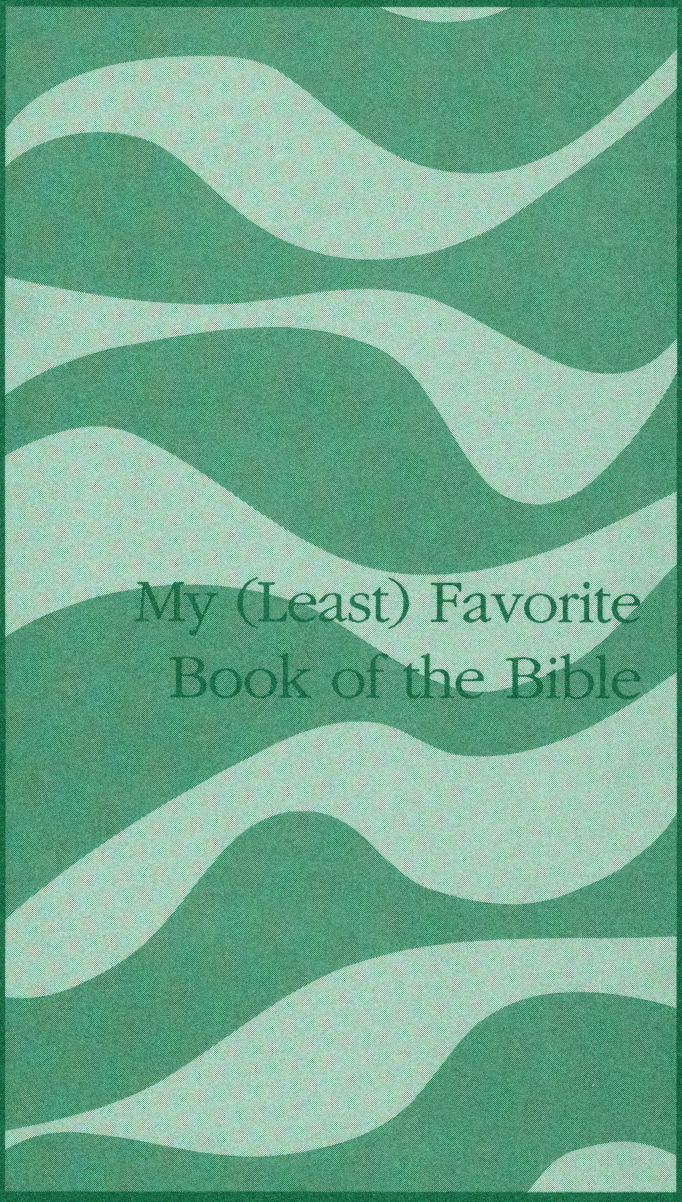
June 1996 Volume 23 Number 3



CURRENTS
in Theology and Mission

Currents

in Theology and Mission

Published by
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

in cooperation with
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
Wartburg Theological Seminary

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CURRENTS IN THEOLOGY AND MISSION (ISSN: 0098-2113) is published bimonthly (every other month), February, April, June, August, October, December. Annual subscription rate: $13.50 in the U.S. and Canada ($15.50 overseas). Two-year rate: $25.00 in the U.S. and Canada ($29.00 overseas). Three-year rate: $36.00 in the U.S. and Canada ($42.00 overseas). Published by Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, a non-profit organization, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60615, to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. Printed in U.S.A.

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

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

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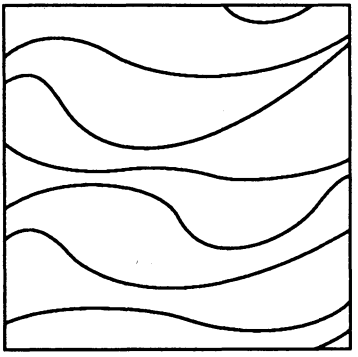
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Series A
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost—Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Contributors: Rodney Hutton, Mary Hannah Rowe

My (Least) Favorite Book of the Bible

I've been teaching the Bible at the college and seminary level for thirty years now, and along the way I've established my own, curricular, canon within the canon. Books like Genesis, Exodus, Ruth, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Job, Psalms, Isaiah (all three parts), Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Jonah, and Daniel never fail to fill me with excitement and theological fervor. I've had a much tougher go with Leviticus, Obadiah, Esther, and, for that matter, the Song of Songs (yes, it's good to celebrate physical love, but then what?).

Hosea is way up there among my favorites. In chapter 11 God is described as a maternal parent, who feeds Israel, teaches it to walk, and pulls it warmly to the divine cheek (my reading of v. 4). But Israel is a rebellious, even obstreperous teenager, bent on apostasy, whom God ought to punish. God struggles with that and finally decides not to exercise divine wrath because God is God and not tied to human rules of retribution. Such self-contradictory divine love is at the center of my spirituality and my understanding of the Christ event. Hosea offers gospel in the Old Testament.

Hosea also compares God to pus, dry rot, maggots, and a she-bear deprived of her cubs! On good days, I put these second pictures into direct confrontation with the suffering God of Hosea 11, and in that creative and paradoxical tension find much worth teaching. But there are bad days when I think Hosea simply went too far.

Diane Jacobson explores these double messages through Hosea, chapter 2. Read from one point of view, within the Christian commu-

nity, God is the victim of Gomer's faithlessness, but God's mercy blossoms out of and beyond God's justified wrath. Read within another community, shaped by feminist concerns, Hosea 2 is written solely from the male perspective, and domestic violence becomes a sign of love. It's a male thing: first hit them, then bring them flowers and tell them you love them. Does guilt ever justify abuse? The first reading sees ourselves as a sinful people graciously forgiven by a loving God. The other reading cannot avoid intimations of abuse and oppression. In these two community readings, the "authority of Scripture" remains vastly different.

Dennis T. Olson constructs his case study out of Hos 5:8–6:6. His careful verse by verse exposition finds similar ambivalences, but he also believes that the verbal images of judgment are redeemed and become images of hope by the end of the book. The authority of Hosea's word was grounded in the trustworthiness of God, who proved faithful to the word God called Hosea to proclaim. Renewal of biblical authority involves the long-term cultivation of a deep, personal and relational knowledge of the God, who created the heavens and the earth, and who yet wills to be known and loved in an intimate way.

Theologian **Vítor Westhelle** responds to these two essays and other lectures at the 1994 Conference of Teaching Theologians, already published in the April issue of *Currents*. He suggests that it is the incapability of a particular church, such as the ELCA, to have normative control of the text that is at the center of theological discussion, and not the authority of the text as such. Luther did not eliminate the external and formal normativity of the Bible, but he placed it substantively in the discerning community. It is important to regain Luther's understanding of the relation of the Scriptures to the Word, in analogy to the relation between the creature and the Creator. Are the Scriptures still the words that move us, surprise us, and leave us uncomfortable in face of utter mystery?

In a second response to the papers at the conference, New Testament scholar **Donald Juel** notes that most of our seminary students were not raised in the traditional communities many of us knew, and that the

real crisis is not at the level of authority, but at the level of interpretation. The question about scriptural authority is at its base a question about the authority of God. What does one do if the pastor tells you about God as one who intends only your own good, but this God comes roaring into your imagination as one more oppressor? The God who terrorizes the helpless from the pages of Hosea is the one who comes to us as savior, healer, and friend in the preached word. The problem of God will not be solved by interpretation but by God's coming to us in the presence of Christ.

For the last 28 centuries Jews and Christians have read the book of Hosea with the hope and expectation that they would meet their God there, in judgment and in grace. And so they (we) have and so they (we) do. Our challenging assignment is to enable those who gather with us on Sunday mornings or in mid-week Bible study to continue to hear that judgment and especially that grace.

Hosea is still a priceless treasure even if his earthen vesselhood and clay feet are more evident than ever in our generation. Hosea probably never wanted to be popular or anybody's favorite. In his own way he wanted to be faithful. That's all that's required also in our stewardship. Only that. At least that.

Ralph W. Klein
Editor

Hosea 2: A Case Study on Biblical Authority

Diane Jacobson
Luther Seminary

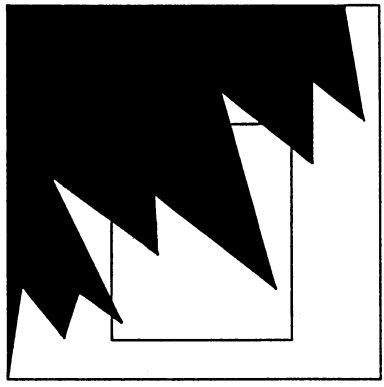
My task in this paper is to use two contrasting readings of the second chapter of Hosea to think about the two central issues of meaning and authority. That is, I intend to explore both how texts manifest meaning, and how the authority of Scripture differs in the context of differing communities.

The assertion which provides the context for this paper is that *the authority of the biblical text manifests itself in the reading of the text in community.* I largely concur with this assertion not only in theory but also from experience. I personally have never been moved to faith by an abstract or disembodied discussion about Scripture. Rather, discussion of specific texts, study, listening to the preached word, and immersion within the Bible itself have shaped and formed not only my community but also my own personal character and values.

However, the notion that biblical authority is tied to community reading leads to two presuppositions which in turn push towards two sets of questions. First, if the authority of the biblical text manifests itself in the reading of the text in community, then logically the problem of meaning is prior to issues of authority. The text must mean something to a community in order for that community to deem it authoritative. And second, it follows that the nature of the interpreting community naturally influences both the meaning and the authority. So I ask two sets of questions: first, how does a text "mean" within a community? That is, how exactly does Scripture help us to discern the word, will, and reality of God? And second, is the nature of an *appropriate* interpretive community predetermined? Are there certain standards for the community? What happens to an individual when two communities vie for attention and commitment? Is community a layered notion? In short, how does it all work?

I would like to look carefully at the second chapter of Hosea with these questions in mind. I use this text both to explore how a text manifests meaning and as an illustration of how the meaning of the text, and hence its authority, changes with the community context. After looking at the text, I'll return to the two sets of questions.

But before looking at the text, I wish to add a personal note. This exercise into the text of Hosea is not, for me, merely intellectual. Hosea, as a book, has often stood at the center of my faith. I respond with understanding when Hans Walter Wolff speaks of the cross of Christ as the "seal" of the message of Hosea. God's passionate cry in



chapter 11, "I am God, and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath," has revealed to me the unfathomable love and forgiveness of God. Likewise also has the whole of chapter 2. Through the community of the church, these texts have opened my eyes and led me by the hand down the road to Christian faith.

At the same time, the second chapter of Hosea horrifies me. I have been dragged kicking and screaming by my community of faithful, committed, feminist scholars to glimpse a frightening God who leaps from this text and wanders throughout Scripture undermining my faith until I want to hide behind every Christian platitude I can muster. Clearly, moral and theological deliberation occurs not just between individuals from one community but also within a single individual torn between various communities.

That said, I can proceed with the discussion of the two vastly different ways that this text manifests meaning.

The first reading comes from within the community of the church, expectantly looking for divine truth, open to the word of God. In marked distinction from chapter 1, we are set up to hear chapter 2 as a metaphor. Just as Hosea has taken a wife of promiscuity and has children who are equally promiscuous, so also Yahweh has taken a wife, Israel, who with her children, the subsequent generations of Israel, has acted promiscuously. The accusation of promiscuity, often mistranslated "harlotry" or "whoredom" (see Gail Yee who follows both Anderson & Freedman and Phyllis Bird), is associated with both the mother and her children. These two slip back and forth as the object of divine wrath. Both are defined by their negative relationship; the children of v. 4 who are *without* pity match the woman in v. 2 who is *not* a wife and to whom Yahweh/Hosea is *not* a husband. Though we might be tempted to ask personal questions about the historical Hosea and Gomer, what presses the text is the metaphor. And from the beginning, we push the edges of the metaphor in order to discover its multivalent meaning. In order to hear how this metaphor works, some detailed examination is called for because the meaning comes specifically from within the details of the text.

We begin then with the prophetic and actual accusation of adultery. Female sexual activity outside marriage signifies betrayal: betrayal of family, betrayal of community, and, above all, betrayal of the husband. We know from Leviticus and Deuteronomy that the punishment of a woman's adultery according to the law is death for both parties (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). According to covenant law, death is inescapable. In verse 3 the wilderness/desert is identified as the place of death for the adulterous wife, just as the desert always was in the past for those Israelites who betrayed God. (See Exodus and Numbers.) But notably verse 3 reflects this legal expectation only as a threat, not as a reality. Israel/Gomer is to put away her adultery, *lest* God/Hosea kill her. Already

room is left for repentance for her current adultery. Thus already the husband himself is disobediently merciful beyond the confines of covenant law.

Hosea 2 is marked by all manner of repetition which add to the meaning of the text. For example the chapter features three speeches of the woman. She speaks first in v. 5 saying,

> "I will go after my lovers; the ones who give me my bread and my water (nourishment), my wool and my flax (clothing), my oil and my drink (refreshment)."

The line here between the woman Gomer and the nation Israel is thin. Within the belief system of the average citizen of Northern Israel, belief in both Yahweh and Ba'al was quite natural. Yahweh was a warrior God who won battles and protected the nation from national enemies. Yahweh was *Yahweh Sabaoth*, the Lord of Hosts, personal God of the people. The people of Israel went to Yahweh in times of trouble, trusting he would save them.

But Yahweh was a political God, not a God of nature. By contrast, Ba'al was a nature and storm god who brought rain and fertility to arid fields and thirsty farmers. Ba'al was insurance against crop failure; he brought life in the midst of death. The Israelites were, in fact, not very different from us. When we are poor, we look to business; lest crops fail, we use fertilizer. When we are sick of body, we go to a doctor; when we are sick in soul, we go to church. For Israel, turning to Ba'al for items of nourishment, clothing, and pleasure seemed ultimately reasonable and very useful. Reasonable perhaps, but also wrong. Such reasoning was betrayal; Israel lacked knowledge of the LORD.

The woman's second speech in v. 7 reflects the same shallow repentance found in the first verse of Hosea 6:

> "I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better with me then than now."

The woman says she will return, שׁוּב, to her first husband. The word for *return* is the same word as *repent*. In v. 2, the woman was asked to repent by putting away her promiscuity, but the repentance of v. 7 is based on self-serving experience rather than on deep covenantal commitment. The shallowness of the second speech is confirmed by the woman's third speech in v. 12 which is identical in spirit to the first speech:

> "These are my pay (i.e. the vines and fig trees), which my lovers have given me."

The woman once again misidentifies the source of nature's gifts.

The woman is not the only one who speaks and acts. Chapter 2 deals primarily with the actions of the husband. In v. 8 God specifically responds to the speech of the woman:

> "She did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, and who lavished upon her silver and gold that they used for Baal."

Yahweh is the true provider of gifts; he is not merely a warrior. The husband's actions are marked by a thrice repeated *therefore*, Hebrew לָכֵן in verses 6, 9, and, climactically, 14. These three *therefores* play against the underlying logic and our expectations of the text. We know the woman has committed adultery and *therefore* deserves death. In v. 5, she goes after her lovers, and *therefore* God "hedges up her way." A hedge might be protection or it might be punishment, but a hedge is not death. In v. 8, God reveals Israel's lack of knowledge, *therefore* in v. 9 God takes back (returns, repents of) his gifts. In the next verses God's actions pile up: God uncovers her shame, puts an end to her mirth and festivals, lays

waste her vines, and punishes her for her ultimate sin of forgetting her husband.

Therefore, we expect the sentence of death. And what do we get instead? The ultimate sin of forgetting God becomes in v. 14 an occasion not for death but for a divine act of salvation. Verse 14 speaks of the overwhelming grace of God. The husband entices his wife into the wilderness and there, literally, "speaks to her heart." The desert is transformed. It is no longer a place of death. It is not a battleground with the devil or a place of rebellion. The wilderness is a place of purity and fidelity where Israel, at last, is alone with her God.

The desert is not the only thing transformed. In v. 15 the speech of the woman becomes a response of faith. "She shall respond," says the Lord, "as in the days of her youth." Everything is reversed and transformed. The earlier misidentified gifts are now given in abundance. The desert becomes fruitful. The language of love mixes with the language of fertility. Yahweh, the presumed warrior, abolishes in v. 18 the bow, the sword, and war in the land and replaces it with safety. The covenant reaches beyond the realm of history into the realm of creation. Answers are multiplied, and the negative names of the wife and children are reversed.

Particularly noteworthy is v. 16. "On that day, says the Lord, you will call me 'My husband' (my man, my אִישִׁי, אִישִׁי), and no longer בַּעְלִי, my Ba'al," or literally, "my lord" or "my master." The relationship transformed is a relationship of man and woman, husband and wife, *not* master and servant. As seen in vv. 19-20, this relationship is marked by righteousness, justice, love, mercy, and mostly faithfulness born of true and deep knowledge of the Lord.

Now, according to this churchly reading, the meaning of the text evolves fairly clearly. Israel, like Gomer, is unfaithful. God, like Hosea, remains faithful and exhibits this faithfulness by bringing Israel home through a process of disciplined isolation. The three *therefores* mark a three stage journey to repentance—separation, deprivation, and purification. Such disciplined isolation reflects a twice repeated pattern in Israel's history—in the wilderness and in the exile.

In this reading, God is victim of Gomer's faithlessness. Yet God's mercy blossoms out of and beyond God's justified wrath. The woman fails to understand the depth of God's gifts. Through trial the woman is given the gift of repentance so that the marriage is finally marked by mutuality. Ultimately faith itself is a gift of God.

Implications of this reading for sexuality are also present. Though indirect, the message is nonetheless discernible and persuasive. Faithful marriage is held up as the ideal relationship. Notably, marriage is not, as is so often claimed, solely for the purpose of raising up children, though clearly the well-being of children is at issue. At root marriage is about relationship, about dedicated and faithful relationship. The marriage covenant, as the basis of the analogy with God's covenant with Israel, demands a relationship of trust, commitment, and knowledge of the other. Monogamy is an ideal reflection of monotheism and monolatry. The sexual ethic of the church, I would contend, is based more on this churchly reading of texts such as Hosea 2 than on specific laws. Reading and hearing and studying this text together helps the church to form its community ethos and identity, so that together with Hosea's child, we say "You are my God."

That said, what happens when communities are switched and the reader is opened up to an alternative community reading of Hosea 2? I approach the text now no longer the biblical apologist and enthusiast. I come

to the text from a community marked by a healthy hermeneutic of suspicion. This community has been shaped by the writings of such scholars as Gale Yee, Phyllis Bird, Renita Weems, and Drorah Setel and by the sensibilities of women attuned to abusive situations. Like the previous reading, this reading arises largely from a discernment of patterns. However, the patterns now discerned do not begin with the poetic patterns of repeated speech and word. These patterns come first from observations made from outside the text: patterns detected in the lives of women, patterns of abuse spurred on by pornography.

I turn first to patterns of pornography. In 1985 Drorah Setel wrote an article about pornography in Hosea for Letty Russell's book, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. In this article, she defined pornography as the "objectification of female sexuality." She then went on to describe different categories which she claims help one to identify a pornographic text. Such a text views female sexuality as negative when compared to a positive or neutral male standard. Women are depicted as sluts or harlots. Women are degraded or publicly humiliated. Female sexuality is portrayed as an object of male possession or control, and such texts often depict women as analogous to nature, especially land, with images of conquest and domination. In addition, among other features: pornography describes reality from the perspective of the male by representing female objectification as universal truth; pornography centers on issues of power and powerlessness; and pornography represents degrading and abusive power as recommended and endorsed. The question then becomes, is the second chapter of Hosea pornographic literature?

Looking at the text with this new pattern in mind reveals disturbing details. The woman is portrayed as promiscuous. The woman is publicly stripped in the presence of others. The woman is referred to as parched land and wilderness needful of male fertility. The text is written solely from the perspective of the male, which takes on the perspective of universal truth.

The relationship transformed is a relationship of man and woman, husband and wife, *not* master and servant.

The power of the man to condemn, to punish, and to forgive is absolute. And in the second chapter of Hosea, the man's power to punish, to degrade and to act in a violent manner is not merely endorsed; it is given divine sanction.

Do these observations settle the matter of whether Hosea 2 is pornographic? Probably not, but within a community of folks whose identities are formed in part by deep suspicion and a consciousness of the dangers of pornography, such observations send off warning signals at the very least. And there is more.

The text of Hosea does not only reflect certain pornographic patterns; the text also mirrors patterns of behavior observed by communities who deal with domestic abuse. From this perspective, the three *therefores* in verses 6, 9, and 14 denote a pattern far more insidious than a three-stage journey to repentance. The enforced seclusion of the woman reflects a common abusive practice

> Authorial intent can never itself prevent a real effect which a text has in a community.

of separating a woman "for her own good" from all she deems valuable. Likewise the deprivation coupled with the exposure, the name calling, and the threats and acts of violence sound familiar notes. Renita Weems observes that the violence of the text demonstrates "the extent to which... the betrayed husband will go to preserve his marriage.... The one who has been betrayed is willing to go to great extremes, even if it means humiliating his wife, in order to win his wife from her lovers" (p. 97). Domestic violence becomes a sign of love. I am reminded of an experience I had as forewoman of a jury in a murder trial in which a man had admittedly murdered his wife and burned her up in their trailer home. Our job as the jury was to decide the severity of the charge against the man on the basis of whether a normal person in similar circumstances would have acted in a similar fashion. Two young women on the jury wanted to opt for a lesser charge in so far as they reasoned that any normal man in love was naturally prone to excessive violence.

Perhaps the most frightening aspect of this reading of the text comes from the new reading of v. 14, the final *therefore*, when Yahweh brings his wife to the desert and speaks to her heart. The very verse which, in the other reading, was heard as the ultimate act of loyalty, forgiveness, and grace is heard by this community as a continuation of the pattern of abuse. First hit them, then bring them flowers and tell them you love them. The trip to the wilderness becomes the worst sort of seduction. The man, having vented his rage, becomes docile and loving and now seeks reconciliation. I have a friend whose abusive husband once told her that making love after a good fight was exhilarating and the best kind of loving.

The effect of hearing the reconciliation of verse 14 as part of the abusive pattern is devastating. Suddenly a reader cannot even rest in the promise of the text. Worse than this, once this text is heard as revealing a pattern of abuse, the entire history of Israel is open to question. Punishment precedes reconciliation and forgiveness both in the Exodus and in the Exile. The demands of the covenant are clear. What manner of God are we dealing with here? God becomes O. J. Simpson who, instead of standing trial, puts us on trial. And though we are surely guilty, does guilt ever justify abuse? The line between punishment and abuse becomes fuzzy precisely because of the metaphor. The problems stirred by the metaphor overwhelm any more benign reading.

The corollary question is, what kind of sexuality and marriage is here being commended? Are we to value the covenant of marriage above all else in the face of systematic abuse? Is the church, in commending this text, suggesting that maintaining the sanctity of marriage has without question a higher value than protecting an abused spouse? Or, worse yet, is abuse to be commended in the case of an adulterous wife? Parenthetically, this quandary brings us face to face with one side of the issue of individual rights over against community well-being. The Bible can be seen as bringing a helpful critique to the modern tendency to center morality on individual rights. In

contrast to the constitution, the Bible emphasizes responsibility over rights, doing that which is good for the neighbor, helping to build community, and serving God in all things. In the context of this community reading of Hosea 2, emphasizing community responsibility over individual rights sounds potentially dangerous.

To return to the issue at hand, a final comment might be made. The positive valuation of Hosea 2 is undermined not only through the reading of this specific text, but also by what happens to this metaphor when it travels from Hosea to Jeremiah and particularly to Ezekiel. What can be read in Hosea as subtle and open to question becomes, in Ezekiel, lewd to the extreme. What then are we saying when we continue to use the marriage metaphor for God and Israel or for Jesus and the church? Has the metaphor any value? This community reading of Hosea 2 would call into question any use of the marriage metaphor.

Only now we are able to return to the original questions of how a text reveals meaning and authority. How, in cases such as this, does Scripture help us to discern the word, will, and reality of God? If the Bible helps to mold our identities through the telling of the story, what identity is being molded here? Through one community's reading of this text we picture ourselves as a sinful people graciously forgiven, embraced, and transformed by a loving and faithful God. The text then manifests meaning in commending faithful relationships between humanity and God and within marriage. But can this text, having even once been read as it has been read by the second community, ever again be read with such innocence? Can this text avoid suggesting abuse and oppression?

In describing these two communities I have intentionally labeled them as churchly versus feminist communities. Though I understand many feminists, including myself, to be faithful Christians, and many Christians, including many of my colleagues, to embrace feminist principles, nevertheless these two communities that shape my interpretation of the text are not comfortably wed. I often experience these communities and their interpretations in opposition. I, for one, despite my own intention and will, can see no clear alternative. In these two communities, the authority of Scripture remains vastly different. The image of God and the dictates of biblical morality are inevitably at stake.

One wants, as a Christian, to claim that Hosea himself guards against reading this text as aimed against women rather than men. Perhaps to prevent just such a potential misreading, Hosea says in 4:14:

> I will not punish your daughters
> when they play the whore,
> nor your daughters-in-law
> when they commit adultery;
> for the men themselves go aside
> with whores, and sacrifice
> with temple prostitutes;
> thus a people without understanding
> comes to ruin.

Hosea himself clearly uses dangerous language subtly. But can Hosea's intention for the metaphor settle the matter? I suggest not. Authorial intent can never itself prevent a real effect which a text has in a community. Does it matter to the snake handlers that Mark intended to end his Gospel earlier? Just as the church has had to come to grips with Scriptures' inherent, albeit largely unintended, anti-Semitism, so also the church must face the abusive effect of even our most cherished biblical texts. If the text is heard as abusive, apologetics and an appeal to the "real" or "correct" meaning cannot "solve" the problem. The problem is real, not merely misguided or willful. I often tell my students at

Luther Seminary that they must never lie when they read Scripture in order to protect either the text or God. Such honesty is frequently uncomfortable, though I see no alternative. We are, despite ourselves, trapped in a dilemma which undermines any easy claim to biblical authority. Faith remains a gift.

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Another excellent resource was published after the delivery of this paper:

Weems, Renita J. *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995.

The Lion, the Itch and the Wardrobe: Hosea 5:8–6:6 as a Case Study in the Contemporary Interpretation and Authority of Scripture

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The Formula of Concord in the Lutheran Confessions testifies that "Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good and evil, right or wrong."[1] How do we understand and in reality practice this authority of Scripture? How can the power of the Word of God be renewed and actualized in the lives of individual believers, in communities of faith, in college and seminary classrooms, and in denominational actions and statements of policy, mission or ethical guidance on difficult social issues of the day?

One fruitful way into such questions is direct engagement with a specific book of the Bible, in this case the book of Hosea, as a case study in the contemporary appropriation and authority of the Bible. The Old Testament book of Hosea compels our interest as readers because it is at once one of the most daring and one of the most difficult books of the Bible. Hosea's language and imagery is passionate and powerful. Hosea is the first prophet to so thoroughly explore

[1] Formula of Concord, Epitome 7-8 in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 465.

Hosea's context in many ways mirrors our own context and culture as North American Christians in the final decade of the twentieth century.

the relationship of God and God's people through the metaphors of husband/unfaithful wife (chapters 1-3) and parent/rebellious child (chapters 11-14). Other pictures of God in relationship to Israel include God as a farmer (10:11), a hiker (9:10), a bird catcher (7:11), a physician (14:4), provider of shade and protection (14:7), maggots (5:12), a lion (5:14; 11:10; 13:7-8), a leopard or bear robbed of her cubs (13:7-8), a cypress tree (14:8), dry rot (5:12), spring showers (6:3), or the morning dew (14:5). Even as the reader wrestles with the evocative imagery of the book, however, the careful reader will sometimes be frustrated by the difficulties of text and language, sudden shifts in speakers and moods, and lack of clear markers between interpretive units which abound in Hosea's text. One commentator has remarked, "The text of Hosea competes with Job for the distinction of containing more unintelligible passages than any other book of the Hebrew Bible."[2]

Despite its difficulties, however, an important reason for us in our time and place to study this particular prophet is that Hosea's context in many ways mirrors our own context and culture as North American Christians in the final decade of the twentieth century. What Hosea did and said with his minority tradition in the midst of a pluralist and idolatrous culture may aid us in wrestling with what we as a church are to do and say with Scripture in the midst of our pluralist and idol-worshipping culture. Hosea prophesied in the midst of a turbulent time in the northern kingdom of Israel. In the three decades of his career from 750 to 721 B.C.E., Hosea watched seven different kings rise to power and then fall (cf. Hosea 7:3-7; 8:14; 13:10-11). The shadow of the Assyrian empire loomed large over the landscape of Palestine. In terms of the religious life of northern Israel, the agricultural economy made elements of Canaanite mythology and fertility rituals attractive so that, in the name of liturgical renewal, Canaanite mythology and fertility rituals crept into the worship of Israel's God Yahweh. At the end of Hosea's career and true to his words of judgment, his nation was conquered by Assyria and its population was divided up and scattered into far-flung exile. The only reason we have the book of Hosea's words is that they were carried south to Judah where they were edited, preserved and applied to a new generation, a new setting, and a new impending exile which came less than two hundred years later as the Babylonian empire conquered Judah.

I hope to accomplish two tasks in this study:

1. I will do a theological interpretation of a particular text from Hosea, 5:8–6:6.

2. Based on that interpretation, I will draw out some implications of our study of Hosea for the questions of the authority of the Bible in our contemporary context.

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[2] Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 66.

The Lion, the Itch and the Wardrobe: Hosea 5:8–6:6

Hosea 5:8–6:6 breaks down clearly into three sub-units, marked in each case by a clear change in speaker. I have chosen to entitle each of the three sections by adapting the title of C. S. Lewis' popular novel about the mythical land of Narnia called *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.*[3]

1. Hosea 5:8-15—The Lion
2. Hosea 6:1-3—The Itch
3. Hosea 6:4-6—The Wardrobe

If we follow the tracks of this three-part text, we will be led into a storied universe, a narrative world. The authority of the text will lie in its persuasive capacity to lure us into entering that world and returning us back with a new perspective, a new understanding, new insights into God, ourselves and the world.

Hosea 5:8-15—The Lion: images of God usually not found in a Sunday School curriculum.

The text begins in 5:8 with an urgent call to sound the alarm of war (cf. Numbers 10:8-9). As is often the case in Hosea, there is no prophetic introductory formula; God simply starts talking, shouting: "Blow the horn in Gibeah, the trumpet in Ramah. Sound the alarm at Beth-Aven." This series of three towns runs from the southernmost boundary of northern Israel northward into the interior of the northern kingdom.[4] There is a three-alarm invasion coming from the south, from Judah. Benjamin is the southernmost tribal territory in northern Israel and so borders Judah. Thus, God warns the tribe of Benjamin in effect, "Watch out behind you, Benjamin! The army of Judah is coming to attack!" This is one of the few texts in Hosea where commentators have tried to link Hosea's words with a particular event in Israel's history, the so-called Syro-Ephraimitic war in 734 B.C.E. and subsequent events involving border conflicts between northern Israel and southern Judah as well as alliances with other nations. But the details of those events (recounted more fully in 2 Kings 16 and Isaiah 7) have receded in the present form of Hosea's prophecy.[5]

As soon as the call to sound the alarm is made, verse 9 tells us the outcome: Ephraim (that is, northern Israel) shall become a desolation in the day of punishment. Standing "among the tribes of Israel," God says, "I declare what is sure."

But God levels the prophetic denunciation not only upon Israel but also upon the leaders of the southern kingdom of Judah in verse 10: "The princes of Judah have become like those who move the boundary stone." God's judgment is here all inclu-

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[3] C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier, 1950).

[4] Gibeah lies just 3 miles north of southern Judah's capital city of Jerusalem, Ramah is 5 miles north of Jerusalem and Bethel (which means "House of God" and which Hosea satirically named Beth-Aven, "House of Evil) is 11 miles north of Jerusalem. Cf. H. W. Wolff, *Hosea: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Hosea*, trans. Gary Stansell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 113.

[5] The classic study which seeks to link various parts of Hosea 5-6 with the outline of historical events associated with the Syro-Ephraimitic war is Albrecht Alt, "Hosea 5:8–66:6. Ein Krieg und seine Folgen in prophetischen Beleuchtung," *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* II (Munich: Beck, 1959), 163-87. A detailed rebuttal of Alt's position is E. M. Good, "Hosea 5:8–6:6: An Alternative to Alt," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966), 273-86. Good attempts to show that the text is a liturgical poem used annually in the cult rather than a series of prophetic oracles arising out of a series of specific historical events.

sive, not picking one favorite over another. Israel and Judah are both guilty for their political and military shenanigans. Judah is guilty of a particularly sensitive crime: moving the boundary stone which enlarges one's own territory and steals the land and economic base of another tribe's allotment of land (Deut 19:14; cf. Deut 27:17). Because of this grave transgression, God pledges to pour out wrath upon Judah "like the waters," a cosmic judgment not unlike the flood waters of Noah or the torrential floods of the winter rains.[6]

We know the reason Judah's leaders are condemned; they are stealing land. But what is Ephraim's iniquity? Ephraim's sins go back to one source, according to Hosea: Ephraim or northern Israel is determined to "go after" (in Hebrew) צַו. To "go after" is a typical formula in Hosea either for loyally following Yahweh (Hosea 1:2; 11:10) or following a rival god (2:7, 15). The Hebrew word צַו occurs only here and in Isa 28:10, 13 where drunken priests and prophets blubber out the word צַו in an unintelligible jingle. Where there is little evidence for what a word means, of course, scholars rush in where angels fear to tread. Thus, many translations have been proposed for the word צַו, including "vanity," "nothing," "filth," "a four-letter word" associated "with human excrement," and my personal favorite, "blah."[7] Despite our inability to know with certainty what the word is, we do know what it means! Ephraim is going after other gods, worthless things which are empty, disgusting, and powerless.

Verse 12 continues the unsavory imagery as God proclaims, "Therefore I am like maggots (or pus) to Ephraim, and like dry rot to the house of Judah." God will be like little organisms that infest open wounds and devour the flesh, whether of the living or the dead. The text seeks to shock us, disgust us and indicate to us the depth of the wound and the seriousness of the disease which affects both Israel and Judah. God is the disease, the wound, but God is also the doctor.

Ephraim perceives its own sickness, its wound. But instead of "going after" Yahweh who is both disease and healer, Ephraim goes running to Assyria, to the "great king," for help.[8] Yet God assures Ephraim and Judah that the Assyrian king "is not able to cure you or heal your wound."

The judgment of God now moves up one more notch with another terrifying image: "For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, and like a young lion to the house of Judah." The Hebrew becomes emphatic as God says, *I—yes I*—will טָרַף, rip to pieces, tear the flesh, a verb used for a beast tearing at the flesh of its prey. Literally in Hebrew,

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[6] Judah's cosmic flood is the mirror image of Ephraim's cosmic drought caused by its sins of swearing, lying, murder, stealing and adultery: "Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing" (Hos 4:3). Nature suffers as the result of human misdeeds. Creation groans in travail.

[7] Cf. Andersen and Freedman, 409-10; and Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 31 (Waco: Word, 1987), 99. Some commentators propose a textual emendation to צָרֵו, "his enemy."

[8] The Masoretic text reads "to King Jareb" which assumes that "Jareb" is the name of the Assyrian king. We have no record of a king with such a name in this period. Most commentators suggest an emendation from מֶלֶךְ יָרֵב, "King Jareb" (or perhaps "a king who will contend/a contentious king" with the Hebrew verb רִיב) to מֶלֶךְ רַב, "great king." The title "great king" was a known title used by the Assyrians for their king. The name of the Assyrian king in this period is likely Tiglath-peleser III. Cf. James Luther Mays, *Hosea, A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 85; Wolff, 115.

the verse reads "I, I, I will tear to pieces and then I will go away, I will carry off and no one shall rescue." In a judgment aimed in particular at the pious priests who preside over a distorted Yahwism with cultural Canaanite mythology deeply embedded in its practice, God turns into a lion.

The image reminds me of a time many years ago when I was on internship out of seminary. My supervising pastor was helping to organize a regional theological conference for pastors entitled "The Gospel as Story." The pastor was aware of a novelist named Frederick Manfred who lived in my hometown and asked me whether I knew him. I told him that Manfred's son was my best friend in high school, and I knew Mr. Manfred well. My supervising pastor asked me to write and invite Manfred, a first-rate storyteller, to come to our pastors' conference and to speak on the topic, "How to Tell a Story." What my supervising pastor did not know but I did know was that Manfred frankly hated pastors. His revulsion to clerical types, I think, stemmed from his years of growing up in a strict Dutch Calvinist environment in northwest Iowa. Fred's novels about the early life of native Americans and early settlers in the Great Plains often included realistically coarse language and somewhat bawdy and explicit sex scenes. The novels reflected Manfred's own untamed and free spirit which he displayed even growing up in the rather closed and non-cosmopolitan atmosphere of Iowa Calvinism. Both as a child and an adult, Manfred had numerous encounters with pastors who chided him with their strict prudish mores. For Manfred, pastors floated in an unreal, puritanical pseudo-world with their heads in the clouds, never really tasting life in all its delicious earthiness and reality.

I told all of this to my supervising pastor. But he insisted. Dutiful intern that I was, I agreed to write the letter. We received a reply a couple of weeks later. Fred wrote that under other circumstances he would rather walk on coals than talk to a bunch of pastors. But since it was me who was asking, he agreed to come. The day of the conference arrived, and Manfred's presentation was next on the docket. After being introduced, he approached the podium. Fred Manfred was a huge man, six feet nine inches tall, hands as big as bear claws, full head of wavy hair, piercing eyes, bushy eyebrows, dressed in moccasins and brown corduroy. He grabbed the podium and looked out on this crowd of pastors and said, "You know, I feel like a lion in a den full of Daniels." With those words, Manfred took a well-known biblical image, deftly inverted it and captured the moment. Manfred went on in a marvelous presentation and told us how to tell a story. The whole event went off without any further incident, to my great relief.

The power and authority of Hosea's word comes from his poetic prowess in inverting images and shocking our expectations.

In a similar way, the power and authority of Hosea's word comes from his poetic prowess in inverting images and shocking our expectations. God, says Hosea, is a lion

in a den full of pious frauds who, when wounded, go whimpering off to Assyria in search of healing and salvation. God the lion attacks and tears. But then comes the final act of judgment, far worse than a lion's angry assault. God the lion turns away. In Hosea, the people are exhorted over and over again to turn or return (שׁוּב) to the LORD (12:6; 14:1-2). But now in the turning of all turns, God says, "I will return again to my place (is the 'place' a lion's lair? a heavenly abode in some far away locale?) until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face. In their distress they will seek eagerly for me." After having attacked and mortally wounded God's people, God the lion will go away and leave the people to their own frantic devices. The land will be secularized, God will be absent, and humans will struggle alone, trying desperately to devise schemes and alliances by which to heal themselves.

The trumpet blast and the blowing of the horn at the beginning of this section had signalled the beginning of a war, a battle. What seemed to be only a battle between two brother tribes, Israel and Judah, now turns into a battle with a divine lion who pounces on its prey, leaves it helpless and then retires to its lair. God who traditionally promised to be present now promises to be absent.[9]

Hosea 6:1-3—The Itch: true repentance or a shallow ploy to manipulate God?

The next section is marked by a change in speaker. God no longer speaks in the first person but now quotes the voice of the people in indirect discourse. The words proclaim a call to repentance: "Come, let us return to the LORD; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up." The words may reflect a genuine liturgy of repentance which the prophet has borrowed from the cult and has now placed in this new context. But the key question is this: do these words in their present context reflect genuine repentance? The call to repentance here is clearly related in some way to the words of God which immediately preceded them where God promised to return when "they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face." Does this call to repentance satisfy that condition or not? Does the speaker of this repentance acknowledge the depth of the wound, the extent of the guilt and the extreme condition in which Israel is trapped? Or does the speaker see the present wound as little more than a surface scratch, a little irritating itch which will soon be healed with little trouble?

The commentators split quite evenly on this question. Some see 6:1-3 as words of genuine repentance. They argue that God is indicating what true words of repentance would sound like. This is what the people *should say*.

Other commentators see the call to repentance as God's quotation of what the still rebellious and unrepentant people *will say* just to go through the motions of repentance without really meaning it. The half-hearted words are a ploy to manipulate what the people perceive in their Canaanite-tinged theology to be a mechanical, cheap-grace God. Pull the right lever and out comes fertility, the spring rains, the return of God. Life is a cycle, a ritual of rules, do the right things and God will reward you as assuredly as putting a quarter in a gumball machine.

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[9]This image of God's absence echoes Hosea's parody of the divine name in Hosea 1:9. In Exodus 3:14, God reveals the divine name to Moses as "I Am Who I Am" or simply "I Am" (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה or simply אֶהְיֶה. In Hosea 1:9, God's name becomes "I Am Not," לֹא־אֶהְיֶה—"You are not my people and I am not your God."

I am inclined to read 6:1-3 in this latter, negative way. My inclinations are shaped both by the form and content of the call to repentance itself and the verses that follow immediately after. As you read through verses 1-3 carefully, you notice that the form and parallelism of the poetry is suddenly very regular, well rounded, without the usual jagged edges, changing lengths of lines and other irregularities common to much of Hosea's prophetic poetry. When set off against the surrounding speeches, the almost overly polished parallel form of the poetry gives the impression of a mechanical cycle. Reality is a cycle of rhythms, spring follows winter, healing follows wounding, presence follows absence, God's saving follows human repentance. Reality is a closed system of predictable seasons and rhythms, assured results, tit for tat, *quid pro quo*, the four spiritual laws and bingo! everything is fine. Like the poetry of these verses, reality is assumed to be rounded, closed, comprehensible, humanly calculable, mechanical. Do the right thing and you will automatically get the right result. Listen to the poetry:

> Come, let us return to the LORD;
> for it is he who has torn, and he will
> heal us;
> he has struck down, and he will
> bind us up.
> After two days he will revive us;
> on the third day he will raise us up,
> that we may live before him.
> Let us know, let us press on to know
> the LORD;
> his appearing is as sure as the dawn;
> he will come to us like the showers,
> like the spring rains that water the earth.
> (Hosea 6:1-3)

The tidy poem reassures its readers that the killing wound and other "unpleasantness" will last only a couple of days, three days tops. Then assuredly God will raise us up. The poem links God's coming and returning to the cycles of the sun rising without fail at dawn and the rain showers that come without fail each spring. There is a smell of smugness in the air. The cycles of rain and fertility in the poem are holdovers from the old Canaanite cult. The shallow call to repentance simply substitutes the name "Yahweh" for "Baal" with no substantive change in the underlying theology of guaranteed fertility and success through ritual manipulation and cultic orchestration. Feed the gods and they will feed you.

The people believe their wound is nothing but an insignificant itch when in reality it is a gaping hole which reaches to their heart.

Thus, the overly neat character of the poetry, the quickness with which the repentance and healing are to happen (two or three days), and the linking of God with the mechanistic Canaanite theology of guaranteed cycles of rain and fertility conspire to render this call to repentance as something less than genuine and heartfelt. The people believe their wound is nothing but an insignificant itch when in reality it is a gaping hole which reaches to their heart.

Moreover, the verses which immediately follow the call to repentance also suggest that the people's words of remorse are something less than adequate. For that we turn to the last section of this text.

Hosea 6:4-6—The Wardrobe: if words can kill, can they also give life?

The image of the wardrobe in C. S. Lewis' novel, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, serves as a gateway for the characters of the story to move from the ordinary world of the British countryside into the mythical world of Narnia. The wardrobe was an ordinary looking wardrobe, a closet with coats. Sometimes you would touch the back wall of the wardrobe, and it would lead nowhere. But at other times there was no back wall. You would simply move through this ordinary wardrobe into another world. And when you returned back through the wardrobe to the humdrum and routine life you had always known, somehow your perspective was different. You had changed.

Verses 4-6 in chapter 6 move from the quotation of the people in verses 1-3 to the first-person discourse again of God's own voice. God has reached the end of the rope and wonders in total puzzlement: "What am I going to do with you, Ephraim? What am I going to do with you, Judah?" God is at wit's end, genuinely baffled by the incorrigible and unrepentant people of God. Israel is God's spouse who has been unfaithful over and over and over again. They are like children who have driven their parent to the edge with their rebellious action and unrepentant attitude.

The people in their call to repentance had said God would come back as predictably as the spring rains. But God proposes a counter image, also an image of water but this time one which expresses the ephemeral character of the people's faith: "Your love," says God, "your devotion, your loyalty (the rich Hebrew word חסד) is like a morning mist, and like the dew that soon in the morning disappears" (6:4). Because of the fleeting nature of their shallow commitment, God proclaims, "Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have killed them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as light" (6:5). It is now clear that the instrument of divine judgment is not primarily the military attack of Judah upon Ephraim nor the political and military entanglements with Assyria. The primary way by which God has hewn and shaped and killed Israel is with the divine *word* spoken through the mouth of human prophets like Hosea. And this judgment is sure. The people were right about one thing in their call to repentance: God's "appearing is as sure as the dawn" (6:3). But the dawning sunlight which assuredly comes is first of all God's judgment which "goes forth as the light" and exposes the insubstantial and dew-like character of the people's faith and commitment.

Finally, God reveals the end or goal which God most desires from the people: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (6:6).[10]

Hosea decrees that God desires the love and knowledge of God, not the human manipulation of God through offerings and sacrifices. In the context of the larger witness of the Bible, these words cannot be

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[10] With these words, Hosea joins a chorus of other eighth century prophets in naming the necessary core and essence of our relationship to God in contrast to those things which are peripheral. In the context of wondering whether one should come to worship before God with burnt offerings and sacrifices of one's firstborn, Micah 6:8 states, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" In the context of God's displeasure with a primary focus on burnt offerings and sacrifices, Amos 5:24 declares, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

taken as a wholesale repudiation of cultic worship and the offering of sacrifices. But the words do suggest that before anything else, God desires heartfelt love and loyalty, a deep knowledge of God which implies a kind of personal, relational knowing of the divine Person. But how is Israel to pass through the wardrobe gateway from its rebellious idolatry to genuine love and knowledge of God? It will have to be through the same means as God used to judge and to kill: God will work through a prophet's words, through human language and Scripture, through dramatic poetry and verbal images which are tipped upside down and turned inside out to beckon and call, persuade and cajole, expose and illumine, wound and heal, kill and make alive. The wardrobe of words, of human language, is used by God to pass us through from judgment to hope, from death to life, from pain and sorrow to joy and blessing.

Harold Fisch in his study entitled, "Hosea: A Poetics of Violence," writes:

> We now begin to see why words are so important to this prophet, not words in organized "wholes" but words thrown out, rescued from the abyss, tormented into a meaning that will make possible some reciprocity between God and Israel. They are inadequate, but they are all we have. Through them we can still somehow reach out to [God] ("Take with you words and turn to the LORD," 14:2); through them God can still make a desperate bid to reach us.[11]

The words and verbal images of Hosea have the power to kill but also to make alive. The book of Hosea proceeds to take several of these images of judgment and turn them on their head. By the end of the book, verbal images of judgment are redeemed and become images of hope. There are at least five of these images which move from severe judgment to joyful promise:

1. God as lion. We saw the image of God as lion who ripped and killed and then turned away (5:14-15). By the end of Hosea, that same image of God as lion is retrieved and becomes life-giving. After God's people have been exiled and scattered to distant lands, God promises in Hosea 11:10-11:

> They shall go after the LORD who roars
> like a *lion*; when he roars, his children
> shall come trembling from the west...
> and I will return them to their homes,
> says the LORD.

2. The dew and mist of the morning. The images of the dew and morning mist were used to denounce the fleeting nature of Israel's faith which soon disappeared (6:4). But Hosea redeems this image as well, leaving behind its transitory character and emphasizing instead its cool freshness and its life-giving moisture. God promises in Hosea 14:5:

> I will be like the *dew* to Israel;
> he shall blossom like the lily,
> he shall strike root like the forests
> of Lebanon.

3. The call to repentance. God's quotation of the people's shallow repentance in 6:1-3 is reclaimed in a second call to repentance found in Hosea 14:1-3. This time the repentance is genuine, deep and heartfelt:

> Take words with you and return
> to the LORD;
> say to him,
> "Take away all guilt; accept that

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[11] Harold Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 143. Fisch's study of the prophet's poetry and use of images illuminates the mastery and subtlety of Hosea's prophetic discourse. I am indebted to Fisch for his many literary insights into the book.

which is good,
and we will offer the fruit of our lips.
Assyria shall not save us;
we will not ride upon horses;
we will say no more 'Our God,'
to the work of our hands.
In you the orphan finds mercy."

This open-ended prayer of repentance is offered at the end of Hosea to future generations of readers as words which lead beyond death to life. Assyria and other world powers, horses and other measurements of military or political power, the work of our hands—these are all potential idols if we look to them for healing our wounds and saving us from death and its destructive power. No, salvation comes from confessing that we are but orphans who find life only in God and in the mercy of God. All we have to offer is the fruit of our lips, the words of our mouth, the language of our praise and thanksgiving. Even the ability truly to repent is not the work of our hands but the gift of a gracious God.

4) *Wounding, healing, and turning away.* The wounding and turning away of God the angry lion in 5:15 becomes now at the end of Hosea the turning away not of God's presence but of God's anger. The wounding of God becomes the healing of God's love as God promises in Hosea 14:4:

I will *heal* their disloyalty;
I will love them freely,
for my anger has *turned* from them.

5. Prophetic words of death become prophetic words of life. The words of the prophet which killed (6:5) now become words which give life as God pledges in Hosea 14:7:

They shall again *live* beneath my shadow,
they shall flourish as a garden;
they shall blossom like the vine.
their fragrance shall be like
the wine of Lebanon.
I will heal their disloyalty;
I will love them freely.

Language, Scripture, the Bible, the Words of God gain their authority insofar as they serve as a verbal wardrobe through which people and communities are led to love God more truly and know God more deeply. For in loving God and knowing God, we move from idolatry to faith, from death to life, from judgment to hope.

Implications for understanding the authority of Scripture

I conclude this study of Hosea 5-6 with some implications for the question of the authority of Scripture in the contemporary world:

1. The issue of cultural resistance to the authority of biblical traditions and Scripture is not a new one. The prophet Hosea was a small minority voice in his culture, and his Yahwistic covenantal traditions had little effect on or appreciation among the powers and rulers of northern Israel. Hosea, like us, may have been tempted to wring his hands over the lack of influence which his words and his Yahweh-alone tradition had upon his society. But Hosea nevertheless kept preaching. He kept preaching because he believed his words had a power behind them that was greater than any other power, the power of God to kill and to make alive a new and faithful people. Hosea would not see the full results of his ministry in his lifetime. But he trusted that God would call others to carry on long after he exited from the prophetic stage. The authority of Hosea's prophetic word was not measured in the growth or decline of membership in his personal prophetic guild. The authority of Hosea's word was grounded in the trustworthiness of God, a

God whom Hosea trusted would be faithful to the word God called him to proclaim.

2. We lament the forces of secularism, relativism, individualism, consumerism and pluralism as anonymous conditions which have rendered the Bible less authoritative in our time and culture. Hosea might urge us to think of these forces as reflective of competing idolatries, "works of our hand" which we call "our god" (Hosea 14:3). Part of the authority of Scripture will be in illuminating and exposing the ultimate powerlessness and emptiness of the idols of our age. We also need to take seriously the possibility that these secularizing conditions are part of God's assault upon us or worse, God's absence from us. Has God simply left us to our own frantic devices? Have we so often looked elsewhere than to God for our healing and redemption as a church that God has simply given up on us for a time?

3. Renewing biblical authority in the church is not something which is achieved quickly. Recall the false hope of Hosea 6:2—"after two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up." No, it takes much longer to heal a serious illness and repair deep wounds. Not even the three days of a church convocation on the authority of Scripture will be sufficient to renew biblical authority and save the church! Renewing biblical authority will also not happen through a series of mechanical gimmicks or quick-fix schemes which promise automatic success. Renewing biblical authority means no less than building steadfast love, trust and commitment to God. Renewing biblical authority involves the long-term cultivation of a deep, personal and relational knowledge of the God who created the heavens and the earth and who yet wills to be known and loved in an intimate way. Such relationships are built over lifetimes and generations. The present crisis of biblical authority is no small itch but a deep and grievous wound which will take time to heal.

4. Hosea warns us against identifying the community of God with one political party or ideology as a strategy to increase the church's power. Hosea did not choose political sides but condemned both Judah and Israel in their diplomatic and military wrangling. Israel's running to join a political alliance with Assyria as a way of healing its wound and bolstering its power has always been a temptation for the church. It is tempting for the church to yoke itself to some visible group who holds visible power in the society, whether liberal or conservative. The church has a distinctive mission in the world, to proclaim the gospel, the power of God's love and mercy of God in Jesus Christ. The church has a legitimate role as a voice of influence in the midst of a pluralism of political and social voices. But the church needs to retain its integrity and its distinctiveness as a community of diversity under the one God who transcends and judges all human divisions.

Renewing biblical authority in the church is not something which is achieved quickly... it takes much longer to heal a serious illness.

5. Finally, the authority and power of

Hosea's words were enhanced by at least three factors. One factor was Hosea's ability accurately to discern the truth and the future of the people and society in which he lived. History confirmed the truth of Hosea's words: the northern kingdom was destroyed, Judah was exiled, and yet God in the end remained faithful to the promise to restore God's people. The Bible will be recognized as authoritative insofar as pastors and believers use the Bible accurately and persuasively to discern the truth about God, human beings, communities and nature in their particular settings and time.

The Bible will be recognized as authoritative insofar as pastors and believers use the Bible accurately and persuasively to discern the truth...

A second factor in the authority of Hosea's words was the captivating and imaginative ways in which Hosea reappropriated the covenantal traditions to which he was heir. Some of Hosea's listeners called him crazy ("The prophet is a fool, the man of the Spirit is mad!" Hosea 9:7). But I suspect no one called Hosea boring! His words grabbed attention and evoked strong, passionate response. Hosea both deftly deconstructed the mythology of his day and yet reappropriated that same mythology in dramatic ways to serve his message. May God bless and increase those many pastors and teachers in our church who are faithful, creative and interesting proclaimers of God's word.

A third factor in Hosea's authority was the integrity of the prophet's words lived out bodily in the prophet's own life. What the prophet proclaimed was embodied in his relationship to his wife and even in the names of his three children. The authority of the Bible will be enhanced to the extent that the actions of our people and the structures of our congregations and church institutions embody in reality the distinctive message of the gospel which we proclaim in our words.

The book of Hosea is the first of the so-called Twelve Minor Prophets of the Old Testament. The second-century B.C.E. apocryphal book, *The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach*, expressed the following prayer and wish concerning Hosea and his colleagues among the Minor Prophets:

> May the bones of the Twelve Prophets send forth new life from where they lie, for they comforted the people of Jacob and delivered them with confident hope. (Sirach 49:10)

That prayer will be answered to the extent that God continues to use the prophet Hosea to speak to us across the chasm of twenty-eight centuries. May God continue to use these old bones of Hosea and the old bones of all Scripture to send forth new life and to deliver us and our church again with confident hope.

Two Omens and an Oracle: Some Reflections on the Convocation of Teaching Theologians

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Introduction

The following reflections aim at two interrelated objectives. On the one hand, my attempt was to detect some common trajectories that crossed the arguments raised in the presentations and discussions of the papers prepared for the 1994 Convocation of Teaching Theologians. On the other, I was concerned in listening to some underlying problems articulating themselves in the midst of these discourses. The following observations and comments are an attempt to analyze and contribute to a discussion that was otherwise very well addressed at the Convocation.

When I was invited, along with Don Juel, to present these concluding critical reflections, I was unaware of how much the whole discussion about biblical authority, in the context of this Convocation, would be predicated on the North American cultural scene, of which I am far from being an expert. So with fear and trembling here I stand trying, however, to turn this obvious disadvantage around and offer to you a sort of a look from the outside. The advantage of an stranger is to bring another eye, another ear, unaccustomed to the all-too-familiar vistas and noises, which might allow (this is my hope) for some reflexivity to be introduced where there were routine assumptions. The risk in this is to exaggerate what might indeed be only plain and evident commonplace: sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, as the Freudian line goes! But let me take the risk and say that everywhere there is more than what meets the eye.

As an outsider, then, my first observation refers to what has caused the choice of the theme for this convocation. It has been frequently repeated in Christian circles and, particularly, in the context of the ELCA, that we are suffering from a growing biblical illiteracy. I will not dispute this, but only frame it in a broader global context. Arguably, for anyone outside of the U.S.A., the present complaint about biblical illiteracy in this society would sound something like a class of graduating students in a department of physics complaining about their junior colleagues' inability to grasp fast enough the General Theory of Relativity.

If for nothing else than for heuristic purposes, let me reverse this approach and suggest that we might have *too much* instead of too little biblical literacy in the U.S. context. But allow me here to qualify this statement. I would like to distinguish two approaches for the question of biblical literacy. One could be called a global synchronic approach, by which the question of illiteracy is set in the relationship between the North American culture vis-à-vis other contexts. The other could be called the internal diachronic approach, that sees the present situation in relationship to the past within the same cultural context. Hence, while suggesting, on the global synchronic level, a strong biblical literacy, I don't dispute Prof. Jodock's analysis that points to a *relative* loss in biblical acceptance at the internal diachronic level of analysis. (See "The American Context and the Authority of the Bible," *Currents* 23 [1996]: 85-103.)

Now, if it is correct that there has been a relative loss in biblical acceptance in a particular context still marked by a strong biblical dominance, I regard this to be possibly a positive sign (as Jodock also did). By saying this I am also saying that what I suggested as being still too much biblical literacy is what could be called a "*Kulturbiblizismus*:" biblical concepts and images permeate different cultural spheres so that the strangeness, the otherness, the scandal of the biblical message is domesticated and no longer heard. In such a situation, the counter-cultural surplus of the biblical message is emptied and the word of the Scriptures is tamed within the confines of North American denominationalism and of theological academia, as the presentations to the Convocation have also denounced. So if we detect a relative loss in biblical literacy this might provide us with the chance of rediscovering the otherness of the biblical message. In this sense the choice of the book of Hosea to serve as a basis for the discussion is a felicitous one. The biblical expositions of Profs. Olson and Jacobson (see pp. 173-84 and 165-72 in this issue) have shown this, renewing in us the wonder caused by a reading we have not been familiar with. To this point I will return at the end of my presentation.

I will restrict myself to only two critical points and a brief suggestion that I call two omens and an oracle.

Legitimacy

Some of the difficulties reflected in the discussions that issued from the papers presented have to do with the fact that we never really worked with an operational and agreed-upon concept of authority and, specifically, of biblical authority. There were different definitions of authority represented in the presentations and circulating in the debates. Let me use two of them to reveal the ends of the spectrum of definitions employed: On the one side, authority was defined as that which makes people obey. On the other, authority was presented as that which engages the imagination and enables us to construct socially our reality. These

are very different definitions. The first is really closer or even interchangeable with coercion. The second is kin to what in recent psychoanalytical language (J. Lacan) or in philosophy (C. Castoriadis) is called the "imaginary." Between these two extremes an array of other conceptions of authority was employed. However, the problem that caused what Jodock described as pain and anxiety was clearly presented, and I am suggesting that it is not quite addressed by the question of biblical authority. It is close to it, but it is not quite a question of authority. And this seems to be the reason why authority was not clearly defined. We were really dealing with a related but distinct problem. I will argue that we were, in fact, approaching the problem of *legitimacy*.



There is a crucial difference between authority and legitimacy. I take the former to refer to the capability to institute a given idea, to be an author. This could be called the power of configuration by which a given text, speech, or institution is able to conform and engage the minds and bodies, ideas and practices, of those under the domain or the field of influence of that text, speech, or institution. Legitimacy, on the other hand, refers rather to the means through which the power of configuration is exercised *and acknowledged*. It implies the tacit recognition that a given entity has the hegemony in the exercise of the power of configuration. Hegemony means the capability of exercising power without the explicit need of the use of force, constraint, or coercion within a given social group. I am suggesting that what caused the calling of this Convocation under this theme has to do not with the problem of authority but with the crisis of legitimacy.

The crisis of legitimacy in biblical interpretation is not a new phenomenon. It is the common complaint in Protestantism since the end of the 18th century, but has its beginning with the Reformation itself. Its insurgence is ironically linked to the Lutheran principle of the *scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (Scripture is its own interpreter), which would, at least since Pietism, justify the right of every Christian to have direct access to the Scriptures, bypassing normative institutional mediations. From its very inception, then, Protestantism has been a religious formation that has grounded itself in the very crisis of legitimacy over biblical interpretation while sustaining a heavy-laden conception of biblical authority. The talk about crisis of scriptural authority ought to be seen, then, as an evasion of the challenges of the critical situation that has determined from the beginning the protestant principle of the *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*: the *sola scriptura*. In other words, what I am calling the crisis of legitimacy is directly, and inversely, connected to the very renewal of biblical *authority* within Protestantism! Hence, what is being diagnosed as a crisis is not related either to a source of authority (a text, a speech, or an institution), nor to its cultural/religious reception, but to the way the source and its reception are linked together. And this is what legitimacy is all about.

To raise the problem of biblical authority as a novel crisis points, therefore, not to the crisis of authority, but to the lack of a magisterial voice by which a given interpretation could be considered legitimate. In saying that it is a question of legitimacy, rather than of authority, I am also suggesting that the Bible continues to exert authority in Christian communities (including Lutheran communities), even if one concedes to the argument that there has been a relative loss in the power of configuration. So, the theme of the 1994 Convocation has to be rephrased. Instead of "Renewing Biblical Authority: A Challenge for the ELCA," it should read: "Renewing Ecclesial Legitimacy: A Challenge for the Use of the Bible in the ELCA."

The use of Hosea as a case study is exemplary. In the Lutheran tradition, if the question would be of authority as such, the discussion should most likely center on the book of James, Hebrews, or Revelation. But what the selection of Hosea tells us is that what is under examination is rather the problem of possible divergent interpretations of an already authoritative text.

The crisis of legitimacy in the interpretation of the Bible, unlike the crisis of authority of the Bible, points to an ecclesial deficit in the church's capability to exercise hegemony. This I heard being said in different ways by both Prof. Jodock and Prof. Anderson. (See "In Defense of Unruly Discernment: Moral Deliberation in the ELCA," *Currents* 23 [1996]: 104-118.) It is thus important to recognize that the canonic Scriptures are a product of the church and not the other way around. And this is even more true for Lutherans who don't have a demarcated canon! It is the incapability of a particular church to have normative control of the text that is at the center of our attention, and not the authority of the text as such. That the Scriptures have authority is, e.g., as often recognized in the criticisms of the First Draft of the Statement on Human Sexuality (when arguments out of the "clarity" of the Scriptures are used against a more nuanced exegesis) as is the crisis of legitimacy of the ELCA in its attempt to interpret the Scriptures on this matter.

So this is the impasse: if in the name of scriptural authority the legitimacy of the church in interpreting it is denied or challenged, Lutherans are trying their own medicine (expressed by the principle that the Scriptures interpret themselves), but now as a poison (*pharmakon*, can be both). I believe this is what the discussion is really all about.

Hermeneutics

My second remark has to do with another issue that has gone through many of the discussions and was explicitly formulated in questions directed to Per Anderson and to Darrell Jodock. Is the authority of the biblical text constituted *functionally* in the reading community, or is there an intrinsic authority to be attributed to it previous to and outside of the community's reception? In traditional theological jargon: Is biblical authority a question of a *fides qua* or is it a matter of *fides quae*? Still in another way, is the Bible authoritative even apart from its use (the Orthodox *etiam extra usum*) or is its authority constituted by its recital in the community of true believers (the Pietist's version)? I am willing to sustain that there is a distinctive Lutheran hermeneutic principle that entails both aspects of the problem: the meaning and authority of the Scriptures constituting themselves in the community's reception while also granting to the Scriptures a foundational status as formal *a priori* judge, norm, and rule for the community's existence.

As Per Anderson pointed out, moral deliberation is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the constitution of the church as *communio*. And he went further to indicate, in a Lutheran fashion, that the condition of the possibility for the existence of the Christian community lies rather in the justifying word of God (*extra nos*). This distinction between the necessary but not sufficient condition and the condition of the possibility *sine qua non* there is a community is a rather important one for our consideration since it lifts up a basic feature of Luther's hermeneutics, and also of the Reformation's emphasis in the *sola scriptura* as the *formal*, yet not the material principle of the church. Let me try to explain this

Harald Diem wrote in 1938 a decisive article on "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms" in which he calls attention to the fact that the fundamental motivation of Luther's Two Kingdoms thinking was a hermeneutic one. Diem's argument allowed him to preserve the formal unity and authority of the Scriptures under the material principle of justification while simultaneously yielding to the critical diversity of the biblical material as it pertains to the realm in which communicative practice can engage the text, discuss it, criticize it, and even reject its validity (on a circumstantial, but not essential, basis). This is what grounds the possibility of having a canon within the canon, which is not a once and for all definition. Luther needed this hermeneutical principle after doing away with the magisterium (by the *primum principium*) while also rejecting the direct spiritual inspiration defended by the enthusiasts. Luther did not eliminate the external and formal normativity of the Bible, but he placed it substantively in the discerning community addressed by the gospel.

Did I hear this distinction being operative in the expositions and discussions? I think so, but it interests me to note that it was never explicitly stated as an operational hermeneutic principle. The reasons for why this principle did not become explicitly articulated can be legion. However, two of them should be brought into consideration.

We have shied away from what, in my understanding, is fundamental for a Lutheran hermeneutics.

First, the Two Kingdoms thinking has gotten a very bad press due to its political misuse during the Nazi period in Germany. The result is that we might have thrown out the baby (the hermeneutic intention) with the bath water (the Twentieth Century use of the doctrine). So we have shied away from what, in my understanding, is fundamental for a Lutheran hermeneutics.

Second, if Jodock is right (and I think he is) in pointing to the institutional crisis of Christendom and the prevailing late modern suspicion of the Enlightenment's project, how can we really trust a way of thinking that in a way supposed or at least was able to live with both: Christendom with its sense of stable Christian convictions (which would make the doctrine of justification a self-evident truth) and the Enlightenment with its critical reasoning (required for entering into moral deliberations).

At first sight, this seems to be a dead end for what I regard as a fundamental

hermeneutic principle to sustain both an ecclesial identity and the ground for having a community of moral deliberation without turning the process of moral deliberation as such into either a church-founding or a church-dividing issue. But if we surrender this hermeneutic principle we are likely to fall into either of two options (which one could hardly fail to see being argued for here and there in the ELCA). We could either move into biblicism, that turns every moral issue into a binding issue for the community or ends up in a doctrine of inerrancy, or we could go into institutionalism by surrendering the practice of conversation as constitutive for the being and identity of the church as *communio*.

If either side of the dilemma—the Lutheran Reformation turning itself against its own institutional reality, or the demise of the Lutheran hermeneutical principle—represents an insurmountable obstacle is difficult to say. Probably not! Actually, I am convinced that the Lutheran hermeneutic principle offers more promises even, and particularly, for our late modern condition. My concern here, however, is only the one of sharpening the issues so that we might locate the problem with some precision.

An oracle

Solutions are difficult to elaborate. Not because they are not available or are far away. They are close, maybe too close for comfort. And this is the reason why we create systems of knowledge that will dissimulate them. Systems are made for that: to domesticate and to control. This is what normally is called knowledge and what makes possible the Western equation of knowledge and power. This I believe was expressed in the context of the Convocation in many and different ways: we have domesticated the Scriptures. The question of biblical authority and ecclesial legitimacy needs to focus on the surprising and astounding otherness of the biblical witness. In other words: back, nay, forward to the theology of the cross.

What prompted these final observations were comments made by Prof. Schott and Prof. Priebe when they emphasized the critical significance of cross-cultural biblical criticism, and of the provoking/evoking nature of biblical imagery. (See "Biblical Authority and God—A Theological Reflection, and "A Holy God, An Idolatrous People, and Religious Pluralism: Hosea 1–3, *Currents* 23 [1996]: 119-25 and 126-33.) This is what causes in us the cognitive dissonance by which a book like Hosea, becomes again an strange text. As teaching theologians of the church it seems to me that our task could be defined in terms of recovering the shocking strangeness of the Word of God and how it came to be expressed in the biblical narrative without turning this narrative into a cozy "idol of the heart" (Luther). It is important to regain Luther's understanding of the relation of the Scriptures to the Word in analogy to the relation between the creature and the Creator.

Let me try to express this with a story I got from the Uruguayan historian and writer Eduardo Galeano. Recently, there was in Latin America a contact for the first time established between whites and a group of natives until then living without any exposure to Western culture. The contact ritual was well under way after gifts were exchanged and a first personal contact was taking place. In the group responsible to start the contact there was a priest. He had a Bible which he handed to an Indian. After some curious scrutinizing of that strange object for a person coming from a non-literary culture, the Indian wanted to know what that object was. After attempts of communicating through the enormous lin-

guistic barriers that separated the two groups some understanding was won. The Indian expressed somehow his understanding of what that object was; and he called it the "skin of God."

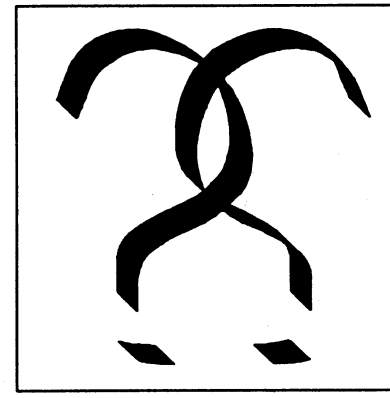
The skin is also a mask of a personality, it is a *larva*. I was reminded of this story when I heard Priebe's comments on the *baalim* as masks of God. The Scriptures as the creation of the co-eternal Word of God are among the visible means through which God presents Godself to us. But, as Luther warned us in the Heidelberg Disputation, they should not become means to speculate about the invisible which would turn the Bible into an idol, a cozy object that caresses hearts and minds. To try to unsolve the mystery of the divine by measuring the dimension of the mask would turn us into what we often become: phrenologists of God. I think the message we take along after this study of Hosea is that the masks of God we see are surprising, challenging, terrible, funny, crazy and even nice. But they cannot be something we might have adjusted to. The biblical message is not what we need under the skin. The question that should remain is this: Are the Scriptures still what move us, surprise us, and leave us uncomfortable in face of utter mystery?

The question of biblical authority and ecclesial legitimacy needs to focus on the surprising and astounding otherness of the biblical witness. In other words: back, nay, forward to the theology of the cross.

The Authority of the Scriptures: an Assessment of a Conversation

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The stimulating discussion over the last few days has provided a marvelous opportunity for assessment: What do teachers in the church think about the Bible? It is not uncommon to attend conferences on topics that make virtually no difference to people in the church. That is not the case this weekend. People are interested in what we have to say about the authority of the Bible, I assure you. I received a letter that was sent to "A Professor" at Luther Northwestern Seminary some time ago by a woman who had some questions.



The letter went something like this.

This letter is for a professor—not a staff person or a secretary. I got some questions and I want answers short and sweet.

1. Is the Bible true, or has it gone through so many hands that we got to take it with a grain of salt?

2. Do we believe in heaven and hell? What happens to us after we die?

I'm 65 years old and I been a Lutheran all my life. But winds of change are blowing. I want to know the truth.

A Concerned Lutheran

Academic programs do not generally train people to respond to such queries. We are better at asking questions than giving answers, and still more comfortable multiplying options than in settling anything. But at some point some answers are necessary, and I take it that this conference is an occasion to sort out questions we are willing to answer, in however halting and provisional a way. What is the truth? If we are unwilling to deal with such people as the Concerned Lutheran who wrote to a seminary professor, we can hardly expect pastors to do it—and we can hardly be surprised if people are skeptical about what happens in seminaries.

The conference has been called because there are questions about the authority of the Scriptures. Prof. Westhelle (see pp. 185-91 in this issue) has suggested that one of the hidden agendas might be that institutions are dismayed that the Bible no longer commands obedience to ecclesial authority. That is surely the case among us. The reason, as several have suggested, is that the question of authority cannot be detached from meaning. And we have become aware of something that has always been the case but has not been as apparent: We don't agree about what the Bible means. There are differences of opinion about how to read as well as what we believe the Bible is good for. And those differences are not trivial.

Simply to acknowledge the reality of such disagreement within the church—differences of opinion among people of faith and good will—would be a significant advance. I was almost amused by the closing prayer that is part of the Vespers service:

> Lord, we thank you that you have taught us what you would have us believe and do. Help us by your Holy Spirit, for the sake of Jesus Christ, to keep your Word in pure hearts...

That kind of mythology—implying that God's will for us is clearly spelled out in the Scriptures—is not helpful. It can easily become propaganda for a faction that wants to coerce others into accepting a particular reading. The Bible's authority is tied to our interpretations of it. Discussions of scriptural authority become important when we do not agree about what we are reading. It would perhaps be liberating if we all acknowledged that since the earliest days of the Christian movement there have been deep disagreements about how to read the Bible and what it says. The real crisis is not first of all at the level of authority but at the level of interpretation.

There are many reasons why the crisis seems more acute now. Perhaps one is that there are fewer "traditional" communities in which everyone has been acculturated. As a first exercise in a beginning Bible class, my colleague and I have asked students to read Potok's *The Chosen*. The novel is not difficult to read, and it not only provides a brief introduction to Judaism for people who may never have known a Jew but offers a poignant example of the clash

between traditional communities and the modern world. What has intrigued us from the first time we used the book is how difficult it proves for students to have any sympathy for the orthodox hasidic Jews in the novel. Students speak with genuine contempt for the "traditionalists" who hide from the world in their religious circles, wearing strange clothing and cultivating strange practices. They assume without question that secular society offers adequate measures of truth and that the strength of a real religion is its ability to integrate itself into the larger society. They are genuinely surprised by the notion that secular culture may be a genuine enemy of truth and that communities of conviction may need to take measures to defend themselves against its corrosive forces.

It hardly comes as a surprise, then, that when asked how many have been raised in families and communities with any particular rituals—like Sunday services, Wednesday evening Lenten services, restricted activities on Sundays, regular times for family prayer, even grace at meals—virtually all indicate they have not. In one class of thirty-eight, only two students had any sense of such tradition, and they were both former Missouri Synod Lutherans.

We live in a changed context. Most of our students were not raised in the traditional communities many of us knew. Prof. Jodock (see *Currents* 23:2 [April 1996]: 85-103) has suggested helpful ways to understand the context in which we speak. We will deal with students and congregations no longer shaped by Christian rituals. We will have to make our way in the world in which there are competing claims. We are no longer a kept people. The situation is not unprecedented in the history of the Christian community; the church has found its way in such settings before. We need to ask the right questions in our own context, however. Can we make a case? What case are we to make? And what does the Bible have to do with both matters?

The question can be asked at several levels. Gathering the academic community of teachers within the church is one way to begin—provided that we keep in mind how much can be taken for granted in this circle that may not be the case elsewhere. In this group, it has not been necessary to argue that the Bible is worth reading. There has never been a question that the Bible has status. Even among so coherent a group as Lutheran teachers, however, we have questions about what it is good for and how we read.

What I hope the church can gain from this conference is both an assessment of where we are and a brief agenda for pursuing our conversation. And perhaps that is a place to begin my own reflections.

The church

Professor Jodock has made a bold argument that Bible ought not be discussed apart from church—and that the authority of the Scriptures belongs within a discussion of the church. Here is one place where real clarity is important. What do we mean by "the church"? Our confessional heritage prefers to speak of the church in terms of its external marks, emphasizing two: the church is the assembly where the word is preached and the sacraments are administered. That's not a bad place to start. What is striking is how much else is loaded on, here at the conference as well as in other conversations. Some here have spoken of the church as the "place of moral deliberation;" a "community of conviction;" the place where "the Scriptures engage the imagination of the faithful and open new worlds."

Is that true? In the 50s and 60s, church

teachers decided that the family was the place where many of the most important educating took place, like the reading of the scriptures and catechization. They invested much of their energy in providing resources for "the Christian family." Families today cannot bear the burdens. "Family" in this sense is in most cases a figment of pious imagination.

What about "the church"? I can tell you about our church. It's a small operation in an enormous building. We do worship nicely, the music is magnificent, and the pastor takes care in preparing biblical sermons. I have little sense that we are a community. My wife and I have been members for less than five years, and it might be argued we need more time. There are many in our situation, however, and sometimes people only spend a few years in a particular location before moving on. How long does it take to form a community, much less a community of discourse? I teach the adult class occasionally, where perhaps 15 people show up. I have done as many as four sessions in a row. If a sustained conversation has resulted from those classes, I at least have not been a participant. There are occasions when people talk together. The pastor managed to get a small group together to review the sexuality statement. There are a few women's circles—far fewer than years ago—that meet for women's Bible study. Otherwise, I do not believe there is much deliberation taking place. The Bible is not being read within many congregational circles. So far as I know, there is no "community" of discourse of any kind. And I suspect our little congregation is no exception. At many of the massive congregations in the Twin Cities, where hundreds, even thousands, worship, there is virtually no educational program for adults. New members are admitted with no real catechesis.

If we believe the way the Bible exercises its authority is in its use, we must seek to foster Bible study and conversation within the church.

It is thus a fantasy to speak of such congregations as "communities of discourse" of any sort. The sobering thing is that many people, I suspect, belong to no real community of discourse, inside or outside the church. And in particular, they don't read the Bible with others as a way of shaping their lives.

If we believe the way the Bible exercises its authority is in its use, we must seek to foster Bible study and conversation within the church. I am more impressed than ever with the directions my colleague Patrick Keifert has moved in his efforts to spark church renewal. His interests in worship and evangelism have led directly into a second project dealing with the building of small groups within congregations. He has prepared very practical material for congregations in light of what he has learned from evangelicals. Lively congregations must have two things: a lively worship that extends hospitality to the unchurched—and small groups. The Southwest Minnesota Synod of the ELCA has been working to develop groups whose focus is moral deliberation. Such efforts require strategy and hard work, but communities can be formed

and changed. Leaders can be trained and congregational resources mobilized. Work with small groups provides at least one way in which the church can actually become a community in which people read and talk together.

If it is true that biblical authority is important first of all within the community of the faithful, there must be places within the church where it is read and pondered.

Authority

Our consideration of authority would be directed along productive paths—and immensely enriched—by attending to the nature of language. Such reflection is necessary when traditional notions of authority no longer hold and people disagree about interpretation. There now exists a vast literature on the character of language, only a fraction of which I have read but which has already changed the way I think and function.

In view of that new body of literature, I am surprised still to hear phrases like, "Well, that's just a metaphor." There is an impressive literature on the use of metaphor—some of it at a very understandable level—that ought to ring true to those from the Reformation heritage. Language does things that nothing else can do. Words, especially metaphors, are not simply fancy ways of saying something we already know. Words, especially metaphors, are not simply pointers to a reality to which we have some other access. Language creates reality. It provides a world in which things can make sense. And it does more: It kills and makes alive. Hosea makes bold references to the power of language. "I have hewn them by the prophets," God says through the mouth of a prophet who proved capable of such destructive use of words.

Those prophetic writings continue to do things when the words are formed in our own mouths. We have heard testimony from our colleagues. Some are healed by the prophet's words; others are wounded. Appreciation of the power of language doesn't require elaborate reading in hard books. Just watch what happens when the Bible is read aloud. Think about what happened here when those images from Hosea 2 were given voice. (See Jacobson, pp. 165-72 in this issue.) People were unnerved—preachers in particular. The images imposed on us by the prophet do things—regardless of what we know about the prophet's own life, regardless of what we can learn about the structures of Israelite society. The images take on a life of their own (as anyone knows who has written anything). Their meaning can be shaped and enriched by providing a context, but we ought to attend more to the sound of the words and their impact on people—a wide variety of people whose reaction may be different from our own.

The way we speak of the language of the Bible and our relationship to it is likewise important. One may speak of being "seized" by the scriptural images. Such language can make people nervous—particularly, perhaps, people who have been controlled and violated by others with power over them. It is quite inaccurate, however, to speak of these powerful images in Hosea as though they were merchandise we could examine and then purchase if we choose. There is something more intrusive about them. They come—perhaps even to the prophet—unbidden. They are God's words, even if spoken through the mouths of others, even when translated into other languages.

The prophetic call is clear enough: the prophet, through the medium of human language, breaks into the blocked imagina-

Biblical images are difficult to control. The language may destroy unintended victims.

tion of those who are insulated from God's judgment as well as God's gift of life. The apostle Paul spoke of himself not as providing options for people but as "taking every thought captive in obedience to Christ." The imagery is appropriate for those called to preach and teach, using the words of the prophets and apostles. Bondage may require drastic measures. In Hosea, God's breaking into Israel's imagination requires drastic images—desperate measures that are necessary if there is to be any repentance and healing.

The problem, however, is that the biblical images are difficult to control. The language may destroy unintended victims. The shock to our system may be purchased at the expense of the powerless, perhaps even the innocent. Respect for the Scriptures must therefore, in the hands of those who wield the two-edged sword, require attention to the effects of the words of God. And this leads me to my last point.

God

The question about scriptural authority is at its base a question about the authority of God. That is particularly true in Hosea. The problem we have encountered in the sections we have studied is first of all God. The book of Hosea claims that the words, spoken in the first person singular, are God's words. That they come from translators who make use of reconstructed texts that derive at some point from the pen of students who remembered words spoken by an historical figure named Hosea does not abrogate the claim that these are God's words. That is both the promise and the scandal of prophetic oracles.

But how what we understand our role with regard to these oracles of God? Professor Olson (see pp. 173-84 in this issue)began with a reference to C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. I would like to think a bit about that book and what light it may shed on our enterprise. In this volume, Lewis offers a remarkably creative narrative interpretation of the atonement. The Christ figure, Aslan, must die in order to save a young boy, Edmund. The way Lewis deals with the issue is by means of a construct he terms "the deep magic." The Lion must die because there are rules written deeply into the fabric of reality—rules about transgression and punishment, sacrifice and reward. According to those rules, the witch (the Devil) has rights to all traitors and must be paid in blood. The only way to ransom a guilty party is by paying in blood for them. Understanding these rules means knowing why the Christ must suffer. But what is the point of that knowledge? Does understanding God's reasoning accomplish deliverance? Must one believe the deep magic to be saved? What becomes apparent is that the enterprise Lewis undertakes is an elaborate game. A problem is posed and a solution is found. End of problem.

I would suggest that much of the discussion—particularly in reaction to Prof. Jacobson's paper—seems akin to Lewis' undertaking. In response to Prof. Jacobson's "confession" that as a woman she found the imagery in the second chapter of Hosea

hurtful and offensive, one of our colleagues, partly in jest, spoke of "fixing Diane's problem." He proposed an interpretation of the imagery that would not be offensive to women. Interpretation, in fact, is the way the church has always sought to make difficult biblical images palatable. An argument advanced at this conference is that the verses must be placed in a larger setting—a narrative context, we might say—to be understood. And that narrative setting—which for Christians must include Jesus—solves the problem of the offense, according to ecclesial authorities. Proper interpretation convinces that these verses about tearing and humiliating are intended for our good. It seems true, as Prof. Olson argued, that by the end of the book each of these negative images has been redone and turned into something positive. God punishes, even humiliates, in order to heal, so the orthodox interpretation argues.

What if that does not do it for you? What if you begin to suspect that such interpretations are only another version of the pious platitudes that are so nicely formed in Hosea 6:1-3? What if the God the pastor tells you intends only your good comes roaring off the page and into your imagination as one more oppressor? Interpretation may come to the rescue in another fashion. Locating the imagery in its ancient culture, and understanding that the prophetic oracle was addressed to another audience at another social location and another time and place, may distance you from the words far enough to settle the problem. The cost of such interpreting will be great, however. Any redemptive possibilities these images have are then ruled out.

A pastor told me once that he had read the Bible from cover to cover when he was 15, and it frightened the daylights out of him. "What if God is really like this?" he asked. His pastors, college professors, and seminary teachers convinced him that there was nothing to be frightened about. They domesticated the fearful imagery by learned interpretation. "The result," the pastor mused, "is that the God of the Bible no longer terrifies me—but I also have difficulty finding the Bible interesting."

If we have any respect for the authority of the Scriptures, we domesticate its language at our peril. But the problem is then how we insure that these verses work properly. For if we can leave readers with no more than the possibility that the Holy Spirit will make them work redemptively, we have done no one a favor. We have simply placed people face to face with a presence over which they have no control, a lion who may well tear them limb from limb emotionally and spiritually.

One of my favorite reading partners over the years has been Frank Kermode. He writes as an opponent of established interpretations, particularly those advocated by powerful institutions like the church or academic guild. In his *The Sense of an Ending* and *The Genesis of Secrecy* he argues a case that Lutherans might well find congenial: we require order and meaning from life, and we will get it at whatever the cost. The "truth," he argues, is that Truth is not available to us. We do not have the means to get what we need. There is no way we can guarantee that the story will come out right and that the language will work on our imaginations the way we hope. The result is that we are reduced to the use of cunning and violence to convince ourselves—and others—that we know life's secrets or can at least get at them by following the proper methods of interpretation.

Reading his work always creates a stir among students. They do not want to believe what he says, and their anxiety often leads to outright hostility. Is this not what occurred in response to Prof. Jacobson's

transgression of interpretive propriety when she told us how women hear Hosea's imagery, how destructive and non-redemptive it is? The response was to argue that there was something she had not understood. And when she was not impressed, there was at least a sense of impatience. The next stage, in many circles where cunning interpretations do not succeed in bringing the strays to heel, is violence—raised voices, threats, even excommunication.

Kermode is correct: our interpretation of the Bible cannot insure that it will come out right and that the frightful imagery of the prophet Hosea will finally heal anyone. That is something that only God can do. The real question for interpreters, then, is whether God does such things. Does God do the things promised in Hosea and the rest of the Bible? Will God make alive as well as kill?

Here, I believe, Lutheran interpreters have a great gift to offer the church. I would not refer to this as a "Lutheran hermeneutic;" that is to suggest too pat a formulation. It is more like a "clue," or "hunch," or "fruitful prejudice." For whatever else our tradition may be about, it is utterly invested in the conviction that the God who terrorizes the helpless from the pages of Hosea is the one who comes to us as savior, healer, and friend in the preached word—a word that is about the one who gave his son to die for us. God comes through a word that is alive, spoken, and spoken in the particular to particular persons. It is a word that comes embodied in water, bread, and wine. The Problem of God will not be solved by interpretation but by God's coming to us in the presence of Christ. It is because we are bold to speak on God's behalf that sins are forgiven, that the soiled are washed clean, that the tiny bits of food we offer are a foretaste of the feast to come—it is because we believe that Christ is truly present in the words we speak and taste that we can dare to read Hosea's prophecy as promising.

The authority the Bible claims rests on promises. "Rests on" is thus an unfortunate image. Hosea's prophecies strain forward, beyond the confines of the book, beyond the historical collapse of Israel to which he spoke, into the narrative that continues through the New Testament and into the future when God will have to deliver on all the promises. They are likewise intimately tied to the present, to the experience of the faithful where God comes to provide a downpayment.

If we imagine that our role as interpreters is to solve the problem of God, we will succeed only in building a hedge around ourselves and those for whom we are responsible. It is then precisely the dissenting voices—the voices of women and minorities and unbelievers—on which we must depend to breach our interpretive defenses and allow for the possibility that we are driven once again to the glorious discovery that we are justified by faith as a gift by a God who can be trusted, who continues to deliver through words we are privileged to read and to speak.

There are other matters for us to discuss. We must still wrestle with how to adequately render ancient books in our own language and idiom. We have still to consider what difference it will make if "strangers" of all sorts are included in that conversation. And we have yet to consider what to make of the Bible as a moral guide—to put it in theological terms, how God works through law. But such matters must await another time.

Considering Veritatis Splendor: A Book Worth Discussing

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Considering Veritatis Splendor. Edited by John Wilkins. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994. xv and 182 pages. Paper. $12.95.

Here you have a real deal! For very little money you get the complete text of probably the most significant encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II together with eleven highly thought-provoking responses interpreting, engaging, criticizing, and defending both the content as well as the intention of the Pope's statement on the foundation and content of Christian morality. In this way this volume can serve both as a first introduction into some of the fundamental issues of Roman Catholic moral theology and its internal disagreements and, more importantly, as a forceful rendering of the central tenets of Christian ethics in a time of encompassing moral disorientation and celebrated arbitrariness of convictions and norms.

A little less than the first half of the book is made up by the editor's very brief but concise introduction to the encyclical letter and by eleven equally short and concise responses, while a little more than the second half of the book offers the complete text of *Veritatis Splendor*. Consequently, there are two ways to read this book. The first is the obvious one of simply following the given flow from front to back. It is very tempting to satisfy one's curiosity by browsing through the engaging responses—and to get enthralled by their strong agreements and disagreements with the encyclical. Yet the clearly preferable way to read this book is, after skimming the introduction, to carefully attend to the encyclical itself, and then to the responses. Despite this recommendation to the reader of the book, the following exposition and discussion will follow the volume's given sequence.

1. What they say about the encyclical

Any selection of responses to a papal document directed to all the bishops of the global Roman Catholic community asks for some tough decisions if the sum of them should show any signs of coherence. In order to

achieve some inner coherence, this selection obviously did not aspire to global comprehensiveness. Thus we miss respondents from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and most European corners. Originally published in Great Britain, it is a primarily Anglo-Saxon response with one Polish and two German voices added. In addition, it is a predominantly Roman Catholic group of respondents. Inside this limited framework the selection of respondents is, nevertheless, quite well balanced: among them are lay people, monastics, and priests, women and men. On the one side we find three leading Catholic moral theologians who substantively criticize the encyclical. On the other side are three equally well-known voices who strongly and unambiguously support and defend it. And in between are five voices which combine a deep appreciation of various aspects of the Pope's teaching statement with some serious concerns and criticisms. Unfortunately, some voices seem to have gotten lost on the way: on the cover one finds announced the Irish moral theologian Enda McDonagh and the English ethicist Peter Hebblethwaite together with all the other commentators. Yet one looks in vain for their contributions in the volume.

But what do those commentators have to say who actually made it into the volume? First, Germain Grizes, a well known American moral theologian teaching at Mount St. Mary's College, Maryland, defends the encyclical in the strongest terms possible, while in the immediately following statement Bernhard Häring, the leading mind and most influential figure of post-Vatican II moral theology, criticizes the document in equally strong terms. The contrast between these first responses could not be starker and is most revealing in regard to the fundamental disagreement among Roman Catholic moral theologians. While Grizes emphasizes the revealed truth of exceptionless norms as the basis of the church's infallibility in believing and the magisterium's authority in teaching, Häring sees the document guided by the overarching goal "to endorse total assent and submission to all utterances of the Pope, and above all on one crucial point: that the use of any artificial means for regulating birth is intrinsically evil and sinful, without exception, even in circumstances where contraception would be a lesser evil" (p. 9). While Häring is pointing to a hidden agenda, the two antagonists show in their strong disagreement that, as a matter of fact, one of the key issues of the encyclical is the relation between the existence of intrinsically evil acts (which are not to be committed under any circumstance) and the magisterium's role in authoritatively defining which kinds of acts fall under this category.

The subsequent two respondents represent two leading voices of those schools of moral theology which are seriously criticized in the encyclical. First the well-known American moral theologian from the University of Notre Dame, Richard McCormick, defends "proportionalism" as precisely a way to make differentiations in regard to intrinsically evil acts. Then the Jesuit Joseph Fuchs, who taught moral theology at the Gregorian University in Rome for almost forty years, defends the notion of "fundamental option" as a concept originating in Karl Rahner's theology over against its alleged misconception in the encyclical.

In a very witty response Nicholas Lash, Catholic lay theologian teaching at Cambridge University, attends both to the questionable issue of authoritarianism in the magisterium's self-portrayal and to the important constructive role of properly conducted disagreement as the crucial vehicle to ascertain truth in moral—and other—matters, while the Polish Dominican Maciej Zieba emphasizes two different but equally

important points: first, that *Veritatis Splendor* has to be read as the church's experience in Central and Eastern Europe under the rule of Communism and, second, that the encyclical's two poles of freedom and truth are at the root of the vexing moral problems of the contemporary world. This is, according to Zieba, the reason why *Veritatis Splendor*'s emphasis on truth in regard to the moral life should not be read in an isolated manner but in close connection with the emphasis on freedom in the Pope's earlier social encyclical *Centesimus Annus*.

Oliver O'Donovan, leading British ethicist at Oxford, also emphasizes the strong relationship between truth and freedom in the encyclical, more precisely the necessity of truth being the condition of freedom. Yet he criticizes the very lack of the richness of the created world informing this perspective of truth in its relationship to human freedom. For Protestant readers this is probably the most important response to the encyclical in this volume.

Mary Tuck, a British Roman Catholic lay woman—criminologist and social scientist by profession—offers a lucid response from which the strain of detailed and dense professional theological argumentation is refreshingly absent. Her appreciation of the encyclical's core message for the everyday life of Catholic lay people, as well as her warnings against a counterproductive overburdening of the same lay people by identifying contraception as inherently evil act, are equally impressive. Noteworthy is also her appreciation of the encyclical's emphasis of martyrdom as witness to the inviolability of God's law.

Lisa Cahill, a Catholic feminist teaching ethics at Boston College, rightly points out the disturbingly non-inclusive language in regard to human beings in the English version of the text. In addition, she highlights three areas of concern from a feminist perspective: the moral meaning of the human body, the proposition of intrinsically evil acts, and the issue of gender roles. Her critical questions are thoughtful, to the point, and framed in a way that they can only further the discussion. Together with most of the other commentators, she emphasizes the encyclical's promise for a timely reinforcement of our common moral foundations—an important appeal to all American readers!

The two last responses point in equally interesting but quite different ways beyond the encyclical itself. Herbert McCabe, a Dominican from Oxford University, provides a very thoughtful and highly convincing theological critique of the encyclical from a Thomist perspective by arguing that the omission of the centrality of the virtues for the moral life leads to a distorted emphasis on law and obedience, and thus causes the encyclical to make a bad case for a good thesis, namely "that we need absolute prohibitions as well as instruction on the paths of virtue" (p. 67). John Finnis, professor of law at Oxford University, addresses the problem of the post-Christian mind and society in which unrestrained human desires are running wild and in which morality only serves the practical purpose of organizing and channeling these desires. "But morality robbed of its objectivity and made an instrument of human willfulness is radically unstable.... Whenever fulfillment of desires seems to them worth the cost in social stability and repute, people will make exceptions for themselves" (p. 73). This critique of the dominant Western trinity of desires, economy, and media is equally trenchant as it is convincing. "No longer 'slaves to righteousness', we are thus freed to live 'according to the flesh'" (p. 75). In the light of this situation he strongly welcomes especially the Pope's reaffirmation that, as a matter of fact, there exist intrinsi-

cally evil acts, prohibited by exceptionless specific norms, and inviolable human rights. Yet he asks for the Pope to address in a teaching document "beyond the encyclical" the issue of "revelation" in order that the church will be enabled to respond to the loss of Christian hope and the pastoral silence in regard to the last things.

In their considerable disagreements all commentators strongly agree that even if not all the answers are fully satisfying, the Pope's document has addressed a most disturbing moral crisis in the world of late modernity and has identified some of the crucial problems in that crisis, especially the deeply disturbed relationship between truth, freedom, and universally binding negative precepts. Yet all of this can only be appreciated in the light of the encyclical itself. There we now turn.

2. What the encyclical itself says

The encyclical falls into three parts which differ considerably from each other in style, focus, and content. The first part, "Christ and the answer to the question of morality," is a beautiful and quite moving interpretation of Mt 19:16-21. It is equally meditative as it is intense. In the encounter of Christ and the rich young man, the encounter of the whole human community with its quest for the good, for true fulfillment, and for genuine happiness is included: "Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?" The unfolding of this dialogue gives the encyclical the occasion to point out humanity's integral vocation in God's economy of salvation, namely that a life according to the commandments is to be understood as a beginning on the path of freedom, which has its peak and fulfillment in the discipleship of Christ ("If you wish to be perfect..."). The encyclical's key-motive of human freedom's positive relationship to God's law is thus set up: "Perfection demands that maturity in self-giving to which human freedom is called.... Human freedom and God's law are not in opposition; on the contrary, they appeal one to the other" (p. 97). The radical core of the first section of the encyclical is christological. It unambiguously reminds us that the very foundation of Christian morality is Christ himself, so that the very way of discipleship is not an external heteronomous obedience to the law but a holding fast to Jesus: "Following Christ is thus the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality.... This is not a matter only of disposing oneself to hear a teaching and obediently accepting a commandment. More radically, it involves holding fast to the very person of Jesus, partaking of his life and his destiny, sharing in his free and loving obedience to the will of the Father" (p. 99). And it is only here, by "walking by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16), that one "find[s] in God's Law the fundamental and necessary way in which to practice love as something freely chosen and freely lived out" (p. 98). This Christ- and Spirit-centered evangelical interpretation of God's law is an inspiring and truly ecumenical opening of the encyclical, rightly addressing the whole ecumene of all Christians with a strong paracletic reminder of their genuine vocation—and of the vocation of all human beings as God's creatures, called to full fellowship and communion with the Triune God. It should be read and meditated by Christians from all branches of the worldwide ecumene.

Which errors the encyclical identifies. The second part differs considerably in tone and style from the first part and, obviously, addresses the more specialized audience of moral theologians and bishops in their teach-

ing function. Nevertheless it is also highly profitable to read for the nonspecialist. If one perseveres through some quite technical sections, one not only gains insight into the intricate inner workings of Roman Catholic moral theology, but one is also confronted with issues and problems which haunt contemporary Protestant ethics.

The papal document addresses four kinds of errors, which in various ways deny or conceptually undermine the fact that there are intrinsically evil acts, which are clearly definable and which are forbidden by exceptionless negative precepts—both of natural law and of revealed law, as being interpreted by the teaching office of the church.

Why there is no freedom without the law. As first error, the Pope identifies a wrong understanding of moral autonomy, an autonomy that is based on the dichotomy between freedom and law. In this case, moral autonomy is understood as freedom from legal obligations, as the autonomy to freely apply general moral directives as "love of neighbor" and "respect of everyone's dignity" in one's individual situation and case. Any unexceptionally binding norms are seen as a threat to true moral autonomy and the freedom of moral choice. Over against this quite popular view, the encyclical emphasizes that true human freedom is not inhibited by the divine law but precisely made possible by it, because both the human being and what is to be called "natural law" are the works of God the Creator. In other words, human freedom and divine (revealed) law and natural law are made for each other, so that human freedom presupposes the law, while the law finds its fulfillment in human freedom. Human freedom is, according to the Pope's teaching, only made possible in a framework of exceptionless norms pointing to intrinsically evil acts, while these norms precisely intend the enactment of truly human freedom. The objectivity of the law and the freedom of the human person inherently belong together.

Why our conscience does not create values. As second error, the encyclical identifies a currently popular notion of conscience, namely the human conscience as creator of values and norms, thus making the individual agent the ultimate moral arbiter and "maker of morality." Here the Pope rightly emphasizes that conscience is to be understood as the faculty of judgment, i.e. of applying general moral truths including negative precepts, which oblige in every case, to one's particular situation. In other words, conscience does not freely "choose" between this or that course of action, weighing costs and benefits and taking some "orientation" from broadly and vaguely conceived guidelines as "love," "respect," or "responsibility." Instead, human conscience is bound by definite norms as implicitly given to human reason and explicitly stated in the divine commandments, and it applies these norms in particular constellations. Conscience is bound by the truth of the law.

Why "meaning good" may not be divorced from "doing the good." As third error, the encyclical identifies the attempt to drive a wedge between a freely chosen fundamental human orientation towards good or evil (the so-called "fundamental option"), on the one hand, and concrete individual acts, on the other. This distinction, brought into the discussion by Karl Rahner, served as a modern reinterpretation of the traditional Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sins. In this view, mortal sins are not identified via particular concrete acts, such as murder, but as a fundamental rejection of

God. A person who commits murder, but has not intentionally rejected God, has not automatically committed a mortal sin. Over against this construction the papal document rejects such a theory as inconsistent with the makeup of the acting person. In other words, the so-called "fundamental option" is always embodied in concrete human acts, so that the freely chosen and intentionally enacted killing of another person is the explicit rejection of God, because it is as an intrinsically evil act at the same time a breaking of God's law. Thus, according to the Pope, the fundamental option has to be understood as a genuine choice of freedom, that is profoundly linked to particular acts. One could say that the fundamental option only takes on reality in and through particular acts and does not exist independently of them, but only in them.

Why weighing the goods and bads is a remarkably bad idea. As last error, the encyclical identifies the schools of "proportionalism" and "consequentialism." While these two important streams of contemporary Roman Catholic moral theology are in no way identical with "situation ethics" and "utilitarianism"—arguably the most popular modes of ethical thinking among Protestants—they address some similar concerns. "Consequentialists" maintain that in order to tell whether a particular act, excluded by the unconditional negative precepts, is morally evil, one has to take into account the greater good or lesser evil which it might bring about. "Proportionalists" insist that causing certain disvalues or evils (deception in speech, wounding and violence, sterilization) in our conduct does not by this very fact make the action morally wrong. The action in which they occur does become morally wrong when there is not a proportionate reason in the act justifying the evil or disvalue. In other words, proportionalists maintain that one has to look at all dimensions of the act before one can say whether it is morally wrong. In rebutting these theories, the Pope's argument becomes extremely dense. Two main points will be mentioned here. First, in response to "consequentialism" the Pope rightly points out "the difficulty, or rather the impossibility, of evaluating all the good and evil consequences and effects—defined as premoral—of one's own acts: an exhaustive rational calculation is not possible" (p. 148). While this is relatively obvious, it is the second point, his response to "proportionalism," which strikes to the very heart of the matter, yet which is also the much more difficult point.

Why a good intention is not enough for a good deed. The Pope insists that "the morality of the human act depends primarily and fundamentally on the 'object' rationally chosen by the deliberate will" (p. 148). The "object," which makes an act good or evil, is always a particular, freely chosen act. And any human act, so understood, represents the enactment of the agent's intentionality. In other words, the human act is first and foremost a matter of the agent's intentionality. And it is this insight, which makes any meaningful distinction between "pre-moral" and "moral" goods impossible. Why? In order to achieve a proportionally better end via the breaking of one of the negative precepts, one has to explicitly and freely intend this breaking of the law. The consequence of this is an evil will which unavoidably leads to a moral self-poisoning of the person. Thus, from the agent's perspective there simply is no way to achieve good ends via evil means (i.e., an intentionally chosen breaking of one of the negative precepts of the law), because the agent has to embody the evil means in a way that the "good" end cannot ever be attained

well. Therefore, it cannot be a truly good end. Thus, the Pope's teaching not only challenges the current wisdom of the means justifying the end (Lenin: "If you want to cook an omelet you have to break some eggs."). Less obviously, he also points out that if the weighing of consequences implies the intentional breaking of an unconditionally negative precept the weighing already has become meaningless, since on this path the greater good cannot be achieved well. In other words, there is no greater good in this case because the agent's intentionality is an inherent element in the good of the chosen act. Only if the agent abstracts him- or herself from the overall picture and thereby positions him- or herself in an observer's perspective—thereby falsely abstracting from his or her intentionality—can the calculation of weighing of consequences "work." Yet this is a subtle form of self-deception. (The Pope's teaching, of course, does not imply that we should never think of consequences in our moral deliberation and activity; rather, the weighing of consequences may never be used to justify the intentional breaking of one of the unconditionally negative precepts of the law.)

In summary, there are—according to the encyclical—three crucial mistakes embedded in some streams of contemporary Roman Catholic moral theology: first, distorted conceptions of the freedom and autonomy of the individual self; secondly, the weighing of costs and benefits as a calculation appropriate for human agents; and thirdly, the relativism of moral norms as cultural productions.

Why human freedom needs the truth of the law and the martyrs. The third part of the encyclical returns in many ways to the tone and style of the first part and thereby closes the overall theological framework of the document. A theological meditation on Christian freedom as authentic freedom opens this section, thus reconnecting with the key-motive of the encyclical's first part. The decisive point in this section is that human freedom itself is in need of liberation toward authentic freedom: "The Crucified Christ reveals the authentic meaning of freedom; he lives it fully in the total gift of himself and calls his disciples to share in his freedom.... Consequently, freedom itself needs to be set free. It is Christ who sets it free: he 'has set us free for freedom' (cf. Gal 5:1)" (p. 155). For the Pope, the relation of truth and freedom has a christological, more precisely a staurological foundation: "Jesus, then, is the living, personal summation of perfect freedom in total obedience to the will of God. His crucified flesh fully reveals the unbreakable bond between freedom and truth, just as his Resurrection from the dead is the supreme exaltation of the faithfulness and saving power of a freedom lived out in truth" (p. 156). Christians are called to participate in that freedom so that their lives give "consistent witness" to the truth of God's law "even at the cost of suffering and great sacrifice" (p. 161).

Most remarkable is the Pope's meditation on martyrdom in the context of the Christian witness: The very peak of Christian freedom is martyrdom, the living and concrete witness that, as a matter of fact, there are intrinsically evil acts. As biblical prime examples the Pope refers to the story of Susanna, to John the Baptist, and early followers who would not deny Christ—i.e. intentionally deny the truth—as Stephen and James. It would be wrong to consider this meditation as one more papal idiosyncrasy in modern times. Rather, what we have here is the witness and insight of a Polish Pope, reflecting the experience and witness of the Polish people and church under a cynical and oppressive regime. Witnessing to both Christ and the inviola-

bility of God's law could and, as a matter of fact, did mean martyrdom for quite a number of Polish Christians. At the same time, we have to understand the invocation of martyrdom as the Pope's radical rejection of the cynicism of Western culture, too. In a culture where in more and less subtle ways everything is submitted to cost-benefit-calculations (what Karl Marx deplored as the "universalization of the commodity form") "with price the only value and pleasure the only goal" (Nicholas Lash) martyrdom might become an increasingly necessary witness to the fact that there are indeed some things worth suffering and dying (not killing!) for, and that the "total" market-society, being fueled by the desire for and consumption of "things" and being ordered towards pleasure, is in no way ordained and legitimized by God's law!

From this intensely Christian perspective of the life of discipleship the Pope turns to the broader perspective of unchangeable norms in the service of the person and society, pointing out that precisely respecting unconditionally binding norms will help in overcoming the twin totalitarianism of modernity: on the one hand the totalitarianism of the "state" or the "collective" imposing its "truth" by erasing the dignity of the individual person and her or his freedom, and on the other hand the totalitarianism of rampant individualism and consequent ethical relativism, which increasingly undermines the acknowledgment of all objectively binding norms. Both forms of totalitarianism deny truth in an objective sense and thereby precisely destroy the possibility of genuine human freedom.

Why the magisterium has not only a last but a first word in moral matters. After all these deeply perceptive theological reflections on freedom, Christian witness, and human life together, one runs into the most problematic section of the third part, the Pope's definition of the magisterium's role in the sphere of morals and of the service of moral theologians in relationship to the magisterium. The following two quotations might explicate why the encyclical found such a controversial reception among Roman Catholic moral theologians: "In proclaiming the commandments of God and the charity of Christ, the Church's Magisterium also teaches the faithful specific particular precepts and requires that they consider them in conscience as morally binding" (p. 173f.). This quotation is highly significant because here the modern dichotomizing between theology and ethics, between orthodoxy and orthopraxis is challenged head-on—not just conceptually, as in the course of the encyclical, but practically, in the precise sense that if the separation of faith from acts is considered wrong and therefore to be conceptually overcome, the magisterium's teaching authority consequently not only applies to dogma but also to morality. This axiom is already set up in the encyclical's Christ-centered opening part: "The Church is in fact a communion both of faith and of life; her rule is 'faith working through love' (Gal 5:6). No damage must be done to the harmony between faith and life:...The Apostles decisively rejected any separation between the commitment of the heart and the actions which express or prove it (cf Jn 2:3-6)" (p. 104). Thus, in order to challenge the claim of the magisterium's authority in moral matters, one has to challenge either the encyclical's axiom of the inseparability of faith and acts or the magisterium's authority in regard to matters of the teaching of the Christian faith. Therefore, the magisterium's claim of authority in moral matters is to be understood as an immediate consequence of the foundational axiom that faith and acts are inherently inseparable.

Why the encyclical missed an important opportunity. Yet not at all consequent is the description of the role and task of moral theologians in relationship to the magisterium: "Moral theologians are to set forth the Church's teaching and to give, in the exercise of their ministry, the example of a loyal assent, both internal and external, to the Magisterium's teaching in the areas of both dogma and morality" (p. 174). Here the encyclical thinks very much down the road of conventional wisdom, for two reasons. It obviously seems to consider the magisterium's teaching not as a last word after a long, critical and open discourse, in which various schools of thought search for the truth, but as a first and at the same time last word, making any such theological discourse impossible and undesirable. Yet, as a matter of fact, such discourse about moral matters has always been present in the church, and the magisterium's function takes place in relationship to this always ongoing discourse. Without entering a complex debate in which a Lutheran is an outsider by ecclesial definition, it may be stated that the magisterium seemed to have missed a unique opportunity to describe itself in a more constructive relation to the ongoing discourse about moral matters in the church, namely in the way that for this particular discourse, in order to proceed constructively, it is precisely in need of both a normative framework in which all participants operate and an authoritative arbiter, who is not just one voice in the discourse but represents the catholicity of the whole tradition in such a way that from time to time it might intervene or even speak a last word. In most of its content *Veritatis Splendor* obviously is just such an authoritative intervention. Yet if this "last word" redefines the whole dynamic between the discourse of moral theologians and the magisterium in such a way that any real discourse becomes undesirable and effectively impossible, one wonders whether the encyclical has not in a very counterproductive way overshot its own goal. Yet the vigorous debate since the encyclical's release seems to indicate that the actual effect was just opposite to what might have been intended.

3. Why Protestants—and especially Protestant ethicists—should consider *Veritatis Splendor*

Any appreciation of this encyclical, be it sympathetic or critical, requires, first of all, a reminder that it is primarily addressed to the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus it officially neither addresses Protestants in general nor Protestant pastors and theologians in particular. Nevertheless our discussion of the encyclical's content and reception, its broad public reception in the media, and its intense discussion by both Catholic and Protestant theologians, sufficiently indicate that peeking over the Pope's shoulders might be beneficial and educative for Protestants, too. A constructive Protestant reception does not first of all mean pointing out the document's shortcomings. (The non-inclusive language—a sadly disturbing factor in the English version of the encyclical, less so in its German version—has already been mentioned. In addition, the unimaginative and counterproductive self-definition of the teaching office in relationship to the discourse of moral theology has been pointed out.) A productive Protestant reading and reception of *Veritatis Splendor* should, instead, consist in appreciating the encyclical as a salutary provocation in light of the slow self-abolition of Protestant ethics as an explicitly Christian and theological discipline of the church.

I can see at least four areas in which Protestant ethics can benefit from a close and intense, albeit critical, reading of *Veritatis Splendor*. First, we have by now an overabundance of books on "Scripture and ethics" by a whole range of Protestant authors, both exegetes and ethicists. But, at the same time, the sustained practice of concrete ethical argumentation that is deeply penetrated and shaped by reading and meditating on Scripture is in serious decline. And such a sustained practice is something quite different, as one can learn from the encyclical, from taking biblical "material" as "orientation" for our own "choices" and from moving from what a biblical text "meant then" to what it possibly could "mean now." Scripture being read in the church is from the beginning always an exercise in *theological* exegesis, and this lesson Protestant ethics has to learn again, so that "Scripture and ethics" does not remain a fashionable but isolated topic to be discussed at the bedside of the patient called "Protestant ethics." Rather, theological exegesis should again become a key-element inherent to the practice of Protestant ethics. This would be no surprising news for practitioners like Bonhoeffer, Barth, Lehmann, Ramsey, Yoder, and Hauerwas.

Secondly, a false understanding of human freedom as autonomy in opposition to any theologically serious understanding of the law has become a rampant characteristic in Protestant ethics. From a Puritan legalism (in Lutheran lingo the moralistic "third use of the law"), American Protestant ethics has fully swung to a happy antinomianism (in Lutheran lingo the rejection of both the law's theological/accusing and its paraenetic/instructive use in the church). The encyclical's insistence both on the natural law as well as the revealed law represents a serious challenge to our comfortable Protestant agnosticism in regard to God's law, and especially in regard to any exceptionless negative precepts of the law. In this regard, especially Lutherans might feel challenged to re-appreciate the rich and complex role of God's law in Luther's theology, ethics, and catechetical instruction!

Closely related to the aspect of the law is, third, the encyclical's teaching in regard to intrinsically evil acts. At this point Protestant ethicists have almost no conceptual tools to even understand—not to mention appreciate or critically respond to—what this is all about. A theological anthropology, in which a consistent theory of action, of intentionality, and of the virtues would play any role, never was the long suit of Protestant ethics. This long-standing deficiency led to an ongoing conceptual underdevelopment resulting in the inability to even meaningfully articulate certain sets of problems in the framework—if there still is one—of Protestant ethics. (Here the early work of Stanley Hauerwas is one of the noteworthy contemporary exceptions).

Last but not least, the Christ-centered opening part and the witness (martyrdom)-centered ending of the encyclical letter uncomfortably reminds Protestant ethics how much it has, in the contemporary scene, slipped away from its christological orientation and witness-focused vocation. If Protestant ethics does not regain its theological center in Christ, its *telos* in *martyria*, *diakonia*, and *koinonia*, and its material content in the ongoing reflection upon God's commandments, its self-abolition into fragmented discourses driven by the pressures of cultural fashion, economic necessity, and political correctness will only continue. *Veritatis Splendor* might not be the truth itself, but it surely is a very uncomfortable yet salutary mirror of that splendid misery, which is the sad truth of Protestant ethics in America as a theological and ecclesial enterprise.

Book Reviews

The Complete Biblical Library. Springfield, MO: World Library Press, 1986-1991. 16 volumes. Cloth. $29.95 per vol. plus $2.75 shipping.

I applaud efforts to make the Bible more understandable, relevant, and useful for people who are not clergy, professional theologians, biblical scholars, or accomplished linguists. The sixteen volumes of *The Complete Biblical Library* is the most comprehensive effort to do that known to me. Vol. 1, a *Harmony of the Gospels* produced by Robert Shank, uses a translation close to the King James Version. It is both a harmony and a synopsis, that is, it first prints a text which Shank produced by conflating the four Gospels, then prints the text of each Gospel. Some excellent color illustrations accompany the text.

Volumes 2 through 10 are a study New Testament, a Greek interlinear with parsing. I had Vol. 8, Galatians through Philemon, available. On the left hand page they print what they call a comparative Greek text, "which includes both the traditional text type [textus receptus] and the text which is common in modern textual editions" (p. 6). The Greek text is printed without paragraph divisions, even those of ancient manuscripts. The two lines above each Greek word parse it, with a number referring to the proper entry in the six volume dictionary of New Testament Greek. Below each Greek word is a transliteration to indicate pronunciation and a literalistic translation. A textual apparatus containing manuscript evidence for selected variant readings occupies the left margin. The facing right hand page contains commentaries written by conservative, evangelical scholars. The list of contributors is long. Citations of various alternative English translations from over sixty modern English translations are given in the right margin. I noticed that the names Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Thessalonians in the book titles are all wrongly parsed, while the parsing in the text itself is often incomplete. The introductions, commentary, and other helps are strongly evangelical in tone, open to textual criticism, but critical of much modern biblical scholarship. The bibliography at the end of the volume lists primarily evangelical works.

The "Greek-English Dictionary," vols. 11-16, is authored by many evangelical scholars. I evaluate it on the basis of vol. 11, which covers the Greek letters alpha through gamma. It has a number of unusual and helpful features. Each entry contains the following: a basic definition; Hebrew equivalents; a listing of forms occurring in the New Testament; an English concordance list, correlated with the Greek forms; cognates and antonyms; short essays on usage in classical Greek, the Septuagint, and the New Testament. Entries conclude with page references to major Greek lexica and theological dictionaries of New Testament Greek.

This is a major effort to make the New Testament a more open book for all readers. Though I am not happy with aspects of the theological approach, everyone who uses this library will grow in knowledge. Immense effort went into this set. I wish there were a more critical counterpart produced for non-professional readers. The set is not cheap. One could get along without the first volume, but the New Testament commentary depends much on the dictionary. The sixteen volume set sells for a total of $523.20.

All in all I would recommend not purchasing this series, but making certain that a number of modern English translations of the Bible, the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, a good Bible atlas, a concordance (or a good computer program), good commentaries written in understandable English, and other aids to good theological, yet critical interpretation of the Scriptures were available in a parish library.

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BibleWorks for Windows. Version 3.2. Published by Hermeneutika Computer Bible Research Software, P. O. Box 2200, Big Fork, MT 59911-2200 (1-800 74BIBLE). $395.00.

In the February, 1994, issue of *Currents*, I wrote about Version 2 of this product: "This is a magnificent concordance that will make possible creative and lightning-fast searches for anyone who is even moderately computer literate. The morphological tags and the dictionary helps that are only a mouse click away make this program accessible to pastors with only a modest knowledge of the biblical languages."

In two years BibleWorks has gotten much better, including a vastly improved manual. This electronic concordance works on Windows or Windows 95 machines and comes on a CD-ROM. You can get it also on diskettes—63 of them! (27 in the earlier version)—but it will take up anywhere from 15 megabytes to 190 megabytes on your hard drive. The program is slightly faster on the hard drive, but I found all the examples of "covenant" in the prophets in 65/100 of a second on my old double speed CD-ROM drive. Why should I clutter up my hard drive for a few extra nanoseconds?

Here's a sample of what you get: six English versions, the Greek New Testament, the Hebrew Old Testament, the complete Septuagint, abridged versions of Hebrew and Greek lexicons, and instantaneous parsing of every grammatical form in the Bible. Included also are a number of older Bible dictionaries and reference works—Easton's Bible Dictionary, Nave's Topical Bible, a Treasury of Scripture Knowledge, and Robertson's Word Pictures of the New Testament. Not to mention the Vulgate, German and Spanish Bibles, Strong's cross reference numbers (see below), and even the Westminster Confession and Catechism!

You can put on the screen at one time Greek and English versions arranged in interlinear fashion. Click a Greek word and up pops its analysis—Aorist, active, 1cs, from such and such a root. Or you can add to the screen a second Greek version that automatically shows all morphological analyses. A similar thing can happen in the Old Testament, featuring Hebrew, LXX, and English. I can't imagine a better way for busy pastors to review or use the biblical languages. Or one could put all six English versions on the screen to see differences in interpretation.

But, of course, this is all preliminary to the main use of BibleWorks, as a concordance. If you wanted to study "covenant" in the prophets, it would not only let you skip quickly from occurrence to occurrence (66 times in 59 verses), seeing how it's used in English (and Hebrew), but with just a mouse click or two you can print out all the verses on a laser printer for personal study or for leading an adult forum. Interestingly enough, outside of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Malachi, there are only six times the word covenant appears in the prophets. (That's pretty important; ask me about it some time). With a little care you can find quickly all the references to Son of God or Son of Man—try that in a standard English concordance—or all the occurrences of "glory, glorify, glorified, glorifies" in the Gospel of John (42 occurrences; hint: it will help you understand the significance of the crucifixion). If your Greek or Hebrew is alive at all, you can even search on specific forms. Just click with the right mouse button, and you can search on the root or on a specific form.

This computer program might lead to one-stop Bible study since you can make your notes right on the computer screen, though no note can be longer than 500 pages (should be enough in most cases!). There's a special feature on the King James Version that lets you turn on Strong's reference numbers. Back in the 19th century Strong assigned some 350,000 numbers to words in the KJV and linked them to Hebrew or Greek originals. This enables people with no knowledge of the original languages to study what the original said. The Hebrew word רוּחַ, for example, is translated by either "wind," "breath," or "spirit" in the NRSV of Ezek 37:1-14. Using Strong's number for רוּחַ (07307) you can catch on to the theological punning the prophet is doing with this word even if you remember not a word of Hebrew.

Computers enable users to do Boolean searches: How often do Peter and John appear in the same verse? 24 times. How often do they appear together without James? 14 times. What's the difference between a search for Mary and

Martha (3 times, all in John 11) versus Mary or Martha (54 times, all but three in the Gospels).

The Windows operating system allows you to open and synchronize multiple windows at one time. 39 buttons with pictures on them allow you to limit your search, parse verb forms, change the versions displayed, call up a Hebrew or Greek keyboard, or do thirty other things. If you forget what the symbol on the button means, a little sign pops up to refresh your memory.

The publisher invites potential customers to call up and discover discount outlets. I'd be surprised if you couldn't find it for at least $100 cheaper than list.

Can you afford to be without BibleWorks for Windows?

Ralph W. Klein

Calling Church and Seminary into the 21st Century. By Donald E. Messer. Foreword by James M. Wall. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995. 144 pages. Cloth. $15.95.

Donald E. Messer, President of The Iliff School of Theology in Denver, adds his voice to the chorus of those who in the last decade have called for a reassessment of theological education on the eve of the twenty-first century. Heartening in Messer's vision is his commitment to the full partnership of seminary and church in articulating the Christian tradition for a new generation. Regardless of the contingencies of the present and future, the task of the seminary to provide preparation of ministers grounded in the gospel remains constant. This fundamental task, however, must be complemented by service in educating the total people of God for ministry. Both of these undertakings require that the seminary operate with a self-understanding "as an intellectual center of the church, seeking to increase the love of God and neighbor" (p. 26).

Messer foresees no diminishment of the need for attracting new candidates for ordained and diaconal ministry. For those called, the privilege of bringing God's gospel to situations of human need carries an intrinsic reward, so much so that one might contend that Christian ministry is "the most overpaid profession in the world." With this phrase, Messer would not overlook the need for justice in clergy salaries but rather point toward the deep satisfaction known by those who enjoy the privilege of serving where God's word meets humankind's sorrow and hope. Do the pastors you know still sometimes say "they still can't believe they get paid for doing what they love doing"?

The most intense chapter of the book aims to refute the charges leveled by critics of seminary education like Thomas C. Oden, author of *Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements*. Messer argues that Oden willfully distorts and exaggerates the ills of contemporary theological education, especially through the use of generalizations which fail to represent the positions of any real seminary or faculty. In this way Oden contributes to a climate of mistrust and polarization which impedes the mission of the church. Where errors exist, they require redress. But Messer argues for the integrity of the seminary and seminary faculties as they seek to faithfully transmit the historic Christian faith within a rapidly changing context.

Current trends already indicate the shape of the future in which church and seminary will be expected to serve. The most rapid growth of Christianity is taking place in the "two-thirds world" of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This means theological education must be prepared for serious encounter with other world religions. Even while the scope of our vision must be international, however, we best learn globalization by immersing ourselves in local reality. Seminaries need to identify new ways to connect with nearby rural and urban marginalization if they are to ever understand the situation of those cultures further removed. Curriculum must be developed to take seriously what Robert Schreiter describes as "local theologies."

Other trends to which seminaries need to respond include: welcoming the increasing number of women as theological students, breaking down the barriers which prevent women from service as tenured faculty and senior administrators, the slow but steady increase in the number of persons of color as students and faculty, the number of older (second and third career) candidates as seminary students and their unique but different preparation for theological studies, the danger of increasing regionalization among semi-

nary student bodies, the value of including persons of other faiths on seminary faculties, the growing presence of openly gay and lesbian students, the increasing number of part-time students, and the financial challenge facing all students in paying for their education. These trends indicate that the future requires readiness for teaching an increasingly diverse student population.

Messer devotes chapters to the notions of "theological education as a subversive activity" and "the seminary as a redemptive community." Here he reflects on the ethos of the seminary which seeks to remain faithful to the dangerous memory of Jesus and the prophets. At the same time the seminary itself aims to embody a community life which demonstrates the compassion of Jesus for those who suffer. An additional chapter insists on revising a standard maxim of seminary faculty existence to read "publish and parish." By this Messer does not intend to sacrifice intellectual rigor but to redirect scholarship toward the service of the church. A final chapter applauds the development of computer networking and other technologies as new means for theological education and Christian ministry.

This book provides valuable insights for those who are concerned about the capability of seminaries to adjust to the demands of a rapidly changing future. Messer bases his proposals on his rich experience as a theological educator. Yet his experience does not restrain him from imagining new vistas. He writes with clarity, freshness, and backbone. He is optimistic about the potential for seminaries to extend their historic task of handing on the faith to new generations of ministers. Most of all, he is committed to the partnership of seminary and church in preparing future leaders for public ministry. This is a worthy contribution to the contemporary debate over the future of theological education.

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Asceticism. Edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valanasis, with the assistance of Gay L. Byron and William S. Love. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. xxxiii and 639 pages. Cloth. $125.00.

This massive volume is the printed record of the International Conference on Asceticism, held at Union Theological Seminary in New York, April, 1993. It contains forty-two items, the major papers presented at the conference, the responses to the papers, and in some cases, a resume of the discussion that ensued.

Thirty-five presentations are organized under six major heads: In section 1. "General Challenges and Reconsiderations," two essays orient one to issues in the discussion. 2. "Origins and Meanings of Asceticism," designed to focus on the "motivations, impulses, ideals, sociocultural matrices and explanations for different asceticisms." 3. "Hermeneutics of Asceticism," centering on the "different types of sources—textual, material—and their representations, and presuppositions, methodological challenges, and possibilities for the interpretation of asceticism." 4. Aesthetics of Asceticism," concentrating on "the different types of emotions that are ascetic practices, and on the responses evoked by the different practices themselves, or by different (literary, material, and other) representations or expressions of asceticism." 5. "Politics of Asceticism," concentrating on the "socio-political locations, functions and ramifications (for different genders, classes, and ethnic groups) of asceticism." (All citations from p. xxvii) 6. "The Discourse Refracted." An Appendix titled "Ascetica Miscellanea" contains seven additional papers. A selected classed bibliography and an index conclude the volume.

As the introduction says, "The essays that follow reflect rich and frightening diversity." The volume supports that statement. In a regular cycle three presentations are followed by a response that seeks commonalities and distinctions, and directions of thought. Areas in two through five above each have two such cycles. The presenters and respondents are distinguished scholars who document their presentations well, all at home in the areas they present. These

include the thought of individuals (Simeon the New Theologian, Maximus the Confessor, Athanasius of Alexandria, Paul, Mirabai), asceticism in particular communities (early Christian monasticism, Tibetan Buddhism, primitive Christianity, Platonism, Islam, Late Antique Judaism, Ethiopian Christianity), or thematic presentations (women and asceticism in late antiquity, ascetic moods in Greek and Latin literature, *enkrateia* in early Christianity, attitudes toward the body in Indian asceticism or Platonism, morality and asceticism, asceticism and art, the place of food).

Anyone interested in the history of asceticism, in the varying faces of asceticism in late antiquity, in the relation of ascetic movements to sexuality, in the origins of Christian monasticism, or in comparing different ascetic communities will find here a rich feast. But the very richness brings with it the problems of any polygraph. Readers not already well-versed in asceticism will have difficulty in finding unity in the presentations, though the individual presentations are impressive. The editors strive to provide a unifying framework in their introduction, briefly tracing the history of scholarship on asceticism and pointing out that most such scholarship has lacked a "cross-cultural theoretical framework" (p. xxiii)—and still lacks it. Even after reading the very useful section on "Vision and Structure of the Conversation" (p. xxvii, summarized above), designed as a guide to reading the volume, it appears unified by title, but not by content.

The editors conclude that "The conference's most significant contribution rests in its modality: conversation." They call others to share in that conversation about ethics, anthropological differences, spirituality, and the like. They recognize the immense diversity (critical, cultural, historical, methodological) that divides differing traditions. And so they call for dialogue. I suspect that much of that dialogue at the conference went on outside of the sessions, in coffee breaks and over refectory or restaurant tables. The reader of this impressive volume cannot share in that conversation, but one can be enriched for one's own appreciation of diversity and for ongoing conversation in the future. Essays from this volume will become required reading in the study of spirituality, comparative religion, specific religions, and cross-cultural concepts of piety. Only the book's high price will prevent it from being more widely used.

Edgar Krentz

Handbook of Catholic Theology. Edited by Wolfgang Beinert and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza. New York: Crossroad, 1995. xiv and 783 pages. Cloth. $75.00.

This new and very attractively designed handbook focuses on Catholic systematic theology and covers all of the central themes and concepts of Christian theology—from "absolution" to "worldview." The length of each article ranges from one to seven pages. The handbook originates in the German *Lexikon der katholischen Dogmatik* from 1987 and was somewhat expanded and adapted to a North American readership. Ten articles written by North American theologians were added to the about 300 articles written by thirteen German theologians. In addition, the bibliographies have been created especially for the English edition. This is both a plus and a minus, since there is not always a good fit between the content of the articles and the books referred to in the bibliography.

The editors represent an open, progressive post-Vatican II position, which is also reflected in the authors who were chosen to write the articles. The handbook clearly has a mediating intent between *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* and thereby embodies one possible programmatic reading of Vatican II: to take account of the biblical witness, remember the church's theology and magisterial teaching, be aware of the ecumenical situation, and take challenges of contemporary thought (feminism, liberation theology, ecology) fully into account. The organization of all entries reflects this purpose: 1. biblical background, 2. history of theology, 3. church teaching, 4. ecumenical perspectives, 5. systematic reflections. A remarkable feature of the handbook are its charts and tables, which make complex dogmatic issues (such as classical Christology or Trinitarian theology) easily accessible.

Unfortunately, in many articles the section "ecumenical perspectives" is remarkably weak. If it were missing, it would actually improve the quality of some entries. In order to carry through the ecumenical aspect in a convincing way, an Eastern Orthodox and a Protestant theologian should have been invited as consultants to the project. In addition, a list of contributors would have been helpful. Nevertheless, this handbook belongs in every Protestant seminary library and should find its way also onto the bookshelves of Protestant pastors and seminary students. It is an indispensable and user-friendly reference work both for the history of theology and with regard to contemporary streams and challenges.

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Jesus and His World: An Archaeological and Cultural Dictionary. By John J. Rousseau and Rami Arav. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. xxiii and 392 pages. Paper. $25.00.

New Testament scholarship is slowly catching up to Old Testament studies in its use of material culture which remains as an indicator of cultural and social history. Not that the sources have not been present—they have simply been ignored. Middle Eastern archaeology led to revisions in writing Old Testament cultural, social and even political history. Recent interest in social/sociological interpretation is leading to a growing series of publications that supplement the traditional literary sources for interpretation.

In this volume Rami Arav and John Rousseau, director and co-director of the excavations at Bethsaida on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, use archaeological discoveries and ancient epigraphic and literary evidence to describe aspects of life in first century Palestine. They discuss sites (Aenon to Tyre and Sidon, with special attention to Jerusalem and surroundings), buildings (camps and siege works, city construction, Garden Tomb, house, Jacob's Well, ritual baths, synagogues, temple), realia, installations and activities (agriculture and cereals, boats, coins and money, crucifixion, dice, exorcism, fishing and nets, house, magic and miracle, medicine and physicians, Moses' seat, ointments and perfume, olive oil industry, pottery, ritual sheep herding, tone and stoning, textiles and dyeing [including the tunic without seam], traditional healing, viticulture, weapons, weights and measures, wood and furniture), and texts (Gospel of Thomas, Dead Sea Scrolls). Each article carefully separates literary from archaeological evidence, often interpreting the former in the light of the latter. Reference to specific New Testament passages at the head of each article suggest why each article is significant. Maps, plans, line drawings and photographs appear.

They discuss a few inscriptions: Pantera's Tombstone, found at Bingerbrüch in Germany, because of the tradition that Jesus was the son of a Roman soldier by that name; the Pilate inscription from Caesarea; the temple warning signs, and the place of trumpeting inscription from the temple. But they have no general article on inscriptions and their value (they do on coins) or on writing and writing materials and implements. Should there have been an entry under "Scribes"? And I noted a few errors: Bisley, rather than Birley on p. 335; a wrong date (400 rather than 100 in the left column on p. 346).

The concluding pages contain a collection of useful aids: chronological and dynastic tables, list of high priests from 200 B.C.E. to 70 C.E., orders and tractates of the Mishnah, weights and measures, and distances in Palestine; a synopsis of the history of the period, a glossary of unfamiliar archaeological terms and foreign idioms, a helpful bibliography, and useful indexes.

I like this reference work very much. It will assist readers in becoming more contemporary with the first century world. This volume should be in the library of every church, exegete, college and seminary. Readers will find it immensely interesting and illuminating. It will not duplicate other volumes there.

Edgar Krentz

acCordance. Software for Biblical Studies. Version 1.1. Vancouver, WA: The Gramcord Institute, 1995. Altamonte Springs, FL: Oaktree Software Specialists, 1994. *acCordance* GRAMCORD Greek NT Scholar's Bundle (includes program, GNT and KJV or RSV, and excellent manual): $350.00. Other bundles or individual texts available.

Welcome the Bible study program that is now the benchmark against which to measure all other Macintosh Bible study programs. *acCordance* is fast, accurate, well documented, and easy to use, distinguished by rich search options and superior results. The number of available texts is impressive and growing. The ancient biblical texts are drawn from the best critical versions (though there is, of course, no critical apparatus). One should not be surprised, since The Gramcord Institute's earlier product, *Gramcord* for MS DOS machines was an outstanding program—now in the process of being revised and upgraded for Windows.

To review this program I ran it on a Macintosh Powerbook 540c, using System 7.5 with 12 megabytes of RAM and a 500 Meg hard drive. I used three different texts: the Greek New Testament (Aland's 26th edition), the Hebrew Old Testament (Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia), and the King James Version. If I were setting up the program for myself (not using what the publisher supplied for this review), I would want the following available: the Hebrew OT, the Septuagint, the Greek NT, and one or two of the more literal translations, preferably the RSV (more literal than the NRSV) and/or the NAB. I would also use either the English Revised Version of 1891 (ERV) or the Revised English Bible (REB), if they were available. (I list the texts currently available later in this review.)

A number of features make this program superior to every other concordance program for the Macintosh Computer presently known to me. It enables swift, sophisticated study of the Bible in its original languages and a variety of translations. The search engine does what it should: enables Boolean searches (AND, OR, and NOT searches in combinations) that far outdistance anything one can do with the best standard printed concordances. Thus one can find all occurrences of a term that occur within three verses of another term, e.g. "grace" in relation to "law" and/or "works." One can limit the search to a specific book or corpus, e.g. Luke-Acts, the Pauline or Johannine corpus, the Prison Epistles, or a reader-defined group of books. One can, of course, save the results of a search as a word-processing file to incorporate in another text, print the results of a search, or print the charts, tables and graphs that aid in clarifying the results.

acCordance is an advance over all other similar Macintosh programs because of a number of unusual features. 1. It uses tagged texts of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint, and the Greek New Testament. (Each text also includes a font to enable seeing the text in its proper alphabet.) This brings a number of benefits that may not be immediately obvious. In contrast to some other programs, one need only enter the dictionary form to find all occurrences of the word, no matter what the case, number, tense, mood, voice, etc. (I was so impressed with this concordance feature that in the first version of this review I consistently mis-typed the program name acConcordance, inserting three letters to make it sound as if it were only a concordance program!)

2. One can also do tense, mood, or case and number specific searches. The tagged text also enables one to find all forms of a verb in the aorist or nouns in the dative, for example. Or one can search specific constructions, such as ἐν τῷ followed by an infinitive, or πιστεύω ἐν followed by a dative and πιστεύω εις followed by an accusative. 3. An unusual "Construct Window" allows one to define unusual syntactical or lexical constructions and search them.

4. The program can construct a vocabulary list for the selected text(s) that can aid in identifying terms to search in the target text. 5. One has various analytical aids to analyze the results of a search: a statistical analysis function that charts the characteristics of the results; a graphing program that produces a bar graph of the occurrences of a term—a visual enhancement not available in other programs—and the ability to build word-frequency tables for each book or chapter.

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6. One can call up parallel text window panes that present the Greek or Hebrew text of any book in the Bible, formatted in various ways (by verse, by paragraph, etc.) and a modern English version in parallel columns. Both texts scroll simultaneously to keep original text and modern translation completely synchronized—a boon for students or clergy who fear that their Greek or Hebrew is rusty. They have an immediate aid on the screen. And the versatility of *acCordance* allows one to do a search in such parallel texts.

7. *acCordance* provides even more linguistic aid. Highlight any word in Hebrew or Greek, click on parsing in the AMPLIFY menu, and almost instantaneously the analysis will appear in a window, including the dictionary entry-form that enables easy consultation of a lexicon. This removes one of the stumbling blocks for beginning students (and others) who have trouble remembering the principal parts of Greek verbs or the various paradigms of Hebrew nouns and verbs.

Of course, one pays a price for such power in terms of computer memory needs (RAM and hard disk) and financial investment. You must use Macintosh System 6.05 or higher. The program proper occupies 4 megabytes of hard disk memory under system 7 (2.5 under system 6.1), while each text module uses an additional 4 or more megabytes of disk space. One obviously cannot run this from floppy disks! When I loaded the program with the KJV, the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament, it took 16.6 megabytes of hard disk space. The Massoretic text took 8.6. megabytes alone; when I add the Septuagint I anticipate it needing another 10 megabytes.

acCordance is not inexpensive, but it is worth the cost. The basic program with the Greek New Testament (Nestle-Aland 27th ed.) and either the KJV or RSV costs $350; adding the Hebrew Old Testament costs another $100, the Septuagint $150. Other available versions include NASB ($40), ASV ($25), NAB ($40), NKJV ($40), NRSV ($40), and Darby ($12). My most recent information was that the publisher is also preparing texts of the Vulgate, TEV, NJB, and the Spanish 1960 Reina Valera Bible. A scholar's installation would include the Hebrew Old Testament, the LXX, the Greek New Testament, and the (N)RSV, at a minimum. Parishes interested in adding *acCordance* for their parish library should acquire a number of English versions. They might also require a site license, if they intend to load the program on more than one computer.

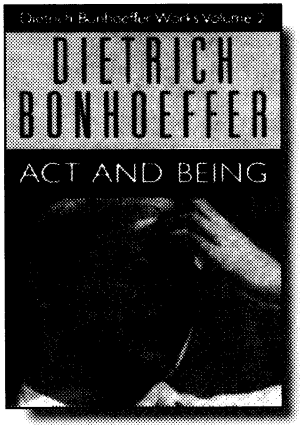
The Gramcord Institute makes a Demo Disk and a descriptive brochure available to potential purchasers. Write The Gramcord Institute, 2218 NE Brookview Drive, Vancouver, WA 98686, or call 360-576-3000.

Roy B. Brown wrote the software, David Delk and Helen Brown the manual. All did their work well. Version 1.1 improved the program significantly. The interface is easy to use, the design of the search window(s) elegant. Perhaps the next revision will add some form of computer help, whether balloon help, or help accessed through an additional menu. The manual is clear and gives a tutorial with examples for the learner to follow as one first uses the program. Given the power of the program, one should be willing to spend some time with it when first loading it.

Since I loaded this program I have removed all other Bible search programs from my computers. I would not be without *acCordance*. It enables me to do quickly what was extremely laborious when working with printed texts. It does it more rapidly than any other Macintosh concordance, with greater flexibility and ease, and with more analytical options. Any Bible student who uses a Macintosh simply must have *acCordance*. I know of no truly competitive alternative. It is worth the cost and the hard-disk space.

Edgar Krentz

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
WORKS



Volume 2

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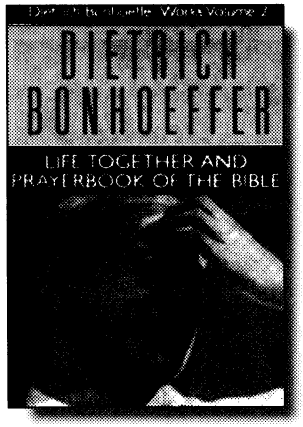
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Leaving Home. By Herbert Anderson and Kenneth Mitchell. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993. 151 pages. Paper. $12.99.

Leaving Home is the first volume in a five-volume series entitled "Family Living in Pastoral Perspective." Each volume in this series examines a pivotal family task: leaving home, becoming married, raising children, promising again, and living alone. The vision for the series was originally conceived by Herbert Anderson and Kenneth Mitchell. Mitchell died of a sudden heart attack while *Leaving Home* was being written; Anderson collaborated with various other colleagues in bringing the project to completion.

Persons familiar with the writings of Lutheran pastoral theologian Herbert Anderson will find throughout the series some recurring theological convictions that have significant implications for pastoral care with families. A central theological theme is *paradox*. The family is understood to be a necessary component of creation, affirmed as necessary for human life to continue, *and* its significance is understood to be limited by the radical claims of the gospel—the call to discipleship transcends family loyalty. The family exists to promote community *and* to honor individual autonomy. These "seeming contradictions" are not meant to be overcome; rather, the pastoral task is to help families live with and live into them.

Leaving Home begins with a vivid consideration of the importance of home, including the observation that *finding* a home rather than leaving home might be the dominant agenda for those who have lived in an epoch of emotional homelessness. The authors reflect on important characteristics of home, concluding with a rumination of the eschatological promise of being at home with God and its relevance for conceiving what "home" means. The second chapter focuses on the relationship between forming a self and leaving home. Chapter Three describes different ways of leaving home and offers some ways to assess when leavetaking has been effective, while the fourth chapter shifts focus from the one who is leaving to the challenges of letting go that families often experience. Chapter Five offers various scenarios depicting struggles regarding leaving and letting go that children and parents experience, along with some suggestions for pastoral work in the face of such struggles. The concluding chapter proposes that leaving home is a religious, ethical, and sacramental act.

Many pastors and church leaders will find *Leaving Home* helpful for their ministries with families. It provides an important way of understanding and talking with families about the conflicts that families experience during adolescence and young adulthood. Its ongoing dialogue with the Christian tradition is very suggestive not only for pastoral care with individual families in the congregation, but for Christian education and preaching. Its down-to-earth language and plethora of stories makes it accessible to a broad spectrum of people. This book could be a wonderful resource for a young adult study group, a parents' study group, or an intergenerational study group. It would make a wonderful gift for families faced with sending their grown children off to college or other adventures and for the young people who are in the process of leavetaking.

Kathleen Billman
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Forgiveness. By Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm. Translated by Thor Hall. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993. viii and 99 pages. Paper. $10.00.

In this study, contemporary Swedish theologian Carl Bråkenhielm offers a comprehensive analysis of the concept of forgiveness. For Bråkenhielm, forgiveness can be construed as a "remotivating act" in which one aims at avoiding an undesirable situation by stimulating the emergence of a new and more desirable situation. Forgiveness mitigates conflicts between the two parties involved and allows for their reconciliation. As such, forgiveness can break the bonds of evil that humans are often trapped in.

Bråkenhielm's purpose in this book is to set forth the concept of forgiveness in common human experience and the Bible. In this task, he engages powerful criticisms of the concept of forgiveness. He counters the criticism of for-

giveness which claims that it is a cheap and easy way to deal with difficult situations. Forgiveness is then nothing other than a facade. Sometimes, forgiveness is viewed as behavior acceptable in a family unity, but unworkable in the political realm. In general, Bråkenhielm claims that modern culture relegates forgiveness to the margins of social life, to our misfortune. Theologically, the problem of forgiveness can be construed as how God's grace can be both unconditional and universal, and yet not the "cheap grace" that Bonhoeffer rightly attacked. For Bråkenhielm, forgiveness applies not only to minor faults, but also to deep rooted problems within the family, society, the political realm, and the human's relationship with God. His analysis of the ethical dilemmas of forgiveness is thorough and powerful. Bråkenhielm believes that forgiveness is not the appropriate response for every injury, but it is a powerful response that can create social healing when it is desperately needed.

My concern with Bråkenhielm's argument is that this book fails to investigate theories of the atonement. In Christian theology, the concept of forgiveness is often closely tied to a theory with how God reconciles Godself to the world in the death of Jesus Christ. Notwithstanding this concern, the book is a superb look at the act of forgiveness. It can be valuable to university and seminary students, theologians, pastors (who see forgiveness in action in the lives of parishioners) and counselors seeking more insight into the phenomenon of forgiveness.

Mark Mattes
Antigo, Wisconsin

Start Where you Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living. By Pema Chödron. Boston: Shambhala, 1994. 154 pages. Paper. $12.00.

In her second book, this American-born nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition makes accessible the *lojong* ("mind training") teachings of mahayana Buddhism. In naming the three poisons (attachment, aversion, ignorance), she promptly adjoins the reader: "Whatever you do, don't try to make the poisons go away, because if you're trying to make them go away, you're losing your wealth along with your neurosis. All of this messy stuff is your richness...."

Far from splitting and running away from the messiness of life, Chödron advises that acts of spiritual surrender require great courage—and, surprise!—genuine acts of gentleness with ourselves. In the Tibetan *tonglen* practice of giving and receiving, the teachings instruct the breathing *in* of unwanted feelings, connecting with what Chödron calls that vulnerable "soft spot" of heart; and breathing out what is most precious—the warm and gentle "awakened heart" that Buddhists refer to as *bodhichitta*. With this practice, everything has the potential of helping to wake us up as we open our hearts to what our defenses have covered.

Each short chapter can be read as a meditation and an invitation to stop and become friendly with the parts of ourselves that we fear and reject. *Tonglen* is an immediate physical practice—holistic in its essence, and seemingly feminine in its accepting embrace of the present moment. Just as the practice teaches, Chödron mines whatever resources are at hand. In addition to spiritual masters, she utilizes sources ranging from Pogo to the *New York Times* to Dr. Seuss. This, like her earlier *The Wisdom of No Escape*, is a gem of a book and an invaluable aid to anyone intent not just on developing a meditation practice but also in learning how to begin to disarm one's own heart.

Suzanne Tague
Chicago, Illinois

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Briefly Noted

The Darkness of God. Negativity in Christian Mysticism. By Denis Turner (Cambridge University Press, $54.95). In a contemporary setting where too often and too facilely patristic and medieval mysticism (especially Meister Eckhart) is claimed as an "ancestor" of current streams of theological "experientialism," this highly interesting revisionist study convincingly shows that such a thesis is only possible at the price of seriously distorting and diluting the dialectic of negativity central to the apophatic tradition. This book makes one newly appreciate mystical theology as a highly reflective exercise in the practice, limitation, and negative dialectics of Christian God-talk. *Reinhard Hütter*

The Assurance of Things Hoped For. A Theology of Christian Faith. By Avery Dulles, S.J. (Oxford University Press, $35). "What is faith?" Here one of America's foremost Roman Catholic theologians gives a succinct, well-informed, and balanced overview of the answers given to this central question in the history of theology and from several important streams of contemporary theology. Dulles' book needs to be praised for taking ecumenism seriously by giving the Reformation—especially on this question—a very fair reading. He also includes the classical voices of Protestant theology of the 20th century in his overview. This book is highly recommended to all pastors and students of theology who want to inform themselves in a reliable, accessible, and ecumenically informed way about the theological locus "faith." What they get is vintage Dulles along the lines of such classics as *Models of the Church* and *Models of Revelation.* *Reinhard Hütter*

The revised edition of **The Gospel According to John** by Leon Morris (Eerdmans, $42) maintains the conservative evangelical stance of the author's first edition. Morris updates the introduction and commentary by evaluating the literature published since the first edition (1971). Morris holds to Johannine authorship, John's historical reliability, and a date prior to 70 C.E. as a possibility; he rejects dislocation theories and the non-Johannine authorship of John 21. The commentary proper is detailed, learned, discusses exegetical alternatives clearly, and locates Jesus in first century Judaism. This revised commentary is the evangelical counterpart to Barrett and Bultmann; it will be consulted much in the next generation—and deservedly so. *Edgar Krentz*

William R. Telford prints thirteen key articles on **The Interpretation of Mark** (T & T Clark, £14.95) in the second edition of this useful volume in the series Studies in New Testament Interpretation. He interprets recent developments in Markan studies and points to the issues in current debate in his introductory essay (required reading for anyone interested in the present status of Markan interpretation), and supplements the essays with an extensive bibliography of Markan studies since about 1970. The essays offer a rich repast, illustrating the wide range of methods and views on Mark summarized by Telford. Names are familiar: Eduard Schweizer, Ernest Best, Robert Fowler, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, and Frank Matera, to name a few. Eight of the thirteen essayists are North American scholars; biblical research is alive in America. Selecting five essays to add to the eight presented in the first edition (1985) from over 250 published since about 1960 is no easy task. Every student of Mark will miss a favorite, but will recognize that the collection is balanced, instructive, and a good introduction to Markan studies. It will be on the bibliography of every course on Mark in the next decade at least. Pastors preparing to preach on Mark in 1996/97 will find this a good orientation. *Edgar Krentz*

Preaching Helps

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost—Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Series A

Speaking Truth to Power

I know. It's become a cliche. But it's still a compelling picture: the prophet, barefoot and ragged, stands before the king splendid upon his throne, surrounded by counselors and the palace guard, bored or irritated by the prophet's ranting. It's Moses before Pharaoh, Nathan before David, Jeremiah before Jehoiakim, Jesus before Pilate. And the prophet's task is to speak truth to power.

Often power speaks to power. As I write this, it's March 15, the Ides of March, when Julius Caesar fell victim to political protest. And Hamas has been carrying out a series of bombings in Israel. And in spite of Dayton, Serbs and Croats and Bosnians rely still on their own power against the power of the other.

Our politics are (usually) less violent. Steve Forbes has just now thrown in the towel, but Pat Buchanan has not given up the race. And citizens try to discern who is speaking truth to the powers in our situation. Or are any truths at all being spoken? As often as not, I think I am hearing falsehoods spoken by powerful orators to weaknesses among our citizenry in order to gain votes. And this is a bipartisan game.

Too bad John the Baptist's story (Matthew 14:1-12) is omitted during mid-Pentecost. The lectionary jumps from Matthew 13:52 to Matthew 14:13. Herod used his power to celebrate himself with a lavish birthday bash, spoke boasting words in the presence of powerful guests, and had to serve up the head of that protester John on a silver platter. In the very next scene, Jesus in his weakness celebrated God's generosity. He took five loaves and two fish, spoke a word of thanks over them, fractured them,

and handed them out, satisfying the hunger of a vast throng of nameless people.

Jeremiah and John and Jesus in their weakness spoke (and lived) the truth of God and made kings shudder, and we still feel the strange power of their witness. A power that sustains in the long days of summer, in the long journey through the wilderness, in the long haul toward the goal of history and the day of Christ the King.

Rodney Hutton has written First Readings, focusing on the first lesson but never neglecting the second reading and the Gospel. In 1982 Rod arrived at Trinity Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, after serving as a parish pastor in Illinois. He is Professor of Old Testament and has published a book on *Charisma and Authority in Israelite Society* (Fortress, 1994). Rod is an avid cyclist and an accomplished musician. His trumpet can be heard in chapel at Trinity and in the community concert band of Columbus. We thank him for sharing his celebration of the texts of Pentecost with us.

The Pastoral Reflections are the work of **Mary Hannah Rowe**, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Alameda, California, where she has served for the past seven years. Prior to coming to Trinity, Mary was Western Regional Director of Lutheran Campus Ministry, and before that she served parishes in Anchorage, Alaska and Whittier, California. Her winter thing is cross country skiing, and she is a skilled all-weather weaver of her own designs in fabric. We thank her for weaving and stitching together her rich meditations on our texts.

Truly, many thanks to Rod and Mary for their contributions to this issue, and the issue of course is how to stay fresh in the business of speaking the truth of God both to power and to weakness.

Truly and I trust Truthfully yours,

Robert H. Smith
Editor of *Preaching Helps*
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
2770 Marin Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94708

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 28, 1996

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

First Reading

The story of Solomon's endowment with wisdom makes a poignant counterpart to the Gospel text for today which focuses upon the similitudes of the kingdom of God. Jesus' parting question, "Have you understood all this?" (Mt 13:51), is responded to with a bold "Yes!" Though such an affirmation might seem benign of itself, Matthew has placed this response in a context which stresses the hiddenness of Jesus' parables and the disciples' own need for the endowment of wisdom through special explanation (13:36). Jesus well might ask if they "got it" this time, and the boldness of their answer in these circumstances leaves the reader a bit surprised if not incredulous. But such insight is the result of "training scribes for the kingdom of heaven" (13:52). In this context, the divine endowment of Solomon with a "listening heart" (*leb shomea'*) can be regarded as an illustration or even a prefiguring of one trained as a scribe for God's reign, the master of the royal household who empties his treasury for the welfare of those who share the house.

The story of Solomon's endowment is set within a rather surprising context. That it is followed by the story of the "Solomonic judgment" concerning the identity of the true mother of the baby is not surprising, since the story of the wise judgment is placed at this point precisely to illustrate Solomon's newly acquired wisdom. What is jarring, however, is the fact that the divine endowment comes via a dream received at Gibeon. Gibeon was recalled in Israel's collective memory principally as a site associated with trickery and violence (the ruse of the Gibeonites in Jos 9:3-10:15; various bloody battles fought there, such as 2 Sam 2:12-17; 20:8-13; 21:1-9; Isa 28:21). It was also the site of a well-known high place, which was apparently one of the major sanctuaries in the tribal territory of Benjamin. That Solomon had to go to this place characterized by trickery and violence in order to offer sacrifices is a problem for the deuteronomistic historian, who tries to lessen the scandal by noting that "no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord" (1 Kgs 3:2). But the deuteronomistic writer could not help but add a mild rebuff concerning Solomon's failure to hold completely to "the statutes of his father David" (3:3). After all, even though there was not yet a temple for the Lord, the ark was itself in Jerusalem, and Solomon could as easily have sacrificed there, as he does upon returning from Gibeon (3:15). It is surprising, then, that such a Solomonic endowment comes in the midst of what is regarded by the deuteronomistic author to be an act of apostasy. God's greatest gifts come at unanticipated and unexpected moments!

God offers Solomon what is often referred to as a "royal grant"—"Ask whatever you want and it will be yours!" Passing up the opportunity for longevity, wealth, or revenge, Solomon chooses wisdom. In one sense such wisdom to distinguish between "good and evil" had been secured for the human condition in the garden (Gen 3:22). Solomon demonstrates God's capacity to bless abundantly with gifts we too often take for granted, and he becomes celebrated in tradition as the progenitor of Israel's wisdom literature. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Wealth, longevity, and coercive power are poor surrogates. RRH

Pastoral Reflections

He swaggered down the aisle of the plane outfitted in cowboy hat, boots and jeans. He was to be our seat mate. No sooner had he buckled up when he pulled out a little round box, took a pinch of some brown stuff and began to chew. It was going to be an interesting trip from Salt Lake to Oakland, riding next to this 8 year old dude named Eric. He talked most of the trip. He was returning home after visiting grandparents in Wyoming. The round box, I learned, contained shredded beef jerky made to look like snuff. His conversation was adult and precocious. He relayed his father's recent interview for a job in Tennessee. He thought they'd be relocating. Compassionately I said, "It must be hard to think about moving and leaving your friends." "Oh, it'll be fine," he responded. "We can afford to buy practically a mansion there when we sell our house here." An 8 year old Californian. A state known for expensive housing and hundreds of thousands of homeless.

In a world filled with precocious children and millions of homeless, only one of the ways society is conflicted, the prayer of Solomon becomes our prayer, whatever age.

Solomon, a young boy, prays to God and says, "although I am but a little child, I do not know how to come in or go out." Solomon asks for something that youth do not have. He asks for the ability to rule wisely and discern evil from good. It was a practical wisdom he sought. Whether or not his decisions and rule were truly wise rather than merely clever is a subject for debate. But his prayer as a child for wisdom is an answered prayer we would like the children of this day to receive as a gift from God.

Little Eric was informed about airplanes, cloud formations, housing costs; he still has much to learn in the way of wisdom. Our children have been called from infancy through their baptism. They have a holy calling, and our prayer is that they will have the ability to discern good from evil. That they will know their bodies as God's temple and not as an object to be abused or misused. We pray that they will look upon others in their schools and on the streets with compassion as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Solomon's prayer remembers God's kindness to his father David, and all that was his father's is now his—and in thanksgiving he prays for an understanding heart. To have an understanding heart means literally to have a listening heart. May that be our prayer.

Jesus said to the disciples, "Have you understood all this?" Perhaps, we are not able to repeat their yes, but we can continue to be seekers of wisdom through a listening heart. MHR

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 4, 1996

Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21
Isaiah 55:1-5
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21

First Reading

Our texts for today are truly for those who are thirsty for grace, for those who hunger for hope. The Gospel text relates the Matthean version of the feeding of the five thousand (Mt 14:13-21). The faithful crowd has followed Jesus into a "deserted place" away from any villages or towns where food and drink might be purchased. The text does not focus upon the "impoverishment" of the crowd, as it is presumed that they do indeed have money with which to purchase food. It is rather the disciples who, in this text, are impoverished. Their meager resources (five loaves and two fish) cannot begin to provide the needs for such a crowd as this!

The first lesson, Isa 55:1-5, also speaks to those who are impoverished and at the brink of starvation. It is a word of hope spoken to the remnant of Israel languishing in its own deserted place. One can hardly think of Babylon itself as a "deserted place," since it was the cultural center of the universe, well watered by the rivers of Mesopotamia and symbolized by its famed hanging gardens. The "deserted place" of Israel's agony was, rather, the interior experience of exile, the feeling of being cut off from God's grace and presence. This was a famine of a far more serious nature, the sort of famine imagined by Amos—a famine of hearing the words of the Lord (Amos 8:11). The word spoken to those in exile, spoken to those broken in spirit and starving from the absence of God from their midst, is one of the most evocative words spoken in the prophetic literature: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters!" Wine and milk, symbols of the wealth of their corporate experience in the land of Israel, available for purchase especially by those who are flat broke, those who, in the midst of their own "deserted place," have neither resources nor energy left to forage for their survival.

This offer is not simply one of material well-being. Much more importantly it is an offer of relationship. The wine and the milk, as real as they are, are also metaphors for the re-establishment of an everlasting covenant, "the trustworthy acts of loyalty of David" (*hasde dawid hanne'emanim*, v. 3). Grammatically this phrase is very difficult. Does it refer to actions performed by David demonstrating his loyalty to God? Or, as suggested by the reading in the NRSV, does it refer rather to divine actions performed for the sake of David to demonstrate God's undying commitment ("my steadfast, sure love for David")? Perhaps the grammatical ambiguity is intended in order to capture the dynamics of relationship. God's faithful love and the people's faithful love will echo one another in a relationship in which hunger and thirst are slaked and satisfied with God's own presence, something that no amount of money can buy.

Even when surrounded by the opulence of Babylon (perhaps *especially* when surrounded by such opulence), we run dry, we wither away, overcome by our poverty of soul. God invites us to the banquet table where God's everlasting and irrevocable promises stand: Take and eat, this is my body given for you. Take and drink. This is my blood shed for you. RRH

Pastoral Reflections

Several years ago our congregation celebrated the life and mourned the death of Nilda, a woman who came with her family as refugees from Cuba. The story goes that in 1980 as a few tired volunteers finished the dishes in the church kitchen, suddenly there appeared the Ponce family, all smiles. A friend translated on their behalf. They were living with a Cuban man in his one room apartment and he could not cope with the situation any longer. The volunteers looked at one another with weary faces. Did they have the energy to again support a refugee family? They sat down and listened. Trinity was chosen by the Ponces because Nilda's husband had been baptized in a Lutheran church. How could they turn them away?

The promise of God comes to those in exile. "My covenant remains. Come buy wine and milk without money or price." What I have for you is a gift.... Accept God's gifts for God's sake.

Nilda was a witness to the bounty of God in a strange land. She never became fluent in English, yet she was always in worship. She lived in a crime-filled neighborhood but felt safe with her trusted dog. She had money only for rent and a few groceries, yet always and proudly contributed her black beans and rice at church potlucks. Not fully understanding her cancer diagnosis, she did understand she was dying and in her limited English vocabulary spoke of God's goodness to her and her family. The baptismal promise gave security to a small family. They claimed the promises and a small congregation gave of what they could and were abundantly blessed by these refugees. God's intention for all in captivity—to all refugees, to all of us sojourners—is to grant spiritual and material abundance. Enough.

The people were hungry, but the disciples found only five loaves and two fish. Lo you who thirst, come to the water. There is enough. MHR

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 11, 1996

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

First Reading

The first lesson for today echoes the theme of the Gospel text with its movement from tempestuous storm to placid waters. Elijah faces the raging storm not only of persecution by Jezebel but also of his own sense of isolation ("I alone am left!"). It is significant that, in the midst of the storm, Elijah heads for Mt. Horeb. He has the sense that "Israel" has forsaken the covenant with God (v. 10); where else can one go to renew one's strength and survey the future than to the very site of covenant-making itself, the Mountain of God? Though the angel twice encourages Elijah to strengthen himself for the trip (vv. 5, 7), the text nowhere indicates that Elijah was being directed to Horeb by any divine voice. In fact, the twofold question which God bluntly asks Elijah — "What are you doing here?"— invites the reader to assume that Elijah's presence here at Horeb is as much a surprise to God as to anyone. Rather than being impelled to Horeb by divine urgency, it is clear that Elijah is fleeing here for security and refuge. He is running away from the pressure-cooker that life had become in Israel. He was seeking in a sense to crawl back into the security of the womb of

God's covenant, having found a nice secure cave in which to mull over his fate and imagine himself to be the only faithful person left in the world.

While on this mountain Moses hears the thunderous roar of wind, earthquake and fire, all phenomena traditionally associated with God's theophanic presence. But God is in none of these. Then Elijah hears "the sound of sheer silence" (v. 12, NRSV). The Hebrew *qol demama daqqa* suggests the sound of a very thin or fine hushed whisper, as that of the sound of the gentle breeze following the blast of a storm. Is the reader to assume that, while rejecting the normal means of manifesting the mighty power of God, YHWH chooses to veil the divine presence in the thinned hush of the storm's aftermath? Such might be the case, and a comparison is certainly invited to the Gospel text, in which Jesus stills the storm which is threatening to overwhelm the disciples.

However, if Elijah came to Horeb, the womb of covenant, in order to find the calm following the storm, what he ultimately learns is that this momentary peace signaled by the "sound of sheer silence" is not the peace he imagined. It is not the calm following the storm. It is, rather, the *eye* of the storm, that mysterious moment when one finds oneself so engulfed in turmoil that, for a fleeting second, the winds die down and the clouds of despair part only quickly thereafter to reform and resume their onslaught. Elijah is told to go back to the stormy life from which he sought to flee and engage the tremendous forces of storm once again—by immersing himself in the violent world of politics personified by Hazael and Jehu.

The peace found by the disciples on the Sea of Galilee is similarly but the eye of the storm. The clouds would soon gather their full fearful strength and cover the entire earth (*pasan ten gen*), with the brunt of the storm unleashed upon Golgotha (Mt 27:45). But the peace at the eye of the storm, whether in a cave on Horeb or in a boat on Galilee, is indeed a foretaste of God's final peace which will reign over the fiercest storms of life. RRH

Pastoral Reflections

What is the story behind the story? What is the cause of Elijah's fleeing and his seeking refuge in a womb-like cave? After all, Elijah had met the foe, the Baal worshippers, on their terms. God's fire consumed the sacrifice and after years of drought the rains did fall. Elijah had killed the 450 prophets of Baal. Elijah's God won! Elijah fled.

There was another, very strong other, and her name was Jezebel. She was not intimidated by the powerful God, Yahweh. She worshipped Baal and continued to be faithful even in the face of defeat. In the Septuagint, prior to Elijah's flight, Jezebel confronts Elijah with the words, "If you are Elijah, then I am Jezebel." It is as if she is saying, If you are a follower of Yahweh, then I am the child of Baal. You will die. You have killed the prophets of Baal. Phyllis Trible states that the "juxtaposition of names bespeaks a theological battle. Yahweh opposes Baal; Baal opposes Yahweh... Jezebel repudiates the defeat. Unbowed, she takes him on." (*Out of the Garden*, ed. Buchmann and Spiegel, 172.)

After the victory, Elijah experiences defeat. "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life to take it away." God reminds Elijah that the reality of his situation is that he is not alone. There are 7,000 who stand with him.

Often we feel utterly alone. No one hears. There appears to be no support. We cry out, but the ethnic, cultural, and religious wars continue. We are no better than those who have gone before us. What is the use? It is enough for a good depression. Instead of

a cave, we want to stay in bed, pull the covers over our head and not leave the room.

God comes. In silence. We are not good at listening to the silence. What does God say to us in the silence? What is the story behind our story? Whose lives have we taken? What theological victories have been won? What battles lost? The God who summoned Elijah to get up and anoint a new king, again summons us with the words from Isaiah, and repeated by Paul: "Beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news." There is good news. The one who comes in silence sent one who walked on water and calmed the sea and reminds us we need not fear. We can leave our bed and blankets behind, for God is indeed with us. MHR

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 18, 1996

Psalm 67
Isaiah 56:1, 6-8
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
Matthew 15:(10-20)21-28

First Reading

The question of the "mission to the Gentiles" has always been a painful one for the church, and one not easily resolved. While Luke shows an obvious directness with regard to such a mission, demonstrated in Lk 4:24-27, neither Matthew nor Mark record this episode (cf. Mt 13:53-58 and Mk 6:1-6). Instead, Matthew and Mark both stress Jesus' mission to Israel, regarding his occasional forays into "foreign" territory to be anomalies (Compare our Gospel text, Mt 15:21-28, with Mark 7:24-30, both recording an event which is not reported for obvious reasons by Luke). Such ambiguity illustrates the long history of soul-searching concerning what the response of the covenant community was to be vis-à-vis those outside the community. Were they to be regarded as enemies? As unclean? As objects of suspicion or, on good days, perhaps of pity and charity? Were they to be regarded as a source of revenue in the post-exilic restoration, rich breasts to be sucked of their wealth (Isa 60:1-16)?

It is often assumed that Third Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66) expresses a "radical openness" to the world outside Judaism—the world of the foreigner and the outcast. While true to some extent, this openness of Isaiah to the world ought not be pressed beyond certain limits. Third Isaiah regards the nations of the world to be precisely a source of wealth and of converts to YHWH in the period following the trauma of exile. The text cited above (Isa 60:1-16) can hardly be viewed as a radical departure from earlier reflection upon Israel's "mission" to the nations.

Our text, Isa 56:1, 6-8, refers to the "repatriation" of two groups who experienced the liminality associated with being at the margins of community: the eunuch, who regards himself as a "dried up tree" (vv. 3-5); and the "foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord" (*ben-hannekar hannilva 'el-YHWH*), who feels vulnerable in the face of rising nationalism (vv. 3, 6-7). While used as a technical term for those who "join themselves" as Levites in service to the sanctuary (e.g., Lev 18:2, 4), the term *nilva* came also to be used of foreigners who "converted" to the faith of Judaism (Isa 14:1; Zech 2:11; Est 9:27). The term *nilva*, "one joined," had its counterpart in the *zar*, the one who was "strange, dangerously anomalous" (e.g., Lev 18:4; 22:10, 13; Num 16:40; Joel 3:17).

Third Isaiah is truly inclusive. However, it still recognizes the presence in the world of that which is so foreign to the

identity of the people of God that it is regarded as dangerous to the integrity of the community. The "foreigner" who is "joined" is to be repatriated to her or his rightful place among those who worship God. The "foreigner" who is not "joined," however, has the same status as the "stranger" (*zar*; Isa 61:5). The community is ever reminded that it is to be open to the world. It is also reminded, however, that such openness is essentially an act of vulnerability, since there is that which is "strange" about the world, so alien that it cannot be tolerated within the community without jeopardizing the integrity and the identity of the community. It is this life of paradoxical danger to which the community of faith is called. Forgetting either our commission to openness or the danger present in the anomalous "strangeness" of the world can lead to failure on the part of the community. RRH

Pastoral Reflections

There are probably good reasons for where the readings for a particular day begin and end. Many times I am left wondering. Take this reading from Isaiah. We hear how the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord are welcomed. The outcasts of Israel will be gathered. Who are they?

The excluded verses (2-5) say that in addition to the welcoming of the foreigner, God welcomes the eunuchs who hold fast to the covenant.

Now, perhaps my questioning of the exclusion of these verses from today's text comes from my prurient interest rather than from scholarly understanding. After all, when I was in the 6th grade and reading every Pearl Buck novel in the library, these eunuchs fascinated me.

Today, it is not fascination that draws me to these verses. It is the radicalness of God's grace and the similarity of our present situation in our church and nation regarding who is acceptable and who is not. Physical disfigurement, sexual orientation, immigrant status, and race are reasons to exclude or include. Listen to the politicians. Listen to the debate among Christians from all walks of life and all denominations.

The inclusion of all people in these first verses are words we want to hear. They were words of comfort to the returning refugees. Those who keep the covenant and worship are included. Yet, in the chapters that follow in Third Isaiah many different voices are heard. These voices speak of the harsh realities and suffering and describe a people seeking self-preservation on their own terms rather than on the terms of the all embracing God whose house would be a place of prayer for all peoples. Does this ring true for us today?

What do these words of God's salvation including the foreigner, eunuch, and outcast say to us who would like to bar the immigrant, exclude the gay or lesbian, and dismantle any care for the hungry or homeless? For us, like those returning to Jerusalem, the future is troubling and frightening, and rather than seeking God's justice we seek ways to justify our own exclusions.

We are reminded in these words from Isaiah that it is God who chooses, not humanity, and God's expansive self reaches far beyond the limits of our church and governmental laws.

The woman whose daughter was demon possessed came to Jesus, begging for mercy. She knew the promises of a loving and magnanimous God. A nagging woman of faith prevailed. Her daughter was healed. Can we be silent when our brothers and sisters in the name of Christ exclude some of God's children? MHR

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 25, 1996

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

First Reading

Sometimes the transient nature of life is overwhelming. The "baby boomers" have hit the half-century mark this year, and my wife and I are in the vanguard of that movement. Surely all flesh is grass! The astounding brevity of life, with its dreadful uncertainty, also characterizes life within the church. Congregations come and go, as do pastors and bishops—and indeed entire church bodies. Life is constantly in flux, growth and decay. The upside of this is that the future remains open for possibility. The downside, of course, is that we become estranged from our past and severed from the essential nature of our identity. The church, too, can seem to be adrift in times marked more by volatility than stasis.

Both the first lesson and the Gospel text for today focus upon rocks—rocks which anchor us securely to that part of our identity which is non-negotiable; rocks which anchor us in the tides of sweeping change. In the Gospel text Simon Peter is a metaphor for the rock upon which the church of Christ is built, fortified in a way in which not even the Gates of Hell can prevail against it. Similarly, our first lesson invites us to look to the "rock from which we were hewn." The term for "rock" in v. 1 (*sur*) is often used as a metaphor for God's divine protection in which the believer can take refuge. It carries then not only the connotation of stability and origins but also of protective care and security. A metaphor normally applied to God is here, however, used of Abraham and Sarah. The people to whom this text is addressed have experienced the rawest edge of life's transience. They live in the waste places and the wilderness of exile (v. 3); their entire cosmos has vanished like smoke, their world has worn out like an old rag (v. 6). They die like gnats! But in the midst of the brutal brevity of life at the limits, God's word of promise rings through: "my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended!" It stands like granite in the midst of a reality which is overwhelmed by decay.

Certainly the figure of Abraham becomes potentially problematic for a community which takes cheap delight in being a stone chip off the old granite block. Perhaps in a play on the metaphor of Abraham as "rock," Jesus has to remind those who have read Isa 51:1 too many times in a radically different circumstance that "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Mt 3:9; Lk 3:8). In the same way, the belief in the church's inviolability symbolized by "Simon the Rock" can lull us into a false sense of security, undermining our ability and willingness to take the powers of Hell seriously. But these words are addressed to a people which is "pursuing righteousness" (*rodepe sedeq*) and "seeking YHWH" (*mebaqse YHWH*) in the midst of exile, an enterprise guaranteed to be fraught with disappointment and discouragement. Such a people in exile needs to be reminded of the rock of the ages which provides their lasting identity and which anchors them in a tumultuous sea. RRH

Pastoral Reflections

Georgia O'Keefe was one of the great American artists of the 20th century. She collected parched, dried skeletons of animals found on

the desert floor in her beloved New Mexico. Often she used these skeletons as the subject matter for her paintings. One shows a vast landscape of blues that shade into white. In the foreground is a skull and the white antlers reach across the canvas. It is a picture of death.

The prophet in today's reading is painting an alternative picture to the one painted by O'Keefe. To the people in captivity broken and discouraged, the prophet speaks boldly and imaginatively: "For the Lord will comfort Zion; will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord."

How does one speak to an unimagined future to a people in former Yugoslavia where the war will not end? What words of hope can one proclaim to a terminal cancer patient or to a young child caught up in drugs and gangs? Is there a picture other than dry bones and vast nothingness?

The prophet speaks of remembering one's past: Look to father Abraham and mother Sarah who bore you! God was with them as they sojourned to a strange land, and be assured that God's salvation will be forever. God's deliverance will never end.

The prophet refuses to accept the reality seen by others. When we are able to answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" we will not accept the reality that surrounds us. Grounded in the God of history, surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, we dare paint an alternative picture.

A member of our congregation is very involved in the plight of orphans in Romania. He has participated in building a playground at one of the orphanages, sending medical supplies, and hosting a young Romanian girl for a year. He speaks to anyone who will listen about the plight of these children. The situation of the children has not radically changed, but as a community we are energized by this prophet in our midst who speaks of an alternative future for these children. All of us are swept into the future he envisions.

The prophet says there is hope because we have a God who is not bound by our perspective or picture, but energizes us to participate in God's vision for the world. MHR

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 1, 1996

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

First Reading

This "complaint" of Jeremiah is plied with pathos, expressing the deep pain of one who feels himself spiritually to be sucking at a dry well. His raw wound screams out in the words: "Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail." The context for these words is a series of oracles relating to "the drought" (14:1), and Jeremiah is experiencing the severity of this drought in his own life and ministry. The well has gone dry and the pump is beyond being primed! The Gospel text for today (Mt 16:21-28) allows us either to associate the suffering of Jeremiah with that of Jesus (one called by God's own name, Jer 15:16) or to identify the rejection of such suffering with that of Peter, who rebukes Jesus for his willingness to "take up the cross."

Jeremiah has an ambivalent attitude toward God in our text. God is not only the source of Jeremiah's hope, the object to whom Jeremiah appeals (v. 1a). More sig-

nificantly God is Jeremiah's major *problem*, the source of his trouble. One of the central creedal formulae in ancient Israel was that God was "gracious and merciful, slow to anger (*'erek 'apayim*) and abounding in steadfast love." It is precisely this phrase, "slowness of anger," that is used in 15:15 (NRSV "forbearance"). What is generally confessed to be one of the major attributes of divine mercy here becomes Jeremiah's central problem. God can be *too* slow to anger. God's mercy can extend *too* far. A striking parallel to the portrait of Jeremiah here is that of the prophet Jonah. He, too, is scandalized by the implications of this creed, and God's oft rehearsed mercy becomes for Jonah, as for Jeremiah, cause for ruing the day of his birth (Jon 4:2-3; Jer 15:10. See below under 17 Pentecost).

However, just as Jonah is turned back —first by the "appointment" of a large fish and then by the "appointment" of a bush, a worm, and a hot wind—so Jeremiah is "turned back" to face those to whom he is being sent. The NRSV translation of v. 19—"I will take you back"—is misleading. The English phrase is too passive, allowing God to be reduced to "receiving" Jeremiah's efforts. The Hebrew clearly indicates that God is a primary actor, and it ought to be translated, "If you turn around (*'im tasub*) I will bring you back (*wa'asibeka*)." Further, the NRSV "utter" in v. 19 ought rather to be "produce" (Heb. *tosi'*). The word "utter" suggests that Jeremiah's main problem is what he had said in his complaint. This is, as far as God is concerned, not the problem. Old Testament piety invited complaints with the most visceral language. Nothing that Jeremiah says would have been ruled out of place in Israel's cultic psalmody. The problem is not Jeremiah's *words*. It is rather Jeremiah's implied *action*, the abandonment of his vocation, laid upon him in Jer 1:10-19. This is precisely why the words of the vocational commission are repeated in 15:20. Jeremiah is asked to take up his cross once again and to resume his ministry.

In the midst of the drought in Jeremiah's life, the well goes dry and Jeremiah's produce fails (the term *tosi'* is also used of the ground "producing" crops). The very character of God's grace seems to abandon us, seems to work against us. God's grace becomes our chief nemesis. This was the dilemma faced by Peter, who rejected the manner in which God's grace would be worked out. But as with Peter and Jeremiah, we too are invited to "keep on task," assured that God will complete the final purpose of divine grace. RRH

Pastoral Reflections

Many years ago, while I was teaching at a girls school in New Guinea, the night silence was broken. I heard the slashing of bush knives deep in the jungle. Girls at the school began to scream. Several of the girls were convinced that evil spirits dwelled in "the bush," and they felt the spirits were determined to destroy them. Each time this happened I assured them of God's love for each of them by retelling them Bible stories and other stories of God's action in the past, assuring them that the same God was present in their lives now. I believed strongly in the power of the Word to create new life and well-being in these girls. But nothing seemed to change. I was living on the other side of their world. I was filled with missionary zeal, but my word was empty. It was not producing results. I felt despair.

One morning I sent the girls to their gardens (discipline) and climbed up the mountain to the caretaker's house. In tears I poured out my frustration and pain and the lack of belief of my school girls. Mrs. Bierendorf listened quietly and then re-

sponded with a soft voice, "Mary, you only need to speak the Word; the Spirit is the one who will bring about the change in the girls." God responded to my despair through the caretaker's wife.

The despair of a young missionary teacher seems rather mundane and perhaps even trite compared to the deep despair of Jeremiah. His struggle to proclaim God's Word and the rejection he encountered was enormous. He knew the source of his people's pain and anguish and was bound to obey God's call. Yet, for each of us, it is difficult to separate personal rejection from faithfulness to our calling. How many of us after an extremely difficult council meeting might say with Jeremiah, "Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?" How many of us have sat with a colleague who is experiencing total rejection by his or her community and feels no support from the church or from God?" If we are able to identify with Jeremiah's despair, also, we should be able to identify with the despair of our people, as did Jeremiah. Imagine the despair of the nurse whose quality of work is now controlled by the "health provider" or a single parent attempting to provide for children with a minimum wage job.

Our task as preachers is to speak a word of hope to those who have no reason to think things will get better. God's word of hope and promise came to Jeremiah and to those who were suffering. "If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them."

As preachers may we have caretaker's wives who will speak God's words of hope to us, and may we be speakers of that which is precious and serve as God's mouth. MHR

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 8, 1996

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

First Reading

The question of who is the greatest in the kingdom of God (Mt 18:1) inevitably leads to the question of how one resolves conflict when people position themselves for greatness within the community of faith. In times of such conflict, the refusal to listen even to the voice of the assembly leads to one being treated "as a Gentile and a tax collector" (18:17). In our first lesson, Ezek 33:7-11, the subject is also the refusal to listen. Ezekiel is appointed as a sentinel who is to call out to the people the drama unfolding around them and the need to take immediate action. But as the editors of this material were well aware, Israel would refuse to listen and their refusal would lead to their being dispersed among the Gentile nations.

There is one major difference between the first lesson and the Gospel text, however. Whereas the refusal to listen in the Gospel text is linked to protestations of greatness, it is the opposite with the people's refusal to heed Ezekiel's message. Both our text in Ezekiel 33 as well as the doublet in Ezekiel 3 agree that it is not because the people are star-struck by their own brilliance and greatness that they cannot hear the sentinel's words. It is not because they are complacent in their privileged and honored positions that they cannot hear Ezekiel's summons to repent. It is the opposite. They are overwhelmed by their predicament, crushed in defeat, and hopeless in their distress. Given

their present situation, marked by the defeat at the hands of the Babylonians in 597 B.C.E. leading to the first deportation, they can only imagine that God has abandoned them. The weight of their sin and brokenness crushes any ability they might muster to renew their lives (33:10; cf. 8:12; 9:9). God, they believe, cannot hear their prayers and refuses to look upon them, so it is useless to listen to God's servant. Being blinded by the overwhelming nature of a present crisis, they cannot see the approach of another even more pressing disaster!

It is often said with over-zealousness that Ezekiel represents the emergence of the individual and of individual responsibility. Certainly such a romantic notion is incorrect. Nevertheless, we do have here a primary insistence that individuals are not fated by their history or their ancestry to continue in their brokenness. Ezekiel would certainly protest against the excesses with which so many excuse their present predicament by claiming that they are "victims." His writings are focused upon calling persons to take back control of their present situation and recognize the extent to which they can be a force for positive transformation (Ezek 18:1-31; 33:10-20).

Such individual responsibility seems to settle upon Ezekiel in spades. The urgency of his mission is literally one of life and death: if he fails to declare the danger to those with whose welfare he is charged, their fate will be at his own individual expense (33:6, 8). This text, when coupled with the Gospel text, suggests the urgency with which the individuals within the community need to address the destructive actions of others, whose self-absorbed and unhealthy behavior jeopardizes the integrity of the body. We are not fated by our past, but neither are we so cut loose in our individualism that the organic quality of the community of faith is dissolved in personal liberty. RRH

Pastoral Reflections

Many times over the past years, my "word for the day" came from Calvin and Hobbes, as Calvin soared through space or received a snowball in the face from his beloved Hobbes. January 1, the word ceased to be. In a local comic strip, "Farley" (by Phil Frank) which tends to comment on politics and social activities, responded to the disappearance of Calvin and Hobbes. Farley: "What a way to start 1996... with the flu and Calvin and Hobbes gone." Crow: "It makes you wonder doesn't it?" // "What if we were just characters in someone's comic strip? You, me the bears, Orwell, that nasty cat, the feral pigs, the meter maids... all of us!!" Farley: "And?" // "And what if the person behind the pen has amassed this gigantic fortune from drawing us and decides to quit and retire to Florida!! We're dead! We're all dead!!" // Farley: "You've been drinking too much of my flu medication."

What if the One behind our creation would give up on us? What if God wrote us out? To the Babylonian captives it certainly must have felt that way. They were slowly dying a spiritual and moral death. Upon their shoulders was the weight of the past and a very uncertain future. God's word comes again to Ezekiel. He calls upon the people to turn from their ways, for it is not God's purpose that they should die. They were not abandoned victims.

Today we live in a culture where many view themselves as victims. People blame their dysfunctional families, the economy, the church and the government for their inability to function. Ezekiel reminds us that God has given people the will and the capacity to make decisions which have consequence for good or ill, life or death.

In spite of the past, there is the possibility of a different future. Turn. Turn back! God does not take pleasure in death. Our

futures are not a foregone conclusion. Our past is not our destiny. Turn back! We are not characters in a comic strip. God will not go to the far reaches of the cosmos and forget us. Turn! MHR

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 15, 1996

Psalm 103:(1-7)8-13
Genesis 50:15-21
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

First Reading

This classic text, illustrating the theme of the day, reports the touching scene between Joseph and his brothers when, after their father's death, Joseph forgives their treachery against him. But the subtlety of the text is such that it invites numerous questions: Did Jacob *really* instruct Joseph to forgive his brothers, or are they trying to cash in on post-funeral sympathies? If Jacob did give such instructions, why did the brothers wait until fear for their safety drove them to approach Joseph?

Though disguised in the NRSV translation, the text clearly presents a two-stage process. First, the brothers "commanded Joseph" (*waysawwu*, v. 16); that is, they sent a petition to him via an intermediary reporting to him from a distance that their father's last wish was that the family be reconciled. Upon receiving this petition Joseph wept, but the text does not indicate the nature of Joseph's inner feelings. However, by now the reader is familiar with Joseph weeping in sympathetic pain and joy for his brothers (cf. Gen 42:24; 43:30; 45:2, 14-15), so one can only interpret Joseph's weeping in our text in light of the earlier texts. The second stage follows: now the brothers present themselves (*wayyeleku*, v. 18) in person before Joseph. The suggestion of the NRSV that the verb at the beginning of v. 18 ought to be read "and they wept" is only a conjecture unsupported by textual evidence. The brothers come to Joseph and throw themselves at his feet. They do not repeat the request for forgiveness. Rather, they fall before Joseph in a simple ritual, offering themselves to him as servants, thus fulfilling the dreams which Joseph had had years earlier (Gen 37:5-11). Then follows Joseph's famous remark, and the goal of the entire Joseph story: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good..." (v. 20). Sending an appeal for forgiveness from a distance is followed by the personal risk-taking of a face-to-face engagement in which the ultimate offer is made: "We are your slaves."

What is perhaps strangest of all in this narrative is its redundancy. If one compares this text with Gen 45:1-15, one wonders why the brothers might still fear Joseph. After all, had he not already assured them of his pardon in words nearly identical to those used in our text (esp. 45:5, 7-8)? Why would the brothers be so insecure in their relationship with Joseph that they would need to replay the entire scene five chapters later?

What was lacking in chapter 45 was a formal request on the part of the brothers for forgiveness. Though they express remorse for their earlier actions already in 42:21-22, they do not realize that their words are being overheard and understood by Joseph himself. In 45:4-15 the brothers' only expression is that of astonished disbelief and terror, not remorse and penance (45:3). The brothers must be brought to stare Joseph in the face and confess their offense, and this is precisely the element that is held in abeyance until our text, at the very end of the story.

The Gospel text presents the issue of

forgiveness from the perspective of the one who forgives. The first reading presents the issue from the perspective of the one who requests forgiveness. As lavishly (seventy-seven times) as forgiveness might be offered, as by Joseph in Genesis 45, it remains incomplete as long as it is not a response to deep repentance and personal risk-taking. In Genesis 45 Joseph's forgiveness remains a bestowal of what Bonhoeffer might call "cheap grace." It is in our text that the forgiveness is completed in the action of Joseph's brothers. It now becomes truly an act of forgiveness based upon deep human need. RRH

Pastoral Reflections

When I visit my parents in a small Minnesota town, my daily walk often includes passing through the cemetery. There are the predictable large stones of the doctors, lawyers, and lumber folk. Their lives were a mix of scandal and good deeds. Reflecting their lives were the stones. Some were in good taste and stately, others gaudy and frivolous. There were large stones, too, of the clerk in the dime store and the farmer who was known for getting his crops in late and sometimes not at all.

Among the surprisingly small stones were unexpected names: the school superintendent accused of being a communist by the John Birch Society and the banker whose name was on most of the buildings downtown.

The scoundrels and saints of the town lying side by side, their histories known and unknown, lives short and long, all there waiting the mercy of God.

Joseph and his brothers have long rested beneath the ground. Joseph, unreal in his absolute loyalty to God and his Egyptian master. He was hardworking, resisted temptation, and saved Egypt as well as his brothers from starvation.

The brothers were deceitful with their father and sold their brother Joseph to meet an almost certain death. When the brothers meet Joseph, they beg for forgiveness and bow down in front of him, fulfilling Joseph's dream. We do not hear Joseph forgiving his brothers. Rather, Joseph declares that it is God who forgives and that what evil the brothers intended, God has used for good.

Like the brothers we bow down in need of forgiveness. We need the forgiveness of our brothers and sisters. We need the forgiveness and mercy of God. To identify with the brothers is to experience the mercy of God. We are a people who cheat on our friends, lie on application forms, claim illness to get out of an obligation, eat too much, drink too much, work too much, waste too much.

We claim the forgiveness that is ours and the promises of our baptism. "For in baptism God graciously liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Children of a fallen humanity, into the waters of baptism, we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life." (*LBW*)

My hometown cemetery speaks of strange reversals. Like Joseph and his brothers, the lowly are raised and the mighty brought low. As a Christian community we seek the forgiveness of God and humanity, we live out God's great reversal in which God uses for good in spite of our intentions. MHR

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 22, 1996

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

First Reading

It always seems unfair that God should honor deathbed conversions as highly as God does entire lives spent in faithfulness and service. It seems like bad business. At least it did to those laborers in the Gospel parable who protested the fact that their lengthy service in the vineyard did not entitle them to any privileged status or special benefits. Such is also the case with the prophet Jonah, who had the unenviable task of being called by God to ministry in that one place which he hated with a passion—Nineveh of the Assyrians! Trying to avoid his commission, Jonah instead attempts to flee from God by running in the opposite direction to the farthest corner of the earth. But God has a means in mind for bringing Jonah back to his mission!

One might have thought throughout the first three chapters of the book that the reason Jonah attempted to avoid his calling was simply because of his hatred for the Assyrians. However, it is only now, in the final scene in the drama, that we learn the real reason. Jonah cites one of the most well known creedal formulae in the Old Testament, one that rehearsed God's being "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (see above, 14 Pentecost). I disagree with those who suggest that, as a prophet of doom, Jonah's single task was to unleash irrevocable destruction on Nineveh; that he knew that God was soft in the heart and might pull the plug on him, leaving him an utter failure. I think it just the opposite. Jonah, consistent with Israel's understanding of prophecy, understood the task of the prophet to be that of calling people to repentance. God's desire was for amendment of life, and repentance would naturally lead to God's own change of heart. Jonah knew what was at stake. He knew the rules, knew what his job description was, knew the divine character, and knew how far God was willing to press this "gracious and merciful" business. He was not afraid of being a failure. Rather, he was afraid of being a success! This is why he tried to avoid his mission.

If "the quality of mercy is not strained," the quality of God's mercy can certainly strain our patience, particularly when it is exercised on behalf of those who we presume do not share our cozy relationship with God. An interesting feature of the book of Jonah is the use of divine names throughout the story. In relationship with Jonah, God carries the divine personal name YHWH (Jon 1:1, 3, 4, 9, etc.), but in relation to the foreign sailors and the citizens of Nineveh God carries the generic divine title 'Elohim (1:5, 6). The exception is when the sailors themselves pray to YHWH for deliverance upon being informed that it is *this* god that is hounding Jonah (1:14, 16). It is therefore not surprising that the citizens of Nineveh pray to this same generic 'Elohim in 3:5, 8-9, and that it is this 'Elohim that repents of divine wrath in 3:10. As soon as the action reverts back to Jonah, however, it is to the personal and familiar YHWH that he unleashes his own fierce displeasure (4:2).

Is God's grace so comprehensive that it includes even those who have at best a "generic" relationship with "God," those who do not even know the familiar name of God, who have no personal relationship with the

divine? Can the depth of their repentance and the joy of their restoration be as significant as that of ours who profess to be on a first-name basis with the almighty? This is the open question with which the book of Jonah leaves the reader. RRH

Pastoral Reflections

Like Jeremiah, Jonah despairs, but for very different reasons. The people of Nineveh hear the Word from God and repent. These wicked and corrupt people are graciously accepted and forgiven by God. Not Fair!

At a very young age I learned how unfair life can be. Or did I learn that God isn't fair? I was a "good girl" and took my responsibilities seriously. But I have a twin brother quite different from myself. In 4-H I would practice my demonstration for the county fair weeks in advance. Mike would get something together the night before and the next day would receive the championship and a trip to the state fair. As juniors in high school we received the identical assignment from different teachers. We were to write our autobiographies. I wrote letters to distant relatives to develop a family tree. It went back to 1858. Creatively, I attempted to make my ordinary life exciting. We both received A's for our work. When I read Mike's paper, written with great stretch of imagination and creativity, there was a family tree back to the 1500s and a life of someone I did not know. Not Fair!

Yes, Jonah is my story. It is our story. The story read in its entirety speaks with humor of God's persistent calling us believers who are self-centered, egotistical, judgmental people to be messengers of the word. It speaks to our resistance and of the great heroics God will take in getting us back on the journey. The messenger, sent to Nineveh by a God who wants so to forgive, is unable and unwilling to repent and accept the forgiveness that is meant for him, also.

Like Jonah, we do not want to deal with the paradoxes and incongruities of life. We do not want to confront the inconsistencies in our own lives which include our prejudices, our anger, and our desire to judge.

Thomas Merton once wrote these lines. To the generation that did not understand him Jesus promised "the sign of Jonah," signalling that we all live by the power of Christ's resurrection. "But I feel that my own life is especially sealed with this great sign, which baptism and monastic profession and priestly ordination have burned into the roots of my being, because like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox." MHR

A Foundational Priority!

Roger Fjeld
President, Wartburg Theological Seminary

These first years in our new church have been difficult years for ELCA seminaries. We have had to absorb quite sudden and significant reductions in churchwide and synodical support. We have been both the objects of and participants in a lengthy study aimed at establishing a network of clustered seminaries for the delivery of theological education. The whole format of funding for seminaries is still being studied and has yet to be determined by Assembly action. It is easy, in such circumstances, to feel put upon and vulnerable.

But we have also been affirmed in some very significant ways. Among them is the fact that theological education has been declared by the ELCA to be one of its three priorities. Funding for seminaries has been relatively protected from the drastic cuts that were made in order to balance ELCA income and spending levels. Seminaries have been challenged to take on new tasks and to intensify their programs rather than cut back what we are doing. Clearly the church thinks its seminaries are important for its life and mission.

That importance is underscored by the fact that theological education is not only *a* priority in the ELCA, but it is designated as a "Foundational Priority"! That reflects the conviction of the church that the other priorities will not be accomplished unless they are provided with the right kinds of leaders. Using the other two declared priorities as examples, Outreach and Global Mission both depend on a steady supply of gifted and well-trained leaders for their missions on behalf of gospel and church. Parishes depend on leaders who understand what it means to be in mission in contemporary America; agencies and institutions of the church require leaders who can engage in missions of education and care and advocacy; partner churches around the world send their leaders to further prepare for their roles in mission.

The list is longer, but the point is that our church has identified leadership education as foundational for all of its mission. In one sense that should be no surprise. No enterprise can long survive, much less prosper, without a steady supply of well-trained leaders. But when ELCA seminary representatives talk with our counterparts in seminaries related to other churches, we quickly discover how blest we are. Our counterparts would give their eye teeth to have the relationships we have between seminaries and the mission of the church. They contend with indifference and/or criticism on a scale we have not experienced (and, God willing, never will!). It isn't just a matter of money. It is also and especially a matter of the failure of their seminaries and church bodies to work within a common vision for mission and its implications for leadership.

We celebrate the gift of being declared a foundational priority. We welcome the

churchwide conviction that leadership education is essential to effective mission. We are grateful to be serving a church that does not intend to allow itself to sink with the sinking mainline churches in America. That image of the sinking mainline churches is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy—our ELCA commitment to mission can also become a self-fulfilling prophecy!

As we celebrate our role in the life of the church, we are also in awe of what is expected of us. Being church in America is becoming more and more difficult. Being secular would be easier. Being sectarian would be easier. Being an "enclave of the past" would be easier. Being in mission in a culture in crisis is not easy, and it won't get any easier in the years ahead. It will take the church's willingness to recruit the brightest and best for leadership. It will take our seminaries' willingness to challenge those recruits to rise to the occasion of mission in our day. It will take commitment and money and clarity about what the church expects of our seminaries and our graduates. But at least we have the sequence right: search out the right leaders, give them the best possible preparation, deploy them where they are needed in mission, and then pray the Lord of the harvest to bless their work. To be "Foundational" in such an enterprise is an honor and a joy!

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