. Although the venerable city—sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims because it contains the Tombs of the patriarchs and matriarchs—has a long history of peace, it is also stained by the brutal massacre of 67 Hebron Jews by Palestinian Muslims in 1929 and the killing of 29 Muslim men and boys at prayer in the Ibrahimi Mosque in 1994 by a Jewish settler, Baruch Goldstein.

The CPT participants specify three aims for themselves in Hebron: (1) ". . . to learn, to talk with every side in the conflict, to listen, and try to understand;" (2) to serve as international observers, reporting what they see to a larger network of churches and concerned people; and (3) to become "an active nonviolent presence in the midst of conflict" (pp. 15f.).

On page after page Gish describes frightening yet often poignant situations in which the Peacemakers choose to place themselves. Peacemakers learn to face their own fears and possible death, discover the daily spiritual resources to persist with hopefulness (e.g., prayer and fasting), and strategize together how to enact creative and effective nonviolent responses in difficult situations. I offer one simple example of such a response: "When [the soldiers] detained someone, we stood by the person detained. I saw Marge squatting when Palestinians were forced to squat. We were in the soldiers' faces, telling them to treat people with respect. The soldiers obviously were not happy with us" (p. 59).

This book raises a fundamental question: Do believers (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim) dare practice an alternative to the world's almost religious trust "in the saving power of violence" (p. 263)? The CPTs have responded to the challenge issued by Ron Sider to the Mennonite World Conference in 1984: "Unless we are ready to die developing new nonviolent attempts to reduce conflict, we should confess that we never really meant that the cross was an alternative to the sword" (p. 9). I recommend your reading and pondering *Hebron Journal.* If one takes seriously Jesus' sayings urging nonretaliation and love of enemy (see Mt 5:38–48), reading these journal entries will be a soul-searching experience.

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Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross. By Michael J. Gorman. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001. xi and 429 pages. Paper. $28.00.

The title of this book is a fair indication of what Michael J. Gorman attempts to do. He focuses on Paul's spirituality, that is, his lived experience of faith, as distinct from his theology. Paul's spirituality is founded on an overarching narrative that tells of Jesus' faithful self-giving on the cross; this in turn becomes the cruciform narrative of the Christian life, exemplified in Paul's apostolic self-presentation. The first five chapters work out Paul's basic trinitarian understanding of the cross. Especially helpful are his thorough cataloguing of Paul's narrative patterns of the cross, his discussion of the phrase "in Christ," and his exposition of Paul's "master narrative" of cruciformity, Phil 2:6–11. The next seven chapters explore four aspects of the cruciform life: faith, love, power, and hope. The final two chapters focus on the cruciform church and on challenges for understanding Paul's cruciformity today. Gorman's clear account succeeds in showing how thoroughly Paul's view of Christian experience has been shaped by the narrative of the cross.

There are some questions to be raised,

however. Sometimes it seems that Gorman's emphasis on the Christian's experience of the cross threatens to overwhelm the radical nature of Paul's gospel of divine election. To take a small but telling example, Gorman distinguishes the ritual of baptism from "dying with Christ in reality," effectively subordinating baptism to our human experience. Again, Gorman argues that in Romans 5–8 sanctification is synonymous with the experience of being justified. But to collapse justification and sanctification together seems to miss something of the radical nature of Paul's proclamation that God "justifies the ungodly." But these questions are merely an indication of the rich and challenging nature of Gorman's reading of Paul. This book presents a vision of Paul that can truly shape the spirituality of Christians today, and pastors who read it will be richly rewarded.

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The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit. By Craig Van Gelder. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000. 207 pages. Paper. $18.99.

This accessibly written, scholarly book will serve as a helpful tool to pastors, rostered and lay leaders, and students to explore the many meanings of the word "church." Whereas authors frequently emphasize the significant connection between ecclesiology and Christology, Van Gelder's theme is that the church is God's personal presence in the world through the Spirit, stressing the intimate connection between ecclesiology and missiology. First and second articles of the creed, God's creating and redemptive activity, are less his focus than the third article: the Spirit's activity of creating a missional community. Van Gelder fully develops a missiological ecclesiology, providing history, context, and vision.

With doctorates in mission and in administration in urban affairs, Van Gelder has in this book—as well as in his career—kept the two disciplines in conversation. He helpfully outlines the functional approach and the organizational approach to the church. He notes as "functional" the current examples of "seeker-sensitive," "purpose-driven," "small-group," "user-friendly," "seven-day-a-week," and "church for the 21st century." However, he is clear: "It is my conviction that we need to move beyond trying to find the 'next' church that will help us be successful one more time. We need to rediscover something more basic about what it means to *be* the church" (p. 24).

Van Gelder provides a brief history of the development of ecclesiologies, giving examples from the pew of typical people today holding those views. This section of the book will be most helpful to those who want a succinct historical overview. (The complexity of certain of his charts hints at the author's having much more information to contribute than this small volume would allow.) Van Gelder shows how the modern conception of church as essentially denominational, organizational, and voluntaristic has shaped the thinking of most Americans as to the nature and ministry of the church.

The vision for the church the author proposes seeks to recover the biblical concept of the redemptive reign of God. He summarizes New Testament images of the church, using Paul Minear's *Images of the Church in the New Testament.* The author very briefly provides some implications for the practice of ministry, organization, and leadership of such a missiological ecclesiology. Readers, however, will primarily take from the book Van Gelder's emphases that the church's ministry flows from its nature: The church does what the church is.

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The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context. By Stanley P. Saunders and Charles L. Campbell. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000. 192 pages. Paper. $16.00.

Stanley Saunders teaches New Testament and Charles Campbell teaches homiletics at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. *The Word on the Street* arises out of encounters with homeless people in Atlanta.

The Word on the Street, a collection of essays, sermons, and reflections, offers an urgent challenge to preachers and church leaders. As Walter Brueggemann notes in the forward to the book, Saunders and Campbell envision preachers as "organic intellectuals," that is, "working academics who are intentionally connected to movements of social transformation and revolution." One central premise to their work is that preachers can and should allow themselves to be shaped through solidarity with the poor and marginalized. They are engaged in "public theology," not a public theology that embraces and supports the status quo, but public theological categories that challenge, expose, and re-imagine.

The work is divided into sections on worship, word, solidarity, and shaping the physical space of the worship/preaching environment. The section on preaching offers a good balance of theoretical frameworks, anecdotes, and sermons.

William Stringfellow inspires their understanding of the preaching activity. Stringfellow was a Harvard-educated lawyer and radical Christian who immersed himself in the life of East Harlem and practiced street law there for several years. East Harlem was the background that gave rise to groundbreaking understandings of principalities and powers for Stringfellow.

Stringfellow had no illusions about the world around him. He saw every day the predatory nature of ideologies, institutions, and images. He understood principalities and powers as created by God and given the task of sustaining human society, but fallen: They claim autonomy from God and domination over humans. They overstep their bounds and forget their createdness by trying to act as God. They become demonic and are governed by death. They take on a life of their own. "In relation to these aggressive principalities, human beings have the status of captives and victims . . ." (p. 66).

In the face of principalities and powers, resistance and hope characterize the Christian calling. One strategy of the principalities and powers Stringfellow calls "babel." "In the place of truthful speech, we encounter the propaganda of the state, the exaggerations of Madison Avenue, the doublespeak of politicians, the false claims of expertise by bureaucrats, the code language of racism, the silent secrecy of corporations, and the diversions of entertainment" (p. 67).

Living amid the principalities and the powers, it is the task of the preacher to proclaim truth. In this way, preaching is an act of resistance against the status quo and the forces of death. Preachers expose the powers of death and envision a redeemed creation. Lutherans use similar categories of law and gospel. Exposing the powers disarms them and shows them for what they truly are. An example used by the authors is Martin Luther King's strategy of getting images of violence against blacks splashed across America's TV screens. In these images, the violence of racism was exposed and lost some of its power. Envisioning a redeemed creation also is a form of resistance. It can transform the imagination, produce shocking images (the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, the poor shall inherit the earth), and undermine the powers and principalities.

Preaching amid the principalities and powers is also characterized by hope. Hope is not shallow idealism but lives among the reality of the powers of death. It is urgent and concrete. "Confronting the principalities and powers with the resurrection of Jesus, the Word of hope ultimately frees people to live humanly in the face of death" (p. 82).

The authors embrace the tradition of street preaching. They seem to use this term in two ways. First, it refers to a stance of solidarity. Street preaching arises from relationships with people on the streets. Bible study is done with homeless people, for instance, and the preacher learns to preach with the realities, concerns, and gifts of the street. Second, street preaching

refers to the actual practice of preaching on the street. The authors note that street-preaching traditions arose when the church was in transition and change was immanent, such as during the Reformation. Street preaching suggests that the Word is not just for those in the church, but the Word needs to be proclaimed outside the church walls. In one example, the authors speak of preaching and "liturgical resistance" done outside a nuclear bomber base, where proclamation of Jesus as Lord took on a heightened urgency and deeper meaning.

Filled with sample sermons, stories, and illustrations, *The Word on the Street* is a good preaching resource. Its urgent tone is a challenge to preach the Word as a form of resistance against the powers of violence and death. "Street preaching offers a clear reminder that the gospel is a strange Word that the world does not always want to hear. . . . At the same time, however, street preaching challenges the church to recapture the audacity and exhilaration of speaking the odd Word of God before the powers of the world" (p. 107). In these days of darkness, violence, and fear, *The Word on the Street* offers an encouraging and challenging message.

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The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years. By Lee I. Levine. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. xvi and 748 pages. Cloth. $60.00.

The origins of the synagogue and its earliest literature are among the major unresolved problems in the study of early Judaism. Lee I. Levine, Professor of Jewish History and Archaeology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is one of the small number of scholars who has the differing competencies needed to address the issues involved. And they are many: When, where, and how did the synagogue originate? What was the nature of synagogue worship before the destruction of the second temple? When and where did a separate synagogue structure and architecture develop? Were there local or regional variations in all this? What occasioned both mosaic and figural art in the synagogues, when Judaism is presumed to be an aniconic religion? Levine discusses all of these issues and others in this large volume.

Anyone interested in the early history of the synagogue will have to start from this volume in the future, since Levine has surveyed both the relevant ancient texts and the modern literature, himself excavated many of the early sites noted, integrated the mass of data, and presented the results in a form both comprehensive and accessible.

Part 1 of the book traces the development of the synagogue in history from its beginnings to the end of the Byzantine era. After a general introduction Levine discusses the origins of the synagogue, holding that the city gate was its matrix. At first the synagogue fulfilled a variety of functions, being close to a civic center, the result of a gradual development, not some major historical event. There follow discussions of the pre-70 synagogue in Palestine, based on literary evidence for such sites as Nazareth and Jerusalem, and the excavations at Gamla, Masada, the Herodium, Qumran, Dor, Caesarea, the region of Modi'in, and other possible sites (Capernaum, Migdal, etc.). Levine then devotes a chapter to the synagogue in the pre-70 diaspora: Egypt, Cyrene, Ostia, Rome, Delos, and Greece, Asia Minor, the Bosporus, and Syria. A long chapter, "The Second Temple Synagogue: Its Role and Functions," summarizes what can be known about activities, worship, and civic role of the synagogue in this period.

Three chapters are devoted to a discussion of the synagogue in later antiquity (post-70 through the Byzantine period), both in Palestine and in the diaspora. Here archaeological excavation of many synagogues plays a larger role, causing discussions of diversity in structures, the use of figural art, and the impact of Christianity on the synagogue.

The long Part 2 presents "The Synagogue as Institution." Here Levine discusses the synagogue as architectural order, its communal dimensions, synagogue officials, the patriarch, sages, and women in the synagogue, the role of priests, the synagogue liturgy, and the iconography of its art, and sums it up in a chapter that discusses diachronic and synchronic dimensions.

The discussion constantly engages modern scholarship on this complicated history, based on a knowledge of the literary sources, the archaeological record, and the epigraphic corpus related to the synagogue. Levine uses well-selected black-and-white illustrations at important points, gives a detailed bibliography, and provides extensive endnotes. Levine's thoughtful text is persuasive, as when he argues that women had actual leadership roles in the synagogue, not mere honorific titles.

This work will clearly be the standard work on early synagogues for the next generation. It deserves careful reading by scholars of Judaism and of the New Testament and early Christianity. It belongs in every college, university, and seminary library collection. It is an outstanding contribution to our knowledge.

Edgar Krentz
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A Global History of Christians: How Everyday Believers Experienced Their World. By Paul R. Spickard and Kevin M. Cragg, et al. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001. 486 pages. Paper. $26.99.

The objective of the authors of this attractive book is to provide neither an organizational nor an intellectual but a popular history of Christianity. Three questions are posed as guides at the outset: How have Christians experienced God in each age? How have they experienced one another? and How have they experienced the society in which they found themselves?

Despite the paucity of relevant materials at times, the authors succeed quite well in their objectives. The book is sensitive to cultural and geographical differences in Christian life, and the discussion of native African and Asian churches is extremely illuminating. Some discussion of theologians was inevitable, but the authors were careful to zero in on those individuals whose work was most influential. One brief example of their originality of approach occurs when confronted with the task of discussing contemporary theologians. Here the authors decided to focus on three theologians in the last century who made the cover of *Time* magazine—Tillich, Barth, and Niebuhr—and who, as it happens, fairly illustrate the dominant theological trends of the modern age.

If the book succeeds admirably, it is not flawless. One may question the fairness and accuracy of the claim that the Eastern Orthodox church prefers a mystical version of Christianity because of a "residue of Gnosticism" (p. 83). And the assertion that the number of Catholic nuns declined because the number of *women taking holy orders* declined (p. 416) can only have been made by someone who is unaware that in Catholicism holy orders is restricted to the male priesthood.

Despite these minor annoyances, the book is a delight to read, unusually informative, and very nicely illustrated. It would work well in the classroom or in an adult studies class on the history of Christianity or the challenges of missionary work.

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Luther's Works on CD-ROM. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. Minneapolis and St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 2001. $249.00.

It is with much excitement that Luther scholars and students greet the release of the American Edition of *Luther's Works on CD-ROM* thus making the complete 55 volumes of the *Luther's Works* available. Two benefits are immediately apparent: affordability and search capability. The price for the print edition of *Luther's Works* exceeds $1400. *LW on CD-ROM* represents savings of more than $1100. Moreover, it saves space. The 55-volume print edition takes up several bookshelves. Perhaps the most endearing feature of the digital version, however, is its search capabilities. A person interested in what Luther has to say about Christian vocation might recall that Luther said something somewhere about shoemakers but does not know where. A quick look at the Index to *Luther's Works* (vol. 55) is no help. There is no entry for "shoemaker." A search on *LW on CD-ROM*, however,

finds 24 occurrences. Moreover, the "Preview" function allows you to see the context of the occurrence so that you need not actually go to the passage to determine if it is the passage you are seeking. Furthermore, *LW on CD-ROM* offers the Luther student the possibility of searching for two words in the same passage. For example, searching for "shoemaker" and "Christian" yields 19 occurrences, or a search for "shoemaker" and "gospel" yields 6 occurrences in *Luther's Works*. Boolean and "natural-language" searches are also possible.

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Theology in the Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Thomas W. Gillespie. Edited by Wallace M. Alston Jr. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000. x and 281 pages. Cloth. $35.00.

Many pastors and church theologians might not on the face of things be drawn to a Festschrift, unless it deals with their particular field of expertise. However, this volume, a tribute to Thomas William Gillespie, recently retired president of Princeton Seminary, should find many friends within both the parish and the church-related academy. Each of the twenty-five contributions is written with Gillespie's desire that academic theology serve the mission of the church. The essays, though ecumenical in nature, are predominantly written by Presbyterian and Reformed church theologians, as would be expected. They express voices from around the world: Gustavo Gutiérrez, H. Russel Botman (South Africa), Jong Sung Rhree (Korea), Karoly Toth (Hungary), Yasuo C. Furuya (Japan) as well as leading North American, European, and British theologians including Gerhard Sauter, Thomas F. Torrance, Robert Jenson, Michael Welker, Bruce McCormack, Ellen Charry, John H. Leith, Edward I. Cardinal Cassidy, biblical scholars Patrick Miller and Eduard Schweizer, and practitioners Don Browning, Robert Wuthnow, Leanne van Dyk, David B. Watermulder, Peter J. Gomes, and David Wright.

Themes of note among the essays are Wallace Alston's contention that the pastor serves as an ambassador who allows people to reflect on the relation between faith and life in a public way. Browning claims that early Christianity helped raise the status of woman by stabilizing male responsibility in the family. If we are to continue to adhere to this ideal, then fatherhood as a vocation needs to be retrieved in contemporary society for the sake of fostering healthy family environments. Charry points out that with the post-Reformation struggle to establish scripture-as-authority over against Rome, Protestant theologians turned away from the "cure of souls" and created biblical scholasticism. Gutiérrez interprets the significance of the Medellin Conference of 1969 in order to harvest its ongoing impact on Roman Catholicism today. Jenson claims that the *real* Jesus, in deference to the quest for the *historical* Jesus, can be found not only from the Bible but also from the church's Jesus tradition. Leith argues that the question of theology's chief accountability should be to the church, not the academy. Bruce McCormack notes that theology in Reformed perspective should test doctrine in a twofold manner—by the witness of Scripture and by mutual coherence with other venues of truth. Miller writes that the imprecatory psalms help people express rage as a part of their dialogue with God, and are not to be acted upon.

Each of the essayists exudes a passion for the gospel, an appreciation of church tradition, a concern for the needs of the parish, and a desire to connect the Christian message to the wider world. The book is suitable for theological specialists, clergy, and other parish workers.

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The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11. By Richard B. Hays. The Biblical Resource Series. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, and Dearborn: Dove Books, 2002. lii and 308 pages. Paper. $25.00.

This is a welcome reprint of a significant book. In his 1983 dissertation, published by Scholars Press, Hayes argued that an implicit narrative about Jesus underlies Paul's thought and gives coherence to it. Interpreters of Paul have had to come to terms with his work since its publication, especially after he reinforced it with his *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), which argued for a broader base of Paul's theology in the Old Testament than the specific citations Paul uses.

The reprint supplements the text with a preface by Luke Timothy Johnson and an introduction in which Hayes looks back at his work in the light of subsequent discussion and research. He stresses here the apocalyptic nature of the implicit narrative (following J. Louis Martyn) and reexamines the basis for his interpretation of πίστις Χριστοῦ as a subjective genitive. The reprint also includes reprints of two papers on the phrase by James D. G. Dunn and Richard Hayes originally published in *Pauline Theology,* Vol. 4: *Looking Back, Pressing On* (Society of Biblical Literature, 1997).

I think Hayes is correct in his interpretation of the "faith of Christ" as a subjective, not an objective genitive, though I give more credence to the interpretation of *pistis* as "proof" than does Hayes. This reprint deserves wide reading; it deals with a significant topic in Pauline thought in a rewarding way—and the additions to the original edition are very helpful. Hayes fears it may be unreadable for those "outside the guild of New Testament scholarship" (p. lii); I hope he is wrong, since a reading would enrich preaching a great deal.

Edgar Krentz

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Briefly Noted

The Bible in Translation. Ancient and English Versions. By Bruce M. Metzger (Baker Academic, $14.99). Part 1 of this book describes all of the ancient versions of the Bible that have survived until today, and part 2 discusses a selection of the English versions (there are more than sixty of the whole Bible and more than eighty of the New Testament). Portions of the Bible are available in 1,862 languages and dialects; the entire Bible in 371 languages and dialects. The last complete version described is the NRSV for which M. served as chair of the translation committee. The descriptions and characterizations are clear, fair, and helpful. This belongs in church libraries. *RWK*

Worship Music: A Concise Dictionary. Edited by Edward Foley, Capuchin (Liturgical Press, $45). The focus of this dictionary is the worship music of English-speaking North Americans, both Jewish and Christian. There are entries on hymnody; influential composers, performers and scholars; technical terms; and other aspects of worship connected to music. Gleanings: Catherine Winkworth translated 400 hymns and Charles Wesley composed over 6,000; Egeria (4th c.) provides early information on the use of *Kyrie eleison* in worship; Richard Allen published the first anthology of hymns for African American Protestant worship in 1801; Zwingli was the best musician among the reformers; *chazzan* is the Hebrew word for cantor, with the first female cantor appearing in 1976 in Reform Judaism. Entries are authoritative and to the point. There are more than seventy contributors, including a significant number of Lutherans. *RWK*

Joel and Obadiah. By John Barton (Westminster John Knox, $39.95). This is another fine volume in the Old Testament Library commen-

tary series. B. divides Joel into two parts: 1:1–2:27 and 2:28–3:21. The first part deals with the devastating effects of some physical disaster, while the second part is a miscellaneous collection of oracles assembled in no particular order. The book as a whole dates to the 400s B.C.E. though the first part could be somewhat earlier though still post-exilic. B. admits that the book of Obadiah with its xenophobic hatred of other nations and of Edom in particular is hard to love. Obadiah's anger was stirred by an attack on Zion, not by just any nation, but by Israel's brother-nation Edom. In addition to judgment on the enemies of Israel, Obadiah articulates Yahweh's care for the people of Israel and his good purposes for them (vv. 17–21). *RWK*

Introducing Biblical Hebrew. By Allen P. Ross (Baker, $39.99) and ***Basics of Biblical Hebrew. Grammar*** (Zondervan, $39.99) and ***Workbook*** (Zondervan, $22.99). R's textbook has 54 lessons and has an outstanding layout (large print, clear typeface, wise and selective use of transliteration). Lessons 41–54 feature excerpts from the Hebrew Bible that provide all the helps a beginning student could desire. There is a one-page summary of each lesson at the back of the book and Hebrew-English and English-Hebrew glossaries. P. and VP. present their grammar in 36 lessons, also well laid out, and accompanied by a 300-page workbook. Their paradigms use different shades of type to teach the "recognition points" used in identifying verbs, and a CD in the back of the grammar provides an answer key to the exercises in the workbook and full-color printable paradigm charts. A web site complements both the grammar and workbook at *http://www.basicsofbiblicalhebrew.com.* This textbook is meant to be a companion to Mounce's widely used *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar. RWK*

The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew. Volume 5: Mem–Nun. Edited by David J. A. Clines. (Sheffield Academic Press, $165). This massive and expensive lexicon is now half done. This volume alone runs to 957 pages and boasts more than 3,500 bibliographical references. This volume also contains 720 "new words," not occurring in the BDB lexicon, and stemming from their appearance in Ben Sirach, the Dead Sea Scrolls, or Hebrew inscriptions, or new words proposed by modern scholars. Every occurrence of the words in this volume is cited, except for the preposition *min,* which occurs more than 9,000 times in Classical Hebrew. Words are defined by their meanings in specific contexts, with no attention to their appearance in cognate Semitic languages. *RWK*

Memory and Manuscript (1961), by Birger Gerhardsson, Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Lund University, argued against the prevailing view of form critics, that the oral transmission of teaching in Judaism was remarkably accurate; the canonical Gospels give us Jesus' words with historical veracity. ***The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition*** (Hendrickson. $14.95) reprints three later essays that support this view: "The Origins of the Gospel Tradition" (1977), "The Path of the Gospel Tradition" (1982), and "The Gospel Tradition" (1986). Donald Hagner's "Foreward" to the reprint points out its significance for evaluating the scholars of The Jesus Seminar, while Gerhardsson's preface surveys briefly his long work on the Gospels. A welcome reprint of works that received a divided response. *Edgar Krentz*

Marshall D. Johnson's ***Making Sense of the Bible: Literary Types as an Approach to Understanding*** (Eerdmans, $12) is a no-nonsense guide to understanding the Bible. After a short, general introduction to the Bible, Marshall discusses eight literary types: wisdom literature ("Morals, Manners, and the Good Life"), poetry ("Praise, Lament and Thanksgiving: Poetry of Worship"), [historical?] narratives ("The Appeal to the Past: Historical and Quasi-Historical Narratives"), prophetic literature ("Justice, Judgment and the Fate of Nations"), legal texts ("Regulating Life"), apocalyptic ("The Appeal to the Future"), letters ("I Want You to Know"), and gospels ("Redemptive Persuasion"). Each section includes a general introduction, discussion of some relevant biblical texts, and a section called "Reading. . . ." A brief reading list and four maps complete the book. Consider it for your parish library; it's brief, but helpful. *EK*

Preaching Helps

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Thanksgiving Day, Series A

The End

We are heading toward the end of the Church Year, and the texts for these Sundays offer vivid images of what we sometimes call "the end of the world." Human beings appear to have an insatiable curiosity about the end, about the last things, about the way things will end up for "The Late Great Planet Earth."

Among the evangelists, Matthew has the reputation for being especially interested in these matters. It is often said that he offers a "heightened apocalyptic." He does have a weakness for warning readers that some in the end will be "thrown outside into deepest darkness" or "into a blazing furnace," where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth." That threat does not occur in Mark and appears in Luke only once (13:28) but is a repeated refrain in Matthew (8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30).

Several times Matthew speaks of "the end of the age" (συντελείᾳ τοῦ αἰῶνος, 13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20). The phrase appears in the NT otherwise only in Heb 9:26. For these and other reasons, interpreters often speak of Matthew as though he viewed the story of Jesus and the history of the world through apocalyptic glasses.

It is a fact that Matthew gives the idea of judgment high profile. He places judgment scenes at or near the climax of each of the five great discourses of Jesus. So the Sermon on the Mount (I) closes with four powerful images of judgment: the narrow and wide gates, good and bad trees, renunciation of spirit-filled persons who are careless of God's will, and the houses built on sand and on rock (7:13–27). The Mission Discourse (II) concludes with words about not fearing those who can kill the body only but fearing rather the One who has power to destroy body and soul together, of confessing or denying Jesus on earth and being confessed or denied before God in heaven, of losing and finding one's life, of receiving a heavenly reward for welcoming the emissaries of Jesus on earth (10:26–42). The Parable Discourse (III) concludes with two of the sayings about "weeping and grinding teeth" and with images of angels catching and sorting through good and bad fish "at the end of the age" (13:36–50). The Community Discourse (IV) ends with the parable of the amazingly dense slave-administrator who was forgiven something like the national debt and then went out and threw into prison a fellow slave who owed him a few dollars. That slave-administrator was then thrown into prison (18:23–35).

Several of the texts for the final Sundays of the Church Year are taken from the Olivet or Eschatological Discourse of Jesus (V). In this discourse Matthew heaps up apocalyptic imagery, ending with a series of end-time parables: a servant remains in charge of the household while the master goes off on a journey of indeterminate duration (24:45–51), wise and foolish bridesmaids fall asleep while waiting for the bridegroom (25:1–13), and talents are doled out to servants to be invested during the master's absence (25:14–30).

Then comes the final paragraph of the final discourse. It offers the last of Jesus' public teaching in Matthew's Gospel: the parable or vision of the sheep and the goats (25:31–46). Here Jesus speaks more directly, less metaphorically than in those earlier passages where he spoke of building a house, weeding out the tares, sorting through fish, rejoicing in cancelled debts, purchasing sufficient oil, or investing money.

What exactly does Jesus teach in this final vision? People living in the time of Jesus and Matthew did not need to be taught that there would one day be such a thing as the last judgment. That was part of the ancient worldview. Jesus offers something new, however, when he speaks about the last judgment. He highlights the basis of the division between the sheep and the goats. He fixes attention on the criterion or standard of judgment: How have "all the nations" treated those who were "hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick or imprisoned"? These six words ring out four times in this very brief vision of the end. Here in the capstone of his public teaching Jesus declares that he, the returning "Son of Man," the coming judge of the universe, desires these works above all others and is pleased when they are done.

These works are the kinds of behaviors that Jesus means when he talks about building on the rock, being wheat and not a weed, a good fish and not a bad one, a responsive or responsible servant, a prudent bridesmaid or wise investor.

This great and climactic apocalyptic scene in Matthew's Gospel is set before our eyes by Jesus not to give us additional information about the timetable of the last days but to call us to discipleship in the here and now. That's central to the message of Jesus in every chapter of Matthew's Gospel. This gospel ends with the well-known Great Commission (28:18–20). The heart of the commission is the call to the eleven to get going in the business of "making disciples," bringing them by baptism into the new community and "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded."

Assisting us in thinking through these texts near the end of Matthew's Gospel is **Paul Bodin**, senior pastor of Emanuel Lutheran Church in Modesto, California. Paul has served in a variety of ministries, including a term as Seminary Pastor at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley. He is currently pursuing a growing interest in faith formation and spiritual direction through the Spiritual Directors' Institute at Mercy Center, an institution of the Sisters of Mercy in Burlingame, California. Paul has written for *Preaching Helps* in the past, and it is a pleasure to hear his voice in these pages once again.

In his materials Paul calls attention to an essay by Rodney Stark. I would add that that essay now appears as a chapter in a remarkable book called *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 1996). Stark's insights on the growth of the early church from Jesus to Constantine are full of images and stories that pastors will find extraordinarily useful in teaching and preaching.

Here's an example that connects with the great vision of the sheep and goats (the Gospel for Christ the King Sunday). Stark elaborates on some insights of E. A. Judge who noted that pagan philosophers of the ancient world "regarded mercy and pity as pathological emotions—defects of character to be avoided by all rational men. Since mercy involves providing *unearned* help or relief, it was contrary to justice." Judge puts it this way: "Pity was a defect of character unworthy of the wise and excusable only in those who have not yet grown up" (Stark, p. 212).

Jesus, on the contrary, declares that God is full of mercy and pity and calls us to a like mercy. Stark quotes words of Jesus in John 3:16 and words of Paul in 1 Cor 1:2. And I would note that Jesus at the end of Matthew 5 describes God as sending rain and sunshine both on the good and evil, on the just and the unjust. How irrational! How unjust! And Jesus there says that if we call ourselves "children of God," we surely want to replicate God's character and action in our own lives. If we do, then, he says, we will be "all grown up." The NRSV translates the Greek *teleios* as "perfect." But the word really does mean to be "mature" or "to have reached the goal, the *telos*." That growing up so that we reflect God's character in our lives is the "end" of which Jesus in Matthew's Gospel loves to speak.

I am grateful to Paul Bodin for reminding me of Stark's work. And I thank him for his splendid work on the texts for the final third of the Church Year. And finally, I wish all of you "good preaching."

Yours,

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Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 29, 2002

Psalm 25:1–8 (1–9 NRSV)
Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32
Philippians 2:1–13
Matthew 21:23–32

First Reading

This Gospel reading begins the first of two final arcs sweeping through Matthew's narrative that bring us to the end of our liturgical calendar. The first arc deals with the question of the authority of Jesus and the response of the faithful to Jesus that characterizes true discipleship. The second arc urges vigilant expectation for the appearance of the Son of Man and describes the final judgment.

As we set forth upon these arcs a host of exegetical decisions confronts us. Scholarship provides us with an abundant variety of approaches and assumptions from which we may select a perspective to interpret these texts. As one option among many possible, we will assume for the sake of our discussion a setting for the Gospel of Matthew in an urban church environment in northern Galilee or the nearer part of Syria—perhaps Antioch, or another urban location of similar character. Urban churches at the turn of the first century C.E. remained deeply involved in a Greek-speaking Jewish matrix; the nascent church and the nascent synagogue were not yet clearly separate. Questions of the relevance of Jewish Scripture for followers of Jesus were not finally settled, and the path of true faith in God was still being debated (as it is still today, of course).

This assumption brings the current pericope into a clearer focus: the question "Which of the two did the will of his father?" presents a criterion for distinguishing the path of authentic discipleship from among the differing options present in Matthew's community. This question and its answer prompt Jesus' response: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him." Those who listened to John and believed him learned the Father's will and so follow John on the way of righteousness into the kingdom of God.

This parable draws a clear distinction between those who give their lips to the Father's commands but do not give their hearts to the Father's will and those who may seem unlikely and rebellious but nevertheless come to know the Father's will and give their hearts to the way of righteousness. The exchange is framed in terms of the response of the chief priests and elders to Jesus' question about John, but there is more here; the question about John arises in relation to the authorities' inquiry into the source of Jesus' authority. This exchange, then, refers not only to John but also to Jesus. The authority of Jesus is that he performs and teaches the will of the Father. What Jesus says about John applies even more to himself; by hearing and believing Jesus one does the will of God and follows the way of righteousness.

The above assumption about Matthew's community also offers an insight into the possible identity of the targets of Jesus' barb here. This pericope and others like it have been used to bulwark a doctrine of supersession, teaching that the Christian church replaces the Jewish nation in the economy of God's relationship with humanity. If, however, this interaction is conceived as an encounter between various parties that have different places within a spectrum of Jewish sectarian identity rather than between people who are Jewish and people who are not Jewish, the conclusion must be different. If the conflict that Matthew's audience understands to frame this story is an internal conflict among members of the same religious community who embrace various interpretations of the authority of Jesus and the nature of righteousness, the thrust of Jesus' point can no longer be construed as anti-Jewish or supersessionist.

This story remains a sober admonition from the lips of Jesus. If it is addressed to the type of Matthean community we have envi-

sioned, the admonition is even more pointed. If the hearers of this story occupy different places along a spectrum of religious identity that ranges from a more exclusive, Torah-observant, ethnically Jewish element at one extreme to a more inclusive, less conscientious, ethnically diverse element of proselytizing Jewish and Gentile adherents to Jesus at the other extreme, the focus is internal rather than external. Thus contextualized, the story invites a more introspective response. Instead of increasing the listeners' comfort by distinguishing them clearly from an external group of unsavory opponents, it demands pointedly that the listeners examine their own response to God's sovereign authority.

Pastoral Reflections

The readings for these last weeks of our calendar invite us to consider two sermon series linked thematically. The special Sundays and occasions occur at appropriate times to mark transitions and provide some variety. One series could begin either this week or next week after the feast of St. Michael and All Angels. This series might take up the challenge posed by the last Gospel before Reformation: "Give . . . to God the things that are God's" (Matt 22:21). What are the things that are God's? How do we tell? What is true righteousness? What does it mean to follow Jesus?

The second series could begin after All Saints and continue through the end of the year, linked by the theme of hope, expectation, and vigilance as characteristics of Christian living. During these weeks our focus on expectation of the last things leads naturally into the seasonal themes of Advent. The celebration of St. Michael and All Angels (for those who observe the festival this week), Reformation, All Saints, and Thanksgiving will keep these themes from becoming repetitious or monotonous and maintain proper perspective in relation to the whole life of the church.

The Gospel this Sunday presents a striking story of two sons acting very much as we have all known sons to behave. They both changed their minds, in different directions. The story emphasizes how momentous it can be to change our minds—the importance of being free to change our minds when we are wrong and to hold on when we are right. It can be hard to know the difference.

Some of us have an easier time changing our minds than others. For many, it is hard to admit error, or to change course openly once committed. It can become very important to us that we be right. If we change our minds we admit we were not correct—it can be more important to us that we appear right than it is to change our minds and actually *be* right.

What we urgently need is the freedom to be *wrong*. If appearing correct becomes so important to us that we are reluctant to admit error, we must be freed from bondage to rectitude. This is one of the reasons that repentance is such a prominent feature of the life of faith; freedom to change our mind must become a virtue in our eyes if we are to follow the path Jesus encourages. The message of John, whom Jesus is extolling in this passage, is just that: "Repent, for the reign of God is near you" (Matt 3:2; cf. 4:17).

The Baptist is quoted as using the Greek verb *metanoeo.* It is usually translated as "repent" or as "turn around." Etymology would suggest a different emphasis, literally "to change one's mind." Etymology can be a dangerous method for determining meaning: meaning is determined by usage and context. In this case, however, etymology provides a useful illustration of what the Baptist was commanding. John urged his hearers to change their minds.

One Greek lexicon, based on modern linguistic theory and organized according to semantic domains, tells us that *metanoeo* means "To change one's way of life as a result of a complete change of thought and attitude" (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., ed. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida [New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989], 1:510). Jesus uses another Greek word in the parable for this Sunday: *metamelomai.* The same lexicon says it means "to change one's mind, to think differently." This change is near the center of the life of faith, to so love and trust Jesus that we allow the will of God to transform us in this way. The ability to change

is a valuable skill in daily life and social interaction. In the life of faith it is beyond value.

It's not too late; we can still change our minds!

St. Michael and All Angels
September 29, 2002

Psalm 103:1–5, 20–22
Daniel 10:10–14, 12:1–3
Revelation 12:7–12
Luke 10:17–20

First Reading

The television series *Touched by an Angel* is not the only influence that leads public imagination to picture angels as gentle, lovely, helpful beings that inspire only warm sentiments. If people think of angels at all these days they tend to think of such idyllic pictures. This is not the picture the Bible paints.

Consider the most common first words we hear from angels who appear to humans in biblical narrative: "Fear not." In the biblical stories these are important words, for the appearance of an angel inspires immediate fear.

Such fear is warranted. In the first place, angels are not creatures of the same order of creation as humans. The New Testament refers to "principalities and powers," and this is the level of existence to which angels are native. According to the thought of the biblical milieu, it is dangerous to mingle beings from such different orders. Humans are not the most powerful of creatures, and interaction with stronger, more powerful creatures is something we are not strong enough to undertake lightly.

Moreover, angels are not merely beings of another order, they are beings who were created to serve as God's soldiers and messengers. They are like the heralds of ancient kings, armed warriors whose mission it was to carry important orders and diplomatic messages through embattled territory. Angels are supernatural military beings—warriors and officers in God's armies. They are either those who fight in the front lines directly against supernatural powers of evil, or God's communications corps who keep vital information links open through dangerous country.

Such are Michael and his hosts. Daniel refers to Michael as a "prince," a great ruler of God's heavenly armies. In the thought world underlying the book of Daniel, each earthly nation is overseen by such a heavenly prince, and Michael is the heavenly prince who serves as the protector of Israel. Michael is among the most powerful of this nobility, for his province is the care of God's chosen nation. Only when God disciplines this nation are other princes able to prevail over Michael.

This world of Daniel is the world of the Seleucid kingdom during the time of the Maccabees. The final vision of the book of Daniel speaks of the "time, two times and half a time" —the period from the desecration of the Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes to the time of its purification and rededication. The vision explains how this apparent defeat of the faithful is not a defeat of God but part of the divine plan and fully under the control of God's forces. Michael is among the most powerful of those forces.

The text from Daniel reports an apocalyptic vision from before the time of Jesus; the text from Revelation is apocalyptic from Christian sources. Here again Michael is mentioned, portrayed this time as the commander of the heavenly armies who fight against the devil. In Revelation, also, Michael is seen to be a mighty warrior and a commander of warriors, a prince or general in the army of God.

The Gospel for this festival also speaks of such supernatural beings, but this time in reference to those who have rebelled and oppose God. The seventy return from their mission rejoicing that in the name of Jesus even the demons submit to them. Such jubilation is understandable when we remember how powerful these rebellious angels were thought to be; by themselves the seventy would have no chance against their strength. But the name of Jesus prevails. Yet the response of Jesus puts the theme for this day in perspective. Jesus says, "Do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." The seventy are protected

from the powers of evil, even the power of Satan himself, and unseen armies fight heavenly conflicts in their behalf. Nevertheless such matters are of no importance compared to the one most significant fact: their names are written in heaven.

Pastoral Reflections

Angels have currently snagged the public imagination. Funky angels, kind angels, old angels, young angels, all are easy to find in the media. *Touched by an Angel* is a popular series on television. People want to believe in angels.

There is something dangerous in this sentimental attachment. The readings for St. Michael and All Angels remind us that angels are not cute, benevolent, harmless folk wandering the earth incognito trying to earn their wings. They are powerful, dangerous beings whom God created to be warriors, sentinels, and heralds of God's reign. They were not created to serve humans but to serve God. From time to time angels *do* serve humans because it is God's will that humans be served, but that is not the main mission of angels.

Does our infatuation with angels demonstrate our tendency to replace God with less transcendent substitutes? If so, we must watch out for idolatry. Our faith and our hope do not rest on the service of angels but on the grace and power of God. Whether guardian angels dog our steps and guard us from whipping branches when we jog, as one recent advertisement portrays, is not nearly so important as whether God is with us.

There are positive lessons in these readings as well as warnings. One is a simple message that does us a world of good: we are not alone. Our world is "shrinking" noticeably every year, even every day. We communicate with our friends on the other side of the world in the twinkle of an electron. Astronauts in the International Space Station span the entire globe with a glance. If we are in a hurry and have the money, we can be almost anywhere on Earth in a day. As our world shrinks around us we begin to think of ourselves as rulers of all we survey, like the divinities of myth who encompassed the world in three strides.

It is healthy for us to be reminded of a larger universe that remains beyond our grasp. Even on this globe there are beings of whom we are oblivious, who have very little to do with us. Jesus speaks of seeing Satan's fall from heaven, an angel gone wrong, possibly long before humans existed. Other traditions speak of heavenly powers assisting God in the task of ordering the universe and guiding the paths of the planets. Much of the angelic tradition is part of an ancient worldview that we no longer share; gravity, not angelic power, keeps the worlds in their orbits in modern thought. Yet it remains true that God created life in an abundance and variety we cannot imagine. Much of that creation has little or no relation to human life, impinging on our awareness only now and again by happenstance.

Just as angels were created to serve God, and not necessarily to serve humans, the vast majority of God's creation is made to serve and glorify God without regard to human presence or need. To imagine that all the expanse of the universe we can glimpse in the night sky was made for us is hubris, unseemly and overweening pride. To imagine that all the trees and rocks were made for us to use for fruit, lumber, and building materials is equally hubris. A rock or a tree is made first to glorify God; rocks and trees exist that people never see, and they are still worthwhile in God's eyes. So it is with all creation.

All things were created by God and called to serve God in their own ways. We are not the center of creation, God is the center of creation. We may take comfort in the assurance that we are not the only ones serving, praising, and glorifying God; we have lots of company. Let us not rejoice in our mastery over those things that God has placed in our care but take comfort in our partnership with all the created orders in God's service. In all circumstances let us rejoice that our names are written in heaven!

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost October 6, 2002

Psalm 80:7–14 (7–15 NRSV)
Isaiah 5:1–7
Philippians 3:4b–14
Matthew 21:33–46

First Reading

This pericope, like the one immediately before it, has been used to support a doctrine that the Christian Church supersedes the Jewish people as the chosen of God. If Matthew is read in the context of controversy between the church and the synagogue, this interpretation may be defensible. However, if we read this text as an allegory addressed to such a community as that assumed above, this interpretation must be reconsidered. Verse 45 identifies the subject of this brief allegory with the chief priests and the Pharisees. The vital question becomes, What group are we to regard as the group represented by the chief priests and Pharisees? The supersessionist interpretation construes them as representing the Jewish people, taken as a whole. Within the kind of community we have assumed as Matthew's audience, other interpretations are at least as viable.

If we take this possibility seriously, it makes a tremendous difference in our interpretation of this passage. If Jesus is not simply pointing to a succession in which the Christian Church takes the place of the Jewish people in the economy of God's relationship with humanity, then what is Jesus trying to say?

Jesus' choice of words, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people (*ethnos*) that produces the fruits of the kingdom," may certainly be read to imply that one nation will be replaced by another. Clearly, though, even in this interpretation the new *ethnos* is not an ethnic group but rather the group of people who have accepted the stone that the builders rejected: those who have received Jesus. Why, then, should the previous tenants necessarily imply an ethnic group or nation? Jesus says that the kingdom will be taken away from "you"—second person plural—and the text clearly indicates that the chief priests and Pharisees perceived that Jesus was speaking about them. The key question becomes, then, Who *in the religious community of Matthew* might the chief priests and Pharisees represent in this story? This question is more specific than the question above.

Unfortunately, this must remain unanswered; we do not know enough about the community of Matthew to clearly identify a specific element as the target of this story. We can, however, productively speculate about what qualities set this group apart.

The tenants in the story refuse to return the proper proceeds of the vineyard to its legitimate owner. They do not receive the owner's representatives; in fact, they abuse and mistreat them. They even kill the heir. Later in this same discourse Jesus says, "Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar" (23:34–35 NRSV). Here Jesus speaks of the way in which the scribes and Pharisees treat the prophets in language strongly similar to the portrayal of the treatment of the landowner's messengers by the wicked tenants. Although the Pharisees and scribes claim the tradition of the prophets, the way in which they mistreat the contemporary prophet, John, along with their opposition to Jesus, gives the lie to their claim. Their actions align them rather with those who mistreated the prophets throughout the history of Israel. God's representatives to the wicked tenants thus correspond to the prophets. The reference to Jesus as the heir is clear.

Matthew devotes more attention than any other Gospel to the role of prophecy. The prophets are sent by God to teach God's will to those who follow in the way of righteousness. Ironically, the scribes and Pharisees, the tenant farmers in God's vineyard, who claim the right to interpret the message of the prophets

and to provide leadership among God's people, are the very ones who refuse to receive the true message of the prophets and actually mistreat the messengers. They not only refuse to receive the message, but by preventing that message from reaching the people they deny God the fruits of the vineyard—the obedience of the faithful. Ultimately their conflict with the heir, escalating now to a fever pitch, leads to his death.

With equal irony, those who claim the mantle of the prophets in Matthew's community may be those who actually refuse to hear the prophets' message and do not accord due import to the message of Jesus, the heir. Perhaps they are those who claim possession of the authentic interpretation of Jewish Scripture and tradition and do so in such a way that the true authority of Jesus is denied. Thus they are characterized as professing outward obedience to the will of God while they actually obscure the revelation of God's will in the person and teaching of Jesus.

Pastoral Reflections

This passage reminds us that we are stewards. The wicked tenants were stewards, too, responsible for cultivating the vineyard. The relation between these irresponsible stewards and the messengers they reject draws our special attention today. There is a hook in this story: the tenants' treatment of the messengers is connected with the failure of their stewardship. How may we hear that connection in our own lives?

There are many ways in which we are stewards. All that we have, even all that we are, comes from God. We are accountable for the use we make of these gifts. Thus we might think of our work in God's vineyard in any number of ways, depending upon the gift we are considering.

Tending God's vineyard might very well be interpreted to refer to our stewardship of creation. Especially if last week was observed as St. Michael and All Angels, this could be an appropriate implication to explore. If all things are created by God to bring glory and praise to God, we should consider whether we so care for the parts of creation in our control that they bring greater glory and praise to God. This is one of many perspectives Scripture may bring to our consideration of ecological ethics and the care of creation.

God calls us to other concerns as well. The Gospels all make God's care for the poor and needy manifest. If God holds us responsible for our care of creation, how much more will God hold us accountable for our care of one another? The poor are ever with us, so that we are unlikely to banish human problems like poverty, homelessness, and despair. However, we do have the power to affect the lives of those who are afflicted with these plagues. How we use that power, those gifts, is one element in determining how faithful we are in the care of God's vineyard. Some of the most precious things growing in that vineyard on Earth are the people.

Yet another facet of stewardship draws our attention here, though; it relates to the hook of those messengers. What does that hook draw forth from us? What is it that the prophets give us for which we are responsible?

When we state the question in this way, the answer emerges. If the messengers are God's prophets and apostles, even Jesus himself, then God pays attention to how we receive them. The Word of God, the message of God's love and concern for us and our world, is also a gift of which we are stewards. Paul writes in much this way in 1 Corinthians 4, where he speaks of his apostleship; he states that as an apostle and messenger of the good news he is a steward of the mysteries of God. He does not care how the Corinthians judge him, he is concerned about how God judges him: whether he has been faithful in his stewardship of the message of God's love and forgiveness. If he faithfully receives and passes along this message, his conscience is clear.

If we are responsible to render care to our needy neighbors by offering them food, drink, shelter, and consolation, how much more are we responsible to render to them the consolation of God's message of love and forgiveness. This message is the most precious of the gifts God gives to us. It is the one with which God sent the Son. If God expects us to make good use of our less important gifts as stewards of creation and of one another, God will

certainly expect us to make good use of this even more wonderful gift.

Our stewardship of this message is two-fold. First, we are accountable for how we ourselves respond to the messengers. These messengers come from one to whom we owe respect, attention, and obedience. Do we receive the message gladly? Do we listen carefully and do our best to put the message into effect? Do we mull it over and allow it to influence the way we live and work? Do we allow it to transform our lives, to turn us in God's direction? Or do we make a big show of receiving the messenger, then put the neglected letter away in a cardboard box somewhere while we go on with more pressing business? The next time the messenger knocks, do we grow impatient and fail to listen?

Just as important is the second part of our stewardship: Do we share the message with others who need it, so that God's intentions for our vineyard are fully realized? There are lots of others working in the vineyard—some have not heard the instructions. We can blame them for not paying attention and just see to our own work, but is that good stewardship? Should we not rather share our treasure so that the whole vineyard benefits? When the owner comes to collect the fruit, our stewardship will make a difference.

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost October 13, 2002

Psalm 23
Isaiah 25:1–9
Philippians 4:1–9
Matthew 22:1–14

First Reading

This parable (actually another brief allegory) poses a baffling question of interpretation. How can we understand the incident of the wedding garment? Modern readers perceive shades of the haughty *maitre d'hotel* looking disdainfully at a poorly-dressed diner with no jacket or tie. In this context such a rejection seems incongruous, even offensive.

A careful reading suggests a different meaning. Again the theme is God's rejection of those who reject God's will. The kingdom of heaven is likened to a wedding feast for the king's son. In the context of the narrative the invited guests unmistakably represent the same people as the wicked tenants of the previous pericope. The resemblance of this language to that of the previous passage cannot be missed. When the feast is announced, they do not share in the king's celebration for his son but instead find their own affairs more compelling: "But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them." In great wrath, the king destroys them and their city.

The king still intends a suitable celebration for his son, though, so the previously invited guests are replaced with others who *will* respond to the king's invitation. All whom the king's slaves encounter in the main streets of the kingdom are bidden to the feast. No longer is the invitation limited to those who are in some way worthy or significant; the unworthy, the insignificant, the unsavory are included. The son's wedding must be celebrated extravagantly.

Again the identity of those originally invited is open to interpretation. Whoever they may be, they will be those who would be considered "suitable." In the context of God's reign and the message of the prophets, one would assume that they represent the pious ones, fastidious about religious duties and observances. These would seem the most likely to be righteous. In Matthew's community, perhaps they are the ones most outspoken about adherence to Torah and ancient tradition and least willing to entertain new teachings. The later guests, gathered from the streets, would be less fastidious—less righteous, at least in outward appearance. Perhaps even unsavory outsiders and Gentiles are among this number. Yet they are ready to hear the summons and answer the invitation.

Once the guests have assembled and the groom has arrived, the feast begins. The guests will be expected to join in the festivities and make it an extravagant occasion, for the

king's son has been married. But the king finds one guest who is not taking part in the celebration. Like the one at a New Year's party who refuses to wear the funny hat and blow on the noisemaker, this guest has not put on a party garment. The guest has answered the king's invitation and come to the feast but is not celebrating! The king is outraged and has this guest punished, not because the guest is poorly dressed, or poor, but because the guest has not entered into the spirit of celebration.

Like the first son in the first pericope of this arc, the disgraced guest has promptly answered the command of the king—but has not followed through to do the king's will at the feast. As Jesus said in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." The way of righteousness is to hear and to do the will of God. Just as it is possible to come to a feast without joining in the celebration, so it is possible to acknowledge that Jesus makes known the will of God, to acknowledge the authority of Jesus, and still not follow God's will. This is the offense of the guest who wears no wedding garment.

Thus in the community of Matthew's Gospel there are some who reject Jesus outright. There are others who claim the right to authoritatively interpret Scripture and prophecy but fail to understand God's purpose and so mislead others who would believe. In this little allegory we also learn that there are some who profess to accept Jesus and his teaching but do not alter their way of living to do the will of God. They refuse to celebrate with the son.

Pastoral Reflections

The wedding-garment episode can provide a real stumbling block. As we focus in this short series on what it means to give to God the things that are God's, perhaps it is best to organize at least part of this sermon around that troublesome garment.

Last New Year's Eve we stayed at an inn away from home; it fell in the middle of a holiday vacation. The inn provided a New Year's Eve feast for its guests, complete with English-style party favors. At each place was a cracker—not the kind one eats. This kind of cracker looks like a giant wrapped toffee, but it is really a hollow tube containing surprises. When the ends of the wrapping are pulled firmly apart the cracker bursts open with a loud pop and the surprises spill out. These crackers included little toys, some jokes and fortunes, and a party hat and noise makers.

Each guest responded a little differently. Some were like children at play time. They clapped their hands and laughed when the cracker popped, and eagerly pawed through the contents. They immediately put on the party hat and tried the noisemaker to see what kind of sound it made. Their enthusiasm was unmistakable—they all seemed to enjoy the evening immensely.

Other guests were at the other extreme. Some didn't even pull the cracker. Some opened the cracker and poked and prodded the contents a bit before firmly putting it aside and turning to more serious concerns. These people didn't seem to enjoy the evening very much.

Most of us fell somewhere between these extremes. Embarrassing as it was to act like children, it was obviously expected of us. Once the hats were on our heads the embarrassment passed and the fun began. Putting on the hat and sounding the noisemaker cast a different light on the evening. We celebrated.

This memory comes to mind in relation to the wedding garment. This incident in the story bothers many people. Why would the king care what the guest was wearing? He sent his slaves to gather everybody they could find from the streets of the city; surely the king knew that some would respond who were down on their luck and had no nice party clothes to wear. Does God pay attention to such outward irrelevancies? Doesn't God welcome all people, regardless of their wealth or poverty, cleanliness or filth? Isn't that the point?

We stumble here, perhaps, because we read our own biases into the king's action. We would be upset if somebody intruded on our son's wedding reception without bothering to dress nicely. We expect that God would do better, but we assume that our own biases are the ones at work here.

There is another interpretation, though. Those sober guests at the New Year's Eve party had colorful hats to wear and noisemakers to toot and rattle, and they chose not to. They didn't get into the spirit of the evening's celebration. Perhaps they were traveling on serious business and preoccupied, or in town for a funeral and in no mood for a party. Maybe they were just embarrassed. The point is, they did not enter into the celebration.

At least one way to regard the king's reaction is to think about it this way. The king's displeasure was not prompted by a man who could not afford a rich garment. The king was upset because somebody had accepted his invitation to the feast for his son but refused to enter the spirit of the celebration, who simply would not put on the funny hat and cheer.

Jesus invites us to a great celebration of the reign of God. What does it mean to accept the invitation and enter into the spirit of the celebration? If we don't enter into the spirit of the thing, have we really accepted, or are we just going through the motions? These are among the questions this text poses.

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost October 20, 2002

Psalm 96:1–9 [10–13]
Isaiah 45:1–7
1 Thessalonians 1:1–10
Matthew 22:15–22

First Reading

In this reading the growing conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities finally comes to the breaking point. The Pharisees and the Herodians plot to entrap Jesus so that they might do away with him. The question about taxes is an effort to trick Jesus into saying something they can use against him. Jesus sees the trap clearly and avoids it, confounding his questioners so that they leave in dismay.

This passage is not difficult; the narrative is quite clear and the function it serves in Matthew's story of Jesus unmistakable. There are a few points, however, that bear notice.

Jesus' questioners are the disciples of the Pharisees and Herodians. It is worth noting that these two groups had no great fondness for one another. The Pharisees were, in fact, opponents of the Herodians in some ways. The Pharisees were honored in Jewish society, and their teachings were regarded with respect. They devoted themselves to the study of Jewish Scriptures, their interpretation and preservation. They looked upon both the temple authorities and Herod's government with some suspicion, for they found much to criticize in the lack of true piety among the first and in the secularization and close relations with gentile Romans among the second. The Sadducees, the main supporters of the temple and its institutions, did not accept all the traditions and teachings of the Pharisees. Herod's party was not concerned with religious purity as much as with political power and civil order. It is remarkable, then, that the Pharisees and the Herodians are cooperating here to deal with Jesus. The ministry of Jesus has offended them both, and they unite against what they perceive as a common threat.

The trick question is itself noteworthy. After they set Jesus up with the duplicitous observation that he shows no deference and regards all people without partiality, the messengers ask whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. Perhaps they are playing to the crowd here; although Judea itself is peaceful enough at this time, there is always resentment by occupied peoples of the occupying government. People are not thrilled to pay taxes at any time, and tax collectors were especially despised in occupied Judea. The question is loaded with emotional freight; the questioners are perhaps counting on the sentiment of the crowds to affect Jesus.

Even more noteworthy is the precise wording of the question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" In other words, Does Jewish law allow one to pay taxes to the Roman emperor? The question amounts to asking whether it is God's will that the faithful pay taxes to the Roman emperor. They are asking Jesus to say whether God supports the Roman occupation and rule of Jewish territory.

The answer Jesus offers is careful. After making note of the image stamped upon the Roman coins used to pay the tax, Jesus replies: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Ingeniously Jesus dodges the question. If the question is, "Does God support the Roman rule?" then Jesus has not answered. The coins are Roman coins; the Romans made them, and the Romans say what should be done with them. God has other concerns.

The final point to note is what Jesus means by "the things that are God's." Only a few verses later, in answer to another testing question, Jesus says, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." This interchange is a part of Jesus' last encounter with the Jewish authorities before his betrayal and passion. The exchange leads directly into Jesus' diatribe against the scribes and Pharisees, and here he states again exactly what it is that God wants from the faithful: to love God and do God's will. Jesus' critique of the Pharisees is that they know God's will and don't do it. Jesus urges his listeners to follow the teachings of the Pharisees but not their example. They say the right words but themselves don't understand what they have said. Thus Jesus' answer to the question of the emperor's tax amounts to an accusation against his questioners: "Give to God the things that are God's—because you are not doing that now."

Pastoral Reflections

C. S. Lewis wrote prolifically in many genres. He is best known among Christians for his theological and apologetic writings, but he also wrote a series of very good children's books and three books that many consider to be science fiction. The final book of this trilogy Lewis himself called a fairy tale for adults: *That Hideous Strength.*

In this book one of the characters, a man named Ransom who is the narrative link among the three books, is comforting a troubled women who has come to him in terrible distress of soul. Her life is changing: her marriage isn't satisfying, her career is at a standstill, and she seems unable to maintain her independent standing as her own person in a world that regards women as mere ornaments to the successful life of a husband. She is questioning all her assumptions and even fears she is losing her mind. Ransom is having a decidedly unnerving influence on her. Ransom is a Christian, and she feels a growing attraction to his faith and affiliation with his cause. If she succumbs, her life is unmade, but she is drawn, even compelled. At one point she is about to embark on a very dangerous errand, and Ransom encourages her to commend herself to God's care. She is reluctant to do this and asks if she can't just express her commitment to Ransom himself and his cause—she really doesn't consider herself a religious person.

Ransom's answer is intriguing. He tells her that her solemn commitment to his cause will suffice for the present, but it won't do forever, nor indeed for very long. Sooner or later she will have to face the hard decision, because God will not be satisfied with just part of her; God insists on having all of her.

"Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Exactly what is it that belongs to God? What does God think? Ransom's answer bears consideration in relation to this question. If we follow that logic, God is not satisfied with our possessions or even with a piece of our heart. God will have the whole thing, given without reservation.

As long as we ask ourselves the question, "Is that enough?" it isn't. The very question implies a limit, a place where we want to stop and draw a line. "Up to here, God, it's all yours, but past this line I want for myself!" That won't work.

This is not to imply that God doesn't want us to take care of ourselves; far from it. We are precious in God's sight. God expects us to care for all the precious things we receive, ourselves included. If we neglect our health, if we fail to rest, if we don't nourish our bodies and our spirits, then we fail not only ourselves but also our responsibility to God. God expects us to take good care of ourselves. There

is an old song that urges us to button up our overcoats and take good care of ourselves—and why? Because "You belong to me!"

Godly stewardship of our own well-being should be, then, a faithful response to God rather than a matter of self-concern. It is often important to set boundaries in our lives, to limit the complications of interpersonal responsibilities and obligations, but this won't do between us and God. God won't tolerate boundaries that try to wall off parts of our lives from God's delight. God takes unlimited delight in us and wants to let that delight spread throughout all aspects of our lives. If we set boundaries and try to limit what is God's and what we keep for ourselves alone, we restrict the flow of God's delight, and we also limit our own joy in God's presence.

The whole of our lives in faith can be seen as a long process of removing those boundaries we set to wall off parts of ourselves from God. That's what penitence is about. That is the essence also of prayer and devotion, letting God into all aspects of our lives. What are the things that are God's? Everything is God's, and God will have it all.

Reformation Sunday
October 27, 2002

Psalm 46
Jeremiah 31:31–34
Romans 3:19–28
John 8:31–36

First Reading

The readings for Reformation focus on the central reality of God's grace as the foundation for our relationship with the Divine, rediscovered and reemphasized by the reformers in the sixteenth century. This central reality is most clearly explicated in the reading from Romans. Yet there are dangers lurking here for those who would read Romans simply as a prototype of Luther's religious experience and a concise statement of Luther's doctrine of salvation by grace through faith.

Krister Stendahl, when he presented the Thomas White Currie Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Seminary in 1963, picked up themes he had published previously in 1961 in his essay "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West" (actually a translation of a Swedish essay published the year before). He later developed these lectures into the seminal essay, "Paul Among Jews and Gentiles." Taken together, these works were an opening salvo in a sustained critique of the traditional Protestant, even "Lutheran," interpretation of St. Paul. These seminal essays, later collected along with other related material and published by Fortress Press, are now required reading in courses on Pauline interpretation and theology (Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976]).

One of Stendahl's main points is salutary for our reading of St. Paul on this day. Stendahl points out simply that Paul was not Luther, and Paul's experience was not Luther's experience. This section of Romans is often read as a description of the law's attack on human conscience, leading to affliction, sorrow for sin, contrition, and repentance. Luther's concept of *anfechtung* guides our interpretation. Stendahl maintains, however, that this identity of Luther's experience with that of Paul is specious (Stendahl, p. 82). Paul was writing objectively about the human situation and objective conscience, not about his own subjective experience as a Jew under the law. In fact, Paul reports that as a Jew, even a Pharisee, far from being afflicted in conscience he instead considered himself blameless (see Phil 3:5–6). It is only in the light of Christ and the grace of God that he considers these human accomplishments as nothing. Thus, for Paul, it is grace that showed him how the law condemns, not the law that drove him to grace. Luther's experience of *anfechtung* is not a universal religious experience, and apparently not the experience of the Apostle Paul.

This understanding would transform the interpretation of this passage in Romans 3 from a description of human despair created by an afflicted conscience, driven to the grace of God in Christ by the accusation of the law, to a more objective theological proposition. Paul is offering a description of the grace of God over against hope in human accomplish-

ment, demonstrating that the gift offered by God in Christ is the one way of entrance to the new Aeon that God has initiated in Christ. He demonstrates that a proper understanding of the law in fact leads to reliance on God's grace. He is not necessarily saying, though, that the law functions to drive the sinner to grace through affliction of the human conscience and guilt.

This understanding of Romans leads us naturally into a consideration of today's Gospel. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Later he also said, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." It is knowing Christ that leads to faith. It is hearing the word of truth that leads to *metanoia*—not only repentance, but literally a change of consciousness. If *sola gratia* and *sola fide* are hallmarks of the Reformation, so is *sola scriptura.* In this passage Jesus reminds us that as Christians we seek in Scripture the word of Christ. If we abide in this word, the Son makes us free so that we will be free indeed.

Pastoral Reflections

Many of us Lutherans relish Reformation celebrations. We sing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and "God's Word Is Our Great Heritage" and glory in the conviction that Martin Luther really got it right. We especially tend to read Luther's experience of *anfechtung* and conversion as the norm for all Christian experience. The law accuses and drives us to contrition, the gospel consoles and heals with the balm of forgiveness. Thus a seminary systematics professor (Richard Jensen at Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque) once said to his class, "When you preach the law, don't preach to wound; preach to kill!"

The law/gospel hermeneutic is a powerful interpretive tool, near the heart of our theology. Yet as we work hard to reach out to a largely non-Lutheran world, we should be careful about translating that hermeneutic into subjective human experience. Not everybody experiences the affliction of the law as deep pangs of conscience. If Krister Stendahl is right, even Paul did not experience these pangs. The law, properly understood, identifies human brokenness in whatever subjective form it may take, but individual humans may not necessarily experience it as guilty conscience. Our brokenness may produce in us a sense of alienation, meaninglessness, despair, isolation, or any of a number of other subjective responses. All of them stem from our need of God.

It can be very difficult, though, to articulate another's need. If we try to describe in detail the need of our listeners, we will be frustrated. Strive as we might to find and understand the deepest needs of those whom we wish to reach, almost insurmountable obstacles stand in our way. We may know our own needs well, but not necessarily those of others. This is the hardest part of many of our efforts to reach out beyond our traditional Lutheran constituency: we have a hard time understanding others who are different from us.

Consider what Stendahl notes about Paul's experience. Paul did not come to Christ because he was afflicted with a guilty conscience and driven to the brink of despair. Paul's understanding of the law did not lead him to embrace the gospel. Paul's understanding grew out of his experience of the gospel. Paul came to see all his achievement as loss because he came to understand the surpassing value he gained through knowing Christ. He began to see the law as an accuser and caretaker when he finally understood Christ as consoler and liberator. The gospel came to Paul before he understood the theological meaning of the law, because he encountered Christ.

This has implications for our proclamation to a needy world. We have seen the effectiveness of preaching the law to kill, but there is also much to be said for careful proclamation of God's overwhelming love for all in Christ. If the example of Paul is any guide, when we show Jesus clearly to the world the world will find in Jesus that which it needs. Our task is to proclaim Christ so clearly, to announce God's love so accurately, that the message of God's love in Christ reaches through to the needy heart of our listener. The gospel, when announced in its purity, can both identify and meet the human need it will heal.

I write these words just as we are emerging from our celebration of the Paschal mystery. That second word is important, for the gift of Christ to the world is a mystery to us, beyond our understanding. It touches our hearts, but we don't fully understand how. For St. Paul it was enough that it happened. He didn't understand the mystery, either—that's why he called it a mystery. But when he encountered Christ his heart was won.

If we can proclaim the Word, telling the story so that others glimpse Jesus, God promises that the Holy Spirit will make real the mystery in the story so that those who hear will encounter the love of God in Christ. We can't win hearts—Jesus can and does.

All Saints' Sunday
November 3, 2002

Psalm 34:1–10, 22
Revelation 7:9–17
1 John 3:1–3
Matthew 5:1–12

First Reading

The theme that runs through the lessons for All Saints is the consolation of the faithful. From the blessings that Jesus pronounces in the Beatitudes, through the assurance that John announces to the children of God in the Epistle, to the vision in the Apocalypse of the multitude singing praise before the throne of God, the blessedness of all the saints is recounted. The lessons emphasize that all the faithful, those who live and those who have died, share the same hope and are united in the same blessed community—in spite of present ordeals.

In the apocalyptic vision the great multitude stands in the presence of God to sing praise. They wear festal garb and join the song of the angels and other heavenly beings in that place. They are the people who have remained faithful through a great ordeal to the point of death and are cleansed by the sacrifice of Jesus. Their privilege is to join in that blissful song. Even more encouraging to us, though, is the explanation of the elder: ". . . and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." The scene portrays the hope of those who are faithful to Christ and endure to the end.

The second lesson assures its readers that those who hope in Jesus are children of God. The focus is again toward the future, but now rooted in the present situation: the writer assures the faithful that, although we do not know what we will be, we do know that when Jesus appears we will be like him. Thus while we have no knowledge of what our future holds, we have hope. This is the hope that purifies the faithful, for the one is pure in whom those faithful hope.

The Gospel also holds a binocular focus on both the future and the present. The first lesson describes the reward of the faithful who endure, and the second describes the hope that these faithful hold as children of God. The Gospel characterizes those faithful whom God is pleased to bless as the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and those whom people revile and persecute and slander falsely on account of Jesus.

The striking thing about this list is how unremarkable each group seems. Jesus speaks of the poor in spirit, not the bold; peacemakers, not heroes; the reviled, not the renowned. Those whom God blesses are not the proud, who acknowledge no need, but rather all the ordinary people who know their need of God and seek the will of God. Notable among this assembly are those whose hearts are open to others: the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. Just as Jesus reminds us that God considers our love for one another of great importance, second only to our love for God, so also God shows boundless love to the great masses of humanity who need God's help. Just as this list of the needy tugs at our hearts, so also, Jesus reminds us, does it move the loving heart of God.

Jesus acknowledges that such people will know hard times; their faith will be sorely tried. Others will ridicule them and despise them. Yet these faithful who endure and hope in God are those whom God will bless. The vision in Revelation portrays the reward of those who have died in witness to their faith; Jesus, too, knows that faithfulness will encounter resistance, opposition, even violence. He notes, however, that the faithful who encounter such hardships stand in good company; this is the way the prophets were treated. The reward of endurance is that those who endure will be comforted by God and have their place among those who sing before the throne of the Lamb.

Pastoral Reflections

Not many congregations in this country have graveyards. Many of us encounter them only as tourists, perhaps visiting a famous one like the graveyard at Trinity Church in lower Manhattan. Yet even as a visitor, we feel something in a church graveyard unlike anything encountered in other kinds of cemeteries. Wandering among the headstones evokes a sense of the continuing presence of those past church members whose mortal remains now lie just outside their place of worship. What must it feel like to worship in a place where your grandparents were buried in the yard, and realize that one day your bones will join theirs?

Perhaps this realization prompted the practice of some congregations to hold worship on All Saints in the church graveyard. It is one way to be reminded that the body of Christ transcends physical and temporal limits, even death. What a potent way to remember that we are all one in Christ—those who live, those who have died, and those yet to be born who share the faith. Many congregations that lack graveyards provide a similar reminder by reading at All Saints worship the names of those who have died during the past year.

This is not a maudlin wallowing in sentiment but a reminder of the hope we share in our faith. Thus it is crucial that we hold up on this occasion the importance of faith. The lessons speak clearly of faith, citing the endurance of the martyrs and the teaching of Jesus, sounding a clarion call to imitate their example. On this day we should look clear-eyed at the realities of our situation in the world and the challenges that confront faith. These lessons bid us in our turn to bear our witness and endure.

This is a good time to remember the examples of the lives of the faithful. How do they testify to their faith by word and deed? Listing the names of those who have died is a good beginning, but are there not some stories we could tell? This is a day for examples.

Besides the stories of faithful friends and loved ones in our community, perhaps the stories of some well-known believers could be told, with an eye to pointing out their example. One story might remember the living; Billy Graham or Jimmy Carter are both widely respected people of faith who continue to tell of their faith by what they say and what they do. Others could be chosen, based on the situation in which you live, the perceptions of your community, and the heroes of faith that people hold dear.

There are also many examples of courage and faith from the past, people who have died in hope, faithful to their Savior. One could tell of Mother Theresa or some other respected witness to faith who has recently died. Other stories might point out the long succession of believers who all participate in that great multitude of witnesses, women and men who are remembered because of the way they lived and the way they died—in faith.

And how will the next generation come to faith? That is our part in the chain. The endurance of others has preserved this witness for us, brought us the message of hope in Christ. They faced many obstacles along the way, but they faced them with courage and strength that was beyond their own. This memory summons us to do the same. By our faith we are linked with those who have gone before and with those who will come after. By our endurance the word will reach the faithful of the future. By our testimony the world will continue to know the grace of God in Christ.

Eternity does not begin after we die. In the presence of God eternity has already begun, for God is eternal. Inasmuch as God is in our midst, we touch eternity. The Lamb is seated on the throne, and the great multitude

has begun the song. They sang it with their lives, and they sing it still in God's presence. We sing it now, and although we do not yet see it, our voices sound with theirs. Others will sing it after us, whom we do not yet know. All of us together, each voice a precious part of the mighty chorus, make that eternal song heard. It will never end.

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost November 10, 2002

Psalm 70
Amos 5:18–24
1 Thessalonians 4:13–18
Matthew 25:1–13

First Reading

This Sunday's Gospel begins the second arc through St. Matthew's narrative that will soon bring us to the end of our calendar. Three Sundays take us through all of Matthew 25, which is the second half of Jesus' eschatological discourse to the disciples.

Unlike the allegories we encountered among the conflict pericopes above, this passage is a parable. In other words, this is not a symbolic discourse in which all elements represent something else but a simple metaphoric speech with a single main point. While there are correspondences between elements of the parable and the future events Jesus is discussing, these correspondences don't bear the same weight they do in allegory. For example, the coming of the bridegroom corresponds to the parousia, but this correspondence does not carry any deep meaning apart from the structures the parable requires to make its point.

Thus, while it may be tempting to seek for meanings attached to the number of virgins, the symbolism of the lamps, the meaning of the oil, and so forth, such speculation is alien to the original genius of this passage. Such features are important characteristics of allegory, but this is not allegory—it is a parable.

The point of the parable is clear. In fact, Jesus states it openly: "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." By this parable Jesus is exhorting his followers to vigilance. It is not so much that the parousia is imminent, although early Christians certainly believed that it was, but rather that the time of the parousia is unknown. Since the culmination of the age and the full revelation of the reign of God may come at any time, it behooves us to be ready for it.

The delay of the parousia, though, must be part of the reality that lies behind this passage. While the writings of St. Paul reveal his expectation that the parousia would occur soon, sometime during that first generation before all the eyewitnesses of the resurrection had died, this can no longer be so for the writers of the Gospels and their readers. The earliest possible date for the composition of St. Matthew is more than forty years after the resurrection events. There must have been many who were weary of waiting, or whose expectation was fading. This parable addresses that weariness, that fading.

Neither the wise nor the foolish virgins had expected so long a wait; all grew drowsy and fell asleep. All expected the bridegroom, and none of them expected to wait so long. The difference between the two groups is in their preparation. The wise virgins knew that life brings many surprises, and they could not count on knowing when the bridegroom would arrive, so they prepared for contingencies. The foolish virgins counted on things going according to their expectations, so they were not prepared for the extended vigil; they were running out of oil.

Ironically, while Jesus admonishes his listeners to "Stay awake," the virgins had all fallen asleep! Some, however, were prepared and some were not. Jesus does not expect his listeners to avoid sleep but rather is telling them metaphorically to be vigilant, to be prepared. The point of this passage, especially in its historical context in the gospel community, is that Jesus is urging his listeners to live in expectation of his return at any time. When the wise virgins heard the shout they awoke ready to greet the bridegroom, for they had prepared for a long wait if that were necessary. They sustained their expectation in spite of the delay and their drowsiness, and so they were prepared.

Expectant living, then, is what Jesus urges. He does not specify in this parable exactly what that means in terms of preparation, for there is nothing suggested to correspond to the flasks of oil. Again we note that this is a parable, not allegory. While there are indications of what Jesus considers appropriate preparation in the passages that follow, such advice is not the point here. There is only one main point: your wait may be long, but the parousia is coming at a time we do not know in advance, so watch!

Pastoral Reflections

A friend in a nearby congregation of the Church of the Brethren speaks often of "functional atheism." What this concept means in my friend's usage is "living without expectation." When we devote ourselves to finding our own way in the world "as it really is" and don't expect God to intervene or even make an appearance, we live as though we believed there were no God—we have no expectation of God's action. In fact, we expect God to be inactive. We might as well believe in no God at all! When we have this negative expectation it usually fulfills itself.

Jesus promised to come again, but it has been so long since Jesus lived, died, and rose again that many of us do not expect the return of Christ in our own lifetimes. We use terms like "the second coming," "doomsday," "the end of the world," "the end of time," "the last judgment," and so forth to speak of the distant future—a future we expect to occur long after we are dead and buried. We don't really expect Jesus to come again in our lifetime. We may not even expect to see God act in our lifetime. We may couch our prayers in such terms that if we don't see God's response we will not be disappointed; "if it be thy will" is often not a statement of true submission to the will of God but rather an escape clause that allows us to continue praying even though we expect no tangible results. How would our lives be different if we expected Jesus to come, if we expected God to act?

When we do not expect God, our lives are empty of hope. We have no hope if we don't expect God to save, if we don't recognize God's presence. If our greatest expectation is to save enough money to put the kids through college, retire comfortably, and receive adequate medical care to keep us comfortable through a pleasant old age, then our hope ends with our lives. And we should not delude ourselves, for how we live reveals what it is in which we really rest our hope. If we say we expect the bridegroom to come but bring only oil enough to last until our eyes close, our actions betray us. God arrives, but our lamps have gone out and we don't notice.

If we expect the living God, our lives are filled with hope. Anticipation fills our hearts with the excitement of life. Who knows what God might do next? Who knows what exciting opportunity God might spring on me when I step out the door in the morning? Who knows what joy God might send, what love, what beauty? We don't know, but if we expect God, we face life with the confidence that God will meet us. Our lamps burn brightly.

Expectation also transforms life's trials. If our expectation is for this world only, for the success of our plans and the avoidance of disaster, then we are undone when disaster comes. Disaster always comes, for the world is fallen and we are limited. If, however, we expect the presence and action of God, disaster becomes an opportunity to live by the grace of God. When all else fails, if we live in the expectation of God's action, we will know God's presence.

Jesus invites us to live expectantly. If we live expectantly we see the evidence of God's presence all around us. When we live expectantly, we see a new blossom as a miracle from God's hand. When we live expectantly we notice God's signature in the beautiful pastel painted on the sky at sunset. When we live expectantly we hear the voice of God in the breeze that cools us on a hot day or the murmuring of the doves nesting outside our window. Most of all, when we live expectantly we notice the opportunities that *we* have to make God's presence known to others. When we expect to encounter God, we notice the appearance of God in the face of need—even our own need.

This is entirely contrary to common sense. It isn't new-age optimism or positive thinking, it is foolishness. It is foolishness if we reckon

by the harsh realities of this world. If we are realists, common sense tells us to face the world with the steely-eyed conviction that we are on our own. Common sense tells us to function as atheists because we recognize there is no rational reason to expect God. But Christians do not live by common sense. We remember that he who invites us to live expectantly is the one who bore the cross for us. Jesus demonstrated on the cross that he is trustworthy, that he backs up his promises with his life. From the cross he bids us: Watch!

Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost November 17, 2002

Psalm 90:1–8 [9–11] 12
Zephaniah 1:7, 12–18
1 Thessalonians 5:1–11
Matthew 25:14–30

First Reading

Here again we have a parable. While it is more elaborate than the previous parable, it is still not an allegory; for example, the third slave's statement that the master is harsh and demanding does not necessarily tell us anything about the character of Jesus. We devote our efforts, then, to elaborating the main point of the parable.

The master in the parable leaves for a time, entrusting resources and responsibilities to his various servitors. When he returns he receives their reports and evaluates their stewardship of what has been left in their charge. Matthew's community will hear in this parable that, while Jesus has departed for a time, he has left them with certain resources and responsibilities. Jesus will return, and when he does their stewardship will be evaluated; there will be a reckoning.

Jesus' summary statement, "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away," is troublesome for many Christians. To understand this statement we must remember that this passage is a parable. Jesus does not refer, for example, to wealth or money, nor to any other material good. The talents do not stand for anything specific in any allegorical manner. The master's pointed exchange with the third slave provides the clue we need to understand what Jesus is talking about. Though the slave knew his master's character and expectations, he did not serve his master's interests. He knew the master to be an acquisitive man, yet he did not seek to advance his master's interests; instead he sought to protect his own interests by guarding himself from failure. Thus he disappointed his master and failed in the responsibilities entrusted to him. It is for this failure that he is punished: he served his own purpose, not his master's.

We should remember at this point the great significance that Jesus attaches to "the Father's will" in the Gospel of Matthew. From the beginning of his ministry Jesus' goal is to fulfill all righteousness and accomplish the will of the Father. The way of righteousness upon which he invites his followers to embark is the way of the Father's will. To be righteous is to do the will of God. The presence of the reign of God is evident when the will of God is done. This commitment to accomplishing God's will informs every verse of the Gospel, and it certainly sheds welcome light on this parable.

Just as the purpose of the master's slaves was to advance their master's interests while he was away, so Jesus is admonishing his followers to advance the purposes of Jesus while he is away. They should not merely pursue their own interests, for they have a larger purpose in their lives. While they await the return of their master, they are still to pursue his goals: to accomplish the will of God. To that end they are each entrusted with various resources and responsibilities.

The main point of this parable, then, addresses the issue that the last parable left unclear: How does Jesus expect us to be prepared for the day of his return? We live in readiness by living as good stewards. Jesus shows that we will be prepared for the master's return if, while he is away, we make his interests our own. If we seek to know and to do the

will of God in our lives now, and live in expectation of the master's return, we are prepared.

Where does that leave us with the troubling summary statement? In the parable, the faithful slaves are given more to be faithful about. If the hearers of Jesus are entrusted to be stewards of Jesus' purposes on earth, expected to use their resources and responsibilities to that end, how would they receive more to be faithful about? This parable does not make that clear. It does imply that after the parousia there will be more work to do. The world does not come to an end, or if it does something takes its place that will also provide avenues for faithful service in which the will of God is done. Those who have been faithful in seeking and serving the will of God while they wait for Jesus will have more to do. Those who have been faithless will not.

Pastoral Reflections

In this three-sermon arc bringing us to the end of our year, we began last Sunday by considering the importance of living in expectation. This week our attention might well turn to the question, What does expectation mean for daily living? What is the oil for our lamps?

One answer to this question is suggested by the nature of the third slave's interaction with the returning master. Again we are prompted to think of ourselves as stewards, as this slave is a steward, and the story reminds us of an important element of stewardship. That is, the steward's job is to act in the proprietor's best interest and to do the will of the proprietor. Living expectantly involves making our decisions based on what the proprietor wants, so that the proprietor's return does not become an occasion of recrimination and punishment.

A fundamental component of good stewardship is the process of discernment. If we are responsible to do the will of another, the first step in fulfilling our responsibility is to discover what that will is. Discernment is the process of seeking to know God's will in a particular situation. It is a way of making decisions by searching for God's desires instead of trying to clarify and assert our own.

This may seem to some a repressive and inhumane way to proceed. Much of our social progress over the last century has sprung from the conviction that no one's will should be held in submission to another. We believe that people should be encouraged to discover their own voice, and then speak. Our passion for human rights includes a fundamental commitment to autonomy and freedom. Living in submission to another's will seems a direct contradiction of these high principles.

Women, especially, who have worked so long and hard to begin to emerge from patriarchal domination in our societies, may take offense at such assertions, and not without reason. Our religious institutions have long enforced a pattern of patriarchy that has abused women. Pleas for submission to God's will can sound very much like patriarchal demands that women deny their own gifts and submit to male authority.

Yet this is not what good stewardship is about. It *is* about seeking the will of God and striving to do it, but it is not about denying our own gifts or silencing our own voices. In fact, the proprietor in our parable applauds the first two slaves for using their gifts and boldly allowing their own inner selves to make the most of their opportunities. Stewards seek to perceive and use their best gifts and their own true, God-given selves in the ways for which God designed and made them. When we find God's will, we also find our own truest desire.

Perhaps this is the realization that led June Carter Stapleton to characterize discernment as asking that God lead us to desire that which God desires for us. According to this way of thinking about Christian decision-making as discernment, the first step ought always to be prayer. No modern steward would dream of making important decisions without consulting the owner—in our time of easy communications, managers have resources that ancient stewards couldn't dream of. No more should we think of struggling with major questions about God's purpose for us without resort to prayer. When we ask God to help us desire that which God desires for us, we can open the way to discovering our heart's deepest desire and our own greatest joy.

We too often expect that God's will is going to be unpleasant for us. We have inherited an assumption that when Jesus urged us to

deny ourselves and follow, he meant that God wants us to do difficult things that we don't really want to do, forsaking joy and happiness. This assumption prompts us to expect that what we fear is what we should do, that we should be guided by our guilt. But God invites us to joy, not to fear. God leads us by our joys at least as much as by our fears. The third slave in our parable allowed his fear to guide him, and that lead him to disaster. The others approached their tasks with boldness and gusto, and they found the joy of their master.

Christ the King
November 24, 2002

Psalm 95:1–7a
Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24
Ephesians 1:15–23
Matthew 25:31–46

First Reading

In the two preceding parables (Matt 25:1–13 and 14–30) Jesus urged vigilance until his return and showed that the way to prepare for his arrival is to seek to do his will and the Father's will while we wait. Now this final parable of the eschatological discourse specifies what the Father's will is.

Consider again the setting of the community to which Matthew was writing. In a fascinating paper written for an international conference on the Gospel of Matthew in 1989, sociologist of religion Rodney Stark graphically described the appalling situation that city dwellers faced in first-century urban settings. (Stark, "Antioch as the Social Situation for Matthew's Gospel," in *Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, ed. David L. Balch [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991], 189–210). The life expectancy in the cities of northern Palestine and Syria, cities like Antioch, was under thirty years. Living conditions were crowded and unsanitary. Drinking water was scarce and commonly contaminated. Disease was rampant. Plagues, famines, earthquakes, fires, floods, warfare, and other disasters regularly decimated the population, to the extent that four or five times each century a city would lose thirty percent or more of its residents at a stroke.

The birth rate in these cities was not sufficient to maintain a stable population, and there was a constant influx of immigrants from the countryside and from far-flung provinces. Thus there was little sense of community, no unified populace; ethnic conflict was prevalent. Such conditions created great social unrest. Riots were commonplace, as was violent crime. In the face of disaster each one would struggle in some way to survive, leaving others to their own fates. The sick would be left untended, even by their own families, and dying residents were commonly left in the street to die alone. Even the renowned physician, Galen, did not seek to treat the sick when plague struck Rome but fled to take refuge at his country estate in Asia Minor (Stark, pp. 202–4). These, then, are the circumstances in which Matthew's audience read his Gospel.

Stark suggests that his readers remember these realities and try to read verses 35 through 40 with fresh ears, as the first readers might have done: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Read in this way, these verses are radically countercultural, even revolutionary. It is hard for modern readers to recognize just how radical they are. We read the prophets and hear sentiments similar to these, and we assume that humanitarian sentiments were common in antiquity. They were not. The prophets of Israel did not find echoes in neighboring cultures, and Jesus declares that they were not heard properly even in Israel!

Jesus has previously summarized God's will in the Great Commandment: that we love God and, in accord with God's purpose, love one another. In this parable, Jesus pours concrete content into that teaching. To watch and be ready for the culmination of the age means to do God's will by loving God and one another: to feed the hungry, ease the thirsty,

show hospitality to the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned. This is not the way to get into the kingdom of God. No, this is how believers show that the reign of God is already a reality in our midst.

Pastoral Reflections

Jesus describes to us a vision of the day of judgment. At the end of the church year our attention turns to the end of all things when God takes stock and begins to make all things new.

This Sunday completes our survey of what it means to live in expectation of the return of our Lord. Last week we considered what it means to seek the will of God rather than seeking to please ourselves; this week Jesus speaks to us of the central thrust of God's purpose for us.

As noted above, Rodney Stark suggests that one of the main reasons the Christian Church as a new religious movement was able to survive and thrive was that it provided something that a society in crisis lacked. The unique genius of Christianity was that it taught and practiced love for the stranger. In the face of social chaos, Christianity provided community. In a culture where victims of plague and famine were left in the street to die, Christianity gave people the desire and courage to provide humane care for the sick and the destitute. Christianity had survival value.

These are the conclusions of a sociologist. What shall we say as preachers? Survival value isn't what matters in this story. In fact, the story Jesus tells is about the end of all things, when survival is no longer an issue. What is crucial is the will of God. Jesus makes it clear that the will of God is that we not only love God but also love one another.

The love of neighbor that Jesus urges here is not the performance of charitable actions that spring from the desire to accumulate merit in the eyes of God. This distinction is made clear by the response of those whom Jesus welcomes: they don't remember when they did it. When we do things to accumulate merit, we remember our deeds and keep close track. That isn't what Jesus is describing.

A friend traces the decline of mainline congregations in our city to the social activism of the sixties and seventies. He complains that these congregations declined because they stopped preaching the plan of salvation, personal repentance, conversion, and faith, and taught instead the false gospel of peace and social action. He points to the wild growth of nondenominational "evangelical" megachurches as evidence of his point, for to his way of thinking they faithfully preach God's plan of salvation.

Perhaps he has a point; maybe some of those mainline congregations were afflicted with excessive certainty that they could identify the will of God for our country's involvement in Southeast Asia. But my friend misses another important point. Jesus' clear teaching here is that love of God leads us inevitably to love and serve the neighbor. Adoration of God unavoidably leads us to work for the healing of the world that God made and for the care of those needy ones whom God loves, as well as for the salvation of souls.

Loving our neighbors as Jesus urges does not grow out of self-interest or the desire to accumulate merit but out of our love of God and our desire to do God's will. When we love another sincerely we desire to please them, to bring them joy and happiness. When we love God we want to bring God pleasure, to love what God loves and to seek what God seeks. Not surprisingly, when we love what God loves we find that we love one another. We love and care for others because God loves them, and it is therefore our delight to care for those whom God loves. Our love of God feeds a passion within us for those whom God also loves.

This festival of Christ the King, celebrating our joyful anticipation of that day when Christ returns to fully establish the reign of God, is a time for us to reflect on how we may embody that reign in our own lives. When the faithful in the early church embodied the reign of God to their neighbors, they changed their world and so brought the reign of God near. Today we challenge ourselves to do the same.

Thanksgiving Day (USA) November 28, 1997

Psalm 65
Deuteronomy 8:7–18
2 Corinthians 9:6–15
Luke 17:11–19

First Reading

Much has been made of the occurrence in this Luke passage of three different Greek words to describe the healing that Jesus bestowed. The three words are *katharizo* (twice), *iaomai* (once), and *sozo* (once). Jesus says to the grateful leper, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well (*sesoken se*, i.e. *sozo*)." In this statement Jesus uses a different word than the words used in the narrative of the cleansing. It is also a different word than he used to note that all ten were cleansed (*katharizo*). This variation has been seen to imply that the grateful leper experienced more than the physical healing that the others received.

Truthfully, the use of this different word cannot bear such a weight of meaning. It may indicate a change in emphasis, but the ranges of meaning for these three words overlap to a considerable extent. They can be rendered as substantially synonymous, so that the change of word selection can be construed as a stylistic matter to provide variety in expression. This is not to say that Jesus is not indicating that the grateful leper received something more or different than the others—we merely observe that the change of wording alone does not necessarily denote this meaning. We must examine the passage more carefully to judge.

Leprosy was not a single clinical disease such as we think of today. It was instead a term referring to any of a number of skin ailments. Modern Hansen's Disease (leprosy) was one of them, but many diseases that cause discoloration and lesions of the skin were also included in the same term. Modern leprosy is a progressive disease that, if it does not receive antibiotic treatment and consistent care, causes progressive disfigurement, crippling lesions, and death. Some of the other diseases called leprosy might present an appearance similar to the early stages of this dread disease, but the appearance could have been caused by other disease processes. Thus ancient leprosy did not lead inevitably to death; in fact, it could even heal and disappear spontaneously.

Leprosy was terrible in part, then, because of its unpredictable outcome. It might be a sentence of horrible death. It might be only a temporarily disfiguring condition that would disappear by itself, or it could be a chronic condition that would continue to cause ugly symptoms without mortal consequences. Another terror of leprosy, though, was that the appearance of the disease produced ritual impurity that effectively cut afflicted persons off from any contact with their previous communities or families. Lepers were completely ostracized. Only if the condition disappeared and a priest certified, after the prescribed rituals, that the impurity had been removed would lepers ever be able to resume normal interactions with other people. Thus lepers not only suffered the disease, they also bore a grave social stigma and an automatic sentence of exile for the duration of their affliction.

The cleansing of the ten was an almost unimaginable reprieve from terrible suffering. Theirs was not only physical healing but also religious and social restoration. They received their lives back. The nine who went their way to the priests were only obeying what Jesus commanded to complete their restoration. We note, however, that the text does not say that the grateful leper did not go to the priests—it only reports that he first returned to Jesus and thanked him for the gift he had received. While the narrator reports only that the Samaritan leper thanked Jesus, Jesus says that he has returned to give glory to God. In returning to thank Jesus, the leper is actually giving glory to God. Jesus calls this response faith and says that this faith has saved (*sozo*) the grateful leper.

It is the structure of the story, then, and not the selection of the word, that conveys the message that the grateful leper received more than the cleansing of the others. Once this observation is made, Jesus' choice of this word does become significant, for while the word *sozo* can refer simply to cleansing, healing, or restoration, like the other words, it is

also used to mean rescue or salvation. Unlike the nine others, the grateful leper has faith. This faith is evidenced by his return to give thanks; Jesus says that in this way he gives glory to God. The grateful leper has recognized and acknowledged the source of his blessing: God has blessed him through Jesus. He has offered the proper response for this blessing, which is gratitude, and by returning to offer that gratitude to God through Jesus he shows that he has not simply gone his way; he shows his faith. This faith has not only healed him and cleansed him from impurity, it has rescued him from despair and saved him.

Pastoral Reflections

The heart of faith is gratitude.

When Jesus applauds the gratitude of the leper who came back to say "thank you," he states that the grateful leper's faith has saved him. Faith and gratitude are inseparable; gratitude is the heart of faith.

Faith acknowledges that we receive from God everything that we need—indeed, everything that we have. For example, those of us living in California's Central Valley are keenly aware that our food supply depends on God's bounty. Perhaps in large urban centers people can lose sight of this basic reality. However, here in the midst of one of the world's most productive agricultural areas, where the overwhelming majority of our economy is dependent upon the success of farmers, we can't forget it. A year of drought reminds us that we can't make the rain fall when we need it; we can't increase the winter snow pack in the Sierra even by a single inch. The ski areas can make snow if it is cold enough, but the water they use has already been sent by God and doesn't increase the available supply. Conversely, when the rain falls too suddenly or too long the land is flooded and the crops don't get planted. If the rain falls when the almond trees are blossoming, the bees stay in their hives and the blossoms don't get pollinated and nuts cannot form. Our county is the third largest milk-producing county in the United States. When the Bible describes a land flowing with milk and honey we have a clear example to look at, and our experience reminds us that we don't control its bounty.

Faith remembers that God *does* provide this bounty, and the heart of such faith is gratitude. Luther wrote that the First Article of the Creed means: "I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil. All this he does out of his pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on my part. For all of this I am bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey him. This is most certainly true." The first element in the response to God's gracious providence that Luther lists is that we ought to thank God. Luther, too, understood gratitude as the heart of faith.

The automatic response to healing is joy and gratitude. Anybody who has been long abed with ill health will recognize this truth. When we have been ill we despair of feeling good. When we finally feel well everything feels new and different. As strength and vigor return we are filled with wonder. All ten lepers must have felt this joy and wonder at their healing. All must have overflowed with gratitude. Only one found the proper channel for his gratitude and returned to praise the source of his healing. Gratitude is essential for faith; when gratitude finds its proper channel, that is when faith is born.

The greatest gift God gives us is the gift of healing in Jesus our savior. When we receive that gift, gratitude is the natural response. When gratitude finds its proper channel and overflows in praise toward God, we call that faith. This day calls us to remember in gratitude the source of every good and perfect gift. Perhaps we gather at the meal Jesus has prepared for us and give thanks, and so receive again in faith the gift of salvation.

Responses *are welcome!*

Readers who would like to respond to any article published in *Currents* are invited to contact the editor by mail at the address below or by e-mail, rklein@lstc.edu.

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