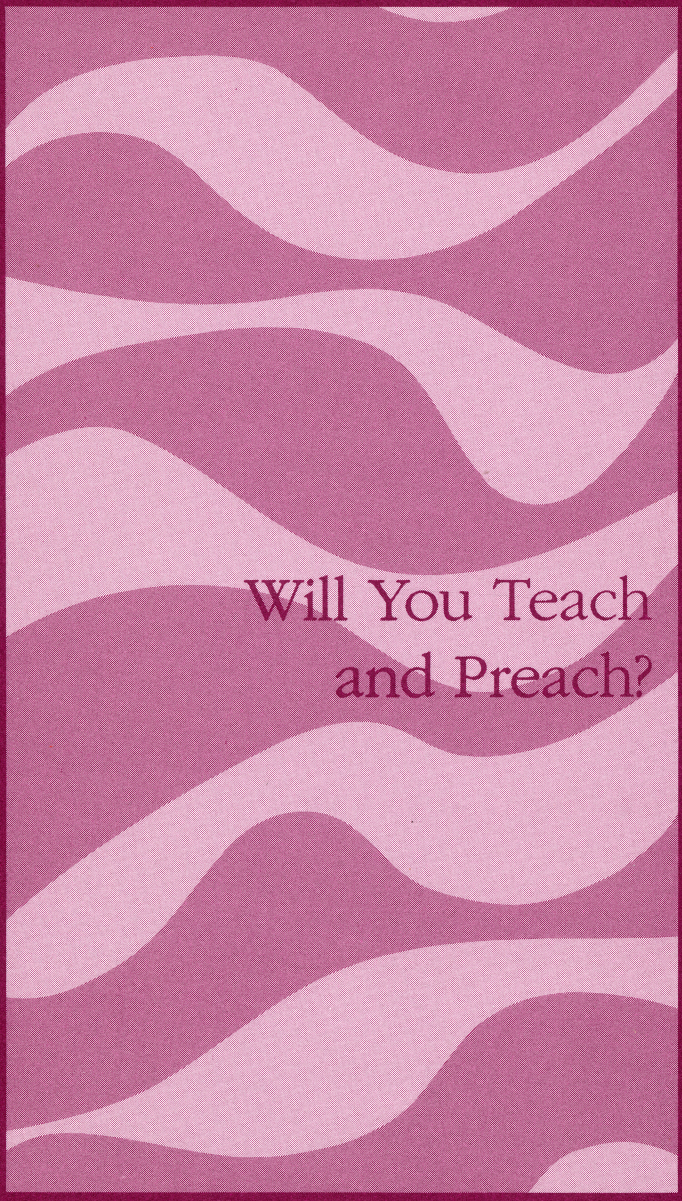
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Will You Teach and Preach?

CURRENTS
in Theology and Mission

Currents

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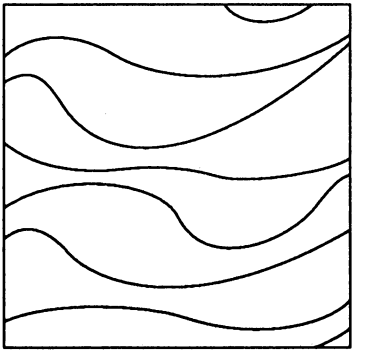
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Will You Teach and Preach...?

Not just in any old way, mind you, but in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and these [ecumenical] creeds and [Lutheran] confessions. I pondered that question again last Sunday when I preached for the ordination of four recent LSTC grads. Wouldn't you know that on the "To Do" list for this week is writing the editorial for an issue of *Currents* dealing with biblical authority. The question of biblical authority is our constant companion.

Every other year the ELCA sponsors a Conference of Teaching Theologians, calling together professors from our eight seminaries and Lutherans who teach at non-Lutheran institutions of higher learning. In 1994 this conference focused on biblical authority, using the book of Hosea as a test case, and the presenters have chosen to share their thoughts on this timely topic with us in the next two issues.

The ordination vow obligates the new pastor to about 3,000 pages, give or take the Apocrypha and whether the Bible is annotated. Or it obligates him or her simply to that perfect freedom defined as obedience to the gospel. In any case, here on the cusp of the third Christian millennium and in a post-modern age, the question of biblical authority is an essay question even if the ordinands last Sunday got by with nine simple words: "I will, and I ask God to help me."

Darrell Jodock names the cultural assumptions that influence Americans and spells out how those assumptions affect our understanding of biblical authority. Though the Bible enjoys high respect within the diverse ELCA, the church itself has become a marginalized institution.

Christian assumptions are less and less dominant in our culture, given religious pluralism and ignorance of the tradition. Our post-Enlightenment culture is disillusioned and polarized, with the one remaining authority being individual experience. To counteract individualism and relativism the church offers life in community, and the integrity of our witness often depends on our being selectively and clearly counter cultural. The Scriptures are the source for an alternative vision, free of Christendom and unbound by the privatizing aspects of our Enlightenment tradition.

Per Anderson investigates how the ELCA has chosen to carry on moral deliberation, under biblical authority, and through an engaged, democratic ecclesia. The effort to use the Bible to determine God's will is located within a larger interpretive process that includes the diverse controls of modern biblical criticisms, the creeds, and the Lutheran confessions, as well as the memory of the whole church's experience. While some see the democratization of consensus as the beginning of the end of integrity in the Christian tradition, the baptized have no choice but to practice correlation between normative texts and the contemporary situation. The "community of moral deliberation" provides the ELCA with a strategy to achieve a communal life.

Faye E. Schott notes that the Bible's central content has furnished the Christian community with identity in diverse contexts and through the use of various interpretive models. Biblical authority is manifested in the event of faith, not in rational arguments, scientific finds, or sense experience. She distinguishes between "low-context" cultures, such as ours, which put stress on verbal aspects of communication and individual autonomy, and "high-context" cultures, which give non verbal behavior a more authentic place than words and which cherish highly communal relations. The latter cultures, with their delight in non verbal communication, explore different types of relationships between God and humans. We are challenged to recognize the positive contribution of various cultural elements to the Christian community's witness, and we acknowledge that the revelation of God transcends any of these elements.

Duane A. Priebe turns specifically to Hosea in order to reopen the question about God. He affirms that the authority of a biblical text is

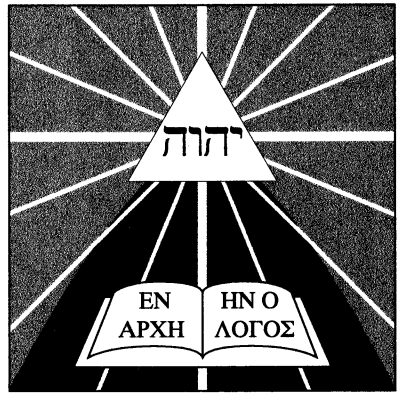
linked to its provocative power to draw our lives and our world into conversation with God and to create new insight in new contexts. In Hosea God comes in life-giving love and refuses the destruction of judgment. Consequently, God's justifying love toward sinners in Jesus Christ is as much a part of God's identity as creation out of nothing and the power to give life to the dead. At the same time, the Canaanite gods are not merely negated as idols, but their functions and identity are assimilated into the picture of Yahweh. Canaanite religion is "fulfilled" in the revelation of Israel's God and in the worship of Yahweh. While aspects of the Baal religion point to the reality of Yahweh, for Israel to turn back to the worship of Baal would have meant turning from God to the worship of idols.

The Bishop asked the ordinands last Sunday if they would be diligent in the study of the Holy Scriptures and in their use of the means of grace.

I know I will, and I ask God to help me.

Faithfully,

Ralph W. Klein
Editor



The American Context and the Authority of the Bible

Darrell Jodock
Muhlenberg College
Allentown, Pennsylvania

Each human being lives in a specific cultural context. The values and assumptions of that culture seep into one's thinking and shape one's understanding of oneself and the world. Because they are part of us, because they are like the air we breathe, we often are not conscious of those values and assumptions. The really important cultural influences are very difficult to identify.

Difficult as identification may be, the task of this article is to do just that—name some of the cultural assumptions that influence late twentieth-century Americans and examine how those assumptions affect our understanding of biblical authority. The article will seek to be descriptive but not limit itself to description; it will also offer suggestions, even if the latter cannot be developed in detail here. Given the difficulty already mentioned, the entire article, including the descriptive part, is exploratory. The author invites reflection and assessment.

Any discussion of context immediately runs into a second difficulty. Each of us lives in several overlapping social and cultural settings, and the peculiar clustering of each person's contexts leaves us with somewhat dissimilar experiences. For example, I live in a national culture: as a resident and citizen of the U.S.A., I share with other American citizens a cluster of assumptions, perspectives, and experiences. More specifically, however, I have resided in only two regions: the Upper Midwest (North Dakota and Minnesota) and the East/Northeast (Washington, D.C., New York, Connecticut, and eastern Pennsylvania). These regions have shaped my identity and my understanding of what it means to be American. Moreover, I am a male, of Caucasian descent—rather than Afro-American, Native American, or Hispanic—and these particularities shape my life. The day-to-day setting for my work is a college rather than a factory or a farm. I share a household with a wife and two teen-age sons. I am a Lutheran Christian, and both of those designations are important, but my understanding of what it means to be Lutheran has again been shaped by contextual factors: type of home congregation, the outlook of its pastors, the influence of specific college professors/experiences, the ethos of a par-

ticular seminary, etc., etc. Each reader will share some parts of my context but not others. The second difficulty, then, is to abstract from the variety of circles in which each of us moves something identifiably common, even if it may be experienced in differing ways, and to do so in such a way as to avoid vapid abstractions while designating something that actually affects the way we think and live. By the very nature of the task, the results remain exploratory.

Ecclesiastical context

The context within which the Bible is used is both ecclesiastical and societal. The major portion of this article will be devoted to analyzing selected features of American society, but first a few comments about one ecclesiastical context, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which will function here as a case study. Readers can make appropriate adjustments to describe other denominational traditions.

1. Diversity. As a national church the ELCA encompasses within it a great deal of diversity. Especially when expressing dissatisfaction with the church, ELCA members seem less than fully aware of the significant differences among regions, the significant differences among inner-city, suburban, and rural congregations, and the variety of ways in which the ELCA's recently-merged constituencies have understood their Lutheranism. Persons from the South calling for higher authority for pastors and bishops may not perceive, for example, how much they are speaking as Southerners, reflecting the distinctive social assumptions (regarding deference, civility, and respect for status) of Southern culture and the regional history of Lutherans in that region. Likewise persons from the Upper Midwest who are suspicious of clericalism may not perceive how much they are speaking as Midwesterners, who are suspicious of individuals sticking their heads too far above their neighbors, or how deeply their Lutheranism has been shaped by the distinctive heritage of Scandinavian pietism.

With regard to biblical authority as well as other aspects of church life, members of the ELCA need to be patient with each other and listen carefully for experiential and historical differences, rather than insisting (too quickly or in too shrill a voice) that proper regard for a particular—perhaps even traditional—understanding of the authority of the Bible will yield uniformity on every issue.

2. Respect for the Bible. Whatever the problems with which church leaders need to contend, the members of the ELCA continue to have an amazing respect for the importance of the Bible. They may not understand it well, they may bring to the Bible all kinds of faulty assumptions regarding its content and meaning, and they may be frustrated to discern how conflicted its interpretation can be, but they tend to take it seriously and want to understand what it has to say to Christians today. Given what is happening culturally, one cannot be certain how long the ELCA will enjoy this level of concern, but, as long as it remains, it is an asset that should not be overlooked. Indifference would be a far different—and more worrisome—problem. In a certain sense, it matters less how much persons disagree about the implications of the Scriptures for (say) human sexuality than that they take the text seriously enough to expect some guidance from it and search diligently to understand its message.

3. Marginalization. We stand at, or near, the end of a fairly long period (50-60 years?),

during which congregations now in the ELCA—whether in rural areas, small towns, or older urban neighborhoods—have been losing the ethnic enclaves within which Lutherans used to flourish. Their neighborhoods and their membership have changed. For many Lutherans, perhaps even most, this transition is an accomplished fact; for others it is a more recent phenomenon. For a number of reasons, it can be quite confusing and its legacy can be painful.

However painful, the first transition is followed by a second, which the ELCA shares with other Christian denominations in our day. The "place" of the church in American society is changing (or has changed).[1] When people lived in small towns or in stable urban neighborhoods, a community of residence, work, and leisure existed. The same people did business with each other, lived in the same neighborhood, attended the same high school basketball games. Under those conditions, each person had a defined "place" on the social "map" of the neighborhood. Likewise, each congregation had its "place." People knew—or at least thought they knew—what to expect of a particular church. Even if participation in churches was less than uniform, a church that belonged to a mainline denomination (rather than a fringe group) enjoyed a good deal of community respect. A variety of factors, including the separation of the workplace from places of residence, the availability of other social outlets, affluence, mobility, pluralism, and the dissolution of ethnic enclaves, has helped to marginalize congregations. The realm of the "private" has expanded so that—along with work, family relations, and leisure—religion has been relegated to the "private lives" of individuals. The neighborhood is "unmapped"; as a consequence every social encounter between individuals needs to be negotiated from scratch, and clergy and

Most members of the ELCA are aware that something has changed but often are unable to identify the change...

congregations have no accepted "place" in the public sphere other than the one they explicitly claim for themselves. Most members of the ELCA are aware that something has changed but often are unable to identify the change and are therefore ill-equipped to deal with it. They feel the pain of marginalization but tend either to lapse into nostalgia for the days when the Sunday School was full or to blame someone else for the pain. Amid their unclarity about the source of the problem, members of congregations sometimes blame their pastor, clergy sometimes blame the synodical staff or their congregations, and theologians may blame those who "run" a national office for departing from this or that tradition.

In my experience, this pain is very real. A minimum response is that the pain be acknowledged. Beyond that, rethinking the role of the Bible is but one facet of rethinking the mission and identity of the church as a marginalized institution. The resulting paradigm for congregations will likely be less that of a stable institution, a neighbor-

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[1]For a fuller discussion, see David Strobel and Darrell Jodock, "Ministry in an Unmapped Society," *Lutheran Partners*, X (May, June, 1994), 12-16.

hood fixture with a defined place, than that of a flexible, dynamic movement with a clearly identified purpose. Whatever the results, energies need to be redirected from blaming to a constructive rethinking, and for that rethinking a careful consideration of the societal context is essential.

4. Tensions between Lutherans and American society. Before moving to that societal context, it is well to observe that considerable tension exists between two of the circles in which we live: the ecclesiastical and the societal. Some themes from the Lutheran tradition do not fit well with American culture. To that degree, Lutheran have been and still are countercultural.

The tension may not have been so evident as long as Lutherans lived in ethnic enclaves, even enclaves in which more than one kind of Christianity was represented, because there some understanding of what it meant to be Christian and what it meant to be Lutheran could be assumed. There they were relatively isolated from the complexities of a pluralistic culture. But, increasingly, ELCA members face the task of articulating to themselves and to a pluralistic populace what it means to be Lutheran. Although formulating a denominational apologetic is not the topic of this essay, it is well to mention some examples of themes from the Lutheran tradition that do not fit very well with American culture:

—The Lutheran doctrine of sin does not fit very well with the exceedingly high sense of human potential which American culture has inherited from its Enlightenment roots.

—The theological implications of the Lutheran emphasis on *finitum capax infiniti*, of God active in the world, do not fit very well with cultural tendencies to see God as standing "above" the world, either controlling it (so that, in the minds even of many non-church-going Americans, whatever happens is God's will) or standing back to let humans be in charge, thus creating what Richard Rubenstein calls a "functionally godless" society.[2] In my judgment, the Lutheran emphasis on "God active in the world" can be a genuine word of good news to persons who view politics and international affairs as "God-forsaken," but this too is not our topic.

—The Lutheran emphasis on the priority of the Incarnate Word of God complicates and relativizes its understanding of the status of the Scriptures. The Scriptures bear witness to the Incarnate Word of God (incarnate in Jesus and elsewhere) and, when preached, may, with the help of the Spirit, become the contemporary living voice of God. But the Bible is a servant rather than a master, a window rather than the reality seen through the window, a pointer rather

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[2]Richard Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 91. Rubenstein argues that the perpetrators of the Holocaust used bureaucratic organization—itself an expression of contemporary Western culture and a product of its drive toward rationalization (the increasingly precise calculation of the means adequate to reach a practical end), secularization, and the disenchantment of the world—to cross the moral barrier which had prevented mass murder from becoming an accepted governmental policy. Once that barrier has been broken, the extermination of superfluous peoples remains an option for future political leaders. Limits are no longer set by a culturally-accepted, supernaturally-based ethic. "We are sadly forced to conclude that we live in a world that is *functionally* godless" (91). "The dreadful history of Europe's Jews has demonstrated that *rights do not belong to men by nature*. To the extent that they have rights, they have them only as members of the polis, the political community.... Outside of the polis there are no inborn restraints on the human exercise of destructive power" (89).

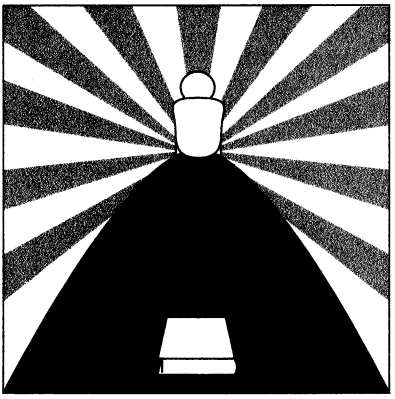
than the one to whom the pointer directs our attention. Its authority is penultimate and not uniform; individual passages may be criticized on the basis of the Gospel. Only in a somewhat complicated and derived sense can the Scriptures themselves be called the Word of God. The Lutheran doctrine of the Word does not fit the patterns readily available in American culture, which reflect a different (less incarnational, less sacramental) tradition with quite a different understanding of the nature and authority of the written text.

—The Lutheran emphasis on the church as a community does not fit very well with the American understanding of "voluntary associations." Like-minded persons form an association; the community is diverse, it is a "mixed body." The members of a voluntary association are in control of its identity; the community of believers is called into being by the Word of God and needs to learn to live with an identity given to it, as well as the incredible diversity that results.

—The Lutheran understanding of law and gospel has few analogues in a society that tends to think of social legislation as redemptive and love as the undialectical "acceptance" of whatever is by an indulgent God.

—The "theology of the cross" does not fit well with manifest destiny, with American triumphalism, with the utopian strain in American politics, or with the heady Prometheanism of an Enlightenment society. How can a society that wants to "fix" every problem understand the tragic, understand the importance of "being with" others, understand a God who co-experiences pain, or the need for a theology of failure?

Members of the ELCA share with other Christians the difficulties of understanding the marginalization of the church in our society, but they also face a task distinctively their own: explaining to themselves and others what it means to be a Lutheran in contemporary American society. The task is not easy, given the tensions between Lutheran themes and many of the assumptions of that society.



Societal context

Having sketched a few features of the ecclesiastical context, let us turn to the societal context and endeavor to identify and describe those features of American culture that most significantly influence our perception of the Bible and its authority. For purposes of this discussion, "authority" will signify the recognition that the Bible has some claim on one's attention, priorities, and behavior.

By way of preface let me cite how Stanley Hauerwas, who is not known for mincing words or understating his case, expresses the urgency of the task:

> No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America. Let us no longer give the Bible to all children when they enter the

> third grade or whenever their assumed rise to Christian maturity is marked, such as eighth-grade commencements. Let us rather tell them and their parents that they are possessed by habits far too corrupt for them to be encouraged to read the Bible on their own.[3]

So he begins the first chapter of *Unleashing the Scripture*. He ends his second chapter with the following words:

> God certainly uses Scripture to call the Church to faithfulness, but such a call always comes in the form of some in the Church reminding others in the Church how to live as Christians—no "text" can be substituted for the people of God.[4]

Hauerwas' point is that Christians need spiritual and moral transformation and that the outlook most Americans bring with them to the Bible gets in the way of that transformation.

I do not concur with Hauerwas' suggestion that the Bible be removed from the hands of individual Christians in North America, but the Bible does not fit well with the societal assumptions Americans bring to it. The authority of the Bible cannot be established on the basis of contemporary cultural assumptions.

What, then, are the features of American society that are pertinent to an understanding of biblical authority?

1. A post-Christendom society

The U.S. is rapidly becoming a post-Christendom society.[5] However inelegant the descriptive term "post-Christendom" may be, it focuses attention on the cultural embodiment of religion. "Christendom" is a pattern of social organization in which Christian values are given privileged status and embedded in a society's laws, politics, music, and art. Other observers sometimes describe the present era as "post-Christian" or "post-Protestant," but these designations are potentially confusing, because they seem to point to the disappearance of Christian believers or an absence of religious conviction among individuals. That is not the point. The issue rather is that Christian assumptions are less and less dominant in our culture. This constitutes an important change, because most immigrants who came to the U.S. from Europe brought with them the assumptions of Christendom, a pattern of culture that had developed and flourished there for a thousand years. To be sure, adjustments were necessary because of the separation of church and state, but during the first half of the nineteenth century activists in the Second Great Awakening effectively created a "Protestant America," which was our own version of Christendom. Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, and other Protestants set the tone for society. Together they shaped many of the assumptions and the values which found their way into the laws, the political speeches, and the mores of our nation. The legacy of "Protestant America"

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[3]Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15.

[4]Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*, 28.

[5]Harold Bloom thinks that a peculiarly American form of religion has replaced Christendom. According to him, religion in our "post-Protestant" nation is "subtly other than Christianity." We live, he says, "a persuasive redefinition of Christianity." *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 45. I am not persuaded that he is right about the nation as a whole, but many manifestations of Christianity are so acculturated as to deviate from the Christian tradition. Acculturated expressions of Christianity endorse individualism, civil religion, and capitalism in a seemingly uncritical way.

influenced much of the twentieth century and continues to inform some evangelical Protestants and other Christians who are active in right-wing political causes, but in most of the U.S. its impact has largely disappeared. For many, the absence of prayer in public schools remains one potent symbol of this change.

During the heyday of "Protestant America" the Bible became a cultural icon. The Bible was distributed widely. It was read in public schools. Its cadences reverberated through the language of a political leader such as Abraham Lincoln and echoed still in the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jimmy Carter. Soldiers were given copies of the New Testament, and in virtually every hotel room in the country a copy of the Bible could be found. The Bible enjoyed enormous cultural prestige.

With the disappearance of our American version of Christendom, all of this has come to an end.[6] When asked to read the Bible, college students who lack a religious upbringing initially dismiss it as outlandish fiction, obviously contrary to what they "now know to be true." They have no cultural allegiance to the document. For the church, this means that the authority of the Bible cannot be assumed.[7] A recognition of its authority is a by-product of what happens in the community of faith, not an assumption that people carry with them into that community.[8]

Is this cultural change a gain or a loss for the church? The answer is unclear. If its members are willing to seek a fresh understanding of the Bible, the absence of cultural support may well turn out to be an advantage. The world of the Bible is so different from the cultural world in which Americans live that leaving the cultural assumptions behind and delving into the Bible anew can be an exciting (and sometimes perplexing) adventure.

In any case, in a post-Christendom society a recognition of the authority of the Bible is a by-product of what happens in the community of faith, not an assumption that people carry with them into the community. This fundamental observation will need to inform every contemporary attempt to teach the Bible, proclaim its message, and encourage people to wrestle with its implications for their lives.

a. Religious pluralism. Religious pluralism is an obvious feature of our post-Christendom society. Included in "pluralism" are both the reality of religious diversity and the viewpoint that more than one religion is socially acceptable.

From the very beginnings of our nation, each church has needed to accommodate itself to the existence of other churches. Denominationalism was the result. But in recent years *religious* diversity has been added to *denominational* diversity. Where I grew up, one was either Lutheran or Catholic. (Yes, there were a few who belonged to the tiny Assembly of God church, but the only division that counted was the one that separated Lutherans from Catholics.) There

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[6]One small sign of this transition was the controversy in 1976 regarding Jimmy Carter's interview in the November issue of *Playboy*. As the ensuing controversy revealed, most members of the news media did not understand the biblical foundations of the Presidential candidate's confessions regarding lust, sin, and adultery.

[7]Few have probed this change very deeply, and it does not appear to have affected preaching and church life very deeply.

[8]The kind of neo-orthodox theology that informed my theological education assumed that the Bible had some acknowledged claim on people. I remember lots of discussions about how to interpret the Bible, but I remember hardly any that probed the question: why take the Bible seriously?

> The church no longer can assume an understanding of the character, much less the content, of biblical language.

were no Jews, no Muslims, etc. But today I interact regularly not only with Christians of many different denominations but also with Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and secularists, and I would not have to go very far to come in contact with Hare Krishnas, members of the Unification Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, etc. Pluralism is the lived experience of more and more people in most sections of the United States.

Pluralism raises the question of the authority of the Bible vis-à-vis other religions. Instead of being a distant, hypothetical issue, it is now a part of the lived experience of most Christians as they try to explain themselves to others who have no sense of what Christianity is about. Face to face with a living Jew, one cannot (at least one cannot in the light of the Holocaust) say that everything that person stands for is wrong while everything a Christian stands for is right. What then does one say? The problem is exacerbated, because most Americans tend to assume that religions are defined by their beliefs. If beliefs are (as is popularly asserted) ideas for which there is no evidence, then how does one justify one's own beliefs? And if (as is also popularly assumed) the Bible is the source book for Christian beliefs, then how can one justify attention to it rather than to another set of scriptures?

In order to put the conversation back on the right track, persons need to begin to understand that the backbone of religion is not beliefs but an overarching story (or mythos or vision) that gives identity to this particular people and to begin to understand that religious language, including the language of the biblical story, points beyond itself to a transcendence which cannot be adequately named or described. The profundity of the Christian narrative is that the Word is conveyed not only in words but also in a living being, Jesus of Nazareth. The authority of the Bible derives directly from the church's witness to that Jesus and the larger story of which he is a part. If that witness is credible (whether the community lives out its witness always influences a person's judgment about that), then the Bible becomes the place to search out the Christian view of the world. If not, then no *theory* of biblical authority can salvage its credibility.

The experience of pluralism calls into question many traditional Christian formulations, because (from the Nicene Creed and on) they frequently reflect an emerging or already formed Christendom. Pluralism actually brings us closer to the conditions that existed in the Roman Empire at the time the New Testament was written and thereby invites us to reinterpret and reexamine the Scriptures from this "new" perspective. Dialogue with other religions can help acclimate the church more fully to pluralism and help the church read the text afresh. Such a reading enables the church to understand its identity in a way appropriate to the new setting without being determined by that new setting. As the community of faith's engagement with the text produces fresh insights, the community embodies

those insights and in so doing offers them to the larger society. It offers them but in such a way as to retain its own integrity. The community of faith offers those insights but does not impose them.

b. Lack of acquaintance with religion. In this post-Christendom society, more and more persons are unacquainted with religion. To be sure, the pollsters still find the U.S. to be amazingly religious when compared with the other industrialized countries of the world, but I suspect that the conditions under which this religiosity has flourished are changing. For example, in an introductory course, I regularly take students to a synagogue service and a church service, intending to expose Jews to Christian worship and Christians to Jewish worship so that we can explore the similarities and differences between these two traditions. In recent years, however, an increasing number of students have said that these visits are their first to *either* a synagogue or a church service. They go on to observe how strange and alien both services are. The language, the gestures and movements, the symbols, the music—everything is unfamiliar. Occasionally they compare the experience to someone's first encounter with the jargon associated with computers.

So far as I can tell, these students represent a vast number of younger Americans, whose parents—whether because of a bad experience with a church, or as an accommodation to their own differing religious backgrounds, or as a concession to the lack of cultural support for religious commitment—have chosen not to involve their families in a religious community. This development has great significance for church outreach, but those consequences are not the topic of this article. Instead, let us identify two implications related to the authority and use of the Bible.

The first is that increasing numbers of Americans are not only uninformed about the contents of the Bible, they are also unfamiliar with religious language. During the first weeks of the same introductory course, students are asked to read sections of Genesis and Exodus. When asked what kind of literature this is (historical, theological, ethical, mythic, etc.) many have only three categories available: objective science, objective history, or fiction. If the chapters from Genesis and Exodus are not scientific or historical (in the "objective" sense), then they must be fiction. Having never been exposed to worship, and having never been immersed in a community with a living tradition (or in some cases even if they have), they have no sense of the role of metaphor in naming transcendence and the role of remembrance in expressing the goals and aspirations of a community. Their schooling has drawn a sharp distinction between "facts" and "opinions," and their hours in front of a television set have not helped, because, unlike oral story telling, this medium does not enhance the sense of the metaphorical. Its pictures either literalize a subject or produce non-literal impressions by heaping one visual image on top of another.

The implication is this: in order for the Bible to be appropriated in a religiously significant way, the character of religious language and the inescapable importance of metaphor in any religious language must be understood and appreciated. The church no longer can assume an understanding of the character, much less the content, of biblical language.

The second implication is that the importance of religion needs to be affirmed. The Barthian strain of neo-orthodoxy contrasted Christianity to religion, distinguishing sharply between revelation and human attempts to express the divine. Whatever

the value sixty years ago of drawing this distinction (and I expect it did have value in the face of certain kinds of Nazi propaganda), the continuity between religion and Christianity now needs to be affirmed. The eclectic experimentations of the "new age" seekers is but one manifestation that a sense of religion is missing from the lives of many middle class Americans. The church needs to introduce people to the role of religion in human life—to familiarize them with the visual symbols and symbolic movements of religion, with the role of communal interaction, and with the significance of story, of selective remembrance and narration, as the source of identity and meaning—before the significance of the Bible can be understood and appreciated.

A specific aspect of introducing religion is to help Americans who are imbued with the myth of control, the myth that humans can master the circumstance of life and control their own destinies, appreciate the role of mystery—namely, the sense of awe that does not disappear but only deepens as a person learns more. As John Haught says in a little book called *What is God? How to Think About the Divine*:

> the difficulty people have in connecting their experience with the word "God" is for the most part a consequence of the lack of a sense of mystery in their lives.[9]

He goes on:

> the refusal ever to be concerned about these unanswerable questions [Why do science at all? Why bother being logical? Why be responsible?] is perhaps the result of a repression of mystery which a culture built predominantly on the ideal of power inevitably promotes.[10]

Along with a livelier sense of mystery comes a readiness to acknowledge the tragic, an appreciation for the realm of religion, and a sense of the metaphorical character of religious language, all of which prepare the way for understanding the Scriptures.

c. The loss of the power of words. Another feature of contemporary American society makes the task of helping people understand the nature of the Bible even more difficult: the loss of the power of words.

The culture in which I grew up was predominantly oral. There were only a few books in our home. My mother read to my sister and me, but I do not remember reading books on my own, other than those assigned at school. Social gatherings were frequent, and at social gatherings two things usually happened: eating and talking. I spent hour after hour listening to my father talk with other men, exchanging stories and sharing new developments related to farming. Thousands of dollars of business were conducted in the community without anything ever being written down. And, if words needed to be said about anything personal, they were carefully chosen. Everyone sensed that the wrong words could produce misunderstandings that were very difficult to erase. If people, especially the older ones, did not know what to say they could and would sit comfortably in silence, sharing only an occasional word or a sigh. In religious education a few words were learned very well. The catechism, selected Bible verses, and certain songs were set to memory. (The same entrance hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy," was sung every Sunday in my home church.) It was an oral culture, and words were very important; they were taken very seriously.

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[9]John F. Haught, *What is God? How to Think About the Divine* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 116.

[10]Haught, *What is God?* 122.

Today words have lost much of their power. This loss results in part from the way we are deluged by messages—from radios, television sets, billboards, magazines, newspapers, and books. We soon become skilled at "tuning them out." An even more significant factor, however, is the effect of advertising and political propaganda that demean words by applying them to something trivial and thereby drain them of their content and power. For example: "Buick, something to believe in," or "Pontiac—freedom is just a drive away." What happens to the word "believe" once the car breaks down or wears out? What happens to the meaning of "freedom" when one is enslaved by car payments, insurance bills, and repairs? Or to turn to the political: what happens to the word "peace" when nuclear bombs are described as "weapons of peace"? What happens to "faith," "sacrifice," "obedience," "passion," "resurrection," a "thousand year" reign, and other similar biblical expressions after the propaganda film, "Triumph of the Will," has linked them with Nazism and after its program has turned out to be destructive and demonic? People begin to distrust words. In the twentieth century advertising and propaganda have combined to sap words of their power.

In post-Christendom society biblical words have lost their cultural resonance, yes, but the problem is much deeper. Words themselves—especially spoken words—carry little weight and are easily distrusted and dismissed. We do it every day. Under these cultural conditions, how can the *Word* of God have power? How can the Bible have authority?

What does this difficulty mean for the church? At least two things:

First the church needs to teach people to appreciate and respect the power of words. Among other things, this means teaching people to listen to each other, to see listening carefully as an expression of love. Moreover, it means helping people to recognize and understand the healing and the destructive power of words. Both of these tasks presuppose meaningful interaction among the members of the community of faith.

In the twentieth century advertising and propaganda have combined to sap words of their power.

Secondly, the church needs to pay careful attention to praxis, to the embodiment of words in action. The visitor who attends church must be able to see that someone is being helped, not just be told that help is available, before he/she is likely to believe the announcement.

Just as God sent his Word in incarnate form, so God's Word today comes to others in incarnate form. People are 'gospeled' by handshakes, hugs, attention, and involvement in a community of faith. The awareness of the authority of the Bible grows out of their encounter with the life of this community. In that setting words can be reenriched to the point where the message of the Bible begins again to be trusted and to have significance.

2. A post-Enlightenment culture

Despite the importance of "Protestant America," U.S. culture has never been consistently or thoroughly under Protestant influence. From the very beginning, this

Republic has been a child of the Enlightenment. As a result, our culture has had a good deal of confidence in human beings and their capacities. Individuals, we have assumed, can use their reason to decide what is good and what is right and are free to act accordingly. Education is considered to be important, because it is the only thing humans need to equip them to know and do what is good. Other dimensions of the Enlightenment outlook are its distrust of tradition (because tradition is supposedly laden with superstition, ignorance, and parochialism) and its confidence in the future. It believes that, by using the insights of modern science and technology, humans can "advance" into a better future. This view assumes that all societal structures are malleable. They can be adjusted and improved; to do so is to contribute to "progress."

Enlightenment tradition has not opposed Christianity in any direct or obvious way... it has merely subsumed Christian teachings under its own philosophy.

This Enlightenment tradition has not opposed Christianity in any direct or obvious way. Instead it has merely subsumed Christian teachings under its own philosophy. Churches have been relegated to a specific niche in society, where they are supposed to function as agencies of moral education, contributing to the formation of enlightened citizens. In this way Christianity's influence has been limited. Churches are not to go beyond their role of moral education and citizen formation, and, since other means of education are available, they are ultimately dispensable. They are certainly not expected to call Enlightenment ideals into question. Moreover, support is withdrawn from churches and religious groups if they endorse anything sectarian or mystical, advocate "enthusiasm," or expect the kind of allegiance that is considered "fanatical." (In recent years religious groups that go "too far" are usually accused of "brainwashing.")

The status of this Enlightenment tradition is difficult to ascertain. On the one hand, it still exerts enormous influence. Students who regard the Bible as fiction express confidence in the ability of science to discover the truth. When confronted with a crisis, people fall back on the optimism of the Enlightenment outlook, expecting education and/or technology to come to the rescue. On the other hand, this tradition no longer enjoys the confidence it once did. Within academic circles, both postmodern attention to the role of the subject in creating the meaning of a text and an increasingly pervasive awareness of cultural diversity have undermined people's confidence in the universal applicability of the findings of reason. While the Enlightenment regarded "reason" to be not just a faculty but a universally available set of precepts, contemporaries are quick to say that what is right and true for one person is not necessarily right and true for another. If confidence in reason has declined, so has confidence in science. As is now commonly recognized, science and technology brought us not only the "advances" of twentieth-century medi-

cine but also nuclear weapons, pollution, and an ecological crisis.

a. A disillusioned society. To the degree that the Enlightenment tradition has lost its pervasive power, Americans are disillusioned, because our society offers middle class whites no alternative "myth" to which to turn. Douglas John Hall formulates the Enlightenment legacy this way: Its hero is "'Man' as the Promethean steersman of the bark of history, the lord and master of nature!"[11] This modern heroic illusion (or myth or vision), he goes on to say,

> has at last manifested itself as "*mere* illusion"—indeed, as one of the *least adequate* of the illusions by which human beings have lived; for it built itself on an exaggerated estimate of our capacities for life and ignored our fear both of life and of death. The failure of the illusion has been pathetic in the Western world at large; but it is most pathetic among the people who gave themselves to it most uncritically, the North Americans. We are a disillusioned people, a people whose rudimentary *mythos* has proved unworthy, but who as a people remember no alternatives.[12]

According to Hall, three alternatives are open to persons disillusioned with the Enlightenment myth: cynicism (the abandonment of hope), repression (the nurture of false hope), or the discovery of a new creative vision that is truthful about what is happening in the world while still holding out the prospect of a good which transcends this present reality.[13] Of these the second is the most common, and its cost is very great. Repression "requires a great deal of psychic energy to blot out unpleasant or unbearable realities."[14] Perhaps such exertion is one source of the "burnout" that so many experience: people are spending psychic energy blotting out those realities which contradict the Enlightenment myth. Lacking a viable alternative, they cannot give up on it, even if it no longer seems credible.

The Enlightenment myth did not give cultural support to the authority of the Bible. Instead it rendered biblical authority problematic: the Bible was part of (the suspect) tradition, and individuals were to decide the truth on the basis of their own reasoned judgment, without regard to the past or to an external authority. Thus portions of the Bible could have validity only when confirmed by reason. Likewise, the Enlightenment myth did not prepare people to understand the contents of the Bible, deeply aware as the Bible is of the ambiguity of the human situation: created in the image of God and yet capable of so much evil.

If Hall is right that every significant religious experience assumes a certain amount of disillusionment, then perhaps ours is a kairotic moment, within which the church can explore the Bible anew. But, if so, the challenge is first to find a way for white middle class Americans to recognize and acknowledge their own disillusionment. Repression makes that task difficult.

Lest our generalizations about the Enlightenment tradition get out of hand, it is important that we acknowledge that there are other sources of disillusionment in contemporary society. In the century of World Wars and Watergate, in the presence of the massive human destruction perpetrated by Stalin, Hitler, and others, it is hard to have much confidence in governments and political leaders. In the shadow of Vietnam and Wounded Knee, the manifest destiny of

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[11]Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 192.

[12]Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 192.

[13]Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 173-76.

[14]Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 175.

the U.S. is less than obvious. To the degree to which the civil rights movement gave us a glimpse of our society as seen from a black doorstep and the women's movement has given us a glimpse of our society as seen through a victimized woman's eyes, and to the degree that crisis after crisis (Iran-gate, insider trading, the S & L boondoggle) has reminded us of white-collar misdeeds, it is hard to have much confidence in community mores and inherited social distinctions regarding rank and influence. All of this disillusionment adds up to a crisis in authority, a crisis that spills over into a certain uneasiness about the authority of the Bible.

The disillusionment experienced by so many—even affluent middle class Americans—suggests that the task for the church is to seek in the Scriptures an alternative vision (or overarching story or myth) to inform our sense of who we are. Such an alternative vision will need to incorporate more complexity than did the Enlightenment model: corporate and structural sin as well as national destiny, the tragic as well as the capacity to overcome, the wrath of God as well as God's love, the importance of the corporate and the public[15] as well as the private and the individual, and so on.

As the source of an alternative vision, the Bible can have some claim on our attention.

b. A polarizing society. Our society is polarizing. The two main cultural roots of American culture have been Christendom (the synthesis of the Greek and biblical traditions) and the Enlightenment. Since Christendom has broken down and disillusionment regarding the Enlightenment myth has set in, we are engaged in what James Hunter[16] calls a "culture war." One side (the "conservative") seeks to reassert elements of Christendom. The other "progressive" faction seeks to assure that certain Enlightenment ideals about the rights of individuals will not be abandoned. Each creates an ideology and struggles valiantly to repress any doubts about its viability. Both sides seek to perpetuate their program by enlisting the support of the state, which is in our world the sole repository of legitimate violence; in other words, they seek to win by overpowering the opposition. As Hunter points out,[17] culture wars are serious, because, unless something intervenes, they lead to shooting wars.

On issues such as gay rights, abortion, and the control of public schools, our society is already polarized, and the interpretation of the Bible is often enlisted in the conflict. But the point I want to make is somewhat different: that our society is polarizing. It operates according to a paradigm of combat between two opposing forces, assuming a zero sum game in which one side wins and the other loses. (Note the letters we all receive soliciting contributions to a cause lest "the other side" win. Except for reversing the names, the letters from opposing groups are usually interchangeable.) As Hunter has observed (e.g., in a workshop at Muhlenberg College on May 25, 1994), the news media sensationalize and oversimplify because they operate with this polarizing paradigm. They create the impression of a society even more po-

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[15]Note the critique of the Enlightenment tradition regarding what is public and what is private and the redefinition of "public" articulated by Linell Elizabeth Cady in *Religion, Theology, and American Public Life* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

[16]James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

[17]James Davison Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 4.

larized than it is. The "issues" are described as if they had (only) two sides. Anyone who tries to formulate a third option is accused of "waffling."

Most problems facing the public are more complex, most Americans hold views which fit neither of the two polarized positions, and there are, in any case, no *political* solutions to conflicts that are moral and cultural. Hunter thus recommends community debate and dialogue and invites proposals which tackle the problems in a different way, identifying positive actions which contribute to a "victory" by neither side but elicit the support of many "in the middle." For example, he suggests that citizens of a state the size of Pennsylvania enlist 30,000 couples who pledge to adopt any child, irrespective of age or race or handicap. They would then be able to say "there are no unwanted children in this state." This course of action is what I would call a "non-ideological" contribution.

If the church is a community in which listening is an expression of love and words are taken seriously, if it is a diverse community, a community that explores an alternative vision which embodies more complexity than the Enlightenment myth, then here is a point at which the church needs to be countercultural. To be countercultural in this sense is not to disengage from society but to model and propose an alternative pattern of public discourse and to make "non-ideological," "pre-political" contributions to the nation's problems. The church need not recommend to society that it pay attention to the Bible, but the church itself needs to attend carefully to its own Scriptures in order to help locate a "common ground" (not a compromise but an alternative based on other values) to offer to society. This is precisely what Martin Luther King, Jr., accomplished when he so defined racism that its elimination would benefit both whites and blacks. His "common ground" offered black and white Americans the option (for the time being at least) of linking arms in a joint struggle instead of going to war against each other.

> Our society... operates according to a paradigm of combat between two opposing forces... in which one side wins and the other loses.

The Bible has much to offer by way of sorting out the strengths and weaknesses of socio-political ideologies, and Lutherans (especially) need to hone the skills involved in distinguishing between better and worse proposals, but just as Luther refused to label any one set of demands "Christian," so we should not expect the Bible to support one socio-political ideology to the exclusion of another. Whenever the interpretation of the Bible is polarized in this way, the radicality of its message is lost. It is domesticated, and it ceases to be a resource for an alternative vision.

c. Individual experience and individualism. The lingering shadow of the Enlightenment reappears in the next feature of American society. The Enlightenment validated an appeal to individual experience as a source of truth. Contemporary society continues to regard individual experience as authori-

For the disillusioned, reason does not give access to truth.

tative, but without the other claims made by the Enlightenment. For the disillusioned, reason does not give access to truth. Science has not been able to chart a humane course for society. Governments and social institutions are suspect. The one remaining authority is individual experience: What is true is true for me; no other claims can be made about it. What is right is moral for me; no other claims can be made about it either.

To phrase the present outlook in this way is to indicate that the full Enlightenment framework has already been lost; yes, the Enlightenment trusted individual reason and individual judgment, but it trusted them precisely because they were the best avenues to the universal truth, which was in principle knowable by anyone who paid attention and used his/her head. Yes, the individual was valued highly, but there was a good deal of confidence in dialogue and debate. Because the goal was a truth to which reasonable persons could give common assent, debate could be meaningful. Between the Enlightenment myth and contemporary society stands a loss of confidence in the availability of trans-personal and trans-cultural truth. The confidence in the individual remains, but the individual can only find a truth for oneself and what is right for oneself.

Thus we are left with a peculiar kind of individualism. The biblical witness affirms individual dignity but does so within the context of a covenant relationship. Human dignity is enhanced by healthy relationships with other human beings, with God, and with nature. The kind of individualism which characterizes contemporary society views the human being as an autonomous unit, influenced only by what that individual chooses to affirm. Relationships are temporary; they are nice so long as they contribute to one's own happiness and sense of self-fulfillment but can (and indeed, according to pop psychology, should!) be abandoned at will.

So pervasive is this individualism that most young people (and perhaps most others as well) have little sense of what a genuine community is like. Lacking this awareness they also do not perceive how authority grows out of a shared community experience. For them any external authority is always authoritarian, always an imposition which restricts their individual autonomy. In one of my classes I include a section on the Amish. At first the students dismiss the Amish way of life, because it seems inconceivable to them why anyone would turn their backs on cars, electricity, telephones, television sets, and the like. But as the students read, and as they have the chance to visit an Amish family, they begin to be attracted by the sense of community and the cohesive family life they discern there. Their respect for the Amish grows, as does their awareness of what life in community entails, but their ambivalence grows even higher. They want the family orientation and the community ties but are unwilling to give up the individualism, the mobility, and the uncritical endorsement of technology that erode the communities they find attractive. Their ambivalence is not an unexpected result, but it is a revealing comment about American society that individualism is so pervasive that one needs to turn to the Amish in order to find an example of

community vivid enough for my students to begin to grasp what the concept means.

From such individualism arises a distorted sense of freedom—distorted into the "right" to do whatever one pleases. And this distorted sense of freedom feeds some of the violence in our society, for if an individual has the *right* to whatever he/she wants, then those who get in the way are oppressors. Only a little emotional instability is necessary before a person decides to "blow the oppressors away." So the disgruntled employee who has been dismissed walks in and opens fire in the post office where he worked, because he has the "right" to the job and no one should take it away.

Individualism is inimical to any genuine sense of authority, whether of the Bible or anything else, because genuine authority is not imposed on a person but grows out of the community in which that person interacts with others around a shared story and shared identity. Authority is a by-product of their communal engagement with the story.[18] If in our culture the authority of the Bible cannot be assumed, it also should not be the first item on a list of beliefs about which the outsider is to be convinced. Whenever this occurs, biblicism results. Instead, persons unfamiliar with Christianity should be drawn into the community of faith, there to be gospeled in word and deed. Only as they become familiar with what it means to be a community and familiar with the spoken, lived word of God should they be introduced to the authority of the Bible, for the Bible is not the master but the servant of the contemporary interaction of Word and community.

Robert Wuthnow observes that for church leaders finances, declining membership, turnovers in leadership, and the need to start new congregations and develop effective programs come to mind when considering the challenges faced by the institutional church at the end of the twentieth century, but behind all these specific issues,

> the problem of *community* itself will remain fundamental. If the church is unable to provide community, none of these other programmatic concerns will make very much difference, for the community above all, as Karl Rahner has observed, "is the visible sign of salvation that God has established in this seemingly godless world."[19]

An appreciation of the authority of the Bible grows out of involvement in a community, because only in a community does tradition become important. There the story is lived out, and one begins to discern how the biblical story nourishes an alternative vision and an alternative identity.

d. Relativism. Another characteristic of our society, to which we have already alluded, is relativism—moral relativism and intellectual relativism. This position is another distortion of the Enlightenment tradition. It assumes that what is true is true only for the individual holding the position and that what is right is moral only for that individual. Coupled with this relativism is an ethic of indifferent tolerance: one person should let another believe whatever he/she pleases so long as that person does the same in return. It does not much matter that such relativism is intellectually indefensible; it is a convenient adjunct to individualism and

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[18]See Darrell Jodock, *The Church's Bible: Its Contemporary Authority* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), especially chapter 6.

[19]Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6. The Rahner quotation is from *Theological Investigations*, Vol. XXII (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 123.

thus has pragmatic warrants.

Because relativism is supported by pragmatic considerations and by an ethical concern to respect differences among people, it does little good to mount a frontal attack and seek a way to defend the absolute truth of the Bible or some absolute code of right and wrong. Instead, a sense of what is true and what is right can emerge out of an alternative experience of participating meaningfully in the life of the community of faith.

To participate in a covenant community is to begin to sense the mutual responsibility one person who is loved by God has toward another. Out of this engaged respect/concern for persons loved by God and interacting in community comes the kind of grounding that ethics deserves. And out of this same experience comes an appreciation for the potential for healing and the destructive potential of ideas. The truth matters, not only for me, but also for my neighbor, whose life is either enhanced or diminished by the ideas people affirm.

The Bible takes on authority when it becomes a resource for understanding life in community. Distilled from approximately 1,500 years of Israel's history, the Bible contains profound insights into human values, as well as human foibles. The more a community wrestles with its norms and with the meaning of life, the more the Bible has to offer. Why turn to this set of documents rather than another? Because as a useful resource its insights begin to have a claim on the community.

e. Consumerism. A final feature of our society is consumerism, the false promise that goods can satisfy human cravings for acceptance and meaning. The issue is not that goods are bought and sold. The issue is instead the false gospel that buying and possessing these goods will usher in the good life.[20] Consumerism fits well with the individualism discussed above, because products now get in the way of that very kind of human interaction which can enrich our lives. For example, experience has taught me to ban the use of the video games when my sons' friends are at our house for a birthday party or gathering. Only then will they interact socially. Otherwise they sit around for hours flicking switches, with hardly a word said. Last winter four teenage girls who were part of the district orchestra became snowbound at our house for a day. When we all sat down to dinner, one of them commented how nice it was for a family to eat together, because her sister routinely eats in front of the Nintendo, her father in front of the TV, her mother eats as she cooks, and the teenager herself winds up sitting alone at the kitchen table. The products which promise human fulfillment wind up interfering with it.

Consumerism promises instant gratification. This expectation has become so pervasive that it affects people's attitudes toward religion and education. I do not know any way to deal with consumerism except to identify and name it and work to model an alternative. This means that the church cannot be anything but countercultural if it is to have any integrity in our society.

And what does this mean for the authority of the Bible? There is no direct path from individualism, relativism, and consumerism to the authority of the Bible. The only roadway runs through the kind of reorientation (repentance) called for by John the Baptist and Jesus. And the agent of that

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[20]Consumerism is what gives poverty a distinctive twist in our society. To be poor here is not only to have fewer goods but also to be denied access to the good life, as that is defined by our society.

change is the spoken and enacted Word of God at work in the community of faith.

Summary and conclusion

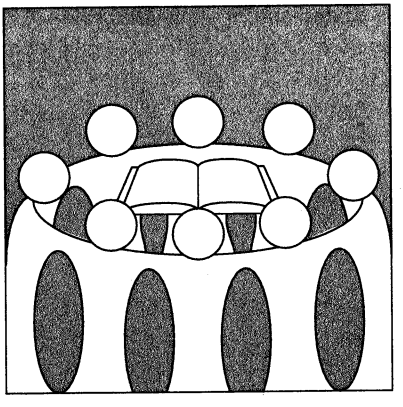
This essay has claimed that the U.S. is a "post-Christendom" society in which the Bible is no longer a cultural icon and the authority of the Bible lacks cultural support. The religious pluralism which characterizes this society offers the church an occasion to rethink our understanding of the Scriptures in a post-Christendom mode. The members of this post-Christendom society are increasingly unacquainted with religion and religious language; the church needs to help them understand both so that they can begin to comprehend the message of the Bible. In contemporary America words have lost much of their power, and the church needs to begin its approach to the Bible, not just with explaining biblical words but by underlining the formative power of all significant words. Though still influenced by our Enlightenment traditions, American society is disillusioned with the Enlightenment myth, and the church must help its people see in the Bible an alternative vision. Disillusioned as it is, our society is polarizing. The church cannot acquiesce to this tendency but needs to probe the Bible and use its imagination to identify other points of view and viable courses of action. People in this society continue to prize individual experience to the point where they espouse and embody individualism. They adopt an attitude of tolerance/indifference that leads to relativism. To counteract individualism and relativism the church offers life in community. The consumerism of our society must be challenged as the church identifies a more humane set of values, which can be embodied only through a reorientation of priorities.

All of these features of society complicate our understanding of the authority of the Bible. The cultural "baggage" often gets in the way of the biblical message. But these features also provide the opportunity for the Bible to speak with a fresh voice. The key to discerning its claim on our attention, priorities, and behavior is to approach it through the life of the community of faith which understands itself to be out of step with contemporary society, for the authority of the Bible emerges as a by-product of its role in that community. Conversely, any attempt to formulate a theory of biblical authority that appeals directly to persons in a post-Christendom society who are uninvolved in the community of faith will have to appeal to their individualism, one of the very things which needs to be transformed. The inescapable result of such an attempt is a culturally captivated version of Christianity—an already-all-too-common feature of our social landscape.

As members of a church marginalized in this society, we can see more clearly how the integrity of our witness depends on our being selectively and clearly countercultural. The Bible's claim on our attention, priorities, and behavior is informed by an exploration in community of the Scriptures as a source for an alternative vision, free of Christendom and unbound by the privatizing aspects of the Enlightenment tradition.

In Defense of Unruly Discernment: Moral Deliberation in the ELCA

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This essay examines the problems and promise of communal moral deliberation with a view to renewal of biblical authority in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. As the biblical canon came to be through "complex historical acts of recognition by the communities of faith,"[1] questions about biblical authority always already include authority in the church.[2] In this essay, I assume a situation of dire straits: that the traditional "house of authority" is beyond

repair[3] and that renewal of biblical authority depends upon a new constitution of church. I develop a case for democratic conversation and community formation as a way beyond crisis. A community is "a group of persons who share a history and whose common set of interpretations about that history provide the basis for common actions."[4] We are a church without sufficient identity to know what the Bible means for us and so what authority it possesses.[5] To learn, we should subsume renewal of biblical authority under the quest for community.

The ELCA affirms such a quest in its notion of "community of moral deliberation" set forth in the 1991 foundational social statement, "The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective." This ecclesiology is a valid Christian form with a viable future in our world. It represents a clean break with traditional ecclesiology where authority to interpret and teach a biblical deposit of revelation resides in hierarchical institutions (episcopacy, papacy, clergy) that claim identity with Jesus, the apostles, and the fathers (canon, creeds, councils, confessions). What "community of deliberation" means as alternative to tradition remains to be seen. Suffice it to say that the establishment of this new authority must overcome some daunting difficulties. Yet I see no proposal more fitting for a Lutheran Christianity on American soil.

Listening to *Lutherans Say*

I begin with some interpretation of the cultural and ecclesial situation in which we consider "community of moral deliberation." More specifically, I want to develop several critical observations from data in the *Lutherans Say* series.[6] These studies record the sensibilities of more active members of the ELCA with a median age of forty-seven. The views of those uninterested or unable to return a random sample—particularly the youngest and the oldest—

[1] Krister Stendahl, "The Bible as a Classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103/1 (1984):6.

[2] On the ecclesial sources of biblical authority, see Stanley Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture: The Politics and Ethics of Remembering," in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 4: The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 242-75; Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Crisis of Scriptural Authority: Interpretation and Reception," *Interpretation* 44 (October 1990):353-68; David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 89-119; Darrell Jodock, *The Church's Bible: Its Contemporary Authority* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 105-28.

[3] Edward Farley and Peter C. Hodgson, "Scripture and Tradition," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, new rev. ed., ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 63-77.

[4] Hauerwas, "Moral Authority," 215.

[5] Patrick R. Keifert, "The Bible, Congregational Leaders, and Moral Conversation," *Word & World* 13/4 (Fall 1993):392-97.

[6] With the exception of quoted material, my interpretation draws without specific citation upon data and analyses from five reports, written by Stephen Hart and Kenneth Inskeep and published by the ELCA Office of Research, Planning, and Evaluation, from November 1988 to December 1991. The reports are: "*Lutherans Say*...#1, Narrative Report;" "*Lutherans Say*...2, Faith, the Church, and the World: How ELCA Members See the Connections;" "*Lutherans Say*...2, Financial Support of the Church: Member Attitudes and Behavior;" "*Lutherans Say*...3, The Quality of Life, Religious Traditionalism and Concerns for the Decade;" "Lutherans Say...4, Controversial Social Issues and The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America."

Though most Lutherans hold a high view of the Bible, they read it less than once a week.

are missing. However, since we are considering a call for an engaged, democratic ecclesia, it seems fitting to know something about that group most likely to respond to such an agenda.

The reports contain ample evidence to support a bleak outlook on serious moral community. ELCA members are mostly comfortable middle class people, whose class consciousness appears to be more informative of habits and attitudes than religious ideology. The best off are least likely to want a socially-serious church. Most people experience life to be improving for them and are accordingly optimistic about the general future. Consistent with wider patterns of affiliation in American religion, typical urban Lutherans do not live and worship in the same neighborhood. They drive 10 or more minutes to a church of choice. Over 70% of the laity have no articulate impression of the work of synod and churchwide offices. Though most Lutherans hold a high view of the Bible, they read it less than once a week. Lutherans under thirty read less and are more likely to practice private religion. They tend not to invite others to church, to talk with others about faith, to see daily action as witness, and so on. Yet, 68% of lay respondents to *Lutherans Say* are optimistic about the future of their congregations.

Turning to the congregation, one might expect that voluntary affiliation produces similarity between the ideologies of pastor and members. Actually, churches typically do not call like-minded pastors, and differences hardly diminish during the course of a pastorate. Stephen Hart, one author of *Lutherans Say*, offers an explanation that also fits wider trends in American religion.[7] Pastors and members of different stripes can be a congregation because shared beliefs and values do not constitute a major principle of identity and unity. Further, occasions for congregational encounters with their actual ideological diversity are apparently few. Even though most laity (69%) say they want the church "to challenge me to rethink my ideas and priorities for life," a third say that the church should avoid issues "likely to be divisive within the congregation." For Hart, strong support for the notion of church as redemptive social agent (89% of laity) does occasionally translate into congregational deliberation resulting in practical change. But most lay respondents to *Lutherans Say* do not engage in regular discussion—formal or informal—about controversial social issues (with some exceptions like the Middle East and child rearing). Most people voice concern about social problems and agree that the congregation provides a fit forum. Most seem open to a church engaged with worldly troubles. Yet a minority view prevails in practice: divisive issues do not belong in church.

Data like these point to a perplexing tension in the thoughts and actions of laity concerning congregational life. On one side, American individualism and voluntarism define and seemingly limit commitment to church as a primary society. People

[7] Stephen Hart, "*Lutherans Say*...2, Faith, World and Church," 21-22.

relate to the congregation as they see fit, according to their interests. As Kenneth Inskeep points out, "No one has to come and no one has to stay."[8] Some do come and live richly in the church and its story. But most want a level of communal association that looks too thin by the lights of modernity[9] and apostolic standards.[10] The mission of the church should be formation of the self: spiritual needs, moral development, religious education. Social issues that affect personal vocations are in, those that deal with corporate action such as institutional reform are out. Laity, then, are socially serious but not modern. They worry about the needs of the dispossessed but not about structural sources (unlike mainline Protestant pastors generally). No one, then, will object to investing congregational energy in prayer teams or Meals-on-Wheels. But questions of structure, which involve social decision, bring the group to the limits of cooperation. How so?

Inskeep, another author of *Lutherans Say*, views the voluntaristic thinking of the laity to be a principal obstacle before "community of moral deliberation." Voluntarism impedes community because conflict ever threatens to destroy association. Without abiding loyalty to the other, the church has no base and counter-force for the inevitable strains of issues that threaten middle class consciousness. On the whole, ELCA laity believe in the American institutional system. When they worry about social issues, they worry about those like drugs and crime that threaten our pretty good lives. "Commitment" to community, then, is a critical internal problem for ELCA churches. Congregations are fragile and timid societies in the face of moral difference and conflict.

The other side appears when one asks what avoidance of conflict out of concern for congregational unity means. Recall that almost 70% of the laity (over 95% of clergy) want a church that pushes critical consciousness. More (89%) want a church active in the world. What do we make of this? I want to try an explanation, admittedly optimistic. We need to consider one last datum from *Lutherans Say*, perhaps the most consequential. Eighty-one percent of the laity agreed that "The ELCA's social statements should reflect the views of a majority of its members." Thirty-seven percent of clergy take this view. As the data go, this is both very high affirmation and very large difference between laity and clergy. The report calls it "enormous" and goes on to note that "An overwhelming majority of ELCA members appear to be committed to the principle of satisfying the majority of members as a *sine qua non* for making social statements."[11]

It may be startling to see democratic sensibilities so firmly lodged in the church. This sort of situation once moved Hannah Arendt to contend that authority has vanished from the modern world. Whatever we mean by authority today, it is not the hierarchical conception that has ruled Western experience.[12] In Arendt's terms, authority

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[8] Kenneth Inskeep, "*Lutherans Say*...3," 22.

[9] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, trans. Hans Jonas with David Herr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[10] Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimensions of Christian Faith*, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

[11] Hart, "*Lutherans Say*...2," 14.

[12] Hannah Arendt, "What Was Authority?" in *Authority*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 81-112. See also idem, "Authority in the Twentieth Century," *Review of Politics* 18/4 (October 1956): 403-17 and idem, "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), 91-141.

has vanished, for "church" can no longer be defined over against its members as a something that always demands obedience because of its self-evident value, truth, or being. If such a church is to rule (have social statements), it is by persuasion (force being impossible), which presupposes equality. The consent of the governed legitimates church power.

How does majoritarian order provide an interpretive key for conflicting thoughts and actions about the social mission of the church? I read the interest to avoid conflict as a sign of promise for moral community. It is a well-intentioned pattern funded by the belief that "the church" is finally the local society of word and sacrament and that its existence cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, no one has to come, and no has to stay. Everyone knows that the gospel is inclusive and that all who come ought to stay. But how to keep the society viable? Apparently, laity of the ELCA have baptized a secular social contract theory of representative democracy to establish the legitimacy of the church. Since people do not typically come in response to given authority, contract theory accounts for authority by majority consent. ELCA social statements should reflect a majority viewpoint because the laity know no other way to see legitimacy in an action of the church. The old hierarchical authority really is gone. Laity, of course, may ratify the given tradition, but only if they are so persuaded.

Evidence that lay people do not take responsibility for the authority they claim is troubling, of course. Still, such behavior need not belie evidence that laity want "the church" to change its members and world. For they also know it to be a contingent institution whose legitimacy and efficacy depend upon voluntary association. Dangers of conflict loom huge. Majoritarian thinking, at least, suggests that the laity see moral deliberation of some sort to fall within the life of faith and that they want the church to be more than yet another lifestyle enclave. The will toward Christian moral community (of some kind) lives. What we seemingly lack is the capacity to enact that pledge in the face of difference and time. American middle class life, and all that its structures do to impede community, surely has its way with the ELCA.

Culture wars and identity crisis

A democratic ethos of equality and freedom provides, on the whole, a congenial context for Christian community of moral deliberation. Egalitarian values and interests should be regarded as culturally ascendant and ineradicable. They should figure in any constructive interpretation of the Christian tradition, as they appear to do in "Church in Society." However, our wider cultural context also supports a certain social ferment that problematizes the gains of democratic impulses. In this section, I analyze an important interpretation of American society that isolates a principal obstacle to moral community. It concerns our interest in common knowledge or conventional wisdom and the worldview and ethos that support it.

Humans are incorrigibly social about knowledge of what is real and right. We need to be in dialogue and agreement with others about the meanings of our lives. Accordingly, Glenn Tinder argues that human interest in truth is so ultimate that the principal task and service of the church should be community understood as an association committed to hearing, speaking, and being heard about God. Love serves the diverse needs of the neighbor so that we may converse and discern together what is

true.[13] In "Church in Society," the corporate quest for knowledge centers upon discerning God's will. To discern together, I think, is to be in consensus, and consensus should be the measure of truth in our context. But what might this mean? Herein lies the ferment.

In a provocative reflection on the modern crisis of authority, John Burkhart selects a phrase from a fifth century treatise by Vincent of Lerins to represent the way in which Western Christians have thought about authority.[14] To aid the church in distinguishing between truth and heresy, Vincent proposes that care be taken that "we hold to that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all (*ut id teneamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*). For Vincent, ecumenicity, antiquity, and consensus constitute the marks of truth. Vincent here embodies the Roman legacy of respect for the past, especially the founders and fundaments of the community. Those in authority pass this ancient foundation along from generation to generation. For the community, the bearers and contents of authority enjoy self-evident significance.

For Burkhart, Vincent's conception of authority—ecumenicity, antiquity, consensus—looks too impossible for too many in the churches today to function creatively as a community standard. For many, experiences of plurality and moral ambiguity in the received foundations have occasioned a critical consciousness that must unleash suspicion on any candidate for retrieval. Who, for starters, is that "we" that Vincent assumes? Moderns must even think differently about consensus.

> For Vincent, consensus was fundamentally the agreement among the "priests and teachers" of earlier times; and it was honored whenever a council, as that at Ephesus in 431 A.D., "devised nothing new... but took every care to hand down nothing to posterity which they themselves had not received from the fathers." And it was honored whenever individual theologians acquiesced before the authority of the received tradition. But, for most of us now, the present has its own worth and rights. It may even offer wisdom. In any event, we are not enslaved to the past. The past, to be sure, may often gain our respectful attention. It may fascinate, instruct, and guide us. But it does not have, nor even deserve, our sole allegiance. Our notion of consensus is a matter of agreements achieved now. Such agreements, obviously, may be more or less thoroughly informed by the texts and traditions which we have received from the past, as these texts and traditions resonate in and among us; but the decisive resonance, finally, is among ourselves. In the modern world, consensus has been democratized.[15]

Burkhart articulates assumptions and implications of majoritarian thinking. Yet one probably could not speak so plainly in an ELCA pulpit or assembly and expect common agreement. Instead, one would be entering the polarized conflict that James Davison Hunter terms "culture wars."[16] If Hunter is correct, almost any agreements that Americans may seek about human conduct will be defined by two seemingly incommensurable worldviews currently con-

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[13] Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity: The Prophetic Stance: An Interpretation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 116-25.

[14] John E. Burkhart, "Authority in Crisis," in *Worldviews and Warrants: Plurality and Authority in Theology*, ed. William Schweiker and Per M. Anderson (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), 79-88.

[15] Burkhart, 85.

[16] James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Harper Collins, Basic Books, 1991).

Justification, properly preached and heard, can give the church the principle of identity and unity it needs.

testing for cultural dominance. The language of war seems apt, for the conditions of dialogue and consensus-building (like civility and openness) are mostly absent. This conflict does not even guarantee common rules of engagement and argument.

For Hunter, different ideas about moral deliberation are founded upon different conceptions of moral knowledge: orthodox and progressive. Hunter's theory is daring and subtle. It is daring because it claims to identify a principle of identity in American life that transcends standard indicators of ideological difference: ethnicity, gender, education, wealth. There is plurality upon plurality in America, but we should not miss the way in which otherwise different people typically take up common cause. The many in America share one of two impulses about how to know how to live.

The theory is subtle because it aims to capture a fluid and complex phenomenon, hence, the language of impulses. Strictly speaking, the orthodox and progressive worldviews are ideal types (Weber), heuristic constructs designed to help us sort through the data. Most Americans occupy a large middle ground between these poles, which issue forth different systems of moral understanding. For Hunter, the extreme antagonism that surrounds public issues like abortion, gays and lesbians, and immigration originates largely from different underlying conceptions of cultural identity and moral authority. The orthodox impulse organizes moral understanding around "*the commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority,*" like the Bible, an authority that provides eternal truths to which the self should conform. People receive a package of moral truth from beyond. They do not contribute to it or properly grade its contents. For the progressive impulse, moral understanding occurs in a world of change. Morality is properly relative, historically and culturally. Thus Hunter says that "what all *progressivist* world views share in common *is the tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life.*" [17]

Hunter's analysis has explanatory power concerning community. It shows how particular moral judgments are linked to larger conceptions of order and meaning and how such worlds so envelop the self as to provoke refusal when the other appears. "Pure" progressive and orthodox types must talk past each other and cannot tolerate each other. Both draw social boundaries that exclude each other. Both want to subjugate the other. Obviously this large piece of American life does not school us today for community—except as contrast experience.

Since the appearance of Hunter's thesis, ELCA intellectuals have looked for culture wars in the church.[18] Doubtless, we

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[17] Hunter, 44-45.

[18] In August 1992, Karen Bloomquist, Director of Studies, ELCA Division for Church in Society, addressed with approval Hunter's proposal in a paper before the Convocation of ELCA Teaching Theologians. See also Ted Peters, "Culture Wars: Should Lutherans Volunteer or Be Conscripted?" *dialog* 32/1 (Winter 1993): 37-52.

have them. About our sexuality debate, Leland Elhard observes:

> The variety of responses to the sexuality study uncover profound differences in perspective about the nature of reality. It is a little frightening to add that differences about the very heart of Christian faith have been uncovered also. It is frightening to face these differences because they are tied to the convictions and points of view for which we fight to the death because they integrate our senses of personhood and of community. So, it is difficult to step back from them in order to see why they are so strong in us, how they developed, etc.[19]

Hunter would claim these insights for his thesis. This means, among other things, that the ELCA has no moral identity of the sort that usually marks and sustains a community. Lutherans too can talk past each other and be intolerant, as culture wars teach. As the processes of primary socialization go, all Americans are predisposed to be drawn into this conflict. Obviously, if we continue to engage difference in this way, the prospects for moral community in the ELCA are bleak. If congregations limit deliberation for fear of breakdown, culture wars are a big part of the chill. If Hunter is right, deliberation about issues will uncover deeper, intractable conflict.

So, here we are: a mix of orthodox conservatives and progressive liberals, voluntary participants in the ELCA. Though some have left, most are staying and laying down competing claims on the church. Diversity is both celebrated and lamented, under the banner of evangelical freedom. Social sources of identity, especially ethnicity, that once united us are waning. If a community must hold something in common to act, what can our unity be?

In response to Hunter, Ted Peters argues that Lutherans have something theological to say that does not blink on social reality. Lutheran notions of solidarity in sin and justification by grace can fund inclusive community, since one's position on the culture wars does not finally matter before God and so the believing community. Culture wars are about the morally ambiguous character of history and of self-justification. If we be religious people, who put the God-self relation first, our agony about acceptance can be healed by trust in God's promise. For Peters, the logic of justification also has social consequences that meet the challenges of plurality. God's grace should yield toleration, love, and forgiveness of the neighbor, who we find politically incorrect or hyper-zealous. Justification, properly preached and heard, can give the church the principle of identity and unity it needs. Justification creates a condition for the possibility of community in diversity.

Peters' proposal tests the religious vitality of a church like the ELCA. Is it possible to invoke theological ideas and religious commitments as a basis for ecclesiology? Multiculturalism, Peters notes, forces the question. Given the ultimate value or sacrality of morality in our time, are we prepared to accept a church unity not founded upon shared morality? Can we so function? For Peters, common theology and religion can provide the social cohesion that diverse mores cannot. The grace of God forms and marks the church, as it also provides a warrant for reconciliation and dialogue among humans. We should respond to the other as God does.

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[19] Leland Elhard, "Pastoral Realism and the ELCA Sexuality Task Force Proposal," in *A Collection of Responses from ELCA Academicians and Synodical Bishops to "The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective"* (Chicago: Division for Church in Society, ELCA, 1994), 83.

How such a church would function practically requires some thinking. For example, it is hard to imagine the ELCA agreeing to disagree over homosexuality. We would still have practical questions about ordination or marriage. But, more importantly, agreeing to disagree would be a remarkable consensus given the current situation. Peters will sound too "progressive" for some. Peters is correct that the first Christian Lutheran response to culture wars should be theological. God acts, and humans respond in kind. In this sense, the church should not be founded upon social compact. God's redemptive action creates the group and funds community through an ethos of solidarity, forgiveness, and toleration. But Christians also want to show gratitude and loyalty and love in all that they do. And if God's action intends a universal response, if God has a will, then Christians find themselves bound together in deliberation toward common morality and witness. As "Church in Society" contends, the question of God's will is for the whole church.

The church cannot avoid divisive but necessary social decisions. Simply to classify particular roles, actions, or attitudes as morally relevant or morally indifferent—one requirement of a functional moral system—enjoins the problem of moral unity. As debates about political correctness, communitarianism, and universal human rights illustrate, functionally interdependent people need common moral norms and practices for social integration. For the vitality and order of the church, congregations need leaders and communicants of grace. What moral standards are integral to the pastoral office? How shall we determine them? In the United States, we address moral plurality in part by referring disputes to offices of the state: courts, legislatures, regulatory agencies. Over time, these institutions create binding common morality. One way or another, human groups do and seemingly must.

Community of moral deliberation

Consistent with Burkhart's notion of democratized consensus, the ELCA seeks, according to "Church in Society," a common morality formed through contemporary agreement. Authority to discern God's will resides in the inclusive and participatory gathering of the baptized. In light of the communal and cultural realities considered above, I want now to examine some of the implications and the promise of community of moral deliberation. I will not give attention to procedure and implementation, but focus instead upon basic assumptions, methods, and goals. I address three themes: community formation and biblical renewal, deliberation and correlation, democracy and truth.

Community formation and biblical renewal. Moral deliberation is a form of conversation or dialogue that assumes some principle of identity, present or expected.[20] Like Peters, "Church in Society" locates the bonds of community in the meanings of baptism. The text does not say that Lutherans read the Bible or pray together. It does not assume much common history, space, or practice. Rather, God acts in common while humans respond in different ways. This diversity can be good ("gifts of the Spirit"). It can give more life to the process.

If one asks whether deliberation seeks consensus, the text is silent. There are no

[20] On conversation, see David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

promises of moral likemindedness, big or small. But the object of deliberation implies that engagement can, in principle, find consensus. The point is discerning God's will, on the assumption that the many do best at knowing an elusive One. Thus, the aim of deliberation cannot be majority rule, where conversation ends when mass opinion claims victory over difference. Consensus of the baptized about God is the aim. Or is the aim community formation?

The two realities are inseparable. A society serious about deliberation will always attend to the character of conversation itself. Is it just? Is it creative? In this theory, the quest for community is an inescapable component of the quest for God. Good communities, communities that do well with the communication of difference, will do better at discerning God. This principle puts community formation within the process, the method, of discerning God. I note this because baptism does not seem to be a sufficient condition for community of moral deliberation. Similarly, "common convictions of faith" in the ELCA are too thin to function as a principle of identity. What to do?

"Get Christians to read the Bible." Such would be the uncontroversial counsel of some leading theologians and ethicians who have recently worked on the authority and use of the Bible. Despite variations, most read the Bible primarily as a source for formation of agents and communities. Few use the Bible for direct prescriptive norms.[21] Several developments contribute to the decline of Bible as moral rulebook. They include the recognition of the diverse, irreducible forms of ethical discourse in the canon[22] and of the hermeneutical circle in all interpretation[23] as well as the diffusion and acceptance of a hermeneutics of suspicion through the influence of liberation theologies.[24] Awareness of moral diversity and ambiguity in the Bible and of the complexity of moral judgment have caused ethicians to render complex the connections between Bible and ethics. This new hermeneutic does not deny that biblical ethics include law and command or that principles and rules play a role in any ethical system. But as there are other elements of the moral life such as the formation of dispositions and intentions, so too the Bible may function authoritatively in these contexts.[25] William Spohn captures this trend

A society serious about deliberation will always attend to the character of conversation itself. Is it just? Is it creative?

[21] William C. Spohn, S.J., *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 131-35.

[22] Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 73-118. For a study building upon Ricoeur, see David L. Bartlett, *The Shape of Scriptural Authority* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

[23] Kelsey, *Uses of Scripture*, 158-81.

[24] For a representative statement, see Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology," in *Readings in Moral Theology*, 354-82.

[25] Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, rev. and enl. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989), 189-94.

toward a pluralization of the use and authority of the Bible.

> Virtually every literary form in the canon can have some moral impact on the hearer. Narratives offer paradigms for religious character; symbols aid in interpreting the signs of the times; parables dismantle our customary expectations; lyric poetry nourishes the moral dispositions; wisdom literature shows the regularities and limits of creation.[26]

"Read the Bible" means, then, that the whole canon can shape the identity of the reader. The complexity of character formation and of moral judgment argue against selectivity of themes and genres. Just read the canon and often, if one wants to properly connect ethics and the Bible.

But toward what end? First, reading Bible under the pluralist approach has the promise of dismantling the common view that morality is a simple set of rules. As Spohn points out, both fundamentalists and overly secularized Christians share this error.[27] The pluralistic approach makes way for a wider appreciation of the meanings of the canon. It may overcome a legalistic image that inhibits contemporary reading. Second, the pluralist approach has implications for community formation, but it needs the help of continuing scholarly interest in the unity of the canon. Scholars who commend the whole Bible are confident that readers get a general message or experience that creates both Christian identity and community. Richard Hays represents this view when he defends three governing images in the New Testament that unify its meanings. Among them, he contends that "The church is a counter-cultural community of discipleship, and this community is the primary addressee of God's imperatives."[28] For Hays, the ethical mandate of the New Testament is communal, not individual. The New Testament arises from communities of discipleship. So too, the church is called to embody an alternative order that witnesses to God's activity. This image—as well as cross and new creation—arises out of the texts themselves and provides a norm for a "scripture-shaped" Christianity. Good readers, then, should not miss an invitation to community in the New Testament.

Since the authority of the Bible turns upon the recognition of the church, the potential of biblical reading to engender the community of faith should be clear. For David Kelsey, it is precisely through such action that the Bible functions authoritatively. If reading the Bible serves to create the church, it then has authority, for it "authors" or shapes communal and individual identity. The being of the church is not an end in itself, of course, but a condition for its worldly mission. With Hays, Kelsey views God's intentions through the Bible to be the creation of the church for the sake of the world.[29]

Describing and accounting for this "turn to community" in recent theological ethics and biblical studies could continue at length.[30] Suffice it to say that this happen-

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[26] Spohn, *What Are They Saying*, 97-98. See also Birch and Rasmussen, 191. and Bartlett.

[27] Spohn, *What Are They Saying*, 6-7.

[28] Richard B. Hays, "Scripture-Shaped Community: The Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics," *Interpretation* 44 (January 1990), 47.

[29] David Kelsey, "The Bible and Christian Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48/3 (September 1980): 385-402.

[30] For overviews of recent Roman Catholic and Protestant thought, see Lisa Sowle Cahill, "The New Testament and Ethics: Communities of Social Change," *Interpretation* 44 (October 1990): 383-95, and William C. Spohn, S.J., "The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 47/1 (March 1986): 88-102.

ing springs from various sources. Those ethicians who seek biblical help for community formation do not seek a simple repristination of a bygone lifeworld, but rather the creation of analogous expressions in contemporary life.[31] Within the ELCA, such reflection on community is likely to occur around any important issue today. It should given the way in which community is bound up with the terms of moral deliberation. "Community" (by any definition) is logically prior to conversation. The search for consensus builds upon earlier, more elemental agreement. But in experience, earlier agreements always undergo alteration and renewal. Community and moral deliberation are of a piece.

Moral deliberation cannot be Christian if it is not biblical. According to the academic opinion just considered, the practice of Bible reading is a condition for the possibility of its renewed authority. Like virtue acquired through habit, reading the whole Bible can engender community, the sign and seal of biblical authority. Reading the whole Bible can give the community a stronger base or sense of identity. Scripture-shaped community should result in commitment to deliberate toward consensus about God's will.

Deliberation and correlation. According to Hays, Kelsey, Lohfink, *et al.*, God wills community. Christian life and morality are communal projects. Accordingly, for the ELCA, deliberation about God should be communal. But saying that the community should deliberate does not settle the way it should go. "Church in Society" does not provide a specific method for deliberation—be it a doctrinal or confessional starting point or controlling idea, a type of ethic by which to evaluate information or to define judgment, or a theory of revelation to settle the forms and weights of sources. Consequently, many deliberations—like sexuality, where methodological difference abounds—will begin in a tangle.

Saying that the community should deliberate does not settle the way it should go.

But "Church in Society" says enough to be controversial in a culture wars context. Apart from one basic methodological commitment, the ELCA has decided that more particular decisions should occur in deliberation, relatively free from abstract (and orthodox) norms. These decisions, as ethicians know, are determinative moments of judgment. They almost settle or launch ethical conflict. Because methods are integral to moral judgment, deliberation should include them. Even within the Lutheran tradition, decision-makers typically face such choices,[32] and it is not obvious that an

[31] See Wayne A. Meeks, "A Hermeneutic of Social Embodiment," *Harvard Theological Review* 79/1-3 (1986): 176-86. Discussions of character and community formation in the churches might profit from Meeks' work because of the way in which he documents the "resocialization" processes of New Testament communities in ways that may be recapitulated in the present. See also *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

[32] For a discussion of Lutheran choices with respect to sexual ethics, see Timothy Lull, "The (Normative) Sexual Hole," *dialog* 32/1 (Winter 1993): 65-68.

It is not obvious that an adequate moral system must order every situation by the same strategy.

adequate moral system must order every situation by the same strategy. Further, for the ELCA, a rigid or thick theory of deliberation would exclude some voices, given the cultural context. It would impede, if not rule out, the search for consensus. There is, then, critical moral theory and a principle of good conversation at work in the amethodical or unruly structure of "Church in Society." It outlines a method sufficient to gathering and sustaining a democratic church dedicated to discerning God's will.

The crucial and basic commitment of "Church in Society" is correlation methodology coupled with a model of moral sources that James Gustafson would call "great variety."[33] In the language of attention, illumination, and dependence, the text sets out a triadic relation between Word, world, and church constituted by reciprocal, mutually-critical communication. The church is here pictured as sustained by and active in two relations, divine and created. The world mediates the church's discernment of God as this awareness enlightens the church's vision of the world. Consequently, the church attends to both Word and world.

The text speaks of Bible as "the normative source" of deliberation. But the authority of Bible in the determination of God's will is located within a larger interpretive process that includes the diverse controls of modern biblical criticisms, the creeds, and Lutheran confessions, as well as the memory of the whole church's experience. In addition to these texts and their expert interpreters, "Church in Society" recommends the consideration of all human experience relevant to understanding the world. The sources—either personal or textual—for the church's deliberations are vast and varied. A particular working method provides guidance for gathering and reflecting upon these sources. Decisions about method would be driven by certain preunderstandings of the Christian life. They would be part of the communal deliberative process and would be subject to change.[34]

What about the Bible in all this? The text again leaves room for debate. One baseline sense of "the normative source" can be derived from the thought of David Tracy. Because the Bible bears the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ, its testimony should norm all future interpretations. Interpretation should mean continuity, not strict identity, which the church undertakes through conversation with the Bible. For Tracy, following Hans-Georg Gadamer, to interpret is to converse, a process wherein the preunderstandings of the interpreter and claims to attention of the text meet and interact. An appropriately critical conversation will involve a correlation between two interpretations: the received text or tradition and the situation in which the church's interpretation occurs. For Tracy, such conversation entails participation in a

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[33] James Gustafson, "The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study," in *Readings in Moral Theology*, 151-77.

[34] Kelsey, "Bible and Christian Theology," 386.

to-and-fro of question and response whose outcome cannot be determined in advance. The possibilities range from identity to negation. Neither text nor interpreter should rule the outcome. The conversation about a common subject matter should eventually decide. Yet, for Tracy, a "Christian" correlation should not be in "radical disharmony" with the central Christian witness of the Bible.[35]

Democracy and Truth. Burkhart's notion of democratized consensus in modern churches finds methodological expression in "community of moral deliberation" understood as inclusive, mutually-critical conversation. Though conversation as such does not guarantee consensus (which would depend upon the subject and the participants), it does offer a forum that egalitarians should prize. But conversation turns upon other values which, as Burkhart's use of Vincent suggests, Christianity has not always prized. Conversation entails the possibility of being changed, which will be conditioned by one's openness to the claims of the other (conversation being properly non-coercive). Such openness will be predicated upon respect for the other, perhaps a relativization of one's own claims to absoluteness, or more certainly what Schubert Ogden calls "a properly modern, nondogmatic, and critical attitude toward all claims for the validity of religious traditions, including one's own."[36]

"Democrats," in social theory, should be nondogmatic and critical. But, in history, the demand for shared power can flourish while commitment and competence for governance fade. We see this in the ELCA where we deliberate little but still think that majority rule will be godly. Or, as already suggested, majoritarian order may be a strategy of exclusion (the extremes) to maintain a voluntary society. In either case, the data point to a society that experiences community in a minimal way because of suppressed conflicts about Christian belief and practice. When such minimalism becomes institutionalized, these conflicts do not disappear. Rather, the church does not practice the moral deliberation that will supply virtues to negotiate the really big tangles, like sexuality.

The deliberation that "Church in Society" envisions is a demanding morality and polity. If taken up seriously by the church, this practice would re-order its life. Accordingly, there are the usual and many structures and forces that would be affected, and the change here would be arduous. Since many considerations hold around such a project, one hesitates to select particulars for attention. However, the culture wars thesis suggests a focal issue. For many in the ELCA, a full enactment of "Church in Society" would not be a way of renewal—of church and perhaps biblical authority—but death at the hands of the Enlightenment. The democratization of consensus is the beginning of the end of the integrity of the Christian tradition under the power of Ogden's "properly modern, nondogmatic, and critical attitude." We will slowly remake the Christian God in our own image. We will slowly give up Christian morality.

Concerns about appropriateness or adequacy or truth are valid. If interpretation of God's will becomes the province of the baptized, who practice correlation between normative texts and the contemporary situation, what stops the community from "radi-

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[35] Robert M. Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 175-77, 158-60, 170-73.

[36] Schubert M. Ogden, "Some Thoughts on a Christian Theology of Interreligious Dialogue," *Criterion* 33/1 (Winter 1994): 7.

cal disharmony" with received norms? By what right does the community "converse" with tradition? These are real and troubling questions for many, and they cannot be resolved here. However, concerning the particulars of "Church in Society," four features challenge the notion that the integrity of the tradition will be doomed by deliberation. 1) Mutually-critical conversation—to recall—means that neither text nor situation rules. 2) All interpreters correlate, in some fashion.[37] Deliberation draws upon relevant forms of analysis to reveal and question the preunderstandings of the interpreter, as well as biblical authors and communities. Historico-critical criticism is especially suited to help the church respect the integrity of the tradition. 3) Deliberation seeks to reach consensus without exclusion of diversity. The tradition should always have voices. The dead will not be forgotten. 4) Finally, recall that Bible is "the normative source," the principal other of the conversation.

That said, it remains difficult to talk as a church about these issues given the polarized atmosphere of culture wars, where neither the purely orthodox nor progressive vision corresponds to the model of deliberation that "Church in Society" intends. Even if the ELCA could find its own social space to think about ecclesiology, interpretation, and authority, I suspect that the conversation-stopper for many is the possibility of revisionist readings of the Bible, as our debates over sexuality reveal. Here we may be learning that the fundamental method of "Church in Society" and typical ELCA moral practice are still far from joined.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have construed "community of moral deliberation" to be a practical possibility, sometimes seen in the present, but far from being a common fact given the state of church and society. With conflict over sexuality dividing the church and others helping, the ELCA may conclude that its experiment in democracy has failed. This would be a mistake. There is no turning back on a democratic world, only better and worse reforms of the cultural system.[38] "Community of moral deliberation" provides the ELCA with a strategy to achieve a communal life. It would be something unruly, for quite some time. But it would be something godly to practice, as further reflection on the first churches and the priesthood of all believers would suggest. "Community of moral deliberation" corresponds to evidence that people in the ELCA want to engage difference but fear that we will fail the demands of good conversation. Indeed, conversation is a skilled activity that we know little how to do, for many reasons. But consider the alternatives before we cast this project aside.

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[37] David Tracy, "Tillich and Contemporary Theology" in *The Thought of Paul Tillich*, ed. James Luther Adams, Wilhelm Pauck, and Roger Lincoln Shinn (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 260-77.

[38] The social thought of Charles Taylor provides a helpful model for criticism and reform of modern values and institutions. See *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

Biblical Authority and God—A Theological Reflection

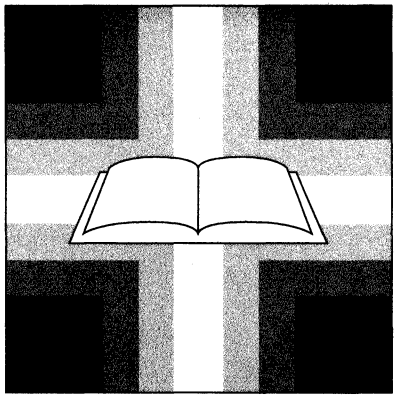
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Challenges to the Christian claim of biblical authority have never been stronger, and they come from all directions. Any adequate response to these challenges can only come from within the Christian community whose grounding itself is in question. The authority of the Bible is related to the church's witness to God who is faithful. That witness consists not only of the oral tradition and the written form that evolved from it, but also the ongoing appropriation and furtherance of that witness. The community of faith's authority for forming its identity cannot come through conforming to some external principle. Rather, it arises out of the community's own life of relationship with the faithful God to whom it witnesses. It is increasingly important, however, for the Christian community to have some way of stating its criterion for biblical authority that will be intelligible in its contemporary American setting. And as we are well aware, less and less can be assumed about common understandings among various communities in that setting.

The biblical text

The importance of a biblical text is that it furnishes an identifiable content to the Christian witness, but allows for this content to be appropriated by communities in diverse circumstances. Since a biblical text functions as Scripture not because of an inherent quality but because of the way it is used, theologians of the narrative school have argued that there is a "plain sense" of biblical texts: "a consensus reading, interpretation having distilled into conventional opinion when a certain approach to texts has come to be a community's unself-conscious habit."[1] For the Christian community, the contents of the Bible have their plain sense through an overall shape or focus, which can be summarized as the story of the interaction of God with Israel centered in the

[1] Kathryn Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 63.



event of Christ. These contents have continued to furnish the community with its identity, as it has existed in diverse contexts and has used various models for communicating within these contexts. What the content of a biblical text obviates, therefore, is not the existence of hermeneutical models, but rather the claim that a particular context, including its criteria for authority, should predominate in formulating a hermeneutical model.

The content examined in this article is Hosea's parabolic image of God, who is described as the faithful husband of an adulterous wife. This personal story of a broken marriage relationship and its promised resolution represents the historical situation of the broken covenant relationship of Israel with its God. Because there is an identifiable content, Hosea makes a specific addition to that which the Christian community upholds as its theological tradition. This addition is the conception of history as the locus for the revelation of God, along with the realization that the character of God is that of being faithful in history. Such a realization developed within the Israelites' immediate context, in which they associated their concrete experiences of nature, in drought and harvest, and of social/political order and disorder, in marriage, prostitution, religious ritual and war, with God's continuing aim toward relationship with them.

Theology's concern is not with an abstract concept of God, but with God in relation to human beings as God becomes known through their ongoing experience. Hosea's own personal experience in marriage is connected with (and even prompted by) his message about God's relationship with Israel in its corporate history. There is no hint here of any division between the private and the public, the sacred and the secular, or church and society, such as that assumed in our 20th century North American setting.

We who are 20th century Christians may acknowledge without difficulty that the text originated in a context different from our own. What we have more difficulty owning up to is that in its contextual difference it stands as a critique of our own culturally conditioned perceptions and assumptions. Our historical critical methods perpetuate the Enlightenment mode of objective thinking that leaves us with the comfortable illusion that our present intellectual context is the dominant one. Without such a methodological defense, we are vulnerable to being jarred by the alien features of Hosea or other biblical writings. Encounter with the biblical text is then an event in which we are confronted with our own narrowness of understanding.

The fact that we are jarred, and that we are able to discern some meaning in the text, demonstrates the fact that the content is capable of transcending the hermeneutical limitations of any one historical setting, including the original. In regard to exegesis and theological interpretation, George Lindbeck comments: "What the Bible properly means theologically is the right application

of what it meant historically."[2] He adds that there may be no application to a present situation, but those who assert a lack of applicability must prove their point if they want to uphold the text as authoritative. Only by taking seriously both the historical meaning and the applicability of the text can theological interpretations be faithful to the identity of the community for which they are intended.

Present context

Taking seriously the applicability of the text means taking seriously the impact of present contextual factors on the identity of the Christian community. One of those factors is the plurality of religious and ideological perspectives that inform our conceptions of reality. So the Christian community whose identity is grounded in witness to the world must ask itself: Is the assertion that revelation is God's faithful action through history translatable to other conceptions of reality? This question about history points to the complex relation of the Christian witness with Western cultural trends that are apathetic or antithetical toward any assertion of biblical authority, as well as with other cultures that have developed independently of any Judaeo-Christian influence. Christianity has an intrinsic drive to relate to all cultures and to translate the biblical witness into apparently incompatible cultural frames of reference. At the same time, it places a high value on the multiplicity of cultural perspectives that denies the possibility of any one perspective assuming historical ultimacy and thus destroying the inclusive nature of the gospel.[3]

Can other cultural realities, that are increasingly making their influence felt, broaden this Western perspective and enhance the North American Christian community's understanding of God? Can various cultural perspectives be a part of the ongoing transcendence of contextual limitations and thus part of revelation? A major challenge for North American Lutherans is our growing awareness of the cultural diversity which surrounds and permeates our existence; we want to be relevant but we also want to maintain our own confessional identity. Both these concerns pertain to our witness to who God is or, perhaps more accurately, the character of God in relation to us.

Authority of the Bible within the present context

The authority of the Bible is not external to the life of the community but comes in the proclamation and reception of the gospel. Any claim of the Bible's authority must therefore take seriously the fact that the biblical witness as a whole is not concerned with the community's "possession" of revelation (God's word contained in a text). Rather, it centers on the promise of ongoing and future redemptive relationship (God's faithfulness). Hosea has a number of references to such promises (e.g. 2:18, 23), and it is the proclamation and appropriation of these promises by the community which makes the text authoritative.

If the community of faith constitutes the locus of the Bible's authority in this

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[2] George Lindbeck, "The Story-shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation," in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Tradition*, ed. Garrett Green, 162-63.

[3] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, American Society of Mission Series, No. 13 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 46-48.

way, then the ongoing event of proclamation and its reception in faith is the means by which the authority of the Bible continually increases. As the story of God's interaction with Israel, centered in the event of Christ, is articulated within diverse cultural frameworks, its broadening meaning constitutes an increase in this authority. One particular historical/cultural tradition alone cannot be the foundation for faith identity because it fails to take into account the biblical witness to God's continuing aim toward relationship with persons in diverse historical settings. In the face of the temptation to say that our present culture can determine how authoritative the Bible is, we must counter that no one culture, even a biblical one, can finally determine the full meaning of the relationship to which the Bible witnesses. Here the Lutheran confessional heritage offers a very relevant point: biblical authority is manifested in the event of faith, not in rational arguments, scientific findings or sense experience, however those may be valued or devalued in a particular context.

Once the revelation of God has become more complex insofar as relationship with God has come about through proclamation in more diverse contexts, any insistence on a narrower perspective resists the authority of revelation as a whole. That does not mean, of course, that greater authority comes through a wholesale assimilation of all available beliefs, norms and values, predominant or otherwise. The plain sense of Scripture, which is identity-forming for the Christian community, can function as a criterion for judging external beliefs, norms and values. However, Christians should also be prepared to exercise the "principle of charity,' in revising and expanding what they consider to be coherent with the community's plain sense meaning of Scripture.[4] In exercising this principle, our reading of Scripture participates in its authority to critique and to be reformed in the 20th century context in which we live out our faith-identity.

Hermeneutical model

The authority of the Bible is grounded in proclamation, and this authority increases as the Christian message is proclaimed through culturally diverse perspectives. Keeping this in mind, we can begin to construct a hermeneutical model that takes seriously the biblical text, as well as the complexity of our present context, for understanding the character of God. It remains to be seen how this model works in regard to Hosea.

Hosea deals with the nature of God-human interaction within one cultural setting, although it implies the recognition of diversity of cultures and their religious norms in its references to worship of the Canaanite deity Baal. The narrative that describes the God-human interaction takes the form of a parable derived from a particular historical situation, involving Israelite marital and sexual codes of conduct. This narrative is capable of hermeneutical expansion, however, in relation to other historical situations of the community of faith whose self-identity is in continuity with the community to which the original witness was directed. In its drive to translate into all cultures, the witness to God necessarily takes new forms, which become part of the witness itself. The authority of the biblical text is therefore manifested as its content is

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[4] Bruce D. Marshall, "Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths," in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshall (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 96.

proclaimed within diverse cultural settings with their accompanying norms and language structures.

The hermeneutical model to be explored here involves the connection between social structure and language and the way differences in such structures affect efforts to communicate, both within and across cultures. Cross-cultural studies have distinguished two basic communication styles. A low-context culture puts stress on the verbal aspect of communication and locates meaning primarily in words themselves; gestures, facial expressions and other nonverbal signs simply modify what is stated verbally. The context is less important than the text. On the other hand, in high-context cultures, people consider nonverbal behavior a more authentic or genuine expression than words, and too much verbiage may be regarded with suspicion.[5]

The relative importance or non-importance of context in communication has ramifications for the intellectual and social life of a particular culture. In a low-context culture, such as that which predominates in the U.S., texts assume great importance for the establishment of identity. In social interchanges, accurate communication of a message depends on the speaker and hearer clarifying meaning through *verbal* give-and-take. Because of deep-seated cultural values, the American style of communication is described as "problem-oriented, direct, explicit, personal and informal."[6] Confrontation tends to be direct, and high priority is placed on factual information. This communication style contrasts with that of high-context cultures, which rely less on rhetorical skills and more on physical and contextual nuances for clarifying meaning. In these cultures, confrontation is indirect and language tends to be image-oriented rather than factual. All of these characteristics reflect the difference in values between low-context cultures, in which individual autonomy is esteemed, and high-context cultures, which give precedence to the maintenance of communal relations.

> No one culture, even a biblical one, can finally determine the full meaning of the relationship to which the Bible witnesses.

These distinct communication styles are intrinsic to different cultural perceptions of personal identity in relationships. Communication theorists have endeavored to describe these differences and their significance by the theory of "face": "The basic assumption of a theory of face is that any act of communication is a threat to face, that is, to the public self-image that a person seeks to maintain."[7] Thus communication involves the dynamics of withdrawal and entrance into social relationship, depending on how much trust is present and how much vulnerability can be tolerated. One theolo-

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[5] Edward C. Stewart and Milton J. Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1991), 157.

[6] Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*, 154.

[7] Ron Scollon and Suzanne B. K. Scollon, *Narrative Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication*, Advances in Discourse Processes, vol. VII (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1981), 171, 172.

gian who has picked up on this insight and its implications for biblical interpretation is C. S. Song, who argues that the preservation of "face" is more important in high-context than in low-context societies. He applies this argument in his explication of Jesus' parable of the great banquet (Lk 14:16-24), describing God's grace in terms of "giving face": "Jesus startles us by implying that God gives 'face' (honor) even to outcasts and strangers. What this does to God's honor does not enter God's mind. Nor is it the concern of Jesus. His utmost concern is to show that God's love is amazing."[8]

What such a reflection points to is this: when proclamation takes place in a community for which the dynamics of giving face are crucial to the sense of personal identity, those dynamics form part of the event of proclamation. The nonverbal aspects of communication in a Christian community in a high-context cultural setting result in a different type of apprehension of God in relation to humans than would be possible for a Christian community operating with the framework of a verbally-orientated, low-context culture. Contributions from both cultures to the overall shape of the biblical witness broaden our knowledge of God in relation to humanity and in so doing increase the authority of the biblical text.

One possibility for dealing with the question of God in Hosea 1-2, as it relates to our present context, is to appreciate diverse cultural insights in the Christian community's proclamation. We can acknowledge and reflect on differences in how the text of Hosea communicates the reality of unfaithfulness and the promise of deliverance in both low-context and high-context societies. For example, "I will have pity on Loruhamah, and I will say to Lo-ammi, 'You are my people'; and he shall say, 'You are my God'" (2:23, NRSV) indicates the way by which "not my people" become "children of the living God" (1:10). This is part of the identifiable content of the text which allows for the proclamation of God to humans within social frameworks which emphasize preservation of face as well as those which value direct confrontation. If those of us who participate in a predominantly low-context cultural setting take into account that theological statements about God are made from within both kinds of social frameworks, our proclamation will still be subject to cultural limitations. But we can gain a greater awareness that the continually expanding communal witness to God incorporates various cultural perspectives. With such an awareness, our affirmation of biblical authority is less determined by one particular context and thus is more adequate both to our context and to Hosea's original witness to the character of God.

Character of God

One major point of Hosea's prophecy is that God is characterized by faithfulness through history and commitment to be in relationship. God is the one who saves or delivers from shame and restores the integrity of the people in their communal relation with God. Hosea describes this relationship with the parabolic image of marriage and the historical reference to covenant. But as the text clearly illustrates, this relationship is not a commitment between two equal partners. For Hosea, God's faithfulness contrasts sharply with the betrayal of commitment on the part of the Israelites, personified in Gomer. God, however, aims toward renewed relationship with the people who proved to be unfaithful. God transcends the

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[8] C. S. Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 31.

original covenant relationship, in a sequence of actions that is one-directional, but which also incorporates Israel's prior history of unfaithfulness. The first of these actions is deliverance from shameful behavior, and the second is the restoration of integrity in communal relation. Neither of these actions constitutes an objective statement about the being of God; instead they convey the reality of being under God's judgment and promise, and in that indirect way communicate something about the character of God.

Hosea portrays God vividly as the one through whom there is deliverance from shameful behavior. The reference to harlotry (2:5) indicates the shamefulness of the Israelites' behavior in returning to Baal worship after they had experienced the revelation of God's faithfulness in their history, and this behavior brings about severe consequences—God disowns and deprives them of material well-being and any last vestige of dignity: "Now I will uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers, and no one shall rescue her out of my hand" (2:10). To be delivered includes being confronted with the reality of the hopelessness of their attempts to undermine the covenant relationship. The Israelites' attempt to disregard the revelation of God's character becomes itself a part of the revelation.

Following this deliverance that entails confrontation, God further exhibits the character of faithfulness by restoring the people's integrity in communal relation. In their plight of being "not my people," God promises that they will be known as "children of the living God" (1:10); "not my wife" (2:2) changes to "I will take you for my wife forever" (2:19). God shows faithfulness in promising to bring back those who had violated the covenant, through more than simply restoring them to a prior status. The promise is of a new kind of integrity grounded in God's compassion for the people who have become mired in a plight of their own making. The promise is of a radical change that incorporates negative and positive elements of prior perspectives and actions into a more comprehensive understanding of God.

What can we say about the character of God from our own perspective of Christian faith at the end of the 20th century? First, our perception of the character of God in this text continues to grow through our recognition of the diversity of high-context and low-context understandings of God in relationship with humans. Yet there is something more significant that happens in the life of the faith community than just perception. The relationship itself grows through the impact on one specific context of the complexity of contexts through which revelation happens. At the end of the 20th century we are being impacted in just that way; we are challenged to grow in recognizing the positive contribution of various cultural elements in adding to the Christian community's witness, but also in acknowledging that the revelation of God transcends any of these particular elements.

Theology's purpose is not to describe God in speculative thought. Its primary responsibility is to aid the community in understanding God's faithfulness to us and bearing witness to it in contextually relevant ways. In so doing, theology most adequately responds to the challenges of the present and supports the expanding authority of the Bible.

A Holy God, an Idolatrous People, and Religious Pluralism: Hosea 1-3

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How does the Bible contribute to the contemporary issue of God? This question is fundamental to how the Bible functions as an authoritative religious text today. Although Hosea 1-3 has been primarily interpreted in terms of Israel's unfaithfulness leading to God's judgment, it also opens interesting perspectives into the question of God.

As we explore the intersection between biblical texts and contemporary issues, it is inappropriate to start with these issues in such a way that they control our engagement with the text and the possibilities it opens for our understanding. It is essential for the interpreter to allow the text its say in its distance from our concerns—perhaps even irrelevance to them. This remains an abiding contribution of historical methodologies. On the other hand, our context, with the possibilities opened by its questions and insights, is the world within which we read the text.

The task of biblical interpretation entails participating in a lively conversation between the text and our world. We listen in our context to what the text has to say in the expectation that the text will creatively illuminate and speak to our world. But the text itself is also illuminated in new ways. Meaning is always contextual. Texts create new meaning in new contexts, and in so doing the texts themselves acquire new meaning in those contexts. Faye Schott will speak of an increase in meaning as texts are read in new contexts.[1]

Particular texts generate a history of meaning as people in various contexts

[1] See "Biblical Authority and God—A Theological Reflection," pages 119-25 in this issue. This approach to the hermeneutical question is strongly informed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed., trans. and revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

wrestle with its truth as God's word. Of course, the text itself constrains the possible range of meaning and its history also includes mis-interpretations. This rich, complex history belongs to the meaning of the text. When we explore its meaning, we have to explore a multi-faceted history of meaning rather than search for the single meaning. What the original speakers or authors intended in their historical context cannot control the scope of a text's potential for meaning as it addresses us. Even in their present literary context, biblical texts often mean something different from their original historical intention. Like the text's history of meaning, that original historical meaning may inform our interpretation and creatively open new possibilities, but it does not determine those possibilities.

The authority of a biblical text is linked with its provocative, evocative power to draw our lives and our world into conversation with God and to create new insight and new meaning in new contexts—meaning that would not be there apart from the text. This includes its power to lead us into considerations we would not risk if it were not for the text. Diane Jacobson's provocative paper[2] proposes starkly different readings of Hosea 1-2 in a churchly context and in the context of the issue of spouse abuse raised by feminists. Both alternatives belong to the text as it engages those contexts. One cannot decide which is the correct or the authoritative meaning. The text itself evokes both meanings.

Texts like Hosea draw us into conversation with the disturbing questions present in our world, whether the issue of God and abuse raised by Jacobson or Walter Michael's powerful, terrifying question as to whether the violence of our world does not suggest that God is "an equal opportunity torturer." In that dangerous engagement between the text and our world, the text drives us into issues of the relationship between God and our world we might otherwise avoid. In so doing the text demonstrates its authority.

Although Hosea 1-2 often is interpreted primarily in terms of what it says about Israel's idolatry, it raises significant issues when it is read in the context of the question of God. We will explore two aspects: Hosea's marriage as a parable of God, and the relation of YHWH and Ba'al.

A parable of God

The conceptual background for Hosea's marriage and the imagery of Hosea 1-2 is strongly rooted in Canaanite religion, which linked the order of the agricultural world and its fertility with Ba'al and his relations with his sister/wife Anat. Hans Walter Wolff argues that the harlotry of Hosea's wife should be understood in terms of a Canaanite ritual practice.[3] Young women ready to be married sought fertility by offering their virginity to Ba'al by having intercourse with men in the temple precincts. Their children would be children of harlotry in the sense that their birth ultimately derived from this ritual conduct. Wolff suggests that Gomer's behavior was not unusual, but was typical. Thus it embodied the depth of Israel's idolatrous faithlessness, in which they sought from Ba'al what YHWH alone could give. Hosea's marriage, his children, and their names carried his message of Israel's idolatry and God's judgment into the fabric of daily life as people

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[2] Jacobson's essay will appear in the June 1996 issue of *Currents*. Ed.

[3] Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea: A Commentary of the Book of Hosea*, trans. Gary Stansell, ed. Paul D. Hanson, *Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 14-16.

God's judgment is at the same time God's passionate plea to the one God loves: Return to me!

greeted "Not Pitied" and "Not My People," speaking and playing with them.

In spite of Hosea 3:1, which makes God's love for Israel parallel to Hosea's love for his idolatrous wife, Wolff argues that the prophetic sign acted out in Hosea's marriage is characteristic of Israel's unfaithfulness, but not of God's activity toward Israel.[4] Nevertheless, both the question assigned for this paper and Hosea 3:1 invite us to explore the option that Hosea's marriage functions as a parable of God as well as a prophetic sign of Israel's idolatry and God's judgment. "And the LORD said to me, 'Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress; even as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins'" (Hos 3:1). This command to reclaim his former wife, who now loves another, the command to act out a sign of God's love toward Israel, requires Hosea to do what God's law forbids, namely to take back a former wife who now lives with another man (Deut 24:1ff.).

Read as a parable that illuminates God, Hosea's marriage to Gomer suggests that both in choosing Israel as God's people and in continuing to be faithful to Israel, God has chosen to be the God of an unfaithful, idolatrous people. In the imagery of the story, God has chosen to be the husband of an adulterous wife. While this imagery apparently originates with Hosea, the basic idea that God has chosen to be God of an idolatrous people occurs more widely. Israel's ancestors served other gods when God called Abraham (Josh 24:3) and in Egypt (Ezek 20:5-8). God did not choose Israel in love because they were an important people nor because of their righteousness; in choosing Israel God chose a stubborn people (Deut 7:7-8; 9:4ff.). While other nations, whose gods are not gods, do not change their gods, Israel has forsaken the LORD, "the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jer 2:11-13).

Hosea's family illuminates the dynamic structure of God's love for God's unfaithful people. God's love brings judgment, yet God is torn between the harshness of judgment and love. It is not all right for Israel to live in harlotry, ascribing God's gifts to gods who have no power to give those gifts. Idolatry brings death, because Israel cannot find what they seek in their lovers. "She shall pursue her lovers, but not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them" (2:7). Judgment unmasks the utter folly of Israel's idolatry. They pursued Ba'al and ascribed to him their food and drink and clothing. Israel "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 which they used for Ba'al" (2:8). The worship of Ba'al seemed to be the practical religion that met the needs of daily life in an agricultural community. God's judgment corresponds to Israel's sin, drawing the consequences of their action. What they seek from Ba'al is

[4] Wolff, *Hosea: A Commentary*, 16.

taken from them, because Ba'al has no power to give what YHWH alone can provide.

God's judgment is at the same time God's passionate plea to the one God loves: Return to me! Blocking her way to her lovers, so that she cannot find them, God aims at leading her to "return to my first husband" (2:7). In judgment God brings an end to the fertility of the land in order to return her to the wilderness, where God will once again woo her, speaking tenderly to her and drawing her back to YHWH (2:14-15).

The sharpness of God's judgment corresponds to the passion of God's love. Initially Hosea's message of judgment seems to anticipate that judgment will bring Israel to their senses and lead them to return to YHWH. But ultimately even that hope seems frustrated. God's judgment borders on being absolute. God will no longer have pity on Israel, for they are not God's people, and the LORD is not their God.

Hosea 11 portrays the frightening contradiction between God's love and Israel's idolatry, and the resulting tear in God between judgment and love.

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Ba'als,
and burning incense to idols.
Yet it was I who taught E'phraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of compassion,
with the bands of love,
and I became to them as one
who eases the yoke on their jaws,
and I bent down to them and fed them.
—Hos 11:1-4

Because Israel has refused to return to God and are bent on turning away, they shall return to Egypt and Assyria shall rule them, and their cities will be destroyed. "They are appointed to the yoke, and none shall remove it" (11:5-7). While Israel refuses to repent of their idolatry, God is torn between judgment and love.

How can I give you up, O E'phraim!
How can I hand you over, O Israel!
...
My heart recoils within me,
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger,
I will not again destroy E'phraim;
for I am God and not man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come to destroy."
—Hos 11:8-9

God's holiness, God's otherness as God, consists precisely in God's compassion toward God's idolatrous people, in which God comes to them in life-giving love, refusing the destruction of judgment. While Israel ceases to be God's people, having violated the covenant, God's love overrides the conditions of the covenant. When Israel stubbornly refuses to repent, God restores her in a work of salvation that is God's action alone (Hosea 3; 11). God's faithfulness overrides their unfaithfulness. "I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD" (2:20). In Hosea's imagery, the destructive violence of judgment, which expresses God's helpless frustration at Israel's persistent idolatry, in fact fails to change anything. Only a radically different approach, in which God's compassion and love triumph over God's judgment, is any genuine new possibility for life opened.

Hosea's marriage and family life is a

parable in which God reveals Godself as well as being a prophetic sign of Israel's idolatry and God's judgment. In choosing Israel and in remaining faithful to her, God, like Hosea, chooses to be the husband of an unfaithful wife. God chooses to be the God of a sinful, idolatrous people. This does not excuse or justify their idolatry, which in and of itself leads only to their destruction. It discloses the depth and power of God's faithful love, which cannot be overcome or thwarted in its purpose by their idolatry and the judgment that results.

As a parable of God, Hosea's marriage also discloses the character of Israel's history with God as itself a parable of God. In choosing Israel as God's people, God discloses God's will to be God of an unfaithful, idolatrous people who have turned from God. God does not will their unfaithfulness, but God's love in creating them and giving them life will not be overcome by their turning from God or by God's wrath and judgment. In a sense, in creating the universe, God has chosen to be the God of sinners and unfaithful people, who persistently seek to draw life from created things rather than from the Creator who alone is the source of life. As a parable of God, Israel's history with God discloses God's will to be the God of the Canaanites and other nations, even when they may be regarded as idolaters who have turned from God. In a similar way, Paul says of the Corinthian congregation with all their problems that they themselves are a letter from God that can be read by everyone, recommending Paul and his message. In the fabric of their life as a congregation they speak to the world of God's will to call sinners to be God's people in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 3:2-3).

The promise that God will have pity on Not-Pitied and will say, "You are my people" to Not-My-People, then, is not only addressed to Israel. Through Israel, this promise is addressed to the nations. When the story of Hosea's family is read as a parable of God, the application of this promise to the salvation of the Gentiles in Romans and 1 Peter follows (Rom 10:25f.; 1 Pet 2:10). Indeed, God's justifying love toward sinners in Jesus Christ belongs to God's identity just as does creation out of nothing and the power to give life to the dead. In Romans 4 Paul uses four phrases to identify the God in whom Christians like Abraham believe: God is the one who "raised from the dead Jesus our Lord" (4:24), who "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (4:17), and who "justifies the ungodly" (4:5).

YHWH and Ba'al

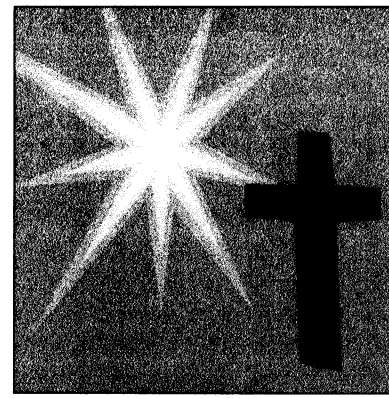
A second issue illuminated by the world of this passage is the question of the relation between YHWH and the pluralistic world of religions. Clearly Hosea says an unqualified "no" to Israel's worship of Ba'al. It is idolatrous unfaithfulness to God, which leads only to judgment. But the situation is also more complicated. What Israel ascribed to Ba'al—bread, water, grain, wine, wool, flax, oil, silver and gold—was in fact given her by YHWH (1:8). In Canaanite religion, El was the Creator of the creatures. Ba'al, his son, was the one whose rule produced the order necessary for human, agricultural life. Ba'al was the source of life-giving rain and fertility. This was developed in the stories of Ba'al's battle with two other brothers, Yamm and Mot, and in his relationship with Anat, his sister and wife.

The story of the conflict between Ba'al and Yamm, the Sea, was a conflict over who would rule as King. The issue was whether Ba'al, the god of a world ordered for the sake of life and agriculture, or Yamm, the

god of chaotic power symbolized by the sea, would rule over all things. Ba'al's victory was followed by the construction of his palace in seven days, symbolizing the establishment of the ordered agricultural world. The battle between Ba'al and Mot, Death, symbolized the conflict between life and death. In this battle, Ba'al is defeated and swallowed by Mot. Drought and death rule. Ba'al had to be rescued by Anat, a savage warrior who was his sister and wife. Anat killed Mot and restored Ba'al to life. This was apparently related to a seven year cycle for drought and fertility.

For Hosea, YHWH is the source of both fertility and drought. What the Canaanites ascribed to Ba'al and Mot, as well as Anat's power to deliver from the power of death and aridity, all derive from YHWH. Ba'al is the god of order, who defeats Yamm, the Sea, and establishes the world's order, becoming the ruler over the gods and the world. The Old Testament frequently associates this theme with YHWH's rule and the creation of the world's order. YHWH is the one who provides what the Canaanites ascribe to Ba'al. In contrast, the Old Testament excludes the conflict between Ba'al and Mot, Death, from its interpretation of YHWH. YHWH is the source of both life and death. Even drought and infertility ultimately serve God's purpose to give life. In the New Testament, however, the theme of God's conflict with Death returns as a dimension of the picture of God's creative, life-giving work in Christ: death is the last enemy to be defeated (1 Cor 15:26).

In Psalm 29, attributes of both Ba'al, the storm god who produces fertility, and El, the Creator of the creatures, are assimilated into the picture of YHWH, whose rule gives strength and peace to God's people. In Genesis 14:18-22, YHWH "becomes" the maker of heaven and earth by being identified with *El Elyon*, the god of Melchizedek, the Canaanite king of pre-Israelite Jerusalem.



This points to a complex relationship between YHWH and the Canaanite gods. They are not merely negated as idols, but their functions and identity are assimilated into the picture of YHWH. What Hosea says about God, including the prophetic symbolism of his marriage, is possible in that context only on the basis of the Canaanite religious traditions that form a significant dimension of Israel's religious context. That means that on one level the Canaanite religious traditions, including the functions and imagery of their gods, are also prophetic pointers toward God. The Canaanites who worship their gods have a relationship to YHWH, even though this relationship is not clear to them. The identity of the Canaanite gods and their worship is not only negated; Canaanite religion also makes an essential contribution and is fulfilled in the revelation of Israel's God and in the worship of YHWH.

In his commentary on Genesis, Luther criticizes the church's rejection of the

anthropomorphists as heretics.[5] He argues that God always meets us through created things, which serve as masks behind which God is present. God's presence and activity through created things is the basis for the danger of idolatry, in which the created things themselves become identified with God rather than being merely the vehicles of God's presence that point beyond themselves to the Creator who meets us through them. But they also provide the only language and imagery in which we can speak of God and God's activity. This is analogous to Hosea's use of Canaanite religious traditions as well as to his critique of the temptation toward idolatry they offer.

God's presence and activity through created things is the basis for the danger of idolatry.

In fact, one of the most striking features of this passage is that it even suggests that Israel once worshiped YHWH under the name "my Ba'al": "'In that day,' says the Lord, 'you will call me, "My husband," and no longer will you call me, "My Ba'al." For I will remove the names of the Ba'als from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more'" (2:16-17). The language is probably related to marital terminology, in which "My Ba'al" (My Master) accents the legal aspect and the subordination of the wife, while "My Husband" expresses the more intimate, loving, and mutual relationship between a husband and wife. But the language also is clearly intended to evoke the religious associations of "my Ba'al," as v. 17 demonstrates. This language corresponds to two aspects of Israel's historical reality. The one is that in the administrative reorganization of Israel under Solomon, many Canaanites, who traditionally worshiped Ba'al, were, in effect, administratively incorporated into Israel. On the other hand, Israelite names often incorporate the divine name Ba'al, reflecting the use of that name. Such names were included among David and Saul's children as well as in other names and in inscriptions. This implies that, at least in some circles, the name Ba'al could be used alongside the name YHWH.

This passage suggests an irreversible relation between the Canaanite gods, like Ba'al, and Israel's God. The name El apparently could be associated with YHWH in a relatively unproblematic way. In addition, for the Canaanites and at one time even for Israel, worship of Ba'al was a pointer toward YHWH: Israel once called YHWH "my Ba'al." However, once Israel knows YHWH, they cannot return to the worship of Ba'al without becoming idolatrous. Yet even then, in their context Israel cannot speak appropriately about YHWH in relation to the reality of their life in the world without including into YHWH's identity the identity and functions of the Canaanite deities.

Let me illustrate this from a different context. In Papua New Guinea there is a widespread myth of the two brothers, which comes in many variations. The basic idea is that the elder asks the younger to kill him

[5] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1-5*, trans. George V. Schick, *Luther's Works* I, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 15.

violently and to bury him in a fenced off area. When the younger brother comes back later, he finds pigs, sweet potatoes, or taro growing there, depending on what is the most important for the life of that group. Life and all that is essential to the fullness of life flows from the death of the brother. It seems almost natural to see this myth as a Melanesian prophecy of Jesus, whose death is the source of life for people and the cosmos, and who, as the risen Lord, is himself the life of the world. The story itself is not a Christian story, and the reality of Jesus is quite different from the reality of the brother in the story. Yet in this context, when you read the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 in the desert (Mk 6:1ff.), that tradition also illuminates the story in new ways. In the desert, where little or nothing grows, Jesus, who is the source of life for the universe, bids people sit on the *green grass* and provides an *abundance of food* from two fish and five loaves. The green grass, which initially seems anomalous, suddenly becomes part of the point of the story.

If one sees the story of the two brothers as a prophecy of Jesus, Jesus is more than the prophecy even when the prophecy illuminates Jesus is a particular way. But you cannot simply return to the pre-Christian cultural and religious tradition without losing the reality toward which it points in so far as it is prophecy. Ba'al and the Canaanite religious traditions may point to the reality of YHWH and may be the way God once was worshiped, but for Israel to turn back to the worship of Ba'al is to turn away from God to the worship of idols. At the same time, Israel cannot speak adequately about YHWH in their context without critically incorporating the traditions of Canaanite religion in their power to illuminate the reality of God and God's activity in their world. This opens up a creative approach to other religions as traditions that in some sense bear the impress of God's revelatory and redeeming activity. Is there not a similar relation between Christian faith and Hebrew Scripture, if the Old Testament is not to be read in a Marcionite way as a witness to a different god?

In Face of Mystery: A Book Worth Discussing

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In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology. By Gordon Kaufman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. 509 pages. Cloth. $39.95.

The "overall task of Christian theology today," says Gordon Kaufman, is the "attempt to construct conceptions of God, humanity, and the world appropriate for the orientation of contemporary human life. "*In Face of Mystery* is Kaufman's attempt to produce such serviceable concepts within the strict limits imposed by his own critical assessment of theological method as beginning, remaining, and ending with the human imagination.

The result is apologetic theology that threatens to cross the boundary between the theological sense of "apology" and the common definition of that word. Kaufman's tone is all level-headed common sense as he obligingly does away with Christian doctrines that he is certain could retain no credence in our enlightened time. His appeal is to the scientifically-minded sophisticate for whom evolution and the scientific method are defining features of the universe, and he takes care to distance himself from more traditional Christian formulations before presenting his intended readers a stripped-down Christianity as one option which they might possibly choose to consider when shopping for a life-orienting worldview. As he invites the reader to take "small steps of faith" along the way toward a nominally Christian worldview, Kaufman is a no-pressure salesman. "We're all pluralists here," he seems to say, "but let me point out a few advantages of Christian theism as a way of meeting your life-orientation needs."

In his preface, Kaufman acknowledges that his approach provides for less emotional enthusiasm and conviction than does certitude (or, imagined certitude) about God. But, he adds, it has the advantage that it opens the way to a fuller appreciation for the human in all its diversity. That's one advantage, and an indication of the thoroughgoing anthropocentrism of Kaufman's method. Another advantage Kaufman claims is that his respect for pluralism and, indeed, relativism shields his theological propositions from an antihistorical reification that can lead only to idolatry and totalitarian authority claims.

Kaufman's initial premises are those he presented in 1975 in his *Essay on Theo-*

logical Method, namely, that theology is and always has been an activity of the human imagination and nothing more; that theology will benefit from owning up to its anthropological roots and limits; and that the results of theological work done within anthropological limits will be more humane, less authoritarian, and more productive of human freedom than is theology that claims a superhuman basis. Theological method should strive to be a nuanced, sophisticated version of the perennial myth-making activity of humankind.

Since we make our own God-concept, then orient our lives toward that concept, clearly our God-criteria will depend upon our current sense of the highest values for humankind. In the present volume, Kaufman's chief concern is to incorporate into theological thought two defining aspects of human being—our historicity and the context of mystery within which we live and which is the backdrop of all human experience.

Historicity relativizes, but it also gives warrant for the serious consideration of the presence of God-talk in human culture. A recognition of our historical conditionedness prevents our making reliable positive assertions about eternal truth, but, at the same time, it grants greater stature to the conditioned and conditional in its own right. Because theologians *cannot* know the mystery, they are freed to concern themselves with anthropology, to do theology as the study of the *human experience of mystery.*

Mystery itself also relativizes. We all live within the context of mystery—all our thoughts and actions are accompanied by an awareness that our knowledge is partial and inherently limited, that the future is open ahead of us, that our actions will produce more than their intended effects.

Kaufman defines human being according to these realities. The *sine qua non* of humanness is historicity, including the ability to imagine the future and, so, to make responsible decisions about actions based on their likely effects. If our God-concept is to serve human being, then, it will promote human freedom so as to maximize opportunity for ethical behavior for the individual and among humanity as a whole. God fits into this picture as the great unknown which delegitimizes authoritarian limitations on freedom. We don't finally know what God says or wants, so no one can claim to be carrying out God's will at another's expense. Yet, God *can* be spoken of (should one so choose), so long as the distinction is maintained between God and our God-concepts. Talk about God by means of God-concepts can be a creative, freeing force in the world.

But what can we say about God beyond using the word to signal our own mental limitations? Kaufman recognizes that he is historically situated in a Western Christian context, and, largely for this reason, his constructive work will be, in fact, a *re*construction of Christian concepts (although he also presents historical evidence for a possible superiority of Christianity as promoting his humanistic ideals). His method of reconstruction will be to lay bare the essence of key Christian theological concepts (world, humanity, God, and Christ), then see how these (thus freed of accretions) might serve as orientation-points for contemporary humanity. As he expounds his reconstruction, piece by piece, he invites the reader at each point to take the "small step of faith" required to move that much further beyond what is empirically arguable, one step closer to the goal, "a conception of God to which... moderns can commit themselves with integrity."

In the process, long-standing Christian doctrines are reinterpreted to purge them of meanings that seem nonsensical to Kaufman

Kaufman's God is a God which can, perhaps, be accepted into one's mental repertoire but which cannot be believed in, relied on, or prayed to.

(and, he assumes, to his contemporaries) or which have the potential to encourage abuses of present-day humane values. So, for example, Kaufman finds the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth absurd:

> Consider, for example, the familiar affirmation in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation." Clearly, the writer here is not speaking simply of the man Jesus of Nazareth, an ordinary flesh-and-blood human being: What could it mean to speak of being "in" the man Jesus? Something else must be intended.

To Kaufman, it is clear that the term "Christ" must refer rather to the people and events surrounding Jesus, not to the person himself. This is more logical, according to Kaufman (never mind that his literalistic reading would similarly exclude twentieth-century believers from being "in" the events of Jesus' time). And, beyond this increase of logic, Kaufman claims an added advantage for his interpretation, namely, that it corrects a misapprehension that has led to such evils as parochialism, patriarchalism, and religious chauvinism. "When interpreted in [the old] way, then," he writes, "it is not surprising that the notion of the incarnation appears to modern consciousness as archaic and even somewhat weird, and of very limited usefulness."

Thus does a book called *In Face of Mystery* slowly but unrelentingly strip life and faith of depth and nuance, of any sense of mystery beyond the flat reality that there are huge regions of space and time that are inaccessible to the human mind. This *apologia* for Christianity, intended to show that a reconstructed faith can serve contemporary humankind, proceeds in a tone of obsequious attentiveness to an empiricist, secularist mindset, to arrive at this definition of "God":

> *God*, I now propose, is to be understood as the underlying reality (whatever it may be)—the ultimate mystery—expressing itself throughout the universe and thus also in this evolutionary-historical trajectory (of particular interest to humans) which has produced humankind.

Kaufman's God is a God which can, perhaps, be accepted into one's mental repertoire but which cannot be believed in, relied on, or prayed to. This God offers no salvation and certainly no love in any recognizable sense of the world.

Kaufman's book may have an audience, but it is clearly not the church. There may be a handful of rationalists who would like to believe that there is a God and who could somehow rest content with a "God" like Kaufman's (Alfred North Whitehead is said to have reasoned his way to faith in God). But Kaufman's approach seems strangely at odds with his own focus on human historicity. Surely a phenomenological study would show that this is not how faith happens, that people do not arrive at faith by small steps, that most are born

into a religious context and do their believing as well as their doubting within that context, and that people (even contemporary people) seek and receive more from their faith than an orientation productive of humane ethics and the meager comfort of a sense that the trend of evolution and history is in a positive direction.

This book plays out in great detail the results of a theological approach that, in the interest of protecting the majesty and transcendence of God, refuses to look for God where God has promised to be found; that, in order to safeguard God's transcendence, denies God the capacity to come visibly and audibly to humankind. It is as if I were to meet Kaufman and, upon being introduced, say, "No, this can't be Gordon Kaufman. I'd conceptualized him quite differently."

On the positive side, Kaufman's book may serve as a spur to the evangelical theologian to consider and respond to issues which are well-met neither by Kaufman's rationalist one-sidedness nor by a simplistic appeal to, say, scriptural authority. What *can* we say about the interaction of hearing and reasoning, faithful reception and critical evaluation in the theological enterprise? And has theology made too casual use of the idea that God transcends human attempts to speak of God, creating a vacuum to be filled by a pluralism of metaphysical options of undifferentiated value?

Book Reviews

The Quest for the Messiah: The History, Literature and Theology of the Johannine Community. By John Painter. Revised edition. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993. xv and 492 pages. Paper. $24.95.

The Gospel of John can frustrate anyone. Its language appears transparent; yet any attempt to describe John's thought precisely soon runs into a morass. Any pastor who preaches on the Gospels in the Easter cycle soon runs into difficulties. For that reason the revised edition of John Painter's *Quest for the Messiah* is a welcome addition to Johannine studies.

In the first chapter Painter describes his three aims: to detect the underlying tradition suggested by the process of composition; to recognize the evidence that suggests that the history of the Johannine believers shaped the Gospel; and to interpret the Gospel in its completed form.

Chapter 2, "Johannine Christianity," provides the historical and theological context in which Painter interprets John. In it he then passes in review a number of great issues in Johannine studies: Johannine Christology; relations to Qumran, Philo, and the Hermetic corpus; the community, author and sources; and the purposes of the Gospel.

He next presents a commentary (chapters 3-11) that combines historical, literary, social, and theological insights in the form of essays on each section of John. He regards John's use of "quest stories" as the major key to interpreting Jesus. Quest stories involve a quester who approaches Jesus with a request for help, which dominates the story, holding all the episodes together. The quester is important, not a mere flat foil for Jesus, an individual who shows the need for individual response to Jesus. There are difficulties to overcome in the quest, difficulties that are finally removed by Jesus. The quest stories turn quests for physical things (water, bread, etc.) into symbols of quests at spiritual level. Painter interprets John from this vantage point, tracing out this quest motif from John 5-20. (He does not include chapter 21 in his discussion.)

In chapter 12 Painter argues that a unifying theme that runs through the Gospel is the redefinition of Messiahship in terms of the relation of history and faith: hence the title for his work, *The Quest of the Messiah.*

The last two sections of the work examine the farewell discourse and the "opponents" in 1 John, while the conclusion sums up the major insights Painter feels he has gained—a section one might well read early on before going through this massive text.

Painter's work is stimulating, but few readers will read it from beginning to end. To use the commentary well one should read the first two chapters, above all chapter 2, and the conclusion first. Then reading sections of the commentary will make greater sense. Painter dedicates this book to C. K. Barrett, with whom he first studied John. He first presented some chapters as papers to the John Seminar of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, and pays tribute to the discussions with its members. *The Quest for the Messiah* will help many in their quest to understand John—and is a fitting tribute to C. K. Barrett.

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Jeremiah: An Archaeological Companion. By Philip J. King. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993. xxvi and 204 pages. Cloth. $27.00.

Philip King uses our interest in the book of Jeremiah to draw us into an introduction to the archaeology of Palestine. The ploy is quite successful; his constant quotation of passages from the prophet provides touchstones which keep the book interesting. His use of Jeremiah is quite authentic, however. At no point does he

lapse into the popular mode of using archaeology to "prove the Bible."

The book covers every aspect of daily life in Israel around the time of Jeremiah, and includes chapters on written materials, worship customs, burial practices, agriculture, and crafts. King assumes only a familiarity with the book of Jeremiah, not prior experience with archaeological studies. End-notes and a bibliography unobtrusively point the reader in the direction of further information.

The chapter on agriculture is an especially useful one. The world of the Bible was an agrarian one, and the writers of Scripture drew heavily on metaphors from the central reality of the lives of their hearers/readers. Many of us live far from the production of the soil, and this particular chapter is helpful in bringing many common biblical images to life.

The book's principal shortcoming is in the historical and geographical overview of the second and third chapters. Both are dense with names and dates, and the average reader may be put off by them. Although such summaries seem to be inevitable, I would recommend skipping or merely skimming those two chapters until after the more interesting material in the later chapters has been read. The maps and sketches are excellent, but a few of the photographs could have been reproduced more sharply.

This book is small, easy to read, and would be excellent for a pastor preparing to preach a series on Jeremiah. Interested lay people will also find the book engaging, and it could easily form the basis for a class of several sessions, perhaps in response to one of the recurring stories from the popular press about sensational finds in the area of biblical archaeology, since it provides a responsible guide to the use of scientific methods for shedding light on the documents of our faith.

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The Unrelieved Paradox: Studies in the Theology of Franz Bibfeldt. Edited by Martin E. Marty and Jerald C. Brauer. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994. xiii and 231 pages. Paper. $14.99.

Some scholars, like Gregory Thaumaturgus, attract legends to themselves. Some, like Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth, become legendary figures around whom an aura gathers. But only a very select few are born as legends—and among them Franz Bibfeldt has attracted more attention than any. The present volume documents his coming to be, describes his far-reaching influence, and makes a case for his "it could be this, but could also be that" theology. The two editors have gathered the almost annual lectures in honor of this legend given at the University of Chicago by a series of distinguished scholars (Martin Marty, Jerald Brauer, Robert M. Grant, Robin Lovin, Jill Raitt, to name only a few); provided a preface to set the context for these lectures; and included sections on Bibfeldt in the media, proofs for the existence of this distinguished legend, speeches accepting the Donnelley Stool of Bibfeldt studies, and the like. Finally Martin Marty in "By Way of Response" describes the trajectory of the tradition by which Franz Bibfeldt came to be. (Bibfeldt, of course, is a completely fictitious theologian, the wonderful creation of one of Marty's seminary classmates, as Marty notes in "By Way of Response."

To my knowledge there are only two major gaps in this impressive work dedicated to a legend in our own time.

1. The essays discuss the quest for the historical Bibfeldt, his postmodern theology, his pastoral theology, his views on culture and art, and the history of Bibfeldt scholarship. But there is not in this impressive tome any discussion of Bibfeldt's use of Scripture. Could it be that he developed a theology without it? Or was it that he could not make up his mind which canon of Scripture to use? Or did he not pass his Greek and Latin in the gymnasium or the *magnum Hebraicum* and *magnum Graecum* at the university?

2. Marty refers to Bibfeldt's publication, *The Relieved Paradox*, which he reviewed in

1952 (p. 224). The book does not mention that ten years later the editors of *The Seminarian*, John H. Elliott, Richard J. Neuhaus, and Robert C. Wilken, published a review of another Bibfeldt work, *The Paradox Revisited*, a work not listed in the Bibfeldt bibliography on p. 178.

"He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh," the Bible says. Franz Bibfeldt is a salutary reminder that the theologian also needs to be a *homo ludens sive iocosus*, a person who can play and laugh. This volume is a wonderful spoof of learned academic theology, an antidote to the *odium theologicum*, that acerbic language found in too much theological debate. As a member of the class of 1952 which experienced the arrival of Bibfeldt in, as I recall, the fall semester of 1947 (Thanks to Robert Howard Clausen!), I greet this volume with loving laughter and urge you to study this legendary theologian, who has much to say to theology in our time, to lighten your load and join in the heavenly laughter. You will rise up and bless this product of theological imagination and walk with a springier step.

Edgar Krentz

Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge. By Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith†. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993. x and 234 pages. Paper. $19.95.

This book makes a major contribution to the debate about homosexuality. For the authors, however, the primary issue is not homosexuality but heterosexism, what they define as "a reasoned system of bias regarding sexual orientation" (p. 13) which works against anyone who is not a heterosexual person.

The authors' argument is sophisticated and detailed. I can trace only its major components. In chapter one, the discussion of heterosexism includes the authors' conclusions about the "givenness" of sexual orientation and a helpful typology that displays a range of possible views on homosexuality. Of the five moral positions described (viewing homosexuality as gross evil, disease, defect, imperfection, or variation), the authors conclude that only the fifth position—viewing homosexual orientation as a good variation in God's creation—escapes the heterosexist framework. It is this position they advocate by the argument of the book.

In chapter two, Jung and Smith first attempt to demonstrate that heterosexism is not a fully credible tradition, especially when measured against its own assumptions about "procreation" and "gender complementarity" as the fundamental rationales for heterosexism. Secondly, they tackle a thorny issue—the role of the Bible in mounting a reform of the tradition which is faithful to the heart of that tradition. They claim that the scriptural witness, though accorded primacy in the process of moral deliberation, is nevertheless to be employed dialogically with other sources of wisdom available today.

The authors' reevaluation of the traditional interpretations of the biblical texts "against homosexuality" (Gen 19:1-29; Lev 18:22, 20:13; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 1 Tim 1:8-11; Rom 1:18-32) and "for heterosexism" (Gen 1:27-28, 38:1-11, 2:18-25) then follows in chapter three. Central to their argument is an attempt to question the heterosexist approach to these biblical texts.

In chapter four the authors examine the fears that perpetuate heterosexism (e.g., that the acceptance of homosexuality would undermine the family and confuse youth). They argue credibly that there is a "sexist slant to heterosexism" (101) and call for clarity in discussing homosexuality in terms of the issues of faith healing, celibacy, and sexual abstinence.

Following the first four chapters that marshal the authors' challenge to heterosexism, the next two chapters ("Confronting Heterosexism," ch. 5, and "Dismantling Heterosexism," ch. 6) address directly the life of the Christian community. Key to chapter five is its call for a paradigm shift in the church's sexual ethic and its discussion of the issue of ordination. Key to chapter six is its exploration of a theology of sexuality in light of the marriage liturgy.

The purpose of the final chapter ("Moving Beyond Heterosexism") is to describe sexual lives outside the heterosexist framework. Jung and Smith do so by exploring the topics of sexual authenticity and sexual fidelity. As the Postscript makes clear, the authors have sought to argue for a "pluriform rather than uniform un-

derstanding of human sexuality" (187).

In my judgment, this book establishes the parameters for the church's on-going moral deliberation about homosexuality. To appreciate the book fully one must read carefully the vignettes introduced throughout as representative of the experience of gays and lesbians and the extensive endnotes wherein the authors debate and converse with other positions. Despite my praise of the book, I am not satisfied that a convincing biblical/theological case has been established for viewing homosexuality as a good variation within God's creation. For example, the authors do not investigate what Paul in Rom 1:18-32 might have intended by "against nature," nor do they address fully traditional approaches that view Genesis 1 and 2 texts as confirming a God-ordained heterosexual order (e.g., the Roman Catholic notion of "natural law," the Lutheran "first use of the Law," and the so-called "orders of creation" approach). They develop their strongest biblical/theological argument in their discussion of Rom 1:18-32 (pp. 78-84), which pushes readers to understand the devastating implications of the claim that the sexuality of homosexual persons has been affected by the Fall in a far different way from its effect on heterosexual persons. Such a claim implies that the very existence of homosexual persons is not good. The authors argue, for this reason, that Paul's anthropology and notion of God's inclusive love would have led the apostle to an empathic understanding of homosexuality if he had known what we today know about sexual orientation as a "given."

I highly recommend this book for study in the church. The book is so useful because the authors state their moral argument clearly while being fair to other positions. Not all readers will agree with the authors' position, but a genuine dialogue with the book cannot help but clarify the reader's own position regarding homosexuality and whether or not the real issue is heterosexism. Both pastors and lay people will profit from a serious discussion of this book.

James L. Bailey
Wartburg Theological Seminary

From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology. By Maurice Casey. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991. 197 pages. Cloth. $21.00.

In this book, a revised version of the 1985 Cadbury Lectures delivered at the University of Birmingham in England, the author traces the origins and development of the New Testament confessional claims about Jesus. He does so by analyzing the Christology of each writing in tandem with an assessment of the Jewish/Gentile identity of the community producing it. According to Casey, the Christology of a specific writing correlates directly with how Jewish the community considers itself to be in terms of the eight characteristics of Second Temple Judaism (ethnicity, Scripture, monotheism, circumcision, Sabbath observance, dietary laws, purity laws, and major festivals).

Casey assigns the various New Testament Christologies to three stages of development: in the first stage, "the Christian community was Jewish, a subgroup within Judaism;" in the second stage, "Gentiles entered the Christian community in significant numbers, without becoming Jewish;" and in the third stage, "Christianity is identifiable as a Gentile religion" (97). In Casey's overall scheme, the historical Jesus clearly belonged to the Jewish culture and can be best viewed as a prophet and teacher. Likewise the Jesus movement was thoroughly Jewish, only at odds with the scribes and Pharisees regarding purity issues and the proper observance of the Sabbath. Even the earliest Christians' viewing the resurrection as a sign of God's vindication of Jesus can fit within Jewish beliefs. Further, most christological developments in Paul's letters are comprehensible within a Jewish framework although there are exceptions (e.g., the claim that Jesus replaced the Law). It is not until the claims about the deity of Jesus in the Gospel of John that there appears a Christology that is totally alien to Jews and presumes a Gentile church separated from Judaism.

In the final chapter Casey discusses the major conclusion of his study. He considers the Johannine Christology that ascribes deity to Jesus to have been unhelpful, even wrong. This Christ-

ology is historically and sociologically understandable but theologically indefensible. "If Christianity is to remain a viable option for honest and well-informed people, it would surely undo that process of development, and emerge as something nearer to the religion of Jesus of Nazareth." (178)

Casey's work revisits the debate—last stirred up by the 1977 publication in Britain of *The Myth of God Incarnate*—regarding the truthfulness of Christian beliefs about Jesus' deity and incarnation. His scholarship deserves careful study by teaching scholars, particularly because of its comprehensive discussion of the documents in the New Testament and of Second Temple Judaism. How readers judge the validity of the author's dismissal of Johannine Christology will depend on, at least in part, how they make sense of the claims of the New Testament regarding the person of Jesus in light of its claims about the redemptive significance of his activity.

James L. Bailey

Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture. By Miri Rubin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. xv and 432 pages. Cloth. $24.95.

"At the centre of the whole religious system of the later Middle Ages lay a ritual which turned bread into flesh—a fragile, small, wheated disk into God." The opening of Rubin's introduction states the book's basic premise. Originally intended to study the Corpus Christi feast itself as a new and innovative phenomenon of the 13th century, the question of why a *eucharistic* feast, and why at this particular time, led to a more wide-ranging study of how the Eucharist and its theology functioned within the everyday life of late medieval society. Thus, as the subtitle suggests, this is actually a fairly wide-ranging examination of popular understandings and attitudes about the sacrament that moved so powerfully to the fore in Christian consciousness during the Middle Ages.

For the sixteenth-century reformers the Corpus Christi feast was the archetypal example of the *mis*use of the Lord's Supper—embodying practically every element in medieval sacramental theology to which they objected. For this reason this study should be of interest to pastors and students who want to gain a sense of the theological milieu that led to the specific expression of the Corpus Christi feast itself and its subsequent development in terms of liturgy and tradition.

But along the way, Rubin also shows how the Eucharist served not only to reinforce a priest-laity hierarchy, but as used in the Corpus Christi festival and elsewhere, it became a tool of social ordering and cohesion. Clearly, the significance of this sacrament in medieval society was not limited to matters of theology; thus, to attack it was to threaten much more than just *churchly* dogma.

Rubin's study revolves around the medieval *English* church, and a warning is given repeatedly that a phenomenon so closely bound to culture as the medieval Eucharist may take different expressions in other places. Occasional references to continental practices may represent exceptions to the local norm in those places.

Though not so described, the book resembles a dissertation in that if two or three examples of a phenomenon are helpful, then seven must be even better. This is not necessarily bad; multiple citations can show how a single concept might be expressed in sermons, devotions, explanations, etc., in a variety of ways. On the other hand, after toiling to decipher the fourth or fifth multi-line medieval-English citation, the reader may occasionally forget the topic under discussion. Most of the Latin passages more than a sentence long are translated; the medieval French ones are not, and old English citations are a riot of colorful spelling and archaic letters. There are usually hundreds of footnotes per chapter.

A caveat must be issued: the book suffers from an abysmally wretched job of editing and proofreading—not what one would expect from a press with the cachet of Cambridge. Once finds "effected" for "affected" (164) and the description of an illustration confuses the top half of it for the bottom (299f.). Here and there a footnote shows careless editing. One also finds punctuation problems involving such things as commas and apostrophes. Griping about punc-

tuation may seem nit-picky, but in so dense and complex a text as Rubin's, a missing semicolon or apostrophe may require two or three re-readings of a long sentence before its sense is finally clear.

In spite of these drawbacks, the reader will likely find the text rewarding, thought-provoking, and worth the trouble.

Keith Killinger
Chicago, Illinois

The Bible in Modern Culture: Theology and Historical-Critical Method from Spinoza to Käsemann. By Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995. xi and 282 pages. Paper. $20.00.

Harrisville and Sundberg, both professors at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, trace the development of historical criticism in order to evaluate the method theologically. They first describe the Augustinian, pre-critical approach to the Bible, a form of direct approach to the text practiced by both Luther and Calvin. In Protestant Scholasticism this approach, based on a rigid view of biblical inspiration and inerrancy, became arid, which led to differing reactions in Pietism and Rationalism, thus setting the stage for the rise of historical criticism.

They describe this development by discussing in historical sequence ten "giants," seminal thinkers who contributed to the rise and development of historical-critical methods used in the study of Scripture today. All but two (Spinoza and Machen) are German, since the German university provided the freedom of inquiry necessary for these thinkers. Each represents a culture-conditioned movement in society and theology (noted in parentheses): Benedict Spinoza (rationalism), H. S. Reimarus (Enlightenment), Friedrich Schleiermacher (romanticism), David Friedrich Strauss (idealism), Ferdinand Christian Baur (idealism), J. C. K. von Hofmann (salvation history), Ernst Troeltsch (liberalism), John Gresham Machen (American fundamentalism), Rudolph Bultmann (dialectical theology), and Ernst Käsemann (post-Bultmannian malaise).

Each chapter follows the same useful format. The authors first set the cultural and theological stage in a brief essay, then give a short biographical sketch of the theologian. An analysis of the thought of one or more of each theologian's significant publications leads finally to an assessment of his significance for historical criticism.

In the final chapter ("Two Traditions of Historical Criticism"), they evaluate "The Enlightenment Tradition" in the face of the contemporary "dizzying array of disparate trends" in biblical interpretation. Historical criticism uses "rational, scientific investigation to reveal the content of Scripture" (263). It was the loss of the Augustinian dogmatic tradition as an undergirding force that led ultimately to the present state of confusion in method. They call for scholars in the Enlightenment tradition "to examine not only the 'meaning' of the Bible but the 'truth' to which they pledge their intellectual loyalty" (267). They need to make clear that the Bible is "a document of the past," but not only that. They also need to clarify "what the Bible says"—the basic characteristic of the work of Bultmann and Käsemann.

This work on a very complex topic is a good read. The authors have the gift of clarity, both in thought and presentation. Their evaluation is unabashedly theological—from a Reformation perspective. But they neither rage against the use of historical criticism nor yearn for a return to the pre-Enlightenment world. They call for a rethinking of the role of critical exegesis in the academy for the church. Pastors who ponder the role of critical Bible study in their own work would do well to read this book and ponder the implications of the final chapter for their own proclamation. It is disturbingly stimulating, the mark of a good book.

Edgar Krentz

Augustine, Confessions, Volume I: Introduction and Text; Volume II: Commentary on Books 1-7; Volume III: Commentary on Books 8-13. By James J. O'Donnell. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. lxxiii and 205 pages. Cloth. $85.00. xiii and 484 pages. Cloth. $115.00. xiii and 481 pages. Cloth. $110.00.

There is more to this three-volume commentary on Augustine's *Confessions* than meets the eye, and less. By virtue of his previous publications and now this masterpiece, O'Donnell is unquestionably the leader, at least in English, of scholarly research into Augustine's *Confessions*. He here offers a massive accumulation of detailed observations and apparatus on the Latin text of the *Confessions*. "The way forward for students of the *Confessions* lies in renewed and assiduous attention to the most minute details of the text" (Vol. I, lxii). As authoritative as his minute detail may be, these volumes will frustrate most readers in that there is no general narrative about Augustine or his *Confessions*, nor even an English translation. The entire project is for those specialists who want to appreciate the nuances in Augustine's Latin phrasing.

Volume I contains an excellent bibliography and a brief overview of previous scholarship, and then simply the Latin text of the *Confessions*, an expensive proposition since there is no major difference between this text and the standard critical edition by Skutella. O'Donnell's own emphases are stated in the introduction and then are evident in his format throughout. The other two volumes present thousands of paragraphs of commentary on selected Latin words or phrases by Augustine. O'Donnell's principal strategy is to provide in Latin the parallels in the Bible or in Augustine's other works. He is especially concerned to chart the occurrences of specific terms in the *Confessions* themselves, and is well equipped to do so by his already famous facility with computer-based research. These entries often contain secondary literature pertinent to that precise passage in the *Confessions*. The method here is to let Augustine interpret himself, but of course the choice of parallel passages is crucial. Of more general interest is O'Donnell's conviction that Augustine's biblical foundations have often been under-appreciated. The Augustine who emerges from these technical notes is a devout Christian less interested in Ciceronian rhetoric and Neoplatonic philosophy than in baptism, Christ, and the triune God. Specifically, O'Donnell considers Augustine's baptism to be the pivotal event in the text and explains Augustine's brevity on that point as part of his devout attitude toward the cultic secrets of the faith. The only exceptions to O'Donnell's format of providing technical comment on specific words and phrases are, first, his introductions to each book of the *Confessions* where he outlines their basic structure; and, second, his occasional excursus: "Mothers and Fathers in the *Confessions*," "The *liberales disciplinae*," "Alypius, Paulinus and the Genesis of the *Confessions*," "Psalm 4," and "Memory in Augustine."

This mountain of Latin cross-referencing and bibliography (with extensive indices) has already become the standard reference tool for specialized study of the *Confessions*, which is achievement enough. But "it is not a commentary for the general reader, and neither is it a commentary for a passive reader" (Vol. I, lxv). We can only hope that O'Donnell will one day channel his vast learning and passion for Augustine's own meaning into a general discursive commentary for the average reader. He has here served the specialists; the rank and file of pastors, seminarians, and interested lay people who keep the *Confessions* a best seller would also benefit from his insights.

Paul Rorem
Princeton Theological Seminary

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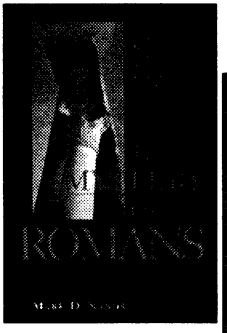
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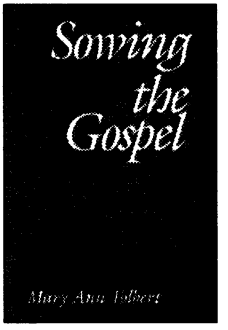
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Preaching Helps

The Day of Pentecost—Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Series A

A Load of Should

She teaches the theology of ministry and was addressing a roomful of pastors up in Oregon. Her talk was wide-ranging, but focused on the shocks administered to the system by the shifts in the life of church and world. It is easy for pastors to get discouraged.

Faced with declining memberships or declines in any of the other statistics by which we so often measure "success," she noted how easy it is for pastors to "should" on themselves and others. Beat up on themselves. I should have done this or that. And of course their sermons may also be full of "should."

About a week later I was talking with an old friend in Wisconsin. He is a retired parish pastor and former professor of homiletics. He has been wrestling throughout his entire ministry with the question of how to speak the gospel so that it really is good news and not merely information or a demand (a "should") or a piece of good advice.

"I have lived my whole life in a trans-moral universe," he said. "In proclamation our imperatives grow out of the indicative, or we're just preaching the law."

How "should" we preach? (There's that word again!) The first quoted teacher suggests listening to sermons (our own and others'), asking the question: "Is God the subject of any of the sentences, or is it all 'You' or

'You and I' do this or that, should do or should think this or that, ought to, might try, had better" and so on. God as the subject.

Our contributors this issue are both passionate about the quality of the life of the church. Their passion flows from their perception of the action and passion of God.

Walter A. Michel has been studying the Book of Job for his whole life, probably even before he knew he was studying it. His preparation began in his own experience of the dark days of World War II with all its terrors. As a professor of Old Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, he finds himself now in the midst of (up to his neck in?) a writing project of marvelous proportions. He is producing a multi-volume commentary on Job.

In the studies he has prepared for this issue, you will experience Walter's passion for telling the truth, his compassion for sufferers, his deep love for God's original people Israel and the Jewish people in their historical struggles, as well as his commitment to the original language of the scriptures. That commitment is both scholarly and spiritual. In his own translations the language of the readings is often earthier and more shocking than in standard translations.

Walter moves us farther along the path we have been following during this entire year, focusing on the Old Testament readings Sunday after Sunday.

The Pastoral Reflections have been prepared for this issue by **Kelly Denton-Borhaug**. Kelly is associate pastor for evangelism and outreach at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in San Francisco. She is at the same time pursuing a doctoral program at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley concentrating in systematic theology. Among other topics, she is fascinated with the relations between justice and justification, between liberation theology and the theology of the cross, God's actions and passion and our own.

Matthew's Gospel is usually read as though it is full of "should." But

how about that Gospel for the seventh after Pentecost? His "yoke is easy, and his burden is light." This one verse alone "should" be enough to kick us beyond "should" into a better space. Shouldn't it?

Yours in the Spirit,

Robert H. Smith
Editor of *Preaching Helps*
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The Day of Pentecost
May 26, 1996

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b
Numbers 11:24-30
Acts 2:1-21
John 20:19-23 or John 7:37-39

First Reading

Rebellion against God's vision for all humans from the very beginning (Genesis 3) and now rebellion against God's vision for God's people led by Moses! (משׁה, *moseh*, a Qal participle, can be derived from the root *ysh*, "be victorious," and functions as an abbreviation for the name *moseh 'el*, "El is victorious.")

Moses is desperate and meets God at the "Tent" (the physical prop for God's presence) with seventy elders (Moses had "registered" their names as true leaders, Num 11:16). God "solves" the problem and shrewdly, draws upon God's spirit (authority), which God had put on Moses, and shares it (like sharing the light of a candle) with seventy (!) elders. They are all en-thused and empowered, authorized. But God plays a trick on all administrators and also authorizes Eldad (אל-דד, "El is [my] Lover") and Medad (מי-דד, "Water of Love") who had not come to the official "Tent" for being en-thused = authorized (although they had also been "registered"). That is major trouble for Joshua, who had been Moses' administrator from the beginning. (יהו־שׁע = *yeho-sua'*, *yeho* = *Yeho* + *sua'* = ישׁוע, "he rescues," from ישׁע, "rescue." English "Jesus" is from Greek, Ιησους, which is from ישׁוע, "rescuer, liberator.") Joshua counsels the limitation of en-thusiasm, em-powerment from God. Moses sighs a deep sigh and hopes (against hope?): "oh, were it only granted, that all of YHWH's people were announcers/prophets / that YHWH would place His breath (=intent, will, spirit) upon them!" Against the "Angst" of the bureaucrat it is Moses who expresses his and God's desire that all of God's people would accept God's en-thusiasm, wish, in-

tention, life-breath and image for all creation.

Together with Genesis 1, Psalm 8, and many other passages, the psalmist of Psalm 104 dreams of the time when all beings (who are able to breathe) will sing and praise the one and only Creator and accept the sovereignty of the one and only God. YHWH created the creation by using Wisdom (בחכמה, "with Wisdom"). Important: "Wisdom" is identified with תורה, *torah*, "Teaching" in the Wisdom literature and by the rabbis. (*Torah* should have never been translated as "Law." The root is *yrh*, "direct, teach, instruct, reveal.") First God created Wisdom/Torah and then, with it, created the creation. Therefore, only those who know Torah know the purpose of creation.

Why is v. 35a of Psalm 104 not part of the pericope? This exclusion reveals the fundamental misunderstanding some Christians have of biblical statements which express the "Messianic = Christian" longing for final justice, wholeness and peace. Such peace will only come (1) when sinners repent, "pay" restitution (to those they have hurt) and accept the sovereignty of God or (2) when God removes all evil doers from this creation.

Are you familiar with the attempt of some to limit the work of the "Holy Spirit" to proper channels? Have you heard of teachers and professors who have been warned by bureaucrats not to be too enthusiastic? Can you imagine stifling the enthusiasm of a child or of a seminary professor, because such enthusiasm for and by the "Word of God" has hurt a couple of weak and sick students, who are preparing to be pastors (ambassadors of God and of Christ) ready to be en-thused, invested by the Spirit?

Is there a difference between ecstasy, enthusiasm and prophecy? Yes! See, e.g., A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper, 1971 [1962]) 2:138. Enthusiasm involves the will to be en-thused. Prophecy is imposed against the will, so much so, that Jeremiah bitterly complains (Jer 20:7ab), "You, YHWH, have seduced me // You have raped me." In that sense, pastors are not prophets and neither is the church asked to be prophetic. WLM

Editor's note: For additional reflections on the Day of Pentecost, see the February 1996 issue, pages 78-79.

First Sunday after Pentecost
The Holy Trinity
June 2, 1996

Psalm 8:1-10 (RSV, 9)
Genesis 1:1–2:4a
2 Corinthians 13:11-13
Matthew 28:16-20

First Reading

In exile in Babylonia (6th cent. B.C.E.) when some of our forebears in the biblical faith had lost everything (homes, relatives, land = produce and income, temple = the physical reminder of the presence of God, king = government, priests = cult, dignity, independence) except their lives; when they had nothing and were nobody, *then* they were overwhelmed with a powerful, rich revelation, with consequences for all humans: Only YHWH is Deity. Only YHWH is Creator. All other deities we have encountered (in Egypt, Canaan, Babylonia...) are not deities (Isa 44:6). Only YHWH (our liberator from Egypt, our giver of the Torah and the Land...) and YHWH alone (without any divine or created equal) has created every thing and every being. YHWH created humans (male and female) as YHWH's image, representative, vice-regent, ambassador, agent. Humans are responsible for the care of the animals and of the earth, in God's stead, responsible to God, who is the *owner* of every thing and every being.

Our forebears stood in reverential awe (Psalm 8) before God when they realized the dignity and responsibility bestowed on them and on all humans—even their captors, the Babylonians! They already understood humans to function as *cultivators* of God's earth (Genesis 2), but now they summarized their duties with five verbs: (1) פרה, "be fruitful, bear fruit," i.e, have children, educate them and en-thuse them with the same revelation; (2) רבה, "multiply, be many," i.e., have enough children for the human task of responsible conduct; (3) מלא, "fill," i.e., be present on the earth everywhere as God's vice-regents (of course, this was not understood as a commandment for overpopulation or for irresponsibly "producing" children out of the legal bounds of family without proper care and education); (4) כבש, "subdue," i.e., like a good regent, defeat anything hostile and destructive to the well-being of animals and the earth; (5) רדה, "have dominion, lead, direct, govern, manage, steer," i.e., like a good regent, exercise *responsible* leadership, in God's stead, *for God's purposes* and not for human ambition and objectives.

Most importantly, though, our forebears understood that all of creation lives with the Eternal Sabbath breaking into our existence and orienting all of us, weekly, toward the ultimate meaning and purpose of all of creation: YHWH, God. The abstention from any work (שבת means "abstain," not "rest") by God, all creatures and humans, indicates that dignity and worth, ultimately, do not "rest" in activity and work, no matter how responsible.

I feel like the psalmist in Psalm 8: overwhelmed and awed that it is YHWH (the only deity, the only creator), who does take me (and everyone else) so terribly (!) seriously and commands me to be YHWH's agent in every moment of my life.

I am astonished and empowered by the message of the Sabbath, succinctly summarized by M. Tsevat (in *The Meaning of the Book of Job* [Ktav, 1980] 49): "...every seventh day the Israelite is to renounce dominion over time, thereby renounce autonomy, and recognize God's dominion over time and thus over himself. Keeping the sabbath

is the human acceptance of the sovereignty of God." *This* is the sense and purpose of creation: *the acceptance of the sovereignty of God.* What are the consequences of this acceptance? According to a midrash (Exodus Rabbah 25:11) the Messiah would come if Israel would keep *but one* Sabbath *properly.* WLM

Pastoral Reflections

These days the creation stories call to mind for me a wonderful book that I commend to preachers: *The Body of God*, by Sallie McFague (Fortress, 1994). McFague's thesis is that in order for our theology to reflect the value of the well-being of all bodies, both human bodies as well as the body of the earth, we need to turn to a long-neglected model of the relationship between God and the world: the world as God's body:

> the body model gives us both an ecological and a justice context for theology, for it involves a planetary perspective while focusing on the most basic needs of human beings; the model of the universe as God's body suggests both an anthropology and a theology — a way of seeing our proper place as inspirited bodies within the larger body, within the scheme of things, and a way of seeing both the transcendence and immanence of God — God as the inspirited body of the whole universe (22).

Is such a valuing of the well-being of bodies any different really from the exclamation made at the conclusion of each step in the creation? "And God saw that it was good." God's good act in creation is the ground for all our efforts at cherishing, preserving, and enhancing the well-being of all bodies; as we say each Sunday in that beautiful offertory prayer: "We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you have made."

What will it mean to truly value and support the well-being of the bodies of creation? Preachers might think last and least to look to the model of the Trinity for some suggestions to answer this question. But what if one were to focus on the ancient Eastern Fathers' notion of *perichoresis*? Contemporary writers like Catherine LaCugna have mined the tradition for just such riches as this word implies: *perichoresis* describes the relations of the members of the Trinity, the way in which each person of the Trinity is disposed toward the others. And what is at the heart of that disposition? *Perichoresis* describes the attitude of welcome and love, support and delighted mutual indwelling that characterizes the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. Yet *perichoresis* describes not only the inner relations of the Trinity but the way in which these same relations embrace and encompass all existence of all times. Talk about a theology of the well-being of all bodies!

P.S. Why not also use this Sunday to experiment with inclusive wordings of Trinity? There are such gems as this one I recently came across: "Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all." Blessings to one and all in your creative Trinitarian endeavors! KD-B

Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 9, 1996

Psalm 50:7-15
Hosea 5:15–6:6
Romans 4:13-25
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

First Reading

It was part of the prophets' unpleasant duty to hurl God's disappointment with God's people into their faces in order to bring about repentance. (Cf. the severe words of Jesus.) It is part of the duty of a teacher and pastor to remind us of the fierce words of God whenever they become appropriate for us.

Hosea discloses God's profound disappointment at a particular historical moment. Yes, at times, God does behave in a destructive way and not only in the past. Hosea uses a number of dreadful metaphors for God: "moth" // "dry rot" (5:12), "lion" // "tawny lion" (5:14). The root *kpr*, extant in the Ebla texts, means "reddish brown" and refers to the metal we call "copper." The Day of Atonement, *yom kippur*, is the day on which "payment" is made to redress an imbalance in the relationship with God. Cf. "lion" // leopard (13:7), "bear robbed of cubs" // "lion" // "wild beast" (13:8). These epithets are shocking, but they do indicate God's deep pain. What is much worse is when God actually withdraws from us even while we seek God (5:6).

God has a legal right to be angry like any parent or covenant partner. God has made us part of God's family and we have agreed. But then we use our mis-deeds as instruments to cut the bands God has used to tie us to God. Why should God not also be disappointed with us? Are we Christians really children of YHWH (through Jesus) or are we children of alien gods (5:7) and ideologies? Are we children of the god *ṣw(')*, "Filth, Shit" (5:11)? The noun *ṣw*, also spelled *ṣw'*, from the root *ṣw'*, "to stink," means "excrement, filth," and is used here as a generic epithet for all alien deities and theologies. Whom do we follow? Whose children are we? Our deeds testify to our allegiance (Mt 7:16). Does YHWH have a right to testify against us (Ps 50:7)?

Hosea blurts out the agony of God in 5:4. Mis-deeds cut the bond (covenant) with God and make fellowship with God impossible—unless there follow drastic acts on the part of the people and God. Mis-deeds cannot be blotted out or painted over by our beautiful music and impressive liturgies nor by our very correct creeds or Lutheran Confessions. Mis-deeds must be followed by (1) acknowledgment of guilt (5:15), (2) active seeking of living according to YHWH's vision (5:15b) and of living *da'at 'elohim*, "knowledge of God (6:6). "Knowledge of God" must be expressed through active *ḥesed*, "loyalty," and deeds which reveal fidelity to God. *Ḥesed* must not be like mist or dew (6:4) which disappears when the challenge of a specific witness for God's vision for human life is demanded. Knowledge of God has nothing to do with knowing something about God, but living God's vision in daily acts of faith and loyalty. WLM

Pastoral Reflections

Rev. Charles Lewis retires this month after more than a quarter century serving as the "Night Minister" of San Francisco. Both the first lesson for today and the Gospel call to mind ministry such as Pastor Lewis.' Night after night during all these years, after the vast majority of support and crisis services have long shut down for the night, Chuck has

been there for poor, marginalized and hurting people. He walks the seediest streets during the night hours. Wearing his collar, he visits the all-night bars, speaks with the people on the streets, and is available for the lonely and down-and-out in the downtown hotels. He receives calls from the night ministry hot-line and goes to people wherever they are to offer a gospel presence, solace, and support.

For many of the other clergy in San Francisco such as myself, serving mostly comfortable middle class people in the parish, Rev. Lewis' ministry in San Francisco has a way of keeping us honest. The "sinners and tax collectors" of Matthew's Gospel were just as much an untouchable lot to the everyday religious community as Chuck's "parishioners" are to the majority of folks in my congregation. I and the people of my congregation need to continually strive for ears that can hear Jesus' saying: "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'"

These words of Jesus remind me that perhaps one of the most hopeful and important signs of the gospel in the congregation I serve occurs every Sunday morning, during the well-stocked coffee hour. In the urban setting of our congregation, we can be sure that local homeless people will join members of the congregation for something to eat and a hot cup of coffee, and thus, the eucharist that began inside the church sanctuary is continued and widened by a fuller presence of all God's people. Most of these people are never seen by us more than a few times, but there have been a few who have returned Sunday after Sunday, and who have even gone on to join our parish. This enriches our life together beyond measure. KD-B

Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 16, 1996

Psalm 100:1-5
Exodus 19:2-8a
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23)

First Reading

Whatever happened at Sinai (wherever and whenever), the history of one people and the rest of the world has changed forever. The event was initiated by YHWH/Elohim and by the free acceptance of YHWH's promise, covenant and Torah (= "Teaching, Revelation") by a motley assemblage of people. Awesome, mysterious, unfathomable, glorious, unique, and therefore, terrifyingly dangerous and potentially deadly.

Creator YHWH is the owner of earth and sky and of every thing and every person (19:5, Psalm 100). But the Exodus (a second and "spiritual" creation) reveals the intent of the creation. God singled out a mixed crew of people and brought them to God at Sinai. Another group, intent on killing God's project, were destroyed. An ominous precedent! Life out of death! Acceptance of God's project = "life." Opposition to God's project = "death."

"On eagles' wings" = powerfully, swiftly and securely. For any other "bird" to challenge an "eagle" is deadly. But throughout history the "Eagle" (=YHWH) and "YHWH's Chosen" and the "YHWH-Choosing People" have been challenged and fought against brutally. Antiochus (in the 2nd century B.C.E.) was determined to wipe the world clean of the "Jewish religion." (Read 1 & 2 Maccabees, especially 1 Macc 1:41ff., 2 Maccabees 7.) Then "Christians," when

and wherever they had political power, taught contempt of Jews, mistreated them, expelled them. Pogroms! And then came Stalin and Hitler. The attempted "Final Solution" (= extermination) of the Jews and the "Jewish Problem" was a "religious" mission and occurred among "Christian" and "civilized" people. The "mission" continuous. We Christians must no longer be part of this type of "mission" if we want to survive.

Creation and then choice by YHWH come first. Three fateful terms for the people "chosen" were chosen by YHWH: (1) לי סגלה, "to Me a Treasured Possession"; (2) ממלכת כהנים, "a Kingdom of Priests;" (3) גוי קדוש, "a Holy Nation." All three terms need thorough study. All indicate "division" and "separation" from the rest of the people of the world, not because of superiority (of any kind), but because of a special "mission," namely, to invite all other people to accept YHWH's project for humanity and the world. Imagine: YHWH entrusts the "spiritual" creation to the free choice of the "Chosen People." YHWH wants all humans to freely become the people of YHWH and to be and live as "YHWH-Choosing People."

Creation and Torah belong together. With Creation God made a division between "chaos" and "order." With the giving of the Torah God made a division between "wrong" and "right." By daily choosing between "wrong" and "right" all humans—led by YHWH's people—choose between "chaos" and "order," "death" and "life" (Deut 30:15f.). The "YHWH-Choosing People" commit themselves daily: "All that YHWH has said we will do." Action!

Because of Jesus Christians celebrate being implanted (although "wild olive shoots") on the "Tree" of the "YHWH-Choosing People" (Rom 11:17f.). Jesus is our "door" to the heart of YHWH (Jn 10:7f.). WLM

Pastoral Reflections

How appropriate, that the twelve who are commissioned by Jesus (and Robert Smith describes them as "the nucleus and mirror of the entire new community of all times and places") are depicted here as pilgrims. The focus in this chapter shifts from the ministry of Jesus to the ministry of these twelve, and by extension, the ministry of the church of all times.

These twelve and we too are pilgrims on a journey, though we know not precisely where the travel may take us. It's a strange sort of journey, utterly unlike the images that pop into mind when most of us think of taking trips. The securities and the safeguards are all intangible. At first glance they seem all wrong. Authority to cleanse and to cure? An urgent word that must be proclaimed? These aren't the things we're used to packing. And the things that do appear on our "don't forget" lists, things like extra tunics and travelers' checks, are exactly the things we're admonished not to bring along.

The tenuousness of the pilgrim life is starkly at odds with so much of our culture. We're bombarded with the values of a people that wants nothing more than to have "finally arrived," to "make it," to "have it all." At the end of the 20th century, Christendom long a past epoch, Christianity is once again a truly counter-cultural movement. The realm of God, the kingdom of heaven, is at hand—close enough if our eyes can open to see and recognize it, unfolding among us in ever new and startling ways. The urgent draw of that realm set the twelve on a pilgrimage of proclamation, cleansing, and healing, of trusting in nothing so much as the ultimate and grounding love of God for all creation and all people. Can we preach the same kind of urgency to our people? Do we dare take deeper and deeper steps into that counter-cultural travel known as the gospel? KD-B

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 23, 1996

Psalm 69:7-10, (11-15), 16-18
Jeremiah 20:7-13
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

First Reading

Jeremiah expressed what so many experience who have been overwhelmed by God and have dedicated their total lives to the "Word of God." Dedication to God has earned impatience, disrespect, ridicule, and, for some, prison, torture and death. And this not only from "secular," but *especially* from "religious" people and also from close friends. There are thousands of painful stories throughout history! Jeremiah bitterly cries out,

פִּתִּיתַנִי יְהוָה וָאֶפָּת, *pittitani* (Pi.pf.) *YHWH wa'eppat* (Ni.impf.);
חָזַקְתַּנִי וַתּוּכָל, *ḥazaqtani* (Qal pf.) *wattukal* (Qal impf.)
"You have seduced me, YHWH—and I was seduced; You have raped me—and You persisted."

Translations are always interpretations or unintentional (and even intentional) lies. What is worse is that "well meaning" translators try to protect faithful Christians from harsh statements in the Bible. Worse yet are translators who impose a given ideology (take your pick!) on the biblical text. Hebrew scholars have always known that Jer 20:7a should be translated as presented above.

Jeremiah and the psalmist are furious with God. They have dedicated their lives with great zeal to YHWH's word and cause. YHWH has become like a "burning fire" (Jer 20:9). As *ṣaddiqim*, "righteous," they knew that a *ṣaddiq* is *tested* by God (20:12. Cf. Abraham, Job, Jesus ...). They did not object to a test (neither did Job), but they were appalled that loyalty to God included so many horrors. Note the expressions: *seḥoq // lo'eg*, "laughingstock" // "mocking" (20:7); *ḥerpah // qeles*, "reproach" // "derision" (20:8); *ḥerpah // kelimmah*, "reproach, "insult" // "shame" (Ps 69:7,9); *muzar // nokri*, "stranger" // "alien" (69:8). Worse, the psalmist feels already part of the Land of the Dead, Sheol, the Underworld: *ṭiṭ // sone'ay // ma'amaqqe-mayim*, "Mire" // "my Enemy" (= Sir Death, King of Sheol) // "Deep Waters" (69:14); *sibbolet mayim // meṣulah // be'er*, "Vortex of Water" // "Abyss" // "Pit" (69:15).

There is no such thing as a lower depression than expressed here. Is there any hope? On what basis? The *ṣaddiq* has no human legal recourse. There is only one option: to remind God of God's *ḥesed // raḥamim*, "(covenant) loyalty" // "wombs = compassion" (69:16) and call upon God as *gibbor 'ariṣ*, "a ruthless Warrior" (20:11) and upon God's *neqamah*, "vindication, avenging, vengeance" (20:12).

Out of the deepest depths those who have committed their cause to God have a right to cry out to God for vindication. In spite of the deepest depression, disappointment and hopelessness they know that God is serious when God proclaims,
לִי נָקָם וְשִׁלֵּם "to Me belong vindication/redress and recompense/peace" (Deut 32:35). If God does not act on behalf of those who suffer injustice—the righteous, the oppressed and the ridiculed—then God's name is mud. Do only humans break the covenant or does even God break God's covenant? WLM

Pastoral Reflections

Instructions to the soon-to-be-sent-out disciples continue in today's Gospel. But sud-

denly the circle is widened in these verses. The instructions regarding persecution and hard choices are not limited to the disciples. Jesus says, *Whoever* denies me before others, I will also deny." No doubt Matthew had in mind his own church's experience as well as that of the twelve in this writing.

Preachers need to contextualize the themes in this lesson in order to avoid taming the reading. For the realm of God is not about making peace with the powers and principalities of any age, perhaps least of all our own.

What is the gospel message of grace and mercy laying bare in my own life, in the life of my community, my society? Or to put it in Luther's words, in what "god" have we placed our ultimate trust?

The issue here is not that we dare not love our mothers, or fathers, or in-laws too much. No, the issue is about faithfulness to the end, as opposed to compromises at every turn. While the majority of us are not called to be Jeremiahs, nonetheless our faith does call us to follow Christ in a world that will perpetually offer us tempting, though finally death-dealing, alternatives.

Jesus reminds the disciples that even the hairs on their heads are all counted. Salvation, communion with God, is not something we need to worry about. That has already been granted, and we thus need not fear. The question is, can we hang our lives on that promise and joyfully engage the struggle for the realm of God? Dare we risk our own security for the sake of the love of Christ? Jesus' own ministry, summarized in 9:35ff., can serve as the basis for what our own following will look like: going out near and far, teaching and proclaiming the good news of God's realm, healing disease and sickness, growing in compassion and justice. KD-B

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
June 30, 1996

Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18
Jeremiah 28:5-9
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

First Reading

Great power politics. Babylon—will it survive or die? How will the population exchanges be managed? Will the exiles come home, and in what condition? Oh, how some of us hoped for Hitler and Stalin to disappear; for the death factories to cease; for the Gulag to disappear; for the survivors to be able to come home to a home, a free nation. Hananiah? Jeremiah? Who is right? There is only one way to find out: read tomorrow's paper.

How awkward and embarrassing: prophet contradicting prophet with the authority of YHWH! The text spells it out clearly: חנניה הנביא // ירמיה הנביא, "Jeremiah, the prophet" // "Hananiah, the prophet."

Who is the right and who is the wrong/false prophet? How does one know? Simple. Let's see which word will come true. (Cf. Deut 18:21-22.) What happens when Truth meets Truth, Myth meets Myth? Jeremiah argues from precedent: all previous prophets were prophets of doom. But, he hopes against hope that his word from YHWH would turn out to be wrong. What magnanimity! What chutspah! (*ḥuṣpah*, from *ḥpṣ*, "to be insolent, impudent, impertinent.") Have you ever done anything like it in a similar situation? Jeremiah is a patriot, a YHWHist. But so is Hananiah. Jeremiah would love to have Hananiah be right: in a couple of years Babylon's yoke will be bro-

ken, king and exiles will be back, and even the looted temple vessels will be returned. Amen! (אמן, *'amen*, "to be steady, firm, established.")

But Jeremiah is *extremely* pessimistic. He doubts the peace-mongers. Cf. Jer 6:14; 23:17. In the face of sin, injustice, doom and destruction the preaching of peace and comfort is a crime, a sin.

When my family and I had to flee during World War II (in order not to be murdered) the hope was great that soon—in a few months—we would be able to return "home." Peace, peace, where there is no peace! I am OK, you are OK, we are all OK. What hypocrisy! Not one of us is OK. Not one person, ethnic group, country or nation is OK. What happened to sin? What happened to the preaching of repentance, restitution and newness of life? Is it no longer necessary?

We know, as pastors, how hard it is to speak about sin, preach doom and damnation (even eternal damnation, hell, the End of the World) when the earth continues its merry way and famous (and not so famous) academicians and "professionals"—including "religious" persons—find yet another soothing term to gloss over sin and its consequences. Which churches "succeed" (whatever that means)?

Where is peace? (Jer 28:9) Who is "Hananiah" today? Who is "Babylon" today? Who will be a "Jeremiah?" WLM

Pastoral Reflections

The spiral of welcome in God is all-inclusive: it begins with the disciples themselves (and that, by extension, means us); embraces Christ; moves out towards the prophet and the righteous person; enfolds the "little ones," the ordinary, the unlikely, the unnoticed. Preachers who have not utilized Trinity Sunday to preach on the wonderful gospel theme of welcome will certainly want to do so for this Sunday. I recommend a beautiful and highly readable chapter from *Freeing Theology*, edited by Catherine Mowry LaCugna (Harper, 1993). It is entitled "God in Communion with Us" and offers inspirational reading and grist for the preacher's mill on the theme of welcome.

Or perhaps, before we leave Romans 6, preachers will find themselves moved to proclaim the power of baptism into the death of Christ, and the mystery of our hope that as Christ was raised from the dead, so we too might walk in newness of life. The "might" of that last clause is an intriguing one, suggesting that newness of life is ours by glimpses on the long road of sanctification. Paul describes the community in Rome as having experienced a kind of "heart-obedience" to the gospel. They have become slaves to righteousness, which paradoxically is the freest and truest thing of all. It's not so much slavery as it is transformation, Paul seems to suggest, as he moves from language of slavery to that of sanctification which leads to eternal life. And it all comes to us as free gift from God.

Aren't so many of us, not to mention so many of the people in our pews, longing for some newness of life? We all find ourselves weighted down and distracted by so many things. Paul has a way of clearing the decks and bringing us back to those first steps of faith, the same first steps which we never really leave behind. Grace, not compulsion, steers us not around but through the cross, and there we discover the unending life which is God. Surely sanctification, even "slavery to righteousness," is the joyous outpouring of our hearts, just as God's heart was poured out to us through our Lord and brother, Jesus the Christ. KD-B

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 7, 1996

Psalm 145:8-14
Zechariah 9:9-12
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

First Reading

Zech 9:9-10 (the King's Entry into Jerusalem) is sandwiched between Zech 9:1-8 (Restoration of the Land of Israel) and Zech 9:11-17 (Restoration of the People of Israel by the Power of YHWH).

Eternal peace is accomplished by ultimate power. The only *one* who possesses ultimate power is the Creator YHWH. How is the restoration of the land and of the people possible? By the defeat of the enemy! The hope is that one day either YHWH or YHWH's agent will kill all opponents and impose peace.

Who is addressed?
בת־ירושלם // בת־ציון,
"Daughter Zion" // "Daughter Jerusalem." Zion/Jerusalem does not *have* a daughter, but *is* a daughter. The city with its inhabitants are called *bat*, "daughter." The "daughter" is to rejoice and shout for joy. Why? Because YHWH has, finally, brought about victory. Only now can God be called "King." A king צדיק ונושע, "legitimate/rightful and victorious/saving." Legitimacy is based on victory and salvation, not on pious thoughts.

Only after the Victor has achieved a resounding military victory (often with corpses stacked high and the rivers running red with human blood) is it safe to ride a young, strong farm animal and not a warhorse, i.e. a tractor and not a tank. Only after all snipers are removed is it safe to walk the streets or ride in an open car. Only after the Victor YHWH has removed "chariots with their war horses" = tanks with their gasoline, and "battle bows" = missiles, does the Victor have the authority and the necessary force to impose peace on the whole world. World-wide dominion by Israel? Absolutely not! YHWH is and will prove to be King. This is the "messianic/Christian" hope (Messiah/Christ = משיח [יהוה], "anointed of [YHWH]," i.e., power established by YHWH). Christ the King! When?

YHWH-Choosing People are "prisoners of hope" (אסירי התקוה). They are bound by the sure hope (based on YHWH's promise of loyalty, covenant and compassion, cf. Psalm 145) that YHWH will act and will set the "prisoners of hope" free from their fetters so they will, actually, enjoy the realization of their hope. YHWH will even restore double, like a thief caught in the act (Cf. Isa 40:2; Exod 22:4, 7, 9; Job 42:10). YHWH will, finally, be victorious over all evil-doers.

The national anthem of modern Israel is התקוה, "The Hope." What is the content of this hope? We Christians share this hope. We are one in hope, one in YHWH, one in "the Spirit." מרן אתא (Aramaic), "Our Lord has/will come" (1 Cor 16:22). "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20). WLM

Pastoral Reflections

"I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand." So writes Paul in the famous chapter 7 of Romans. In the 20th century Reinhold Niebuhr has brought home to us the realization that our very best efforts to do the good may indeed veil self-serving interests beneath the surface. All kinds of groups, nations, associations, even churches, are susceptible, ac-

cording to Niebuhr, to the evil of self-justification, and to rationalization of any and all efforts to maintain the status quo of the group. Such rationalization is perhaps at its most evil when it masquerades as the good.

Was it this kind of evil that was behind the inability of the generations to truly hear the message of the realm of God proclaimed by first John the Baptist and then by Jesus? Jesus sarcastically compares the fickle crowds to bickering children who won't play one anothers' games. Was the message so threatening, so destabilizing to the group, that the crowds intuitively acted to defuse and ridicule it, lest it challenge and change them by its power?

Who has the ears to hear? Jesus launches into public prayer—perhaps itself a parabolic answer to that very question. The ones seemingly best educated and best prepared to listen don't have the ears for the kind of hearing this message demands. Instead it's the infants, the most dependent and vulnerable humans beings of all, who are capable of truly hearing. Why? Jesus doesn't say directly, but continues in the prayer, painting with lovely brushstrokes the deep connection between himself and God the Father. Then he paints the whole human community into the picture: "Take my yoke upon you! Learn from me!" What is this but invitation to enter into the close relatedness between Father and Son? We are asked to yoke our selves to Jesus, to become apprenticed to him, to open ourselves, perhaps to be as vulnerable as infants in our relation to God.

Who has the ears to hear? In this gospel "hearing" means the deep openness to God that comes from trust. That is the hearing that Jesus invites us to grow into, and it is the hearing that will fill our very souls with the peace beyond all understanding. KD-B

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 14, 1996

Psalm 65:(1-8), 9-13
Isaiah 55:10-13
Romans 8:1-11
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

First Reading

The biblical writers knew the literature of the ancient Near East well. They knew about chaos and order and about the importance of divine communication for human life and death. The Egyptians spoke of creation through the divine word. The Babylonians thought of gods of chaos and gods of order. According to Mitchell Dahood, the people at Ebla, near Ugarit (both in modern Syria), already in the 23rd century B.C.E., knew of a divinity called *dabar*, "Word." (See W. L. Michel, *Job* [Biblical Institute Press, 1987] 1:94 n. 70.)

Why this divinization of communication among humans? I think we all know. An ancient proverb has it, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits (Prov 18:21). We have all experienced the fateful consequences of a little word or phrase, "Yes!" "No! "I do," "I love you," "I hate you," "I respect you and what you do," "You and your work are ridiculous," "I have no time for you," "I do not want to share your joy!" We all know people who have been crushed (thrown into depression and even death) or uplifted (brought back to joy and life) by a little word. Think about it! It is, therefore, not so difficult to understand that our biblical writers announced that without "the Word" there would be no world, sky (space), ocean, plant, animals or humans (= natural creation). And,

even more importantly, that without "the Word" there would be no Torah ("Teaching"), no "Ten Words" (commandments, guides for life), no "People of YHWH," no "Land of YHWH," in short, there would be no "spiritual creation."

Second Isaiah knew this kind of thinking very well. He celebrates the "Return of the Exiles" (from sure death and assimilation in Babylon) to Judah and Jerusalem in glowing language, which he borrowed from his colleagues, who wrote about creation and the first exodus: stories about order and life out of chaos, bondage and death. As beneficial rain, in season, brings forth fruit, so also does "The Word" = the promise, assurance, oath of God. Even the curse of the earth (Genesis 3) is lifted: instead of "thorn" // "briar," now "cypress" // myrtle." YHWH's "Name" (= reputation) is no longer mud. It is שֵׁם, "name, reputation, memorial" and אות עולם, "eternal sign." The psalmist (Psalm 65) is of the same opinion. (Just read verses 5-6!) By the way, פלג אלהים (vv. 9/10) refers to the "heavenly channel" which leads from the fresh-water ocean above the sky/heaven (space) to earth. It is full of water. Hallelujah! We do not need to fear a drought and sure premature death.

"The Word" is completely meaningless and unproductive unless it takes concrete shape in dirt, water, grain, flesh and blood. Abraham knew this. Moses was sure of it and raised a lot of questions for God. The prophets lived and died with "The Word." Without Ezra and Nehemiah, who carried "The Word" (ordered by the Persians and with Persian money!) the return to Judah would not have been noted by anyone and there would be no "Judaism," much less a "Christianity." Others continued the "incarnation" of "The Word." We Christians are glad, and in awe, that through Jesus "The Word" took shape also for us and continues to burn in us and challenges us to live it in order for the whole world to recognize it, accept it, and join us as "YHWH-Choosing People." WLM

Pastoral Reflections

Second Isaiah's poetry is some of the most beautiful and hope-filled in all of Scripture! The poet sees in the certainty of the seasons and the rains and snow the same nurturing, thirst-quenching Word of God which may be opposed, but which ultimately can never be thwarted from accomplishing its purpose.

So too in this parable from Matthew's Gospel. The Word is abundantly, even lavishly scattered over all types of soil. And though some is scorched, eaten, choked, never to achieve maturity, yet look at what a marvelous harvest the extravagant sowing yields!

It is the same certainty and extravagance of the Word that we cling to in our faith in the face of all types of present setbacks, struggles and even failures. Just this year in San Francisco we are facing all kinds of difficulties: a historic church building burnt to the ground; two of our congregations expelled from the ELCA; others of us facing huge building costs because of the need to retrofit for earthquakes; and on and on, and no doubt you could add many of your own struggles to the list.

But God's Word continues to be scattered abundantly among us; and in the midst of struggles, people draw close together for strength and search for new directions for mission. The Word grows, springing forth and sprouting, so that even in all our struggles, we still find ourselves with overflowing bread with which to feed our neighbor. And our faith grows in awe of the greatness of God, who continues to scatter abundantly and extravagantly, filling our emptiness. KD-B

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 21, 1996

Psalm 86:11-17
Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16-19
or Isaiah 44:6-8
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

First Reading

Where there is only *one* there can be no talk of exclusiveness. In these passages is expressed the most important rock-bottom belief of biblical faith—everything else is commentary: YHWH alone is God. YHWH alone is Creator of creation and creatures. Therefore, YHWH can not have divine rivals (because there are no other gods); no creature can be a creator or a god; YHWH "created" the people of YHWH by "redeeming" them; only YHWH has power and establishes what is right. YHWH's might makes right.

Second Isaiah spoke these revelations during the Babylonian Exile when the people of YHWH were nothing. They were not a people, had no government, land or temple; YHWH had been defeated (killed) by Marduk. What chutspah (*ḥuspah*, "insolence, audacity, gall") on Jeremiah's part to say that YHWH alone is creator and redeemer!

Second Isaiah chooses powerful epithets for YHWH: גאל, "Redeemer;" מלך־ישראל, "King of Israel;" צבאות יהוה, YHWH of Warriors, Fighting Men, Hosts, Armies;" ראשון // אחרון, "First" // "Last," and צור, "Rock," the only sure foundation. In the turmoil of the passions about how to name God, "Rock" might provide a solid footing for our meditations. (For about 150 names and epithets of God in the Book of Job alone see W. L. Michel, *The Ugaritic Texts*, 1970. Published on demand by Univ. Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Order Number 70-24, 709.)

For the rabbis אמת, "firmness, stability, truth," provided a basis for meditating on YHWH. The first letter of the Hebrew alphabet is א, the middle is מ, and the last is ת, which, for them, was a mnemonic device to remember that YHWH is present and active in the past, present and future. WLM

Pastoral Reflections

"Look at what goes on in the name of the church! I'd never want to lend my name to such an institution as that!" Perhaps even Matthew's community experienced people voicing just this kind of statement that is so prevalent among unchurched and "recovering" church-goers in our own time. Partly excuse, partly rationalization, but also genuine experience of evil within the church leads people to disillusionment and accusation. Clergy sexual abuse, intolerance of those who are different from the majority, and seeming indifference to human suffering beyond the confines of the church's walls all contribute to growing suspicion. Many do not trust the church to be a safe and open place where people can search for God and become part of a Spirit-guided body.

How can it be possible that there exists among us both wheat and destructive weeds, and what should be done about it? We often tend to focus on the aspect of judgment in the parable of the weeds, but the issue of the ambiguous life of the people of God is no less important. Even within ourselves we find both wheat and weeds. A rich and long tradition in Christianity has explored the mystery of good and evil within the church and in individual Christians. Luther's phrase of *simil justus et peccator* is one of the most creative contributions to that discussion.

We are not alone in our unease with the ambiguous life we experience as people of God. Paul tells us that the entire creation is groaning in anticipation of full and complete redemption. Yet, even as we recognize the ambiguity, we need not remain stuck and immobilized. The promise of God is sure. What is important in this in-between time is our own faithfulness, that childbirth-like straining of the people of God towards life and love in God. For the Spirit of God is indeed bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God. Thanks be to God! KD-B

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