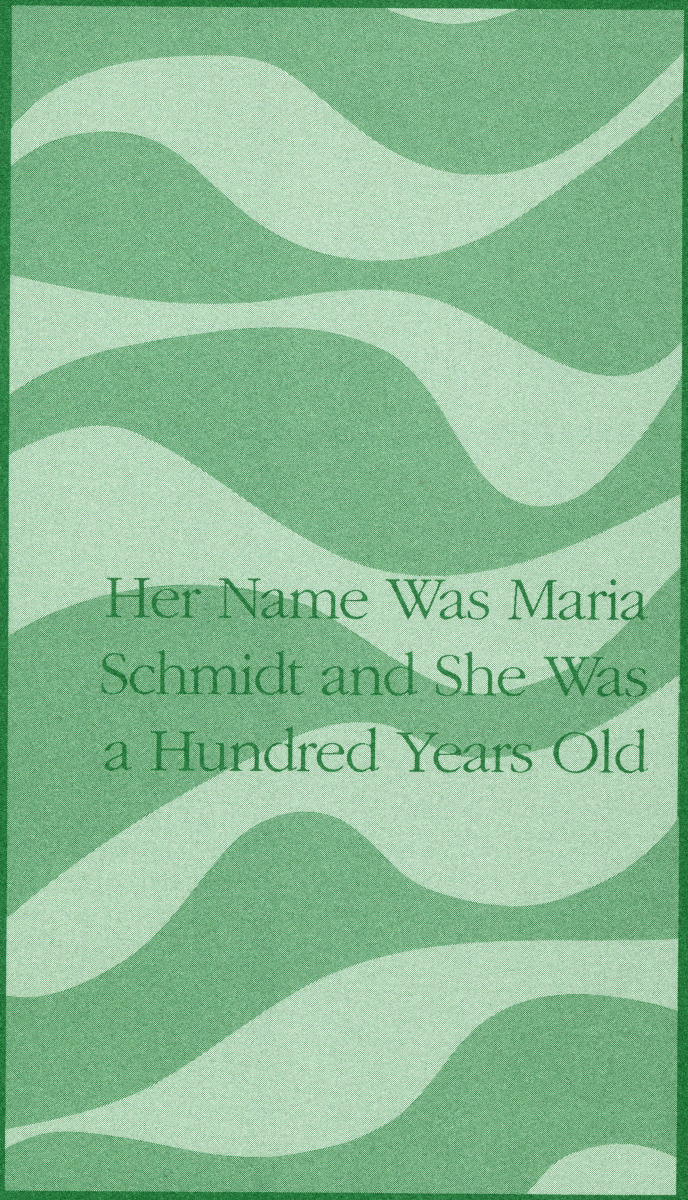
June 1999 Volume 26 Number 3



CURRENTS
in Theology and Mission

Currents

in Theology and Mission

Published by
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

in cooperation with
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Wartburg Theological Seminary

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

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

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

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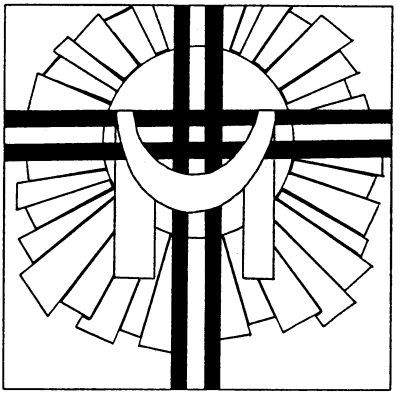
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Her Name Was Maria Schmidt and She Was a Hundred Years Old

There was a letter with her renewal order, and it started this way:

"My mother subscribed to your publication for quite some time. I lived near her and we read the Bible together every morning, and almost always she had your publication in hand to tell me about something exciting or challenging that she had read. Her name was Maria Schmidt and she was a hundred years old."

Maria died nine days after a car accident last November: "On the day the accident happened, our pastor was reading Martin Luther's comments on Psalm 118:5 (*Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place*) and gave me a copy. I read it over and over to myself, twice to my mother and also to anyone who would listen, and God has carried me through. I asked my sister if I could have mother's *Currents* when they come, and I just received one and it is like meat to the soul. . . . I wanted to write right away to subscribe for two years and to let you know why Mother will not be getting it anymore."

For twenty-six years I have been writing these editorials, and it has never seemed so important as now.

Edward H. Schroeder asks the missionary's question: Why Jesus at all? St. Paul concluded that the Unheil (the condition of anyone outside salvation) was more drastic than either Judaism or Hellenism admitted. As good as the law of Moses is, it could not justify sinners. This led to what Luther called the joyful exchange: God made Christ who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Christians claim that Jesus is necessary for healing our relationship to God and they know of no other kerygma that even makes that offer. The primal fracture in divine-human relationships necessitated a crucified and risen Messiah Jesus. Bonhoeffer is right. It is "*teuere Gnade*," costly grace.

Jay C. Rochelle introduces us to the wonders of Orthodoxy. God has condescended to be known in human form and in the church so that we might

experience salvation and sanctification. "Apophaticism" means that definitions fail to grasp God. We can receive God only by the path of humility of intellect, relinquishment of concepts, and silence before the divine Presence. Other terms too get defined and applied: hesychasm, theoria, theosis, icons, iconostasis. No church takes the wholeness of the faith more seriously than Orthodoxy. The church is the great sacrament of salvation that Christ has instituted in the world.

Steven L. Churchill wants to alert us to the mystical nature texts of Luther and reflect with us about the panentheistic presence of God in all things. We can see God in creatures, but we have no direct cognizance of the godhead. In Christ we are only beginning to recover knowledge of all creatures. This side of the grave and this side of the fall, we always live lives of beginning. Luther showed no interest in any kind of experiences in which a person is merged into one being with God-in-nature. Christ's work frees us to know and see and love God in all creatures and thereby to cease trampling earth underfoot and to use nature's gifts with thanksgiving.

Paul J. Nuechterlein introduces René Girard and his hermeneutical theories. Girard believes that human desire is mimetic, imitative, leading to rivalry and conflict. Mimetic rivalry results in mimetic violence that threatens complete self destruction within a community. This violence founds or generates all human culture. Christ's love breaks the cycle of vengeance and murder, and establishes a beachhead of mimetic obedience in the midst of the continuing mimetic rivalry. The story in Luke 9:51–62 deals not with rejection of Jesus by the Samaritans, but rather with Jesus' rejection of the kind of deep-seated prejudice expressed by his disciples against the Samaritans. Jesus came to mess up our insider/outsider games of scapegoating by identifying with the outsiders of the world. Jesus initiated a culture in which everyone is invited to take part but only through solidarity with the victims of this world's insider/outsider games.

Lois Malcolm reviews a new collection of essays on ethics by Lutheran authors who write from widely differing perspectives, compares it to one compiled half a century ago, and urges its authors to continue to explore their positions even more boldly and thoroughly than they do in these essays.

And finally, from **Judith**, the grieving daughter: "Although my church . . . is LCMS, I find that we have the important things in common.

"P. S. 'The Lord is my strength and my song and is become my salvation.' Psalm 118:14."

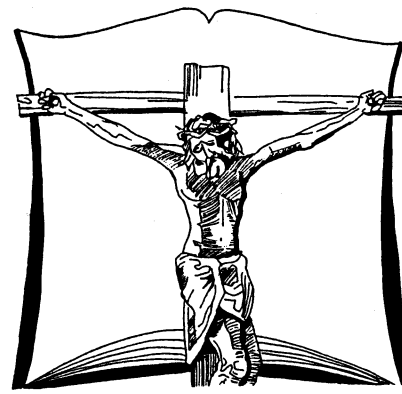
Mine, too.

Ralph W. Klein
Editor

Pluralism's Question to Christian Missions: Why Jesus at All?

Edward H. Schroeder
Saint Louis, Missouri

In Spring of 1997 the Mormons dedicated a new temple in St. Louis, Missouri, and the Bahai community opened their place of worship. Already "at home" before that in St. Louis were Hindu and Buddhist temples and several mosques, plus some twenty additional religious communities alongside those called Christian. And St. Louis is heartland U.S.A. When I was a seminarian here in the fifties it was Lake Wobegon. You were either Lutheran or Catholic. Well, there were some of the other mainliners, but St. Louis was a Catholic and Lutheran town. Not so any more. Religious pluralism is here in the heartland.



So the missionary question has come home to roost. Why Jesus? Why is Jesus necessary—for anyone?

It is a truism to say that the person of Jesus, what he did and said—and what was done to him and said about him—is at the center of what Christians bring to the mission field, whether it is in St. Louis or in Singapore, in Chicago or in Calcutta. When Christians do that, the question inevitably arises in some form or other from the receivers: "Why Jesus? What do you witnesses for your Lord offer with this Jesus that is not already present in our current state of affairs without Jesus?"

The most succinct answer to that question—already from New Testament times—was the one Greek word *euaggelion*. Rendered in English that is Good News. These two four-lettered English words are at the core of the answer to "Why Jesus?" With Jesus comes something Good and something New.

An amateur's overview

For twenty years I've been roaming as an amateur—maybe even as an alien, since I'm supposed to be a systematic theologian—within the American Society of Missiology, and its international counterpart, the International Association of Mission Studies. I've learned that answering the "Why Jesus?" question nowadays inevitably pushes you to take a position about Jesus in relation to other religions in today's marketplace. Today's missiologists, the folks who do mission study as their daily work, talk about three options: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

Exclusivism says: Jesus is the only savior. No other savior, no other religion, saves at all. There is only one way to the top of the mountain of salvation.

Inclusivism says: Jesus is the salvation in all its fullness; the salvation offered in other religions is not contrary but included in what Jesus brings. All the roads up the mountain are in some basic sense Jesus-ways. The way that calls him by name illuminates best what the other ways are all about.

Pluralism says: Jesus is one way up the mountain; there are many other ways going up there, and they get you to the top, too.

Recently missiology studies are challenging this "establishment" threefold set of options. One example is S. Mark Heim's 1996 book *Salvations*. Note the plural "s." Heim says not all religions are climbing the same mountain. There are many different mountains of salvation. Jesus is the way to the top of the Christian mountain. But Buddhists are climbing a different mountain. Nirvana is not the kingdom of God. That said, Heim does not dispute that Buddhism is the way for achieving Nirvana. Hinduism has its mountain, and so forth. But these are different mountains, different salvations.

A fundamental axiom in missiology today. Setting Heim aside for the moment, it seems to me that the dominant paradigm in the threefold set of the earlier "-isms" is rooted in the scholastic tradition of Western Christian theology. Even with such roots in a distinctively Roman Catholic theological tradition, it is widely accepted across today's ecumenical spectrum. I suggest that the axiom underlying all three options in the triad is the formula: *gratia non tollit naturam, sed perfecit*. Literally: grace does not remove or abolish nature, but perfects it. For us that says: What God's grace (including the Good News about Jesus) offers is not a replacement for what is naturally present but a fulfilling of what is already there. God's grace latches on to something already good, though not as good as it could

Every ideology, every -ism, every religion offers to help people move from a bad situation to a better one.

be, and by appropriating what is already there God's grace brings it to completeness, to 100% full-goodness.

All three of the going "-isms" build on this nature-grace premise. Exclusivism uses it to say: What's new in Jesus is that only in him is saving grace present to bring lost human nature to the perfection God intends for it. Inclusivists, starting from the same premise, see the grace present in Jesus also present in other religions, and in all cases grace is bringing nature to perfection. What is "good" in Jesus and distinctly *new* is that he is grace in absolute fullness, the perfect fullness of God's grace. Pluralists see grace present in all religions, perfecting humankind and the world in a plurality of ways. There is nothing so distinctively new or good in Jesus that is not available elsewhere as well.

This grace/nature axiom is regularly linked in today's mission theology to a revelationist framework for all of theology. God's self-revelation is understood to be what all religious searchers are seeking. If religions were to be rated, the one offering more of God's revelation would be preferred. But at present that very point is what's disputed. Yes, even the exclusivist will grant God's self-revelation in some other religions, but will deny that it is sufficient for salvation. The inclusivist and pluralist find more of God's self-revelation in other religions, even granting—as pluralists do by definition—that it is sufficient for salvation. When revelationist-minded Christians are asked "Why Jesus?" they respond: "In him we Christians have experienced God's gracious self-revelation in all its fullness. Thus we call Jesus Lord."

The reformers' alternative. Sixteenth-century Reformation theology did not directly dispute the nature-grace axiom, as far as I know, but in its Lutheran confessional writings—and in Luther too—it basically replaced it. One reason for the replacement was that there was no biblical term that fit what Greek philosophy called "nature." A second was that a "grace" which perfected such "nature" was not what the New Testament called the "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," a.k.a. "the power of God for salvation to those who trust it."

In its place (for relating what was good and new in Jesus to what God was already doing throughout human history) Lutheran theology offered its own axiom of the distinction between God's work designated "law" and God's work designated "gospel." In the earlier Lutheran confessions of 1530 and 1531 the paired terms are law and promise, St. Paul's favored set of opposites. This alternate Reformation axiom has scarcely been exploited, even by Lutheran missiologists, for its mission theology potential. What follows is an attempt to get started on the project.

Every ideology, every -ism, every religion offers to help people move from a bad situation to a better one, from perceived "un-heil" (not-healed) to desired "heil" (healing). All claim to have "good news" for humankind. Implicit in such offers is the conviction that people need help, that they've got a problem, a serious one.

Using the alternative with St. Paul as partner. From the earliest times disciples of Jesus used the word "gospel" (=good news) as the label for what they had received in their own encounter with Jesus and what they had to offer. Their good news was good and new for other people as well. They too had to answer—and had an answer—when asked: What was "good" about Jesus, and what was "new" about him?

The question in New Testament times came from two different directions: the Jewish faith community and Hellenistic religions. Christians in those days had to show how their good news measured up to these long-time favorites. To give some initial content to these two options I shall use St. Paul's own designations in 1 Corinthians. Judaism sought "signs" (signals for fulfilling God's law, ethical power) while Hellenism looked for "wisdom" (insight into the world we live in; how things really are, with an ethic appropriate to such wisdom). And each of these two offered their own good news for how to achieve what was sought.

People already practicing (and trusting?) these two options were not easily persuaded that the Christian good news was either good or new. St. Paul in the N.T. documents promoted the Christian gospel to both groups. He did not always succeed. Look at his track record in the book of Acts, or in his epistles. He was not an obvious winner either in Jewish synagogues or in Greek forums around the Mediterranean basin.

In the epistles from his hand we see him working out theological support for the goodness and the newness of the Christian gospel vis-à-vis these two major competitors. These epistles are not verbatim reports of his missionary witness to people committed to these two basic alternatives. Rather they are addressed to audiences who already claim to be Christian, but who in Paul's diagnosis of them are often moving back (have already moved back) into the Judaism or Hellenism where once they were at home. Doubtless he had given a clear answer to the question, "Why Jesus? What is good and new in Jesus?" in his original missionary preaching to these audiences. Yet it apparently didn't stick, so he is constrained to do it again. In many instances from his epistles we see that his mission congregations ostensibly see nothing so new or so good in Jesus that it cannot be merged with the good news they enjoyed in their previous Judaism or Hellenism.

In Paul's theology throughout his epistles, even when we grant the important differences of their various contexts, he claims at least two "new" elements in the message he preached. Of these two only one is actually "good news," and the other is basically "bad." Yet you don't enjoy the goodness of the good news unless you come to terms with the badness of the bad news. It's like a wonder drug for some rare disease. If you are afflicted with that rare disease, you won't see how good the wonder drug really is unless and until you come to terms with how bad the disease is that afflicts you. And it may even be that only after being healed will you say: "I now see how sick I really was."

One new element within Paul's preached theology is a deeper diagnosis. Paul sets the gauge on his theological X-ray machine to get a picture *de profundis*, out of the depths, at the deepest level of human need for salvation. That X-ray exposes "unheil" to be more drastic than either the Judaism of his own earlier years had acknowledged or the Hellenism of the world he traveled in had discovered. That deeper diagnosis was itself new, though hardly good. But it was of a piece with, a corollary to, the more profound good news he pro-

posed alongside it. That was, of course, the gospel of Jesus, the good news about Jesus, for Jews and for Greeks, something both *good* and *new*. This Jesus was "good enough," he claimed, to meet and treat the diagnosis *de profundis* that finally God's own X-ray brings to light.

> You don't enjoy the goodness of the good news unless you come to terms with the badness of the bad news.

It might be argued that in Paul's own life he first encountered the goodness of the Good News in his Damascus encounter with the risen Christ, and then extrapolated how bad the bad news must be. But we do not have enough clear signals in Paul's own writings to reconstruct how that all happened. At one place he does 'fess up to the fact that he "didn't know what sin really was," until he bumped into the "Thou shalt not covet" commandment (Rom 7:7). Paul surely had learned that commandment on his way to being "a Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil 3:5). Perhaps both came at once: Christ gifting Paul with faith-righteousness at the same time as the scales fell from his eyes to see his own original sin, a life of coveting the law's righteousness.

In Luke's report of Paul's sermon to a Jewish audience (Acts 13:39)—even if not Paul's *verba ipsissima*—we have in one sentence a summary of the good and the new about Jesus that does recur throughout Paul's epistles: "Through him [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses." This could well have been Paul's linchpin for answering the Why Jesus question to Jewish audiences.

As good as the Law of Moses is—and Paul never denigrates it—there is one thing it was incapable of doing: justifying sinners. That good and new thing comes with Jesus.

Some help from Westermann. Without getting into an extensive excursus on the full meaning of "justifying sinners," we are helped by recalling Claus Westermann's insight into Hebrew anthropology so evident in the Psalms (and articulated in Westermann's commentary on them). Humans are created for living in three primordial relationships:

Relationship #1: to others (relationships to the outside) [R-1];

Relationship #2: to self (relationship to the inside) [R-2];

Relationship #3: to their creator (relationship to God) [R-3].

Primal among these primordial relationships, of course, is R-3. Sin's fundamental fracture is at R-3. The fractures at R-2 and R-1 result from it. To be healed or not-healed at R-3 constitutes the root of being healed or not-healed in the other two—inside and outside—relationships. And conversely, sickness or health at R-1 and R-2 is symptomatic of the health/unhealth at the root, the God-side. It is the X-ray of the God-side of our human selves that goes beyond, goes deeper than, what Paul had come to see in the Judaism of his upbringing.

God's promissory words and actions culminating in the Good News about Jesus are the actual healing. A classic articulation

thereof is Paul's claim in 2 Cor 5:19 using the language of commerce: "God was in Christ balancing the world's account with himself, not reckoning people's sins against them." The mechanics of the transaction were also economic (v. 21): "God made Christ who had no sin [on his account] to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Luther recognized the fundamental economic picture here when he designated this "*der fröhlicher Wechsel*," the joyful exchange.

Consequences for missiology

So "Why Jesus?" Only in him is God not reckoning sins to sinners' accounts, as God otherwise regularly does. In Jesus the Christ, God offers sinners a joyful exchange: the sin of sinners is assumed by Christ, Christ's righteousness becomes the sinner's possession. Christians claim that Jesus is necessary for R-3 healing, and they know of no other kerygma that even makes that offer. The Christian gospel claims that healing of this primal fracture is a very costly transaction. It necessitated a crucified and risen Messiah Jesus. Bonhoeffer is right. It is "*teuere Gnade*," costly grace.

With that healing comes an entirely new prognosis, a new future, for the formerly sick one. And therewith comes another aspect of the "newness" of the gospel of Jesus. Especially vis-à-vis the alternative of Jewish religion, Paul hyped freedom. First, the grace in Jesus was a free gift with no prerequisites. Second, the life it engendered, the ethics of life in grace, had no post-requisites, either, no *ex-post-facto* "you gotta's." In ethics that too is good and new.

In dialogue with other healing proposals of our day, whether secular ones from our Western culture or the gospels of other world religions, Christian conversation partners should push the discussion to the R-3 agenda. This is not to be pessimistic, but to hear how any alternate gospel diagnoses this primal malady—if at all—and how it offers healing.

Secular gospels do not address the R-3 malady at all, for they doubt that it exists in reality. If people do claim some "God-problem," secular gospels regularly relocate it to the level of R-2 and diagnose it as illusion or neurosis. Before one can answer "Why Jesus?" here, Christians will push dialogue partners to greater depth in their own diagnosis of the human malady. Otherwise Jesus is indeed unnecessary.

There is a parallel here with classical Buddhism, I believe. Buddhism balks at seeing any genuine R-3 "bad news" at all in human historical terms. That is true, say Buddhists, because the human "self" is the problem, and any God-figure is but another Self to whom my self is related. Sorry to say, all that is illusion. Buddhism's diagnosis of humankind's problem goes only to the point of R-2 desires and R-1 suffering arising from that libidinous root. Here too the Good News of the crucified and risen Jesus is unnecessary. But, of course, the Christian claim is that the diagnosis is too shallow.

In conversation during my guest-teaching stint in Ethiopia (1995) with seminary students coming originally from African Traditional Religions—where the R-3 agenda (God-problems) is daily-life experience—I learned that the sacrificial systems for "justifying sinners" in their home culture never liberated them from the system itself. Sin always recurred, and the system of required sacrifice never stopped. With no coaxing, their answer to "Why Jesus?" was like the apostle's words in Acts 13: "Sins are never *forgiven* in transactions with the spirits; they are paid for. The good and the new about Jesus is sins forgiven,

and with him comes freedom from the pay-back system itself."

Later that year in a seminar in the USA a man was describing how greatly he had been helped in his own healing by "therapy" from psychological and psychiatric professionals. I expected him to conclude from the way he was talking that he had no need for Jesus. But I asked him anyhow: "So what's your answer, John, to the 'Why Jesus' question?" His response (with no prompting): "To get my sins forgiven. Therapy doesn't do that, can't do that."

Some initial conclusions

Back to St. Paul's words about God's new economy, namely, God's balancing accounts with sinners not by counting their trespasses but by accounting sin to the crucified Jesus in the "joyful exchange" and then vindicating Jesus at Easter. This economy is not really a "fuller" revelation of God than is encountered in God's other trespass-counting economy, including God's economy operating in other world religions. Isn't it rather something qualitatively new and different from what even Christians experience in their encounter with God's other economy in daily life? Does the joyful exchange have any genuine parallel in the goodness that is admittedly present in God's first economy, and also in what God's economy is doing in other religions?

Isn't it fundamental to the Christian gospel that it is genuinely "new wine"? If so, might that not lead to triumphalism in just a different way? Not necessarily. The Christian gospel's claim to having "better" good news is not that "we've got something better than you." No, Christian good news is linked to a realism about a "worse" diagnosis of the human bad news. Sin is more than R-1 loveless behavior, more also than R-2 wickedness in the human heart. Sin's primal reality is the sinner's God-problem [R-3], the chronic malady of not fearing, loving, or trusting God, and substituting self-fear, love, and trust in its place. The Christian claim is: "R-3 healing is needed. R-3 healing is possible. We have a story about how it happens."

That story tells of the crucified and risen Jesus, that suffices to forgive, to justify, sinners with their God-problem. Other religions—secular, new, classical, or even Christian permutations—that ignore or deny the R-3 diagnosis have no real need for the gospel's Jesus. If there are any proposals in today's religious marketplace, proposals that diagnose the human malady to its R-3 depths, they need to be listened to. And if a religion doing such depth diagnosis should also claim to have sufficient good news to fix that malady apart from the Jesus of the New Testament, that gospel would be a genuine challenge to the Christian Good News.

If alternate religions with their alternate gospels are not coping with the R-3 reality, they are scaling a different mountain. Heim just might be right—different religions, different mountains. The Good News about Jesus makes no bones about how bad the bad news is. It does not make a mole hill out of the mountain called sin. But it is not pessimism that animates Christian diagnosis about the deadly mountain that needs scaling. It is finally the Christian good news that urges such a diagnosis. It is the good news that on a particular mount outside a city set on Mount Zion, this diagnostic mountain was scaled by the crucified and risen Jesus. That's not just to say, "Good for Jesus! He made it to the top!" It's also good for sinners trusting Jesus. Such sinners are now home free, free to scale this mountain into the presence of God—finally free to climb every mountain.

Majesty, Mystery, and Mercy: An Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy

Jay C. Rochelle
St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
Allentown, Pennsylvania

What is the underlying center, the heartbeat that resounds in the icons, the smells, the vestments, the smoke, the little and great entrances in Orthodoxy? The opulence and richness of vestments and icons can overpower you so that you become disoriented rather than aware and awake to the truth conveyed through ritual. What comes through is, indeed, the mystery of the faith which addresses you through your sensitivities, but you may not be able to articulate it verbally.

The center of faith and its ramifications

At the center of Orthodox Christian faith is a double and paradoxical conviction. On one hand, God is incomprehensible and unknowable by virtue of any human power, whether that be logical reasoning, mystical insight, or psychic intuition; nothing that we can do will win either the knowledge of God or the grace God provides. On the other hand, God has condescended to be known in human form and in the church to the end that we experience salvation and sanctification. This is the miracle of faith, not that we believe doctrines and dogmas, but that the impossible has become possibility: God has entered human form through the door of humiliation. God has become available to us.

This truth of Incarnation is at the heart of the world, and this truth is better known by participation than by analysis. Fr. Alexander Schmemann insisted that people should "come and see," that doctrine should only be discussed after one has been at liturgy for six to nine months. For Orthodoxy, the proper use of reason is to contemplate God to the end that we participate in divinization and in the Truth (below).

Orthodoxy makes the crucial distinction between the *ousia* (essence) and the *energeiai* (energies, or works) of God; we can know the energies of God but never the essence of God. This concept, used already by St. Athanasius, was more amply formulated by the eighth-century theologian John of Damascus. The *locus classicus* is 2 Peter 1:3–4, which says, "His divine power has given you everything... so that you... may become participants in the divine nature," by which the Orthodox understand participation in the energies of God.

We are united to God through Christ and in the power of the Spirit, but God

remains forever mystery, beyond our time and space, beyond human language, beyond our ability to comprehend. Orthodoxy, perhaps better than any other Christian theology, supports the miraculous nature of the Incarnation and never lapses into sentimental concepts of God's presence based upon human emotion or reason. That is, just because you "feel" or "think" the Presence of God, that is no reason to conclude that your thought or feeling is accurate, since God comes among us only in condescending grace. God can never be grasped, only received.

This sense of God's incomprehensibility brings a quality of humility to Orthodoxy, a humility that manifests itself in the spiritual tradition known as *apophaticism* and in the concept of prayer known as *hesychasm*. These two things require explanation, and we will return to them later. God is indeed incomprehensible in the sense that we cannot grasp God, but we are not without the revelation of God's will and purpose. God's revelation in Christ is salvation, and hence has to do with overcoming the effects of ancestral (*propatorikon*) sin (called original sin in the West), which are corruption and death. The Orthodox never believed in inherited sin or guilt, as is true in some Western hamartiologies. If we inherit anything, it would be mortality and the propensity to sin; the Orthodox tend to see sin as individual failure and separation from God. "Original sin means that the origin of sin lies in oneself," says John Breck.[1] This is important for understanding the theology of the Orthodox communion.

According to one Greek Orthodox Catechism, the image of God consists in six things: ability to triumph over nature, the gift of reason, free choice, desire for knowledge, thirst for happiness, and eagerness for immortality.[2] The image of God is not lost but has become tarnished through sin. "The fall was heavy but not mortal. The God-like image in man became blurred, but did not altogether disappear."[3] We are inauthentic beings. The image of God is, however, not lost as was taught by the scholastic theologians in the West. Orthodoxy makes a distinction, found in the early Fathers, between the image and the likeness of God: the image is roughly analogous to being, the likeness to becoming. We are called to become God-like, once we are freed and restored as image of God; hence the role of progressive sanctification, which is very much a part of Orthodox thinking.

In and through "putting on Christ" (Gal 3:27), we receive the gift of *theosis*, which is the restoration of the original order of creation in the lives of the faithful. Lutherans have been uneasy with the teaching of theosis, because it seems to smack of works-righteousness, a cardinal sin for Lutherans. But the Orthodox use the term to refer to participation in God, which is the result of the Incarnation. We also must learn that the Orthodox think of Incarnation as the whole act of God in Christ, not merely his birth. Death and resurrection are included in the understanding of Incarnation, so that the

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[1] John Breck, "Divine Initiative: Salvation in Orthodox Theology," in *Salvation in Christ*, ed. Robert Tobias and John Meyendorff (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 110.

[2] Constantine Callinicos, *The Greek Orthodox Catechism* (New York: Greek Archdiocese of America, 1960), 22.

[3] Callinicos, *The Greek Orthodox Catechism*, 23. For a full treatment, see Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1958). The distinction between image and likeness was first made by Irenaeus, *adversus Haereses*, book V. For Origen, *de Principiis*, book IV, chapter 3, and Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* book VI, the image is given us at creation, the likeness is attained through growth toward holiness.

totality of human existence is caught up in the incarnational parabola. Theosis refers to God's act of catching us up in the Incarnation. In part, the teaching as first formulated by St. Irenaeus underscores the truth that we cease to be fully human when our relationship to God in the Spirit is lost.[4] In part, the teaching assumes the divine origin and nature of humanity: we are *restored* through redemption, we are brought to original grace. Remember, as we pointed out earlier, theosis means participation in the energies but not the essence of God; we are unable to participate in God's essence.

Incarnation and redemption belong to the one ongoing creative act of God; they are not to be separated from the whole process as individual self-standing acts of God. Out of love God enters the created order through the Incarnation to save humanity and rescue us from sin. The Greek fathers, to quote theologian John Meyendorff,

> never develop the idea [of justification] in the direction of an Anselmian theory of "satisfaction." The voluntary assumption of human mortality by the Logos was an act of God's "condescension" by which He united to Himself the whole of humanity; for, as Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, "what is not assumed is not healed, and what is united to God is saved."[5]

By grace we are progressively united to God in fulfillment of our human destiny. Lutherans, following Luther, mean by the bondage of the will that we are unable even to respond to God's call. This concept is an attempt to safeguard God's initiative in salvation. Orthodox have made the distinction, following the theologian St. Maximos the Confessor, between the natural will, which is indeed tarnished and "bound" by our sinfulness, and the gnomic will, which is able to respond to God's initiative to cooperate in salvation through faith, love, and obedience.[6] This response is what is meant by the term *synergy* in the Orthodox tradition, a concept misunderstood sorely in the Western church, especially by Protestants who think that synergy may deny the initiative of God in human salvation.[7] For the Orthodox, synergy means that we are caught up willfully in God's redeeming act in our lives. God uses our free will to complete the work of salvation. We respond to God's grace "by welcoming and interiorizing it" in our personal existence.[8]

Orthodoxy makes a distinction between the image and the likeness of God.

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[4] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson, vol. 1 in Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 385–91. See also Gustaf Wingren, *Man and Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959), 160.

[5] John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 3–75.

[6] Breck, "Divine Initiative," 110–12; cf. also John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1975), 131–51.

[7] Cf. the Introduction to *Salvation in Christ*, ed. Tobias and Meyendorff, 9–14; also Carl Volz, "Human Participation in the Divine-Human Dialogue," in the same volume, 85–104.

[8] Breck, "Divine Initiative," 117; see also Archimandrite Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Partakers of Divine Nature*, trans. Stanley Harakas (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing Co., 1976).

This is the place to note that the Orthodox, while denying any concept of or reality to a purgatory, nonetheless continue to pray for the dead, in the belief that God's work of sanctification continues beyond death.[9] The argument is that, just as in this life our spiritual growth is never-ending, so that growth proceeds beyond death. Theosis is a process. Forgiveness of sin is granted the penitent for the sake of Christ, but sin may leave long-lasting scars that require ongoing cleansing and healing. We continue to be transformed, as Paul put it in 2 Cor 3:18, "from glory to glory." Our experience of grace is always prolegomenon to deeper, fuller experiences of grace.

The revelation of God: Oneness in Trinity

All revelation has to do with salvation, in the view of the Greek fathers. Thus God has revealed the mystery of salvation and this "secret" can be known (cf. Ephesians for the "secret" motif). The ancient Greek theologians spoke of *theologia* and *economia*, by which they meant the distinction drawn in the West between the "immanent" or "essential" and the "economic" Trinity, the former referring to the inner being of God, the latter to God's actions on our behalf. Thus, God has revealed something of God's being and works of salvation, and both can be known. Note that this is not the same as participation in God's *ousia*: we are referring to revealed knowledge, not participation.

Of these two approaches, Orthodox theology focuses more on the Oneness of the inner working of the Holy Trinity (*opera ad intra indivisa sunt*) rather than upon the outer working of the individual Persons (*opera ad extra divisa sunt*), which seems to be the special focus of the West. This is a communal or relational view of the being of God, which is being recaptured in the West. The Trinity is *the* revelation of the nature of God, and without this revelation we would not have a clue to the personal, relational, and ontological nature of God beyond the ambiguous witness of the creation.

It is the ontological nature of God that is crucially important to the Orthodox. They hold that God has truly come in human form and likeness since "what is not assumed is not saved"; and, by the same revelation, it becomes clear that God has in store for us more than fellowship or forgiveness, which are existential categories of relatedness. The Orthodox hold that "God became human in order that humanity might become divine,"[10] which means that we are called to participate in the very being of God, by way of the divine energies and not the divine essence. This also means that the Incarnation is a true Incarnation of *God*: it is God who raises us all up in the cosmic event that we know as the resurrection of Christ. The true God had to become truly human in order that the truly human might become truly divine. Thus far the Nicene Creed. God had to participate fully in our being in order that we might participate fully in God's being. But now, by participation, we are restored to our rightful and proper place in the natural order as stewards and keepers of creation's household.

This view of God is dynamic: the divinity flows from Godhead (*deitas*) to the Father and to the Son and to the Spirit, and thence to create and embrace and uplift humankind. This is called the *monarchial*

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[9] See David C. Ford, *Prayer and the Departed Saints* (Mt. Hermon, CA: Conciliar Press, 1991), 10–12.

[10] See Athanasius, "On the Incarnation of the Word," in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy, vol. 3 in Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 55–110.

view of the Trinity, and it is one reason why the East rejected the *filioque* clause added to the Nicene Creed in the West. In the monarchial view, the Father *begets* the Son and *sends forth* the Spirit; to enlist the Son in sending forth the Spirit confuses the Persons, ascribing the origin of the Spirit to the Son, which contradicts the confession of the early councils.[11] As an aside, we note that their stress on the Oneness of the Holy Trinity may place the Orthodox closer to our Jewish forebears and co-religionists.

What is most noticeable in Orthodoxy is a relentless emphasis on the two central dogmas of the church: The Mystery of the Trinity and the Two Natures of Christ. At an episcopal liturgy in the Orthodox church, the bishop will bless the faithful with two candlesticks, one in his right hand with three candles to symbolize the Holy Trinity, one in his left hand with two candles to symbolize the two natures of Christ. The bishop is the sign of "right worship" (orthodoxy) and of unity in the church; as the chief teacher he is called to uphold the two central dogmas of the faith. The episcopal blessing is a picture of this view.

Orthodox spirituality: apophaticism and the hesychast tradition

In order to understand the spirituality of the East, we turn to the two concepts we mentioned earlier. We treat the apophatic tradition first.

Apophaticism is usually called the *via negativa* in the West. Saint John of the Cross (sixteenth-century Spain) used the concepts "dark night of the soul" and "dark night of the senses" to refer to this phenomenon.[12] The term apophaticism indicates a spirituality of negation whereby all definitions and categories for God are constantly destroyed or counterbalanced in the awareness that God cannot be defined. The definitions fail to grasp God. So we counter God's judgment with God's grace; we counter God's transcendence with God's immanence. In other words, there is an awareness that God cannot be grasped in essence, and so we let concepts go, one after the other, in order that the Living God may confront us as Presence in each moment of our existence. This mysticism insists that union with God does not occur through conceptual knowledge but by an intimate, experiential knowledge in which God comes to us. God, so to speak, steps out of transcendence to become immanent in our lives, but by God's will and not by our bidding.[13]

This spirituality is shared East and West, but it manifests itself in peculiar ways in each tradition. In the East it leads to an ultimate silence of the human before the awesome Mystery of God. The further we attempt to grasp God by the intellect, the more God recedes into the divine darkness, what the fourteenth-century English classic calls *The Cloud of Unknowing*.[14] Apophatic spirituality matches the humiliation (*kenosis*) that God underwent in becoming fully human. As God became human and thus entered the realm of ambiguity and speech, so we can receive God only by the path of

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[11] On the Trinity, see Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1978), 27–50, and Dmitriu Staniloae, *Theology and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1980), 73–108.

[12] John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1957).

[13] See Urban T. Holmes, *A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 1–13; George Maloney, *Pilgrimage of the Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 26f., 232f.

[14] *The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. and with introduction by Clifton Walters (Baltimore: Penguin, 1961).

humility of intellect, relinquishment of concepts, and silence before the divine Presence.

This silence and its concomitant simplicity became the heart of the monastic movement and the spirituality of the East; it forms a true counterpoint to the words and melody and the opulent art of the divine liturgy. To this Western eye, it is almost as if the liturgy were filled up with meaning only to be emptied out into the divine silence. The silence is called, in Greek, *hesychia*, and it means also calmness, rest, centeredness.[15] Hesychast spirituality has two main parts: the first is detachment, which is characterized as *apatheia*, which means "passionlessness" but really indicates that we are available to all sorts and conditions of people and natural phenomena. According to Evagrius of Pontus, a fourth-century monastic organizer and spiritual writer, "apatheia is simply the domination of the passions in us that are opposed to charity. It withdraws us from the domination of demons to give us back to that of God. It suppresses nothing of the most natural human feelings, but it purifies them in taking away from them anything that is disordered."[16]

The second part of hesychasm is the integration of one's inward being. The point here is that we are recollected—body, soul, and spirit—in order to be at the disposal of the work of the Trinity indwelling us. In order for this to occur, according to the tradition, we must live in a sobriety (*neosis*) that rules over our thoughts. Gregory of Nyssa called our awareness of God's presence "sober inebriation."[17]

Hesychast spirituality also affirms that the divine illumination fills us with light. We experience this illumination in the midst of the emptying, quiescent stance that is characteristic of hesychasm. This double movement is experienced as a single process. The light, called the Light of Tabor, is assumed to be a sign of most intimate union with the indwelling Trinity. For Gregory Palamas, it was the symbol of divinization. Gregory was quick to add that the light was at work in the life of every Christian, even if it is not experienced, since our experience cannot be the criterion of God's action in our lives.[18]

The Jesus Prayer (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner) is integral to hesychast spirituality, particularly as it was revived in the thirteenth century by the monks of Mount Athos, and as this is reflected in the writings of Symeon "the new theologian."[19] Repeated mantra-like until it becomes one with your breathing and ultimately with your heartbeat, this prayer is a way to empty the mind and the soul for the self-presencing of God. It prepares us to be receptive to the indwelling

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[15] On hesychasm, see Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Place of the Heart*, trans. Fr. Stephen Bigham (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1988), 81–103; Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God* (Leighton Buzzard: Faith Press, 1963); and George Maloney, *Russian Hesychasm: The Spirituality of Nil Sorsky* (Mouton: The Hague, 1973).

[16] Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers* (New York: Seabury, 1982), 386.

[17] Cf. Jean Danielou, *From Glory to Glory* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1979), 33–46. The principal text is Gregory of Nyssa, Song of Songs, sermon #9.

[18] John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1974).

[19] See *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*, trans. E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1951); also Kallistos Ware, "The Origins of the Jesus Prayer: Diadochus, Gaza, Sinai," 175ff. in *the Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold S.J. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Presence. The Jesus Prayer is also called the prayer of the heart. One classic writing on the Jesus Prayer is called *The Way of A Pilgrim.*[20] It is an anonymous treatise by a nineteenth-century Russian, available in English translation since the 1930s.[21]

The Jesus Prayer is such a compelling model because it emphasizes the basics of faith in a short, memorable, and scriptural form (see Mt 9:27, Lk 13:18, Phil 2:9f.). "Lord" reminds us of the *transcendence* of God, who is known *immanently* in Jesus Christ. The quality of God's *mercy to save*, known in Christ, is underscored, and human sinfulness is taken into consideration. All this is accomplished in a short prayer whose use in coordination with breathing and the beating of one's heart reminds us that we are a psychosomatic unity. As George Maloney, a Roman Catholic scholar whose lifelong subject has been Eastern spirituality, writes in *Pilgrimage of the Heart*, "This method was a natural conclusion from the Semitic roots of Christianity that matter is a diaphany or point through which God's loving presence could shine forth to touch and transform the believing, purified Christians into loving children of God."[22]

Orthodox spirituality is marked by a contemplative element that is called *theoria*, a Greek word that means "beholding." Theoria is a contemplation of the inner being of all things as they coinhere in God. Thus one may contemplate nature (*theoria physika*) as the manifestation of the divine Logos in material things; one may contemplate the Holy Trinity (*theoria theologica*) as the consummation and author of the Logos in all things.[23] This concept goes back to Origen and Clement of Alexandria (third century C.E.) who taught that the Logos was like a seed of God which infused and was discoverable in all natural phenomena, and which was known in the heroes and movement of the Old Testament world,

The Jesus Prayer is a compelling model because it emphasizes the basics of faith in a short, memorable, and scriptural form.

before attaining full incarnation in the figure of Jesus Christ.[24] Thus there is a role for contemplation of the natural world, though it bears no saving grace. Such contemplation leads us to the feet of Christ, like the law in Galatians. An image: the seeds that

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[20] *The Way of A Pilgrim*, trans. R. M. French (New York: Harper & Brothers, n.d.).

[21] Additional writings on the Jesus Prayer include Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus*, trans. Father Lazarus (London: Watkins, 1965); A Monk of the Orthodox Church, *On the Invocation of the Name of Jesus* (London: Fellowship of SS Alban & Sergius, n.d.); A Priest of the Byzantine Church, *Reflections on the Jesus Prayer* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1978); Per-Olof Sjogren, *The Jesus Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); Kallistos Ware, "The Power of the Name," in Behr-Sigel, *The Place of the Heart*, 133–72.

[22] George Maloney, *Pilgrimage of the Heart*, 25.

[23] Cf. John Breck, *The Power of the Word* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1986), 93–113; also Maloney, *Pilgrimage of the Heart*, 17, 57f.

[24] The principle is found *in nuce* in Justin Martyr, *Apology* I.23, 46; II.13; then see Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 8, *Protreptikos* 1; *Paedogogus* 1; Origen, *Commentary on John 1, Contra Celsum* 6.

take to the air when dandelions shed in the spring; they all return to their source in the dandelion flower. So it is with the Logos.

The role of icons in Eastern spirituality

Icons are problematic for those who grew up in the aniconic tradition, of which most Protestant churches would be examples. The iconic tradition of the East eschews three-dimensional statuary in the belief that this is too lifelike and encourages idolatry, but the tradition encourages the devotional use of two-dimensional painted portraits of individuals and scenes from the Gospels. The Orthodox are puzzled that Western Christians, especially Western Protestants, would think them idolaters since the Orthodox labored long to overcome idolatry.

The years after 726 C.E. saw a violent rash of iconoclasm. Icons were destroyed and vandalized all over the Christian East. This destruction was the external sign of the struggle between the Islamic and the Greek traditions. Islam, a radically iconoclastic form of religion, swept through Eastern areas that had become Christian and challenged the tradition of images. John of Damascus was a major figure in the controversy; he argued that the sacred pictorial language of the icon may be justly compared to the theological narrative function of the Gospels, and therefore icons deserve a place in the church's theological repertoire. His position became the rallying point for the East.[25]

It is very important to understand that the Orthodox believe, in accord with holy tradition, that some icons—the original Virgin *hodigitria* (Mary pointing to the Christ child as Son of God) and the Virgin *elousa* (the Virgin of tenderness or kindness, wherein Jesus and Mary touch cheeks)—can be traced back to Saint Luke, who is believed to have been the first iconographer as well as an evangelist.[26] In particular, holy tradition says that Saint Luke sent the *hodigitria* icon along with the written Gospel to Theophilus, whom he mentions in his prologue (Lk 1:1). The point of tradition is quite clear: the gospel is conveyed to the world in image as well as in text. That God became incarnate in human form means that depiction of the Christ in image as well as in word is permissible. The icon of Christ known as the *acheiropoietos* ("made without hands") or *mandylion* ("veil") is said to have been a pictorial representation of the face of Christ from Veronica's veil.[27] Lastly, the famous Virgin of Kazan—conceivably the most popular icon of Mary in all Russia—is held by tradition to have appeared originally to Saints Peter and John upon the wall of the church they founded at Lydda and for which they had sought the Virgin's blessing and portrait.[28] Icons are, thus, part of the whole faith of the church for the Orthodox. They are not incidental to theology or spirituality.

The second council of Nicea (787 C.E.), an ecumenical council of the undivided church, finally stated that icons are an acceptable form of art in the church, suitable for devotion. The council decreed that

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[25] Saint John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1980); John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1975), 173–92; and Saint Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, trans. Katharine Roth (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1980).

[26] Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1978), 72f.; Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1989), 80.

[27] John Baggeley, *Doors of Perception* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1988), 7f.; Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, 59f.

[28] Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, 76.

icons may be venerated (the Greek word is *douleia*) but not worshiped. "The honor shown to the image is conveyed to its prototype," said the theologians; the model for the relationships is that of Christ to God the Father.[29] "He is the image of the invisible God," says Paul in Colossians, and thus reckoned the iconodoules. Though their position won, it was not until a hundred years later that the controversy was finally laid to rest.

The Greek word *eikon* means image. Icons are two-dimensional, usually painted on wood panels which have been coated with a gesso plaster. The traditional paint is an egg tempera that is then covered with many coats of varnish to achieve a certain planar translucence.[30]

More importantly, an icon is a spiritual portrait. An icon is a window or a door onto eternity. A saint is depicted in stereotypical fashion on the basis of canons of icon-writing which are handed down through the generations and which change only slightly from age to age.[31] The spiritual body of the saint is depicted and, thus, you find that fingers and toes are lengthened beyond actual human physiology. The forehead may be out of proportion, made larger to suggest the illumination of the mind that is given to the faithful. Lastly, the words, are an integral part of the design in an icon; this carries forth the traditions of Egypt and, to some extent, Islam, wherein words are an essential part of the visual language.[32]

The *iconostasis* grew gradually over the course of the development of Eastern churches. Originally a low wall separated the nave from the sanctuary in Byzantine churches. In time a series of columns was added atop this wall, with an architrave above the columns. The spaces between the columns were filled with curtains, but by the twelfth century these spaces were filled in with icons, hence the iconostasis. This stylized wall of icons represents the barrier between earth and heaven and also informs the worshiper that she stands with the whole company of heaven before the throne of grace à la the Book of Revelation.[33]

That God became incarnate in human form means that depiction of the Christ in image as well as in word is permissible.

Since Lutherans uphold the decrees of the councils of the undivided church, we have no opposition to icons on theological

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[29] Decrees of Nicea II, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner S.J., Vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 133–38.

[30] See Guillem Ramos-Poqui, *The Technique of Icon Painting* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1990), 18–28.

[31] See *The 'Painter's Manual' of Dionysius of Fourna*, trans. Paul Hetherington (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1992).

[32] Ramos-Poqui, *The Technique of Icon Painting*, 52–67; Michel Quenot, *The Icon: Window onto Eternity* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1991), 65–119; Egon Sendler, *The Icon: Image of the Invisible*, trans. Fr. Stephen Bigham (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1988), 87–183. for a full treatment of the icon, see Paul Evdokimov, *the Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, trans. Fr. Stephen Bigham (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1990).

[33] Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 59–67.

grounds. They are simply foreign to our usage. The Augsburg Confession and its Apology at article XXI ("On the Invocation of Saints") say that the attribution of mediating power to any image or statue is idolatry, which is the principle at work in the East as well as in the West.[34]

Icons were in use in the early medieval West, but they fell into disuse before and after the Renaissance. The fourteenth-century Sienese painter Duccio, a forebear to Raphael and Michelangelo, perfected the form in the West in an Italo-Byzantine rendition. But the icon fell on hard times in the Renaissance, due to the return to humanistic ideals and the celebration of the individual, and the traditional form was lost completely in the West by the Baroque period. Icons seem to be returning to provenance in the West, as part of the rapprochement that draws many strands of Christian faith together into a single tapestry.

The spirituality of Mary: *Theotokos* and mother of the church

The Blessed Virgin Mary, most often referred to as *Theotokos* ("God-bearer"), is utterly central to the piety of Eastern Christians. Mary is first of all the model of the individual Christian who receives the Word of God and who bears Christ. She is secondly the model of the church as bearer of God's Incarnate One to the world.[35]

The East tends to be reticent about the establishment of new doctrines and relies on popular movements to develop the piety of the church, while pastors, bishops and theologians tend to the core of theology. So Mary is not defined in the East as co-redemptix, a term with which Eastern Christians would have trouble as do Protestants. The Orthodox also hold the two newest Western doctrines about Mary to be in error. The immaculate conception of Mary, promulgated by Pius IX on 8 December 1854 (apostolic letter *ineffabilis Deus*) is held to be wrong because Mary is part of sinful humanity.[36] John Chrysostom accused Mary of the sin of vanity in connection with the miracle at Cana.[37]

The Orthodox also reject the doctrine of the assumption of the blessed Virgin Mary into heaven, promulgated by Pope Pius XII on 2 November 1950 (apostolic letter *munificentissimus Deus*).[38] Orthodox piety speaks of the "dormition" or falling-asleep of Mary, when she was received into heaven, but the church refuses to doctrinalize the assumption. As in the West, however, Mary is chief among the saints. The orthodox venerate Mary as *panaghia*, "all-holy." In common with many of the early Greek fathers, the church considers Mary the typological correspondent to Eve; as Christ is the new Adam, so Mary is the new Eve and mother of the church. In his letter on Mary, *Redemptoris Mater*, 25 March 1987, Pope John Paul II made gestures toward rapprochement between East and West through copious citation of Eastern sources and writers.[39]

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[34] Cf. *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 46–48, 229–36; also Smalcald Articles, Art. II, part II, p. 297. There is no specific entry on icons in the *Book of Concord.*

[35] On Mary in the East, cf. George Maloney, *Mary: The Womb of God* (Denville: Dimension Books, 1976); Ware, "The Power of the Name," in Behr-Sigel, *The Place of the Heart*, 44f. and 100ff.

[36] Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 380f.

[37] John Chrysostom, *Sermons in John*, commenting on chapter 2:1–11.

[38] Anne Freemantle, *The Papal Encyclicals* (New York: Mentor-Omega Books, 1963), 299.

The church: life in the Trinity

God's revelation proceeds from the Father through the Son and thence into the church, which is the sphere of the Spirit's work and witness.

The church is experienced wholistically: it all goes together, Bible and icons, prayer and liturgy, ministry and service, theology and spirituality: they are a whole, unbroken so that you cannot take them apart to look at simply one aspect. Bible belongs to church, church is people of God, sacraments are manifestation of the life of the Trinity in the life of the individual and of the community. The Orthodox used the Septuagint, so they kept the Apocrypha, but a range of opinion on its utility and acceptance as revelation spans from Thomas Hopko (yes) to John Meyendorff (no), both of whom served on the faculty at St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York. In any case, the lectionary contains only a few readings from the Apocrypha.

Theology and spirituality are one. No church takes this wholeness of the faith more seriously than Orthodoxy.[40] The church is divine presence manifest upon earth; in the church we experience the Mystery of God in Three Persons, and in the church we are incorporated into the ongoing incarnation of God for the life of the world. God acts for the life of the world in self-giving Love, *agape*; in the church we learn that lovely emptying of our selves in thanksgiving, or *eucharist*.[41]

The church is the eucharistic assembly in which we learn that our whole being is to be offered in thanksgiving. Life is eucharist. We are called into Christ for the sake of the world. Life is priesthood; we are called to intercede for the world, to give thanks for the creation and our own lives. We are led by the Spirit to return the world to its origin in the creative and redemptive love of God. This is our proper work and our highest calling: to resume our place in creation as offerers of God's natural realm into the hands of its creator, to be agents of redemption in the created order. Here is grist for building an ecological theology.[42]

Sacraments are called Mysteries in the Orthodox church, and they relate to the one mystery of God's self-presencing in and through Christ. The East never engaged in the enumeration that characterizes the scholastic age in the West, but the same sacraments are observed. The eucharist is open to all baptized, and young children receive as do adults. Both elements are and always have been distributed to the faithful.

Baptism is currently offered throughout the year; there is no focus on the Easter Vigil as we have seen develop in the West, since the re-institution of the ritual by Pius XII in 1953. Baptism at the vigil was the original pattern in the East as well as in the West, since Jerusalem was the guiding light for the development of the vigil.[43] The

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[39] John Paul II, *Mary: God's Yes to Man, Encyclical Redemptoris Mater*. Introduction by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, commentary by Hans Urs von Balthasar (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

[40] See Ion Bria, *The Sense of Ecumenical Tradition* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), and Alexy Khomiakov, *The Church is One* (London: Fellowship of SS Alban & Sergius, 1968).

[41] Cf. Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: World Student Christian Federation, 1964), esp. 1–30.

[42] Cf. Paul Gregorios, *The Human Presence: An Orthodox View of Nature* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1978), and Per Lonning, *Creation—An Ecumenical Challenge?* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989), 166–78.

[43] Cf. Edward Yarnold, S.J., "The Fourth and Fifth Centuries," sub *Initiation* in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward

formula spoken over candidates for baptism emphasizes that one is baptized into Christ. The priest is not singled out as the agent of baptism as in the Western formula.[44] Chrismation, anointing in the Holy Spirit, follows directly upon baptism. The initiation rite was never divided as in the West, where a separate "confirmation" grew apart from the washing and in lieu of chrismation. Baptized converts to Orthodoxy undergo chrismation but are not rebaptized.

The sacrament of forgiveness is ritualized differently than in Western catholic tradition. A penitent faces the icon of Christ, with the priest alongside. The priest, after spiritual conversation, declares the forgiveness of God. There is no tradition of "penance," as in the medieval West, which Luther protested. There is no call for amendment of life through recitation of prayers or acts of charity. Forgiveness is declared free and boundless.

The monastic life continues in the Eastern church, which places high priority on the centrality of prayer to the life of the world and, thus, sees the establishment of religious communities as good for the renewal and sustenance of the life of the whole church. Orthodox laity visit monasteries on retreat and for spiritual direction as do people in Western churches. Among the Orthodox you find the *starets* (Greek *geron*), the charismatic and wise elder. *Startsi* are usually monks or nuns, often hermits, sometimes priests. They are spiritual directors and possess a call directly into service; they are perceptive and insightful guides sought by laity and monastics alike.[45]

Under pressure from early reformers, the monastic life took a decided downturn among Lutherans, although we do have small houses in the U.S.A. and there are sizeable ones in Europe.[46]

In closing, hear Bishop Maximos Aghiorgoussis:

> The church is the great sacrament of salvation that Christ has instituted in the world. The church is at the same time the image of the Holy Trinity, the people of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. All these aspects are necessary for a complete image of the church.[47]

Yarnold S.J., *The Study of Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 95–110, esp. p. 97, "the baptismal catecheses of Cyril, Ambrose, Chrysostom and Theodore assume no date other than Easter."

[44] Cf. *Lutheran Book of Worship*, "Holy Baptism," p. 123, where both options are offered, Western rite in left column, Eastern in right.

[45] See, e.g., Archimandrite Sophrony, *The Monk of Mount Athos* and *Wisdom from Mount Athos: The Writings of Staretz Silouan, 1866–1938*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1974 and 1975).

[46] St. Augustine's House, Oxford, Michigan, was founded in the 1950s by the late Fr. Arthur Kreinheder, and the current prior is Fr. Richard Herbel. St. Augustine's welcomes visitors and retreatants. A wider circle called the Fellowship of St. Augustine prays for the house and for the renewal of community in the church. They are in fellowship with the diocese of Vasteras Sweden and, since the formation of the ELCA, have become a special ministry in the Michigan Synod.

[47] Bishop Maximos Aghiorgoussis, "Orthodox Soteriology," in *Salvation in Christ*, ed. Tobias and Meyendorff, 51.

"This Lovely Music of Nature": Grounding an Ecological Ethic in Martin Luther's Creation Mysticism

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> [God's] own divine nature [is] wholly and entirely in all creatures and in every single individual being, more deeply, more inwardly, more present than the creature is to itself . . .
>
> . . . the power of God must be essentially present at all places, even in the tiniest tree leaf. God is in all creatures, even the smallest flowers!
>
> God is in the creature, which he creates and in which he works. But we pay no heed . . .
>
> —Martin Luther

It was April 1996. I stood transfixed along with hundreds of thousands of others watching the nightly visits of the gigantic fuzzy snowball from outer space. Comet Hyakutake was the name of this rare guest from distant cosmic reaches. And it was marvelous. Local newspapers were aglow with reports of the event's rarity and corresponding scientific interest: "The brightest comet in twenty years." "A rare opportunity to study some primeval ingredients of the solar system." "Comet Hyakutake is thrilling astronomers and amateur sky-watchers alike with its twin tails of gas and dust billowing across millions of miles of space."

It was a thrilling opportunity for livers of the spiritual life as well. It was a chance to see an extraordinary God in an extraordinary occurrence.

A danger lurks hereabouts. We stand to lose a great deal if we restrict our experience of God's presence and activity in the world to the extraordinary, the unusual, the "miraculous," losing sight of the holy all around us, of the sacred as it is under our feet and before our faces. (In any case, God will not be so restricted.) That's the path of a truncated spiritual life devoid of Spirit, save in moments of heavenly visions and visits of angels.

Our insensitivity to the presence of deity in, with, and under the ordinary events all around us is a regular lament of Martin Luther:

> This crude doggerel is right, and there was certainly good reason for composing it: "omne rarum carum," "all that's unusual is appreciable." If the stars did not rise during every single night or in

> all places, how great a gathering of people there would be for this spectacle! Now not one of us even opens a window because of it.[1]

Like words rhythmically repeated aloud again and again to the point of meaninglessness, daily encounters with daily things dull our senses and our souls to the presence of divinity in everything in which we live, move, and have our being, to the reality that things are no less wondrous because they are daily. Picking up on a metaphysical metaphor of one ancient Greek sage, Luther bemoans the fact that

> we do not marvel at the wonderful light of the sun, because it is a daily phenomenon. We do not marvel at the countless other gifts of creation, for we have become deaf to what Pythagoras aptly terms this wonderful and most lovely music coming from the harmony of the motions that are in the celestial spheres. But because [people] continually hear this music, they become deaf to it . . . we have verily become deaf to this lovely music of nature.[2]

To be sure, there's nothing wrong with marveling at comets, provided we also marvel at the daily sun and nightly stars. Luther brings the whole matter down to the level of deep earthiness as well.

> Nothing—even raising the dead—is comparable to the wonderful work of producing a bird out of water [as God does, Gen 1:20]. We do not wonder at these things, because through our daily association with them we have lost our wonderment. But if people believe them and regard them more attentively, they are compelled to wonder at them, and their wonderment gradually strengthens their faith.[3]

How often are we attuned to the ever-present bird song all around us? Not very often, if we are honest with ourselves, or perhaps not at all. Luther is surely right about the reason: daily saturation. The ubiquitous character of birds and their music, the very commonality of the phenomena, render us slow and dull and without wonder.

It was a family of house sparrows that woke me from my bird-lethargy. A mother built a nest for her young ones right outside our bathroom window, on a well-protected ledge inside the overhanging roof (as sparrows are wont to do), less than a foot from the wall. From our vantage point inside the bathroom, we could see, from a distance of no more than two feet, the very act of the mother putting food into the babies' mouths. From practically anywhere in the house, we could hear the babies' delightfully frenetic chirping upon the mother's return to the nest with the next meal. It was the first time in my forty years that I had experienced such a thing.

I repeat Luther's point again. Because this association with a family of sparrows is novel, I am spontaneously moved to stop, attend, and marvel. The event's very rarity brings amazement, awe, and wonder.

"Wonder" occurs four times in this brief quotation from Luther. What if our lives had the same proportion? Thus does Brother Martin urge us to greater attentiveness on our faith walks, attentiveness to that to which it is so easy to be inattentive. Attentiveness gives birth to wonder, awe, and amazement; these too are sprinkled all over Luther's writings. Slow down, pause, stop, whatever it takes to reverse that virtual law of nature which lays it down that whatever is always around is really never around, to bring the common out of the background and into the foreground.

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[1] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955), 1:127.

[2] *LW* 1:126.

[3] *LW* 1:49.

Luther the nature mystic

Seventy-five years ago, that great disciple of the mystics Evelyn Underhill wrote that "the existence of music and poetry, the qualities of beauty and of rhythm, the evoked sensations of awe, reverence, and rapture," as well as "wonder and mystery," show us that "attitude of the self . . . generally called *mystical*."[4] There is a Reality, an Absolute,—"God," for people of religious faith—which cannot be accessed by strictly empiricist philosophy, based as it is on sense perception narrowly conceived. How often does Luther toss out rhetorical challenges to the philosophers in his audience to explain the inexplicable, to understand the unintelligible, to speak the ineffable, to give a rational account of realities disclosed through the eyes and ears of faith alone? For Underhill, such is disclosed in mysticism.

Luther speaks of marvel and wonder, of awe and reverence. If Underhill is right (and I have no doubt that she is), then Luther is brought fairly and squarely into the mystic's territory. A mystical Martin Luther is coaxing out the mystic in each of us.

Underhill wrote:

> Luther, it is true, had his mystical side. The Lutheran 'faith,' which is the foundation-stone of his theology, has far more the character of mystical adherence to God than of mere belief. He was deeply influenced by the *Theologia Germanica*, and in his popular preaching continued many of the ideas of the German mystics. But this aspect of his reform died with him, and mysticism has never been really at home in the Lutheran . . . branch of the Church.[5]

It's time that those old dry bones of Luther's German mystical heritage got dug up, extracted from the master's texts, reassembled into a spiritual body, and resurrected into a fresh and living spirituality for the people of God today.

There's nothing wrong with marveling at comets, provided we also marvel at the daily sun and nightly stars.

Far be it from me, however, to undertake such a gargantuan task within the confines of a single essay. I shall tackle a far more modest aim here, restricting my comments to one single corner of the mystical desert, the nature corner.[6] I will attempt no comprehensive study of what Underhill calls Luther's "mystical side";[7] instead, I delve

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[4] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Image Books, [1911] 1990), 20, emphasis in original.

[5] Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church* (New York: Shocken Books, [1925] 1964), 212.

[6] Rosemary Radford Ruether notes: "The word *nature* is used in four distinct senses in Western culture: (1) as that which is 'essential' to a being; (2) as the sum total of physical reality, including humans; (3) as the sum total of physical reality apart from humans; and (4) as the 'created' world apart from God and divine grace" (*Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* [HarperSanFrancisco, 1992], 5). While recent ecological writing zeroes in on sense 2, and while sense 4 surely fits the vast majority of Luther's uses of the term, in this essay I will stick with sense 3, which, in the ecological context, seems to fit Luther's usage best.

[7] This may be gleaned from works such as Heiko Oberman's "*Simul gemitus et raptus*: Luther and Mysticism," in *The Reformation in*

only into his reflections on God's mysterious presence in, with, and under nature's creatures. As Heiko Oberman insists, "it is highly precarious to separate the mystical tissue from the living organism of Luther's spirituality."[8] I aim to isolate and lift up some of the main cells of Luther's nature mystical tissue, making no effort to treat the entire organism.[9]

Through and through, from end to end of this essay, I seek first and foremost to lift up some of Martin Luther's nature mystical texts, enabling us to enter into them, experience them, meditate with them, appropriate them, and live them; in short, to make Luther's nature mysticism live and move and have being for us.

An undercurrent of wonder

Being awake and alive to the panentheistic presence of God in all things constitutes—in addition to wonder, awe, and marvel—a second leg of nature mysticism. At the close of the last century, commenting on the nature of nature mysticism, William Ralph Inge said: "After the Reformation period the mystic tries to look with both eyes; his aim is to see God in all things, as well as all things in God."[10] And not long thereafter Underhill put it this way:

> To "see God in nature," to attain a radiant consciousness of the "otherness" of natural things, is the simplest and commonest form of illumination. Most people, under the spell of emotion or of beauty, have known flashes of rudimentary vision of this kind. Where such a consciousness is recurrent . . . there results that partial yet often overpowering apprehension of the Infinite Life immanent in all living things, which some modern writers have dignified by the name of "nature-mysticism."[11]

Seeing—timeless mystical code word for knowing, experiencing, encountering—God in nature: such is the essential starting point of nature mysticism. And we have seen that for Luther such seeing is accompanied by wonder and its kin. That point is not lost on Inge. For Inge the glory of God appears "in all the wonders that science can discover, and all the beauties that art can interpret."[12] And Underhill notes that the nature mystic experiences "that intense and innocent joy in natural things, as veils and vessels of the divine," which results from seeing "all creatures in God and God in all creatures."[13] That these themes should run throughout Luther's spirituality like an underground river watering and nourishing the entire landscape should come as no surprise. Hundreds of years before Inge and Underhill—and Luther—the *Theologia Germanica* had voiced a quite parallel spiritual outlook. In its very first chapter we read,

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Medieval Perspective, ed. Steven E. Ozment (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 219–51; Bengt Hoffman's *Luther and the Mystics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976); and the Introduction and Notes to the same author's *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). The reader also may consult the numerous references found in these works.

[8] Oberman, "*Simul gemitus*," 220–21.

[9] For studies complementary to the present one, see H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 121–33, and Larry Rasmussen, "Returning to Our Senses," in *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-justice and Theology*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 40–56, 186–90. Rasmussen's essay appears essentially unaltered in his *Earth Community Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 270–81.

[10] William Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), 299.

[11] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 234.

[12] Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, 300.

[13] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 206.

> The Perfect is a being who has comprised and embraced in himself and in his being all that is. Without this being and outside of it there is no true being and in it all things have their being since it is the core of all things. . . . When does it come, then? I say, when it is known and felt and tasted in the soul to the extent possible."[14]

The *Theologia Germanica* gathers up and recapitulates many panentheistic and mystical themes from earlier medieval mystics, mystics whose writings constitute Luther's mystical heritage of which I spoke earlier.

God in all things

In being dull to the wonders of creature things and events, for Luther, we miss much more than creaturely wonder. We miss the very Creator as well. "I can't sufficiently marvel at an egg," says Luther. The processes through which "God forms a living chick in the shell . . . are all miracles." Why? Because "God is in the creature, which he creates and in which he works."[15] In calling us to lives of wakefulness before the wonderful events of God's creatures in God's creation, Luther knows what deep spiritual reality is at stake for us either to hit or to miss: the very presence of God the Creator.

It is crucial that we not miss the nuance here. We don't encounter creatures and then "infer," "deduce," or "think about" some distant Creator God who's somewhere else. That would be the way of a deistic natural theology, with which Luther will have nothing to do. Philip S. Watson puts it this way: "For Luther, God is not to be sought behind His creation by inference from it, but is rather to be apprehended in and through it."[16] Luther says God is *in* the creature, and he means it.

When he is fighting with Zwingli over the nature of Holy Communion—Zwingli maintaining that the risen and ascended Christ couldn't now be on ten thousand altars all at the same time, Luther maintaining that indeed he could—Luther goes back to the article of creation to argue his point. Pick any thing you like; God is its Creator and Preserver. Luther then spins out the conclusion: "If he is to create or preserve it, however, he must be present and must make and preserve his creation both in its innermost and outermost aspects." Granted, God could do such creating and preserving work from ten million miles away in some far-out "heaven"—deism might be right after all—or from outside of spacetime altogether—which God in any case is—but Luther will have none of this. For he asserts in the immediate sequel to the just-quoted text: "Therefore, indeed, [God] himself must be present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power." And these brief quotations barely scratch Luther's surface; throughout his anti-Zwingli polemic he hammers away on the panentheistic anvil:

> Now if [God] has found the way whereby his own divine nature can be wholly and entirely in all creatures and in every single individual being, more deeply, more inwardly, more present than the creature is to itself. . . .
>
> Then if [God's] power and Spirit are present everywhere and in all things to

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[14] Hoffman, *Theologia Germanica*, 60. These themes of experiencing God in all things run throughout this short treatise, forming its mystical groundwork.

[15] The snippets in this paragraph are all from *LW* 54:100.

[16] Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1950), 78.

> the innermost and outermost degree, through and through, as it must be if he is to make and preserve all things everywhere . . .
>
> there is no one and nothing other than God himself who is in all things everywhere.[17]

Jesus Christ can be present in, with, and under bread and wine *only because* the Creator God is in, with and under all creatures.[18] Luther bends over backwards to invoke every spatial image and preposition possible to convey the utmost seriousness of his profound yet plain thesis: God is in all things.

Consequences of fallenness

Fallen human nature being what it is, can we have any such experience as seeing God in creatures? Aren't all such encounters ruled out by the fall into godlessness, forgetfulness, or ignorance? Can there really be any answer to the Luther laments we've been considering? Luther propounds the woes of this situation in two stages. Together they look like a one-two knockout blow to any nature-mystical project.

Belden C. Lane writes that Luther

> insisted that God's naked, aweful majesty could never be pursued directly. In order to shield human beings from the unapproachable light of God's glory, God always remains hidden, veiled by a mask (*larva*). Though not seen face to face, this God is yet encountered with a striking immediacy in the *larvae Dei*—the created marvels of God's hand. . . .[19]

God's "naked, aweful majesty" can "never be pursued directly." Quite so; therein lies a major difference between Luther and some of his mystical comrades, both forebears and successors. For Brother Martin will have nothing to do with fanciful flights into the bare, uncovered Godhead: "It is folly to argue much about God outside and before time, because this is an effort to understand the Godhead without a covering, or the uncovered divine essence."[20] Wherein lies the foolishness of this folly? Luther puts it clearly: "our mind cannot grasp what lies outside time."[21]

As Luther knows, we fallen creatures live turned away from—and in the mystical context that means living without direct access to—God's pure being. That is incomprehensible. "This nature of ours has become so misshapen through sin, so depraved and utterly corrupted, that it cannot recognize God or comprehend his nature without a covering. It is for this reason that those coverings are necessary."[22] Thus Luther appears poised to grant us to see God in creatures—masks, coverings, veils of the divine presence in the world—while denying us direct cognizance of the Godhead. But what Brother Martin giveth, Brother

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[17] Quotations from *LW* 37:57–63. Luther's whole discussion in these and the immediately following pages constitutes a veritable cosmic hymn of praise to the God who is present in all things.

[18] Luther writes: "God himself is personally present in all things, without which presence even God could not have become [human] nor one person made of divinity and humanity" (*LW* 37:63).

Or again: "For he who believes that God is the Creator, who makes all things out of nothing, must of necessity conclude that therefore God can raise the dead"; "But he who can believe . . . that God is the Creator of heaven and earth will not argue or have any doubts about the resurrection of the dead" (*LW* 4:120, 121; see Luther's whole discussion throughout pp. 119–24).

[19] Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 39.

[20] *LW* 1:11.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.*

Martin taketh away. For on the logical heels of these no-uncovered-Godhead texts, Luther issues pronouncements like this one:

> Ever since the fall of Adam the world knows neither God nor his creation. It lives altogether outside of the glory of God. Oh, what thoughts [humans] might have had about the fact that God is in all creatures, and so might have reflected on the power and wisdom of God in even the smallest flowers![23]

In this valuable passage, Luther appears explicitly to repudiate the possibility of the very matter which I've been about in this essay, namely, seeing God in all creatures. Luther's attitude here, perhaps not surprisingly, seems doubly pessimistic: the fall into sin takes away from us the pure knowledge of the uncovered Godhead, which is encased in coverings; but we are ignorant of God *in* these coverings, too. We thus appear hopelessly doomed to ignorance of God in this life, and cut off from any chance of nature-mystical experiences. God may very well be in all creatures, behind and before, above and below, through and through, but we'll never know it, much less experience and enjoy it.

Looking to Christ

How unapproachable is that light of God's glory? How far out of sync with God-in-all-creatures have we fallen? Is there any way back in?

Luther would have us look to "Christ, who has restored our freedom from guilt through the remission of sins and who *makes our state better than the state of Adam was in Paradise*."[24] We would have settled, I suppose, for as good a one, a glimpse of what Adam and Eve saw, a mere morsel of what they tasted—being, as they were, in a condition of "original righteousness" with God. But Christ goes that one better. In an amazing comment at table, Luther says: "We are at the dawn of a new era, for we are beginning to recover the knowledge of all creatures that we had lost through the fall of Adam. We now observe creatures properly. . . ."[25] And the recovery of that knowledge comes through the work of Christ, who was sent by God "to remind the world" of God's "grace in the creation."[26] We are beginning to recover the knowledge of all creatures, declares Luther. "Beginning" is the key. This side of the grave and that side of the fall, we live lives of beginning, always beginning to live: "the new creature begins to be restored by the Gospel in this life, but it will not be finished in this life."[27]

> This side of the grave and that side of the fall, we live lives of beginning, always beginning.

A state better than Adam's in Paradise? How good is that? Luther: "*Perhaps* God appeared to Adam without a covering. . . ."[28]

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[23] *LW* 54:327; cf. *LW* 1:141.

[24] *LW* 1:100, emphasis mine. Cf. Luther's similar comments at *LW* 1:64.

[25] WA.TR 1:573.31–33, quoted in Eric Gritsch, *Martin—God's Court Jester* (Ramsey, NJ: Sigler Press, 1990 [orig. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983]), 193. I have altered Gritsch's translation by rendering omnium creaturarum as "of all creatures," for which Gritsch has "of the external world."

[26] *LW* 54:159.

[27] *LW* 1:65.

[28] *LW* 1:11, emphasis mine.

And with more confidence: "Thus *there is no doubt* that our first parents worshiped God early in the morning, when the sun was rising, by marveling at the Creator in the creature or, to express myself more clearly, because they were urged on by the creature."[29]

Luther's imaginative ventures are deliciously suggestive. Adam and Eve were once upon a time a theologically astute couple. They understood how to preserve God's unity within multiplicity, divine otherness amidst earthy thisness. They knew God's transcendent being immanent in the here and now. They found a distant God close at hand, the Unintelligible within the intelligible, the sacred within spacetime. They knew the simple profundity of a well-placed preposition: they knew the difference between idolatrous pantheism and sacred pan*en*theism.[30] God comes to us *in* the creature but *is not* the creature. Adam and Eve could turn to the creature and no less to the Creator—indeed, to the Creator precisely by turning to the creature. Skillfully and successfully walking these theological high wires, they were free to have a worshipful encounter with God in nature. They were enabled to do so by the joyous, ecstatic power of the Creator God who made both them and all creatures and set them at first in right relation one to another: "Adam had been created in such a way that he was, as it were, intoxicated with rejoicing toward God and was delighted also with all the other creatures. . . ."[31]

That earlier bad news—"Ever since the fall of Adam the world knows neither God nor his creation"—is now on the transformative path to Good News. Our knowledge of both creation and Creator—and most crucially, of the difference between them—is being restored. And for Luther, exactly in line with his panentheistic orientation to nature, it is through the creation that the Creator God comes to meet us and that we know that God. "Those who know God also know, understand and love the creature, because there are traces of divinity in the creature."[32] And this: "But it is our duty to read and to instruct others, in order that from Holy Scripture we may gain knowledge of the creatures, and from the creatures of the Creator."[33] As Luther's syntax indicates, the knowledge at play here is, to borrow Bertrand Russell's phrase, a "knowledge by acquaintance"; we become acquainted, as it were, with God in and through creation. Such knowing, for Luther, involves "feeling and experience"[34]—as we would expect from a mystic.

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[29] *LW* 1:15, emphasis mine.

[30] Whether or not you are willing to apply this appellation to Luther's theology of nature—as I have been doing throughout this essay—depends on how you define the term. Ted Peters' conception of panentheism sticks closely to that found in process theology: "Or we can posit God as including the world in the divine being but without exhausting this being—which is *panentheism*" (*God—The World's Future* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 123, emphasis his). Peters further considers panentheism so defined to be "a variant of pantheism" (124). On that account, Luther is most assuredly not a panentheist. I intend the term in an "ordinary language" sense as found in recent writings on environmental theology and ethics. James A. Nash writes: "Sacramentality is not pantheistic. Perhaps it can be described as *pan-en-theistic* in the sense that God is *in all* and all is somehow *in God* without being part of God" (*Loving Nature* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1991], 115, emphasis his). Rasmussen writes similarly with regard specifically to Luther. He says that Luther with his "earthbound theology" is "boldly pan*en*-theistic" (*Earth Community Earth Ethics*, 273, emphasis his).

[31] *LW* 1:94.

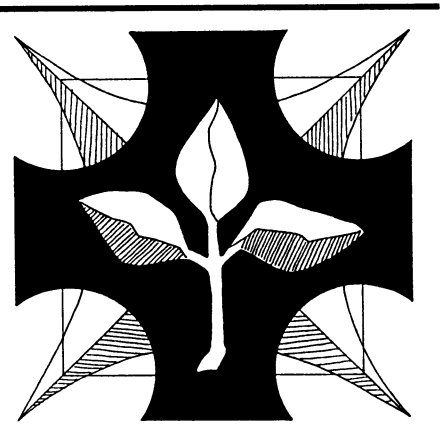
[32] *LW* 4:195.

[33] *LW* 4:249.

[34] *LW* 1:241.

This knowledge is no less a right understanding of fundamental theological truths as well. Following immediately upon his description of our first parents' worshipfully meeting God in creation quoted above, Luther says, "Their descendants continued the custom, but without understanding. Thus this practice turned into idolatry."[35] Idolatry: as Watson expresses it, "The 'natural man,' who has not seen God in Christ, does not rightly recognize Him . . . for he lacks the wisdom to distinguish between the veils of God and God Himself, and he is ever prone to worship the creature instead of the Creator."[36] Christ's work of redemptive reminding has begun to restore to us a right recognition, wisdom, knowing: we know the creature, we know the Creator, the latter in and through the former, and we know the two as ontologically distinct one from the other. As Luther puts it, each of us knows that "Although I can say of all creatures, 'There is God' or 'God is in it,' I cannot say, 'This is God Himself.'"[37]

We are also granted to know the limits of knowing. The uncovered Godhead is beyond human reason's capacities both natural and redeemed; but so is the manner in which that Godhead dwells within coverings. "God was incomprehensible in His essential rest before the creation of the world, but . . . now, after the creation, He is within, without, and above all creatures; that is, He is still incomprehensible."[38] This sets an outer limit, as it were, to our knowing God in creatures: we know God in the wondrous being, createdness, life, grace, beauty, and preservation of created things; we know that God is not the sum of such attributes; but we are utterly ignorant of the how of God's immanent presence in space-time beings. And Luther would have us rest content within such limits. They serve to keep us focused on this one fundamental reality of creation: God is in all things.



In a particularly tender passage, Luther imagines God saying, "Look! Under this wrapper you will be sure to take hold of Me."[39] In the face of fallen human urges to forget that God, creating and preserving all things from the beginning of spacetime existence, is also in those very creatures, or, worse still, positively disbelieving the divine indwelling presence in the *hic et nunc*, the reality of the Incarnation reminds us, lets us begin to recover our knowledge that God is a God who likes to live deep in the flesh and bone of earthy this-life stuff, Christ and creation alike. And we may awaken, hearken, and respond thanks precisely to that recovering/reminding work of Christ.

Absorption mysticism

To some the claim that Luther is a mystic will appear nonsensical, dangerous, and reckless, not to mention bad Luther exegesis. For consider two other definitions of nature mysticism. Rudolf Otto writes:

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[35] *LW* 1:15.
[36] Watson, *Let God Be God!* 80.
[37] *LW* 37:62.
[38] *LW* 1:11.
[39] *LW* 1:15.

"Nature mysticism . . . is the sense of *being immersed in the oneness of nature*, so that man feels all the individuality, all the peculiarity of natural things in himself."[40] Louis Dupré concurs, only in stronger form: "Nature mysticism refers to the kind of *intense experience whereby the subject feels himself merging with cosmic totality* . . . a sense of transcendence persists throughout the experience of cosmic union either with regard to nature or to its underlying principle."[41] Aside from the obvious fact that neither of these definitions is particularly religious in nature, omitting as they do any mention of God or faith, what, according to Luther, is wrong with them?

In Oberman's happy phrase, Luther is not interested in "absorption mysticism,"[42] species of which the Otto and Dupré accounts pretty clearly constitute. Luther's creation comments show no interest in any kind of experiences in which a person is experientially absorbed, merged, or united into one being with God-in-nature. Seeing God in nature, yes; being absorbed therein, no.

The *Theologia Germanica* knows nothing of abnormal or unusual experiences, of absorption and merging. On the contrary, that treatise appears to deny—rightly or wrongly—the very legitimacy of such experiences.[43] In Underhill's description, the *Theologia Germanica* is "one of the most successful of many attempts to make mystic principles available for common men."[44] And, I take it, "common" people only uncommonly have experiences of merging with or being absorbed into God-in-all-things. Thus there's no reason we wouldn't be on the lookout for such normalcy in Luther's nature mysticism as well.

So let me add a word to the claim that ended the previous section: Martin Luther is a *normal* creation mystic. This modified claim is good news for us: nature mystical experience—ordinary, daily, available-to-all, wonder-filled sightings of God in all creatures, neither more nor less—is open to you, me, all people. Truly, Luther is trying to wake us up to the amazing spiritual truth that we are all creation mystics through Christ's redemptive act.

The basic problem

Over at some friends' house for dinner I recently met a veritable aficionada of things Latin American and global, justice and ecology among others. She had on one of those T-shirts with a rather lengthy text and several small accompanying pictures on its front. After several failed efforts to read it through the wrinkles of her seated posture, I asked her if she would stand so I could make it out. "*Solamente cuando este último árbol esté muerto—y cuando este último pez esté atrapado—y este último río esté envenenado—solamente entonces entenderemos que no podemos comer el dinero—Costa Rica.*" Right there, crying out from the threads and colors of a piece of human-woven fabric, the essence of the situation: "Only when the last tree is dead, and when the last fish is caught, and the last river poisoned, only then will we understand that we can't eat money."

"We are [the basic problem]. Wrong-headed notions, human numbers, greed, arrogance, ignorance, prejudice, and stu-

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[40] Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), 74, emphasis mine.

[41] Louis Dupré, "Mysticism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 10:247, emphasis mine.

[42] Oberman, "*Simul gemitus*," 225, 232.

[43] Hoffman, *Theologia Germanica*, 115–16.

[44] Underhill, *Mysticism*, 465.

pidity are what most need to be taken into account."[45] Pick any ecological degradation you choose: deforestation, ozone depletion, global warming, air pollution, accelerated species extinction, water pollution, overconsumption, environmental racism, overpopulation, all their inextricably interrelated human injustice and inequality and poverty and misery and on and on and on. We are indeed the problem, all of us, with our human maladjustment to the rest of nature. And surely the T-shirt and Rasmussen are right: greed and its ilk lie at the mucky bottom of the mess—all of our greed, "we," the whole humanity bonded together in a global nexus of cause and effect, sin and consequence.

Luther proposed that if we had due faith in God as Creator,

> we would also act accordingly, and not swagger about and brag and boast as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves, as if we ourselves were to be feared and served. This is the way the wretched, perverse world acts, drowned in its blindness, misusing all the blessings and gifts of God solely for its own pride and greed, pleasure and enjoyment, and never once turning to God to thank him or acknowledge him as Lord and Creator.[46]

What most needs to be taken into account; what is the essence of the matter? The grounding of Luther's nature ethic reaches right to the ground of the human condition, the stuff that makes us tick every day on Earth—the ground on which any ecological ethic must rest, the soil in which it must be planted if it is to bear fruit.

Is mysticism—even of the normal, nature variety—to be the prescribed antidote? For if a glance at Christian (and other spiritual) history shows anything, it surely makes abundantly clear that any form of mysticism is the absolutely last place to go for help on anything even remotely this-worldly, what with its checkered history of escapist attempts at climbing up to God, avoiding corporeality, fleeing bodily being, and so forth. Rasmussen is crisp:

> Any orientation that is only a mystical affirmation of what is, no matter how deep the experience, falls short; and with that it fails to recognize the long and painful distance between the present state of affairs and a better earth. The sacramentalist stance, lost in wonder at what is, can easily incline to such mystical affirmation and its resident shortcomings. It can glory in what is, to the neglect of what ought to be. When it does, it sacrifices its inherent moral and ethical power.[47]

Is Luther's nature mysticism so lost, sunk in an ethically empty abyss of mystical meandering?

Hardly.

> Ever since the fall of Adam the world knows neither God nor his creation. It lives altogether outside of the glory of God. Oh, what thoughts [humans] might have had about the fact that God is in all creatures, and so might have reflected on the power and wisdom of God in even the smallest flowers! Of a truth, who can imagine how God creates, out of the parched soil, such a variety of flowers, such pretty colors, such sweet

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[45] Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics*, 170. Cf. the quotation on greed from Reinhold Niebuhr at p. 276 n. 22.

[46] *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 57.

[47] Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics*, 240. Rasmussen is commenting on and is inspired by John Haught's book, *The Promise of Nature* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 110–14. Haught insists that sacramentalism, mysticism, and action (as well as silence) must go together, lest any one without the others be perverted, distorted. Luther's nature mysticism, I maintain, keeps them tightly bonded into one.

> vernal grass, beyond anything that a painter or apothecary could make! Yet God can bring out of the ground such colors as green, yellow, red, blue, brown. Adam and those around him would have been elevated by all this to the praise of God, and they would have made use of all created things with thanksgiving. Now we enjoy all this to overflowing, yet without understanding, like cattle or other beasts trampling the most beautiful blossoms and lilies underfoot.[48]

The logic of this text is inescapable: Christ's redemptive work for us (discussed earlier) stands this fall on its head, throwing it into full retreat, thrusting us into creation care. Christ's work frees us to know and see and love God in all creatures *and thereby* to cease trampling Earth underfoot and indeed to use creation's gifts with thanksgiving. Panentheistic nature mysticism, ecological ethics, creation care: these Luther items dance and celebrate together one with another as integrally and essentially as do the protons, neutrons, and electrons making up an atom's—all atoms'—dance of life.

If Luther has his way—if God has Luther's way with us—that last tree will not die. The Reformer writes: "Christians hold converse with trees and all else that grows on earth, and the latter, in turn, with them. As Christians look at these, they do not think of gormandizing like swine. . . ."[49] We hold converse with trees—fully appropriate behavior for incarnational Christians who know that God is in all creatures, even the tiniest tree leaf. Do we hear anything from them that might put the brakes on our gormandizing tendencies? "Even the innocent creature cannot bear its sufferings without intense protest. . . . A tree that is cut down does not tumble to the ground without a creaking noise."[50] From trees felled and removed in backyard landscaping projects to the trees in a tree farm to the trees populating a forest—all trees cry out in protest at being cut down. How much louder the cry when hundreds of trees cry out together, when thousands of square miles of trees in a vanishing forest protest with a collective creaking cacophony? Do we have ears to hear?

And we hold converse as well with "all else that grows on earth." And what do they tell us, those billions of species of plants and animals, even fish and rivers, and humankind too, growing and living on Earth with us? We do have ears; will we listen?

"He [we might now say, the creation mystic] who knows God also knows, understands, and loves the creature, because there are traces of divinity in the creature." On the other hand, "The ungodly . . . know neither God nor the creatures, far less their use."[51] Flowing from a creation mystical acquaintance with God, creatures, and traces of divinity in creatures, then, is an understanding of the proper use of creature-gifts. That right use is, in turn, determined by the overcoming of greed: "But in money a greedy person sees only substance, form, and weight; he is not aware that it is a trace of the Son. Nor does he consider the use of a thing, that is, what purpose it should serve—chiefly, of course, the glory of God, then the benefit of one's neighbor."[52] Christ's redemptive work on the cross not only frees us to see God in all creatures; it also frees us from ourselves, from pride-filled, greedy grasping, overreaching, gormandizing glutting of creation. Knowing God in all things, we marvel, reflect, and let ourselves be as full of amazement as are all creatures: in short, we give glory to God. And we benefit our neighbors, all of Earth's

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[48] *LW* 54:327.
[49] *LW* 15:180.
[50] *LW* 13:107.
[51] *LW* 4:195–96.
[52] *LW* 4:196.

What might Earth look like if all humankind took what they need and no more?

creatures and beings, ecosystems and habitats where human and otherkind live, move, and are.

Adam and Eve "might have reflected on the power and wisdom of God in even the smallest flowers." Thanks to Christ's work for us, so do we. "Therefore I prefer that we reflect on the divine solicitude and benevolence toward us," says Martin; in the creation God has "provided such an attractive dwelling place for the future human being . . . so that he might enjoy all this wealth free, in proportion to need."[53]

The key is "in proportion to need." "Proffer the distinction between needs and wants," counsels Ted Peters.

> We pretend that everything we desire has the status of a need. I submit that needs should be understood as those things that all people require just to be human: food, shelter, sleep, exercise, protection from danger, and such. . . . Wants, in contrast, have to do with our desire to be unique or superior. They are insatiable. The more we get the more we want.[54]

Luther, too, can speak in a minimalist, simpler-living tone: "while we live here, we should use all temporal goods and physical necessities, the way a guest does in a strange place, where he stays overnight and leaves in the morning. He needs no more than bed and board. . . ."[55]

What might Earth look like if all humankind took what they need and no more? if we left enough bed and board for future generations of all planetary guests, both human and otherkind? if we no longer trampled down God's good creation? if we made use of all created things with thanksgiving, glorifying God with our nature wonder and creature fascination? if we cared for our Earth-neighbors by leaving just and fair shares of creation's blessings for all? if we all became what we are, Earth-loving creation mystics?

It was April 1997. I stood transfixed along with hundreds of thousands of others watching the nightly visits of the gigantic fuzzy snowball from outer space. The Hale-Bopp Comet was the name of this rare guest from distant cosmic reaches. And it *was* marvelous. And another family of sparrows came to our bathroom ledge and built a nest a few feet down from last year's.

And a regular lament of Martin Luther came to mind, "all that's unusual is appreciable. . . ."

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[53] *LW* 1:39.
[54] Peters, *God—The World's Future*, 374.
[55] *LW* 21:13.

The Work of René Girard as a New Key to Biblical Hermeneutics

Paul J. Nuechterlein
Racine, Wisconisn

> [20] In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. [21] Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." [22] Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. [23] Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you."
>
> —Mark 11:20–23

What is faith?

Jesus' response in this passage from Mark is often cited to talk about faith in the grandiose fashion of a "faith to move mountains." But such talk glosses over a very important word in the biblical text: "this." In both Mark's and Matthew's (21:21) versions of the story, Jesus specifies "*this* mountain." Which mountain is he talking about? This portion of Mark's Gospel is about Jesus' opposition to the temple. The passages relating Jesus' cursing of the fig tree (11:12–14 and 11:20–25) frame Jesus' cleansing of the temple (11:15–19). So the context would seem to indicate that Jesus is referring to Mt. Zion, the mountain on which the temple stood. Jesus is pointing to the mountain of sacrifice.[1]

Why, then, is Mark's clear specification of "*this* mountain" neglected when we speak of faith as a force to move just any old mountain? I would suggest that it is because we have a difficult time understanding the depth of Mark's original meaning in referring to the mountain of sacrifice. I believe Mark's Jesus is claiming that faith is all about our willingness to live without the human institutions of sacrifice, and about our trusting that we can do so. Faith, in short, is being able to live without the temple mountain and all that it stands for.[2] Yet the specificity of Mark's Jesus is lost when we instead talk about faith in terms of some grand metaphor for trusting in God for the ability to do wild and outrageous things, like tossing mountains into the sea. The

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[1] I owe the basic exegetical insight to Gil Bailie, *Creation, Fall & Sacrifice*, tape 3 (Sonoma, CA: The Florilegia Institute).

[2] Most modern scholars put the writing of Mark at the time of the temple's destruction, making how to live without the temple a very timely topic.

wild and outrageous thing Mark's Jesus has in mind is for human beings to live without their sacrificial institutions, even though we have relied on them since the beginning of history. Jesus comes as the one who will tear down the temple and rebuild it in three days. As we read the gospel narratives about Jesus the "Lamb of God," I would suggest that the mission Jesus has come to fulfill is to offer us God's new alternative to the institutions of sacrifice, or to transform them into a new community based on *self*-sacrifice. Today, with the absence of the temples and their ritualized forms of sacrifice, we not only would dismiss this faith as Jesus talks about it, but we do not even realize our need for it. The sacrificial spirit of our modern human institutions has been concealed beneath many additional layers of 'civilization' since Jesus came to reveal it.

My purpose in writing this essay is to invite the reader into a new body of work which has arisen in the last thirty years that has the potential to make such scriptural matters concerning the sacrificial spirit shine forth with a brilliant new clarity. It is a body of work that has arisen from, and in response to, Stanford scholar René Girard. As a professor of literature, he began to weave together fundamental principles of an anthropology which has seemingly reversed a modern trend by joining together the many human disciplines and sciences with common threads, rather than relegating each to its own separate closet. In the process, Girard himself experienced a conversion of sorts, as he found the literature of the Bible to most fully reveal these anthropological principles. He became increasingly convinced that the biblical literature, especially the Gospels, must be the work of inspiration of the one true God, who is revealing to us both the true Godself and the true human self at the same time—hence, the Christian doctrine of the incarnation which weds matters of theology and anthropology in the person of Jesus Christ.

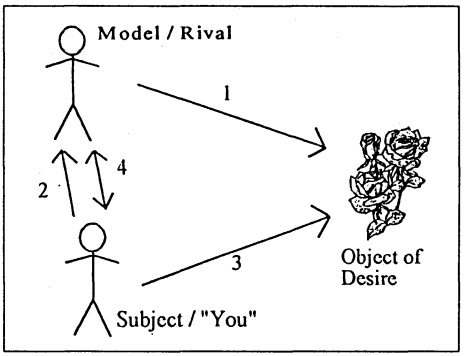
I invite the reader to consider these new categories and concepts of René Girard. I have found them to be nothing short of a brand new key to my own hermeneutics of Scripture, revolutionizing the way in which I experience my faith in Jesus Christ. At the same time, I realize that this brief essay cannot be more than an invitation, a small bite to whet the appetite. I will risk the briefest of introductions to Girard's basic principles. Primarily, however, I will simply give one further example of this hermeneutic in use: an alternate, Girardian reading of Luke 9:51-62.

An abstract of Girardian anthropology

Girard's anthropology is founded on two basic insights: 1) that human desire is "mimetic," or imitative, leading to rivalry and conflict; and 2) the natural mechanism for controlling the conflict generated by mimetic desire in human beings is a "scapegoating mechanism," which is itself generative of all human culture. The first of these principles pertains to the psychological dimension of human experience, while the second involves the sociological/cultural dimension. I would venture that addressing both these dimensions is why Girard's anthropology shows potential for yielding a unified interpretation of who we are as human beings.

The Girardian anthropological psychology has been dubbed an "interdividual psychology," due to its insistence on working with the relationships between individuals as constitutive of individuals. It revolves around the notion of mimetic or "triangular" desire. (A good biblical term for mimetic desire might be "covetousness.")

Girard uses the word "desire" to describe the natural forces that are constantly at play between human beings. We must see desire as a natural force relating individuals rather than as somehow residing discretely within individuals, subject to their 'free' control. The natural shape of desire is triangular because all desires arise from imitation (hence, the term "mimetic"). The illustration shows the triangular movement, which can be summed up as: (1) The model desires an object (which he or she has gained by imitation previously); (2) you, the subject, imitate the model and (3) desire the same object; but (4) desiring the same object now potentially turns you and the model into rivals.



Consider the Bible's narrative of fundamental anthropology in Genesis 3. The desire for the forbidden fruit is never described as unilaterally arising within an individual. The woman acquires her desire from the serpent, and the man from the woman. The result is a rivalry with God that escalates into a deadly rivalry between offspring. Cain murders Abel.

The implication of this murder at the beginning of time is one which human beings have rarely wanted to consider: namely, that our very civilization is founded upon murder. Jesus was one who did not seem unwilling to consider it. The "Q" source records Jesus as having said of/to the representatives of his own civilization, that "this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary" (Lk 11:50–51; par. Mt 23:35). The Johannine Jesus similarly addressed the leaders of his people: "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him" (Jn 8:44). Jesus' own murder subsequently became a source of revelation of our murderous institutions, but only because (1) his forgiving love of his enemies enabled them to risk looking at their participation in murder; and (2) God's raising him from the dead vindicated him as the truly innocent victim who willingly sacrificed himself to our sacrificial institutions. The resurrection further unleashed the work of the Holy Spirit to reveal these truths to us. It is the work of the Johannine Paraclete, the Advocate or Defender, who helps us to see all the victims of our sacrificial institutions *as* victims.

René Girard humbly offers his second anthropological principle as a further development of this work of revelation. The shape of the murder that generates our very institutions and culture is that of "scapegoating." Mimetic rivalry leads to mimetic violence that threatens complete self-destruction within a community. Such anarchy is avoided, and a semblance of order is restored, when the majority find a new cohesiveness and relative peace by carrying out their murderous impulses against the minority, or against the one. Girard's daring move is to show how these murderous impulses go beyond simply infiltrating all human institutions at some point or other. His claim is that such scapegoating murders

actually *found*, or generate, all human culture. Somewhere beneath all the layers of ordered civilization lie real murders of human beings, violence sanctioned by the community so that order might be established and maintained. In short, all human order is based on some form of sanctioned violence.

Admittedly, this is a very hard claim for us to swallow. Yet in light of the Christian claim for salvation through Christ alone, I have found it to be the sort of human predicament that might necessitate such a radical divine solution as the cross and resurrection of Christ. God in Jesus Christ breaks into our circle of violence and becomes victim to it, the only solution to the problem of violence which does not itself resort to violence. Moreover, despite the seriousness of Girard's claims about founding murders, I believe it to nevertheless be a more hopeful outlook than some versions of original sin. For Girard's thesis does not make murder a component of human nature, in the sense that murderous impulses naturally reside in each individual. Rather, the nature of mimetic desire is that it has the capacity for both good and evil, depending on whose desire it is that we imitate. The Bible witnesses to the fact that since the beginning of time we have imitated the rivalrous desire of the creature rather than the divine love of the Creator. And this fall into mimetic rivalry has led to spiraling times of violence and to the sanctioned violence of sacrificial order, imposed by our human institutions as a means to control the violence. Only the divine love itself could break into this predicament with a love powerful enough to incarnate imitation of the divine love. Thus, Christ's love both breaks the cycle of vengeance and murder and establishes a beachhead of mimetic obedience in the midst of the continuing mimetic rivalry.

I suspect that this brief summary raises as many questions for the reader as it attempts to answer. The strongest objections generally come in response to the idea that murder lies at the foundation of all human civilization and thus shapes all our culture. This is the most difficult claim to make without mounting considerable evidence (as I believe Girard and his followers have been able to do thus far). My angle here is to offer a taste for its effectiveness as a hermeneutical tool for interpreting Scripture. In anticipation of turning to our examination of Luke 9:51–62, and setting up the kind of language I will bring to my exegesis, let me venture to summarize the sacrificial nature of our institutions in this way: The basic action of the sacrificial spirit is to distinguish between 'insiders' and 'outsiders.' The insiders then band together at the outsiders' expense. They seek to gain a relative peace among themselves by either killing, expelling, blaming, or simply neglecting those designated as outsiders. Even relatively benign neglect can have deadly consequences, can it not? And is not this a familiar sounding dynamic, one that we can point to everywhere, even if the temples are long gone? The only true distinction is not between insiders and outsiders but between the victims of this deadly game and its perpetrators. At a critical point in Luke's narrative, Jesus must diffuse this deadly game even among his disciples. And we, Jesus' modern, aspiring disciples, must be careful not to follow in their footsteps in our reading of it. To that story we now turn.

"A Samaritan village refuses to receive Jesus"[3]?

With Jesus' face set toward Jerusalem, he and his disciples pass by a Samaritan village, and the disciples seem eager to scape-

> The only true distinction is not between insiders and outsiders but between the victims of this deadly game and its perpetrators.

goat its inhabitants: "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"[4] The question I would like for the reader to consider is: Are we, the readers and hearers of Luke's telling of this story, also hasty to scapegoat them? I would submit that, yes, the history of interpretation would seem to indicate that this is the case.

I would like to first comment about the overall importance of Luke 9:51–62. The first verse, 9:51, is widely regarded as a pivotal verse in Luke's Gospel. Most commentators see it as the beginning of a major new section in the Lukan narrative, the famed "Journey to Jerusalem Narrative." Luke, more than the other Gospel writers, presents Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem as the climax of a prolonged journey that begins at the first verse of our passage in question here: "When the days drew near for him [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." This verse is quite well known among Luke's commentators. Why is the passage connected to it not as widely commented on? One often sees in the commentaries multiple references to 9:51 in isolation, and then a glossing over of the rest of the passage. I hope to encourage not only interpreting the passage in its entirety—not just its first verse—but also that the reader might come to see it as vital to our reading and understanding of what it is that Luke is trying to tell us, not only about Jesus but also about ourselves.

The first indication of scapegoating—i.e., that Luke's interpreters may be following the disciples in scapegoating the Samaritans in this story—is our predilection to negatively amplify Luke's choice of verbs for what the Samaritans have supposedly done to Jesus. The nearly universal tendency has been to take Luke's rather passive verb, "receive" (δέχομαι), and turn it into an active rejection. The most literal rendering would be, "But they received him not." Compare this with the NRSV caption for the passage, as quoted above: "A Samaritan village refuses to receive Jesus." Clearly, it changes Luke's primary verb, "receive," and relegates it to a supporting infinitive role; the much more active verb "refuses" displaces Luke's more passive choice. And this is one of the milder illustrations of this quite typical transformation of Luke's verb. The favorite choice of verbs in the commentaries seems to be "reject," even more negatively active in its connotations.

So we might ask: why are we, Luke's interpreters, apparently so eager to read

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[3] This is the current title given to the paragraph of Luke 9:51–56 in many NRSV editions. Other translations and editions put the matter even more strongly, such as "Samaritan Opposition" (many NIV editions). Perhaps the most extreme interpretive caption is "The hostile Samaritans," and it comes from a surprising source (considering the extremism), *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1991), page 96NT (in the notes).

[4] Luke 9:54. All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, unless otherwise noted.

rejection here on the part of the Samaritan villagers? Luke knew the harsher verb well, ἀποδοκιμάζω (to "reject"), but chose not to use it in this instance. In fact, Luke used it only a few verses previously, as Jesus warns his disciples that "the Son of Man . . . must be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed."[5] Luke used the stronger verb in this instance. Why not in the one in question? Could it be that he wants to emphasize the rejection by the Jewish 'insiders' and not the alleged rejection by these Samaritan 'outsiders'?[6] And does not the whole point of the passage seem to focus instead on ***the disciples' rejection of the Samaritans***? Luke narrates a story here of the disciples' readiness to make scapegoats out of these traditional rivals to the Jews—for which Jesus must momentarily turn his face, which has just become set to journey towards his own scapegoating in Jerusalem, and rebuke the disciples for their attempted scapegoating of the Samaritans. Jesus would soon be more like one of these Samaritans, a scapegoated outsider to his own people. Yet interpreters through the ages have invariably labeled this text in terms of a Samaritan rejection of Jesus rather than in terms of the disciples' rejection of the Samaritans.[7]

The second indicator that we the readers may be wanting to join the disciples in scapegoating the Samaritans is that the implied subject of the verb need not be the Samaritans in the first place. There is some grammatical ambiguity in the antecedent of the third person plural verb form of "receive." The immediately preceding noun, i.e., "a village of the Samaritans," is a genitive construction whose noun is singular and adjectival modifier is plural. Thus, the plural verb matches "Samaritans" in number, but not the noun, "village." In the English, for example, would not the best grammatical form be: "But *it* did not receive him," rather than "they"—if we are to assume with all the commentators that "the village of the Samaritans" is the antecedent of the verb?[8]

Let *us* not assume so for the moment. We will need to look at the preceding verse as well, in order to find a definitive third person plural noun. Here is Luke 9:52–53 in both English and Greek:

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[5] Luke 9:22; ἀποδοκιμάζω is from the adj. δόκιμος, meaning "tested" or "trustworthy," and is the opposite of the verb form δοκιμάζω, "to be tested," implying that one has failed the test or been rejected. Grundmann (Kittel's *TDNT*, Vol. II, p. 260) points out that the Synoptic Gospels connect this word with Jesus' quote of Psalm 118:22, referencing the stone which the builders have rejected.

[6] Emphasis on 'insider' rejection as opposed to 'outsider' rejection is precisely the theme of the next passage in Luke, the sending out of the seventy (Luke 10:1–20). The theme of sending out might even be seen as secondary to the otherwise strange passage embedded in the midst (10:13–16) in which Jesus utters woes to the 'insider' towns of Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum. He specifically states that it will be worse for them in the judgment than for 'outsider' towns like Tyre and Sidon. The conclusion of the woes gives the apparent criteria for judgment: "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." (Here another word for "reject," ἀθετέω, is used.)

[7] I think it is significant that I have never seen a paragraph caption of Luke 9:51–56 in any edition of the Bible that highlights the action of either the disciples requesting judgment or Jesus rebuking the disciples for it; rather, such captions always allude to the alleged action of the Samaritans.

[8] Perhaps "all the commentators" is a bit strong; but I consulted over a dozen commentaries, all of which ignore the grammar of the passage and all of which assume that the verb "not received" refers to the Samaritan villagers.

> [52]And he [Jesus] sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; [53]but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.
>
> 52 καὶ ἀπέστειλεν ἀγγέλους πρὸ προσώπου αὐτοῦ. καὶ πορευθέντες εἰσῆλθον εἰς κώμην Σαμαριτῶν ὡς ἑτοιμάσαι αὐτῷ· 53 καὶ οὐκ ἐδέξαντο αὐτόν, ὅτι τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ἦν πορευόμενον εἰς Ἰερουσαλήμ.

The problem is the same in both languages, even though they have different grammatical structures. The Greek, unlike the English, does not require the use of a separate word for the personal pronoun "they," since that third person plural designation is contained in the verb form itself. But the verb, like the pronoun in English, does need to agree in number with its implied subject. There are two verbs without definite subjects in these two verses: εἰσῆλθον ("they entered") and οὐκ ἐδέξαντο ("they received not"). In the first instance, it is clear that the object of the previous sentence, ἀγγέλους ("messengers"), agrees in number with the next verb; so we can imply that it is the messengers who entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for Jesus. But we have already stated the problem with the second verb. In this latter instance, the object of the previous sentence, κώμην Σαμαριτῶν, is a singular/plural compound that does not fully agree in number with the verb of the following sentence. So we have two choices: assume with all the commentators that Samaritans is the antecedent (and that Luke used less-than-perfect grammar); or revert back to the same subject as previously, i.e., "messengers," which *does* unambiguously agree in number.

But, of course, this latter option drastically changes our reading of the text. We would now understand *the messengers* as not having received Jesus into the village. A slightly paraphrased translation of these two verses might read like this:

> [52]And Jesus sent messengers ahead of him. Journeying in this way, these messengers entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for Jesus; [53]but they never received him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

Does this reading make sense? I think it does—especially if we return to the first indicator of scapegoating, the continual changing of Luke's verb on the part of us, the interpreters. If we assume with all the commentators a harsher verb form, such as "reject," then assuming the messengers makes no sense. These messengers would not have gone ahead to prepare for Jesus only to then reject him. But, if we leave Luke's (well-chosen) verb in place, then perhaps it even makes *more* sense to assume *the messengers* as having "not received" Jesus. Consider it this way: Luke begins by simply stating the presumably general practice of sending messengers ahead: "And Jesus sent messengers ahead of him." Then, he tells of a specific instance in which the advance guard—one might call them the "Hospitality Committee"—went into a Samaritan village to do their job but never had the chance to welcome Jesus because he had since set his face to journey to Jerusalem. Is not this what Luke's text seems to be conveying to us? Might that also be why he chooses a congenial verb like "receive," which has to do with hospitality and welcoming, rather than a more hostile verb like "reject"?

If we accept this alternate reading, then the passage highlights even more the disciples' attempt to scapegoat the Samaritans. For their venomous request to Jesus would not be out of revenge for the Samaritans having rejected him. No, they would simply be noticing that Jesus had decided to

skip this town and then assumed the reason out of their own prejudice. They would have assumed that Jesus was skipping this village out of the same hostility to Samaritans which they so clearly express in their request to rain down God's consuming fire. They were seeking such terrible revenge, not for a simple lack of hospitality, but out of centuries of hard feelings. Doesn't the latter really end up being a better explanation for such deep hatred, anyway? Isn't a firestorm, à la Sodom and Gomorrah, a rather harsh response to an alleged slight on the part of one village?

Many commentators are quick to point out that the esteemed Elijah (whom three of the disciples had just seen on the mount of transfiguration, 9:30) had ordered such a firestorm upon Samaritans. They often mention the variant ending for verse 54 that makes explicit the connection to Elijah.[9] But does this story in 2 Kings 1 in any way provide a justification for what the disciples suggest to Jesus? Elijah receives a message from the LORD to intercept some messengers of the king of Samaria and to send them back to the king with a word of judgment to him. When this word is relayed to the king, we are never given his in-depth reaction, other than that he seems to want to know more. For the king of Samaria sends messengers to Elijah, asking that he "Come" in person. When Elijah responds to this invitation by raining fire down on not just one but two groups of fifty emissaries, it is clear that he is the one rejecting an invitation. Thus, in the popular reading of Luke 9:51–56, it is the Samaritans who are refusing to invite or receive Jesus, but in the story of 2 Kings 1, Elijah refuses an invitation from the Samaritans and also rains down fire on his inviters. True, the disciples (and Luke[10]) may have had Elijah in mind as a model in requesting a firestorm. But my reading suggests that it is not so much for some reason parallel to Elijah's situation, i.e., the rejection of an invitation, but more likely for the same true, underlying reason: a deep-seated prejudice of Jews against Samaritans. This is how the disciples are modeling Elijah! In reading the text this way, the point of the story is clearly not some rejection of Jesus by the Samaritans, but rather Jesus' rejection of the kind of deep-seated prejudice expressed by his disciples against the Samaritans.

At this crucial point in the narrative, Luke gives us a clue to Jesus' overall mission by having him rebuke the disciples. Isn't this point lost behind an interpretation which focuses instead on the Samaritans allegedly rejecting Jesus? And, perhaps more importantly, doesn't the popular interpretation reveal our own susceptibility to getting caught right up in the same kind of scapegoating game? Obviously, we do not have the same kind of stake in scapegoating the Samaritans. They no longer represent for us a group with whom we have had a long-standing hostility. But we do have such groups, the Jews unfortunately being one long-standing target. History is tragically stained with just such Christian acts of violence against Jews. At a time when we are trying to heal those relationships and repent of our past sins, the alternative reading suggested here runs less risk of obscuring the main point, which is that Jesus came to put a stop to such violent hatred, whether it be Jews against Samaritans or Christians

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[9] Codexes A, C, and D are among the ancient texts that conclude the verse with "as Elijah did."

[10] Could Luke intentionally be having the disciples imitate Elijah in a negative fashion because Jesus has come to supersede Elijah as God's prophet? This would seem to continue the point of including Elijah in the Transfiguration narrative only a few verses previous (9:30).

against Jews. Jesus himself came as the one rejected, consumed by our scapegoating hatred on the cross, the loser in our insider/outsider game of scapegoating. On the cross he was in solidarity with outsiders. He would be declared an outcast to his own people, thereby in the same company as the Samaritans.[11]

To make this story be about a Samaritan rejection of Jesus is to thus miss coming to terms with what the Girardian anthropology has urged me to see as the heart of the Gospel: namely, that Jesus came to mess up our insider/outsider games of scapegoating by identifying with the outsiders of this world. To see the story as a Samaritan rejection of Jesus plays right into the existing structure of the Jewish/Samaritan rivalry of that era. I do not think that our historical approach has served us well in this instance. To read this text in the manner in which I am suggesting is to more properly feel Jesus' rebuke to his disciples for having played the deadly insider/outsider game of scapegoating. For the point of the gospel, it seems to me, is this: we all play those games, including we who seek to be Jesus' modern-day disciples. This is what Jesus came to show us on the cross. Luke 9:51–56 is thus a foretaste of the main dish to come at a crucial point in the narrative.

Scapegoating the evangelists

Why would *we* "want" to scapegoat the Samaritans in this story? We no longer have a direct stake in that particular rivalry between Jews and Samaritans, do we? But I would like for us to consider that we at least have an *in*direct stake in such scapegoating: namely, that our human penchant for scapegoating would not be so directly revealed. We point to the historical circumstances to make it *their* problem, not our problem. When it is read as simply a historical matter between Jews and Samaritans, we do not have to read ourselves into the text. We do not have to see ourselves as Jesus' disciples, receiving his rebuke for our continued scapegoating behavior.

Perhaps a subtle example of modern scapegoating is in order here. A recent trend in biblical scholarship is to accuse the Gospel writers of anti-Semitism. The implication is that the evangelists are partly to blame for centuries of subsequent violence against Jews on the part of Christians. The evangelists may be seen as the beginning of a bloodstained history. In fact, there may be some who are uncomfortable with my reading of Luke 9:51–56, because I so heavily emphasize the Jewish hatred for Samaritans. The spirit of this current trend is that anything which remotely sounds like pointing a finger at the Jews must have a spirit of anti-Semitism behind it. In their view, I am being anti-Semitic; or, if my reading is correct, then perhaps it is another example of Luke being anti-Semitic.

The wider trend is to read anti-Semitism into all the Gospel accounts because of their harsh treatment of the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders. It is correctly pointed out that the accounts of the Passion focus culpability for the crucifixion of Jesus on Jewish leadership more so than on the Romans. Those who see anti-Semitism in these narratives thus argue that the more likely historical scenario was greater Roman culpability, based especially on the fact that it was a Roman form of execution. But, again, to argue solely in terms of historicity is to miss the central point of the Gospels. Jesus

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[11] Elsewhere in the Gospel, Luke seems to portray a solidarity between Jesus and Samaritans. In the only other two references to Samaritans in Luke's Gospel, they are lifted high as models of good behavior: the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25–37) and the Healing of the Ten Lepers (17:11–19).

came to reveal what I am calling the insider/outsider games we play that lead to the seemingly endless cycles of violence in our world. Here the basic historical data does come into play: for Jesus to confront those who thought themselves insiders in his own time and place, it was necessary to confront the leaders of his own people. To blame the Romans does not as directly reveal the problem, since they were hated outsiders to the Jewish people. The Romans were regularly scapegoated targets for Jesus' own people, and to blame them would bring no new insight into the insider/outsider dynamic of human culture. In order for any of us to fully recognize the problem, we must first see that it is those of us who consider ourselves insiders who are the source of the problem. We seek to always perpetuate the insider/outsider structure to our advantage. In the case of the Gospels, the crucial folks to reveal this to were the insiders of Jesus' own people, the Jewish leaders. To structure the narrative in this way is not anti-Semitism at work. It is the gospel's very theme of revealing the insider/outsider structure.

I began these reflections on this modern trend in scholarship wondering whether it is itself an example of the insider/outsider game. Apparently, in modern academic circles, the role of insider is reserved for those who are always on the lookout for anti-Semitism, to expose it wherever it may be found, even if that is in Scripture. But there is a double irony here. First, the implication of what I am saying is that the very impetus of looking out for anti-Semitism comes from the Gospel narratives—which many now accuse of anti-Semitism! In making such an observation, I am by no means trying to deny that subsequent Christians have had a problem with anti-Semitism. Far from it; I would underscore the truth that, since Constantine, Christians have generally been the insiders, and Jews have been the outsiders, to the power structures of Western culture. Christians have disgracefully and tragically acted out this insider/outsider game of scapegoating which, from the point of view of this essay, Jesus came precisely to reveal.

It is those of us who consider ourselves insiders who are the source of the problem.

The second irony is that scholars may now be playing this same insider/outsider game when they overzealously see anti-Semitism everywhere, even in the gospel itself. Scapegoating is such a trap that we may even fall into it when we are trying to stop others from scapegoating. Many modern scholars (and here I walk a fine line myself in not scapegoating them!) have come to scapegoat the Gospel writers without really understanding what it is that the Gospels reveal. I would suggest that they fail to recognize that the source for their sensitivity to anti-Semitism is itself the gospel-preference for the victim of the insider/outsider game.

Luke 9:51–56 is a crucial passage in coming to recognize our own tendencies to scapegoat others, since it points to the scapegoating among Jesus' own insiders, i.e., his disciples. We who consider ourselves disciples of Jesus should read ourselves into this text. The point is not to blame or scapegoat someone else for scapegoating but to come to see it in our-

selves! Christians have missed the whole point of the gospel at the cost of millions of lives, when they have sought to scapegoat Jews or Muslims—or whomever.

Luke 9:57–62: Continued instruction for would-be disciples

At the outset I mentioned a hope to see the wider passage of Luke 9:51–62 in its unity. Thus far, I have not dealt with 9:57–62. The link is provided in the first two words of v. 57, Καὶ πορευομένων ("And going"). Luke has used this same verb four times previously in 9:51–56 to establish the action of journeying to Jerusalem. This motif of journeying continues in vv. 57–62. The other theme that holds vv. 51–62 together as a unity is that of failed discipleship. This theme is more obvious in the half we are yet to deal with; my argument regarding the first half has been that the focus of our reading should be on the failure of the disciples rather than on the Samaritan village. The first event on this journey is the disciples' misperception of its goal: they have not heard Jesus' prediction of his rejection by the elders of Jerusalem and instead anticipate the role of the Jewish leadership by desiring to play the same deadly game against the Samaritans. Verses 57–62 now continue the journey with three would-be disciples who underestimate the cost of taking the journey with Jesus. Jesus' responses to these three are often labeled under the heading of "hard sayings" and are dealt with separately from 9:51–56. By contrast, I will read the second portion of 9:51–62 in light of the first, using the Gospel themes we have attempted to bring forth thus far.

The first would-be disciple promises to follow Jesus, to which Jesus responds: "Foxes haves holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." This saying is not just about the inconvenience of occasionally not having a place to stay. Nor is it, I think, trying to say that he *never* has overnight accommodations; for this would not ring true after telling us of their traveling procedure of sending messengers ahead to prepare. To say that Jesus and his disciples do not have a place to call *home* like the foxes and birds is closer to the meaning. But I think it still misses the deeper significance—which is: in a world that structures itself around the deadly games of insiders against outsiders, one who comes to be on the side of outsiders is completely out of place.[12] Verses 51 and 58 together anticipate Jesus' ultimate lack of reception in this world by looking forward to the days of his lifting up to heaven. Only the God who is on the side of the victim will receive Jesus once again in the Ascension. This present lack of reception echoes the theme emphasized in the traditional reading of 9:51–56, as a lack of reception on the part of the Samaritans. Our alternative reading still recognizes a lack of reception, but it is on the part of the messengers. And their lack of reception is due to Jesus' initiative in changing his itinerary. The setting of his face to Jerusalem now makes more real his 'out-of-placeness' in this world, which Jesus expresses to this first would-be follower on the journey.

Jesus' response to the second would-be disciple is even more difficult without the proper context for understanding. The second man is apparently willing to follow Jesus but first must go bury his father—a

[12] I am indebted to James Alison for insight into Luke 9:57–60 from his reflections on the parallel version to these verses in Matthew 8:18–22, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 86–87.

quite reasonable request. But Jesus' answer is downright shocking: "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." What is Jesus doing here? He is not exactly the model of the compassionate grief counselor! The clue to the meaning comes in the absurdity of the first part: obviously dead people cannot bury anyone, busy as they are with their own decomposition. As Girardian scholar James Alison puts it:

> Rather [Jesus] is saying: this piety of burying the dead is proper to a culture based on death, and has nothing to do with the piety of those who are building the kingdom which knows not death. Get out of the culture of death, leave it behind, and build with me the culture which is coming into existence.[13]

Jesus has come to replace human culture, based on the deadly games of insiders against outsiders, with a culture in which everyone is invited to take part—but only through solidarity with the victims of this world's insider/outsider games. Jesus' statement is eschatological more than pastoral. It may not be the most pastoral response to the situation in the present, but, properly understood, it looks forward in hope to God's reign based on life. It seeks to jar us out of our enslavement to the human culture based on death.

Jesus' third response, then, continues the eschatological bent. His image of the farmer at the plow underscores that his followers must keep their gaze forward; looking back to past ties with human culture is to risk returning to the slavery. One imagines the farmer whose steady gaze is lined up on the tree at the other end of the field. Jesus, at this point in Luke's story, has his gaze steadily fixed upon a tree outside Jerusalem. There is no turning back, if he is to meet God's goal of exposing the deadly insider/outsider games of human culture. There should be nothing worth looking back to, if the goal is truly God's offer of a whole new way of living that is freed from the ultimate grasp of the reign of death.

Conclusion

Has this Girardian reading been exegesis or eisegesis? My view is that one cannot ultimately decide between these two without having a unified interpretation of the text. The interpreter can then measure how many exegeses of passages square with the overall interpretation. If the number of passages resistant to one's hermeneutical key multiplies, then eisegesis is more likely. The interpreter begins to read more into the text. When one's unified interpretation continues to successfully bring light to a text, on the other hand, then chances are good that it is exegesis. The interpreter is reading out what is actually there in the text.

The ultimate measure of my success with Luke 9:51–62, therefore, is contingent on deciding for the overall success of the Girardian anthropology as a hermeneutical key. I hope I have given you, the reader, a clue sufficient to prompt your own investigation into the work of René Girard as a new hermeneutical key for reading the Bible. The image that comes to mind is the moment in fifth grade when I tried on my new pair of glasses and the whole world instantly became more clear. A traditionally biblical image might be the feeling of sitting in darkness and suddenly seeing a great light. I hope this essay is enough to spark your interest to try on these 'Girardian' glasses as a uniquely illuminating way to see the light of Christ. Perhaps they will work for you, too.

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[14] Alison, *Raising Abel*, 87.

Annotated bibliography: Selected works by René Girard

Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure. Girard's first major work, it lays the first pillar in Girardian theory, that of "mimetic desire" (called "triangular desire" in this first work)—through the study of novels by Cervantes, Proust, Dostoevsky, and others. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965. (Originally published in French, 1961; translated by Yvonne Freccero.)

Violence and the Sacred. Girard's second major work, it lays out the second pillar of Girardian theory—namely, his anthropology of the mechanisms of victimage, or "scapegoating," that lie behind all of human culture—through a study of classical Greek drama, Freud, and Levi-Strauss. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977. (Originally published in French, 1972; translated by Patrick Gregory.)

"To Double Business Bound" : Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology. A collection of essays. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World. Research undertaken in collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort. To date, Girard's magnum opus. The third of his major works, it programmatically lays out Girard's entire theory in dialogue form. It is structured into three major "Books" entitled "Fundamental Anthropology," "The Judaeo-Christian Scriptures," and "Interdividual Psychology." Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987. (Originally published in French, 1978; translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer.)

The Scapegoat. Girard takes a different starting point, a mid-fourteenth century "text of persecution," to unravel his theory of myths and then to show how biblical texts demythologize the mythical viewpoint; roughly, one-half theory of myth and one-half biblical commentary. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. (Originally published in French, 1982; translated by Yvonne Freccero.)

Job: The Victim of His People. Girard uses and expounds his theory through a uniquely enlightening commentary on the biblical Book of Job. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987. (Originally published in French, 1985; translated by Yvonne Freccero.)

A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare. Girard's most recent work, it provides a comprehensive analysis of Shakespearean drama using his theories. It is a masterpiece of literary criticism befitting the master dramatist of the English language. Even the most learned of readers may discover a whole new Shakespeare (which is actually the same old Shakespeare understood in a whole new light). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

The Girard Reader. Edited by James G. Williams. An anthology of basic texts designed to give a substantive introduction to Girard's thought and work, with an emphasis on his more recent positions; includes a brief biography, an interview, and a glossary of Girardian terminology. New York: Crossroad, 1996.

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———. *Knowing Jesus* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1994). A wonderful expression of basic Christian theology based on the perspective of the victim as vindicated by God

through the Resurrection. It is an excellent and readable introduction to the Girardian thought-process for the Christian faith.

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———. The Florilegia Institute lecture series on audio cassette tape. Similar to his book but generally a bit more in depth. Highly recommended are the series: *Creation, Fall & Sacrifice*; *The Gospel of John*; *The Gospel of Luke*; and *St. Paul's Letter to the Romans.* For more information see the Florilegia website at http://www.florilegia.org.

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Schwager, Raymund, S. J. *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987). (Originally published in German, 1978; translated by Maria L. Assad.) The first attempt by a biblical scholar and theologian to read Girard's theories through all of Scripture. Currently out of print, but worth looking up in a library.

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Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture. Published annually: Volume I, Spring, 1994-. Published essays from the annual COV&R conferences.

A Book Worth Discussing: *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*

Lois Malcolm
Luther Seminary
Saint Paul, Minnesota

The Promise of Lutheran Ethics. Edited by Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998. 256 pages. Paper. $18.00.

Fifty years ago, the United Lutheran Church commissioned some theologians, including Joseph Sittler, William Lazareth, and George Forrell, to contribute to a three volume set entitled *Christian Social Responsibility*. Like them, the authors of this new collection of essays have been commissioned by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America—through its Church Council and Division for Church and Society—to help its members "think through the nature of Christian ethics today" (p. 1). Any reader familiar with the work of Sittler, Lazareth, or Forrell will see that these essays are not only responding to a radically different context but, indeed, are defining Lutheranism in very different ways. For the most part, these essays criticize a specific distortion in much Lutheranism: the reduction of the Christian life to the "motivation touched off by justification" (p. 27). They are especially critical of the way Protestant ethics has been aligned with the "punctual self" of modernity, a self "unencumbered" by its ties to nature or even to the rest of the human community. This criticism, in my view, is the chief strength of these essays, along with their concrete proposal for how ethics and the law might be conceived in more substantive and positive terms. What remains a question—a question that is especially salient when we compare these essays to the work of their predecessors—is whether they have captured the comprehensiveness and, more importantly, the distinctiveness of Lutheranism's *theological* contribution to the ethical problems of our day.

This volume consists of seven essays sandwiched between two short introductions (one by each editor) and a concluding transcript of a "table talk" conversation among the authors. John Stumme's introduction stresses the "tradition's" focus on the gift of faith; Karen Bloomquist's stresses how "today's context" is largely defined by a range of reactions to the Enlightenment's focus on freedom, a focus that has influenced much of the contemporary "culture wars" debate (e.g., with regard to homosexuality and abortion). Although the concluding "table-talk" reveals sharp differences among these authors, it does conclude that the church has a mandate to

define itself in concrete and substantive terms as a "community of moral deliberation." But these authors present very different proposals for what that community might look like. Four different positions can be identified in this volume. James Childs' essay works out of an "eschatological" perspective. The other six propose some form of a "contextualized" ethic. Three of these present an argument for an "ecclesial" ethics (Robert Benne, Martha Stortz, and Reinhard Hütter); two argue for a form of "liberation" ethics (Richard Perry and Larry Rasmussen with Cynthia Moe-Lobeda); and the final essay (David Fredrickson's) offers a reading of Pauline ethics that mediates between these two positions even as it articulates a distinctive proposal of its own.

With the exception, then, of Childs' essay, all the others offer some concrete proposal for enacting the substance of the Christian life. Childs, by contrast, focuses on the "ambiguity" and "complexity" of moral choices, and how the reign of God offers a "horizon" against which to make these choices. Given the distinctive character of his voice in this volume, it is unfortunate that Childs is so tentative in developing his proposal, focusing more on the ambiguity and complexity of what the church might say rather than on the courageous and substantive stands it could take for justice and mercy. Indeed, the vision of the reign of God he presents has much potential and could serve as a norm that offers precisely the kind of substantive yet critical criterion needed to mediate between the more ecclesial and more liberationist essays in this volume. Also, as Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg have shown, the symbol of the kingdom of God is highly relevant to our understanding of trinitarian doctrine, a doctrine central to any theological formulation of Christian ethics.

Among the essays stressing an ecclesial ethics, Benne's offers a bridge between the emphases of a previous generation—say, as stressed in a volume like *Christian Social Responsibility*—and those of this volume. He begins by outlining classical themes in Lutheran ethics: justification, the church's distinctive work of proclaiming the gospel, the twofold rule of God, and a paradoxical view of human nature and history. He then names a contemporary challenge: Lutheranism's tendency to reduce "the whole of ethical life to the motivation touched off by justification" and its corresponding failure to develop the church as a "community of character." Instead, he argues, it offers only a vague "realism" that, because of its lack of substance, leaves the church vulnerable to various hermeneutics of suspicion (from Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche to feminists and multiculturalists). His concluding constructive proposal centers not around the themes he began with (justification, paradox, etc.) but around correctives to these challenges—themes like "covenantal existence" and "divinization." Although he presents a number of tantalizing suggestions, Benne does not offer an integrated picture of how the latter two themes, especially the Calvinist theme of "covenant," cohere with the "classic" Lutheran emphases he outlines at the beginning of the paper. He is in a unique position to offer such an integration because he appreciates the distinctive contribution of Lutheranism's classic emphases even as he is cognizant of their potential for misappropriation. I hope he will articulate the theological center of his argument more fully in future work.

A similar comment can be made of Stortz's essay. She offers an intriguing depiction of Martin Luther's understanding of the practice of private prayer—a depiction that, she states, is intentionally empirical, concrete, and inductive (as opposed to

being theoretical, abstract, and deductive). Appropriating the Ignatian focus on "formation" as a lens for her analysis, she outlines Luther's instructions for daily prayer. In turn, she establishes a connection between the daily practice of prayer and a way of life shaped by responsiveness, gratitude, modesty, and joy. Given her recognition of the reflexive connection between doctrine and practice, Stortz could bring to the fore even more explicitly what is meant by Luther's understanding of *tentatio* (prayer and meditation), which he uses coterminously with *Anfechtung* (suffering or "tempting attack"). *Tentatio* is a key moment that links Luther's practice of prayer to his theology of the cross and understanding of justification. As Ignatian prayer has at its heart our tangible participation in Christ's death and resurrection, so Luther's understanding of prayer is deeply shaped by the *tentatio* that brings us face us to face with the crucified Christ and his resurrection life. Indeed, we might say that the activity of *tentatio* is precisely the "inductive" way by which a theology of the cross is enacted in our lives. And further, such *tentatio* not only "forms" the lives of Christians but offers a radical critique of all sinful distortions that keep us from union with God. I hope Stortz also will pursue the theological import of her argument more fully in future work.

Hütter's is the one essay in the volume that does not shy away from rigorous and thorough theological argument. His footnotes are a veritable survey of relevant literature in theology and ethics. Presenting the most explicit critique of the modern theological impoverishment of Protestant ethics, he analyses two dimensions of what he calls the "Protestant fallacy." The first is its reduction of all theology and ethics to the single article of "justification by grace through faith alone," and the second is its strictly negative understanding of freedom as freedom *from* the law rather than *for* it. Aligning these "Protestant" emphases with modern ethics, he situates his own proposal in relation to three twentieth century movements that serve as correctives to the restriction of all ethics to the "unencumbered" self: (1) the Christocentrism of dialectical theology; (2) the Protestant discovery of Aristotle's and Thomas' character and virtue ethics; and (3) the stress on embodiment and location in liberation theologies (including feminist and eco-ethics). The heart of his proposal centers around a reading of Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian." By way of a reading of Phil 2:4–11 and Luther's commentary on Genesis, he argues that, for Luther, law gives concrete form to the life of the human creature "deified by grace." Drawing on David Yeago's interpretation of Luther, he contends that although sinful humanity may receive the law as an external code, for the subject "deified by grace" there is no difference between "God's gospel" and "God's commandments."

Hütter's critique of Protestant ethics and its alignment with the excesses of modern ethics is a brilliant one, as is his strong argument for a retrieval of the commandments in ethical teaching. His argument is one that demands attention, and I concur with much of its thrust. The question I have about his essay is whether he fuses law and gospel in the lives of believers. For example, does he maintain the distinctions Lutheran orthodoxy has held among the three uses of the law (first or "civil" use, second or "theological" use, and third or "exhortatory" use)? Or, are they subsumed under a kind of "third use" unique to the Christian community? In other words, does he do justice to what Lutherans have called the first two uses of the law? The first use of the law pertains to the presupposition (based on the first use of the law) that all

human beings, by way of their being created in the image of God, have the capacity to perceive some understanding of law or the "orders of creation" (the traditional name given for the requisite conditions for human life in community). To affirm this capacity is not to affirm an Enlightenment conception of "autonomous" ethics but rather to affirm that God's power and goodness encompass the totality of life and our creaturely—and this includes nonbelievers'—participation in it. The second point is its recognition (based on the second use of the law) that even believers live in the tension between being made in God's image and yet being fallen members of a humanity in bondage to sin. To affirm that the law also functions as an "alien" demand in the believer's life (which criticizes all the demonic distortions that keep us from worshipping God and treating our neighbors justly, both individual and corporate) does not entail negating its very positive capacity to guide and give substance to that life. And finally, and many would say, most importantly, we can ask whether he does justice to the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel—that the gospel truly is a free gift from God not contingent on human works. That distinction, many would argue, is what distinguishes Lutheran from other forms of ethics. A stronger recognition of what is distinctive about a Lutheran understanding of the gospel and the first two functions of the law would greatly enhance his argument and bring to the fore what Lutheran ethics has to offer other forms of ecclesial ethics (e.g., Calvinist, Wesleyan, or Roman Catholic).

The two "liberationist" essays make very different types of arguments, but they share the "ecclesial" ethicists' emphasis on particularity, embodiment, and community. Perry presents his case from the vantage point of the experience of African Americans. Like Hütter, he is concerned that traditional Lutheran preoccupations have tended to sever the connection between "who we are before God" and "what we are doing among God's people." His concern is not with appropriating Lutheranism for an African American situation but with examining what the rich and diverse traditions of African American Christianity have to offer Lutheranism. In this appropriation, he makes an important contribution to Lutheran ethics by tracing the actual history whereby African Americans offered a corrective not only to racism in this country but to the tendency in much of Lutheran ethics to separate "right doctrine" from "right practice." What would make his argument even more potent is if he concentrated more fully on how African American conceptions of "who we are before God" theologically inform "what we do among God's people." This would establish even more firmly the rich theological resources African American Christianity has to offer—and criticize—Lutheranism, especially in its predominantly European American forms.

These essays make an important contribution with their stress on the concrete formation of individuals and communities . . .

A similar point can be made about the essay by Rasmussen and Moe-Lobeda,

which identifies the environment as the essay's concern and the question of whether life as we know it is able to meet the needs of "the expanding world and the rest of nature for present and future generations" as its contextual problem (p. 132). But unlike either Perry, who describes specific practices of advocacy, or even the "ecclesial" essayists, who describe practices that form Christian community, Rasmussen and Moe-Lobeda focus on a "reforming dynamic," which, they argue, is the "proper dynamic of a Lutheran ethic for our time" (p. 134). This dynamic does not negate the role tradition plays as a "deposit" carried over time. Rather, it is essentially a "dynamic" that moves within a "dialectic of continuity and discontinuity" that interprets itself in light of the "signs of the times" as these are read in and by the believing community. I hope Rasmussen and Moe-Lobeda will develop even more fully the theological import of their argument: specifically, how this "reforming dynamic" (as a *formal* construct) is intrinsically shaped by the material themes of "creation," "cross," and the "response of faith"—themes they also discuss in the essay. They do establish this connection in the essay, but it could be developed. Doing so would make even more explicit how this reforming dynamic is not merely a function of tradition and change but a function of *God's* justice and mercy in the world and how we, as creatures, might speak, think, and enact it.

So far we have identified two major poles in this volume: a pole emphasizing the substantive ethos of Christian community life and a pole emphasizing its critical prophetic dynamism. Fredrickson presupposes both poles in a "political" reading of Paul's ethics, which draws a parallel between the way Paul conceptualizes the local church and the "assembly" (*ekklesia*) of Greek city-states and their democratic procedures for decision making. But what is distinctive about Fredrickson's reading of Paul is its theological thrust. The political process of the church's discernment as an assembly is not simply a baptizing of Greek political procedures but an actual and tangible participation in Christ's death and resurrection by the power of the Spirit. The free speech of the "political" assembly of the congregation is granted by the Spirit. Unlike Hütter, who interprets the Christ hymn in Phil 2:5–11 in relation to the role of law in the believers' lives, Fredrickson focuses on how we are transformed by "the Spirit's free gift of the mind of Christ to the community" (p. 124). Thus, the Christian community's "political" process of deliberation cannot be divorced from the "ethical" way in which we are, through Christ, mutually enslaved and dedicated to one another's freedom. In turn, a focus on "ethos" and communal identity cannot be divorced from the "critical principle" in Paul's ethics, a principle defined theologically by the freedom granted by the Spirit through Christ's death for us. Fredrickson makes a truly innovative argument in this essay, but he restricts his analysis to a close exegesis of the texts he analyzes (2 Corinthians 3; Philippians 1:27–2:18; and Romans 12–15). Hopefully, the argument he develops in this essay will be developed more fully in future projects.

This book makes a timely contribution to the "ethos" of contemporary American Lutheran congregations. It identifies a central modern problematic—individualism—and a central theological problem in much of Lutheranism—the tendency to reduce ethics to personal motivation. But the question remains whether some of the resources in Lutheran theology that are either rejected or neglected in this volume might not be the very ones needed to help us respond to this situation. For example, a sharp distinction

between law and gospel may especially be needed in an age that relies even for its "spirituality" on human technique. A strong theology of the cross, with its critique of all forms of self-salvation and its focus on Christ's death and resurrection, is a needed message for our time. All our attempts at securing ourselves—politically, economically, technologically, even by way of our religious identities and forms of spirituality—are not sufficient to save us from the realities of sin, death, and demonic power. To say this is not to reject the law and the way it offers substantive guidance for how to live. In other words, a corrective to either an antinomianism or an interiorized interpretation of justification need not entail a rejection of the core Reformation insight—an insight that is essentially theological—that God and *God alone* has the power to save.

Furthermore, Lutheran theology has strong warrants for a wholehearted affirmation of the doctrine of creation and its implications for our lives as creatures within the very complexity and nuance of all our interactions—interpersonal, political, economic, technological—with other human beings and even the natural and technical worlds of which we are a part. Rasmussen and Moe-Lobeda grapple with this question the most (with their focus on "sustainability"), but Perry deals with it as well (with regard to institutional racism), as do Benne and Hütter (by way of retrieving the "orders of creation" or "natural law") and Childs (by way of an eschatological vision of creation). Yet much more could be said, especially given the highly complex systems each one of us actually participates in on a daily basis—from, e.g., the systems of the mass media to those of a global economy. This task of fully grappling with what it means to be 'creatures' is not a simple one, but more guidance is needed if God's power and goodness are not merely to be restricted to a Christian ghetto of interpersonal encounters.

And a focus on creation leads to the need for a rehabilitation of a concept not discussed in a sustained fashion in these essays: the doctrine of vocation. At issue here are the concrete roles and relationships in which our "ethos" as Christians—as individuals and communities—takes a palpable form as it serves the neighbor's needs. Given the plethora of popular books, Christian and otherwise, dealing with spirituality in everyday life or finding one's purpose in life, it is surprising that these essays touch on the doctrine of vocation only in a cursory fashion. If writers like Deepak Chopra are not to corner the market on spirituality in a capitalistic society, then theologians need to retrieve those aspects of our tradition-such as the doctrine of vocation-that do speak of God's justice and mercy in relation to the actual circumstances that constitute most of our waking hours.

In spite of these concerns, these essays make an important contribution with their stress on the concrete formation of individuals and communities, whether or not one defines it primarily in terms of "retrieval" or "reform." The need to attend to ethos and community is probably one of the most important tasks facing congregations in contemporary North America. And, an individualistic, self-centered piety or spirituality is not sufficient for facing this task. But this corrective should not leave us with a truncated vision of the resources in the Lutheran heritage. Perhaps a return to the themes discussed in that first three-volume set—with echoes to the work of theological ethicists of a previous generation like Sittler, Forrell, and Lazareth—is needed as a corrective to this corrective.

Book Reviews

After Christianity. By Daphne Hampson. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996. x and 326 pages. Paper. $25.00.

According to Hampson, Christianity is neither relevant nor true in the context of the modern/postmodern world. In its place, she lays out a theism which she finds congruent with modern understandings of human agency and of the causal nexus of history and nature.

Hampson's dismissal of Christianity has two primary foci. As a revealed religion, Christianity postulates a God who is "other," existing in a heteronomous relationship with humanity. Hampson argues that this conception of God leads inevitably to a hierarchical, heteronomous paradigm of spirituality and social organization incompatible with modern understandings of self-identity. Moreover, Christianity can not be true because its grounding in the particularity of the Christ event contradicts modern knowledge of how the world works. Throughout her critique, Hampson characterizes Christian theology as a male enterprise representing the hopes and aspirations, needs and fears of men in their experience of reality.

Hampson's theism builds on the feminist notion of the centered self and on the conviction that there is more to reality than meets the eye. The centered self is able to stand on its own, yet exists in reciprocity with others. Self-centering brings persons into an at-homeness with the universe, to the awareness that we are profoundly connected to what is in excess of what we are and that there are powers on which we may draw. Hampson calls this reality "God." The centered self approach to life offers a spirituality consonant with modern self-identity and leads to an ethics of attention, honesty, and ordering.

Obviously, Hampson's theism moves beyond the theological boundaries of most readers of this journal. Her book, however, is important because of the questions she raises. Has the paradigm of human subjectivity changed? If so, how shall we respond? Do the images we use to formulate our theology sometimes hinder rather than help the mission they are supposed to facilitate? Hampson's "solution" may not be appealing to many readers. The questions she raises, however, are crucial for us as we ponder our identity and mission in the twenty-first century.

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My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk. By Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth KASIMU Baker-Fletcher. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997. xii and 307 pages. Paper. $18.00.

As a pedagogical tool alone, this book succeeds. The text is in the form of "theological conversation." Each author takes the topic at hand, presents a womanist/Xodus perspective, and then engages the other in response and dialogue; questions and provocations further the construction of each chapter. This style of authorship not only provides occasion to further the scholarship of the respective areas of thought, but it models a style of teaching from which theology can immensely benefit.

The text takes the form of a systematic theology, with topics including God, Christ, Humanity, Generations, Church, and Last Things. Each of the six parts is divided into three sections, as described above: womanist perspective, Xodus perspective, and dialogue. Karen Baker-Fletcher presents a womanist voice which emphasizes God as the strength of life, addresses problems in the construction of atonement theory, and utilizes the metaphor of dust as a powerful means to speak of spiritual memory and unity. Her voice speaks of the humanity of black women in a way that examines gifts for survival and wholeness.

Garth KASIMU Baker-Fletcher presents a black male theology which he names Xodus theology. The term, he says, functions as "a

creative way of naming the various liberative responses—in second-generation Black male theology—to the crisis in African American hope and vision in the early 1990s" (p. 7). This approach couples traditional theological analysis with ethical, political, economic, and social analysis of communities and churches filled with "Martin's Dream Children . . . and X People" (p. 9). He critically examines the sociopolitical status of the black male in this country and theologically challenges the community to reclaim the Spirit in order to be moved toward authentic justice for all.

Each author brings a critical eye to the other's presentation. Xodus theology is challenged by womanist theology in its presentation and understanding of women in the life of the black man. One particular challenge is the Xodus reclamation of the Mother Hen image from Scripture as a means to image God in female terms. The ramifications of the image are discussed in a dialogue which suggests the Mother Eagle as an alternative, but upholds the Mother Hen as a potentially helpful image for Christian men (pp. 64–65). Likewise, the womanist criticism of the death of Jesus and its glorification is questioned by Xodus theology in terms of the struggles for freedom that the black community has been bodily engaged in for many generations. Xodus theology, while respecting the critical location from which the womanist perspective comes, strives to maintain the sense of God's power to overcome death, especially on the cross.

As a former student of the authors, I know that the book models their personal style of authorship and collaboration. This book serves as a fine example of theological conversation, and uses that conversation to clarify individual positions and engage in criticism face to face. Not only can it serve as an excellent introduction to womanist theology or to black male theology, it can demonstrate the power of conversation as a pedagogical tool It would be a fine text for an educated adult learning group as well as a classroom resource in systematic theological construction.

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Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism. By Carl E. Braaten. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998. 164 pages. Paper. $18.00.

Carl Braaten reworks previous essays in order to contribute to the current ecumenical dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics by highlighting the doctrine of the church as the decisive issue that current ecumenical discussion must engage. Braaten is convinced that the most important historic doctrinal difference between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church, often identified as the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, has been resolved and is no longer a church-dividing issue. Braaten argues that any barriers that still divide the Western church should be dismantled as soon as possible. In other words, both Protestants and Catholics should endeavor to find ways to overcome obstacles to unity. Only with unity can the church have an effective and credible missional impact on an increasingly secular world. Braaten claims that secular ideals are able to infiltrate and compromise the integrity of the church's teaching and mission.

Braaten thinks that the Catholic Church as much as the Lutheran affirms the *sola gratia*. Hence, for Braaten, the most pressing contemporary theological locus now must not be soteriology, as it was for the reformers, but ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. We must aim to understand how to restructure our churches so that they can witness to our unified faith stance. In other words, Braaten believes that Catholics and Lutherans are no longer divided on the substantive issue of the meaning of the gospel but on a formal issue of how the church best should be structured for mission. What is clear for Braaten is that Protestantism is *not* well structured for mission. Effective mission must presuppose a greater cohesion in churchly witness and discipline than Protestantism is able to give. Easily fragmented, Protestantism is prone to become sick with culture viruses such as "doctrinal normlessness" and "liturgical adventurism" (92). In comparison with Catholicism, Protestantism's greatest problem is that of lacking the authority to weed out infested secularist ideologies and thus easily falling prey to a smorgasbord of spiritualities that divide its witness.

In its origin Protestantism was to be provisional until the Catholic Church would begin to teach the gospel in its purity. For Braaten, Protestantism's entrenched attitude of both permanency and establishment perpetuates structural divisiveness in the face of substantial doctrinal agreement and this violates the unity that ought to characterize the church. Problematically, Protestantism has become satisfied with itself as a permanent institution. In the face of pluralism and secularism, the Catholic magisterium has a greater capacity than any alleged source of authority in Protestantism to preserve the church's integrity in the face of various culture viruses. While Catholicism is capable of providing a healthy sense of authority at a time when the church's authority is everywhere questioned, it is sometimes the perpetrator of an unevangelical authoritarianism, which likewise can hurt the witness of the gospel. It is clear that Braaten sees the Protestant liability as more threatening to the gospel witness than the Catholic. In a sense he is seeking a middle ground that would provide a healthy dose of both authority and freedom in the face of the current extremes of Protestant libertinism, which (as Braaten admittedly exaggerates) offers freedom but not order, and Catholic authoritarianism, which offers order but not freedom (p. 17). Braaten does not just put the onus for church separation on Protestants; specifically, he calls the Catholic Church to find ways to make reunion with Protestantism easier.

Braaten claims that a renewed and reunited church would recognize its trinitarian basis as the source, image, and goal of the church (pp. 6-7). Such a church would acknowledge that its provisionality is with reference to the coming kingdom—that she should pioneer the future of the whole world (p. 29). In other words, Braaten suggests that an eschatological approach to the church would show that she exists not for her own sake but for that of the kingdom, her ultimate, true, and final end (p. 37). The church's fidelity then would be evaluated by her ability to prepare people for God's future and not by her ability to repristinate the past.

Once again Braaten demonstrates "fire in the belly." He is a passionate crusader for an ecclesiology as formulated by "evangelical catholicism." For instance, he shoots at "confessional Lutherans" with the charge that for the sake of unity and truth, Lutherans should give up their "*satis est* reductionism": the *Augsburg Confession* presupposes an ordered ministry of the historic threefold office of the ministry, even though bishops minister not by divine (as Rome teaches) but human right (pp. 21, 23). Critics have noted that since his *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (1983), Braaten, a onetime advocate of liberation ethics, has taken a more conservative theological stance than what he held in the 1960s and 70s. What I notice in this book is a sense of balance. Braaten is no biblicist-fundamentalist. Yet he calls for fidelity to the apostolic faith—clearly a crucial New Testament imperative—*as well as* a concern for minorities and a better *social* embodiment of the church that would reflect the goals of the coming kingdom. This means that Braaten is harder to categorize than many of his critics are willing to admit.

He writes prior to the Vatican's *Official Response to the Joint Declaration on Justification,* in which it is obvious that Rome does not accept the Lutheran teaching of *simil justus et peccator*, because it is not compatible with the renewal and sanctification of the "interior man" as taught by the Council of Trent. In this document Rome also faults the Lutheran view as undermining the ability of the healed will to advance its new capacity to cooperate with the divine will in its sanctification. Clearly, Braaten is right that Lutherans and Catholics agree about the *sola gratia*; perhaps this issue has never really been in dispute. However, it would perhaps seem that the Lutheran approach to faith as *sola fide*, defined as the profoundly eschatological reality of dying and rising with Jesus, is still a hindrance for Lutheran and Catholic unity. I would also like to see Braaten deal in a future essay with such hard issues as papal infallibility, papal primacy, and papal authority as grounded in divine right, issues which may inhibit a Protestant return to the Catholic fold.

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Jesus and the Logic of History. By Paul W. Barnett. New Studies in Biblical Theology. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997. 182 pages. Paper. $18.00.

There are two Anglican/Episcopalian bishops publishing books on the historical Jesus. This is the other one—and christological chasm between the two could hardly be wider. Barnett mounts a counteroffensive against life-of-Jesus studies which present "a Jesus who is unrecognizable to the Christian faith as expressed in the historic creeds and confession of the church" (p. 15). But *Jesus and the Logic of History* does not directly critique of the works of other writers; indeed, Bishop John Shelby Spong is never mentioned. Rather, Barnett concentrates on crafting a constructive proposal. This Anglican bishop of North Sydney, Australia, has published books and articles for more than twenty years. *Jesus and the Logic of History* shows us an author who reads widely in New Testament literature and whose passion for intelligent witness for traditional Christian faith remains strong. The book well suits the series "New Studies in Biblical Theology," which self-consciously melds biblical exegesis and theology "within the framework of confessional evangelicalism" (p. 9, preface).

In eight chapters, plus a brief conclusion, Barnett contends that historical probability, i.e. "the logic of history," when applied to Jesus leads to the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth was who the early church proclaimed him to be. In short, the rise of Christian faith is most plausibly explained by *continuity* between Jesus in history and the Jesus Christ proclaimed by the early church.

This is a wide-ranging study. In just 165 pages Barnett takes up matters of method in historical study, reviews non-Christian witnesses to early Christianity, and surveys the New Testament witnesses. He discounts the usefulness of the *Gospel of Thomas* and Q: *Thomas* is late, remote, and derived, and Q is quite hypothetical, being without external reference by Paul, the early fathers, or the early manuscripts (p. 27).

The book is to be commended for the attention it gives to New Testament letters as sources of data on Jesus. Barnett scans the Pauline literature, James, 1 Peter, and Hebrews. Likewise, his brief excursus on the quest for the historical Pontius Pilate is a bonus to which one is rarely treated in historical Jesus literature.

Jesus and the Logic of History offers an excellent opportunity for readers to interact with a thoughtful, well-read scholar who reaches exegetical conclusions that one might almost call precritical. Barnett concludes, for example, that the beloved disciple "must" be John Zebedee (p. 149, n. 91), that Ephesians is authentically Paul's (pp. 45-46), as are the pastoral epistles (pp. 58, 143, 144), that the author of James is James the brother of Jesus (pp. 50-51), and that 1 Peter was written by Peter the disciple of Jesus through his amanuensis Silvanus between 52 and 65 A.D. (p. 51).

The index alerts readers to mention of modern authors on pages where those authors are mentioned in the footnotes. But the index does not alert readers to mention of a modern author made in the body of the text without a corresponding footnote, e.g., mention of Mack, Downing, and Crossan on p. 59. Along those lines, it is curious that Barnett does not take for granted that his readers are familiar with the idea of "Q" (see pp. 24–25, n. 23) but does seem to take for granted that readers know who Mack, Downing, and Crossan are.

This reasonably-priced work is well worth inclusion in any pastor's library. While not persuasive at every point, I think that pastors will appreciate Barnett's healthy antidote to historical skepticism.

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A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath. By Erich Zenger. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996. ix and 104 pages. Paper. $14.00.

Have you ever had to deal with misguided efforts to expunge the Old Testament's "God of vengeance" from the life and spirituality of the church? to deal with such efforts launched by others? by yourself? If so—and who among us has not?—you won't want to do without Zenger's book.

Zenger's thesis is both challenging and provocative: "The 'psalms of enmity' are a way of robbing the aggressive images of the enemies of their destructiveness, and transforming them into constructive forces."

After exposing the ubiquitous character of prayers for and images of violence, wrath, and destruction of enemies throughout the Psalter, the lion's share of the discussion in Zenger's first chapter is given over to a powerful indictment of "Protest and Rejection in the Name of Christianity." Zenger here provides extensive quotation and discussion documenting anti-Jewish attitudes toward the psalm of vengeance from Christian pastors and scholars throughout this century.

Zenger then exegetes seven psalms—12, 139, 58, 83, 137, 44, and 109—to illustrate the "multiple perspectives" of the psalmists' discourse on the God of vengeance. He shows how his thesis is embodied and fleshed out in the rhetorical structure and theological movement of the texts. Zenger's exegeses are rich tapestries of form- and rhetorical-critical analyses of the psalms as seen in their historical-social settings. And each psalm is rightly and responsibly considered as a whole. The resulting interpretations are impressive and convincing. Two brief samples should whet the appetite: Psalm 83 does not "hope for the end of the enemies of God, but rather for an end to enmity toward God"; and the materials in Psalm 137:8–9 "are not . . . a 'blessing' on child-murderers; they are a passionate outcry of the powerless demanding justice."

In Chapter 3, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Psalms of Enmity and Vengeance," Zenger sets interpretation of the psalms of vengeance within general principles of biblical exegesis. All of history belongs to the God of justice; and these psalms cry out so that God might act. Yet whether God will mete out the desired punishment also belongs to God. The one who prays these psalms urges God not to let evil and violent people have history's last say. And by so urging through the medium of poetry, the one praying is confronted with her or his own feelings of hatred and aggression. Yet seen within the full theological panoply of the entire canonical Scriptures, the one praying is also confident "that God will have the last word and that God's love is always greater than God's justice."

Zenger concludes with some suggested "Practical Consequences." He encourages our recovery of lament in liturgical prayer. We might add a lament over the suffering of others to our confessional lament over sin; or engage in liturgical "prayer-dialogue" by pairing a given psalm of enmity with another thematically related psalm of healing and reconciliation of enemies. The viability of these and other proposals will depend on the resources and dynamics at work in a given faith community.

The great value of Zenger's book is that his hermeneutic of the God of vengeance goes far beyond the psalms of divine wrath. Reading Zenger's book sensitizes one to the complex interface of God, justice, violence, and human society wherever they occur in the biblical text, and wherever they occur in our time and place. As such, the book will be a blessing to all who preach, teach, and pray in the church.

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Women and Redemption: A Theological History. By Rosemary Radford Ruether. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998. 366 pages. Cloth, $45.00; paper, $19.00.

Are women redeemed by Christ? In her latest volume, Rosemary Radford Ruether poses this and other startling questions that serve as catalysts and guides for the book. If women share equally in redemption, why do the wheels of sexism and oppression continue to turn? The author reaches into thirty years of teaching to address the discrepancy between proclaimed liberation and institutionalized prejudice.

The scope of this study is breathtaking. Theologies of gender from the first Jesus movement provide background to the discussion of such theologies developed over numerous centuries and continents. Particularly striking in this long and meandering walk is the primary role given to the creation stories in Genesis 1–3. Both stories feed the assembly of theological anthropologies along orthodox and unorthodox lines. While Tertullian described woman as "the

Devil's Gateway," who by her taste for fruit brought sin into the world, abolitionist feminists like the Grimke sisters based their view of human equality on the equilateral distribution of the image of God.

The reader has the opportunity not only to read concise summaries of orthodox theologians but also to hear voices from the margins. Perpetua, Marcion, Hildegard of Bingen, Quakers, and Shakers all appear as resistance to prevailing sexist tides. Contemporary feminist theologians (including the author) all receive several pages in which Radford Ruether explains the theological approach of each.

"Redemption means overcoming all forms of patriarchy" (p. 274). This statement, as well as the driving questions behind this study, avoid "spiritualizing." Redemption requires implementation and praxis of equality. The presence of patriarchy in the church and society leads one to believe that women are not redeemed by Christ. A fitting question might be, "Are oppressors redeemed by Christ?" Oppressors can arise from all classes, races, and both genders. Do the habits and ease of domination exclude one from redemption? This study encourages us to look past easy answers.

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Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today. Edited by V. George Shillington, with a Foreword by Sean Freyne. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997. xvi and 199 pages. Cloth. $24.95.

V. George Shillington of Concord College, University of Winnipeg, has edited a collection of essays by a variety of authors on several parables of Jesus. He classifies those parables discussed under the rubrics Temple, Land, Economy, and People. In an introductory essay Shillington says the authors have concentrated on two contexts: the place of the parable in its Gospel context and the content of the parable in its Palestinian context. A series of essays by different writers cannot be easily summarized. Let me simply mention some interpretations that struck me.

Shillington himself, writing on the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, suggests that the owner (even though an absentee landlord) wanted his Jewish laborers to be sufficiently equal in their work/pay that they could all act as legitimate Jews. That is, for example, they could all rest from their labor (sabbath, pp. 98–101). While this is an interesting suggestion, one wonders why Jesus told the parable and why the Jesus tradition used it. Shillington argues that a major intent of the sabbath, besides rest, was to equalize the human family.

Joel Wohlgemut proposes a fascinating interpretation of the Parable of the Talents. Siding with some recent scholars, he assumes the real hero of the story is the third (one talent) servant who refused to extend his master's fortune beyond what was appropriate in a limited-goods society. By burying his sum he "blew the whistle" on the other servants who extravagantly played the market. The Jesus parable then speaks against those who try to stockpile favor in the reign of God (pp. 119–20).

In his study of the Prodigal Son, Richard Rohrbaugh, noted for anthropological studies in the New Testament, argues that the entire family, not just the Prodigal, was dysfunctional. Among many interesting insights he suggests that the supposed compassion of the father for his wayward son was actually an attempt to salvage what honor he could for him.

All of these essays will inform the reader about current research. Some will offer new interpretations.

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Preaching Helps

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost—Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Series A

Walking on Water, Sort of

Where did I read (no kidding) that some Israeli entrepreneur is working on a unique water park. He wants to install some clear plastic stepping stones an inch or so below the level of the Sea of Galilee. That way, all you would have to do is pay your shekels and then step out onto the water. With a little help from the map that will come with each ticket, you will be able to walk on water. What a concept. It gives a whole new meaning to "following in the footsteps of Jesus." Only the nearsighted or the klutzy would fall off and need to be rescued the way Peter did.

Until the park is up (or down) and running, the nearest we can get to a first-century experience is to board one of the wooden boats that ferry tourists-pilgrims from Tiberias to Capernaum or vice versa. Or get a table at the lake side and enjoy a dinner of St. Peter's fish drawn from the water of that small "sea."

I don't know what the entrepreneur will do about the fact that the water level of the lake varies. When it drops during a drought, his plastic steps will look like lily pads sticking up out of the water. Or will he have some system for raising and lowering them?

Any visitor to Israel-Palestine sees the dramatic effects of Israeli and Jordanian thirst for water drawn from the Jordan River/Sea of Galilee system. Both countries are irrigating intensively. So people and herds and the land itself drink deeply of those waters. The Dead Sea no longer resembles the sketches of it offered in any atlas of the Holy Land. The water level is dropping at an alarming rate, and the surface area is decreasing, exposing more and more land.

All life began in water and still depends on water. Maybe water will be as precious in the 21st century as oil has been in the 20th.

We have all probably had the experience of having our water service interrupted. Now what? Never knew how much we depended on water! Never gave

water a thought as long as we could turn the tap and get a reliable supply of cool, clear water.

We are not fish living in water, but we might as well be, in the sense that we move through our days surrounded by an abundance of water, living in the presence of water, taking it for granted, never really noticing it.

We must be "born of water and the Spirit," says Jesus in John 3. I wonder what that means. Maybe it is what the central tradition says it means: in the water of baptism the Spirit of God gets hold of us and brings us to new life. Or are water and Spirit opposites, like flesh and Spirit? That's not so far-fetched. Back in John 1:13 the evangelist declares that "God's children" are people who have been born not just of "bloods" but of "the will of God." Some ancients thought that human beings were produced by the commingling of "bloods" contributed by women and "watery stuff" (semen) contributed by men. Then Jesus in John 3 would be saying, "Of course you are born of water (and blood) as a human being. But living, breathing human beings must and can be born again, regenerated by the mysterious Spirit of God. Along those lines, the combination "water and the Spirit" might be meant as what the grammarians call a hendiadys (talking of one thing even though you use two words). Then "water and spirit" would mean something like "the free-flowing spirit of God," or "the stream of God's Spirit."

I think that every religion speaks about being born again in one way or another. Breathing in and out is good, but something more is what every religion offers. Higher life, deeper life, more authentic life, spiritual life, enlightenment, inner peace. It goes by many names. That Jesus speaks of water and spirit and rebirth is not at all remarkable in the history of religions. He himself seems to regard his words so far in John 3 as nothing exceptional. "Earthly things" is his name for it. But then he goes on to speak of "heavenly things."

What is the higher stuff? It has to do with his being "lifted up," he says, and his lifting-up happened on the cross. That hard revelation sets Jesus' message off from easy New Age solutions to age-old issues of living. Our being born again has everything to do with the river of the Spirit drowning us and then throwing us up onto the far shore three days later, where somehow we are found alive.

"Walking on water" in popular speech means living a charmed life, enjoying success after astonishing success, moving unscathed through fire and storm. Walking in the Spirit has more to do with drowning than with that kind of walking on the water. So I find myself shaking my head at the thought of those plastic stepping stones allowing tourists to cheat their way across some stretch of the Sea of Galilee. I like the realism of the texts for the Pentecost season far better.

In more than one of the following studies and reflections the **Rev. Donna Duensing** speaks of water and baptism and the Spirit, as she ponders storms on Sinai, storms on the Sea of Galilee, storms that buffet God's people in their daily lives. And she describes in pastoral fashion the flowing of the Spirit by all means into those same lives, lifting them the way water lifted the ark and brought Noah and his family and all those animals safely through the flood of waters engulfing the earth once more in chaos.

Donna served as a parochial and public school teacher and as a Director of Christian Education before attending seminary, from which she graduated with an M.Div. in 1983. After ordination she served for six years as Pastor of St. James Lutheran Church in Richmond, California. She has just recently completed nine years as Director of Contextual Education at her alma mater, PLTS. She serves on regional and national boards of the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, The Association of Theological Field Educators, and the Association of Case Teaching. So she is a wife and mother and a feminist Christian theologian, with experience as pastor and administrator. She wrote once previously (in 1989) for these pages, and we welcome her return.

I thank her for her words, and I wish all you readers good swimming in the waters of life, if it should happen that you cannot find those plastic lily pads and walk on the water! And never forget that your words are Water of Life!

Yours,

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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 12 July 25, 1999

1 Kings 3:5–12
Psalm 119:129–136
Romans 8:26–39
Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

Prayer of the Day: O God, your ears are open always to the prayers of your servants. Open our hearts and minds to you, that we may live in harmony with your will and receive the gifts of your Spirit; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading

God's ears are always open. In the first reading it is Solomon who has God's ear. Solomon bares his soul and admits, "Lord, I don't know if I'm coming or going!" Yet Solomon knows he has been placed in charge of "a great people . . . so numerous that they can't be counted." So where does boy Solomon begin? He asks for an understanding mind to be able to discern between good and evil. We are promised that even before we ask, God answers. That was certainly true in the case of Solomon. His wisdom is already evident in his admission that he doesn't know if he is coming or going and in his asking God for help! Wise before he asked for wisdom!

The psalmist bends God's ear with praise for the law, which "gives light and imparts understanding to the simple," and with a prayer to be kept on steady footing. Steady footing prevents that ill which strikes fear in the heart of leaders, the possibility of falling on their face.

Paul writes that God's ear is attuned even to the deep sigh of the Spirit interceding for us when our weaknesses leave us speechless (Rom 8:26–27). He reminds us of the Spirit's work on our behalf and also of God's loving purpose for our lives. God's loving purpose knows no limits. God did not even withhold his own Son. Here is proof positive that God's love and care knows no bounds. Surely God will give us everything else we need. So is there anything we need fear—hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword? "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

The account in Matthew gives us more hints of what life is like in this realm where the ear of a gracious, limitlessly loving God is attuned to the needs of all creation. Jesus says it is as miraculous and awesome as a small mustard seed, which is not even big enough to keep a single small bird alive, becoming a tree where a whole flock of birds can find a home. The reign of God has a dramatic effect, like yeast that is mixed with not just one but three measures of flour (about 50 pounds). It leavens the whole amount. This kingdom is as precious as a treasure hidden in a field. Anyone stumbling on it would surely sell everything s/he had in order to buy that field and so gain that treasure. A collector once discovered a pearl of unsurpassed beauty. He gladly liquidated all his other assets in order to gain it. Isn't the miracle of a God whose ears are ever open to us a more precious discovery than a pearl of great price?

Pastoral Reflections

Now God's ear is tuned to you, the preacher. What kind of a week has it been? Have you known whether you were coming or going? Are you like a person on a journey with unsteady footing? To you and me also Jesus puts his question, "Have you understood all these parables?"

If your answer happens to be "no" instead of "yes," the Spirit of wisdom and understanding awaits. God trusts you to be

a scribe trained for the kingdom and promises guidance so that you may bring out of the treasury what is new and what is old. These scriptures are designed first of all to uplift and encourage you, the preacher. The gospel you sow may not bear fruit immediately in ways you deeply desire. But the seed, the leaven, will have its God-appointed effect.

If God is a listener, shouldn't the servants of God be listeners, too? Craig Nessan, professor of contextual theology at Wartburg Seminary, highlights the importance of listening in his book, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission* (Fortress Press, 1999). He writes, "If the greatest of all spiritual gifts is love, then one of the purest expressions of love is to listen. In the words of Paul Tillich, 'the first duty of love is to listen.' Children need it. Spouses need it. Friends need it. You need it. And the Church needs it. . . . Our listening to one another is grounded in God's faithful listening to us" (p. 13). What will we discover when we listen both to God and to the community? What new visions of the kingdom will be revealed through our listening? What will happen when the gift of Holy Wisdom answers our prayer for "open hearts and minds"?

God's ears are open to your needs even as you address the task of preaching. Even before you ask, God answers. Listen for your questions. Listen to the people. Cast your net far into the community and listen to those people whom you assumed had nothing to say. Listen to the scriptures on the lookout for treasure, for things new and old. When you have found the treasure invest all you have to possess it and then to share it. "The kingdom of heaven is like a certain pastor who listened, like a certain congregation that listened and then acted urgently."

In the prayer of the day we acknowledge that God's "ears are always open to our prayers." We ask that our hearts and minds would be open to God that we may live in harmony with God's will and receive the gifts of the Spirit. Having asked, we know God will answer.

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 13 August 1, 1999

Isaiah 55:1–5
Psalm 145:8–9, 15–22 (14–21 NRSV)
Romans 9:1–5
Matthew 14:13–21

Prayer of the Day: Gracious Father, your blessed Son came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world. Give us this bread, that he may live in us and we in him, Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading

Having emphasized the work of listening last week, this week our texts add the activity of feeding. Through Isaiah, God offers to those without money not merely a visit to the local soup kitchen but an invitation to a royal banquet! This text reminds us of wisdom's invitation that the simple come to her banquet (Prov 9:3–6), and of Jesus' invitation to the thirsty to come and drink (John 7:37). This food and drink cannot be purchased or earned; it is not limited to the rich and famous. It is free, and it is freely offered to all.

The theme of listening returns to echo in today's readings, because this food, freely offered, is a life-giving message. It is God's abundant grace. "Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live." Eat and drink deeply of the wisdom of God, the word of God, the Son of God.

The theme of plenty runs through the psalm. "The eyes of *all* look to you. . . ." Seeing and hearing the need in the eyes is enough for God. God gives food abun-

dantly, so that "the desire of *every living* thing" is satisfied. God invites us to feast not simply on food and drink but on mercy and steadfast love, on compassion and justice. God's "food" includes upholding those who have fallen and raising those who are bowed down. Stomachs are filled, spirits are lifted, yearnings are satisfied, and people are kept safe in God's care.

Told of the beheading of John the Baptist, Jesus withdraws by boat to a deserted place. Does he go there to be fed, to be lifted up, to be filled by God's presence? The deserted place quickly becomes filled, as great crowds are drawn to it. Jesus' dispirited soul is filled with the Spirit of compassion, and plentiful healings result.

What are the disciples experiencing? They seem inattentive, distracted, confused. Are their eyes on God? on the Spirit? on Jesus? or on the clock and the size of the crowd? They see the lateness of the hour, they feel their own hunger, so they suggest that Jesus send the people away to roundabout villages to fend for themselves and find food. The disciples have not noticed how this deserted place has been filled. Jesus invites the disciples to join in sharing the plenty that belongs to him and to God, saying, "These crowds need not go away; you give them something to eat." His word is promise as much as command, "You can give them something."

All they see is scarcity, five loaves and two fish. Jesus sees plenty. He looks up to heaven. Just as the psalm says, "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season." After blessing and breaking the loaves, pathetically few in number, he invites the disciples in on sharing the feast. All are satisfied and there is an abundance of leftovers. The empty desert is suddenly full —full of people; people with full stomachs; disciples filled with surprise and with more questions than before.

Pastoral Reflections

"You give them something to eat." These are the words that come to the preacher who faces the task of preparing the "food" to feed the hungers of the people in the pew. Who has the loaves and fishes? What do they look like? Are the loaves and fishes these texts, these biblical readings? Am I supposed to feed hungers with these words? Where are the resources that Jesus promised? What are we to take in hand and bless and break and share in the community this week? The prayer of the day reminds us that Jesus is the "true bread which gives life to the world." We pray, "Give us this bread, that Christ may live in us and we in him."

God promises a great banquet, yet our streets and congregations are filled with starving people. People are clamoring for those things that are not bread and laboring for that which does not satisfy. Yet God waits to satisfy the desire of every living thing. How do we bring a word of good news that does not sound like "pie in the sky"? How can we offer true bread and not stone? Can we do it without first getting fed ourselves? If we do not feast on the true bread, won't we preachers feel as empty as those crowds wandering in a deserted place, as confused as those disciples who said, "Send them away"?

It was a regular liturgy for a mother and her developmentally challenged son. He would begin with the words, "Let's talk."

Mom: "What do you want to talk about?"

Son: "Love."

Mother: "Okay, let's talk about love."

Son: "Do you love me?"

Mother: "Yes, I love you."

Son: "Why?"

Mother: "Just because you're you."

Then one day the child changed the liturgy. This time he said, "Do you love me?"

Mother: "Yes, I love you."

Son: "Why?" And then, pausing for a

brief second, he added the next line himself, as a question: "Just because I'm you?"

Out of the mouths of babes. Yes, the mother did love this son because he was flesh of her flesh.

We are fed, and so Christ lives in us and we in him. Therefore the images and words we need will come to us as we look for the loaves and fishes in our congregation. They are there waiting to be discovered, blessed and shared. God will satisfy our desire to find a way to share the feast with the gathered community. As the True Bread from heaven becomes part of us, we will find ourselves filled with compassion and know how to heal and feed. We will spread the feast of God's abundant grace and mercy, healing and love, filling the lonely stretches of people's lives with the bread of life. And the community will leave the sanctuary carrying baskets of leftovers.

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 14 August 8, 1999

1 Kings 19:9–18
Psalm 85:8–13
Romans 10:5–15
Matthew 14:22–33

Prayer of the Day: Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we are to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve. Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merit of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading

Elijah is frightened. He is alone and running for his life. He had triumphed gloriously in the contest on Mount Carmel, calling down fire upon the altar. He had brought the drought to an end. And he had destroyed all the prophets of Baal. However, now Jezebel was after him, and he felt completely alone.

Last week we had the wonderful stories of abundant feedings, of the availability of more food than was needed. Running from Jezebel, Elijah is told to eat so that he will have strength for the journey. He eats, and that angelic food keeps him strong for forty days and nights. However, no food could fill that hollow feeling of fear and loneliness in the pit of his stomach. Huddled in a cave on Sinai, Elijah wants desperately to experience God's presence.

A child visiting her grandmother couldn't sleep with a storm crashing all around. She called, "Grandma, come here with me." The grandmother answered from downstairs, "It's all right. I'm right here, and God is in your room with you." The child

responded, "But I can't see God. I want a God with skin on!"

Elijah yearns for a God "with skin on" to lift him out of his lonely fears. God instructs Elijah to leave the cave and wait on the mountain because the Lord is about to pass by. But God doesn't come in the way Elijah expected or wanted, not in the hurricane, not in the earthquake, not in the fire. These are followed by sheer silence. Sheer silence can be deafening when one is frightened. Yet it is in this absence of anything loud or spectacular that God is present!

The psalm paints another picture of the presence of the word of the Lord. The word is peace, the absence of fear. The sounds that roll out are steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace. The Lord will give what is good. God is ready to give "more than we either desire or deserve."

These assurances are echoed in Romans. The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart. And no one is left out. The Lord is Lord of all and generous to all, to Jews and Greeks, proverbial insiders and outsiders alike without distinction. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." The Lord saves Elijah, the psalmist, Paul, the disciples, us.

The Gospel of Matthew picks up where we left off last week. After feeding the 5,000 Jesus goes off alone to pray, while he sends the disciples on to the other side of the sea. We ride in the boat with the disciples. Fear is the dominant emotion in their story just as in Elijah's story. A storm batters the boat, setting the disciples' nerves on edge. Like Elijah, the disciples had participated in a miracle just hours before, yet any earlier confidence they may have felt vanishes when the wind blows and the waves rise. The wind is against them, and they travel all night but can't get to the other side! Then in the dim light of morning, they see someone walking toward them on the water. They fear it is a ghost. But it is Jesus who reassures them, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." Peter responds quickly, suddenly confident that he can handle this rough sea. However, Peter's courage is short-lived. He begins to sink, crying, "Lord, save me." Jesus reaches out while gently rebuking Peter, "Why did you doubt?" The storm is calmed, and so are the disciples. Free of fear and doubt they worship Jesus, confessing him as Son of God.

Pastoral Reflections

Fear is familiar to us humans. We have all been there. We are confident one minute, and we find we can live out our faith in surprising ways. Perhaps we haven't been involved in spectacular miracles of calling down fire to consume water-soaked wood, thereby demonstrating the power of God. Perhaps we haven't participated in a miraculous feeding where five loaves and two fishes were enough to feed 5,000. But we probably have had the experience of feeling confident that we do know God and know that our lives are safe with God. Then one day we find ourselves in the boat of our life's journey, just planning to go to the other side of some small sea, when suddenly we meet the expected storm. We are bombarded with wind and waves unlike any we have encountered before. Fear grips us, as our whole life seems headed for shipwreck. What we thought God had in mind for us is blown away. How we thought God was involved in our life is all washed up. We begin to see ghosts and demons instead of Christ. We begin to doubt everything we ever trusted. Try as hard as we may, we no longer believe we are safe in the care of this God we thought we knew. We find ourselves crying out in fear.

Then in some unexpected way, in sheer silence or the still small voice, God says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Slowly we recover a sense of meaning in the midst of chaos and we do not know how it happened.

As the catechism tells us, "We cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him." Maybe all we did was to cry out in our fear. "But the Holy Spirit calls us." We discover God in a new way. Or God discovers us, and we experience our faith in a new way.

It is said that "faith" is best understood as a verb. "Faithing" is the on-going discovery we make about God's involvement in our lives, about God's care and compassion. Faithing means getting into the boat again and again, expecting an ordinary journey to the other side, and becoming a new person in the process. Jesus tells us to meet him on the other side. We can't always get there on our own, but he always comes and leads us.

Here are some lines of a Ray Makeever song, "Walk Across the Water." It speaks about this invitation to "faithing."

1. When the waters of our Mother broke,
and the world first came to be—
It was in that instant God done spoke and said,
"Walk across the water to me."

2. On the day we came to be baptized,
By the word in the water freed,
Jesus looked into our wond'ring eyes and said,
"Walk across the water to me."

Refrain:
Walk across the water
Walk across the water,
Let your faith run free on the raging sea,
and walk across the water to me."

—Ray Makeever, Fortress Press, 1990

We are invited to risk it all, to step out of the boat and walk to Jesus. When we can't "faith" on our own, Jesus reaches out and says, "You of little faith, why do you doubt? You and I have been here before." So "let your faith run free on the raging sea, and walk across the water to me."

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 15 August 15, 1999

Isaiah 56:1, 6–8
Psalm 67
Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32
Matthew 15:[10–20] 21–28

Prayer of the Day: Almighty and ever-living God, you have given great and precious promises to those who believe. Grant us the perfect faith which overcomes all doubts, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading

Isaiah 56 begins announcing the imminent coming of salvation and the revelation of God's justice. It reaffirms the great and precious promises of God. The text continues with the vision of gathering. God gathers the outcasts of Israel, gathering others besides those already gathered. The "foreigner," once excluded from the covenant, and the "eunuch," traditionally barred from worship and priesthood, are now gathered. They are invited to "hold fast my covenant" and to become part of the worship assembly of the people of God. The temple will finally be a house of prayer for all people.

Psalm 67 echoes these themes of Isaiah. As we read the psalm, it is as though we are participating in a liturgy designed for entering the house of prayer to which Isaiah referred. "Let the people [insiders] praise you, let all the nations [outsiders] praise you, O God!"

One wonders, "Who are the outcasts whom God is inviting today?" Perhaps it is only when we are granted "the perfect faith which overcomes all doubts" that we will be able to remove our doubts about some people who are currently outsiders.

Romans 11. "Has God rejected God's ancient people? By no means!" Paul reminds the readers of Elijah (Pentecost 11, Proper 14) who had felt rejected. But God's great and precious promises are irrevocable. The new thing that is happening is that outsiders are being called to join the old insiders. "You were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy." The ancient promise of gathering continues. Mercy covers all, both insiders and outsiders.

Matthew addresses the topic of clean and unclean head-on in chapter 15. In Jesus, God offers fresh definitions of "clean" and "unclean" (15:2–20). God is more concerned with the heart than the digestive system (15:17–20). What is the condition of your heart? What emerges from it? Jesus then moves on to areas near Tyre and Sidon where he is met by a Canaanite woman. She's a double outcast as a pagan and a woman. What comes out of her heart? "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." Her heart speaks the language of faith.

Jesus' response is shocking. He has been healing insiders and outsiders, but suddenly here he is silent! The disciples want Jesus to tend to her just to get rid of her. But now Jesus draws the disciples into the relationship with the woman. "Tell her I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Did Jesus intend to arrange a "teaching moment"? The woman does not give up. She assumes the posture of faith. Kneeling before him, she says quite simply, "Lord, help me." Jesus counters with the harsh image, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She does not waver, but says that even the crumbs from the table will be plenty for her. "Woman," says Jesus, "Great is your faith!"

His emphatic response about her "great faith" is a stark contrast to his words to the disciples just shortly before: "You of little faith" (14:31). The woman's daughter was healed. I suspect the disciples also had a "faithing" and healing moment.

Pastoral Reflections

"Grant us the perfect faith which overcomes all doubts." These words shape my reading, as I ponder our calling to preach in the "house of prayer for all people." Crumbs were enough for the Canaanite woman. We have feasted more richly than she, and yet how many doubts we have. What form do our doubts take, when we approach the themes of the gathered and the outcasts, Jews and Gentiles, clean and unclean? If we were granted "the perfect faith which overcomes all doubts," what new thoughts would start rising out of hearts, what fresh words would leap from our lips? Last week, fear in the face of storms and the possibility of shipwreck was the cause of our doubts. Is fear also what causes our reluctance to include in our care and in our communities the foreigners and the unclean of this age?

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 16 August 22, 1999

Isaiah 51:1–6
Psalm 138
Romans 12:1–8
Matthew 16:13–20

Prayer of the Day: God of all creation, you reach out to call people of all nations to your kingdom. As you gather disciples from near and far, count us also among those who boldly confess your Son Jesus Christ as Lord.

First Reading

Solidarity! Look to Abraham and Sarah, Isaiah 51. Look to the rock (Abraham) from which you were fashioned; look to the quarry (Sarah) from which I dug you, says the Lord. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah your mother. Look how I called them and blessed them. Your blessings will be the same. Your wilderness will become like Eden, your deserts like gardens. I rescued them and made them all right, and I will also give you "salvation" and "righteousness."

God's gift of salvation and call to righteousness. This is rock solid stuff. "The heavens will vanish like smoke and the earth will wear out like a garment . . . and those who live on it [earth] will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever and my deliverance will never be ended."

Psalm 138 reminds us in a hymn of thanksgiving of the foundation of all faithful, bold discipleship. We can be bold because God delivers us from trouble, again and again. God increases our "strength of soul."

Not conforming but being transformed is the mark of faithful, bold discipleship (Romans 12). Renewing of minds to discern what is the will of God is a daily task in this transformational living. This high calling is difficult or impossible individually, but is eased and encouraged by community. "We who are many are one body in Christ . . . with gifts that differ." Gathered together with persons who differ from us, we discover that we are hewn from the same quarry. And the building is stronger and better when the blocks of stone are added one to another.

In the reading from Matthew Jesus begins by asking the question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Then he focuses: "But who do you say that I am?" Is Jesus wondering if the disciples have conformed to the world's way of thinking? Is he leading them to be transformed in their thinking? I believe so. Jesus is leading them to a new way of thinking, toward understanding that Jesus is bringing in transformation, a new heaven and a new earth.

Peter responds, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus takes Peter's confession and says, "Yes, you have it right, Peter. And this confession does not come from you. These words come from that quarry of faith from which God has hewn the faithful from the beginning of time. And to help you remember it, I will rename you 'Peter,' the 'Rock.'"

A primary responsibility of the rock-hewn new community is "binding and loosing," "forbidding" or "permitting." Matthew would see the new teaching of Jesus bringing in a new understanding of community and of who is included and who is excluded. (Smith's *Matthew* commentary in the Augsburg series devotes several pages to this pericope [197–203]. A rich resource!)

Pastoral Reflections

"Transformational" is a popular term in the church today. We are told that churches are looking for "transformational pastors." I worry that some use that term to mean "suc-

cessful" pastors or "growth-oriented" pastors. Perhaps we need to be careful not to be conformed to the world's idea of being a transformational pastor. What we need, says Paul, is "to be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God."

Amextra is an organization of indigenous people in Mexico, working together to transform their communities. They quote this text from Romans 12 on transformation as they speak of the philosophy of Amextra. I have had the opportunity to meet with women from this group on three or four occasions. These poor, undereducated women are commonly viewed as unimportant and expendable by the larger society. But by working together they have created excellent day care centers, after-school programs, parenting classes, and a women's bank. They are presenting themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, and being transformed by the renewing of their minds.

Amextra's programs include classes teaching these women self-esteem. At first glance, self-esteem classes seem contrary to Paul's suggestion "not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think." The key to having the proper opinion of oneself seems to be in seeing oneself in relationship to others. Healthy church communities are alert to the many and varied members of the body. Each week I attend a text study group in Oakland, California. By my participating I find that I am transformed many a Tuesday morning by the renewing of my mind. My faith is always stretched and deepened through the sharing and insights of these women and men of faith who so willingly share their gifts as well as their questions and vulnerabilities. Private study in isolation can never provide as great an opportunity for the renewing of the mind. The same is true in our congregations, as people become actively engaged, sharing their gifts.

Anne Lamott in her recent book, *Traveling Mercies*, offered this reflection on the importance of a faith community:

> Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians—people banding together to work on themselves and for human right. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful. I saw something once from the Jewish Theological Seminary that said, "A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be a part of a great meaning."

This week's texts urge the preacher to be about the business of reminding the people of the gifts they bring and the meaning that they help impart to the community. Throughout history God has gathered disciples from near and far, and *this* Pentecost season the Spirit stands ready to strengthen the souls, renew the minds, and transform lives and communities in your place and time. What shape that will take in your community remains to be seen. It can be risky, but it will be exciting to be counted among those who boldly confess that Jesus is the Son of the *Living* God.

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 17 August 29, 1999

Jeremiah 15:15–21
Psalm 26:1–8
Romans 12:9–21
Matthew 16:21–28

Prayer of the Day: O God, we thank you for your Son who chose the path of suffering for the sake of the world. Humble us by his example, point us to the path of obedience, and give us strength to follow his commands; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading

Last week we prayed that we and our congregants would be counted among those who "boldly confess." This week we discover the consequence that comes with that boldness. First we listen in on a dialogue between a disillusioned Jeremiah and a challenging, reassuring God. Jeremiah's words move from a prayer for God to avenge him, to a description of joy in God's words, to despair and indignation, and then, shockingly, to an accusation that God has been deceitful! Jeremiah describes God as "waters that fail."

God comes back with some conditions: "If you turn back, if you utter what is precious." It appears that Jeremiah needs to make the first move to reestablish the relationship with God. Although there will be no end to the people's opposition to Jeremiah, God will be present to support and sustain him. God's presence, God's words in Jeremiah's mouth, are both the source of Jeremiah's suffering as well as a source of life.

The Romans text begins with "Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good" and ends with "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." In between these statements is a wonderful list of behaviors that really would counter evil in our world. Can you imagine a community in which members wouldn't get into the power plays of getting even or taking revenge? "Outdo one another in showing honor." Showing honor is not something we see regularly. How does one show honor? What would a list of honorable deeds look like?

When people are attacked or criticized for doing what they thought was right or just or merciful, it is difficult for them not to simply give up or come back with their own attack. We know that the life of bold, faithful discipleship is going to provide many opportunities to practice Paul's challenge to overcome evil with good. Fortunately, we know that evil has already been overcome!

In Matthew 16 Jesus begins to unfold the unpleasant news of what faces him. It isn't as though his life has been a breeze up to this point. Even as a child, Jesus' life was threatened. By this time in the narrative, his forerunner, John the Baptist, has died a violent death. When Jesus reveals what is to face him in Jerusalem, Peter's reaction is "No way! Never!" Jesus' rebuke of Peter is a sharp contrast to his response to Peter's confession last week. He again raises the image of Peter as a "rock," but this time it is not a foundation stone but rather a satanic stumbling block! Peter's understanding of his position as a disciple of this "Messiah" follows the human rather than the divine understanding of power.

Jesus continues to explain these divine things: denying oneself, taking up the cross, and following. Discipleship mans following the "Divine Disciple," Jesus, in his way of life. Jesus the teacher struggles to teach this radical way of saving one's life by letting go of the idea of saving it. His lesson plan will be unfolded in the next chapters of Matthew's Gospel.

Pastoral Reflections

The task for the preacher this week is especially difficult. All of this is so countercultural. Every day we are bombarded with the importance of looking out for ourselves. We are urged to buy not only insurance but supplementary insurance, in case the first doesn't take care of us. We are urged to protect ourselves with security systems for house, car, and computer.

It is also difficult to preach on a gospel text that has often been used in very ungospel ways. Regularly one hears reports that a victim of domestic violence has stayed in an abusive situation, influenced by the suggestion that the abuse was the cross s/he needed to bear. I have also known clergy who have remained in unhealthy, abusive call situations because they felt they were called to accept that abuse as their cross.

Yet Truth with capital "T" is being revealed by Jesus' teaching, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." The idea of turning the focus away from oneself to service to others is a theme that runs through many faith traditions and wisdom sayings. Pema Chodron, an American Buddhist nun, has written:

> Curiously enough, if we primarily try to shield ourselves from discomfort, we suffer. Yet when we don't close off and we let our hearts break, we discover our kinship with all beings. His Holiness the Dalai Lama describes two kinds of selfish people: the unwise and the wise. Unwise selfish people think only of themselves, and the result is confusion and pain. Wise selfish people know that the best thing they can do for themselves is to be there for others. As a result, they experience joy. (*Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* [Shambala, 1997], 87)

Every preacher this week needs to listen again to the prediction that Jesus made, that he "must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering . . . and be killed and on the *third day be raised.*" Jesus denied himself, took up the cross, gave his life, and was raised from the dead. Here is the good news: Jesus set his mind on divine things, taught us that life comes through death, and then gifted us with Christ's victory over death. The promise to us, as to Jeremiah, is that of God's saving presence in the midst of our human existence. It is that saving presence of Christ that brings life out of death and enables us to be "wise selfish people" who know that the best thing we can do for ourselves is to be there for others. In doing so we will be in the presence of the living Christ

So this day we give thanks for the One who chose the path of suffering for the sake of the world. And we ask God to grant us the wisdom to choose the humble path of obedience and to give us the Spirit of the Resurrected Christ that we may have the strength to follow Christ's commands.

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 18 September 5, 1999

Ezekiel 33:7–11
Psalm 119:33–40
Romans 13:8–14
Matthew 18:15–20

Prayer of the Day: Almighty and eternal God, you know our problems and our weaknesses better than we ourselves. In your love and by your power help us in our confusion and, in spite of our weakness, make us firm in faith; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading

The final chapters of Ezekiel are devoted to oracles of hope or restoration. With restoration as a goal, the charge comes for the individual to challenge offenders to turn from their ways. The charge is followed by the wonderful words: "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live."

Psalm 119:30–40 serves as a prayer for God's help in this turning. "Teach me, O Lord. . . . Give me understanding. . . . Lead me. . . . Turn my heart. . . . Turn my eyes. . . . Confirm your promise. . . . in your righteousness give me life." And Romans continues the instructions for this restoration life, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. . . . The commandments are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

The themes of restoration, righteousness, and love fulfilling the law are natural companions to the Gospel of Matthew with its theme of Jesus as the fulfiller of all righteousness. Today's text from chapter 18 lays out the plan for living out this all-rightness in the community of believers. This pericope is preceded by the story of one lost sheep (vv. 12–14) and is followed by the story of the unmerciful servant (vv. 23–35). Paying attention to this framing of the instruction to the community for dealing with offenders within its membership allows us to hear this as an oracle of restoration.

Our text is not a prescription for excommunicating someone but rather a gracious method for restoring community. Where the NRSV translates, "If another member of the church," the Greek reads, "If your brother. . . ." We are dealing with people in relationship, siblings, sisters and brothers. We are about the business of restoring family. The steps are spelled out. First, attempt to settle it privately. If that doesn't work take one or two witnesses with you. If s/he still doesn't listen, take it to the whole assembly of sisters and brothers and have the whole family attempt the task of restoration. Only if all this fails, let that person be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

This final name-calling seems especially interesting, if the author is himself one of these former tax collectors. Was the Gospel writer suggesting that, even at that, "Gentiles and tax collectors" may not be outside the community for good? that Jesus might yet call them (as Matthew had been called) and so restore them to community?

Jesus concludes with the promise that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." With the presence of Jesus, the fulfiller of all righteousness, love is present, and where love is present, law is fulfilled. Community is restored by the powerful presence of the love of Christ.

Pastoral Reflections

Confronting those who sin against us is not any easy task. I have seen many congregations who allow the vicious gossips to hurt countless sisters and brothers without ever confronting them. Instead, the victims are told, "Don't mind her, that's just how Frieda is," or "Harry finds fault with everyone and everything, so don't take it personally." Allowing someone with a vicious tongue to have free rein in a community can be just as damaging as letting someone run loose with a machete.

The words from Ezekiel accuse those who would stand by in silence and watch such destructive wickedness." If I say to the wicked, 'O wicked ones, you shall surely die,' and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked

shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand" (v. 8).

It is awesome to see what a powerful impact confronting destructive behavior can have. When I went to a parishioner in private and pointed out how hurtful a comment she made had been to another member, she was quite surprised. Her response was, "Oh, I never wanted to hurt anyone." The conversation that followed was rich and powerful. This woman had a long history of speaking without thinking. That one confrontation didn't instantly change her behavior, but it was a beginning. We had agreed that I would help her overcome the habit by reminding her when I witnessed the behavior in the future. It was hard for her to be confronted by her pastor, but our relationship improved as a result. She discovered that I cared enough about her as a person that I didn't simply commiserate with the victims behind her back. She realized that I believed that she would want to change her behavior if she were aware of the damage she was causing.

It is also a powerful grace moment when we are confronted with our own careless behavior. A seminarian had been deeply hurt by an offhand comment that I had made in jest. When the student came into the office to discuss it with me, my first thought was to say, "Well, I was just joking. I didn't mean to hurt you." However, I saw the deep pain on the student's face. I realized that whether I meant to hurt him or not, I had hurt him! So what I did say was, "I'm sorry that I hurt you. I can see that I was careless in joking about an issue that was of deep importance to you. Thank you for trusting me enough to come and tell me. I hope I will remember this in the future so that I will not cause someone else similar pain." The response was amazing. The student's facial expression relaxed and I could see he was able to let go of much of the anger. Instead of defensiveness, which would have forced him to find additional language to convict me, I offered a sincere, "I'm sorry." And he was able to forgive me. Receiving his forgiveness was a gift of grace. We both knew that Jesus was in the midst of us without our saying a word. Relationship was restored.

Practicing this text will be as powerful as any preaching. Practicing this text will be powerful preparation for preaching. Frederick Buechner says, "For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other's presence" (*Wishful Thinking* [Harper & Row, 1979], 29).

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 19 September 12, 1999

Genesis 50:15–21
Psalm 103:[1–7] 8–13
Romans 14:1–12
Matthew 18:21–35

Prayer of the Day: O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity. Grant us the fullness of your grace, that, pursuing what you have promised, we may share your heavenly glory; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading

The story of Joseph and his brothers touches much of the human predicament. Today's text is poignant. The father has died. Will Joseph take this opportunity to get even? His brothers know that they have it coming. They come begging forgiveness. The sight is too much for Joseph, who is brought to tears. The brothers also weep because they see forgiveness in Joseph's tears. They are so grateful to be forgiven that they offer to be Joseph's servants. But Joseph says, "Do not

be afraid! Am I in the place of God?"

In the prayer of the day we say, "O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity." In this story, powerful Joseph showed mercy and pity. He reassured his brothers, speaking kindly.

Psalm 103 speaks of the kindly nature of God. "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. . . . As a father has compassion for his children so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him." Forgiveness is the greatest power for restoration.

"Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?" asks Paul (Rom 14:10). This is another aspect of the human predicament that catches us before we know it! I get caught when I pass judgment on the Religious Right.

Our reading from Matthew picks up where we left off last week, confronting the sins of brothers and sisters. Peter asks Jesus, "How often should I forgive? As many as seven [the complete, perfect number] times?" How many chances do we give someone? Jesus answers, " Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven." Jesus piles seven on top of sevens to point out the limitlessness of forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't calculating. To make his point Jesus tells the story of the unmerciful servant. One slave owed the king zillions! The terms used, "ten thousand" and "talents," describe the biggest stack of money imaginable. I read that when the Romans first occupied Palestine in 63 B.C.E., they levied on the whole nation an annual tax of 10,000 talents, a sum so enormous, so impossibly burdensome, that Julius Caesar later reduced it. There was no way a single servant could ever repay such an amount. This monstrous debt was forgiven. One would have thought that the servant would weep like Joseph's brothers. One would have thought that the servant's life would be transformed. But that isn't the way the story ends. This forgiven servant, who has just been freed from his humongous debt by the mercy and pity of his king, turns around and in a most unmerciful act, throws into prison one who owes him a much, much, smaller amount. Witnesses to this exchange are shocked and report back to the king. The king is enraged and says, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" The king hands him over to be tormented. This, says Jesus, is what will be done to every one who does not forgive a brother or sister from the heart.

God's generosity is meant to generate mutual forgiveness within the new community. A compassionate heart filled with mercy and pity would never calculate the number of times one must forgive. "I'm up to 7 times, at least I am justified in letting him have it next time!" Real generosity is not possible without the "fullness of God's grace."

Pastoral Reflections

The forgiveness we dealt with last week seems child's play compared to the challenge presented in this week's texts. Cut from the same cloth, these texts unfold a reality that touches the heart and confounds the mind. The prayer of the day presents the radical nature of God's way of forgiveness. "O God, you declare your almighty power *chiefly* in showing mercy and pity."

The Joseph story demonstrates the awesome impact of forgiveness, especially when it is offered from a position of power and by someone who is your own flesh and blood. In *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott speaks of forgiveness in the context of her relationship with her mother:

> I look at this newest photograph of us, and I see how deeply she loves me and always did, how much she has forgiven

me . . . and her forgiveness hurts me beyond my ability to put it into words. . . . Who was it who said that forgiveness is giving up all hope of having had a different past? The pictures do help sometimes, and I'm gentler with my mother, more understanding. They help by making me sad at how hard we all try and how far short we fall, and the sadness softens me for love. I go around trying to do better by her, trying to be God's tender hands and eyes. (p. 213)

This week the task of the preacher is to attempt to proclaim the divine forgiveness that flows through our families of faith, that makes us weep at how hard we all try and how far short we fall. But this sadness softens us for love. So we do not pass judgment on ourselves or our sisters and brothers. We are accountable to God alone, and God has an unfathomably forgiving heart. This is the heart of God, wide open to us in Jesus, teaching us how to welcome and care for the least of these. This is the heart of God, wide open to us in Jesus, helping us to imagine living in community of forgiveness, mercy, justice and love—hallmarks of discipleship. This is the heart of God, wide open to us in Jesus, staying with us in this Jesus to the end of the age, empowering our discipleship.

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 20 September 19, 1999

Jonah 3:10–4:11
Psalm 145:1–8
Philippians 1:21–30
Matthew 20:1–16

Prayer of the Day: Lord God, you call us to work in your vineyard and leave no one standing idle. Set us to our tasks in the work of your kingdom, and help us to order our lives by your wisdom; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading

Jonah's preaching has had powerful results. The whole city of Nineveh, from the king on down, repents. So God's mind is changed, and God does not bring down calamity on the people of Nineveh. Most preachers might be quite pleased that their message was heeded, but not Jonah. He becomes angry that God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. Jonah says he might as well die. His prophecy will not materialize, and he will be labeled as a false prophet. God asks, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah doesn't answer God's question but simply goes away. Is he planning to wait the forty days and see what happens to the city?

God is gracious and merciful with Jonah as with Nineveh, and as a good teacher knows that actions speak louder than words. God appoints a castor plant to grow and shade Jonah. At first Jonah is happy. Then God appoints a worm to attack the bush so that it wilts. At sunrise, God sends a sultry east wind (a symbol of God's anger in Exod 10:13, Isa 27:8, and Jn 1:4, 13), plus a hot sun to beat down on Jonah. Now Jonah is really angry as well as feeling faint. This time

when God asks, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" Jonah says, "Yes, angry enough to die."

God turns the event into a parable. God notes that if Jonah is concerned for the castor plant for which Jonah neither labored nor caused to grow, a plant which came and went in just one short 24-hour period, shouldn't God be concerned with Nineveh, "that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

The generosity of God is also the topic of the parable in Matthew 20. Vineyard laborers are recipients of generosity. The landowner is especially generous to those who were hired late in the day. They worked only one hour, and yet they received a whole day's wage. When those who had worked all day long saw that, they expected big sums to be paid into their hands, beyond what they had agreed to early in the morning. Naturally grumbling broke out when those who had labored all day also received one denarius, the same as the latecomers. But the owner says, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" And Jesus says, "So it is in the kingdom of heaven, the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Pastoral Reflections

"The last will be first, and the first will be last." This saying brackets the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. At the end of chapter 19, Peter has asked, "What about us? We left everything and followed. What do we get for being first to follow?" Jesus answers Peter with a list of blessings that will be theirs. But the story that follows teaches them that blessings are not reserved only for the first. In fact, in God's reign shocking reversals take place.

The parable is unsettling. Fairness is the motivating factor for the landowner. The owner's behavior is prompted by seeing people in need of work while there is plenty of work to do in his vineyard. One could say wisdom rather than fairness is operating here. Involving as many people as possible seems to be important. The theme of participation in this kingdom has been in other stories such as the feeding of the 5,000. God wants no one left out. No one is left out of the joy of participating in the new creation. No one is left out of the generosity of God. The last in line, the last chosen, are first!

We are some four months into this season of Pentecost. Now is a good time to take stock of the growth of the Spirit in the people of God in our place. Does the ministry communicate this radical generosity of God? God calls us and leaves no one standing idle. Are the gifts of each of the members of the body being enlisted for the ministry? The past weeks we have focused on the importance of forgiveness within the body. Today we are compelled to be sure that our lives and our ministries are ordered by Holy Wisdom—Holy Wisdom which upsets the order of things. Generosity is chosen over fairness. God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and has been known to wait for the last stragglers and treat them like firstborns.

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 21 September 26, 1999

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

Prayer of the Day: God of love, you know our frailties and failings. Give us your grace to overcome them; keep us from those things that harm us; and guide us in the way of salvation; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading

Whose fault is it? Ezekiel (18:2) quotes a proverb about children paying for their parents' misdeeds. Ezekiel then proceeds to refute this proverb. Each one is responsible for his/her own acts. "It is the only the person who sins that shall die." That is then the basis of a call to repent and turn from iniquity. "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone," says the Lord God. "Turn, then, and live." For Ezekiel life is intimate communion with God, the giver of life, who urges, "Come! Get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit."

Psalm 25 is a prayer for turning and getting a new heart and new spirit. "Make me to know your ways. . . . Teach me your paths. . . . Lead me in your truth. . . . Do not remember the sins of my youth. . . . Remember me according to your steadfast love."

It cuts against the grain to "look not to your own interest but to the interests of others" (Philippians 2). But Paul summons the Philippians to have the mind of Christ, "who emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, becoming obedient to death" after which God "highly exalted him." Why do we need to look out for our own interests so jealously and zealously? A gracious God is looking after our interests. God will raise us up as Christ was raised up high, not only at the end but from every act of obedient dying along our path toward our end.

Matthew 21. Reversals continue. In the temple Jesus has driven out the money-changers, and he has welcomed the blind and the lame (vv. 12–14), angering the authorities but delighting the children (vv. 15–16). The last are becoming the first.

Matthew's Jesus preaches and teaches as one with authority (7:29), and at the end of the Gospel, Jesus' last words announce that "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me (28:18). The "authorities" (chief priests and elders) question Jesus about his "authority": "By what authority are you doing these things?" (21:23)

Part of Jesus' response is a parable. He begins, "A man had two sons." Familiar? However this parable has a teaching different from that of the more famous story of that other man with two sons, one a prodigal and the other a conscientious drudge (Luke 15). Luke's story is all about mercy. Matthew's is about obedience. "Which of the two sons did the will of his father?" asks Jesus. Was it the one who said, "No!" but then later went out to work? Or was it the one who at first said, "Yes!" but then failed to do what his father willed? Which one did the father's bidding? The answer from the chief priests and elders is, "The first, of course!" Jesus then sends them a zinger: Although the lives of tax collectors and prostitutes seem to say "No" to the will of God, they are the ones who believed John the Baptist and so were obedient to God's program, here called "the way of righteousness." They turn out to be "obedient children," entering the kingdom of God ahead of the priests and elders!

Pastoral Reflections

No one is marked in an indelible manner by the acts of parents or by his or her own

previous actions, good or bad. Both repentance and turning away are possible! God knows our frailties and failings all too well. God knows how often we say "Yes" and carry out "No"! God also knows our tendencies to utter the defiant "No!" and then, washed and empowered by the Spirit of the Christ of our baptism, we find ourselves changing our minds and going off to do that which we thought was inconvenient, irritating, or impossible. "Turn then and live," says God. And we pray earnestly: "Give us your grace to overcome our frailties and failings. Keep us from those things that harm us. Guide us in the way of salvation, in the way of healing."

The preacher's first duty this week is to turn herself and live. Concentrating on life in communion with God, the giver of life, will guide us in the way of healing our own frailties and failings. Have we said "Yes" to work in the vineyard, only then to live out a "No"? At our ordination we answered a whole series of questions, "I will, and I ask God to help me." God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love toward preachers and toward those to whom preachers minister. God says, "I have no pleasure in the death of any one of you!"

Walk through your vineyard as you prepare the sermon this week. What are the answers that people are giving to God's invitation to work in the vineyard? Their answers will depend on whether they have heard the message of the abundant grace of the inviting God.

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