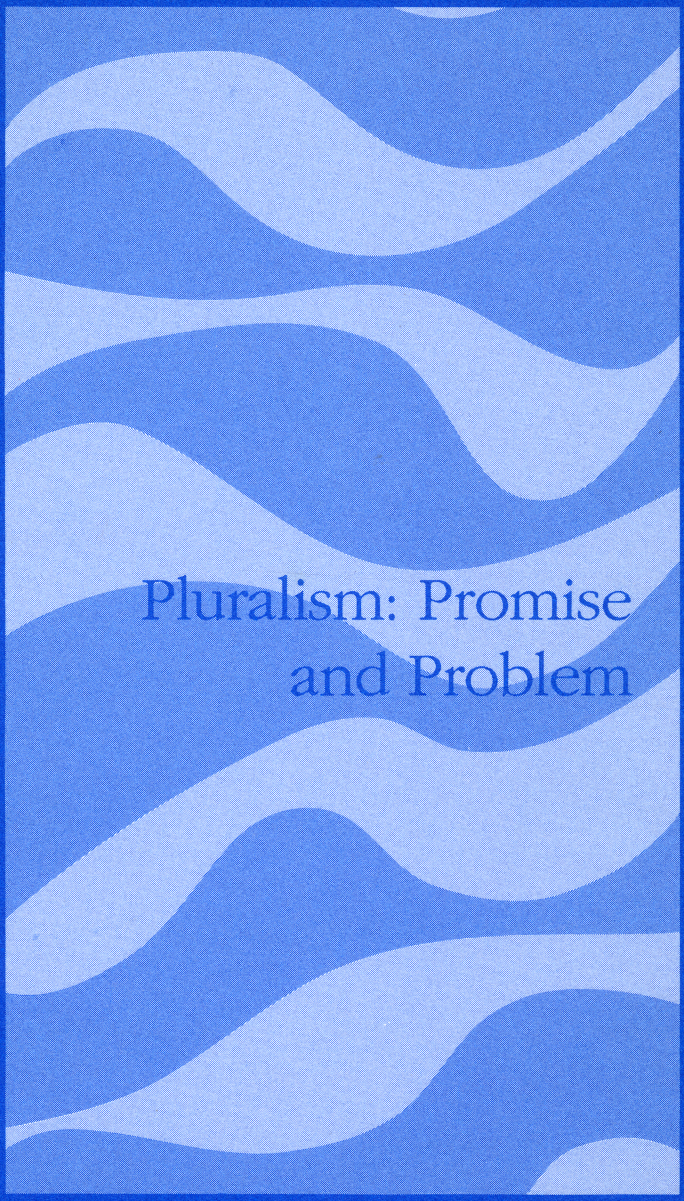
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Pluralism: Promise and Problem

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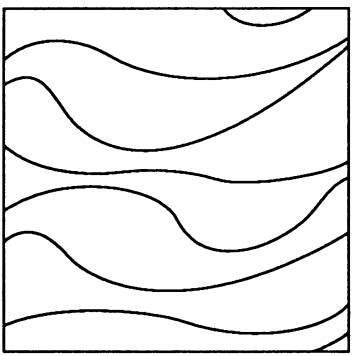
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Pluralism: Promise and Problem

Every other year the ELCA Division for Ministry sponsors a Conference of Teaching Theologians, bringing together representative scholars from our own colleges and seminaries and from those Lutherans who teach at non-Lutheran institutions. The conference in August, 1996, dealt with the promise and challenge of pluralism, and we are happy to present the essays delivered at that conference in this issue of *Currents*.

There are, of course, many kinds of pluralism—religious, cultural, geographic, denominational, and doctrinal, to name only a few. Race, gender, class, and ethnic background also shape what we mean by pluralism. There are even many kinds of Lutherans—conservative, moderate, and liberal; Northern European, African, African-American, Hispanic, Asian, etc.—both within the ELCA and the LCMS. So pluralism is the hand God has dealt us. How will we play it? What are the opportunities and the risks?

Carl E. Braaten addresses the theme of Christianity in the midst of a plurality of religions. He criticizes a pluralistic theology of religions that understands all religions as merely different channels of the same truth and salvation. While God reveals himself in many ways, God's supreme gift of salvation is through Christ alone. This exclusive claim of the gospel is from the beginning counter-cultural. Christ is the essential content and necessary condition of each and every experience of salvation promised by the gospel in his name. The author affirms the universality of the gospel and its all-inclusive hope, but admits to being an eschatological agnostic about how God's will will work out for all in the end.

Patrick R. Keifert proposes that faith and the other must be considered at the location where the primal face-to-face activity with Jesus takes place, the community gathered around word and sacrament, the congregation. He also notes that the most fruitful symbol in regard to faith and the other is hospitality to the stranger. Post-modern people do not experience the security of self control, self determination, or self esteem. Thriving congregations attend to this profound anxiety of the modern self. Congregations are not families; they

are always more. Congregations mediate between the public and private institutions of contemporary society. The biblical image of hospitality to the stranger insists that we are all strangers depending on God's hospitality.

Carol Schersten LaHurd notes that creating and defining one's own community appear to be a primary use of the other in both biblical testaments, but the other also appears in founding myths, religious belief and practice, and questions of boundaries and power. It is especially when the self is in transition or in a new context that we humans redefine old others and find new ones. Jesus' treatment of the woman in John 4 demonstrates approaches that help prevent unfair conclusions about the other, including knowledge of the other, listening, and openness to correcting prior assumptions. Paul alternates between dialogue with others and rather savage satire and criticism. Reading the Bible with others can clarify our own understanding of the Bible and its place among the Scriptures. Reading the Bible with others includes the other, marginal voices within the biblical text, Christians who read from other contexts, scholarly others, and non-Christian others. A hermeneutics of dialogue could enable individual Christians to be faithful to their commitments to God and church, truly to hear the other, and to be open to the kind of mutual transformation David Tracy says is possible in every authentic conversation.

Murray Haar writes a response to LaHurd that questions whether religion and dialogue can go together. The truly other is a threat to the extent that the other calls into question that core visceral truth which binds me at the root. Are Jews willing to talk about Jesus as Messiah? Are Christians willing to examine the possibility that calling Jesus Lord is an act of idolatry? The church will have to listen to the other, but the other will also have to listen to the church. The church must be ready to defend its memories when they are faithful to the gospel, but also be willing to change its most cherished beliefs when they are shown to be contrary to the gospel. The other is not automatically to be tolerated or accommodated. Neither can the church run from the other.

J. Paul Rajashekar asserts that when the other is perceived as the proximate other, there emerges a real urgency for a theory of the other. A society does not simply discover its others; it fabricates them by selecting, isolating, and emphasizing an aspect of another people's life and making it symbolize how they are different. From the beginnings of the Christian church, otherness was an integral aspect of Christian ethnic and cultural identity. Difference from one's own culture is essential to Christian cultural identity. Compassionate acceptance of the stranger, however, is a biblical theme that is frequently commented on in the accounts of Jesus' ministry. Christians are not simply aliens to their own culture; they are aliens who are at home in every

culture. Sin is a refusal to embrace the other in his/her otherness. For the Christian a gracious affirmation of the other is rooted in the acknowledgment of God's embrace of humanity in Jesus Christ. Communities of embrace are places where the power of domination and exclusion has been broken, and the Spirit's act of new creation becomes manifest.

Martha Ellen Stortz emphasizes the many different kinds of pluralism we face and concludes that what we see depends on our point of view or even what's visible from our point of view. No single spectator can see everything. In our cultural wars it would help if each group could recognize it upholds a partial truth—that is nonetheless a part of the truth; if each group could acknowledge that its knowledge is situated—but nonetheless knowledge; and if each group could listen in on another's insights. Baptism is a centripetal force that unites us in the priesthood of all believers whereas incarnation feeds a centrifugal tendency and presents the ordinary, the concrete, and the particular as the realm of divine expression.

In a response to these essays at the conference **L. DeAne Lagerquist** observed that pluralism is among us and around us, and we can respond in terms of apologetics, dialogue, evangelism, hospitality, or embrace. Since all people are in some sense neighbors, our response to pluralism is part of our life of discipleship and we do not all have to respond in the same way. New questions also emerge: Can I see Christ in a person when she does not acknowledge Christ? Can it be that someone can reveal Christ to me even without confessing him? In a parallel response, **Paul Sponheim** concluded that we have been interrupted by pluralism. We are at the same time called into a journey with the actual other. We cannot claim to know too much about the outcome of this journey, and yet this does not cut the nerve of missionary witness. On our journey there will be real risk, but not a little hopefulness.

We live in a messy present and toward an even more messy future. Given by the creator's hand, the messiness of pluralism brings home the reality of Christ's incarnation into real flesh and blood and into the diverse fractious communities where we spend our lives. With so many voices, how can we sing with one voice? How can our one voice keep from silencing the others, who have much to share with us?

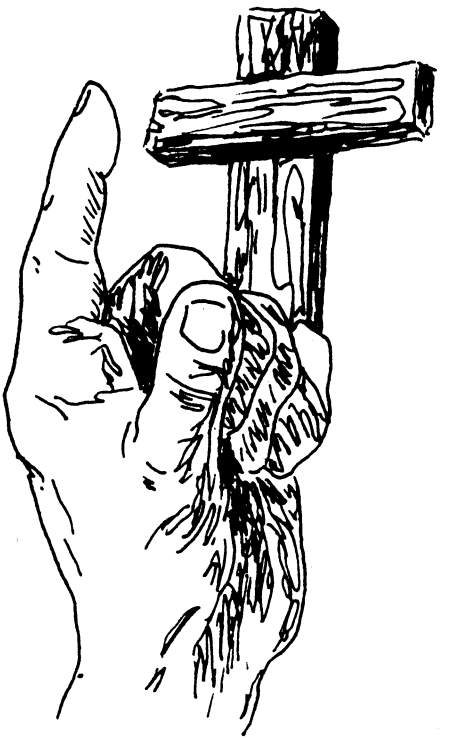
Someone once said that if a messy desk is a sign of a messy mind, just think what an empty desk signifies! Would you really want life and ministry any less messy today?

In confidence and hope,

Ralph W. Klein, *Editor*

Hearing the Other: The Promise and Problem of Pluralism

Carl E. Braaten
Northfield, Minnesota



The word "other" has been creeping into contemporary theological jargon, and will predictably soon be replaced by another. You can tell in what decade something was written by its buzz words—words like "dialectical," "kairos," "existential," "demythologizing," "hermeneutical," "secularization," "praxis," "deconstruction," etc. Now books and articles that reflect the latest trends in graduate schools are busy "out-othering" each other. Derrida and Levinas are quoted more often than Augustine or Thomas, Luther or Barth. Yet, the word "other" is one that we can recall from the early Barth, when

A non-missionary gospel would be a contradiction in terms.

he talked about God as the "*totaliter aliter*," the "totally other," but it can also refer to the concept of transcendence in classical apophatic theology in which God is thought to be so radically other, beyond being, more like nothingness than anything at all, to which one had best respond in mystical silence.

My use of the word "other" will not be nearly so sophisticated as all that. I will speak of the otherness of the gospel in relation to the world religions. I will speak of Christian faith and other faiths, looking for common ground, for solidarity, as well as for difference, for particularity, whatever the case may be. And I suppose it will come out sounding somewhat Lutheran because—well, that's just the way it is.

The theme of Christianity in the midst of a plurality of religions has been interwoven with my life from earliest childhood in Madagascar. In the town in which I grew up there were Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, animists, Catholics, Protestants, and then there was this little colony of missionaries from America planting the church the only way they could, and that was as they knew it in mid-west Norwegian Lutheran pietism. In that situation Christianity was other, sometimes the unwelcomed stranger; it was certainly foreign to the Malagasy religious experience. Thus the situation of religious pluralism, even that of being a member of a Christian minority in a pluralistic situation, has always seemed to me the normal one. And the missionary idea, expressed in the Great Commission, has also seemed to me to be simply the definition of true Christianity.

A non-missionary gospel would be a contradiction in terms. When I first read the new missiology that says that the purpose of the Christian mission is to make Buddhists better Buddhists, Hindus better Hindus, Muslims better Muslims, humanists better humanists, etc., it made no sense in my experience or understanding of the Christian faith. I was taught by the missionaries that everyone should be treated as a person for whom Christ died and rose again, and that it was the church's calling to make the good news known to anyone who had ears to hear. Methods and strategies were debatable, but not the matter itself.

Three models: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism

Experiencing the phenomenon of religious pluralism and thinking about it are two different things. The impetus to think about Christianity and world religions in a critical way came from Paul Tillich, who was my Doctor Father at Harvard Divinity School in the fifties. Not until many years later did the quest for a Christian theology of the religions become the hottest game in town. Now it is perhaps the most important issue bearing on the question of Christian identity. From Kant to Tillich the chief question was how Christianity could defend itself in relation to the offspring of Western enlightenment—scientific positivism, secular humanism, atheistic nihilism, and anti-Christian ideologies. Now the apologetic task has widened to global proportions, making it necessary to define the Christian faith in relation to the rival truth-claims of other major religious traditions and worldviews.

Many complex theories of the relation of Christianity to other religions have been developed. I cannot go into them here. It was Alan Race, however, a disciple of John Hick, who simplified the discussion enormously with his theory of basically three models: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.[1] This classification has caught on. But as with all typologies and models, this one makes complexities overly simple. The typology becomes particularly uncomfortable when one finds oneself or one's favorite theologians pigeonholed in ways that trade on caricatures and simplistic slogans. It is not very helpful in fixing alternatives in our minds. Theologically I am a pluralist in one respect, an exclusivist in another respect, and an inclusivist in still a third respect. I will try to explain what I mean.

On pluralism

The term "religious pluralism" may refer either to the sheer fact of a plurality of religions, or to the pluralistic theology of the religions. Christianity began in a world of many religions; this is not new knowledge. What is relatively novel is the rise of a pluralistic theology of religions that claims to be authentically Christian. I contest that claim. I find it to be an imperialistic insult to every religion, not merely to Christianity, because it claims to possess an Archimedean vantage point from which the particular truth-claim of each religion is dissolved into a higher perspective on universal truth and ultimate reality. The pluralistic theology of religion is an enemy of every concrete religion and theology. The pluralists talk about "crossing the Rubicon," which means that a person can cross back and forth—experientially and ritually—from one religion to another, inasmuch as all religions are supposedly merely different channels of the same truth and salvation.

Opposition to the pluralistic theory of religions does not mean opposition to pluralism as such. The catholicity of the church embraces the many forms of life built into the world that God created and preserves, forms that have to do with sex and age and language and race and culture and nationality. All of these are accepted by grace into the future of God's coming kingdom and welcomed in all their variety at every eucharistic celebration. If the church is to be a sign and instrument of the coming of God's kingdom, she will reflect the pluriformity of the world with joy and thanksgiving. Pentecost was a pluralistic happening—with Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.

God is the author of the world's pluralism. If we adhere to the principles of the Reformation, we will be open to the pluralism we confront in the world of nature, history, and culture, including the religions, all of which are structures through which something of God is revealed. To get right to the thesis of this presentation: God reveals himself in many ways, but God's supreme gift of salvation is through Christ alone. With John Hick we can say, God has many names—many different names in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas in which something of God's truth, beauty, and goodness is being revealed, but there is salvation in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth alone. Paul and Barnabas said as much to the Greeks in Lystra, that God "has not left himself without a witness in doing

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[1] Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982).

good."[2] Likewise to the Athenians in front of the Areopagus Paul said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.... Indeed, God is not far from each one of us. For 'in him we live, and move, and have our being.'"[3] Paul, in effect, said to these Greeks, "revelation, yes, salvation, no." Revelation and salvation are not coterminous. There are two forms of the Word of God, indicating two different ways of God working in the world. The one form we may call "general revelation" or "natural religion" or even "creation theology." The other form finds its unique expression in the gospel. The two forms are to be neither separated nor identified, but properly distinguished. When the pluralists claim that God grants salvation apart from Christ through the myths and rites of other religions, we maintain that a confusion has taken place that violates the *solus Christus* of the doctrine of justification.

On the basis of God's ordering of the world through the law of creation (*lex creationis*), Christians affirm solidarity with all other human beings. All are created in the image of the one God; all share the same nature and dignity. Every person is everyone's neighbor. We are all brothers and sisters, no matter how different in the ways we think and behave. As Christians we have enemies, but we are commanded by Christ to love them, but not the evil they do. Our differences are part of the splendor of creation. We have different physical and intellectual abilities, different talents and callings. But we are all called to be for others; this is the *sine qua non* of genuine human community.

The purpose of the natural moral law is to promote life for the common good. It is a gift of God built into every human being, commanding them to do good and to avoid evil. Since Immanuel Kant many Protestant theologians have given up teaching the natural moral law. I think this is a mistake. The moral law is the voice of God in the human conscience, universally applicable and binding on all people. It is the basis of human rights and social obligations. Because of sin people may reject the principles of the moral law, but they cannot eradicate the law of God written into every human heart. This law is the basis for accepting all human beings as our brothers and sisters with whom we are to live in a peaceful and justly ordered community guaranteeing freedom and dignity for all.

The early Christians, though a minority, understood themselves to be in solidarity with their pagan neighbors. In the Epistle to Diogentus the unknown Christian author writes: "Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by either country, speech, or customs; the fact is, they nowhere settle in cities of their own; they use no peculiar language; they cultivate no eccentric mode of life.... They settle in both Greek and non-Greek cities, as each one's lot is cast, and conform to the customs of the country in dress, diet, and mode of life in general."[4] Then the Epistle to Diogentus goes on to say: "They reside in their respective countries, but only as aliens; they take part in everything as citizens, and put up with everything as foreigners; every foreign land is their home, and every home a foreign land.... They spend their days on earth, but hold citizenship in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their private lives go beyond the laws. They love all people, and are persecuted by all."[5] The message is that on one level Christians

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[2] Acts 14:17.

[3] Acts 17:22, 27b, 28.

[4] "The Epistle to Diogentus," *Patrology*, ed. Johannes Quasten. Vol. I (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1950), 250.

[5] *Ibid.*, 250.

understand themselves to be like all others, but on another they are a peculiar people, not of this world. The difference stems from the exclusiveness of what they have received from Christ, their sense of the difference Christ makes.

The exclusivity of Christ

We have explained that on the basis of God's creation and law Christians are bonded with persons of religious commitment other than Christian. As the law is the preparation for the gospel, so all religions are somehow positively related to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. When persons become Christian, they find fulfillment and not negation of all that they learned of truth and goodness in their previous religious experience. St. Thomas gave us the classical formula: "*Gratia non tollit sed perfecit naturam.*" Augustine's experience provides a vivid example. In his Confessions he acknowledged that he learned about the Logos from the Platonists; in fact, he learned virtually everything that John's Gospel says about the eternal Word of God in verses 1-10, that the Word was with God, that the Word was God, and that all things were made by him; he learned about the life and light of that Word shining in the world and the human soul. But that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, giving power to become the children of God to all who believe, that he learned only from the Bible and the church.[6] Augustine's confession has been reiterated by millions of people who tell about their experience of becoming believers in Christ and members of his church.

True Christianity holds to the exclusive identity and meaning of Jesus Christ, ontologically and soteriologically. As my colleague Robert Jenson puts it: "Jesus belongs in the Trinity." Jesus is not a mere metaphor or symbol pointing to an eternal dimension inside the life of the triune identity of God. Finally Jesus Christ is the only real difference between the gospel and other religions.

> The moral law is the voice of God in the human conscience, universally applicable and binding on all people.

The pluralistic theologians of religion are honest. They admit that their view is without biblical foundation and unprecedented in the history of Christian theology. Never mind! They think that they have come up with a really novel idea, and they are convinced they are right. In terms of theological method, their own reason and experience count for more in making theological judgments than the combined weight of Scripture and tradition. The old *doctores ecclesiae* all believed—from Augustine to Luther, and Aquinas to Barth—that the saving truth of God is revealed in a final and normative way in the flesh and blood of a Jew whose mother Mary gave him the name, Jesus. But, according to the pluralists, they were mistaken. We moderns know better. We have discovered the essence of religion. Our philosophy and science teach us that all particular religions are but different manifestations of the same eternal truth and

[6] Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VII, Chapter IX.

reality. But this idea is not so new. The Hellenistic philosopher Celsus in the second century attacked Christianity for its silly belief in the Incarnation, the idea that only recently had God appeared in the flesh in one corner of the world to accomplish its salvation. Celsus declared that "it makes no difference whether we call Zeus the Most High, or Zen, or Adonai, or Sabaoth, or Amoun like the Egyptians, or Papaeus like the Scythians."[7] It is only through lack of knowledge and insight that Christians believe the exclusive claim of the gospel concerning the world's salvation through Jesus' name and by his authority.

No theory of religion can dissolve the exclusive particles of the gospel without contradicting the core of the Christian message that Jesus Christ is the one and only Mediator between God and humanity, and what he achieved for the world's salvation is done once for all and never to be repeated by anyone else. In the texts of the New Testament and early Christian traditions Jesus is depicted not as a savior but as *the* Savior, not as a Son of God, one among many in a pantheon of gods and half-gods, but as the one and only Savior of the world, God's only begotten Son. The exclusivity claim is part of the kernel of the gospel, not so much husk that can be demythologized away.

Paul Knitter believes that the "one and only" statements can be chalked up to the limited cultural perspective of primitive times.[8] The truth is the opposite. The exclusive claim of the gospel was from the beginning counter-cultural. It was foolishness to the Greeks, and it remains a scandal of which many contemporary Hellenized Christians have become ashamed. The early Christians were prepared to place their lives on the line to confess that Jesus is Lord and God in an utterly *sui generis* sense. If the church is built on the blood of its martyrs, who would be willing to die for the abstractions of the pluralistic philosophers of religion? The best they can do is to recruit academicians for inter-religious dialogue, rather than missionaries for cross-cultural evangelism.

So far we have formulated and defended a two-pronged thesis. Just as salvation comes exclusively by way of the Jews and a Jewish Messiah, so also there is at the same time a universal revelation of God through the way things are made, through the vestigial imprints of God on all things. God is universally revealing something of his eternal power and glory among all peoples, nations, cultures, and religions. They all somehow bear witness in their searching and groping after the unfathomable mystery of God. In inter-religious dialogue Christians may learn from the testimonies of others concerning the different ways in which they experience God.

I believe this categorical distinction between revelation and salvation is fundamental in constructing a biblically based Christian theology of the religions. It is a view characteristic of Lutheran theologians who have written on the subject—Nathan Søderblom, Paul Althaus, C. H. Ratschow, and Wolfhart Pannenberg. It stands in opposition to two other views that equate revelation and salvation, which in turn are in polar opposition to each other. One is the Barthian view that holds that Christ is the only medium of revelation and salvation; the total content of revelation is salvation. The other is the pluralist view that holds that all religions mediate revelation, and therefore all religions are equally valid ways of

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[7] *Origen: Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), V, 45.

[8] Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 182.

salvation apart from Christ. In contrast, we have argued for a two-fold revelation of God. There is a universal revelation of God through all the media of creation—through nature, history, moral conscience, and religious experience. But then, in contrast to this, there is a unique revelation of God in Christ that is categorically different in kind, and not only in degree. The trinitarian and christological decisions of the ancient ecumenical councils took great pains to spell out the difference in ontological terms. Since the pluralists are not constrained by those decisions, they are willing to allow an ontological distance between God and Christ. As the Arians chanted about Christ, "There was when he was not." Neither the old nor the new Arians have a real Trinity, nor a divine Christ who is "consubstantial with the Father."

The inclusiveness of the gospel

I believe that the great truths of the Trinity and high Christology provide the foundations of genuine love and respect for people of other religious persuasions. The frequent failure of Christians to show such love and respect is a moral failure that best be called sin, and is not demonstrably due to a defect of doctrine. Some of the pluralists speak derisively of the high Christology of trinitarian dogma as christofascist and christodolatry. They think that deconstructing orthodox dogma into Arian heresy will improve the attitudes of Christians to persons of other religions.

The pluralists fear that so great a stress on the particularity of the gospel and the uniqueness of Christ will leave little or no chance for the salvation of non-Christians. But this is to sell the gospel short. All religions claim to experience salvation of some kind, but not all mean the same thing by salvation. There is no such thing as generic salvation. Salvation is not like a pot of soup ladled out into different bowls. The gospel does not promise any old kind of salvation. It is quite specific about the nature of the salvation offered in the name of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation is union with Christ; it is receiving the righteousness of God through faith on account of Christ. Gospel salvation is funded by Christ through and through, other wise it is something else. Other religions or quasi-religions offer salvation according to their own lights, whether illumination, unification, access to ancestors, immortality of the soul, liberation from class domination, holistic health, and so forth. The gospel does not deny that there is "salvation" of some kind or other in other religions and ideologies. But the gospel narrative does specify what it means by "salvation" and claims that it is good news for all human beings no matter what other ecstasies they might experience through other means. Some biblical terms for the salvation which comes through Christ are justification, redemption, atonement, forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, adoption, resurrection, eternal life, and there are others. Whatever the metaphor, Christ is the essential content and necessary condition of each and every

The gospel does not promise any old kind of salvation. It is quite specific...

experience of salvation promised by the gospel in his name.

But this gospel has universal scope and significance. Its all-inclusiveness is the beauty of the gospel. This particular concrete individual, Jesus of Nazareth, is uniquely qualified to be universally meaningful. His uniqueness lies in who he is and his place in God's cosmic plan of salvation. He is not there for only Christians. As Bonhoeffer said in his prison papers, "Jesus is one whose only concern is for others."[9] As God in human form Jesus is "the man for others."[10]

Some theologies deny the universality of the gospel, the all-inclusive hope of salvation on account of Christ. The Calvinist idea of double predestination is one pessimistic example, but so is the idea that only card-carrying Christians will be saved in the end. Some Christians seem to believe and behave as though only a handful of faithful who belong to their sect will escape the eternal holocaust of hell.

The church has never defined an eschatological dogma. Some eschatological sharpshooters profess to know how everything will turn out in the end. On some things I am an eschatological agnostic. I like the Chinese proverb that says, "To prophesy is very difficult, especially with respect to the future." There simply is no *magnus consensus* in Christian tradition on how things will turn out in the end. Some things we do not know because they have not been revealed. But we do know that it is God's will that all shall be saved and come to the knowledge of truth. We do know that the love of God is universal. We do know that Christ gained a victory over sin, death, and the devil. We do know that there is not a single person for whom Christ did not die and for whose justification he did not rise from the dead.

At this point I often like to quote Gustaf Wingren: "That everyone should be saved is not an assertion of fact that has any biblical support. But it is something one can certainly pray for.... No one has arrived. So, while we are in the process of moving toward the goal, we can pray what we cannot assert."[11] To let our prayers rhyme with God's intention to save all is appropriate to faith in the living God who loves sinners and the godless. The salvation of those who do not have a chance to believe in Christ in their lifetime is ultimately a mystery that we cannot unveil by speculation.

That all shall be saved in the end—in some postmortem way about which we could only speculate—is not something we can know. All we possess now is the knowledge of what we hope, not an idle hope, but an active hope in the service of God's eschatological kingdom. God is not bound to save everybody. God is free to save anybody. If we take into account God's love, power, and freedom, we may envision an eschatological panentheism, that in the end God will be all in all. This does not necessarily lead to the questionable doctrine of an apocatastasis which has been held by theologians ancient, medieval and modern (e.g., Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Scotus Erigena, and perhaps Paul Tillich and Karl Barth) but it does try to take seriously the *ta panta* passages of 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and Ephesians. These persuade us not to limit our hope born of love and active in prayer that God's will will win in the end.

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[9] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), 237.

[10] *Ibid.*, 238.

[11] Gustaf Wingren, *Credo: The Christian View of Faith and Life*, trans. Edgar M. Carlson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 183.

The Congregation: Critical Location for Faith and the Other

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Theologically considered, faith and the other, must be considered at the location where the primal face-to-face activity with Jesus takes place, the community gathered around word and sacrament: the congregation.[1] This necessity to consider faith and the other at the location of the congregation seems obvious from practical warrants alone, but these practical warrants are themselves founded upon epistemological and theological backings.[2] What follows is a painfully brief outline of the theological and epistemological backings for this practical necessity.

Logic of God

By theological backings, I primarily mean the logic of God, the interior permutations and combinations of that Being whose identity is communion.[3] God, according to trinitarian logic, is an ongoing face-to-face community. This face-to-face metaphor shows itself in the Latin concept of person as mask, the mask used by performers on stage to sound through their identities. The Greek metaphor of hypostasis points more in the direction of God as conversations that constitute God and all being. These traditions balance one another: the one tradition emphasizes the persons of the Trinity in relationship; the other their being in communion. To say God is three persons in one being offers a significantly different image of person than the dominant one in modernity and places Christianity at profound

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[1] Here I use the term congregation "to speak of local religious assemblies in general," cf. R. Stephen Warner, "The Place of the Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration," in *American Congregations: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations,* vol. 2, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 54.

[2] The terms practical argument, warrants, backings, etc. follow the work of Stephen Toulmin, *Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

[3] Regarding the theological concept of face-to-face community cf. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1985).

odds with its environment. When Christians say "all being" they mean that God's creating adumbrates God's being in communion, the essential relationality of all being as being.

God, also, saves. The God whom we worship and trust in as Christians is "the God who raised Israel's Jesus from the dead."[4] This God did so as a response to Jesus having emptied himself into the form of a slave and an obedient slave, even to the creature. All of this takes place for the sake of the creatures, including the human creatures, so that we might enjoy equality with God.

Equality with God is being face-to-face in a conversation and relationship that Jesus enjoys as the Son of God. Notice that the equality with God that Jesus does not cling to for his own sake is not "sameness" in ontology but "sameness" in difference, identity in difference.[5] It is precisely in the face-to-face conversation of different persons that God is being. This face-to-face is the work of the Spirit,[6] the force field[7] that makes true the will of God,[8] even the will of God to be as communion.[9]

The ascension of Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, embodies the freedom of that same Jesus to be physically present, that is, face-to-face, where he so chooses.[10] Jesus promises to choose to be present in word and sacrament always, though not exclusively, and sends the Holy Spirit as the power which calls, gathers, and enlightens by means of these face-to-face encounters of word and sacrament, congregations. Through such encounters we literally participate in the life of God who is such communion.

Epistemology

Epistemologically, I follow the lead of my doctoral advisor, Paul Ricoeur, when he teaches, first, that the truth of anything is found in attending to its phenomenology;[11] and, secondly, that its phenomenology is irreducibly embodied in symbol and metaphor.[12] For example, when he takes up the question of theodicy, he does not begin with the usual abstract syllogism, "If God is Good; and God is All Powerful, how can Evil happen?" No, indeed, he begins with the experience of Evil and he does so in its embodied forms, the stories of those who

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[4] Robert W. Jenson, "The Triune God," in *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 79-191.

[5] David Fredrickson, "'Worthy of the Gospel of Christ (Phil 1:27)': The Ecclesiastical Significance of Christ's Political Agency," 1995, unpublished, all rights reserved; Robert P. Scharlemann, *The Being of God: theology and the experience of truth* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981).

[6] See especially Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) as well as Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: on the foundation of the Crucified One in the dispute between theism and atheism*, trans. Darrell Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmann's Press, 1983), and Zizioulas, *Being as Communion.*

[7] Michael Welker, *God the Spirit.*

[8] Eberhard Jüngel, "Zur Lehre vom heiligen Geist," in *Die Mitte des Neuen Testaments: Einheit und Vielfalt neutestamentlicher Theologie: Festschrift für Eduard Schwizer zum siebzigsten Geburtstage*, ed. U. Luz and H. Weder (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1983), 98ff.

[9] Zizioulas, 74ff.

[10] Robert Jenson, "Spirit," in *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 169ff.

[11] Edmund Husserl, "Phenomenology," trans. Richard E. Palmer, *Encyclopedia Brittanica*, 1927.

[12] Paul Ricouer, *Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

suffer, and he examines the ruling metaphors within which they experience and speak their suffering. The symbol gives rise to thought. Begin with the lament not the syllogism. The syllogism will never get you to truth.

I also follow the work of Emmanuel Levinas who teaches us to avoid the temptation to totalization through abstractions; that the search for truth begins not with the question of metaphysics but with the question of justice and ethical reflection; it begins with the concrete attention to the face-to-face encounter with the other, the topic of our conference.[13]

Practical warrants

The practical reasons that I choose to begin with the congregation should be obvious. The congregation, the local church, can do the most about our relationship with the other, and it is all too often the place where the least is done. At one time, before the major changes in immigration policy in 1965, national offices for global mission and theological schools were the most likely location for the encounter with the otherness of the global community. However, since 1965 the world has been coming to the United States in greater diversity than previously, and our congregations are the site where the most intense, vital, and too often, deadly encounters with global community are taking place. No matter how wonderful our formulations here, if they do not consider the way the congregations actually function as human communities of faith and the other, we do far less good than the church expects from its teaching theologians.

For too long, those of us in this room and the institutions we represent have thought of theology as a commodity that we produce. We then wholesale it to our students and they retail it in their places of employment. We have both assumed and abetted the alienation of the people of God from producing their own critical theology. We have either left them to their supposed innocent, uncritical piety, or we have sent our students to make up an enlightened elite core of theologians in residence, either lay or clergy. As our primary task, we have not seen ourselves as the servants of the people of God as they go about the tough task of attending, asserting, deciding, and acting on the basis of their own theological reflection.[14] Any faithful and effective theological reflection on faith and the other must begin in such servanthood. For though we may think globally, we must act locally. And, if we expect any action locally, we must serve those who we would invite to action.

On the surface my theological premises may seem in direct contradiction to my epistemological ones. In the theological, I appear to begin with the metaphysical. However, if you read closely you will see that my description of the being of God follows from the particularity of Jesus in his irreducible difference from what western metaphysics teaches us is deity. Further, I describe the search for truth by way of the question of justice, a community of strangers, even in God. Linking these apparent contradictions follows.

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[13] Immanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Liagis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

[14] See especially Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), James D. and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: theological reflection and Christian ministry* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1980), and Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985).

Hospitality to the stranger

In recent years I have found the symbol or metaphor that gives rise to the most fruitful thought regarding faith and the other is "hospitality to the stranger."[15] Several characteristics of "hospitality to the stranger" as a metaphor need noting.

First, I view it primarily as a pupil's metaphor rather than a master's metaphor. With a master's metaphor, the thinker or speaker remains master; a master's metaphor illustrates an abstract idea of which the metaphor is merely an example. It is mere rhetoric. This, incidentally, is the model of metaphor and rhetoric taught in most universities since the Enlightenment and became almost unquestioned by Victorian (whether English or otherwise) writing theory. This keeps the Enlightened self well in charge, ruling all that it thinks and speaks, the master of its own knowing and experiencing. The pupil's metaphor, by contrast, is a metaphor within which I know, experience, think, and speak. Such metaphors are alive; they cannot be reduced to examples or illustrations of an abstract thought. They rule rather than being ruled.[16]

Second, "hospitality to the stranger" is hardly a uniquely Christian pupil's metaphor. It comes to us Christians both externally, from other traditions, and specifically from within the Christian tradition. Surely, no one in the west could possibly claim that "hospitality to the stranger" is unique to Christianity. Clearly Judaism and Islam draw upon the metaphor. More interestingly, so do many of the ancient religions and cultures of the west. Who could read the Iliad and Odyssey and not see the power of this metaphor embedded in its story? Similarly, the metaphor is present in great Eastern traditions as well.[17] I spent a major portion of the summer teaching at Vancouver School of Theology with students from several major Asian cultures who readily shared stories of "hospitality to the stranger" and offered rules of hospitality embedded in their culture. My experience with several Native peoples, including the Lakota/Dakota, Crow, Zuni, Navaho, Inuit, Inupiat, and Macaw communities confirm the power of the face-to-face encounter with the other and the themes of hospitality within these encounters.

Third, although it is hardly a unique Christian pupil metaphor, it is a major pupil metaphor within the biblical narrative. Once the metaphor came to my attention, I began to see its place within the basic woof and warp of Scripture and Christian tradition. This is especially true in the encounter with God, even the encounter of disciples with Jesus after his resurrection.

Fourth, and perhaps the most obvious, "hospitality to the stranger" as a pupil's metaphor is best understood as a freeze-dried narrative. If we forget that this metaphor, this symbol, only has life when embedded in a particular story, we lose almost all that we have gained in our work to this point. As common as the metaphor is, it cannot become an abstraction carried in one's pocket from culture to culture, tribe to

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[15] See my *Welcoming the Stranger: a public theology of worship and evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) as well as my "The other: hospitality to the stranger, Levinas, and multicultural mission" in *Dialog* 30 (Winter 1991):36-43.

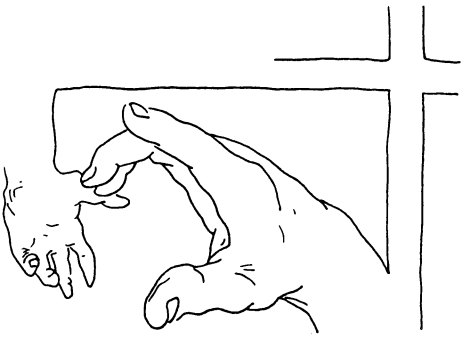
[16] Paul Ricouer, *The Rule of Metaphor, multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), and Richard Lischer, "What Language Shall I Borrow? The Role of Metaphor in Proclamation," *dialog* 26 (Fall 1987):281-86.

[17] Anthony J. Gittins, *Gifts and Strangers: Meeting the Challenge of Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), especially chapters 4 and 5, pp. 84-110 and 110-138.

tribe, neighborhood to neighborhood. It must be embodied in a particular and peculiar narrative, with particular and peculiar creatures, or we lose the disclosive power of truth found in plurality, ambiguity, and difference.[18] In short, if we do not do our theology locally, and become the servants of the people of God who are the primary theologians in particular, peculiar, and different face-to-face communities, we are not letting the pupil metaphor rule but have turned it and those particular communities, those irreducible others, into our slaves, mere examples of our ideas. We remain more captured by Plato's vision of the philosopher kings than by Jesus' vision of slaves who free others to govern themselves.

Over the past several years we at Church Innovations Institute have moved from a theoretical consideration of this metaphor to embodying it within a model of research and theological reflection. When thinking within this metaphor, we begin with members of local congregations functioning as participant interpreters. On the basis of their gathered stories and field notes, we then have reading teams who read with members of congregations (participant interpreters) through specific narratives gathered and interpreted by them from their own congregations. Each reading team member brings their own specialty to this shared process of interpretation. Some are church historians, theologians, biblical scholars; some family systems therapists, parish consultants, scholars of distance learning, sociologists, ethnographers, educators, and community organizers. What they share is a vision that sees themselves as a learning organization that functions as slaves for these congregations so that the congregations might have the leisure to critically reflect on God's activity within their lives.

As I have participated in such reading



teams, I have followed the lead of Levinas in exploring hospitality to the stranger through three moments: the self as stranger; the other as stranger; and God as stranger. Allow me to share a few thoughts that have arisen from reading the narratives of some congregations as they encounter the other as communities of faith.

The self as stranger

As I read the stories of individuals and congregations and their encounter with others, a number of disillusionments show themselves. Their chief disillusionment is with the promise that modernity has made to them about the security of the unencumbered self, the free self of the Enlightenment. They speak of how they feel like they will never grow up, never really know who they are. They feel in a perpetual youth identity crisis, with new stages and passages[19] driven by forces quite against a

[18] David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: hermeneutics, religion, hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

[19] Gail Sheehy, *Passages. Predictable Passages of Adult Life* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976).

supposed unencumbered will. They experience themselves as irreducibly other, as stranger. They long to have themselves secure and known, but the more they know about themselves, the more they fail to have themselves as fully known.

Psychiatrist and social critic Robert Jay Lifton has followed this development of the post-modern self over several decades. Some of his initial work spoke of Protean Man, drawing on the classical imagery of Proteus who was a shape shifter long before Deep Space Nine and Star Trek imagined them. In his earlier work he bemoaned these modern creatures and hoped that a true self, an authentic self, an existentialist self might emerge among them. More recently he has attacked this very longing. He has found that the drive of modernity had led man (and we know it was man the Enlightenment fathers had in mind) to seek an authentic, fundamental self. However, Lifton says such a self does not exist. And, even if it did, it would not be suitable to the task of selves in our time that need these protean capabilities.[20] What he uncovers is the self as irreducibly other to itself, self as stranger.[21]

This post-modern self does not experience the security of self control, self determination, self esteem that naturally wells up within the self, even though all the self-help books tell them they should. Congregations that create space for such honest having of one self as an other, that allow such selves to attend, assert, decide, and act without having it all together, without enjoying self control, self determination, and complete self esteem, thrive in our time.

Should we be surprised at the importance of the small group movement? Robert Wuthnow, now in three separate monographs, documents the "small group revolution" that has powerfully transformed four out of every ten Americans in the last 15 years.[22] Time and time again, our research at Church Innovations shows how thriving congregations that are able to reach the unchurched and genuinely secular, rather than just reintegrate already existing church members from another congregation, use small groups that attend to this profound anxiety and anomie of the post-modern self.

These congregations with effective small group ministry are places that allow the publicly optimistic American to attend to what Langdon Gilkey has recently called the "radical ambiguity of our culture's life, its deep levels of anxiety and of anomie, its hidden layers of guilt, and its fear of death." Gilkey holds that what the modern "secularist does not see, nor perhaps even the liberal, is this radical ambiguity."[23] However, he says, "to this radical ambiguity and anxiety conservative [Christians] offered a religious option visibly different from the culture and thus capable of promising the latter's rescue. To me, says Gilkey, only this understanding of a culture whose cre-

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[20] Robert Jay Lifton, *Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1979); *Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

[21] The obvious debt to Paul Ricoeur in this entire analysis should be clear. Cf. his Gifford Lectures, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992).

[22] Robert W. Wuthnow, *"I come away stronger": how small groups are shaping American religion* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmanns, 1994); *Sharing the journey: support groups and America's new quest for community* (New York: Free Press, 1994), and "Small groups forge new notions of community and the sacred," in *Christian Century* 110:1236-40 (December 8, 1993).

[23] Langdon Gilkey, "The Christian Congregation as Religious Community," in *American Congregations*, ed. Wind and Lewis, 2:111.

ativity (its rationality, moral ideals, tolerance, devotion to freedom) continually lures liberals to accommodate their religion to modernity, and yet whose deep faults cry out for a noncultural religious response, can make sense of the paradox of a declining liberalism and a resurgent fundamentalism. The mainline churches apparently offered nothing different enough from the culture either to stem the slippage to the secular or to answer the religious problems generated out of the secular culture." [24]

The growing awareness of having one's self as an irreducible other opens the door for the Lutheran witness to its traditional stance on the goodness of the created self, the bondage of the will, and the power of the regenerated self that dwells in Christ by the power of the Spirit. All three realities need our witness in order for us to honestly, effectively, and faithfully offer genuine rescue to the post-modern self, the self that has its self as an irreducible other, a stranger.

However, too many among us choose, in the name of metaphysical coherence, one or another of these three different constructions of the self. Some of us tacitly acquiesce to the liberal sinless self thinking that the only real debate is between which part of the immoral society is the worst: big business and capitalism or big government and socialism. We create a social manichaenism that sees the liberal self caught in an immoral society and systemic oppression. Such social manichaeans leave behind both the power of the created self to do much good, even though it is in bondage to sin, and the role of the law and wrath of God to accomplish much good for the stranger. Still others misappropriate the Lutheran teaching of the bondage of the will and use it as an excuse to privatize the life of the Christian, reduce it to the saved self, and lose the public community of faith active in love, seeking justice. Still others among us neglect the profound need of the self to find its rest in God, in the Other, and instead offer all manner of psychological, self esteem, self help programs in lieu of the death of the empirical self that is the beginning of the Christian life in Christ through sharing his death in baptism. Still others, appalled at the cultural chaos in family and work, jump over justification by grace, through faith, into a supposed third use of the law for Christians. They offer either a right or left wing list of virtues as the solution to the anomie and ambiguity of American culture, a quick fix to an enduring human crisis.

Should we be surprised at the importance of the small group movement?

When all self is mediated before and through the other, think what such a deconstructed doctrine of the self would mean to the discussion of decision theology among us; and more importantly, the place of Christian transformation in the life of the individual and the community of faith. This brings to an end metaphysics and epistemology as we have known it. It opens up new doors for conversation with certain Eastern religious thought, especially Buddhism on the death of the empirical self.[25]

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[24] Gilkey, "The Christian Congregation," 111.

[25] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 3* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 608.

The other as stranger

The possibilities for thinking theologically regarding faith and the other through the metaphor of hospitality to the stranger are perhaps most obvious in the other as stranger. However, most of our theological work in mainline Protestantism in this possibility has focused in denominational and supraparochial and extracongregational religion. We continue to do theology as if the impressive documentation and considerable length of scholarship of the declining significance of denominationalism had not been written.[26] We have decried the failure of congregations to concern themselves with the public life, reduced the public life to government, and presumed to speak on behalf of the church through so-called church social statements and lobbyists in legislatures. All the time ignoring the critical reality that discipleship and citizenship are primally and enduringly located in local communities of faith.

We have tended as a scholarly community to accept the judgment of scholars like Gibson Winter and Peter Berger in the 1960s and 1970s that congregations had become simply conclaves of the private. And we explain the success of growing churches to their acquiescence to this private enclave mentality and to individualism.[27]

There is ample evidence for the habit of most mainline congregations to live within private metaphors, the family being the dominant one. Our research at Church Innovations has shown how excluding this metaphor can be when it is the ruling metaphor for congregational life. From the side of clergy, it creates the model of the family home chaplain and a ministry based upon intimacy and personal presence. In its worst case scenarios it creates extremely fused emotional systems. These fused emotional systems not only exclude the stranger but they also allow, aid, and abet the abuse of boundaries, physical and emotional.

Incidentally, the excellent work of family systems theories has been extensively taken up into the study of congregations. Many excellent and "how-to" books applying these theories to congregations are leading to healthier systems.[28] However, I find that most of the congregations with whom we work and who use these family systems approaches have not broken out of the family home ruling or root metaphor. As a result, they effectively use family systems theory to analyze their dysfunction but ineffectively try to use it as the dominant metaphor for healthy congregations. Congregations, at their primal best, are not families in any literal sense of the word. They are always more, much more, irreducibly and essentially more; they are public and private.

Be that as it may, many observers, though not most, are discovering the importance of congregations as more than conclaves of the private. They see the congregations as mediating between the public and private institutions of contemporary society. In the 1980s many who studied congregations spoke of congregations as mediating structures between the public and the private. Parker Palmer spoke of

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[26] Robert W. Wuthnow, *Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), especially chapter 5, "The Declining Significance of Denominationalism," 71-99.

[27] Martin E. Marty, "Public and Private: Congregation as Meeting Place," in *American Congregations*, ed. Wind and Lewis, 133-66.

[28] Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: a family process in church and synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), and Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregation: a systems approach* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1996).

them as bridges between the public and private dimensions of our lives. As such, congregations are critical to the life of the community. Many supracongregational observers increasingly see congregations as critical to delivering social services that in the recent past have been delivered by government agencies. Both the right and left have become interested in congregations in this instrumental manner.[29]

The theme of "the other" and hospitality to the stranger has been taken into the more traditionally liberal (and here I mean liberal in the sense that Ronald Reagan was the most liberal President of the United States in the 20th century) and abstract metaphor: inclusivity. "Hospitality to the stranger" as freeze dried narrative of the Scriptures has become in the hands of many of us a master metaphor to illustrate inclusivity, the ruling metaphor of our imaginations. In doing so we show ourselves more American than Christian; more modern, than either traditional or post-modern; more persons of privilege who can presume we are the ones to invite, welcome, and include. Within the "inclusivity ruling metaphor" the local, concrete, messy, irreducible otherness fades into abstraction. We can talk, talk, talk about doing it but can only blame the racism, classism, sexism, etc. of our members for why we change our lived reality so little.

God as stranger

In contrast to this using the image of hospitality to the stranger as a master metaphor for the abstraction "inclusivity," we should be ruled by the biblical image of hospitality to the stranger in which we are all strangers depending upon God's hospitality. God is the host; the critical, essential character of the congregation grows out of the presence of the Holy One who raised Israel's Jesus from the dead. Too often all this talk of faith and the other, of hospitality to the stranger, and especially inclusivity, is covering our failure to trust that the essential character of congregation, and our life as Christians, grows out of the presence of this Holy One. We busy ourselves with growing churches, or filling food shelves, or renewing the liturgy, or endowing chairs at seminaries, or any number of good things but ignore the deep and profound spiritual crisis in our midst.

> Congregations, at their primal best, are not families in any literal sense of the word. They are always more, much more, irreducibly and essentially more...

Langdon Gilkey, having noted the external decline of mainline Protestant denominations, identifies a much more powerful inner loss. "It is as if, now that they can no longer see themselves as the central nurturers and irreplaceable guardians of the nation's moral and spiritual health, they are now not at all sure who they are, what as communities they represent, and what their role in the wider community may be—as if, granted that their former sociological role is gone, no other sort of role, no "minority"

[29] Cf. Marty, "Public and Private."

Whatever else congregations are, they are face-to-face communities of faith.... Their one unique characteristic is that they offer a peculiar sense of the holy.

task, is open to them.[30] Whatever else congregations are, they are face-to-face communities of faith, they are religious communities. Their one unique characteristic is that they offer a peculiar sense of the holy.

Our research at Church Innovations both confirms the profound spiritual crisis, the inability to attend to the irreducibly other, to God, and our tendency to keep those moments when we do strictly within the private sphere. For example, in our Partnership for Congregational Renewal, congregations commit themselves to a three to five year process of spiritual discernment. As a part of this process, members of the Church Innovations staff who are mission developers converse and pray with key leaders in the Partner congregations. Time and time again, over 80% of the pastors within this setting reveal that they have no devotional disciplines. Their use of scripture is almost totally related to preaching, teaching, and other vocational ends. They experience a great spiritual wasteland and tie this wasteland experience to their profound ambivalence toward the essential tasks of mission and outreach into their communities. Why should they risk the anger and conflict that arises from moving from maintenance to mission, if they do not experience the gospel as true and regularly dwell in and attend to the presence of God in word and sacrament?

This last set of findings and questions returns us to Gilkey's observations around how we experience the Other, the Holy Presence, in our congregations. It drives us into the reality of God as the Other, perhaps the most neglected dialectic in our theology of faith and the other. It drives us back to where this essay began—the Trinitarian, theological backings for understanding the congregation as a necessary but not sufficient place for considering faith and the other. Our linking of practical warrants with epistemological and theological backings is complete.

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[30] Gilkey, "The Christian Congregation," 104.

The "Other" in Biblical Perspective

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In the late 1970s I was working as a parish education director in western Pennsylvania. As part of the Sunday morning adult education program, I arranged a series on Judaism that culminated with a class visit by a husband and wife from the Reform synagogue in a neighboring town. After a very pleasant and fruitful interchange, the Jewish couple accepted my invitation to attend the 11:00 worship service. Listening in their presence to the Gospel reading and hymns, I became aware for the first time of the extent to which the Jew is the "other" in Christian scripture and Lutheran worship—this despite my very thorough confirmation instruction and later religion courses at a Lutheran college in the 1960s.

The second jolt of awareness came in 1981 when our family lived for a year in Damascus, Syria. Some of my husband's students at the University of Damascus were Palestinians. One night several came to our flat for dinner. As they conversed alternately in English and Arabic, it dawned on me that their word for themselves is "Philistini"—and that linguistically at least these young men were the descendants of the much-hated Philistines of Hebrew biblical history.

Although I certainly cannot claim to have made an intensive study of the "other" in the Bible before this year, for the past fifteen years I have attempted to develop consciousness of the other in my teaching and scholarship.[1] In this brief study I propose to combine a comprehensive survey with attention to some specific texts, in the following major sections: variety of types and uses of the other in the Bible; some reasons the results are unsettling; a second look, focusing on passages that can serve as resources for dealing constructively with the other; benefits of reading in the company of others outside the text; and some concluding thoughts for the ELCA, the "member," in Pauline terms, of the body of Christ that claims my loyalty and service.

Variety of types and uses of the "other"

In Hebrew scripture the most obvious others are a series of ethnic groups encountered by the children of Israel: Edomites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Persians,

[1] For their comments on an early draft of this paper I am very grateful to Murray Haar of Augustana College (SD), Immanuel Gitlin of Lenoir-Rhyne College, and Margaret Odell of St. Olaf College.

Medes, Greeks, and Seleucids. With varying degrees of disapproval these other nations, Gentiles, are called the *goyim*. And in cultic terms there are the circumcised and others who are uncircumcised.[2] The Christian canonical scriptures contain a whole host of shifting others: Jews, Judaeans, Gentiles, Samaritans, rich, poor, tax collectors, Pharisees, scribes, the "immoral of this world," pagans who ate meat which had been sacrificed to idols, emperor worshipers, and the not-always appealing neighbor.

In both testaments the other can be the stranger we are to treat hospitably: "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:19). Such hospitality is exemplified by Abraham with the three strangers in Genesis 18 and by a Samaritan in Luke 10. In many cases the biblical narrative is antagonistic toward the other as enemy. The Egyptians periodically and the Philistines, until subdued, are military enemies. The Canaanites can be portrayed as hostile military other, and always they are other in religious terms, a threat to Israel's developing monotheism. The Pharisees and lawyers serve as religious enemy, even the enemy within, in some Gospel texts. The beasts in both Daniel and Revelation symbolize others who are threats in at least three arenas: military, religious, and political.

That Jewish and Christian sacred texts rely so extensively on the positing of the other should come as no surprise. It is common wisdom that we use, even create, others to define our own identities. Creating and defining one's own community appear to be a primary use of the other in both testaments. Without attempting to be exhaustive, we can discern such additional uses of the other as developing founding myths, refining religious belief and praxis, clarifying uniqueness, guarding boundaries and keeping insiders in line, establishing power (or the appearance of power), and justifying conquest and violence.

Ironically, one aspect of Israel's identity-building is the perception of itself as other. Harvard's Peter Machinist studied six groups of written sources for the Hebrew Bible and concluded that all six saw the Israelites as outsiders coming into Palestine from Egypt—in spite of their father Abraham's alleged earlier residence in the promised land. (He mentions 1 Chronicles 1-9 as a possible exception.) Machinist offers two reasons for this positing of the self as other: (1) the homeland "had to *become* Israel" and the community had to be able to exist away from it, and (2) a clear distinction had to be drawn between the Israelites and Palestine's other residents, in order to show the former to be free of contamination. According to Machinist, the sharp distinctions drawn in the narratives may be evidence of actual haziness in the cultural boundaries between Israel and its neighbors.[3] The entry-into-Canaan stories serve as a basis for the Israelites' identity and were later used by Amos to warn the people that they could again become marginalized.[4]

Just as the entry-into-Canaan stories help establish the Israelites' identity and

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[2] Maurice Borrmans, "Pluralism and its Limits in the Qur'an and the Bible," *Islamochristiana* 17 (1991): 5.

[3] Adds Machinist, "Indeed, we may say that the sharpness was there precisely to make sense of reality—to affirm an 'us' whose existence its members (at least those involved with the stories) felt was threatened, and that they may well have been hard put to distinguish from a host of 'others.'" See Peter Machinist, "Outsiders or Insiders: The Biblical View of Emergent Israel and Its Contexts," *The Other in Jewish Thought and History*, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (New York: New York University, 1994), 51.

[4] *Ibid.*, 52.

legitimacy, so too do Paul's arguments about righteousness through faith vs. righteousness through circumcision in Romans 4. In the former case, the non-Jewish Canaanites are the necessary other. In the latter, those descended from Abraham through law only (i.e., circumcision) are other over against those Jews and Gentiles who inherit the promise through faith. "For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham...." (Rom 4:16).

In the case of both the Jews in Israelite history and the followers of Jesus in Christian scriptures the founding myths that help to create identity include others in the drama. Even before the Canaanites and Philistines, Hebrew scripture puts Pharaoh and the Egyptians in that role during the plagues and deliverance of the Exodus.

John's Gospel further defines the Christian community over against its Jewish parent by recasting Jewish cultic life throughout, a literary strategy that requires making the Jew faithful to Jewish praxis a lesser other. For example, the water of the purification jars is inferior to the wine Jesus creates at the Cana wedding in John 2. In John 6 the bread of life Jesus gives for eternal life is superior to the manna Moses gave the Jews in the wilderness (6:31-33). A similar strategy in Matthew portrays Jesus as superior to Moses, both through the birth narrative and through Jesus' continual reinterpretation of the law, as in the Sermon on the Mount.

The founding stories that create religious communities in both testaments often serve the additional function of refining belief and praxis for the authors' communities. By repeatedly demonstrating Yahweh's power over Pharaoh and his magicians and gods, Exodus dramatizes the Hebrew people's gradual commitment to the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 1 Kings 18 portrays the priests of Baal as pathetic other in order to underscore by contrast the validity and power of Elijah's God and to inspire undivided devotion in those receiving the text. Similarly, the reinterpreted law in Matthew helps define for the community how they are to be obedient to God's will.

Creating and defining one's own community appear to be a primary use of the other in scripture.

Yet another use of the other is to guard the boundaries of the community and to keep the insiders in line. Several narratives in Hebrew tradition underscore the prohibition on intermarriage with Gentile others,[5] and the Leviticus Holiness Code provides detailed prescriptions for maintaining ritual purity. Although Paul and the Gospel writers in varying degrees criticize obsession with ritual purity, they nevertheless maintain concern for ethical limits. In 1 Corinthians 5-6 and Galatians 5:19-21, Paul demonstrates his opposition to immorality within the body of Christ. And in passages such as 8:9-24, 13:6-12, and 19:18-19 the author of Acts excludes magic from the range of acceptable Christian practice.

Biblical narratives also manipulate the other to establish power (or the appearance of power). An intriguing study of the Phi-

[5] Robert L. Cohn, "Before Israel: The Canaanites as Other in Biblical Tradition," in *The Other in Jewish Thought*, 80-82.

listine as other contrasts the very negative literary portrayal of this group in such books as 1-2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles with the archaeological record of an impressive Philistine culture as it actually existed, with metal industry, well-planned cities, and trade networks. In Hebrew scripture the uncircumcised Philistines are almost non-human (Goliath) and sexually seductive (the Samson cycle), and their gods are ridiculed. The Israelites' inferior technological and mercantile status may have necessitated narrative demonstration of Yahweh's power and Israel's spiritual superiority.[6]

The book of Revelation illustrates manipulation of the other for rhetorical creation of both political and religious power. The vision of God's heavenly throne and court in Revelation 4 features dazzling images of jewels, creatures, thunder and lightening, torches, and elders whose hymns to God in 4:8 and 4:11 mimic the hymns of praise for the Roman emperor. The implicit other is the pagan empire (with its priests) that both holds political control and condemns and persecutes the minority Christians for their refusal to participate in the official emperor cult.

Finally, scriptural portrayal of the other can serve to justify conquest and violence. The stereotyped portrayal of Canaanites' sexual and religious depravity creates "a moral justification for the conquest of their land by a just deity."[7] In Revelation Christians suffering at the hands of the new Babylon, Rome, and powerless to overthrow it can celebrate Rome's destruction in the seer's vivid cycle of visions.

Ambiguity and ambivalence toward the other

Even with a clear-cut enemy in sight, biblical narratives reveal ambivalence and ambiguity in the portrayal of the other. One example is the mixed picture of the Canaanites, for a time the problematic "nearest Other" for the Israelites. Robert Cohn describes a largely positive portrayal in Genesis that becomes quite negative in Joshua and Judges. The depiction varies according to which founding myth the Canaanites are featured in: the ancestor story or the conquest story.[8] Cohn further argues that as the Canaanites were for the Israelites, so the Jews were for the early Christians: the "Other 'before'" and the "Other' within.'" Cohn summarizes: "On the one hand, the Church claimed to displace and supersede the old Israel whose legalism and hypocrisy God abhorred. On the other hand, the survival of the Jews witnessed to the incompleteness of the Church's triumph and tempted good Christians to 'judaize.'" Both the Canaanites and the Jews remain "the object of polemical attack."[9]

Without a careful study of the Jews as other in the work of each major New Testament writer, I am uncomfortable with Cohn's slick analogy. But I believe his study of the Canaanites in Hebrew narrative illustrates two important concepts: (1) the challenge of what Jonathan Z. Smith calls the "proximate other"[10] and (2) the fluidity and relativity of the other.[11] On the first of these,

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[6] Trude Dothan and Robert L. Cohn, "The Philistine as Other: Biblical Rhetoric and Archaeological Reality," *The Other in Jewish Thought*, 61-73.

[7] Cohn, "Before Israel," 76.

[8] Cohn, 75.

[9] Cohn, 77.

[10] Jonathan Z. Smith, "What a Difference a Difference Makes," *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity*, ed. J. Neusner and E. S. Frerichs (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 15.

[11] The latter is a phenomenon Walter Capps alluded to during a November 1995 planning meeting for the August 1996 Convocation of Teaching Theologians.

Smith draws upon biological examples to assert that otherness involves interaction and "is a matter of relative rather than absolute difference." Often the sharpest distinctions are made between "near neighbors."[12] Jacob Neusner reports that the early Jewish rabbis had no "single criterion for otherness." The Gentiles were the obvious other, but they "play no role in the system." The others that are worth worrying about are the Israelite heretics, Samaritans, Israelites who fail to obey the law, and even women, who seem "abnormal" to the male writers.[13]

As for fluidity and relativity, such can occur with regard to both the self and the posited other. Already we have seen Israel itself portrayed as both stranger and host in the Hebrew Bible.[14] And we have observed fluidity in the portrayal of Canaanites as other in Hebrew narrative and similarly of the Jews in Christian texts. It is especially when the self is in transition or in a new context that we humans redefine old others and find new ones. This phenomenon was especially clear to me one sunny fall morning in Sana'a, Yemen. Northern Yemen is the most gender-segregated environment I have ever experienced. Even after two months I was not adapted to being nearly the only female out on the city streets. Our Yemeni male friends from the university community had become wonderful and comfortable friends. But to the Yemeni male crowds on the streets I was a rare oddity: a western woman, unveiled, and boldly walking in their midst. One morning on a long trek home I had had my usual dose of stares and mild verbal harassment. Suddenly crossing a side street I encountered an African man in his 40s or 50s. He beamed and said to me in English: "Hello, are you Italian? I speak Italian but no English." He turned out to be a Somali from Mogadishu, and despite his limited English we had a warm and relaxed conversation before resuming our journeys in opposite directions. In the context of northern Yemen, this black African male and I had formed a small community of shared western culture—while we were both certainly other to the native Yemenis.

An interim assessment of the survey's implications

This partial survey of the other in biblical perspective is not entirely unfavorable from the point of view of modern concerns about pluralism. Many of the groups depicted as hostile other no longer exist, and their literary portrayal has served the positive purposes of forming identity and community for the emerging Israelite people and the nascent Christian church. Yet the stakes are high when such portrayal is extracted from its narrative context and employed for more sinister ends. Frank Sherman of the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding at Muhlenberg College explains how Luther used Hebrew prophetic self-criticism to "condemn the Jews of his own day," while at the same time reading Christians, not Jews, as the proper recipients of prophetic words about the mercy of God.[15] Studies by

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[12] Smith, "What a Difference," 15.

[13] Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs, "Preface," *To See Ourselves*, xii.

[14] See Paula M. Cooey, "Emptiness, Otherness, and Identity: A Feminist Perspective," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6 (Fall 1990): 20, n. 18.

[15] Franklin Sherman, "Luther and Lutheranism on the Jews and Judaism," *Interfaith Focus* 2/1 (1995) (New York: Anti-Defamation League), 13-14. For a helpful analysis of recent Roman Catholic and Protestant documents treating the relationships between Judaism and Christianity, see Jay T. Rock, "*Nostra Aetate* and Its Younger Protestant and Ecumenical Siblings," *Ecumenical Trends* 25/3 (March 1996):10-13.

such scholars as Uriel Tal and Susannah Heschel have reported the malignant use by both Second and Third Reichs of scriptural polemic and New Testament scholarship. Between 1939 and 1945 the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Religious Life at Eisenach worked to create a "de-Judaized Christianity," and university theology departments such as that at Jena were co-opted. In a purged German New Testament version Jesus' Jewish heritage and practice were eliminated, and "Salvation comes from the Jews" (John 4:22) was re-translated to become the famous slogan "The Jews are our misfortune."[16]

One of the few positive results of the Holocaust has been the serious reconsideration of both Hebrew and Christian scriptures, a reconsideration that has helped us distinguish between religious polemic and ethnic and racial stereotyping. But what happens when such passages as the woes to the Pharisees in Matthew 23 and Jesus' slur at the Jews, "you are from your father the devil" in John 8:44, are taken out of the realm of scholarly discourse and out of their literary and historical contexts and read in churches on Sunday morning?[17] I fear the listeners may be even further encouraged to demonize those perceived as hostile others in our time and to become comfortable operating with stereotypes like "Islamic fundamentalist terrorist" or "young black male criminal." The rhetorical vilification of the other certainly fueled hatred and aggression on both sides during the Gulf crisis. How far did the bogus stories of Iraqi invaders stealing incubators from Kuwaiti infants go toward firing the "smart" bombs that injured and killed thousands of Iraqis? Reflecting on Walter Wink's analysis of the role of religion in violence, Paul Sponheim offers that what we need is conversation with the other—and a hesitation to "start with the assumption that the other is enemy."[18] Of course it is important to acknowledge that real enemies and real evil do exist. The ELCA social statement, *For Peace in God's World*, advocates both reliance on nonviolent responses and the use of force when "helping the neighbor in need" requires "protecting innocent people from injustice and aggression."[19]

Such cases aside, all of my recent life experience—family, church, teaching, research, interfaith dialogue, global living—impels me to have a dialogic posture toward the other within and the other without. And let me be clear that I do not have in mind an uncommitted relativist posture. My fifteen years of dialogue with Jews and Muslims has at once strengthened my articulation of my particular Christian convictions and en-

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[16] Susannah Heschel, "Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life," *Church History* 63 (December 1994) 589, 593, 595, 597. See also Heschel's "Original Shame and Naive Optimism: The Politics of Jewish-Christian Relations," *Ecumenical Trends* 25/3 (March 1996) 1-9; and Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics, and Ideology in the Second Reich, 1870-1914*, trans. Noah Jonathan Jacobs (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1975). Heschel also has an essay in the Summer 1996 *dialog*, an issue with numerous articles on the theme "Luther, Lutherans, and Jews."

[17] In a letter of June 17, 1996, Margaret Odell (St. Olaf College) pointed out the importance of educating people in the parish about the contributions of historical research in helping us understand that the Jewish people and leaders of the gospel narratives are the "proximate" others (to use Jonathan Z. Smith's term) of early Christians.

[18] "'The Other is Given': Religion, War, and Peace," *Word & World* 15/4 (Fall 1995), 435-6.

[19] *For Peace in God's World*, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Sept. 1995, 11.

larged my respect for the deeply faithful relationship with God exercised by my Jewish and Muslim conversation partners. I have found justification for constructive dialogue with the religious and cultural other "in the world." Now the challenge is to find warrant and even guidance for such a posture in the biblical text, which at first look seems overwhelmingly exclusivist, both in discursive statements and in narrative.

Biblical models for constructive engagement

An important biblical world view is unfolded for us in the Genesis creation accounts. Paul Sponheim reminds us that there the "'other' is given," and that the "Genesis witness calls for us to recognize that we are created *with* the 'other,' and that this is part of what is 'good, very good.'"[20] Although the subsequent historical accounts contain a profusion of negative others, we need also to remember that the Hebrew prophetic tradition claims that God's sovereignty and God's concern extend to all the nations of the earth.[21] A series of prescriptive statements brings this macro concern down to the micro level. Deuteronomy's "love the stranger" (10:19) has already been noted. God's people are commanded to love both the Israelite neighbor (Lev 19:18) and the resident alien "as yourself" (Lev 19:34). The prevailing interpretation (in Jewish tradition and in Christian exegesis) of the Hebrew word for "neighbor" in Leviticus 19:18 has been one among the people of Israel, and thus not an "other" in the sense of this essay. However, Marc Gopin of George Mason University argues that some rabbinical commentaries read the "neighbor" as meaning all humans, not just fellow Jews.[22] This view is further supported by Reuven Hammer's midrash commentary.

Hebrew prophetic tradition claims that God's sovereignty and concern extend to all the nations of the earth.

After quoting Rabbi Akiba's observation that "love your neighbor as yourself" is "the great principle of the Torah," Hammer observes that Ben Azzai cites Gen 5:1 to interpret Lev 19:18 in a universal human sense.[23] All three synoptic gospels report Jesus' reiteration of the command to love God and love the neighbor, and the Samaritan parable of Luke 10 leaves little doubt about the universal scope of the term "neighbor." Paul also argues that the "whole law is summed up" in the single command to love the neighbor (Gal 5:14).

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[20] "The 'Other' Is Given," *dialog* 30 (Winter 1990): 9, 11.

[21] S. Wesley Ariarajah, *The Bible and People of Other Faiths* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 7-9.

[22] Marc Gopin, of George Mason University, speaking on "God and War in the Hebrew Bible" at SBL, 21 November 1995, Philadelphia.

[23] Hammer concludes that Ben Azzai is warning against an overly narrow reading: "Who is meant by 'neighbor'? This term is usually interpreted to indicate a member of the people of Israel. The verse he chooses, therefore, teaches that the Torah is concerned with all human beings, since it tells the story of the descendants of Adam, the father of all." See *The Classic Midrash: Tannaitic Commentaries on the Bible* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 439-40.



Even if Christians are clearly called to love the neighbor who is other, does that mean we also have to talk civilly with the other face to face? 1 Peter counsels, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (3:15b-16a).

To what extent is the biblical Jesus a model for dialogue? In all four Gospels we can find examples of Jesus as a skillful debate opponent, raising the stakes and rhetorically scoring against his Jewish critics. But it is helpful to remember John 4. The Samaritan woman Jesus addresses is other in terms of gender, ethnic identity, cultic praxis, and personal moral history. Yet their interchange is a model for inter-religious dialogue, as well as for evangelism. Both Jesus and the woman use first person plural pronouns, as if they are representing their two faith groups (see 4:9,12,19-22,25). Both acknowledge their differences, a step necessary, according to Martin Buber, for an I-Thou encounter.[24] Jesus' treatment of the woman demonstrates approaches that help prevent unfair conclusions about the other: knowledge of the other, listening, and openness to correcting prior assumptions.

Before going further, we must concede that in several key ways this episode is not parallel to modern interfaith dialogue. First, Jesus (as Messiah and God) and the woman are not equal in status, as we try to be in interfaith conversation. Second, Jesus brings actual revelation to the Samaritan woman, not just explanation of his religious perspective. Third, Jesus' goal is conversion, and even commission for evangelism, rather than simply dialogue leading to mutual understanding. Yet Jesus' posture is both respectful and dialogical and thus a valid model for meeting the other face to face.

A second model for dealing with the other is Paul, both the character Paul in Acts and Paul the author of letters. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 Paul pledges to adapt his approach to others for the sake of the gospel and of service. Paul's speeches in Acts exemplify the importance of authentic knowledge of the other and the value of finding common language and images for

[24] Relevant is this summary of Buber's thought by Edward K. Kaplan: "The unity of dialogue emerges from an experienced 'tension of the contradiction,' not as a denial of it; the tension of essential otherness, as it is confronted radically, is overcome, if only for a moment. Briefly put, people can relate authentically only as individuals in the shared distance between self and other. Buber usually characterizes 'unity' as the 'betweenness' which both transcends and affirms distance." See "Martin Buber and the Drama of Otherness: The Dynamics of Love, Art, and Faith," *Judaism* 27 (Spring 1978): 197.

the conversation, for example as he adapts style and vocabulary for Judaean and Hellenistic Gentiles.[25]

Encounters with others were not always peaceful for either the Paul of Acts or the Paul of the epistles, and the letter to the Galatians demonstrates Paul's ability to move from dialogue to rather savage satire and criticism. But for guidance on dealing with the other as enemy, there is Paul's counsel to avoid retaliation and vengeance, to feed one's enemies, and to "overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:17-21).

Problems and benefits of reading with others

In this survey of biblical models for constructive engagement of the other I have not forgotten about the other within. We shall return to that topic later. But at this point I want to suggest that our situation, like that of the first century Christian writers, demands not only that we read the Bible, but that we read the Bible with others and that we read the Bible while also reading the world. I have borrowed the phrase "reading the world" from an excellent little book by Stephen Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, both at Loyola College, Baltimore. The title is *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life*. Their opening axiom is that "the vocation of Christians is to *embody* Scripture in the various contexts in which they find themselves."[26] Their chief example is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who not only read Scripture, but read the situation of the world and attempted to discern God's reality, manifest in Christ in the world.[27]

Paul also read the world when he took account of the secular context to counsel the Corinthians about the practical implications of life in Christ. The author of Revelation certainly read the world to recast Daniel-like visions into images of hope for Christians persecuted in the late first century. These authors' reading of the world influenced their writing, as it does our reading—and our writing of biblical exegesis and theology and ethics. In an eloquent testimonial to the discernment of God in the world, Murray Haar wrote in a 1992 *Christian Century* essay, "To fail to question God after Auschwitz is blasphemy."[28] The realities of the Holocaust, of current ethnic warfare, of economic structures that ensure the existence of a permanent underclass, demand that the world be present as other not only in our theological questioning, but in our Bible reading as well.

Part of the world's reality that we share with the first century Christian writers is religious and ideological pluralism. This is

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[25] In Acts 21:40–22:22 numerous details reveal Paul's awareness of the "other" in his Jerusalem audience and his strategies for bridging gaps. He speaks in "Hebrew," in fact in Aramaic (21:40). He refers to his own Jewish upbringing and persecution of the Way (22:3-5). He borrows vocabulary from the prophet Isaiah to talk about God and the messiah (22:14-15). Similarly in Acts 26:1-32 Paul's words indicate his sensitivity to both the Jewish heritage and the Hellenistic education of King Agrippa. In Acts 17, when he addresses the people of Athens, Paul chooses images understandable to monotheistically inclined Greeks. Apparently his approach in this Hellenistic context was at least somewhat effective. In Ephesus he spent three months in the synagogue and then two years in a lecture hall "arguing"—or "discussing" (Greek *dialegomenos* in 19:8-9)—with mixed results. But "all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word [*logos*] of the Lord" (19:10).

[26] Stephen L. Fowl and Gregory L. Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 1.

[27] *Ibid.*, 149-56.

[28] Murray Joseph Haar, "In the Enemy's Camp: A Convert's Sadness," *Christian Century* (April 15, 1992), 391.

not the time for a systematic treatment of religious pluralism, but it is important to note that the situation is somewhat different for us. At the time of Christianity's origins religious cults were informal and often geographically limited. According to Wayne Meeks, the categories of "religion" and "race" were not yet in common use.[29] Robert Wilken's work suggests that religious pluralism became a topic of debate only after Christianity, with growing success, made particular claims about Christ and about Israel grounded in Scripture.[30] Nevertheless, in spite of a very different understanding of "the religions," first century Christians' reading with others obviously influenced their writing. Paul, John, and the author of Acts all exhibit textual evidence of their encounter with Hellenistic thought. And the Gospels and Paul's letters also reveal an encounter with Hebrew scriptures and the Greek Septuagint—texts these authors were reading alongside readings by non-messianic Jews.

The component of "reading the world" is a topic for another essay, but "reading with others" is especially germane for the current discussion. Among the others to whom we can attend are marginal voices within the biblical text, Christians who read from other contexts, scholarly others, and non-Christian others.

Readers who are culturally other have surely helped me hear marginalized voices in the text. Since 1991 I have been reading and reading about Luke 15 and Jesus' three parables of the lost. Following the lead of Kenneth Bailey in *Poet and Peasant*, I conducted extensive individual interviews with five Arab Christian women living in the United States. Two were Maronite, raised in Lebanese villages, and three were Coptic orthodox from Egyptian villages. Their observations, coming out of a childhood context much closer than ours to the cultural world mirrored in Luke's story world, provided insights I found nowhere else, despite reading most of recent western scholarship on the text. From them I believe I learned to hear the voice of the woman seeking the lost coin, who need not be seen as a lowly housekeeper, but rather as someone entrusted with the family savings and who, like God, has the power to seek the lost and restore wholeness and order.[31]

Scholarly others for me are especially those who read with different interpretive strategies and/or from different cultural contexts. Of course my reading of a given biblical passage is enormously enlivened by the work of fellow European-American Christians, such as David Tiede or Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, who use many of the same methods as I. But my reading experience is also richer because I have discovered the work of such writers as Palestinian Lutheran pastor Mitri Raheb and African-American scholar Cain Hope Felder.

Reading with other biblical scholars presents one set of challenges. Even more complicated are the opportunity and challenge of reading with religious others. Because Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have in common a monotheism (albeit differently defined) based in sacred texts, these three groups are a logical starting point for attempting to read others' scriptures and to read our scriptures with others. In my fifteen years' worth of formal and informal interfaith conversation with Jews and Mus-

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[29] Meeks, "Breaking Away: Three New Testament Pictures of Christianity's Separation from the Jewish communities," *To See Ourselves*, 95-96.

[30] Robert L. Wilken, "Religious Pluralism and Early Christian Thought," *Pro Ecclesia* 1 (Fall 1992): 80-103.

[31] Much of what I learned from the women is reported in my article, "Rediscovering the Lost Women in Luke 15," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24 (Summer 1994): 66-76.

lims, I have discovered a number of reasons for cautions about such reading. First, theological language does not often transfer easily, even from one Abrahamic tradition to another.[32] A second obstacle to reading with interfaith others is the reality of very different theologies of revelation and scripture, for example, when comparing Christianity and Islam. Many Muslims show no interest in either interfaith dialogue or reading the Bible, since they believe they already have all the truth in the Qur'an.[33] A particular barrier with Muslims is the concept of *tahrif*, human alteration of the original revelation. Such biblically-based beliefs as Jesus' divinity, the Trinity, and the reality of the crucifixion and resurrection are considered human distortions of the prophetic message the historical Jesus brought from God.[34] Although Muslims avoid relying on the Bible for legal and theological questions, as early as the 8th century Muslim scholars used biblical narrative material to supplement that in the Qur'an;[35] and in my experience Muslims are very interested in biblical accounts of the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets.

Once dialogue partners have shared their varying understandings of how the Word of God is communicated to humans, there remains the matter of differing hermeneutical principles and approaches. Jane McAuliffe's excellent study of the history of Qur'anic exegesis demonstrates the different underlying assumptions and methods used by Qur'anic exegetes in comparison with biblical scholars.[36] In addition, text selection is a hermeneutical issue that affects all scripture interpretation, even within one religious tradition. How valid, for example, is an account of Paul's theology of the law based solely on Galatians? The ability to be sufficiently comprehensive is compounded when we are reading someone else's sacred texts.[37]

This brief survey represents only a few of the difficulties of reading with religious others. But there are rewards. One has already been alluded to: reading together with Jews and Muslims encourages Christians to clarify our own understanding of the Christian Bible and its place among other scriptures. With regard to specific texts, reading with others can enhance our

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[32] David Carpenter warns about the pitfalls of assuming fixed definitions of theological terms with dialogue partners in "Revelation in Comparative Perspective: Lessons for Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29/2 (Spring 1992):175.

[33] Colin Chapman, "Rethinking the Gospel for Muslims," *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*, ed. J. Dudley Woodberry (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1989), 111. Two recent essays give insights into the particular demands of Christian-Muslim conversation: Sulayman S. Nyang, "Challenges Facing Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the United States," 328-41 (especially 335-39), and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Comments on a Few Theological Issues in Islamic-Christian Dialogue," 457-67, in *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, ed. Haddad and Haddad. Nasr discusses 1) ways God is manifest, 2) claims of finality, 3) sacred scripture, 4) sacred language, 5) sacred law, 6) the life of Christ, especially the crucifixion, and 7) dealing with modernism and postmodernism.

[34] For more information, see Stuart Brown, trans., *The Challenge of the Scriptures: the Bible and the Qur'an* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 76-86; also, William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 30-33.

[35] Andrew Rippin, "Interpreting the Bible through the Qur'an," *Approaches to the Qur'an*, ed. G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (New York: Routledge, 1993), 252-53.

[36] *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (New York: Cambridge, 1991), 13-29.

[37] One provocative example of interfaith scripture reading is Jon Levenson's *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*. This

encounter with God's word. One year the Egyptian Muslim in my New Testament survey class contributed a number of fresh observations on the question of Jesus' own sense of his identity and mission. He noticed in the synoptic Gospel accounts narrative details passed over by readers who had grown up assuming lifelong messianic consciousness on Jesus' part. My own interpretation of God's law in the Christian New Testament has been enriched by Jewish and Muslim positive understandings of law—understandings that can amend the sometimes overly dichotomous aspects of Lutheran thinking.

Finally, reading with Jewish and Muslim others has reminded me that sacred texts are not only about theological meaning and competing truth claims. Scripture has multiple uses. It supplies the words for worship, from the Islamic *salat* (ritual prayer), to the monastic divine office, to the Lutheran liturgy of the Lord's Supper. And while I agree that the Bible is not an easy-to-follow ethical rule book, I also agree with Fowl and Jones that the Bible is a source for "who God is and how we ought to love in relation to that God."[38] Finally, my recent study of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman in John 4 has reminded me that the spoken Word in the time of Christian beginnings—and still today—has the power not only to evoke cognitive belief, but to transform lives.

The ELCA and the other within

Thus far this study has surveyed a variety of examples of the other in biblical perspective, examples that demonstrate both positive and negative postures toward the other. Also considered have been the problems and benefits of reading the Bible together with such others as Christians from diverse cultures, scholarly others, and non-Christian others. The final topic is dealing with the other within the ELCA. A series of phenomena, even well before the rancorous debates about human sexuality, have made diversity within the ELCA more apparent. The 1987 merger was a merger not just of several Lutheran bodies but also of groups of Lutherans with strong ethnic identities. But the ELCA has also brought in many cultural others who do not share northern European roots, others with their own rich cultural and religious traditions.[39] Even without theological and ideological differences we should have expected to be feeling the type of growing pains that appear to have marked the church communities reflected in Paul's letters and in Luke-Acts.

Apart from the issue of Acts' historicity, it is instructive to see the strategies used by church leaders in Acts 15 to deal with the crisis over inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles. First the apostles and elders allowed "much debate" (Greek *zetesis*, 15:7). Then those assembled considered relevant information from the "world" of recent experience: Peter's testimony about the Holy

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study of Christian appropriation of the Genesis Isaac sacrifice tradition is a contribution to interfaith covenant theology that could be further advanced by including even later appropriation of this tradition in Islam. See *dialog* 34 (Winter 1995) for a number of review essays and Levenson's response.

[38] Fowl and Jones, 20.

[39] Relevant here are Pat Keifert's reflections on the multicultural church in "The Other: Hospitality to the Stranger, Levinas, and Multicultural Mission," *dialog* 30 (Winter 1991): 41-43. It should be noted that Lutherans with ethnic ties other than northern European appeared well-represented at the 1995 churchwide assembly. The ELCA has an active Commission for Multicultural Ministries and support organizations for Lutherans of African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, and Middle Eastern backgrounds.

Spirit's intervention in the household of Cornelius (vv. 7-11) and empirical evidence of the mission success of Paul and Barnabas (v. 12). Next James cited scripture: the prophets' foretelling of the inclusion of Gentiles in Amos 9, Jeremiah 12, and Isaiah 45 (vv. 13-17). James proposed a compromise (vv. 19-21), and the assembled "reached the decision." Finally there is consensus and implementation of the compromise agreement (vv. 22-29).

To deal with the other within the ELCA we may need to reread the biblical witness and also to develop a theology of internal difference. A hermeneutics of dialogue[40] could enable individual Christians to be faithful to their commitments to God and church, truly to hear the other, and to be open to the kind of "mutual transformation" David Tracy says is possible in "every authentic conversation."[41]

Concluding reflections

Examples of destructive dynamics can be located in biblical treatments of the other, along with models for positive interaction. Conceding that the Bible presents Christians with warrants for both negative and positive treatment of the other, how do we adjudicate among the myriad pieces of relevant scriptural material? To begin to answer that question and to conclude this study, I offer two insights that may contribute to a biblically-based hermeneutics of otherness. The first is that when we find ourselves face to face with the other, whether within or without, we need to develop the humility that comes from remembering God's otherness. Paul Sponheim uses Isaiah 55:8 to remind us that God's thoughts and ways are not our thoughts and ways and that in the tendency toward authoritarianism some "spokespersons for the Christian religion seem to forget that they do not possess God, that their treasure is had in earthen vessels."[42] Paula Cooey observes that God's "radical otherness" is a notion shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Remembering that "God as other is always more than" our own images and concepts for God can keep us humble in our conversations, especially with religious others.[43] In an eloquent exploration of Christianity's role in the West, Wolfhart Pannenberg concludes, "Intolerant dogmatism was probably the most disastrous sin of traditional Christianity from the early centuries up to the beginnings of modern times." Especially pertinent for the present discussion is his reminder that "While God's revelation is absolute truth, our understanding of it, also as reflected in ecclesiastical teaching, remains provisional and partial."[44]

My second hermeneutical insight comes in response to the Bible's apparent ambiguity toward the other, in view of the narrative evidence for both destructive and constructive postures. For me the biblical bottom line is the command to love God and love the neighbor. To love God with all one's heart and mind and soul means that "truth matters" and that speaking truth to the other matters.[45] I am willing to assume

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[40] John B. Cobb, Jr., makes a beginning in "Being a Transformationist in a Pluralistic World," *Christian Century* (April 10-17, 1994) 750.

[41] David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 93.

[42] Cf. *dialog* 30 (Winter 1991): 13, 16.

[43] Paula Cooey, "Emptiness, Otherness, and Identity," 15-16.

[44] Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Christianity and the West: Ambiguous Past, Uncertain Future," *First Things* 48 (December 1994): 19.

[45] Language borrowed from Paul Sponheim in "The Truth Will Make You Free," *Lutherans and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism*, ed. Klos, Nakamura, Martensen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 139-73.

that those who arrogantly denounce their ideological opponents in the ELCA are motivated by their love of God. And by the way, I have heard arrogant stereotyping of the other from both advocates and opponents of gay and lesbian rights, from both defenders and critics of the coherence of capitalism with gospel values, and from both "liberals" and "conservatives."[46]

But love of God above all other commitments demands not only that we speak prophetically what we perceive to be the truth. That love also demands that we obey God by loving the other. God's will for creation is shalom: harmony and wholeness that need not always mean uniformity of thought. Perhaps God's foreknowledge of the human capacity for unloving rhetoric motivated God's commandment in Exodus 20:16 against bearing false witness against the neighbor. Good counsel for the ELCA today is Luther's explanation in the Small Catechism that the eighth commandment means we must interpret charitably what the neighbor does. In addition to the double love command of both testaments and the Exodus prohibition of bearing false witness, we have Paul's counsel in Gal 5:6 that what counts is "faith working through love." Paul's love for the other within is exemplified by his advice concerning meat sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, where he articulates the very complex balancing act between the exercise of Christian freedom and the care not to be for another "a cause of falling" (1 Cor 8:13).

My final biblical example is again from Luke 15, where the prodigal's angry older brother has been variously characterized as representing Jesus' critics, those grumbling Pharisees and scribes in Luke's literary frame for the parable in 15:1-2;[47] the "lost" Israel who will not be found at the messianic banquet;[48] or the Pharisees whose "Pharisaism is rejected... but who are still understood as belonging to the people of God."[49] Echoing the latter view, Heikki Raisanen suggests the possibility that the older brother is "an insider, though one that presents problems." He could stand for Christian Jews, such as the converted Pharisees in Acts, who have difficulty accepting the converted Gentiles.[50] In that interpretation the older brother, although he needs to learn to forgive and accept his younger brother, is still "always with the father." When we are tempted not to listen to the other and even to treat the other within as an outsider, we need to remember that in Luke 15 the father's unconditional love and his openness to dialogue remain extended to both sons.

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[46] Especially helpful here are Walter Brueggemann's reflections on how the biblical witness undercuts the popular dichotomy between evangelism and social action and discourages such "ideological labelling language" as liberal and conservative. See *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 43-44.

[47] See for example, David P. Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet: The Literary and Theological Significance of the Lukan Travel Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 159; and Jack T. Sanders, "Tradition and Redaction in Luke XV.11-32," *New Testament Studies* 15 (1968): 438.

[48] John A. Darr, *On Building Character: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 108-110.

[49] Charles Carlston, "Reminiscence and Redaction in Luke 15:11-32," *JBL* 94 (1975): 390.

[50] "The Prodigal Gentile and His Jewish Christian Brother, Lk 15, 11-32," *The Four Gospels; Festschrift Frans Neirynck* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 1622-24. Raisenan adds, "It is difficult to maintain a one-to-one correspondence between a group in Luke's textual world and some real-world group of his time." Like the lost son, the older son is an "oscillating figure" (f.n. 59, p. 1625).

Response to Carol LaHurd

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My parents, who came to this country in 1948 after surviving the Nazi madness, brought me up with two contradictory messages: "Be a good Jew" and "Be a good American." For the last twenty five years I have lived among Lutherans as a Lutheran and yet I have always felt like and been "the other." What a strange phrase, "the other." What makes "the other" other?

I first remember hearing about "the other" when I was six years old. My family sat at the Passover seder as my father repeated the ancient words: "*Avodim hawyeenuL'PhaarowB'Mitzraim....*" Pharaoh was "the other." He was the one who had enslaved the Jewish people. He was opposed to God and was thereby evil. But God had been victorious over him. We children were told that Pharaoh and his army had been drowned. God had delivered Israel from bondage. Had God not destroyed "the other," my father said, then we and our children and our children's children would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. At the seder table we read through the ten plagues which God had imposed upon Egypt. My father would mournfully go through the list: *Dom, Zifardaya, Kinim, Arov, Dever, Shecheen, choshech.... Makos Bechoroth.* The list always ended with the killing of the first born. God through an emissary had killed all the first born children of "the other." During the seder my father stopped at this point to remind us that Jews do not celebrate the death of our enemies. He reminded us that every death leaves a blemish on God's memory.

As I read Carol's paper I wanted to agree with her and to believe that religion and dialogue can go together, but, alas, I come away unsure that they can or that they even ought to. Why?

In a recent issue of the journal *Commentary*, leaders and scholars within the Jewish community were asked to comment on the topic: "What Do American Jews Believe?" One of the responders noted that American Jews disagree on almost all issues save one: "They do not believe in Jesus as the Messiah." On this question there is no debate. There is no desire to debate, discuss, or dialogue about the legitimacy of Jesus as the messiah. But can't we have a "civil" discussion about Jesus? No. The issue is closed. If Jews and Christians sit down to talk, they may converse about all sorts of issues of common concern. But can they actually talk about that issue which

> The fact of the matter is that everyone is open except where they are closed.

most divides them? Are Jews ready to entertain the possibility that they have been wrong for 2000 years and that Jesus is the messiah? For that matter, are Christians ready to examine the possibility that calling Jesus "Lord" is an act of idolatry? A dialogue between "others" which avoids discussion of the core differences may be a dialogue which advances understanding and compassion. Yet such a dialogue does not get at the heart of what makes "the other" a threat. "The truly other" is a threat to the extent that "the other" calls into question that core visceral truth which binds me at the root.

The story of God and Pharaoh and the agreement of most contemporary Jews that Jesus is not the Christ are similar. Both stories have to do with communal commitments to certain truths about "the other" without which the center of that community could no longer cohere. Is the same true for Lutherans? Are there certain truths which are not debatable? Are there givens which I do not hold but which hold me within their grip? Are there certain truths which are beyond mere intellectual assent? Indeed, there are certain truths that exist in the viscera of a person which seem to be beyond debate.

I am not pleased with what I have just written. I am an American who has been trained to cherish openness, tolerance, "live and let live," and the individual right to choose the expression of religion that works for them. Like Carol, I too am not a moral absolutist. Yet I find in myself certain core beliefs which I am not interested in debating. A true dialogue is where both parties come to listen, to understand, and to risk being changed by the other. I ask myself in what areas I am willing to listen, understand, and risk being changed. There are many areas where I am quite "open." Most of these are areas where I am confused and am eager to hear discussion, believe that a legitimate diversity of opinion exists, or just don't care.

But there are those discussions in which I find I cannot participate because in my mind there is nothing to discuss. I teach a class at Augustana called "After Auschwitz: The Shoah and Christian Faith." During the final days of the semester last year, a student raised his hand, seemed quite upset, and asked why, throughout the class, we had only dealt with what the Germans had done to the Jews. What about what the Jews did that caused the Germans to exterminate them? The student asked, "What about the other side?" I heard myself trying to explain that there was no other side, that the mass extermination of a million children could not be justified. The student wanted a dialogue. He wanted to converse and he saw me as not willing to allow it. He was right. I was not interested in dialoguing about or debating this question.

At the heart of every religious tradition are certain visceral truths about which there is no other side. Religious traditions are primarily concerned about "truth" and not the toleration of a diversity of contradictory "truths." The danger of really listening to the "other" may be that you will leave your own tradition and join the other. The "other" may be thrilled at your openness and sensi-

tivity, but the tradition which you leave will usually not applaud your discovery that their tradition does not work for you. When I became a Christian my parents declared me to be dead. To this day Jewish tradition is roundly ashamed of and condemns conversion to Christianity by Jews. You can meet the other. You can understand the other. But are you willing to be viscerally changed? This is our dilemma. What do you do when your child leaves your neighborhood to visit a foreign neighborhood and discovers that he or she prefers to live there rather than with you? Are we prepared to declare a policy of "open boundaries" between religions, even the monotheistic ones? Are we ready to celebrate the possible religious conversions or syncretisms which are already occurring as a result of the freedom to religiously migrate as the individual chooses? The fact of the matter is that everyone is open except where they are closed.

There is no real discussion to be had about the centrality of Torah or about the divinity of Jesus. For most Jews and Christians the matter is settled. There are real and fundamental differences between the religions which all manner of conversation, tolerance, and good will cannot ameliorate. We may choose to emphasize those things which unite us as opposed to those that divide us. This is not true dialogue but an evasion of it.

A final word about Pharaoh: Speaking of Pharaoh is a witness to the power of memory. Jews are who they are in part because they remember that God rescued them from the power of Pharaoh. Jews do not celebrate his death, but they understand the justice of it. Varying communities of Lutherans have memories, 500 years worth. Which memories and stories do they keep telling and which do they put aside as not essential? Modern Israel made peace with Egypt because memory is important but it is not all there is. When should memory keep us from "the other," and when should it propel us to speak to "the other?"

As regards the internal "other," it seems that Lutherans like Jews are blessed and condemned to wrestle with the question of identity. "What does it really mean to be Lutheran?" Lutherans love to argue with other Lutherans about who is really Lutheran. Over the course of a quarter of a century, I have heard Norwegian Lutherans tell me that "the church really declined when we let the Germans in." Of course other Lutherans have told me that the church has never really been right since the Swedes got in. And still others are suspicious of all these Hispanics and blacks getting in, not to mention a stray Jew here and there. And still others want to blame the "gnostic feminists" at headquarters in Chicago, or the "Shiite Lutherans" who meet at St. Olaf every summer beating themselves with the confessions, or on a still vaguer note, some scream of "the Judas within the church" that is destroying us from within. A word of caution to all Lutheran insiders: Note: There is always someone somewhere within the church who sees you as an "other" who is not "really" Lutheran. For all of our talk about grace and inclusivity we do not appear to be very gracious or inclusive.

But why all the labels for each other? Why do we hurt each other so much with our words of accusation and condemnation? Are we just being cantankerous, stubborn, or determined to act in a manner which would disappoint God? I think not. We are a community that cares about the truth of what we believe. And because we care we argue with each other. At the core of what it means to be Lutheran are these three affirmations:

We confess that:

1. At the heart of the universe there is

one who is for us and not against us.

2. Whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's.

3. The Christian has no option except to stand with those in pain.

Change without memory begets religious and moral relativism.

On these three points Lutherans would agree. The question is, How do we best affirm these three faith commitments? And what do we do when we live in a culture where people are encouraged as individuals to pick and choose how they will work out their religious commitments? And what do we do when we hear that there are many different ways to be Lutheran? And what do you do with someone like me who shows up with questions that threaten the status quo?

An example: I did my doctoral dissertation on the psalms of lament. After completing my degree, I lectured at various venues in the church. Many pastors attended my lectures, were interested, threatened, challenged, and did truly dialogue with me. They seemed to agree that the Israelites used laments to address God. They agreed that even Jesus' last words in at least two gospels was a lament. Invariably when our sessions were over I asked the pastors how many of them would now go back and add a prayer of lament to the Lutheran Sunday morning service? No one said he would. I was puzzled. We had just dialogued over this issue. Why not use it in your praying? The pastors told me again that though they found the tradition fascinating, they could not see themselves going up to the altar and raising questions and complaints before God. I even suggested giving the questions a Lutheran twist by chanting them, but still they declined. Why? They would not be changed because they could not be changed without violating something quite deep within them. They could lament to God in private, but to publicly chastise God was impossible.

One of the dilemmas for the ELCA is figuring out how to be faithful to its Lutheran tradition in America. When I first became a Christian I had a talk with the then district president of the Southeast Minnesota district of ALC, Elmo Agrimson. I told Elmo that I was not sure whether or where I belonged in this church. He said, "That's o.k., they don't know what to do with you either." I am an outsider in your midst. I am a stranger in your midst. The book of Deuteronomy commands us to "Love the stranger." But I have discovered that as a stranger I threaten people. I raise questions about the soul of the Lutheran Church after Auschwitz. I raise questions about what the connection is between justification by grace and the murder of a million and half children in the midst of Christian Europe. I raise questions about the hymns, the creeds, the liturgy, the bishops, and the way we interpret the Bible. When I speak, inevitably someone asks me, "Well, if you are so unhappy with us, why don't you leave?"

The problem for Lutherans is that now there are many of us "others" who have come into the church. We come from other traditions, Christian and non-Christian. We bring difficult questions that may open issues the church prefers not to deal with. So what does one do with the "other?" On the one hand the church may hope that these outsiders will not all be like Haar. Or the

church can try to listen to all the needs, complaints, questions and suggestions of the outsiders and allow themselves to be transformed into something which they are not. Or—and this is my suggestion—the church can remember who it is and whose it is. The *Baal Shem Tov* teaches that "in memory lies redemption." If the church will remember where it has come from, then it will not be frightened of the questions. There is more power in the questions than in the answers to those questions! If the church remembers its confessional commitments it will not cringe at the word "holocaust" but will examine its very soul to see with open eyes what went wrong in those days.

I close with three suggestions about the church and the other:

1. The church will have to listen to the other, but the other will have to listen to the church. We must teach the church not only to believe but to think the faith. Dialogue is no longer an option. It is a necessity. Dialogue is a risk. It is not merely friendly conversation or "sharing the faith." If you bother to listen to "the other" you may discover that "the other" is right and you are wrong. Am I willing to listen? Am I too scared to listen? When have I stopped listening?

2. The church must be ready to defend its memories and its stories, biblical and traditional, when they are faithful to the gospel, but also be willing to change even its most cherished beliefs when those beliefs are shown to be poisonous and contrary to the gospel. Words like "*Semper Reformanda*" and "*Sola Gratia*" are not merely patriotic slogans but a witness to the integrity and humility of the church. To remember and to reform are both inextricably wed at the heart of the church. Memory without change begets idolatry. Change without memory begets religious and moral relativism.

3. The church must know that evil is real. After Auschwitz we can no longer be naive about the capacity for evil inside the human being. Bonhoeffer came to believe that there was a time to kill "the other." Was he right? Was he wrong? Pharaoh, it turns out, is not just a metaphor. He is real. The other is not automatically to be tolerated or accommodated. Neither can the church run from the other.

"Love the stranger," says the text. The problem lies in the discernment. To which "other" shall we speak? How shall we speak to "the other?" When is it appropriate not to speak? Which "other" do we listen to? And which "other" do we not listen to? Hidden in these questions lies the future of the church. May the questions go with you and not leave you alone!

Faith and the Other: Theological Perspectives

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At the end of 20th century, it has become apparent to many that the question of the "other," "others" and the "different" is perhaps one of the most perplexing and challenging issues of our time. The reasons are many. The spread of modern communication technology, globalization of economy, migration of people from continent to continent, increased awareness and knowledge of other peoples, religions and cultures, are some factors that have transformed our world from a set of self-contained tribes and nations into a global city or international metropolis, affirming the unity and interdependency of the human race. And yet, the closer humanity's unity, the most powerfully we have come to experience its diversity. The "others"—persons of another race, another culture, another religion, another economic status, and so on—are no longer distant to us; we see them daily on television or interact with them on our computer screens, pass by them on our streets. They are our neighbors and colleagues, some of them even our spouses or part of our family. The others are among us; they are part of us, yet they remain others, often pushed to the margins. How should we relate to them? Should we celebrate their difference and support it, or should we bemoan and suppress it? Our society seems deeply perplexed by the question of the place of the "other" in our various worlds, and this perplexity frequently takes the form of polite posturing which either isolates or assimilates "the other," thereby denying real "otherness."

The seriousness of the issue is best illustrated from history in Tzvetan Todorov's book, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other.* From the days of Columbus through the conquest, the European conquerors considered the native population of Mesoamerica (Mexico and Caribbean) either as identical to themselves and therefore assimilated them or as different from themselves and therefore inherently inferior. "What is denied is the existence of human substance truly other, something capable of being not merely an imperfect state of oneself."[1] The invaders were able to do what they did because of their refusal to recognize the native populations as having the same rights as themselves but different from themselves. The conquest revealed human alterity but it led to rejection. In perceiving the other as inferior and unequal

[1]Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 42.

to themselves the invaders succeeded in bringing about much destruction and human suffering.

That the question of the "other" persists even at the end of 20th century is hardly surprising. With our increased awareness of the issues of gender, race, class, culture, and religion we have come to realize the acute dilemmas that pluralism poses for our society. Pluralism is no longer the old philosophical question about the One and Many; it has become a concrete day-to-day dilemma occasioned by the encounter of mutually conflicting worldviews and philosophies. It concerns the question of planetary human coexistence. This is clear from the fact that "pluralism," "the other," and "the different" have emerged as central categories across all the major disciplines, including theology. David Tracy, in several of his recent writings, has noted that the contemporary turn to the other in theology corresponds to the quintessential turn to the other in Postmodern thought, that seeks to account for those from other cultures and those excluded from the grand narratives of the dominant culture. This turn represents the unmasking of the social-evolutionary narrative of modernity as ultimately an implausible reading of human history together.[2]

In a similar way, in the introduction to their book *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, Rebecca Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor speak about five important "discursive shifts" in contemporary theology. By "discursive shifts" they mean "recent and persuasive changes in contemporary setting that have fundamentally altered theological discourse, that is, the way in which theologians reflect, talk and act."[3] Predictably, the shifts they identify are all related to the issue of the other: (1) the increasing rejection of the heroic ideal of "melting pot" in the United States and the emergence of the image of the "mosaic or the collage" of different faces and voices; (2) the crises related to the survival of the earth, the physical abuse of women and children, racial and sexual discrimination, and economic injustice and exploitation; (3) the emergence of Post-Modern culture that values plurality, ambiguity, fragmentation and openness over against objectivism and univocity characteristic of Modernity; (4) the emerging post-colonial sensibilities that challenge the economic, cultural, and political imperialism fostered by the Modern West; and, lastly, (5) the current turn to world religions by theologians interested in dialogue.

All these discursive shifts with regard to the "other" indicate the changes occurring all around us and how important the category of the "other" has become in theological reflection. How one should proceed to develop a proper theological understanding of the other or a "theology of otherness" is far more complex than simple identification of the issue or the issues involved. Before I proceed to offer some theological perspectives, it would be helpful, at the outset, to take note of some general theories of the other.

Some theories of the other

It hardly needs to be emphasized that the social and cultural awareness of the "other" is surely as old as humankind. All human societies through the ages have devised ways of distinguishing or counter-distinguishing themselves from surrounding

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[2] David Tracy, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity," *Theology Today* 51 (April 1994):104; and "The Hidden God: The Divine Other of Liberation," *Cross Currents*, 46 (Spring 1996): 5-16.

[3] *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 3-10.

peoples. Historians and cultural anthropologists have long recognized that the distinction essentially consists of two pairs of binary opposition: *human/not human* and *we/they*. These pairs of binary opposition are usually correlated, i.e., we = human; they = not human. Indeed the distinction between "us" and "them" is not a modern phenomenon but present in our earliest written records.[4] It is a widely established ethnographic fact that ancient tribal societies called themselves "human" and referred to others as "not human" or "monkeys, crocodiles or malign spirits."[5] Such cultural theories of the other surely do serve the purposes of self-affirmation and boundary building, but further reflection would indicate that the problem of conceiving the other is more complex than that.

The fact that peoples universally entitle or name themselves and others is an important semantic element in any theory of the other. A society's capacity to nominate others as human or nonhuman, equal or unequal, superior or inferior, is evidence of a society's sense of singularity. The language a society uses and the terminology it invents to describe and classify those besides itself, along with the social action such language entails, are primary clues to its self-understanding. Peoples designated as "them" are so often neighbors, and this highlights the component of social proximity in any society's conception of the other. Devising a notion of the other is an essential requisite to the establishment of any society and is as much a matter of imagination as of confrontation. For this reason, every culture develops constructs of the other to set itself apart, whether in terms of other worlds (divine or extraterrestrial), other eras (past or future), other languages, other cultures, etc. But when multiple groups inhabit the same or adjoining space and when they are too much alike, the specification of difference becomes an urgent necessity. Thus the most critical feature of otherness presupposes familiarity and reciprocity.

"Otherness," then is more than a descriptive category indicating social distance. It is essentially a situational or relational category. Something is "other" only with respect to something "else." When the other is absolutely different it seldom evokes much theoretical interest. Jonathan Z. Smith has shown that in anthropological studies the aboriginal Amerindian became a figure of high theoretical interest only when he was thought of as being "in-between"—neither the well-known citizen of the fabled "Indies," nor a separate species of man. Amerindian culture became a subject of intense study and speculation in the later half of the 18th century precisely to the degree that it was seen as revelatory of Europeans' own past.[6] Stated differently, the other may be perceived "like-us" or "not like-us," s/he is most problematic when s/he is "too much like-us" or when s/he claims to "be-us." "Otherness" thus becomes a matter of relative rather than absolute difference. When the other is perceived as the "proximate other," there emerges a real urgency of a "theory of the other." This is the case because "otherness" is a relativistic category in as much as it is necessarily a term of interaction. The urgency for a theory of the other is called forth not by the requirement to place the "other," but rather to situate ourselves. The difference between

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[4] Jonathan Z. Smith, "What a Difference a Difference Makes," in *To See Ourselves as Others See us: Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernst Frerichs (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 16.

[5] William Scott Green, "Otherness Within: Toward a Theory of Difference in Rabbinic Judaism," in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us*, 49-50.

[6] Smith, "What a Difference," 47.

"us" and "them" becomes not simply a matter of comparison to be noted; it is, most often, something in which one has a stake. It entails some sort of hierarchical ordering or ranking and thus the other emerges as a political category as well.

It should be further noted that characterization of others in every society is an exercise in caricature or a feat of exaggeration. After all, neighboring peoples do not establish themselves as others, nor do they call themselves monkeys or crocodiles. Rather they are so contrived by others. A society does not simply discover its others; it fabricates them by selecting, isolating, and emphasizing an aspect of another people's life and making it symbolize their difference. To evoke the significant disparity of which otherness is composed, the symbol must correspond powerfully to the naming society's own sense of distinctiveness. Symbols and perceptions of the other are not arbitrary or neutral labels. To be revealing and meaningful they must reach the inside of the culture of the people who employ it, correlate to some piece of themselves that they believe prominently displays who they are, and induce response, perhaps fear or disgust, but also perhaps envy and respect. A society's construal of the other therefore serves not only to certify divergence and discontinuity but also to reshape the naming society's picture of itself, to expose its vulnerability and provoke reflection of the reality of otherness within. Caricaturing others as crocodiles implies an awareness that "we were, or could have been, or might yet be crocodiles too."[7]

These general observations drawn from social and cultural anthropology suggest that theories of the other serve not merely to erect and guard cultural boundaries and maintain social distance (to keep the "crocodiles" out, so to speak), but rather such theories are also means by which societies explore their internal ambiguities and vulnerabilities, experiment with alternate values and symbols, and question their own structures and mechanisms. In other words, any theory of the other invariably involves a theory of the self or self-identity.

Christian identity and the other

From the beginning of the Christian church, otherness was an integral aspect of Christian ethnic and cultural identity. The first strangers of whom early Christians spoke were themselves. They chose to designate themselves explicitly as "aliens and exiles" (1 Pet 2:11). These metaphors in course of time became central to Christian self-understanding.[8] They were of course appropriated from the Hebrew scripture: Abraham was called to go from his country, his kindred, and his father's house (Gen 12:1); his grandchildren and their children became "aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lev 19:34). His later descendants as a nation were forced to live as exiles during the time of Babylonian captivity, and, even when they lived securely in their own land, Yahweh their God expected them to be different from the nations that surrounded them.

However, at the root of Christian self-understanding as aliens and exiles lies not simply the history of the Hebrew people of God as the destiny of Jesus Christ, his mission, his rejection which brought him to the cross. "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (Jn 1:11; cf. Lk 9:59). He was stranger to the

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[7] Green, "Otherness Within," 50.

[8] See Gustav Stahlin, "xenos," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967): 28-32.



world because the world into which he came was estranged from God, and so it is with his followers. The believer was "not to be conformed" (1 Pet 1:14) to the expectations of the world even when people are "surprised that you no longer join them" (1 Pet 4:4). Christians are born of the Spirit (Jn 3:8) and are, therefore, not "from the world" but, like Jesus Christ, chosen from God (cf. Jn 15:19). It is therefore not an option for Christians to be alien in their own culture; the "difference" from one's own culture or the concrete "world" one inhabits is essential to Christian cultural identity.

The "difference" Christian self-understanding advocates, however, is not meant to be a form of distancing from the world or a call for Christian exclusivism. Difference from a culture can easily degenerate into a simple flight from that culture. In Christian self-understanding, being alien and an exile is a way of living *in* and *for* the world. In biblical terminology, the realm and reign of God are not of this world, but they are *in* and *for* this world. Difference must involve belonging as belonging must involve critical distance. Christians who live as strangers and aliens in the world can not be oblivious of others, strangers and aliens in their midst.

In the New Testament, compassionate acceptance of the stranger is a biblical theme that is frequently commented upon in the accounts of Jesus' ministry. The most notable is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37). Here the stranger is the one who is a neighbor to the one beaten down by robbers, and the positive paradigm of the story. In this early Christian story the cliché about the stranger, who devalues and does not care about his reputation before God and others, is shattered. Similarly, according to the story of the healing of the ten lepers (Lk 17:11-18), it was the foreigner, the Samaritan, who alone returned to give thanks. Again the humility of the stranger is acknowledged by Jesus. Another important text in the New Testament is Mt 25:35, 38. Here again the strangers are among those who need help (the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and imprisoned). The needs of the stranger are to be met just as the needs of the suffering. Indifference and distance from strangers and others are inadmissible.

The very "otherness" of Christian identity therefore paradoxically pushes the Christian to acknowledge strangers and show hospitality to them (Rom 12:13). This is possible for the Christian in view of the fact that the Christian now belongs to the "new creation." As Paul declared it in 2 Cor 5:17: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." The rebirth of a person by the Spirit is nothing less than an anticipation of the eschatological new creation of God, a gathering of the whole people of God and of all the cultural treasures that have been dispersed among the nations. Biblical writings place a strong emphasis on the ultimate formation of an eschatological community that is drawn from every tribe, tongue, people and nation in which will be displayed the cultural wealth and glory of the peoples of the earth (Isa 2:2-4, 25:6-10; Rev 5:9-10, 21:22-26). By the working of the Spirit that future universal event becomes a concrete reality in each believer. One consequence

of the re-creation of a person by the Spirit is that s/he can no longer be thought of apart from the rich and complex reality of the new creation. The Christian personality is a personality enriched by otherness, an existence that is what it is only because all differentiated otherness of the new creation has been reflected in it in a particular way. As a result of being born of the Spirit, the "difference" the Christian experiences from one's own culture does not lead to isolation but rather *creates space in me for the other.*[9] Only in acknowledging difference can I be enriched so that I in turn can enrich the culture to which I belong. Christian existence thus becomes a particular reflection of the totality of others and hence there is no room for exclusivism. Christians then are not simply aliens to their own culture; they are aliens who are at home in every culture.

The Christian acknowledgment of difference therefore is not a posture of exclusivism nor is it indifferent relativism. Christian response to pluralism then is not a matter of *de facto* recognition of plurality, diversity and variety in our midst or one of developing a comprehensive and tolerant vision of the world. The Christian does not simply recognize otherness as otherness but seeks to be enriched by it. It implies a positive acceptance of difference—an acceptance which neither forces the difference into an artificial unity nor alienates the other by reductionistic manipulations. In saying so, we are faced with a crucial question whether Christian affirmation of otherness leads to indiscriminate affirmation of all otherness. Otherness surely involves incommensurable claims and perspectives that stubbornly refuse to be dissolved in a peaceful synthesis and there are evil things that masquerade in the name of the other demanding acknowledgment. Here our understanding of pluralism and otherness needs to be carefully delineated and sorted out. Positive acceptance of the other can not mean tolerance of human intolerance, torture, rape, murder, dictatorship, nationalistic idolatry, racial supremacy, "ethnic cleansing" and the like. A Christian existence that indiscriminately accepts such evil would be grotesque. Indeed there are situations where affirming otherness imposes certain limitations and entails making value judgments.

Difference that results from being born of the Spirit surely entails a judgment, a judgment against the demons and evils of our own culture and of all cultures. There can be no new creation without judgment, without the expulsion of the devil, the beast and the false prophet (Rev 20:10). Participation in the new creation invariably involves struggle against the various evils and powers that assault it. Christian existence that is transformed by the Spirit of the new creation is always engaged in the transformation of the world.[10] The biblical concepts of "judgment" and "discernment" invariably accompany this process.

Put differently, Christian acknowledgment of pluralism and otherness does not eliminate conflict or tensions altogether, for it actually compels us take a stance, an appropriate posture, in the effective presence of the other. This is generally true when mutually incompatible faiths encounter one another in pluralistic societies. There are bound to be profound differences and

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[9] I have found the theological reflection on "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkan context by Miroslv Volf as very insightful. I have used some of his insights in this essay; see "Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of "Ethnic Cleansing," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29 (Spring 1992): 230-48.

[10] See Walter Wink's analysis of the powers of the world: *Engaging the Powers, Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

insoluble conflict of ultimate values between followers of different faiths that place the Christian on the horns of a dilemma: fidelity to one's faith commitments and openness to the claims of the other. However, this commitment-openness tension can only be resolved in the actual meeting with people of other faiths and in theologically informed reflection on that encounter. Surely, to meet and to greet persons of different faiths demands considerable sorting out of "different differences," to use Paul Sponheim's phrase.[11] This is a highly complex task involving considerable engagement in dialogue. The purpose of dialogue is not the development of an apologetic structure or a theological hypothesis which enables us to "place" the other in our conceptual scheme, nor is it to produce a mutually acceptable "middle way" or synthesis in which differences are ignored and the excess residue somehow siphoned off and quietly forgotten. Dialogue literally (the Greek preposition "dia") means, "going through the logos," a passing beyond the words with which we articulate and explain our collective and personal histories, stories and commitments. In dialogue our myths and stories, our theologies and philosophical conventions are laid open to the parable which is the stranger.

It is helpful to emphasize that dialogue is essentially an encounter between subjects, not a discussion about objects. The "other tradition," previously an object of polemic and suspicion, has to be seen incarnated in this person, a fellow subject in dialogue. The moment the other becomes a "you," a subject, a human face, and not an anonymous entity, the nature of the problem changes. At this point, the other becomes for me a source of revelation and self-knowledge, no longer a self-projection but the embodiment of a faith tradition from which I can learn about myself.[12] Authentic dialogue can lead to mutual transformation and an awareness that I cannot dismiss the other from a unity which somehow encompasses both of us even though we are unable to agree with (or often even understand) the claims and convictions of the other party. In a religiously pluralistic society, a proper Christian posture is learning to participate in the life of another. Put differently, it is learning to be guests, not hosts, in the midst of people of other faiths.

Towards a theology of embrace

A Christian perspective on the other necessarily includes an ethical responsibility for the other. It was the contribution of Emmanuel Levinas, the Jewish philosopher, who challenged the rationalistic and metaphysical biases of Western philosophical thought by bringing to our attention that we always witness the other in "face-to-face" relationships.[13] The naked vulnerability of the other person, the sense that this person speaks to us, the imperative to leave this person alive and not to murder, constitute for Levinas the basis of an ethics outside the limitations of a totalizing thought. The face of the other is not an empirical face, reducible to generalizations provided by sociology or psychology. Rather, our sense of the other's vulnerability and need, together with the other's call to justice, represents the

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[11] Paul R. Sponheim, *Faith and the Other, A Relational Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 150.

[12] Raimundo Panikkar, "The Myth of Pluralism: The Tower of Babel—A Meditation on Non-Violence," in *Cross Currents* 29 (Summer 1979): 218.

[13] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesene University Press, 1969).

"trace" of the Infinite. The face-to-face encounter with the other which occasions an encounter with the Infinite is a primordial experience. This primordial experience constitutes our capacity to function as human beings. Responding to the other's call leaves us infinitely concerned with the other, and only by responding can we give up our attitude of domination.

The metaphor of the "face of the other" delivers a command: "do not kill me" or do not annihilate the other, and reminds us of the primordial murder, of Cain killing his brother Abel (Gen 4:8). Jesus too perceived that Abel was first of the many innocent people who have been slain (Mt 23:35). This "No-to-the-other"[14] is the worst possible sin, the "sin of the world," that is, the original sin. This "No-to-Abel-as-other" likewise was the offense of the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:31-32). This "No-to-the-other" has been the source of the anthropology of domination and exclusion. Domination and exclusion are interconnected. This hermeneutics of domination and subjugation was also at the root of the European conquest of the Americas. Tzvetan Todorov, whom I cited earlier, tells us that the Aztecs could recognize and evaluate the small group of Spanish soldiers led by Cortez only within their own worldview. In contrast, the Europeans had the capability of perceiving these strange others in their otherness, of grasping them within the Aztecs' own "system," so to speak. Yet, as we know, this grasping of the others in their otherness did not serve for their true acknowledgment; it was a perception of the other in the interest of sizing them up and outwitting them. What this points to is a fundamental human problem: How do we deal with the other in justice? It is a problem that has haunted every society and culture. In fact, practically every civilization has reached its ascendancy at the expense of some "marginal" people: the goyim, the kafir, the infidel, the pagan, the barbarian, the untouchable, the women, the poor, the illiterate, the savage, the black, the third world, and so on. The other *qua* other has been frequently the object of domination and subjugation.

The anthropology of domination is a form of exclusion. The purpose of domination is to exclude others from scarce goods, whether economic, social, or psychological. Exclusion, as distinct from separation and difference, is essentially a sin, a "No-to-the-anthropologically-other." It may be more appropriate to name exclusion as a sin because so often it passes as virtue in society. In Jesus' own day, "sinners" were primarily social outcasts, people who practiced despised trades, those who failed to keep the law as interpreted by the religious establishment, the Gentiles and the Samaritans. A pious person had to separate from them; their presence defiled, because they were defiled. Jesus' very act of table fellowship with social outcasts, a fellowship that belonged to the central feature of his ministry, turned this conception of sin on its head: the real sinner is not the outcast but the one who casts the other out. Jesus denied the equation of holiness with exclusion. He rejected the notion that external things defile or pollute a person's essential being (Mk 7:15). As Water Wink has noted, "Jesus distinguishes between those falsely called sinners—who are in fact victims of an oppressive system of exclusion—and true sinners, whose evil is not ascribed to them by others, but who have sinned from the heart (Mk 7:21-23).[15] The exclusion of

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[14] See Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America*, trans. Alan Neely (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), 8-9.

[15] Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 115-16.

the other from one's heart and one's world is nothing but a contempt for the other, the reverse side of pride. As in the story of the prodigal son, the sinner was not only the younger brother but also the elder brother—the one who withheld an embrace and expected exclusion. Sin is a refusal to embrace the other in his/her otherness, a desire to purge the other from one's own world. Exclusion of the other is also an exclusion of God.

Is there a way out of this sin of domination and exclusion of the other and to adopt a theology of embrace and acknowledgment of the other? To speak of a theology of embrace or a pronouncement of an "Yes-to-the-other" is to enter into the domain of Christian faith. A Christian acknowledgment of the otherness of the other is hardly possible without a prior acknowledgment of the truly Other. After all, our "No-to-the-anthropologically-other" is a form of "self-deification" that culminates in idolatry, in a "No-to-the creative-Other." It is important to recognize two injunctions that surface persistently in the Bible: one is to have no strange gods; the other is to love the stranger. These two injunctions are mutually related: one loves the stranger in the name of the Triune God, who loves strangers. This Triune God is the center that regulates a Christian relationship to otherness. Annihilating the other is a denial of God's epiphany in the other.[16] A gracious affirmation of the other for the Christian is rooted in the acknowledgment of God's embrace of humanity in Jesus Christ. The truly Other enters into our world and experiences sin, domination, and exclusion: "Though he was in the form of God,... [Jesus Christ] emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave" (Phil 2:6-7). The servant actually assumed the sociopolitical, cultural, and economic condition of the alienated, the excluded, and the subjugated in order to demonstrate the all embracing love of God. A theology of embrace thus has no place for aversion to the other but rather conversion to the Other.

The metaphor of embrace connotes a double movement of aperture and closure. In opening our arms we create space for the other. The open arms are a sign of discontent at being myself only and a desire to include the other. They are an invitation to other to come in and feel at home with me, to belong with me. In an embrace we close our arms around the other as well, not so tightly so as to crush the other or assimilate the other into myself—for that would not be an embrace but a concealed power-act of exclusion—but gently, so as to indicate our affirmation and participation in the otherness of the other. In embracing the other, others become part of our own true identity.[17] A theology of embrace creates communities of embrace—places where the power of domination and exclusion has been broken and the Spirit's act of new creation becomes manifest, forging rich identities that include the other.

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[16] Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America*, 8.

[17] The analogy of embrace is here drawn from Miroslav Volf, "Exclusion and Embrace," 247. This analogy may pose certain difficulties in contexts where embracing the other may be potentially misunderstood. Our fear of the other or stranger is the source of our exclusion of the other in society. The point of the metaphor, however, is that "embrace" includes embracing the collective histories of the other and thus goes beyond individual identities.

Hearing the Other: The Promise and Problem of Pluralism

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I have to confess ignorance of the key terms of this conference: "pluralism" and "the Other." I'm not really certain I know what pluralism means: it is an abstract concept that is quite empty without particular content. Moreover, when one gives the concept content, pluralism is neither singular nor monolithic. Pluralism comes in many sizes and shapes, and all pluralisms are not equal. There is religious pluralism, cultural pluralism, geographic pluralism, and doctrinal pluralism. There are the pluralisms born of race, gender, class, and ethnic background. There are the pluralisms generated by divergent values, or competing truth claims. There are the pluralisms engendered by merging church bodies, different traditions, and different understandings of a single tradition. Indeed, one's reaction to pluralism might be celebration, aversion, or exasperation, depending upon the kind of pluralism to which one is reacting. Whether pluralism bears problem or promise, or some more ambiguous mixture of both, depends upon the kind of pluralism to which one is referring.

In the midst of all these pluralisms, I want to ask two questions and make a plea. The first question is this: Which of the above pluralisms—a list that does not claim to be exhaustive—are most threatening to us as a church today? The second question: Does our religious heritage, itself a coat of many colors, give us any clues for dealing with the various pluralisms that "compass us about"? The plea is even more urgent: Let's try to be concrete and specific in all of our talk about pluralism.

I confess equal uncertainty about the Other, who that is, and the whole process of designating Someone or Something Else as Other. There is Emmanuel Levinas' Other, with whom I am face-to-face and for whom I bear ultimate responsibility. There is Luther's Other, whom he designates, with possible exceptions of Turk and Jew, as "neighbor" and regards as bearing the face of Christ. I'll be Other in California by the year 2000, when a majority of the citizens in my state will no longer have English as their first language. Then there is my friend, a white woman and seminary professor doing

field work in an Afro-Caribbean Pentecostal church in Waterloo, Canada. She's not an Other to me, but she was suddenly unmasked as Other when sitting, as she usually does, with an eight-year-old during a service the Sunday a cadre of white Pentecostal ministers visited. Curious about the visitors, the youngster turned to my friend and marveled: "And you must know them all!" Who is the Other in this picture? Are all Others as homogeneous as they might appear to the one doing the designating? Otherness depends on context, presumes a homogeneity that may not exist, and raises the question: Who gets to do the designating? Here again, I plead for attention to context, concreteness, and some critical inquiry into the process of designation.

Whatever we mean by pluralism and the Other, I'm convinced the reality behind them is what really scares us. Perhaps it is the same one William Butler Yeats described in "The Second Coming":

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.[1]

The words aim to unsettle us, no less now than when they were written over 75 years ago. Now, as then, we ask: Does the center hold? Indeed, what is the center?

One of the problems and the possibilities of pluralism for a crowd of teaching theologians is the de-centering of what we know and how we know it. Traditional ideologies that shaped the academic disciplines demanded that the scholar assume a posture of detachment and a standpoint outside reality, in order better to observe, objectify, and closely "read" it. Canons of scholarship dictated a detached and distanced scholarly stance and exiled the scholar from the objective referents of the text. The resultant product was judged by its ability to answer all questions, withstand all challenges, and speak with a monolithic voice.

This ideology and its accompanying set of expository conventions have crumbled in the humanities and the social sciences, as scholars question the objectivity of their vision: how much depends on who's doing the looking; how much depends on where you're located; how much depends on what you can actually see from that location; how much or how little all that finally adds up to.

Accordingly, four aspects of this epistemological shift surface with disturbing clarity: a positioned subject, situated knowledge, partial truths, and various centers, or multiple points of view.[2]

1. A positioned subject modestly supplants the omniscient observer. What is seen depends on who's doing the looking, and no earthling can claim the God's eye view. Rather, she sees through lenses ground and fitted by background, culture, and upbringing.[3]

2. Acknowledging what realtors have long known, i.e., the importance of location, location, location, situated knowledge

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[1] William Butler Yeats, *Selected Poems and Two Plays of William Butler Yeats*, ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 91.

[2] For a more extended treatment of these topics, see my "Truths of Vision and Visions of Truth," *dialog* 34:2 (Spring, 1995), 92-98.

[3] For a look at how this subjectivity has impacted the field of anthropology, see Renato Rosaldo's *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).

supplants boasts of comprehensive scope. What we see depends quite literally on our point-of-view.[4]

3. Partial truths challenge all claims to "the whole truth and nothing but." James Clifford tells of a Cree Indian testifying in a Canadian court to protect his homeland and hunting grounds from industrial development. When asked to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," he paused, then said. "I'm not sure I can tell the truth.... I can only tell what I know."[5] What we see depends on what's visible from that point-of-view.

4. Finally, like theater-in-the round, there are various points of view: no single spectator can watch every scene from all seats simultaneously.[6] Our final view of the play depends on how closely we've monitored the reactions of those who have a better view.

These four shifts urge an attention to context, to particulars, to concreteness. Accordingly, they question abstractions; they challenge universals; they deconstruct totalizing scenarios.

While these four shifts account for a lot of discomfort in academic circles, I wonder if they should not be yesterday's news for people of faith. The Book of Job talks eloquently about *the positioned subject*, as YHWH repositions Job from privilege and power to a dung heap in order to test his faith. Read both accounts of the story of creation for an ancient exercise in *situated knowledges*. The location of two very different authors shapes what each imagines, sees, and writes. Could the apostle Paul have spoken about *the partiality of truth* when he wrote to the Corinthians that "now we see through a glass darkly; then, we shall see face to face?" Finally, the establishment of a canon that includes four Gospels, not one, invests the tradition with *multiple points of view* and trains Christians to wrestle

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with competing viewpoints and different narrative strategies.

Yet for all of this practice in pluralism, we theologians seem doomed to pretend we are as omniscient as our subject matter. Like magnetic needles in search of the true north, we gravitate to systems of knowledge, comprehensive theories of truth, and single, encompassing points of view. In this last gasp of the 20th century, we worry about the problem and promise of pluralism and fret about how we are to hear the other. Behind these concerns, the question burns: Does the center still hold?

Within the confines of a single canvas, Cézanne painted various points of view, simultaneously looking down into an earthen vase, while looking straight on to a cluster

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[4] See Donna Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 183-201.

[5] James Clifford, "Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California, 1986), 6.

[6] Susan Bordo elaborates in her essay, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Scepticism," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 133-56.

of apples, while looking around a table. Cézanne contained all of his subjects within the frame of a single canvas, a painterly strategy to which his contemporaries strenuously objected as an arbitrary union. To draw this artistic metaphor into ecclesial life, we see various points of view simultaneously in one church body. Many would say their presence compromises the integrity of the tradition; others celebrate the diversity. Is there a single frame around this picture? Or is the union merely arbitrary? What is the center? And does it still hold?

These same questions echo throughout church, national, and academic politics and generally garner two standard responses: a centripetal response and a centrifugal response. The fact of pluralism breeds fear in some who would override diversity with commonality. For some, equal regard demands blindness to difference; we treat everyone equally by ignoring particularity. Polities, whether ecclesial, national, or philosophical, require a *centripetal* force drawing everything to a common center. But others celebrate and even flaunt the fact of pluralism in sharply drawn and highly vocal identity politics, highlighting differences that have often been invisible, repressed, or scapegoated. For them, equal regard requires recognition of difference. *Centrifugal* forces fragment polities, as each group flees from a common identity that is seen to be homogenizing, totalizing, universalizing for a particular group identity.[7]

A tension between these two forces exists within our own tradition, making pluralism and the other particularly neuralgic issues for Lutherans. Razing a religious caste system that distinguished sharply between monastic and secular lifestyles, Luther insisted instead on a priesthood of all believers. The centripetal action of baptism draws the believer into this priesthood and bestows a status, "child of God," that supersedes all secondary marks of profession, rank, race, gender, and political affiliation. Behind baptism was the one promise of the one Lord Jesus Christ. This is a strongly centripetal movement within our tradition.

But a strongly incarnational logic embedded in the tradition feeds a centrifugal tendency and presents the ordinary, the concrete, and the particular as the realm of divine expression and encounter and as the arena in which we live out our calling. Thus, we feel pulled by countervailing forces within our own tradition. Remember, if you will, one of early themes for what was at the time a new church: "Many Voices, One Song." It seems now like less a statement than a wish: bold hope for unity in the midst of seemingly insurmountable diversity. In more recent memory, think of how strongly these two impulses played into reception and discussion of the sexuality study.

I'd like to plead for balance, the same balance that holds the moon in its orbit. Centrifugal motion keeps it from crashing into the earth, but centripetal motion keeps it from flying off into space. Pluralism is an undeniable fact: pretending it is not there makes of it too little, but flaunting it makes of it too much. I further choose to regard pluralism in its particular, pluriform character, requiring different response depending on the context in which it appears. Finally, I'm concerned that a critical respect for these various pluralisms not be misinterpreted to sanction relativism, subjectivism, antinomianism, or "mere tolerance," by which I mean everything is ac-

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[7] Charles Taylor traces the history of a contemporary "politics of recognition," identifying its universalist and particularist impulses. See his *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, with commentary by Amy Gutmann, ed.; Susan Wolf, Steven C. Rockefeller, and Michael Walzer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 25-73.

cepted, anything goes, and nothing is judged. Nor do I see that a critical respect for pluralism reduces everything to the lowest common denominator in faith, political judgment, or social mores. My hunch is that two critical issues for this church are cultural and religious pluralism. I'd like to look at each in turn.

Cultural pluralism

Probably the way we most configure the ther is to think in terms of cultural pluralism: i.e., those whose culture differs from our own. Take the rogues' gallery from four decades of James Bond movies, and find a telling history of how Hollywood configures the other: there are Germans, Russians, Japanese, Arabs, Colombian drug lords. But there is also the pulse of a nation, the deepest fears about its continued existence and the gravest threats to its identity. Our enemies define us. The injunction to love them challenges a group to know, to name, and to embrace the most fearful and fragile part of itself, always projected outward in the guise of the enemy.

However, intense animus against an other, or all others, often only confirms that a group is confused about who it is and what it stands for. We police our borders most vigilantly when our own identity is muddled, moribund, or otherwise changing. We project the threat outward, against immigrant groups and illegal aliens, against the Christian Right or the Liberal Left, against the Family Values folk or the Act-Up crowd. A psychologist at nearby Santa Clara University tells of growing up Croatian-American in a suburb of Chicago: the Serbs lived on one street, the Croats on the one directly behind them. In the New World, where the only thing certain was change, he says: "We grew up hating each other—just like in the Old Country." An ancient hatred



defined them, especially in a new surroundings.

In the history of this country, anxiety always accompanied immigration. "They're filling our prisons. They're filling our welfare roles. They're filling our juvenile homes." Are these comments about Asian and Latino immigrants in the 20th century? They were actually volleys lobbed at Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants from the last century. The real question in each century is probably the same one St. John de Crèvecoeur asked in the 1700s: "Who is the American?" The answer to the question depends on who's responding: a positioned subject. For an immigrant response, listen to Pastor Kaldahl's fears of assimilation from O. E. Rolvaag's prairie trilogy:

> If this process of levelling down, of making everybody alike by blotting out all racial traits [for O.E.R. this was probably closer to what we'd dub "ethnic," i.e., having to do with his Norwegian heritage], is allowed to continue, America is doomed to become the most impoverished land spiritually on the face of the earth; out of our highly praised melting pot will come a dull, smug complacency, barren of all creative thought and effort. Soon we will have reached the perfect democracy of barrenness... dead will be the hidden life of the heart

> which is nourished by tradition, the idiom of language, and our attitude to life.[8]

In an essay, Rolvaag elaborates: "The anxious soul asks with great seriousness and concern: how can a person with a markedly Norwegian outlook on life—with a "Norwegian soul"—become a good American citizen?"[9] It sounds poignantly like discussions of Chicano identity, discussions waged more powerfully in fiction than in critical theory.[10] Read Richard Rodriguez's *Days of Obligation*, or Arturo Islas' *Migrant Souls*, or Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*.[11] The questions the immigrant poses echo again and again: "Who is the American? Can we, do we want to become one? Will it cost us our soul? our Norwegian, our Irish, our Mexican, our Khmer souls?"

But the levelling down Pastor Kaldahl feared, assimilation or acculturation in sociological jargon, is only wishful thinking or groundless fear.[12] What happens is that souls change and identities hyphenate: Norwegian-American, Irish-American, Mexican-American, Cambodian-American, or German-Cuban-American. Ethnicities are not blotted out, nor do traditions vanish, but both are transformed by others and transforming of others. Not only are we judged by the company we keep: in strange ways, we become the company we keep, in the sense that the people around us change us, just as our presence changes them. Interaction with other selves and other groups shapes identity.

These exercises in particularity do not mean that we must withhold judgment of other groups or positions, the moral equivalent of "I'm OK; you're OK." Nor do they mean that we should impose judgment, i.e., "I'm OK; you're not." Conflicting judgments from different groups demand discussion and argument, down to the concrete experiences and particular circumstances that go into making those judgments. This sort of detail makes more likely the possibility for a "fusion of horizons," in Hans-Georg Gadamer's sense of the word.[13]

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[8] O. E. Rolvaag, *Their Father's God*, tr. Trygve M. Ager (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 210. Cited in Michael B. Aune, "'Prairies Within' & *La Frontera*: Extracts from a Sabbatical Notebook" (unpublished ms., 1995-1996), 12.

[9] O. E. Rolvaag, *Omkring Faedrearven* (Northfield, MN: St. Olaf College Press, 1922), 107-8. Cited in Aune, "Prairies," 11.

[10] My colleague Michael B. Aune draws some fascinating parallels between the immigrant experiences of Norwegian-Americans and Mexican-Americans: e.g., "Hybrids, Hyphens, and Ethnics All: Using the Fictions of Ole Rolvaag and Arturo Islas to Reconsider Lutheran Identity in America," Ruth and Nyles Ellefson Lutheran Heritage Endowment Lecture, St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN (unpublished ms., September 12, 1995).

[11] Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (New York: Penguin Books USA, 1992); Arturo Islas, *Migrant Souls* (New York: Morro Publishing, 1990); Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

[12] "To put it bluntly, for all the heated debate the phenomenon of assimilation has been poorly understood.... Most analysts have been rather like the infamous archer who shoots an arrow at the wall and then draws a bull's-eye around it." Renato Rosaldo, "Assimilation Revisited," Working Paper Series No. 9: Stanford Center for Chicano Research (Stanford, CA: July, 1985), 2.

[13] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 269. "The horizon is a range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons." Charles Taylor uses this notion to achieve a balance between the universalism and the particularism embedded in variant understandings of equal respect. Cf. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, 67ff.

If each group can recognize that it upholds a partial truth—that is nonetheless a part of the truth; if each group can acknowledge that its knowledge is situated—but nonetheless knowledge; if each group can hear into or listen in on another's insights into truth and knowledge, then the horizon of each might expand. Seeing from another's vantage expands our own. All of this, of course, demands the admission from both groups that each finds itself within the expanse of an ultimate horizon that neither has entirely grasped or seen. This kind of modesty is something we should and do have in a faith community.

Hearing the other as other demands acknowledging the finality of that ultimate horizon, the limitations of what we see presently, and the great distance between the two. It counsels humility as we train our eyes on what we can only see "through a glass darkly," as we await the final vision. Moreover, as we continue in a life of Christian discipleship, we remember that we count ourselves as only the most recent recruits in a whole company of Others: tax collectors and sinners, women and children, fishermen and carpenters. We are chastened by stories of how Jesus' disciples tried to protect him from all those who were "Other" in their eyes: from crowds, from blind beggars outside the gates of Jericho, from Samaritan women. Even the "company of Others" designated Others. Like those earliest disciples, we listen to confessions of faith from the least likely people, according to our canons of what ought to be said and who ought to be saying it: a Roman centurion, a leader of the synagogue, even demons. From these unlikely confessors, we get other glimpses of a God who inhabits our horizons but is not contained by them. I think these biblical perspectives on cultural pluralism counsel a critical respect and even openness to other cultures.

Religious pluralism: other gods and God as Other

I think we get some guidance regarding pluralism from the very tradition that has found it so problematic, in particular in that tradition's understanding of God as Other. When Carl Braaten and I talked about our respective presentations, we agreed that he would treat other gods, or the question of religious pluralism. That left me wondering about God as Other, and I found myself facing the God of Joseph. Maybe if we were able to hear as Joseph did, we would have some handle on how to deal with the various pluralisms and other Others in our midst.

It's not easy talking about God as Other in a religious climate that resolutely attempts to domesticate God with familiar, more comforting titles: Mother, Lover, Friend, or the more abstract but heavily feminized Sophia-God, Sophia-Christ, Sophia-Spirit.[14] There's an Otherness in God that the former formulae try to soften, and it is not a comfortable otherness. There is a pluralism in God, a trinity in deity, this latter pseudo-Sabellian formula discounts, and it is not an easygoing pluralism.

Luther confronted the otherness of God in his biblical commentaries, particularly commentaries on the Hebrew Scriptures. One encounters God always in the concrete, in the particular: in unique histories and individual landscapes, but also in bread and wine, in water, in the person, flesh and blood of God's son, Jesus. Even and especially, encounter with the hidden God, with God as Other, always happens in the concrete, in the particular, not in some sloppy,

[14] Cf. Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

numinous, other-worldly stew.[15]

In these biblical examples, we receive Reformation illustration of a contemporary dilemma. Joseph stands in as a positioned —and repositioned—subject. In the bowels of Pharaoh's prison, he cannot see God's face; he sees instead God's back. He cannot hear God's voice; he listens to God's silences. This is a new position for the favored son of his father Jacob and the overseer of Potiphar's household. Moreover, Joseph gains new insight into God from this position; his knowledge is situated. He glimpses God's back, the dark side of God. He now understands that what he knew of God until this point was only a partial truth, certainly true, but not the whole of God. In this regard he is like Peter, who does not really see the full implications of what Jesus was doing. Finally, Joseph now knows there are multiple points of view, because he's inhabited them himself, looking now at God from the point-of-view of favored son, now abandoned brother, now illegal immigrant sold into slavery, soon right-hand man to the ruler of all Egypt. He probably wonders if in a thousand lifetimes he can see enough to see all the facets of this hidden God.

The promise is universal, but it has been presented to particular persons in a particular way.

But the hidden God is also revealed. In situations like Joseph's, when one sees the back of God, Luther counsels the Christian to cling to the promise—and the promise is as concrete as the incarnate Christ himself, as particular as a carpenter's son from Galilee. Christ accompanies Joseph, and Christ alone. Luther is quite emphatic: "Christ... is the *only one* who sees Joseph, the *only one* who cares about him." Even grace is too abstract; Christ sends the Holy Spirit, "who sustained him in death, disgrace, and confusion, and inspired in him this feeling: 'Do not fear; let your heart be strengthened; wait for the Lord!'"[16]

The promise is universal, but it has been presented to particular persons in a particular way: in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom we confess as the Son of God. We depart from the particularity of the promise at our cost. To depart from or otherwise to pretend away the particularity of that promise is to deny the truth of what we see. Wrestling with similar demons, H. Richard Niebuhr eloquently argues that acknowledging the limitations of point-of-view need not lead to relativism and subjectivism:

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[15] To parse the Joseph story, Luther calls on other passages that are powerfully concrete. From Exodus 33, he recalls a conversation between Moses and YHWH after the Golden Calf incident from Exodus 33. From earlier in the book of Genesis, he listens to Hagar's response to an angel of the Lord regarding a pregnancy that will mean exile: "I have seen the back of Him who sees me" (Gen 16:13). From the Gospel of John, he remembers Jesus' words in the midst of Peter's confusion, as he washed his disciple's feet: "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand" (Jn 13:7 NRSV). The experience of God as Other is always concrete, always particular. Luther, *LW* 7:103ff.

[16] Luther, *LW* 7:100. "For grace alone is not felt; the gift must be added. Christ gave Joseph the Holy Spirit in prison, the Spirit of truth...."

> It is not evident that the man who is forced to confess that his view of things is conditioned by the standpoint he occupies must doubt the reality of what he sees. It is not apparent that one who knows that his concepts are not universal must also doubt that they are concepts of the universal or that one who understands how all his experience is historically mediated must believe that nothing is mediated through history.[17]

Luther's exegesis of the Joseph story invites us to put that more strongly. To deny the particularity of the promise is to deny what we have seen. It is to deny that God has entered time and space, history and the flesh to make the promise palpable, visible, audible. But most seriously, it is to deny that we are there seen, i.e., that the promise is made to particular persons in particular places, that the Spirit is sent to us in the ordinary ebb and flow of our daily lives.

This is a scandal and a folly even and especially today, when ecumenisms forge ahead into generic God-talk and various feminisms recoil from a male savior. We cling to the promise, but we want to rewrite it first, and not all of our editions do justice to the particularity of the biblical record or to the Otherness of God. To depart from the particularity of that promise means that we let go of the thread that allows us to understand all future epiphanies. And then we are lost indeed.

We experience both the style and the substance of revelation in our own relationships to God. Perhaps this is the terrible burden of confessing faith in a personal God, a God in three persons. Justification rectifies and re-establishes a relationship to this God. This relationship doesn't exist in the abstract, but in the concrete: in the water of baptism, through which we enter the priesthood of all believers; in bread and wine, through which we participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We pray together; we worship together. Through these practices we live out a common faith.

To conclude, I would only paraphrase H. Richard Niebuhr's benchmarks for a "critical historical theology," as urgent today as when he formulated them in 1941.[18]

1. Given the limitations of our particular point-of-view, we cannot prescribe the form the Christian life should take at all times and in all places, but neither should we lose sight of a pattern imparted from our tradition.

2. Discern what is essential to maintaining that pattern in our own time and place, discarding what is nonessential.

3. Attempt to formulate the grammar of a particular religious language in continuity with our past and yet comprehensible to our future.

4. Work toward a confessional theology that can carry on the work of self-criticism and self-knowledge in the church and that can dialogue from its particularity with other churches and religious traditions.

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[17] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1941), 13.

[18] Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 13.

The Promise and Problem of Pluralism: A Response

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First I must say something about what I am and am not doing. Like the others who gathered to hear and discuss this topic with the aid of our colleagues' formal presentations, I am making the first steps toward understanding and appropriating what we have heard and said. I am not, in these remarks, taking an oral exam; nor am I attempting to form a synthesis or to reach final conclusions. Rather I am exposing to you my briefly considered response in the hope that mine will be useful to yours.

Second, it is worth noting where we are doing this speaking, listening, and thinking about pluralism's promise and problem. I refer less to the specific physical location of our convocation and more to the social location of our usual audiences. There are the people with whom we live, specifically those with whom we are members of congregations. Last fall I heard Parker Palmer refer to a homogenous, white congregation and observe that there is no such thing. Rather there are congregations of white people trying desperately not to notice that they are different from each other. Even among ourselves we experience the two forces Martha Stortz described: the centripetal force of baptism drawing us together and the centrifugal force of incarnation tossing us apart. Pluralism is among us.

It is also around us. The anecdotes and statistics about religious and ethnic diversity can be multiplied to fill an evening's conversation. Those of you who live in cities and on the coasts may think that we who reside in the small towns of the Midwest speak of these issues only second hand. I assure you that it is not so. In the local supermarket in Northfield, Minnesota, I have heard, in one visit, two languages I do not know and only one of which I could identify. On my way to Minneapolis, on a still rural section of Cedar Avenue, I pass by a Lao Buddhist temple. Pluralism, in the descriptive sense, is all around us and it can be frightening, as the unknown often is. Some retreat from what they fear, others attack. Our audiences include people who make both sorts of responses and all in between.

This situation will not disappear. The variety is unlikely to fade away, either inside our churches or around them in our

communities. If we who are "grown-up" could manage to ignore this reality for the years that remain to us, our students and children can not. More than once in these conversations children have been invoked as the test for the adequacy of a statement or strategy. This is not insignificant. We think about pluralism, about how to listen to "the other," about both problems and promises, not only for ourselves, but perhaps even more for those we teach, those who will live after us.

These comments about our context and audience move toward the question why. Why are we gathered here to think about "the other"? There are at least three forces pushing us to do so. There is the intellectual trend of postmodernism with its concern for difference. A dialect of that conversation is the religious one which Carl Braaten referred to as creeping into theological discourse. However, it is well to recall that concern with the one and the many is not merely a new academic fashion; it is a serious intellectual matter which, in various forms, has concerned thinkers for centuries.

The previously noted reality of pluralism and the presence of the other is another spur to our conversation. We respond to the vivid fact that folks who are unlike ourselves in various ways are in close proximity to us. We are compelled to take account of "them." Sometimes as a result of this forced encounter we discover that the presenting differences between us are not real differences, that what we have in common is more significant than what we do not.

However, I suggest that as Christians these pressures are not the primary reasons for turning our attention to "the other." There is more than infatuation with novelty or urgent utility to move us toward those who are different from us. Christian contacts with "others" and thought about that contact can be grounded, as we have heard here, in the logic of God, or in our experience of God. It can be a response to the divine command that we love others.

There is more than infatuation with novelty or urgent utility to move us toward those who are different from us.

Such a response can, of course, take several forms. The way we think about it matters. The metaphor we use to describe our response as well as the task or practice we identify as central will matter a great deal. Here are half-a-dozen possibilities I have heard expressed in our time here.

1. There is the classic Christian task of apologetics which may regard the other as dangerous and powerful, perhaps even as an enemy. (Carol LaHurd's remarks reminded us that there have been times when we Christians have been the powerful, dangerous other.) When the task is apologetic, the goal is to persuade the other of a better way to understand us; at the most extreme, when the stakes are high, to understand us and therefore not to kill us.

2. Dialogue relies upon another sort of relationship and proposes a different goal. Here the purpose of engagement is to understand and to be understood. There is mutuality rather than hostility between us and them. The other is regarded as a sort of "fellow traveler" in life, one with whom we share profound concerns and from whom we can learn.

As we encounter the other we will discover profound questions that lead us into deep reconsideration of what we knew.

3. Evangelism has a third purpose, to change the other. It requires honesty about what is non-negotiable, what Murray Haar referred to as the "visceral core" and Carl Braaten called that for which you would die. Braaten also urged us to recall the missionary impulse of Christianity. He is right to do so. What else should we do with that which gives us life than share it with others?

4. Welcoming the stranger, hospitality, is a Christian expression of a more widely occurring model of response to the other. Pat Keifert led us in considering it. Hospitality is both given and received; in this way it resembles dialogue. It requires neither the host nor the guest to change into the other-other. However, hospitality does offer the possibility that it will lead to a friendship that will bring changes.

5. Paul Rajashekar offered us the metaphor of embrace as a response to the other. I think that we might regard this as a particular sort of hospitality.

6. Martha Stortz suggested that we respond to the other in the course of following Jesus, that this response is part of our life of discipleship. I find this suggestion intriguing. How do we respond to the other, to the one who is different from us, when we meet that one while following Jesus into an alien identity of our own? If we are to hate our family as part of the discipline, what are the instructions for relationship to others?

In addition to these six, my own suggestion for a way to think of the other is with the image of the neighbor. It is used in the Hebrew Scriptures, in Jesus' parable, and by Luther. It may provide a way of thinking and acting with others of various sorts which is accurate and useful. We do not live in a traditional society, nor is the family an accurate description of either our society or our church. This image allows us to recall that we live in circles of connected others, to use Carol LaHurd's term. It recognizes that difference is intertwined with sameness and affinity. And the notion of neighborliness could move from description of diversity to a suggestion about how to live in diversity. No doubt each of these responses is valid and defensible. Very likely, each one has its advocates and practitioners among those here at this conference.

Then the question arises: which one shall we, or I, practice? Without solving that dilemma, I offer some observations. We don't all have to practice the same response. Some are called by talent, temperament or circumstance to one way or to another way. Each encounter, with various specific others (including our own selves) is conditioned by our prior experiences as well. The attention our presenters gave to their own autobiographies was striking and reinforces this point. It is also true for all of us together; our history as a group conditions our responses in the present. These encounters with others, at least for those gathered here, most often take place in the U.S.A., a social-political context that assumes civility and nonviolence in matters religious to be the norm. We who are here are also all members of a group called

Lutherans, a group which seldom has been the victim of religious violence or oppression. In the U.S.A. we have long depended upon the strangeness of our ethnicity (and languages), our worship practice, or our remote locations to keep us odd and alien from the larger culture. (It has not been our confession of Christ that has marked us as "other.") But it is less true in the 1990s than it was 50 years ago. And I expect that we will need to address this in our life of corporate discipleship. It is true that our individual responses together form a corporate response to the situations in which we find ourselves.

What will the be outcome of these encounters? What will follow from our responses? In near conclusion, I note several possible consequences. As we encounter the other (or our own self perceived as other) we will also discover new questions. These may be profound questions that lead us into deep reconsideration of what we knew. Surely this is what happened to the early followers of Jesus as they encountered others such as the Ethiopian eunuch and the Gentile Lydia. In the course of exploring those questions we are also likely to identify the "visceral core" which will not be surrendered but which might be enhanced. What we learn and gain from such encounters is connected to our willingness to entertain the possibility that the Holy Spirit is at work outside of our own household.

Finally, I return briefly to the image of neighbor as a way of thinking about and directing our activity in the relationships between us. Among those relationships are other-to-other, I-to-thou, and self-to-self. The image of neighbor brings to these relationships permission for the integrity of difference, an expectation of duration, and the vital need for strategic cooperation for the general well-being. These are promising possibilities in pluralism. For me, a Christian, a problem in the sense of a question is this: Can I see Christ in my neighbor when she does not acknowledge Christ? Is it only in her need that I see Christ's need? Can it be that she reveals Christ to me even without confessing him? And am I thereby transformed by Christ present, but unacknowledged, in her and through our encounter? In the present circumstances of diversity and pluralism I must meet my neighbor; may I do so with humility and hope.

The LSTC World Wide Web site contains important points of access to the resources of *Currents in Theology and Mission*. Use your browser to reach http://www.lstc.edu/about/currents and you will find a page with links to Introduction, Table of Contents of Current Issue, Letters to the Editor, Subscriptions, How to Submit Manuscripts, How to Apply for Writing Book Reviews, and Recommended Biblical Commentaries for the Old Testament (by Ralph W. Klein) and for the New Testament (by Edgar Krentz). Is there other information you would like us to post on the web? Send an E-mail message to rklein@lstc.edu.

Concluding Reflections, 1996 Consultation of Teaching Theologians

Paul Sponheim
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I was delighted to hear that this consultation would deal with the topic of Christian Faith and the Other. And I am delighted to have been here. The topic is truly an essential one, one that confronts us from without and calls us from within. I have found the presentations lively and challenging. They may have been strikingly diverse, but they are alike in giving us vital food for thought. The conversations around the sessions have done much, I expect, to help us over the lack of time for conversation as a group. And we do want to have such plenary conversation this morning. That will happen as soon as I finish and so I had better get on with my effort. This conference has given me much more than I could put into fifteen minutes, but in that time I can, and will, say three words.

Interruption

First, a word of description of our situation. The word I would use is *interruption*. We are meeting here to face the challenging and complex reality of pluralism because this reality has entered our lives; we have been interrupted. Emmanuel Levinas says that "the other disturbs one's being at home with oneself." I think of Bob Kysar's opening homily Friday evening dealing with the text Jim Nestigen brought powerfully home to us once again this morning. Bob spoke specifically of intrusion, of interruption. His words rang true for me. The other does interrupt the continuity of our existence. I believe this is true in varying ways whether we speak of cultural or religious pluralism, of pluralism within or pluralism without.

To be thus interrupted is not a comfortable situation. Murray Haar spoke of himself and of many others entering the Lutheran Church as other and of having, I took it, the distinct impression that this was not that comfortable for everyone. As the Other interrupts us, we are not all that comfortable. In her presentation Marty Stortz spoke of how discomfort arises in us as we are made aware of the situated character of our knowing and of the partiality of the truth we claim. Elizabeth Kammarck Minnich has driven this point home for the academy in her book *Transforming Knowledge*, as have feminist authors for such fields as the "natural" sciences.

No, it is not comfortable to be inter-

rupted. The work we do as academics may not be able to go on undisturbed. That would be true, I take it, if the hospitality we seek to render to this strange other recognizes that hospitality is indeed what Pat Keifert called a "pupil's metaphor," where the self is not any longer comfortably in charge.

But may it not be that there is something vital to be gained in this situation of being interrupted? Anton Boisen, one of the fathers of the C.P.E. movement, used to speak of how the human body is such that growth can only occur along a jagged edge of tissue. I wonder about the growth of the soul? Or consider this from Franz Kafka:

> If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? So that it shall make up happy? Good God, we would also be happy if we had not books, and such books as make unhappy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are those books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.[1]

Kafka might trouble us in speaking so, in speaking of death really. What could he mean, that something in us need to die, something we love better than our true selves? Well, he is not a theologian and no doubt he is not talking about theology. But what shall we do with Eberhard Jüngel, who writes this, not merely of death, but of life itself:

> Human life occurs, when the continuity of earthly life and existence is interrupted, in that something intervenes and is apprehended. Human life therefore is the interruption of the continuity of created life by the occurrence of truth.[2]

Jüngel will go on to speak of death, as you know. Now of course there are interruptions and then there are interruptions, there are different differences—as we have said. But I propose that in our disturbed condition we ask ourselves if there may indeed be truth to be heard in our being interrupted.

Orientation

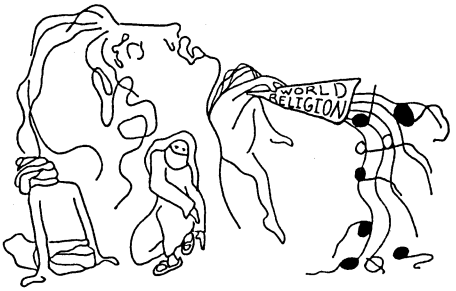
Now a second word, *orientation*. I choose this word over a word like "position." I think it best not to speak of what "position" we will take on pluralism, as it were. To ask that is to ask—and likely to invite us to claim—too much. But we are not adrift. We are on a journey in these matters, but we do have an orientation. We do have a direction, as we travel. I am hoping that we Lutherans in the U.S.A. could reclaim our sense of the temporal, of what might be called "the horizontal movement" in distinction from a kind of "vertical confinement of space." (Cf. the work of Sydney Mead on religion in America.) I am glad to have heard us working these days on that sense of orientation, even as I do not lament the sense of interruption.

The orientation will be theological. It will be indeed a theo-logic, as Patrick Keifert was saying yesterday. It roots in our doctrine of God. The reality of difference in relationship will not fail to find expression in a trinitarian doctrine of God. Difference in relationship roots already in God, but we get soon enough thereby to difference in what is created. Here is how Jüngel boldly makes the case:

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[1] From Mara Donaldson, *Holy Places are Dark Places* (Lanham, MD: University Press, 1988), xii.

[2] Jüngel, "The Truth of Life: Observations on Truth as the Interruption of the Continuity of Life," in *Creation, Christ and Culture*, the Torrance *Festschrift*, ed. R.W.A. McKinney (T. & T. Clark, 1976), 233.



> God *aims* in himself at what is other... God in his own becoming is aiming at the becoming of creation... he is overflowing being and his overflowing being is the expression of his grace.... In the eternal Son of God, who himself was not created, but comes eternally from God, the Father, in this Son of God coming *eternally* from God, God aims at the man who *temporally* comes from God. (*God as Mystery of the World*, 384)

God aims and God gets there. God creates an other other, humankind—"male and female created God them." Here I refer you to the section of Carl Braaten's paper on pluralism, which carries such cautious sentences as "God is the author of the world's pluralism," or again "Our differences are part of the splendor of creation."

Carl is stressing the doctrine of creation in connecting God with the reality of difference in the world. But I think he and I think we would also want to speak of the incarnation, of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as God's claim on the created other, despite sin. Jüngel does that and here the reality of death is not absent. Here is how he puts the point:

> The cross of Jesus is that event in time through which God allowed the continuity of his own eternal life to be interrupted so as to prove himself to be love.... It would be deadly if it were the case that the life of God were uninterrupted life in which there were no place for death. The cross of Jesus disallows this possibility. It represents the appropriation of human death by God and the granting of divine life to man. This is the joyful exchange. ("The Truth of Life," 236)

And surely that new life will be alive in relationship. Michael Welker puts it so:

> The Spirit of God gives rise to a multiple force field that is sensitive to differences. In this force field, enjoyment of creatively invigorating differences can be cultivated, while unjust, debilitating differences can be removed in love, mercy and gentleness. (*God the Spirit*, 22)

Calling

So, what are we now to do? Suppose that we have been interrupted, but that we are not without a sense of direction—some orientation for the journey with the other. How shall we proceed? If I were to choose a third word to speak of that, it would be a C word—Contact or Conversation, or perhaps even *Calling*.

My point here is that we are called into an actual journey with the actual other—and that applies, I think, to the other within and to the other without. Here I would urge myself to travel "light" enough to make the journey. I do not know exactly what that means, but I do think that we may tend to carry rather more luggage along than is needed or helpful on the journey. At the very least we should pack an extra empty bag, recognizing that it may be truth that interrupts us after all. (But we will not be tourists!)

I am pleading for the concrete, the actual, the empirical—to be with the others and to work together toward what truth claims us. I thought I heard Bishop Ander-

son speak of this yesterday when he spoke of our work of teaching as twofold, passing on the tradition *and* raising questions. This was a theme Joe Sittler seemed often to articulate, as when he would speak not of *having* a theology, but of *doing* theology. And I have heard talk here that seems to fit. Paul Rajashekar spoke of dialogue as not about certain objects, but between two subjects. Pat Keifert spoke of the "freeze dried" supplies we will need for the journey. In this final comment then I would not like to contradict myself by giving a detailed set of specifications, but I do have four specific comments which seem to me to follow. I can only list them here:

1. We should not claim to know too much about the outcome. Here I place Carl Braaten's "eschatological agnosticism." Carl is not alone. Consider this statement from Lesslie Newbigin:

> The position which I have outlined is exclusivist in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but it is not exclusivist in the sense of denying the possibility of the salvation of the non-Christian. It is inclusivist in the sense that it refuses to limit the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian Church, but it rejects the inclusivism which regards the non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. It is pluralist in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings [Did not Gustaf Wingren teach us that creation is already God's *opus proprium*, for it is a work of grace?], but it rejects a pluralism which denies the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ. (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 182-3)

Or, somewhat more briefly, consider this from Wolfhart Pannenberg:

> Human experiences of salvation are as ambiguous as other human experiences. It all depends on whether there is communion with God, the God of Israel and of Jesus. Such communion is promised to Christians provided they do not desert their faith.... When it comes to the basis of our Christian confidence in our future salvation, if the spiritual life that Christians experience among themselves remains ambiguous, how could it be less ambiguous in the case of the non-Christian? We may hope that God will look graciously upon them as we hope for ourselves.[3]

Has Pannenberg been pondering Matthew 25? Or perhaps he is hearing the end of the parable five chapters earlier in Matthew, where the master says: "Am I not allowed to do what I will with what is mine?" (Mt 20:15). Or is Pannenberg praying, "I believe, help Thou my unbelief!" (Mk 9:24)

2. I want to make the point that such reserve, such humility, such eschatological agnosticism does not, I repeat *not*, cut the nerve of missionary witness—that is clear. I have often been haunted by the Yeats passage Martin Marty quoted the other day. But I do not believe we find ourselves in a situation where "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." It does not seem empirically true. Does Lesslie Newbigin lack intensity? Does Carl Braaten...?

3. In this journey there will be real risk. Murray Haar stressed that. Paul Rajashekar did as well. Really, all our presenters have done so. This morning Winston Persaud has reminded us of how real the issue of truth is. Error is possible. Evil is real. Judgments must be made. Inter-religious dialogue does not happen well, if the basis is "I don't believe anything... you don't believe anything... let's talk!" There is risk

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[3] Pannenberg, "Religious Pluralism and Conflicting Truth Claims," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 104.

and it needs to be faced. There are two ditches alongside this risky road. Perhaps we do well to ask ourselves toward which ditch we tend, and to take corrective driving measures.

4. But I am glad for the note of hopefulness and confidence. I hear both the risk and the confidence in the Division for Global Mission's statement:

> Christians around the world live in daily contact with people of other faiths. We believe that peoples of various faiths should enter into mutual conversations and interfaith dialogue. Conversations should seriously explore one another's differences as well as seek to understand the power, beauty and integrity found in each other's faith. We believe Christians are called to enter such conversations not knowing where they will go, but sustained by the hope that, in the end, every tongue shall "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:11).[4]

So, I say let us go forward in our work and in our living, seeking to be both faithful and fruitful in our meeting the other. To be interrupted is not pleasant, and the travel will often be difficult. We will hear criticism and we will need to be self-critical. I think of Carol LaHurd's challenging presentation of the ambiguity and ambivalence with which the other is regarded in scripture. Terence Fretheim's Hein-Fry lectures, due out soon, make the same point. Scripture does not seem to offer us a seamless robe we can don for our journey with the other. But perhaps it is right to heed the note of hopefulness, the kind of word sounded by Duane Priebe yesterday regarding our relationship with the inner other.

5. What reason is there to be hopeful? We are not alone in our journey with the other. The DGM statement makes that clear:

> We are committed to inter-faith conversations and dialogue and through these encounters we will seek to understand persons of other faiths; we will listen to what God has to say to us through these conversations and through them we will witness to the crucified and risen Christ.[4]

God has called the believing community to fresh appropriation of its heritage at each step along the way. Gerhard VonRad has made that very clear in the case of Israel. His summary word is this: "Different perspectives disclosed different contents and, what is equally important, they each opened up aspects of the future which were equally specific" (*Old Testament Theology*, II:413). Or in our own century Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from prison of a necessary struggle to find the strange power in the old words. He wrote: "In the traditional words and acts we suspect that there may be something quite new and revolutionary, though we cannot as yet grasp or express it" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, 160-61).

This is our calling. Let us take it up in fear and trembling and with joy and hopefulness, trusting that none other than God is at work in this. Paul Ricoeur wrote this:

> The word is my kingdom and I am not ashamed of it.... As a University professor, I believe in the efficacy of instructive speech; in teaching the history of philosophy, I believe in the enlightening power, even for a system of politics, of speaking devoted to elaborating our philosophical memory [we will soon be tested!]... As a listener to the Christian message, I believe that words may change the heart, that is, the refulgent core of our preferences and the position we embrace. (*History and Truth*, 5)

We, too, are listeners to the Christian message, are we not? We should not say less than Ricoeur.

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[4] Division for Global Mission, "Commitments for Mission in the 1990s," IV.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER WORKS

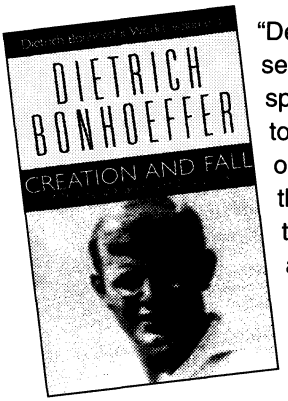
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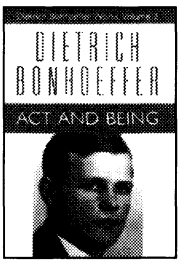
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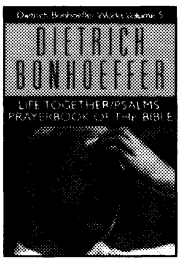
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Book Reviews

Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture. By Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager and John Howard Yoder. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. 299 pages. Paper. $15.95.

Few twentieth-century works on theological social ethics can approach the prestige of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. A consistent best-seller since its publication in 1951, it has served many as their first introduction to the disciplines of both ethics and theology. Moreover, its five-fold typology (ranging from "Christ Against Culture" to "Christ the Transformer of Culture") has gained and maintained such currency that it carries the weight of a nearly self-evident conceptual grid.

Authentic Transformation is an attempt by its co-authors to take *Christ and Culture* seriously by refusing to let it have the last word. They aim to reopen this classic by giving it what has been till now nearly nonexistent—sustained critical examination of its main arguments and most especially of its final (and apparently climactic) motif: transformation.

To a great degree they succeed in their project. Yoder's sharp, even biting, critique—though in the end it seems to be unsustainable on key matters such as Niebuhr's trinitarianism—has the great merit of pointing out how supposed transformation of culture which lacks grounding in the concreteness and radicality of Christ is just accommodation by another name. Yeager does every reader of *Christ and Culture* a wonderful service by interpreting the book and examining some of its difficulties through placing it in the context of Niebuhr's entire authorship. Stassen's first essay is another, more developmental and biographical approach to the same task. He also contributes the final piece which moves beyond Niebuhr to offer a set of marks of authentic transformation with contemporary illustrations of their partial realization in specific congregational and social settings.

This book does not completely satisfy. In particular, while its three contributors take some steps to engage one another, the resulting dialogue is very unbalanced both in the space allotted to each and in the degree of cognizance each takes of the others. Stassen predominates and we yearn to hear more from Yeager. However, *Authentic Transformation* succeeds in inviting and enabling us to crack the covers of *Christ and Culture* again and to read it as its author intended—as a partial and provisional statement of what forever requires more faithful thinking and living.

Jonathan Strandjord
Wartburg Theological Seminary

Ecclesiology in Context. By Johannes A. Van Der Ven. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993. xv and 568 pages. Paper. $29.00.

In this book Johannes A. Van Der Ven, professor of practical theology at the Divinity School of Nijmegen University, the Netherlands, combines theological and social scientific approaches to the development of practical models and strategies for the church's interaction with modern society. Written from a Roman Catholic perspective, this work is an exercise in practical theology. As such, Van Der Ven seeks a non-competitive correlation between theology and various disciplines in the social sciences. His quest is guided by a vision for the liberation of humanity through the church's evangelical praxis.

Van Der Ven believes that the church must acknowledge the contemporary social move toward secularization as an inevitable reality which the church cannot ignore. He believes that four core areas found at the intersection of ecclesiology and social science must be redeveloped: (1) religious identity, (2) social identity, (3) the church's policies and organizational structure, and (4) the church's administrative infrastructure. In order to achieve these goals, Van Der

Ven applies contextual, integrative, semiotic, and empirical approaches to help him understand the role of the church in society, along with core theological images of the church. He seeks a scientific assessment of his analysis of the church in secular society by providing statistical studies of the attitudes of people from various churches in the Netherlands.

In the first through third parts of the book Van Der Ven, appealing to semiotic theory, identifies four core functions of the church which parallel and mutually implicate several corresponding codes. The function of the identity of the church is paired with the codes of the church as "people of God" and "Jesus movement." The function of the integration of the church is paired with the code of the church as "body of Christ." The function of the policy of the church is paired with the code of the church as the "building of the spirit." The function of the management of the church is paired with the code of the church as a "church with the poor."

In the fourth and fifth parts of the book Van Der Ven examines the integration and policy of the church. He claims that what holds the church together is the interpersonal interactions of its members. These people-dynamics however must be understood in light of societal factors of industrialization and urbanization. While these economic factors tend to accentuate a process of individuation, people continue to be bound to each other by means of groups, networks, and other forms of community formation. The church needs to realize that modernity tends to bond people by means of an abstract solidarity, in which people have functional, not organic, union with one another. For Van Der Ven, the vision and mission of the church must be worked out in terms of its policy. In the contemporary context, such policy can hardly ignore the individual's drive for utilization, the quest to satisfy one's own needs and interests.

In the last part of the book Van Der Ven examines the management of the church. Without this component, there is no community of believers. However, in our context, the church defaults to being a service organization, run to some extent by its marketability, its ability to deliver in the dynamics of supply and demand. The bottom line for Van Der Ven is that the church cannot escape or ignore her calling to be a church *with* the poor, and not paternalistically for the poor.

Van Der Ven's analysis is powerful and persuasive. If used in the seminary classroom, it should be supplemented with biblical and theological analyses of the church (including premodern theologians) so that students can better understand the church's own inner conversation about its identity from within its own perspective. In the North American context, one would also do well to read Van Der Ven along with John and Sylvia Ronsvalle's *Behind the Stain Glass Windows: Money Dynamics in the Church*, in order to specifically pursue the dynamics of secularization in the North American context. All in all, Van Der Ven's book is a superb example of contemporary practical theology. It is well worth your investment of time to read and study.

Mark C. Mattes
Grand View College, Des Moines, Iowa

An A to Z of Feminist Theology. Edited by Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996. xv and 266 pages. Paper. $19.95.

This text, a theological dictionary, attempts to sketch some of the basic concepts and issues pertaining particularly to feminist theology. As a publication of Sheffield Press, it is intended as a companion volume to *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Isherwood and McEwan, 1993) but can stand on its own as a valuable resource in feminist theology. While being far from exhaustive, this modest "dictionary" provides an effective starting point for a conversation with and within feminist theology. The individual authors of each entry present their topic in a clear and creative manner. The intent is to "understand, deconstruct, and reconstruct" (ix).

The breadth of this text is respectable with around 145 entries. It contains some very specific topics, including Asian Women's Hermeneutical Principle, Sin, and Inclusive Language. It sometimes tends toward the creative and even esoteric with entries like Invisibility, Circle Dance, and Wholeness. Some very basic topics

are well-explicated. For instance, the entry on Eve first covers the traditional interpretations and scholarship surrounding this biblical figure, and then moves to show how these interpretations have reinforced sex stereotypes in society and the church. Eve is finally embraced as a positive model for women dynamically seeking knowledge and creativity.

The text covers a range of areas in feminist theology, including historical studies, theological topics, biblical figures, hermeneutical trends, and ecclesiology. With entries on both New and Old Testament Women, one gains an overview of the major female figures in the scriptures. Social issues find their way into these pages in the pieces on Justice, Violence (two entries), Pornography, and Anger. Approached from a feminist theological perspective, these entries provide an introduction to the relevance of each issue in theological discussion among feminists. Likewise, the reinterpretations of such topics as Resurrection, Crucifixion, and Salvation provide entry into a critical and constructive conversation.

While it appears that this text emerges as a sort of British-published counterpart to the newly published *Directory of Feminist Theologies* (Clarkson and Russell, Westminster/John Knox, 1996) it is far from exhaustive and tends toward the creative rather than the traditional. For this reason, it may serve as an effective resource for one either familiar with some basic theological concepts, or one interested in creative responses to traditional issues being offered by feminist theologians. It may not be as helpful for those not comfortable in the theological realm.

Feminist theology as a field can only benefit from the emergence of this text and others like it. The editors state: "feminist theology does not present itself as a unified body of research, but rather as a rich tapestry of life experiences and reflection upon them.... It always celebrates women" (x). This text offers more threads for the tapestry that is being continually woven by women around the world. By functioning in dialogue with other texts and sources, it enriches feminist scholarship.

Caryn Riswold
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Why We Live in Community. By Eberhard Arnold with two interpretive talks by Thomas Merton. Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1995. 73 pages. Paper. $6.00.

This concept of community fascinates people more than the reality of community. The concept fascinates people of all walks of life and all kinds of faith or lack thereof. Few know what they are talking about when they write of community. Much of the talk is hyperbole born of wishful thinking, not out of the hard sweat of experiment.

Eberhard Arnold's thoughts on community are important for two reasons: first, he lived them. Everything he wrote was forged on the anvil of experience, and there was precious little gap between his words and his deeds. Second, he derived his energy and direction from the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. This little book is a brief explanation of why Arnold and others chose to live in community.

The primary reason to live in community, of course, is that this is God's way to organize life on earth. All else derives from this primary reason. Life in community is life in the Spirit; they are equal terms for Arnold, as properly understood they would be for all Christians.

Merton's interpretive talks were comments made at a monastery in September 1968, some three months before his death. They enhance Arnold's writing from the perspective of catholic monasticism, and from Merton's own perch as a social critic and ecumenical figure.

As with all of Arnold's writings, much food for thought is packaged into few pages. This book ought to be on your shelves right next to Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* and Jean Vanier's *Community and Growth*. Many, perhaps most, of us are incapable of the radical communitarianism of the Bruderhof the Arnolds began. But in this age of violence and brokenness, we seek common ground for building community. Arnold's message is indeed radical but it has applicability in a variety of settings. Look at it with your own in mind, and you will learn.

Jay C. Rochelle
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The Individual and World Need. By Eberhard Arnold. Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1993. 71 pages. Paper. $6.00.

Eberhard Arnold's words from the 1920s continue to bear the weight of truth into our own time. Arnold's meditation on the challenge of poverty and want is worthy of sustained application in any community. He begins with the observation that the human being is made up of many cells which must work in cooperation with each other, then moves quickly to the human community in which the same principle is at work. Alas, self-centeredness takes over and convinces us that we are individuals. But individualism turns immediately to isolation, and hence we yearn for connectedness with others but our very sense of self robs us of the ability to make the connections.

Our yearning for community and harmony leads us to the God who has loved us in the cross of Christ. Arnold's most powerful words convict us of the separation that we cherish, but which also makes us miserable and lonesome. When we are cut off from human community we are cut off from divine community as well. This sense of division and separation leads to guilt because we know we are made for community, and we experience this guilt as a paralyzing condition. We cannot overcome the guilt of separation on our own. We need the message and the power of the gospel.

Christians are people who rise up out of the morass of guilt and isolation to show another way, people who understand that risk-taking in the direction of community-building is service to the kingdom of God. This calls for sacrificial self-offering and for emptying ourselves into the world as Jesus emptied himself. Called to be raised up with and in Christ, we are able to point to the vacuity of human society and the liveliness of forgiveness and unity in God. So we enter into community, and this community is eternal life because it unites humanity with God.

Besides its use as a sustained meditation for Christians, you might read this book profitably with the social ministry committee of the church or with your witness/evangelism committee.

Jay C. Rochelle

Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology (Luke 4.16-30). By Michael Prior, CM. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995. 228 pages. Paper. $18.50.

Under the conviction that method and meaning go together, Prior employs wide-ranging methods to study Jesus' inaugural sermon in Luke. The text is particularly important in Luke-Acts because it foreshadows what lies ahead. Readers generally encounter Prior's account of the history of research on an issue and then Prior's position—usually siding with a view already established.

Prior compares Luke-Acts to contemporaneous literature and suggests that it is a mixed genre incorporating features of biography and historiography—with implications of historical reliability. Closely related, the purpose of Luke-Acts is to give an orderly account of the universal mission of Jesus and his disciples as they are empowered by God's Spirit. With respect to Luke 4, Prior supports the view that Jesus' intimations of extending the liberation of the poor beyond Israel unsettled the people of Nazareth.

But the book shifts from ancient history to challenge modern readers to join the cause of liberating the poor—those deprived both materially and socially. So Prior calls for holistic evangelization of the poor—action to redress the serious inequalities of wealth and security.

Pastors and lay people will find the book readable and clear, but some of the history of research cumbersome. They will also be challenged with respect to their own disposition of wealth and actions to rectify inequalities. But in correlating the text to today, Prior reads the text for principles and examples. Readers might be alert to other ways to appropriate biblical texts such as analogy, identification with characters in the story, extending the story to include readers, and uncanny correlations that we may not be able to anticipate.

Robert L. Brawley
McCormick Theological Seminary
Chicago, Illinois

Preaching Helps

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Blasted Assurance

Somewhere in the following pages Pastor Jean Lebbert uses the phrase "Blasted Assurance" to describe those folks (I am sure none of you is guilty) who bash people over the head with Bible verses. I think I can picture what she means. "Bam! Take that! This Bible verse will show how wrong you are! Socko! Here's another one to straighten you out and get you to fly right!"

We have all met these people. Actually we may all have been guilty of doing this sort of thing on some occasion when we weren't quite up to our true evangelical selves. At least I have to confess that I can remember using the Bible this way in "conversation" with some interlocutor. Woody Allen is supposed to have said that he always carries a bullet in his breast pocket, just in case someone throws a Bible at him!

Rather more seriously, a colleague of mine is offering a course on bad religion. That's not the title. What it is, he tells me, is a course investigating some of the unhealthy and destructive uses of our religious tradition, including the Bible. "Spare the rod, spoil the child!" Whack! I don't suppose they actually quote the proof text, "Hebrews 11:9-12!" while they are laying on the rod. But we have not only the Bible but many traditional uses of the Bible, some great and good, some far less than wholesome.

Especially in recent years women have been in the forefront of those who have begun to speak up about bad uses of biblical material. Jesus at the heart of scripture, in all his exchanges with women, seems caring and freeing and life-generating. He listens, heals, strengthens, converses in private and in public. The churches on the other hand have been far less affirming as they have interpreted scripture through the centuries in ways that limit the roles of women both in church and in society.

Just recently I have seen a number of books and articles deploring the centrality of the crucifixion in Christian rhetoric. The Bible, we are told, encour-

ages child abuse! God the heartless father maintains a cool distance and sacrifices the innocent Child in order to accomplish a great theological purpose! We could (and should) point out that such a rewording of the central event of our salvation is a bad misstatement of Christian thinking about God (the doctrine of the Trinity contradicts such a separation of the work of Father and Son). Neither the story of the crucifixion nor the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac should be used to support the notion that children are the property of their parents and can be dealt with as harshly as the parent likes.

The Bible is certainly an adult book, full of real stories of real human and divine life. That the rich good narratives of scripture have had bad uses is true enough. What people do to one another in the name of religion is by no means always pretty. But it is certainly not true that these good narratives inevitably lead to bad uses. What is odd but true is that these narratives are in our hands and to that extent at our mercy. How well do we tell and retell the stories and the Story?

Where are we with the Bible? Where would we be without it? It is certainly burdened with the heavy baggage of countless contradictory interpretations. Even the Lutheran tradition is not one thing but many things. But Lutherans have traditionally desired to be evangelical and worked to be evangelical, and that means, in terms of the title of this piece, that Lutherans have attempted to offer "blessed" and not "blasted" assurances. Or Lutherans have committed themselves to blessing rather than blasting.

Well, all this is by way of introducing our contributor, **Jean Lebbert**, for the past five years Associate Pastor of Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Lodi, California. She has written for Preaching Helps before (and will, I hope, again), and she is a staff writer for *Christ in the Home* and *The Word in Season.* Jean is a master story teller and story user. She conducts a "Bible Story-Telling Ministry" and is very much in demand as a conference speaker. Concerning this ministry she told me, "I gave it to God this year to expand it." With Dr. Margie Brown she has written a "Story Teller's Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles," which now awaits publication. One final note. Jean has a dog whose full name is Anastasis (I love that commitment to Greek), affectionately called "Annie." Thanks to Jean for her good work with the good news.

And to all of you Tellers of the Story, Blessings!

Robert H. Smith
Editor of Preaching Helps
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

First Sunday in Advent November 30,1997

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:1-10
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

Pastoral Reflections

The Gospel reading for the first day of the church year has us peek at the last page of the story—to Judgment Day—to see how it turns out. Why?

Readers claim justifications for peeking: to see how the story ends, to find out which characters are significant and which ones not to put a lot of faith in, to give the reader a sense of control during the suspense.

What do we learn about this story by taking this peek? One guess, given the context of the other Lectionary selections for the day, and that it's Advent, is that the story has something to do with restoring righteousness. Righteousness is a conspicuous word in the Jeremiah passage, occurring three times in verses 15-16. It's also an objective that reappears several times in other Sundays of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany.

Juxtaposing Jesus' words and Jeremiah's this week, we get the idea that righteousness won't be restored easily. There will be distress and confusion, fear and foreboding. And, when we pay attention to the cadence of the readings, we pick up Luke 21:32-33, when Jesus utters the scary phrase "pass away" three times in two verses. God, do you mean we have to *die* for righteousness to be restored?

We feel the beating of our heart. The word "heart" occurs in the readings every week throughout these three seasons (it does not occur in the Commemoration of the Holy Innocents; however, we are acutely aware on that day that Herod's heart is hardened and many hearts ache over the death of the babies).

It's not coincidence that the heart is conspicuous; we're talking about the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. As Luther was fond of pointing out, the Devil couldn't care less about the story of Jesus being a nice story or nice event in history, but when it becomes something in which your heart trusts, when Jesus becomes the means of grace and righteousness for you, then the Devil is defeated. So, "strengthen your hearts in holiness" and "be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down." You ain't seen nothin' yet.

Advent wrenches our heads and our hearts away from our familiar and beloved perishable existence to that of the mysterious and intangible imperishable. The long-awaited righteous Branch will sprout from the fallen fig tree—Creation has been telling us this story ever since the stars and the sun and the moon were put in the sky for signs (Gen 1:14). The whole story flashes past us in our Gospel reading:

"Sun, moon, stars as signs" alludes to the Creation in Genesis as well as the coming Judgment Day, and we are reminded of the distress and confusion of the fall of Israel and Judah, when the people worshipped these signs, and of the wise men led to the Christ child, a blessed and bloody story.

"Nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves" harks to the Great Flood in Genesis and to Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea and to Joshua and the crossing of the Jordan and the nations gathering to John the Baptist at the Jordan and to Pentecost and even to our dying in the waters of our own baptism.

"People fainting with fear and foreboding of what is coming" harks to the fall of the Divided Kingdoms and the destruction of

the temple and the judgment to come.

"The Son of Man coming in a cloud" harks to Daniel's vision which stoked the exiles' faith, and then to John's Revelation.

"Heaven and earth will pass away" harks to their creation in Genesis and their passing away in Revelation 21.

Incredible novel. We can peek at the first page or at the last to find what we need to sustain us through the middle. Kudos to the author.

Incredible life. Beginnings are as finite as endings; most of living, most of the fear and foreboding part, is done in between the two. Ask anyone who has just graduated. Or who just got divorced. Or who lost a spouse or parent or a child. Or who gave birth to a baby. There's distress and confusion and fear and foreboding when our world as we have come to know it ceases, and when we have to go past the loss or gain the goal and are peering into the poker-faced future.

In the 21st chapter of Luke, a widow's last mite becomes significant treasure, and the treasured temple faces a fate as a pile of rubble, and Jesus continues to teach his disciples about the story to prepare them for all that is to come.

When we peek at the end of the story, at first, it seems the only character left is the Son of Man in the clouds. Like it or not, creation's story is God's story. But, wait. *We* are there! We are the ones with the raised heads, or at least, Jesus wants us to be there—not losing our heads nor scattering in panic nor quivering under the bed, but with strong hearts and raised heads, looking upon the ebony silhouette of a cross against the radiance of the heavens, rent open to let in the new beginning.

Kudos to the Faith Giver. The end becomes the beginning. As soon as a Christian dies, we celebrate their resurrection.

Prayer of the Day: Gracious God, as we begin this church year and take up the Advent anticipation of the coming of our Christ, we thank you for our scriptures which tell us of your mercy and steadfast love. Through your Holy Spirit, make us always aware of your power and presence as we journey between the endings and beginnings of life. Amen

From Jean's Journal: "The church in a secular society provides the individual with an opportunity to participate now in the ultimate destiny of human life." Pannenberg

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #118, "Sing, My Tongue," to tune of REGENT SQUARE.

Second Sunday in Advent
December 7, 1997

Baruch 5:1-9 or Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 1:68-78
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

Pastoral Reflections

The first mountain falls and the first valley is lifted right in the first two verses of our Gospel reading.

In a way, it almost sounds like Luke is doing stand-up comedy to weary ears that know the story, inviting them in with humor. "In the fifteenth year of the big, important reign of all these emperors and governors, like, oh, Pontius Pilate, and rulers, like, oh, Herod, and high priests, like Annas and Caiaphas (it sure seems like Luke picks out examples that we'll all know, rulers who don't have a handle on what real power is), the word of God comes to some P.K. who's out in the wilderness.

The power of politics crumbles, and the powerless are lifted up by the hope of God's presence among them.

The word for "word" here is ρημα, uttering or sayings. If it had been *logos*, we could have speculated that Luke was continuing his comedy and writer's prowess with an intentional pun like the Easter pun, when the women go to the tomb when the sun (sounds like son, even in Greek) had risen. "The word of God comes to John. The Word of God, get it?" This Gospel must have been written before the Word hymn, "In the beginning was the Word...," that was so popular it was used to open the Gospel According to John.

And then, we wait for Luke to give us another chuckle, and instead we hear him quote prophet's words that are meant to encourage those who still have to face suffering and waiting. They are the words of Isaiah, but we also hear them from Jeremiah and his secretary, Baruch. We're not all on level ground yet.

In six verses, the Gospel raises our valley and levels our mountain. Now we know what Advent feels like.

It feels something like changing clothes in public, which is what Baruch talks about. It's wonderful to think about taking off garments of sorrow and affliction and putting on robes of righteousness and a crown of glory, but to do that, we have to endure an awkward moment of nakedness. To change clothes, you've got to risk, at some point, having no clothes on! You have to risk feeling vulnerable and imperfect and conspicuous—like you feel when you truly confess and repent. Some people refuse to change clothes because of the exposure. Some refuse to repent, deceiving themselves that they can retain sin or withhold forgiveness and continue to be healthy. Some people, when they are depressed or sick, prefer to stay in their comfortable old clothes.

Advent challenges us to change our ways as we change our clothes, but to change them for righteousness' sake. In the gruesome Malachi reading, those who love evil strip people *past* their nakedness!

As I write this, we are confirming our eighth graders. I always point out to them the top of page 201 of the *LBW*, where we ask them to do powerful, difficult things, "to live among God's faithful people...to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed...to serve all people...to strive for justice and peace in *all* the earth." But I point out that they don't have to do it alone. They answer, "I do, and I ask God to help and guide me." (Guess you *can* still get good help these days.)

It sounds good to have everybody on an equal plain, but it's another thing to be stripped of power and height and depth and bends and twists. And the more we need to be stripped, the harder it is. But we don't have to do it alone. Advent challenges us to level living, but points to Christmas, when God takes off the robes of deity and puts on the humblest clothes of a diaper and a diadem of thorns—all so that we can be changed and righteousness restored.

"Will you take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction and put on the robes of righteousness?"

"I will, and I ask God to help and guide me (and please don't laugh)."

Prayer of the Day: Gracious God, open our ears today so that we may hear the Baptist's cry to repentance, and help and guide us to prepare and see the pathway for your coming. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

From Jean's Journal: Here's a story that teaches us that it's wiser to change our ways and risk nakedness than to rely only on ourselves; I heard it from the Rev. Jay Ford in 1991. One foggy night at sea the captain

of a ship saw what looked like the lights of another ship heading toward him. He had his signalman contact the other ship by light. The message was: "Change your course ten degrees to the south." The reply came back: "Change *your* course ten degrees to the north." Then the captain answered: "I am a captain, so you change *your* course ten degrees to the south." Reply: "I am a seaman first class—change *your* course ten degrees to the north." This last exchange really infuriated the captain, so he signaled back: "I am a battleship—change *your* course ten degrees to the south." Reply: "I am a lighthouse. Change *your* course ten degrees to the north!"

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #36, "On Jordan's Bank The Baptist's Cry"

Third Sunday in Advent
December 14, 1997

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Isaiah 12:2-6
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

Pastoral Reflections

We start off with more rejoicing than we've gotten in the first two Sundays of Advent. "Sing aloud.... Rejoice and exult with all your heart" (from Zephaniah); "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (from Isaiah); "Rejoice in the Lord always" (from Philippians). It seems that our faith and waiting are going to pay off.

It's interesting that the first verse of the Isaiah passage isn't included in the pericope. The whole chapter is only six verses; why do we only get five? Last week, we heard the whole chapter of rarely heard, barely known Baruch. Why don't we get the complete thought of good old Isaiah?

Verse one is:

"You will say in that day:
I will give thanks to you,
O LORD,
for though you were angry
with me,
your anger turned away,
and you comforted me.

After condemning Jerusalem, the prophet promises comfort and consolation to those who wait patiently and serve God. The inhabitants of Jerusalem shall rejoice that their God is in their midst to save them and gather them home. Including this verse would make this pericope a nice parallel to the Gospel's scene, where John exhorts and then immerses.

Why isn't this verse included? Is it because we don't want God sounding like Santa Claus so close to Christmas ("You'd better watch out! You'd better not cry! You'd better not pout!")? Or is it that verse one would pile too much anxiety on us for this week?

Anxiety hits us in the Gospel reading, tempering the rejoicing. In verse 15, the people are apprehensive, fearful—the word is προσδοκια—and they are questioning, διαλογιζομαι, in their hearts. They wonder who John is, if he is the messiah, and they get two choices: to believe or to reject. The plain of anxiety is a fertile bed, one where joy can be choked out by the weed called doubt.

In the fifth chapter of his systematic theology opus, *God—the World's Future* (Augsburg Fortress, 1992), Ted Peters offers a discussion about anxiety that I often refer to.

"Anxiety is the prelude to sin," Peters states. "In itself, anxiety is not sin; but it stands before us like fruit on the tree of knowledge, tempting us toward aggression" (p. 156). Later, he writes, "In itself anxiety

is not sin, because there is the possibility that an anxious person could live in faith" (p. 157). There are Christians who despair when anxiety and doubt creep in, but, see, it's okay to have anxiety; it's one of the reactions we can have to stuff.

It was a big, undefined crowd, an ὄχλος, who had come out, like cunning snakes, to this appealing ascetic's baptism ritual, and they were all anxious to do what would be good for them come Judgment Day.

We all have our anxieties about what will be written about us in the book kept at the pearly gates which will gain us entry: "I see you were baptized. Welcome." "I see you are descended from Abraham. Welcome." "I see you faithfully took Communion at least once a year. You're in." "I see you confessed on your death bed—close timing!"

The people asked, "What will we do?" And John's answer seems pretty logical, really, nothing brilliantly new for Jews. "Live out the commandments. Live out Jubilee Year ethics. Duh." But it appears to John that the people are hoping they can take a bath but keep their old habits.

While it's okay to have anxiety, it's not okay to stay there or to digress. As a pastor, I hear people say, "I know this isn't Christian, but...." And I ache to be able to grab them by the throat and say, "You viper, you! If you know it isn't Christian, why are you letting it rule you?"

Advent aches for us to live by God's ethics. So, why do we stay in our sin?

To hear from Peters again, "Despite God's gracious call to fulfillment, however, there seems to be a proclivity in human thought and action that resists God's intention. Instead of answering the call forward, we choose to fixate ourselves in an unchanging present. Instead of answering the call to wholeness, we choose partiality. Fixation and partiality cannot help but produce destruction. To choose fixation and partiality is to choose sin; and the result is evil. Instead of becoming human, we find ourselves awash in unbecoming evil" (p. 155).

I like IDB also; it's a little more succinct. "Stagnation is not necessarily a religious virtue." (Vol. 1, p. 719)

The promise is that there will be rejoicing in heaven over a sinner who repents. Let's get on with the baptism so we can go to the party called eternal living.

Prayer of the Day: Almighty and merciful God, move us this Advent day to prepare our hearts for the coming of our Christ by choosing to live by your commandments, and lead us from the gurglings of doubt to the songs of faith. Amen.

Jean's Journal: "Standing on the promises is not the same as sitting in the pews."
Don Abdon

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #556, "Herald, Sound the Note of Judgment," sung to the tune of REGENT SQUARE

Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 21, 1997

Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 1:47-55 or Psalm 80:1-7
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

Pastoral Reflections

Luke creates more anxiety in us in this week's Gospel reading.

Hey! But, it's the final Sunday of Advent. Only three more days. Many of us have our trees up, packages wrapped, and we are more ready to listen to Handel's *Messiah*, "Comfort ye my people," than we are to scoot up in our pews and do some more pondering about what God is doing in this story, not to mention in our lives.

Advent continues its stirring in us, in our hearts. Not all the mountains have tumbled yet.

Luke sets up a commonplace encounter that we are rarely privileged to in our Holy Scriptures: the intimate meeting of two pregnant women. Both have experienced angel encounters and extraordinary conceptions. Poor old Elizabeth has been secluded for six months with a husband who hasn't been able to hold a conversation. Little Mary could have been stoned! Mary rushes over to Elizabeth's house, hot on the heels of the Annunciation, and Elizabeth's baby turns somersaults. These two women have a lot of interesting things to say to each other. We scoot up on the edge of our pews, ears alert.

And then Luke, instead of giving us a CPE verbatim, carefully restricts their emotions and exclamations to those more like the carefully controlled reactions of pious priests in public. I'm certain that eventually Elizabeth and Mary came to understand how God employed them in the salvation story, but I'm just as certain that they didn't draw these conclusions this quickly and that this isn't literally what they said to each other, and this makes me anxious (and those who insist on taking the Gospels literally will also get anxious by a statement like this). Luke is inserting theology here. Another most disturbing detail comes in verse 56, which, by the way, just missed making it into this pericope. (How come the Lectionary chops off chapters at a single verse?) Young Mary ends her three-month visit when Elizabeth is *nine months along!* She doesn't stay to be with her elderly kinswoman through her labor and witness the birth of this miracle baby? I don't think so.

The Gospel writers, those who knew the human Jesus and the resurrected Christ, never really give faithful humans full permission to be only human anymore. There are stories in the Gospels where humans act only human (take the rich young man, for example), but they do so at the expense of the righteousness that has been visiting us in our Advent pericopes.

Elizabeth and Mary have had some kind of stuff happen to them, for sure! Stuff happens. We get bowled over by the bends and twists and other travelers along life's road. The Gospel writers are empowering us to the kind of faithful living that gives us the stamina to get back up and keep going. I believe we can only do that when we look at what has happened to us in order to see what God is doing for us and by us for others' sakes.

Elizabeth and Mary, as only human, perhaps more likely would have made a pot of tea and talked and talked and talked, like you do when you visit relatives. However, Luke stringently scripts and choreographs their visit so that they don't act only human. But it's not to put down humanness; it's to testify that with the inbreaking of the Word Incarnate, godliness has fulfilled the humanness we were created to be. Now we can

have hearts strong enough and we can raise our heads to fully encounter what's to come, because of Emmanuel, God with us—with us in everything that happens to us. We are becoming the image we were created in.

Hmm. The peek at the end of the story that we were privileged to enjoy on the First Sunday of Advent visits us again. The Lectionary has taken us full circle in our Advent season. Advent would have us scoot up on the edge of our pews, ready to take in once again the wonderful miracle of Christmas.

Prayer of the day: Gracious God, thank you for the witness and faith of Elizabeth and Mary, the mothers of John and Jesus. Bless our ears and hearts as we grow with them into clearer understanding of what you do for all the world through the Christ child. We pray in his holy name. Amen.

From Jean's Journal: "Worship is one place where, like it or not, one will bump into God." Quote from Epiphany '97 event in Sacramento—I am not certain who said this, but it might have been the Rev. Noreen Meginness who preached at the event.

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #285, "Spirit of God, Sent from Heaven Abroad" (vv. 1-3), or #231, "O Word of God Incarnate," or #417, "In a Lowly Manger Born."

Christmas Day
December 25, 1997

Isaiah 62:6-12
Psalm 97
Titus 3:4-7
Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

Pastoral Reflections

One of the biggest letdowns for me, as a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ, is puny church attendance on Christmas Day. We've had four weeks of preparation, of prophets' exhortations, of promises of justice and peace, of knowing that God is gracious and merciful to us poor, miserable sinners. On the eve of the day, people even come out to worship late at night. The actual day comes, however, and many of God's people don't come to worship. Stressed out from preparations and expectations, prioritizing family and traditions and bright paper packages, they aren't perched on the edge of the pews taking in, once again, the miracle of Christmas.

I suppose we are kin to the shepherds in Luke's manger scene. Let's take a closer look at these surprising sentinels (they certainly aren't the sentinels Isaiah was writing about, are they?).

The shepherds were "keeping watch over their flocks by night." The expression is φυλάσσοντες φυλακὰς τῆς νυκτὸς ἐπὶ τὴν ποίμνην αὐτῶν. If we become meticulously literal in the translation, we could say that the shepherds were guarding their night watch, which happened to be watching sheep. That is, they were tending to their job of watching sheep, not tending to the sheep. They are like the hired hand in John 10, who abandons the flock when a wolf comes. After all, they do abandon their sheep, at night, to go find the baby. Sometimes we're the same. We trust more in

believing than we do in God. That's part of the reason we have inactive members who resist being purged from the books.

Shepherds were despised and unreliable. Luke levels another mountain in his depiction of shepherds being serenaded by an army of angels and being the first witnesses of the Christ child. But then, after they are visited by angels and see for themselves an angel omen in the flesh, the Messiah no less, *the shepherds go back to being shepherds!* Isn't that just like us humans? We experience the in-breaking of the extraordinary and then go back home and put on a pot of coffee. We're talking about God coming to earth here! I get a little disappointed that people can hear this news and then say, "That's nice, dear." No wonder God had to save us, "not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy."

The blessing in Luke's manger scene for me is Mary, pondering in her heart. The verb is συμβάλλω, literally, to throw together, maybe even to piece together, like sewing remnants into a quilt. Mary, sweaty and soiled from giving birth, opens her heart and throws in angels and shepherds and straw and afterbirth and her firstborn. She's a much-needed reminder to me that people don't have to come to church to encounter or to give thanks to God.

Prayer of the Day: Gracious and merciful God, we bless you this holy day in thanks for the birth of our Christ, the witness of the shepherds, and the heart of Mary. Help us to retain the awe and wonder of Christmas. Amen.

From Jean's Journal:
This is a Repeat-After-Me Story that makes a great children's sermon, although adults have fun doing it, too. Make up obvious hand gestures to illustrate each line and have the "kids" repeat everything you say and do.

One fine day in heaven
God yelled, "Gabriel,
I need you to go to earth
You've great news to tell."
So I spread my angel wings
Having wings is nice
And I polished my angel halo
In fact, I polished it twice
And in the twinkle of a star,
Which is how an angel flies,
I appeared to a girl named Mary
And I said to her, "Surprise!
Mary, do not be afraid,
Although you'll think it odd,
You've been made a chosen one
And you're having a baby, by God!"
Then I flew to the star manufacturer
Said, "Make the biggest star you're able."
And I hung it in the heavens
So it would shine upon a stable
Then I summoned an angel choir
And we unzipped the sky
And sang about Peace on Earth
To shepherds in the night
I did a lot of amazing things
Some funny, I suppose,
But the mostest amazingest thing was when
God put on baby clothes!
And every year at Christmas time
All the world recall
That God became the Only Son
A Babe born in a stall
And of a virgin, Mary
Such a simple birth
The baby grew then died
His resurrection shook the earth
Some people didn't believe it then
Some don't believe today
That God, almighty and powerful,
Would save the earth this way
But I believe

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #50, "Angels From the Realms of Glory"

Holy Innocents
December 28, 1997

Jeremiah 31:15-17
1 Peter 4:12-19
Psalm 124
Matthew 2:13-18

Pastoral Reflections

I had a dream that I was in a Christmas shop looking over bins of creche characters you could buy piece by piece. Some of the bins contained statuettes of the slaughtered remains of infants from Matthew's manger scene.

Two events caused my brain to concoct this vision. The first was when my Bible-study buddy and I, during an evening of silliness (both of us prescribe occasional, intentional silliness for those who work in the church), created a creche out of Spam™ and string cheese. She and I had won first place in the Spam™ cooking contest at the County Fair that year; that's why we were playing with this tinned pork product, you see. When you carve figures like Joseph and Gabriel and a donkey out of Spam™, you end up with odd bits and pieces. We piled some up behind Herod's castle (we were making the most complete manger scene there ever was) and called them "the slaughtered remains of the infants." It was therapeutic dark humor to help us through the bloody part of the Christmas pageant. The second event was when my sister gifted me with our mom's treasured creche a year and a half after Mom's death and two months after Dad's. Death gets on my mind now at Christmas.

Difficult as it may be for us, Matthew has us struggle with fitting death in amongst our pretty manger scene and Yuletide tinsel. He gives us several "scriptural speed bumps" (this is a highly hermeneutical term that I learned in seminary and refers to something in a text that forces you to slow down).

First is his quoting Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." It's not a verbatim quote from the Hebrew nor from the Septuagint. Is Matthew quoting from a scroll that didn't make it into posterity or sloppily misquoting from memory? Or is he inserting theology about Jesus here?

In the next verse, for Herod's outrage, Matthew uses the verb θυμοομαι. He also uses the emphatic λιαν. So he is talking about Herod being really mad here, mad enough to be insane. The noun of anger, derived from the same root, appears numerous times, but here is the only time in the entire New Testament that the verb form is used. We slow down for rare appearances.

His Jeremiah quote is also not verbatim from the Hebrew nor the Septuagint, and it is a quote that puzzles biblical scholars. It's hard to explain, so hang in here with me. Ramah is 8 miles from Jerusalem, not near Bethlehem. It is not where Rachel died, but is the site of national grief for Israel. Rachel's tomb, according to Gen 35:19, is at Ephrath, which *is* 1 mile north of Bethlehem. Rachel would be weeping from her tomb for the death of her children, since she died giving birth to Benoni/Benjamin. But, the reference to Ephrath in Genesis is in a gloss used to elaborate on Ephrathah, which is near Jerusalem, not Bethlehem. For a Gospel that became known as the Teaching Gospel, Matthew sure has a lot of inaccuracies. Or intentional speed bumps.

Rachel's crying is the third we have heard. The first was John's prophetic voice crying in the wilderness. The second was the baby Jesus being born in the manger. The third cry, so different from those of exhortation and new life, might be the Lectionary's speed bump meant more to slow us down and to console us over the death of innocent babes than to prove that God ties up all

prophetic loose ends. Christmas contains crying and carols. Eventually, we all come to experience this.

Humans die while God saves the Christ child, who is eventually going to die to save us. Why? Baby Jesus was the Only Son of God, sent in love to save us, and he was just as innocent as a newborn as he was when he was crucified 30 years later. If he had died as an infant by Herod's hand and, three days later, God raised him to life again, there would have been a salvific resurrection miracle.

The difference is in the 30-something years in which humans got to know Jesus.

If the proverbial tree falls in a deserted forest, does anybody care if it makes a noise? Does it matter? Surely God could save us without our knowing; at the least, God could have let the Christ baby be killed and resurrected. But who would have known? It must matter for us to know Jesus and to know that we are saved by him.

Knowing that we are precious enough for God Almighty to save us by grace gives extraordinary value to our lives now, and not just to our birth and death, but to all the terrific and terrible and joyful and woeful times in between. When God saved the God child, it was for the sake of the gospel, which converts and consoles us during the in-between times of our lives by assuring us of our salvation. There wouldn't be much of a gospel story to tell if God had let the baby die and be raised to life again, and who would have been there to tell it, Jesus' mom and some scraggly shepherds?

It hurts our hearts that babies had to die. But we've known from the beginning of Advent, when we peeked at the end, that righteousness isn't won without cost. Those little ones died so that we might know Christ.

Prayer of the Day: Gracious God, we pray today for the innocent ones who died by Herod's unreasonable anger and for their parents who wept. Help us to give you thanks for what was won for us by their martyrdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

From Jean's Journal: A cheer from 1 Peter 4:12-19: "Lean to the left, lean to the right. Suffer, suffer, fight, fight, fight!"

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #413, "Father Eternal, Ruler of Creation," vv. 1, 4, 5 (This is a difficult tune; perhaps the hymn could be read responsively.)

Second Sunday after Christmas
January 4, 1998

Jeremiah 31:7-14 or Sirach 24:1-12
Psalm 147:12-20 or Wisdom 10:15-21
Ephesians 1:3-14
John 1:(1-9) 10-18

Pastoral Reflections

I recently had an awesome conversation with a fifth-grader who is struggling in his mind and heart with questions about how God can have no beginning. "How can something exist before everything begins? When God began, wasn't that the real beginning? How can you have no beginning?"

This child of God is working hard to understand his God; he is hovering over the chaos of faith.

As a child, I had that kind of struggle, too. Mine was wanting to understand why God created the world. Mom used to come in at night and tell me to "Stop thinking and go to sleep." But thanks be to God who calls children, even above Mom, to struggle at knowing their God. Here is my answer the best I can explain it. Today anyway.

Before the beginning, there was God, and the Word and Wisdom were with God, and the Word and Wisdom were God.

God was filled with the Word and was inseparable from the Word. The Word, in essence, was "I love you," because God is love. That has to be the Word of love. But there was no one to speak it to and no place to go to be in love. Before the beginning, love lay trapped inside love, like life trapped in a tomb. Love contained *in* love is totally different than love springing *from* love. It is perfect love with no way to be perfected. It is great love with no one to give its all to so to be great. Creation wasn't a serendipitous whim; it was the Word leaping in God's womb, burning in God's κολπος, God's bosom/heart. It was love that couldn't be contained.

God was filled with Wisdom. But before the beginning, there was no one for Wisdom to pour itself out upon, and wisdom unshared is not wisdom.

And so, before the beginning, before there was Creation for God to be God of, God, who was all, was also not. When there is no "you" there is no "I" and love exists in the middle of nothing.

Creation isn't an act of grace, it is purely God being God.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Bang! Begun! (NRA's version: Be gun! Bang!) "And the earth was without form and void. And the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of the deep." Everything all became at once and was chaos, like trying to get puppies to line up. But God brooded over the chaos lovingly and wisely and uttered the Word, released it from its womb-tomb, and it came out beaming. The Word was spoken over the chaos, and it was love at first light.

We are being changed, charged with the work of the Holy Spirit. All of us encounter chaos—sometimes, we must confess, we even create chaos. What do we do? Let love be genuine so that we can be genuine.

We don't feel lovable when we are in chaos; we don't want to approach and love others who are thrashing around in chaos. Stepping up to chaos and saying, "I love you," is explosive, always has been and ever will be. It wasn't created to be easy, but it was created to work. I think of a teary and tousled tot who is soothed back to smiles by a parent's loving attention. When we can say "I love you" to another, and when we can hear it, in our need, from another, we put the darkness in its place.

Prayer of the Day: Loving and all-knowing God, we give you thanks for the love and wisdom that has poured from you and given us life. Teach us, as your co-creators, to act in the same love and wisdom, to face the chaos in our lives, and to offer ourselves to others who are in chaos. Teach us the orderliness and power of saying, "I love you." We pray in the name of your love incarnate, Jesus our Christ. Amen.

From Jean's Journal: "Well, so that is that" by W. H. Auden

Well, so that is that.
Now we dismantle the tree
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—some have gotten broken—and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and mistletoe must be taken down and burnt, the children got ready for school.
There are enough leftovers to do, warmed up, for the rest of the week—
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot, stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—to love all our relatives, and in general, grossly overestimated our powers.
Once again, as in previous years, we

have seen the actual vision and failed to do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility, once again we have sent Him away begging though to remain His disobedient servant, the promising child who cannot keep his word for long.

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #315, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling"

The Baptism of Our Lord January 11, 1998

Isaiah 43:1-7
Psalm 29
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Pastoral Reflections

The Gospel pericope starts with verses that we've heard before, on the Third Sunday of Advent. They have us revisit the anxious hearts of the people who have come out to possibly participate in a ritual.

It is helpful, as long as the Lectionary already has us looking back, to revisit the pericope for the Second Sunday of Advent as well—Luke 3:1-6.

Luke's version of John the Baptist's preaching and Jesus' baptism differs from the other two synoptic Gospels; we pay attention to variations. In the Second Sunday of Advent, Luke begins uniquely with a roster of political and religious leaders and concludes extending his citation from Isaiah 40 to the fourth and fifth verses, which prophesies to God's universal effect. The next Sunday, Luke fleshes out the ὄχλος in verses 7-20. They are an eclectic crowd: Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots, Greeks, Romans, tax collectors, tax payers, soldiers, civilians, leaders, led, misled....

The people have come out *en masse* to something new, which causes anxiety in their hearts. This was not the entrance rite for proselytes nor the daily purification rite for the ascetic Essenes (which, by the way, is easy to say ten times fast). John was preaching a baptism of repentance and forgiveness for everyone. Is this the universal effect? Is this why Luke extended the Isaiah 40 quote?

Why does the Lectionary choose verses 15-17, which we've heard before, and then skip to 21-22, on the Sunday when we commemorate Jesus' baptism? Perhaps it wants us to keep our focus on the crowd.

Luke makes a significant vocabulary change in verse 21. Instead of reusing ὄχλος, Luke uses λαος to refer to the people. The Greek word λαος is generally used to refer to a defined crowd. It's like a nationality word. When we run across this word in the New Testament, the writer is usually referring to the Jews, to the nation of God's people. But those who are baptized here are not exclusively Jews. I wonder if Luke is depicting the birth of a new nation in this baptism scene. Stick with me here.

The scene is "Now when all the people (λαος) were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

But wait! Check out the footnote in your Oxford Annotated. Some manuscripts have "You are my Son. Today I have begotten you." So, which is it, Luke? Did God recite from Psalm 2:7 or Isaiah 42:1? Is God referring *only* to Jesus? We've always thought of it that way before.

However, the word "begotten" implies conception. Is Jesus, Son of God and Son of Humans, being reborn? Or are we witnessing the procreation through baptism of the Body of Christ? Is this diverse crowd the one

that is baptized with water here and will be baptized with fire on Pentecost? Was Jesus changed or were the people changed and Jesus anointed by the dove as their Head?

The Roman census is unique to Luke as well. This census was an affront to the Jews; it was Rome's denial of their position as the people, the λαος, of God. Emperor Augustus, in those days, had himself worshipped as a god. Being forced as a Jew to participate in this Roman census was being forced to pledge allegiance to a false deity. Is Luke comforting anxious hearts by showing baptism of repentance and forgiveness to be redemption and rebirth of those who had been forced to die?

Luther taught us to remember our baptism when we need comfort and assurance. Maybe he took his cue from Luke.

The first reading, also in Isaiah, makes a beautiful baptism prayer for this day. If you have a baptism, why not substitute it for Luther's water prayer?

Prayer of the Day: Gracious God, Creator and Redeemer, through the waters of baptism you have made us your own. Sustain our hearts, when they grow weary with fear and anxiety, with the assurance that we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Amen.

From Jean's Journal: This story illustrates how many can be changed by the sacrifice of one.

In a concentration camp in Japan during WWII, the game of life shriveled up into the game of survival for the prisoners. Even the thought of being able to end up in the poor house was merely the stuff of fantasy. The object, day after day, was to make it through alive. And each prisoner did what he had to —stole food, hoarded whatever medical supplies were given, betrayed fellow inmates to the guards to win a favor, maybe get a break.

One day, a guard rounded up all of the prisoners a little early from work duty. That was unusual. The guard announced that a shovel was missing. He threatened, but no shovel was produced. Finally, the guard said, "If the man who stole that shovel doesn't step forward, I will shoot all of you." What were they to him? His job was to keep account of the supplies.

Finally, the man stepped forward and the guard shot him.

When they put away the supplies later, somebody discovered that no shovel was ever missing.

After a while, prisoners who were stronger and healthier shared their food with weaker ones. Medications were pooled and prisoners helped dress each others' wounds. A secret system of communications known only among the prisoners was developed—especially for the benefit of the new prisoners.

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #182, "Rise, O Children of Salvation"

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 18, 1998

Isaiah 62:1-5
Psalm 36:5-10
1 Corinthians 12:1-11
John 2:1-11

Pastoral Reflections

I get the feeling that the Gospel writer and the Lectionary want us to be thinking about something other than Jesus changing water into wine at a wedding.

"On the third day...." Why does the writer use this phrase? Is it merely a break from using "the next day," which he has already used three times (1:29, 35, 43)? Or is he using an idiom? This phrase was an idiom of the time; it was kind of kin to our phrase "just around the corner." Once, I heard someone speculate that literally counting the days mentioned in the Gospel thus far (four plus three) puts this event on the seventh day, which indicates, in Hebrew yore, a time of completeness—a perfect time for Jesus to perform a sign. But when I hear "On the third day," I hear the sound of women's sandals scuffling toward a tomb in the light of dawn, when the sun had just arisen.

"...there was a wedding"—preceded by a phrase that draws my mind to the resurrection, this wedding draws my mind to the great marriage feast, like the one Isaiah was talking about, like the ones in Jesus' stories, not just this one he attended.

When I hear, "And Jesus said to her, 'Woman...'" I hear Jesus speaking from the cross. Just as this event is unique to the Gospel of John, so is the scene when Jesus gives his mother's care over to a disciple. I wonder if these are the only two times in this Gospel when we hear Jesus directly address his mother.

"My hour has not yet come"—I know what hour Jesus is talking about.

"...six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification...." What are a half dozen giant temple jars doing in this house? Maybe the reception was at the church! But, since we are hearing this story one week after the story of Jesus' baptism, these water jars make me think more about Jesus' next baptism, into his death and resurrection, when he would pour himself out for our salvation.

The spotlight is definitely following Jesus around. He is the only one named in the story. We can't push a permanent pin into the map to locate this Cana, a town unique to John's Gospel, home town of Jesus' disciple, Nathanael, also unique to this Gospel. We might not even get a glimpse of the bride and groom, because the toastmaster didn't go up to them, he called (φωνεω) to them, maybe just raising his glass toward the wings of the stage.

The clincher, however, is the water/wine. I see the water and the blood ("...he took a cup, saying, 'This is my blood'") pouring from Jesus' side. The side piercing, and the witness by only the soldiers of the pouring of blood and water, is also unique to John's Gospel.

God saved the best wine until the hour of the Son. Now the kingdom of God is at hand. Now is the time for righteousness to be restored. Restored by the Savior, we feast on the body and blood given for our righteousness. We feast today, to nourish our faith, so that it will be our strength for the days that make up our "now." And we eat a foretaste of the feast to come! This best will pass away, and a new best is coming.

Prayer of the Day: Almighty God, we bless you and thank you for the signs he performed that revealed the glory and mission of Jesus the Christ and for the gifts of Word and Sacrament, which continue to reveal your

love and glory. Amen.

From Jean's Journal: "When you care enough to send the very best, you come yourself, if you're God." Dr. Robert Goeser

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #197, "O Living Bread from Heaven."

Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Conversion of St. Paul) January 25, 1998

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

Pastoral Reflections

Over the next two Sundays, we get a story of Jesus preaching in his home synagogue. Next week, we focus on what's on the minds of the people who hear Jesus. This week, let's dare to focus on the thoughts in Jesus' mind.

Luke 4 gives us a glimpse of the birth of Jesus' call to ministry. Like many call stories, Jesus' starts with testing from the darkness.

God separated the darkness from the light; God didn't completely eradicate it (*ergo*, God knows why we have to deal with the darkness). Darkness has established its roots in corners and shadows and stage wings and wildernesses and endings and beginnings, waiting for us to let ourselves be vulnerable.

After Jesus is baptized, he enters the darkness of wilderness. We see a mini-parallel when we confirm 8th-graders and send them to high school. As pastors and preachers, we most likely have our own initial testing story too.

Jesus, being more our role model here than our Savior, stands up to the testing. He spews out his barmitzphah memory work, stands on the promises, leans on his faith, all the stuff we get exhorted to rely on when darkness leaps upon us.

Bursting with the power of the Holy Spirit, the buoyancy of faith, Jesus takes on Galilean towns with great success. Then Luke brings Jesus home, back to where he's more the Carpenter's kid than the son of God or the charismatic itinerant preacher. Here, a second test begins, but it's more our test than Jesus.'

Jesus shows up at his home synagogue, and the crowd murmurs, perpetuating rumors and truths of what they've heard he's been doing. He's a hit in Galilee, but who are they, those Galileans? What do they know?

Jesus is handed the scroll and reads from Isaiah; then, when all eyes are fixed on him for interpretation, he simply says, for all to believe or reject, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

What's going on in Jesus' mind at this point? Does he realize that he is proclaiming something new to people who kill new news? That's been their history. Something new happens and they either whine or wield weapons. In the Nehemiah reading for this Sunday, Ezra enjoys a hearty reception at first because he isn't reading the people anything new; he has merely unearthed what they already cherish, though temporarily had lost: the Law of the Lord, more to be desired than fine gold.

Is there a sadness to Jesus' voice as he reads Isaiah? Or is that frustration or something?

Things haven't really changed with believers today. As consumers, people buy "New and Improved," but when it comes to religious matters, a lot of people still prefer "Eternally the Same." They want nothing

that will disturb the scrap of faith they've managed to master and think they can use that against all the challenges of life.

Hey! Wait just a minute! We were supposed to be focusing on Jesus' experience in this temple drama, and here we are back, turned on ourselves, *en curvatis in sei.*

If we say we are not *en curvatis in sei,* we deceive ourselves, and we can't even enjoy a moment of what our Jesus may be thinking.

Maybe that's why Jesus read the text he read. Maybe he was sent to relieve the poor, release the captive, and restore sight to the blind because he was sent to help those caught in their own predicament so tightly that they can't help themselves. To be freed from *en curvatis in sei,* we need to give it all up to Jesus, uncurl our grip and release it from our hands. And, we do. Indeed, today this scripture has been fulfilled.

Prayer of the Day: Gracious God, thank you for sending us a Servant Savior to model for us the life of faith. Free us to follow him and to be captivated by his love. Amen.

From Jean's Journal: Here's a joke I heard from Dr. Jane Strohl. "How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: *Change?*"

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #133, "Jesus Lives! The Vict'ry's Won!"

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 1, 1998

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

Pastoral Reflections

This Sunday's Gospel is a real cliff hanger. Jesus reads a prophetic passage, sits down, and says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The verb is πεπληρωται, and the tense Jesus uses indicates to his listeners that he is saying that it has happened and is happening now; the servant has come, and the people will taste freedom. You might say that it's like a feast for today and a foretaste of a feast to come. Jesus always presses us to live in the now and in the now to come, where hope frolics freely.

The people listening to Jesus are amazed, stupefied. Instead of asking, "What do you mean?" they turn to each other and say, "Is not this Joseph's son?" They seem more bent on weakening his credentials now than on listening to what he has to say to them. They prefer to stay in the now and the what has been. They've gone a long time believing in the coming of this servant; the very idea that the servant has come and gone and now it's up to them is too scary. They've gone a long time claiming that God instituted among them the Jubilee Year; the very idea that it's now and they are going to have to actually observe it is too scary.

We recall other prophetic words, "Those with ears, let them hear."

Jesus counters their attempt to destroy his credentials with adages, "Doctor, cure yourself!", "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." He highlights stories

where God's grace was extended to Gentiles, when God's own turned away. He does so to toss responsibility back to the people. Jesus proclaimed the truth; let the people believe or reject. They're getting a servant, not a stand-in to live their life for them. Let's create the sayings, not let them create us.

Apparently, the congregation consisted of folks who wanted to get their obligatory worship out of the way for the day but not be transformed by the Scriptures and the truth and the Savior among them. I have to confess, there may be folks like this that sit in the pews in my church. They are quick to accuse the preacher of personalizing the sermon when it speaks to them instead of acknowledging that God's Word can still reach out and touch them—yes, them personally.

Jesus' congregation is filled with rage. They drive him out of town and up onto the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. Apparently, they are filled with blind rage or become a faceless, eyeless, brainless mob. Jesus turns around and passes through the midst of them. It's no more a miracle than human nature is.

What a cliff hanger. They came to worship God, and the Son of God stepped into their midst! It was like they prayed, "Come, Lord Jesus," and Jesus said, "Okay," and came! Jesus opened their Holy Scriptures and started to teach them and to reach them. They were pleased and amazed and outraged—people don't have these kinds of emotions unless they are being touched. "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (Jn 1:11). They let God just slip through their fingers.

Epiphany is the season of light and of the revelation of Emmanuel. This Sunday leads us to a cliff, the cliff that looks down into the darkness of our own anger and objection to how God is acting in our lives today. Do we jump or turn to the light?

Prayer of the Day: Oh bright and glorious God, we thank you for graciously revealing yourself to us through word and sacrament. Forgive us our anger and rejection. Clear our eyes. Open our ears. Empower us to see and believe. Amen.

From Jean's Journal: "We are twisted people talking to twisted people about an untwisted and untwisting God." Gardner C. Taylor at the 1994 Preaching Days at PLTS.

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #218, "Strengthen for Service, Lord."

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 8, 1998

Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13)
Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Luke 5:1-11

Pastoral Reflections

Simon laid the washed and untangled net precisely on top of the pile at the opposite end of the boat, so that it would sail clean in that night's casting. He stretched. Only one more to go. It was going to feel good to get home to his wife, get out of these drenched clothes, bathe, slip into a fresh tunic, and lie outside in this warm sunshine. It had been a rotten night of fishing.

He hoisted the last net, heavy, sopping, fishy, up onto his lap and began to scrape. And just then, he looked up. What was that? At first it looked like some kind of throbbing puddle on the horizon. And it was growing! Ah, it's people. Holy menorahroni, what a crowd!

Just then he ran across a snarl. He

looked down and worked it loose. It only took seconds. Then he looked up again. Wait. They are much closer than a crowd that size can move, aren't they? Wait. There's a leader!

There was a single figure, a man, walking fast to keep ahead of the enthusiastic and clearly needy mob. For a moment, it looked like the guy was going to get knocked over and crushed. Wait. That's Jesus, the carpenter's son, the one that stirred things up in the temple that day. The one that rebuked the fever from his mother-in-law. Oh, no, he wouldn't.

Quickly, Simon began scraping with what he hoped looked like genuine concentration, like a hard-working man with something to do and somewhere else to go. But the shadow grew over him, and two sandal-clad feet stopped, right in front of him. For a moment, Simon stared at the knots in the thongs of the sandals, and then, slowly, reluctantly, but compulsively, he looked up.

As he pulled the oars through the choppy Gennesaret, Simon couldn't believe that he had actually put off shore. Jesus' crowd lined the shore, some even wading into the shallow. And then he began to address the crowd from the boat! Simon bent his head stiffly forward, hoping he could find another tangle in his nets to work on.

Why did you look up, you idiot? You could be heading for home right now. What a chump. Wait. What did he just say?

That was good teaching. I wish I had been paying attention. Hup! Class must be dismissed; the crowd is leaving.

"Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

Oh, yeah, right. Who does this guy think he is?

"Um, Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing."

Simon looked up into Jesus' face—and felt like he might have just said the stupidest thing in all of creation, or not.

"Yet if you say so, I will, ah, let down the nets." When they come up full, I'll start teaching too. I'll do your job, you do mine.

The nets sailed cleanly. It was a beautiful cast. Drat. So much for basking in the sun today.

Jesus and Simon sat in the sound of the sea lapping against the boat. There was peace. There was anxiety. There was confidence. There was skepticism. Fishing is a funny business. There's a lot of physical labor, but the hard work is the waiting.

Simon tried a couple times to say something; Jesus never once. Once, Simon caught a long look at Jesus' face and shoulders; he was at least as weary as Simon was.

Then the boat rocked sharply. Simon's stomach turned. There was a pretty good sized catch in the nets. Wait. There must be a huge catch; the nets were strained; fibers in the ropes were beginning to snap. Simon signaled to his partners; their work had been slowed by Simon's putting out with this Jesus, so they were still on the shore and obviously watching. At first signal, they jumped in the other boat and put out.

It was the biggest catch any of them could remember. They hoisted and hooted. The fish kept coming, flopping into the boats. When the last net was emptied, both boats were so full, they began to sink.

Simon looked at the boats. The exclamations of his partners faded, and he fell down at Jesus' knees. (He would have fallen at his feet, but both of them were standing knee-deep in fish.)

"Go away from me, Lord. I am a sinful man!" James and John stared and shuffled in their fish. Their partner should be filled with glee, not guilt. What was happening?

"Do not be afraid; from now on you will be fishing for people." Jesus said.

Finally, Simon saw in his mind the faces in the crowd that had pressed in on this man.

Their hearts were no different than his. They were just as confused with conflict, working just as hard to wait for peace.

When they had brought their boats to shore, Simon, James, and John left everything and followed Jesus. It seemed, sort of, like it was going to feel good to bask in this man's light.

Simon wanted to ask Jesus something. He wanted to ask if they could stop by the house and change clothes. But it seemed silly. There would be opportunity to change.

Prayer of the Day: Merciful and loving God, we thank you this day for calling each of us through your Word and for filling our emptiness with your glory through Jesus our Christ. Amen.

From Jean's Journal: "When we first become conscious of the human condition, we find ourselves already knee deep in the currents of unbecoming evil." Ted Peters, *God—the World's Future* (Augsburg Fortress, 1992), p. 155.

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* # 449, "They Cast Their Nets"

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 15, 1998

Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-26

Pastoral Reflections

One of my many, many favorite parts of Proverbs, chapter 30, verses 7-9, comes to mind when I ponder Jesus' beatitudes. I wonder if Jesus had it in mind when he was working on his sermon notes:

Two things I ask of you;
do not deny them to me before I die:
Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that I need,
or I shall be full, and deny you,
and say, "Who is the LORD?"
or I shall be poor, and steal,
and profane the name of my God.

Our Gospel reading is called Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. "On" is an elusive adjective, and let's keep it that way. Jesus' sermon is delivered upon a plain and it's also about a plain.

If you're going to be what people were expecting the savior of the world to be like, you couldn't get any better than Jesus in the sixth chapter of Luke's Gospel. He takes on the corruption of Sabbath observance, ascends a mountain for nightly prayer vigils, appoints apostles, oozes with aura, and teaches with the wisdom of the ancient prophets. I wonder if Jesus isn't making a mountain out of people's expectations so that they can eventually be toppled and the people, thus, freed from them.

He comes down from the mountain to a place that is level, πεδινου; it's derived

from πους, foot; it's a place that's easy on the feet. We are primed to expect that he's going to spread his arms and finally dispel the darkness from all creation. Instead, he continues the prophetic toppling of mountains and raising of valleys. We are waiting for him to take us away from this world, and he gives the world to us. He recalls the wisdom of plain living, of not striving for nor getting swept away into extremes on either end of the scale.

"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.... But woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.... Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.... Woe to you when all speak well of you."

Jesus teaches us about trusting in God for all things and about being serious about just and equal living. The kind of living where we lose out if we watch out only for ourselves. The kind of living that thrusts us into the thick of loving our neighbor and of seeing everyone as our neighbor. The kind of living that acknowledges that each and every single one of us counts. It sounds idealistic and impossible; however, the reason people are dying for a savior is because they've let the balance slide. The starving and the satiated, the sad and the ecstatic, the slandered and the slanderer all suffer from the consequences of injustice and inequality. Why do bad things happen to good people? Because the consequences of sin come randomly; we are all victims.

It's easy to oversimplify Jesus' beatitudes so that they become platitudes, but it's also easy to overcomplicate them. They are not a Bible verse to bang over people's heads (like Bible verse flingers who more often preach Blasted Assurance than Blessed Assurance); they are a sound tool for the wise and righteous who are like the tree planted near water that appears in the Jeremiah reading and the psalm. They bring to mind another tree, planted in Eden, where the balance began to go awry.

God gave the human beings everything they needed. The serpent was crafty. Made disobedience sound like a high-risk step toward the big pay-off goal of being just like God. So, the humans got a choice: they could have everything they needed or they could have everything. They chose the need to have to live in the extremes and to give thanks to God while in them and the need to have to be taught beatitudes.

We can expect things will go wrong when we take them solely into our own hands. Thank God we can also expect things to be restored when we put our hands into God's who gives us faith to move mountains.

Prayer of the Day: Gracious God, you have given us a good and sufficient world; through your abundant mercy, instill in each of us the utmost desire to be wise and righteous and wholly dependent on you. Amen.

From Jean's Journal: God breathes us to life and says, "Go. Live (i.e. Love)." Simple as that. Then in flood excuses: "That's okay if you're politically free and economically mobile and walking in a safe neighborhood and have your health and as long as everybody else plays by the same rules...." We have more faith in the validity of our excuses than in the promise of the gospel. (From a letter to Dr. Margie Brown)

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #552, "In Thee Is Gladness"

The Transfiguration of Our Lord February 22, 1998

Exodus 34:29-35
Psalm 99
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)

Pastoral Reflections

The story of Jesus' transfiguration seems more like the story about the three disciples who accompany Jesus than about Jesus. We see only what these disciples see. We hear only what they say. They are the only ones who feel anything in the story. Indeed, Jesus glowed, but it is these three disciples who learn about being transformed from one degree of glory to another.

Peter, John, and James go with Jesus as he goes up (αναβανω) the mountain into the heavenly company of Moses and Elijah, and they go with him when he goes back down (καταβανω) into the hell of performing an exorcism. They are the eye witnesses of the ascending and descending of the Christ. (See also Genesis 28:12, John 1:51, and the second article of the Apostles' Creed.) They see Jesus transfigured. They see Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. (I wonder how they knew these men were Moses and Elijah.)

Luke differs from the other Synoptics by having the disciples fall asleep. I love the footnote to verse 32 in the Oxford Annotated NRSV. The verse describes the three being "weighed down with sleep." The footnote jumps to the conclusion "Apparently the experience took place at night." Like we don't fall asleep at any other time. I think this is the same sleep that overtook these same disciples in the garden, when Jesus left them to pray. I think this is the same sleep that overtook Jonah in the boat. I think this is the same sleep that overtakes the people in the pew who are too weighed down with stuff to remain buoyant and attentive. The sleeping verb (ησαν βεβαρημενοι) is the pluperfect, meaning that they fell asleep. They didn't witness the transfiguring moment of Jesus; they only saw the completed transfiguration.

"They saw his glory...." Glory literally means weight, in a good sense of the word: to be worth one's weight in gold, to be honorable or praiseworthy. The opposite of glory is weight in a bad sense of the word: to be burdensome, weighed down, dull, boring, asleep; to say, "Oh, it's not going to make any difference if I'm there or not." This is not a glory attitude.

God, in glory, is worthy of all of our praise and attention.

For us to be glorious means that we comprehend that we matter, that we are vitally important. We need to not let our hearts be weighed down and let ourselves fall asleep. God *died* because we matter, and in Christ, we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another!

I'm not saying that we should be sleep-deprived people. Getting the proper sleep is good stewardship of our bodies, which is part of the transformation. I am saying that even the stuff that is weighing us down is part of our transformation and worth staying awake through. We have to go through all of the degrees to get to the glory, and sometimes we lose patience and let "sleep" overtake us.

One time, I was teaching a young man how to make lemon meringue pie filling. It was his favorite pie, and he was enthusiastic about learning to make it—at first. You make lemon meringue pie filling by mixing lemon juice, sugar, water, cornstarch, a pinch of salt and stirring it over medium-low heat. The young man stirred and stirred and stirred. It takes a while for this mixture to heat up to

the right temperature in order to thicken. He stirred and stirred and stirred. Finally he said, "Nothing's happening." I took the spoon and said, "Well, let me take a look at it." I scooped the spoon around the pan just one time and, snap, the mixture had just at that moment reached the right temperature and the mixture thickened! One more, oh, just one more stir around the pan, and the guy would have experienced it for himself. But he was overcome with sleep (by the way, we weren't making lemon meringue pie filling at night) and he missed it. He saw the transfiguration, but missed the transfiguring.

The disciples, in the fog of sleep, jump up and jump to the conclusion that the proper thing to do is to make camp, maybe follow Moses to a burning bush and roast marshmallows. Their fog thickens. What exactly is it that terrifies them? They are terrified before the voice speaks. In their terror, they are reminded to listen to Jesus, and the fog lifts and Jesus is with them. In Luke's version, Jesus doesn't have to tell them not to say anything. Perhaps they've already figured out that they slept through it and wouldn't be able to explain what they actually saw. Like the way we sometimes change the subject after church, when someone asks us what the sermon was about.

Prayer of the Day: Glorious God, we bless you and thank you for the Only Son, our Christ, the light of the world, and for your grace which continually transforms us into glorious witnesses of the gospel. Fill our hearts and minds with the power of your presence and help us to take on your glory. Amen.

From Jean's Journal: "God doesn't settle for just functioning; God wants us to thrive." Dr. Jane Strohl, at PLTS Preaching Days, 1997.

Hymn of the Day: *LBW* #271, "O Splendor of the Father's Light"

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