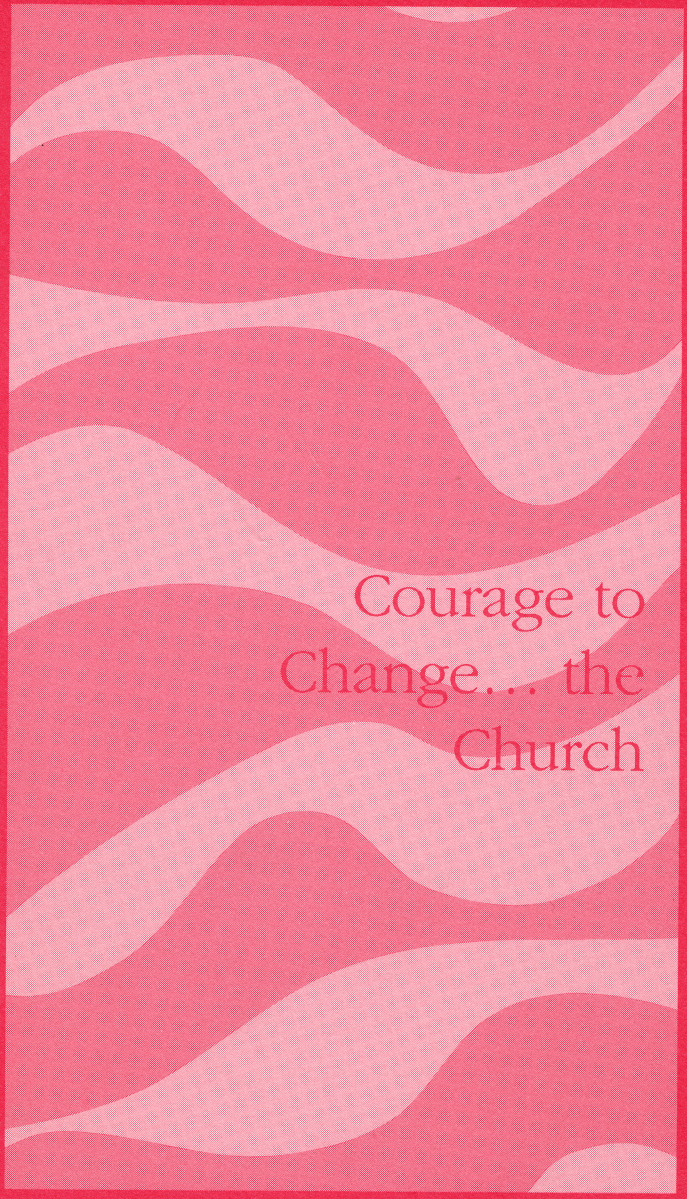
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CURRENTS

in Theology and Mission

Currents

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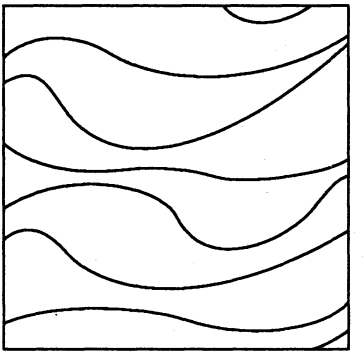
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Courage to Change... the Church

The once-mainline churches of North America are confronted by irrevocable change; the only serious question is whether we shall simply be *changed or shall find the courage and imagination needed to give to the existing change some positive direction and purpose. Such direction and purpose can only be acquired through a new* theological *originality and daring on the part of churches that have been too dependent doctrinally.*

That was the thesis **Douglas John Hall** developed at the Professional Leadership Conference at LSTC on February 6-7, 1995. A Canadian, ordained in the United Church of Canada, Hall is professor of Christian Theology in the Faculty of Religious Studies of McGill University in Montreal. He has written eighteen books, and his main project is a three-volume contextual theology: *Thinking the Faith; Professing the Faith; and Confessing the Faith.*

This issue of *Currents* contains Hall's three essays and some of the responses to the essays by LSTC professors and other friends of the seminary at the conference.

Hall begins by characterizing the broad societal changes that are sweeping over North America and asks why we so seldom engage in original theological reflection ourselves, preferring instead to import our theologies from the hard thinking of other (usually European) people. Modernity has had a basically positive outlook, that has often ignored or suppressed the negations in our society. Right now there is an undercurrent of skepticism in North America. Meanwhile, Christendom has come to an end and most of the mainline-churches have been sidelined. This exclusion from the halls of power can become the entree to a new and different ministry within this society, for we are inevitably positioned now on the edge of the empire.

In his second essay, **Hall** offers a theological proposal for responding to this context. The reduction of Christendom is hardly an unmitigated tragedy since it gives us the freedom to evolve a community, a theology, and an ethic that is faithful to our foundations. The incorporation of formerly excluded voices—racial and ethnic minorities, gays and Lesbians, and the poor—provides evidence for our new freedom. His proposal for renewal is a theology of the cross, that trusts the God who is there in the midst of pain. The test of any theological system is the challenge to make itself vulnerable to that which negates. We do not abandon the dominant culture, but we endeavor to engage it from a perspective different from its own values and pursuits. Our theology does not suppress the darkness, but offers light *in* it.

Hall offers suggestions in his third essay about worship, preaching, education, and outreach in our changed context. He calls for the establishment of communities of discipleship within the churches and hopes for ministers who are both theologians and pastors. Instead of preaching sermonettes that produce Christianettes, church leaders of the future must plunge us into the baptismal depths of truth. Are there alternatives to stipended ministry? Are those of us in theological education prepared to live as we teach. In an illegal community of prayer and suffering, Bonhoeffer found a way of following Christ, but also of suffering with him and with crucified people in his beloved world.

Three LSTC professors offered responses to Hall after his second lecture. **Cynthia Jürisson** noted that it is not a theology of a cross or of crosses, but the particularity of one cross that the Christian Church understands as crucial. Without this, Jesus becomes another good sufferer who died young. She noted Hall's silence about our immigration mentality, our savage economic system, and the pervasive influence of the media. She suggested that Lutherans might refrain from automatically taking pot shots at the Christian Right.

Edgar Krentz observed that as a New Testament scholar he works in a pre-Constantinian era. Change was present right at the beginning of the church: Jesus did his ministry among village Jews, but within 25 years Christianity was an urban phenomenon. He differed with Hall on whether we should speak of "gospel" or "the gospel," and he proposed that we keep resurrection closely tied to the word of the cross, but

interpret it in and for the marginalized church.

Vítor Westhelle called attention to the broader scope of the contextual problem. The legacy of Christendom is only one issue; alongside it we need to consider that we are not yet over racism and patriarchalism. Some things should not change: the gospel was first addressed to the poor and oppressed. What, then, is the role of excluded people in the church's engagement of the dominant culture? He, too, noted the crucial importance of resurrection, especially for the poor. How do we talk about the crucifixion in a crucified world?

We print two responses to Hall's third essay. **Julie Lindorff**, a church musician, noted that she and her colleagues also find themselves disoriented and disestablished. Theirs is a servant role: to provide a seamless and well laid conduit for the faith community's encounter with God.

Marta L. Poling-Goldenne concluded that the Lutheran Church faces a crisis because it has not heard the cries of those inside or outside its doors. We snipe at the religious Right, but rarely do we engage the culture as they do. The church longs for theologians who listen to the questions of the unchurched and help all of us form a genuine congregational response.

Finally, **Phyllis Anderson** tied the theme of the conference to the observance of the 25th anniversary of the ordination of women. Her sermon on Mark 14:3-9 spoke of the anonymous woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany. This story is about everyone who has risked ridicule, rebuke, and rejection for love, a story with which every ordained woman can identify.

If we desire to change the church, we must surely be changed ourselves. The humbling news that 700 urban churches are at risk in the ELCA and that our members are on the average 52 years old, whereas the average American is only 34, offers no encouragement to optimism. Rather, we are invited once more to take up the cross and follow.

Ralph W. Klein
Editor

Courage to Change... the Church!

Introduction to the Series

Douglas John Hall
Professor of Christian Theology, Faculty of Religious Studies
McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

"The Church's Response to Change." As I pondered this title, the correspondence, and the preliminary literature for this event, I found myself thinking of the well-known 'serenity prayer' of my dear teacher, Reinhold Niebuhr, of blessed memory: "God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, the courage to change what should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other." I wonder if this prayer ought not to become the prayer of the churches in our time. If it did, then I suspect that the phrase on which we should all have to concentrate most fervently would be the second one: "Give us... the courage to change what should be changed."

Not everything about the church can be changed. Not everything needs to be changed. But some things (and I believe they are vital) do need changing. More importantly, some of the things that need changing really *can* be changed—if we open ourselves to the courage, imagination, and self-criticism that belongs to faith in Jesus Christ. Like most long-established institutions, churches are doggedly resistant to change. Perhaps, being institutions of religion, churches are apt to resist and resent change more fiercely than most other institutions. Moreover, the kinds of changes that are being asked of us at this juncture in the history of the Christian Movement are so far-reaching that none of us escapes some degree of anxiety whenever we glimpse their implications. If we are professionals in the church, most of the changes that are required at the end of the Constantinian era affect us very personally. For this reason we rather quickly persuade ourselves, in conferences like this, that radical change is out of the question—impractical, idealistic. The time, we say, is not yet quite ripe for it. We may shake our heads sadly, indicating our general empathy with those who counsel change, but we go away from such consultations assuming privately, or in little groups, that we shall have to carry on pretty much as before. The first clause of Niebuhr's prayer consoles us: "Give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed."

In these three lectures, if I may be so foolhardy as to suggest a 'thesis,' what I

shall argue is that the situation of the so-called mainstream churches in North America today is one in which existent and irrevocable change itself confronts serious Christians with both the necessity and the possibility of significant *intentional* alteration. We are being changed, willy nilly. The only question, really, is whether we shall perceive in this necessity that is laid upon us by historical providence some possibility for entertaining and developing a more faithful disciple community, and therefore of giving purpose and direction to the transformation through which we are passing. Employing the terms of Niebuhr's prayer, I might put it this way: if we can find the serenity really to accept what cannot be changed about the state of the church at this juncture in its historical pilgrimage, then our very realism may prove the needed entrée to the kind of courage that is required to attempt significant change.

The Changing North American Context of the Church's Ministry

Douglas John Hall
Professor of Christian Theology
McGill University, Montreal

The title of this first address, which like the others was devised by the planning committee, suggests that what I shall discuss here is our changed social context. And I shall do that. But I doubt that we could adequately reflect on our changed societal situation as Christians today unless we also considered the change that has come over Christianity itself—especially, in our context, Christianity as it has been embodied by the older denominations whose history is intimately bound up with the history of European civilization on this continent. Accordingly, in the first part of this address I shall try to characterize the broad societal change that I feel we are undergoing; then, secondly, I shall speak briefly about the changed status of the churches within this society; and, in concluding, I shall ask you to consider whether the altered status of the churches vis à vis the dominant culture might not in fact constitute a new and evocative positioning in relation to that culture, a vantage point from which the churches could actually address and engage, creatively, the deeper problematic of this society.

The spiritual estate of the Union

There are many modes of discourse that we could employ to try to describe the social context in which we find ourselves today. The 'Overview' paragraph in the pamphlet that was prepared for this event implies some of these: we could speak about the pluralistic character of American and Canadian society today—the variety of races, nationalities and languages. In Canada we are constantly hearing the term "multiculturalism" used to describe who we are—to the point, I must say, that one might wonder whether the country had any history prior to the end of World War II and the great post-War influx of peoples from non-European backgrounds. Or we could think about the ever-growing secularity of our society and the so-called "new spirituality" that it has begotten as a reaction to godless materialism. Or we could consider the changing role of technology, especially the so-called communications revolution, or the related problem of unemployment or underemployment. Wendell Berry, one of the prophetic voices in our midst, draws attention to the fact that we now have a whole new category of people called "permanently unemployable"—raising, he says, the question, "What are people for?"[1] Or again, we could reflect on the effects of economic and cultural globalism upon the life of our nations and the displacement of local cultures that this involves; or we might consider, as Jean Bethke Elshtain has done in her excellent CBC series, *Democracy On Trial*,[2] the impact of critiques coming from special interest groups and the consequent difficulty of sustaining the democratic conception of responsibility for society at large, and so on. All such specific concerns would have to be aspects of a full-fledged account of our changing context.

But Christian theology and ministry have always to try to delve beneath the surface of a society's specifics and to ask after the underlying spirit or mood (*Geist*) of the social context to which it hopes to bear witness, in thought, word, and deed to Jesus as the Christ. 'Gospel'—which I think we should learn how to use without the definite article; for when we say "*the* gospel" we convey the impression of something static and unchanging—gospel, "good news," responds not only and not immediately to specific ethical or cultural matters, which are almost always symptoms of the deeper societal malaise, but to the underlying spiritual condition which, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged, sways the soul of a people. Discerning that *Geist*—discerning "the signs of the times"—is of course always difficult, and always a risk. But it must be attempted; because otherwise Christians may end, and regularly do, by substituting law for gospel, or presenting gospel as 'the answer' to questions nobody asked, or (worse still) allowing the Christian witness to function repressively, as a way precisely of avoiding the real problems and possibilities inherent in its always-specific, always-changing context.

I first became existentially conscious of this need to develop sensitivity to what I am calling here the underlying mood or spiritual estate of a people when I realized, in the late 1960s, how a theology that had been 'made in Europe' could function in North America in what I felt then, and still feel, was an inauthentic way. Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* appeared in German in 1965.[3] In 1967 my best friend, a

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[1] *What Are People For?*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990.

[2] Toronto: House of Anansi, 1993.

[3] *Theologie der Hoffnung*, München: Christian Kaiser Verlag.

German pastor and theologian, came to give lectures at the western Canadian theological college where I taught then, and he chose to introduce us to this new and exciting then-young thinker, who combined Reformation insight with Marxist categories to expound a theology that would break the hold of fatalism and *accedie* on post-war German and European culture.

I was profoundly moved by Moltmann's thought. And then I noticed a strange thing beginning to happen: all over North America, theologians and seminaries and Christian bodies of every description began to stage events on the theme, 'theology of hope.' Why? Why did this theology, which was so obviously addressed to a post-Christian public whose great temptation was the Nordic melancholy and fatalism of defeated or reduced people in northern Europe, have such appeal to North American Christians, whose history and cultural ethos (apart from minorities) manifest so little readiness to contemplate 'the darker side'?

What I found, as I observed this phenomenon of Moltmannia, was that the North American fascination with this new wind blowing over the theological world had very little to do with Moltmann's actual analysis. In fact, in my experience very few of those who spoke about these things had actually read through Moltmann's difficult book. The slogan was enough! "Theology of Hope." We liked that! It was upbeat, it was positive, it could be communicated to the grass-roots, it blended well with the euphoric 'Age of Aquarius'; above all, it was wholly corroborative of what Sydney Hook called our "national philosophy of optimism."[4]

It dawned upon me then that theologies made in Europe (and now I would also add in Latin America and elsewhere), no matter how right they may be for Europe, and no matter how exciting they may seem to people like me whose introduction to serious theology was essentially European, and no matter how important they were for all Christians everywhere to know about and wrestle with and learn from, did not likely answer the deeper questions made in Canada or the U.S.A. In fact, on the contrary, these Europeans' questions and answers could function, and did, to prevent us as Americans and Canadians from exploring the real questions of our own bailiwick—questions like, Why do we so eagerly latch onto sloganized adaptations of these theologies manufactured elsewhere? Why, apart from a few exceptional individuals and small movements, do we so seldom engage in original theological reflection ourselves, preferring instead to import our theologies already conceived and assembled from the sufferings and hard thinking of other peoples?

Why do we so seldom engage in original theological reflection ourselves, preferring instead to import our theologies...?

The outcome of these ponderings in the late 1960s was the production of my first significant (for me significant!) published essay, which I wrote in some heat, and which I called, "The Theology of Hope in

[4] See Robert L. Heilbroner, *The Future as History* (Harper & Brothers, Harper Torchbooks, 1959), cover.

the Officially Optimistic Society." It was a programmatic essay, the substance of which I then built upon and elaborated in my first two books, *Hope Against Hope*[5] and *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross*.[6]

In these works, and in many smaller papers and addresses of the 1970s, I argued that the underlying mood of the dominant, middle-class culture of the two northern nations of this continent is one of a deeply repressed anxiety—a version, perhaps, of Tillich's third anxiety-type, "the anxiety of meaninglessness and despair.[7] But, I felt, while this anxiety also permeates the old cultures of the European motherlands, there are still in those cultures systems of meaning and interpretation, both pagan and Christian, for absorbing the effects of this anxiety; whereas, in North America, the 'New World,' we do not have the benefits of these alternative systems—alternative, that is, to the Modern vision, which conceived of history in terms of inevitable and continuous progress and of humanity in terms of mastery. As my fellow-Canadian, the political philosopher, the late George P. Grant, put it, we have no past—no *operative* past—other than the past of Modernity.[8] We were to be "the New World" and this continent was to be "a new Eden [for] a new Adam"—"mankind's great second chance."[9]

Nor did our religion, Christianity, offer much by way of a point of reference for the negations that we, as a people, were increasingly unable to brush aside. For, while there were certainly Christian minorities in our midst that remembered the 'darker side' of existence from which biblical faith by no means shields its faithful readers, the dominant forms of Christianity in North America were those that were adaptable to the positive outlook of Modernity. In fact, the "national philosophy of optimism" depended, I felt, precisely upon the cultic support of a religion that could undergird it in doctrinal, symbolic, and ritual terms. Hence the ritual predominance of Christmas and Easter in the Protestantism of this continent. Especially Easter, with its strong, popular, even flamboyant expression of the defeat of everything that negates and the unchallenged reality of the good, better, and best, served to cast in cultic form the very 'dream' that generated us as a people, a dream whose basic themes were, ironically, not Christian at all, but products of a movement inherently and explicitly critical of the Judeo-Christian heritage—the Enlightenment.

Since both our culture and our official cultus assured us (to use Martin Buber's phrase) that "it will grow ever lighter," we lacked as a people, any frame of reference for what I called "the experience of negation." Negative experiences like regress and failure and incurable illness and corruption in high places and unvictorious wars and alienated youth and racial tension and violence in cities and homes and debilitating old age and even death itself, which we so cleverly camouflaged, were simply incompatible with the story we told about ourselves. So that the only thing we could do with the growing incidence and weight of negativity and ambiguity in our unfold-

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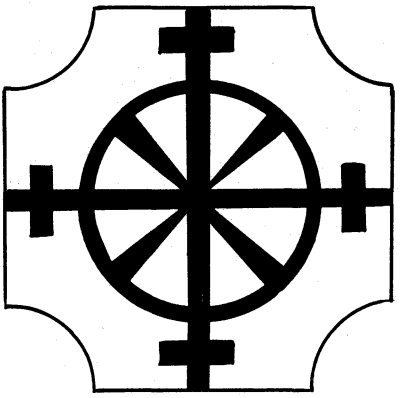
[5] Geneva: World Student Christian Federation, WSCF Books, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1971.

[6] Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976.

[7] See *The Courage To Be*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1952.

[8] See especially Grant's *Philosophy in the Mass Age* (Toronto: The Copp Clark Publishing Company, 1959, 1966), and *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969).

[9] Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, Vol. I (Garden City, NY: Image Books [Doubleday], 1975), 34.



ing story was to find ways of repressing it. And here religion played a vital role, because the negations that could not be straightaway negated by technology or medicine or the joys of sex and shopping and the oblivion of television could always be handled by a triumphant religion that offered resolution every Sunday or, failing that, in the still sweeter bye and bye.

Our determination to be an "optimistic people," however, was not, I felt, just an innocent thing; it not only created personal and grave social problems for ourselves, as repression always does, but it claimed as its most unfortunate victims other peoples round about, and minorities within who could not indulge in the fiction of untrammelled happiness. Like the sick person who denies his illness in the name of his well rehearsed self-image as one possessing remarkable health and vigor, a society that represses its internal problems must locate, outside itself, the causes of its growing discomfort. And with the cold war, and the hot war, and the rising up of African Americans and youth and gays and women, we did not have to look far for such causation. Our optimism was purchased at a very high price!

Well, and has all this changed? Frankly, I do not think so. Or rather, I think that the public mood that I tried to describe in *Lighten Our Darkness* and elsewhere has only become less nuanced, more conspicuous than it was twenty years ago. The determination to accentuate the positive has (so to speak) hardened. I spoke then of an "*official* optimism," by which I meant an optimism that is precisely *not* spontaneous, but ideological—obligatory, *de rigueur* for bank officials and politicians and university presidents, and for religious institutions wishing to remain popular with a needful public. Genuine optimism, such as one sometimes meets in new immigrants to this continent, people whose past has been so discouraging that there is no place to go but up, is a posture one can admire; but optimism as a duty, as an oft-told tale, as hype, is finally only pathetic. It is Willy Loman, running on about his wonderful prospects for the future whilst secretly, perhaps subconsciously, thinking about the mechanism by which he will take his own life.

I believe, in short, that the "official optimism" has only become increasingly threadbare, increasingly "official"; its failure is more and more conspicuous. The average citizen has become far better informed, in the past quarter century, about the devastations wrought in nature by the demands placed upon it by the consumer society. The great cities of our continent have become increasingly violent and perhaps ungovernable. The major institutions of our countries have failed to live up to the challenges and pressures placed upon them by an increasingly diverse populus. There is an almost palpable cynicism about government and public service. (In the recent congressional elections, which predictably turned to the Right, only 2 out of 5 eligible voters in the U.S.A. bothered to vote). Technology no longer seems salvific. And be-

neath all the talk about the end of the recession and economic prosperity in the future there is the grim reality of joblessness, the revocation of the social safety net, and that vague self-doubt that transcends all explicit causes and effects that Alvin Toffler named "future shock."

In my *Professing the Faith*, therefore, I went beyond the gloominess of which I was accused in my earlier works and ventured the generalization that the present *Zeitgeist* is more sisyphean than promethean.[10] Reinhold Niebuhr was conscious of addressing a public whose dominant image of the human was promethean—'Henry Ford.' But the promethean positivism that was already unconvincing by the end of Niebuhr's life has become almost purely rhetorical by now, it seems to me. And no matter how many Newt Gingriches may arise to reconstruct the Humpty-Dumpty called 'the American Dream,' they are not going to dispel the undercurrent of skepticism that has set into the soul of North America and is confirmed by hundreds of everyday occurrences. That malaise requires stronger medicine than the religious or secular pep-talkers can provide.

The sidelining of mainline Christianity

While the society has been moving towards an increasingly desperate bid to recover its fabled optimism and derring-do, the churches too have been changed, and the change through which they are passing is far greater than most of us have as yet, I think, grasped.

In fact, as I have argued in a number of places and shall develop more discursively in the third volume of my trilogy, *Confessing the Faith*, I am persuaded that contemporary Christians are living during one of the two truly momentous transitions in the history of the Christian movement. The other moment of destiny occurred in the fourth century of the Christian calendar, when the previously 'suspect' *Communio Viatorum* was invited to become chaplain to Empire. To that beginning, the advent of what is properly called 'Christendom,' there now corresponds an ending. Contrary to most 'New World' perceptions, the winding down of Christendom is by no means a new phenomenon. It has been occurring for at least two centuries, and perhaps it should even be traced to the decline of the Middle Ages. Yet the mechanisms and institutions and customs that world views set in motion do not die with the death of the vision that begot them; hence, the "End of the Constantinian Era" manifests itself in diverse ways, according to the effectiveness of these externalities in the various provinces of Christendom. In North America, and notably in the United States (here Canada is significantly different), the demise of Christendom is strangely camouflaged by the peculiar historic admixture of 'Christ and Culture' that has pertained in this society; so that many American Christians have (or allow themselves to have) little awareness of its occurrence, and some are deeply offended by any discussion of the matter. Yet it grows increasingly obvious also amongst us on this continent that the church as we have known it (especially as those of us fifty and over have known it) is undergoing a tremendous metamorphosis, literally, a change of basic shape [*morphe*].

In the North American context, this change is felt particularly in the old, historic, and so-called 'mainline' denominations of Christendom. These denomina-

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[10] Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993; Chapter 5, 301ff.

Many clergy, who ought to be the theologians of the congregation, feel abandoned by the scholars who could help them become theologians.

tions, the most established of all expressions of the Christian religion in our history, are ironically the ones that experience most keenly the realities of contemporary *dis*-establishment. The mainline is being, has been... sidelined. To be sure, this shift has been felt more directly in some denominations than in others, and in some regions of the continent than in others. But that it is a process affecting all of us, Roman Catholic and Protestant alike, cannot, I think, be denied.

How can this be explained? Without intending to exhaust the reasons, let me venture some suggestions.

First, one should assume a global perspective (as I did a moment ago when I spoke of the "end of the Constantinian era") and say, simply, that the North American instance of the de-Constantinianization process is, after all, just that—an instance of a widespread phenomenon throughout the West. And it is natural that those denominations with the stronger ecumenical ties with European and other branches of Christendom should feel the effects of this universal process more directly than do (say) the formerly sectarian bodies that were created on this continent as concrete religious responses to the quite explicit spiritual demands of this people, or segments of it.

Secondly, one would have to recognize that precisely in these older, historic churches, there have come to be over the centuries and decades traditions of tolerance, liberality, and learning that are bound eventually to discourage and even preclude the preservation of doctrinaire forms of Christian belief—including systems of dogma and morality that are inherently exclusive of other faith traditions and lifestyles. This (if you like) 'liberal, bourgeois' openness and dislike of dogmatic finality does not lend itself to the kind of disciplining of the membership and (especially) indoctrination of the young that may be necessary to its own numeric growth. Moreover, this same liberality prevents the 'reasonable' oldline churches from engaging in the predatory kind of evangelical activity that rides roughshod over the beliefs and disbeliefs of others.

Thus, with the increase of pluralism on the one hand and the growing public (and legal!) demands for respecting the rights of others, religious bodies that are open and tolerant and compassionate are the more likely to be thrown into confusion about their mission, and, in effect, to withdraw from the competition to win converts or even retain those whom they have.

Thirdly, these same denominations (with a few noteworthy exceptions) have not been vigilant and diligent theologically. While the members of the theological guild have usually been reared within the congregations of these churches, the past two or three decades in particular have seen what I think must be called a disastrous retreat of scholars in all of the theological disciplines from any sustained sense of responsibility towards the churches. I am told that the last

meeting of the American Academy of Religion brought forth some 7000 intellectuals, most of them teachers of Christianity in places of higher learning, to this city of Chicago. But there is precious little evidence of biblical, historical, theological or even ethical ferment in the churches, which grow increasingly distant from foundational presuppositions of the faith. As John Cobb Jr. has written recently, "Since so little of the scholarly and intellectual work of faculties of theology is geared to the service of the church, it is not surprising that the church takes little interest in this work. Scholars largely write for one another, and for the students to whom they assign their books."[11]

How does this relate to the decline of these denominations? Well, if there is great uncertainty about the message and ministry of the church, and those who are best equipped to fill that vacuum have become disenchanted with the institutional churches or more interested in their reputations amongst members of their guilds, the confusion is certainly not going to right itself. Many clergy, who ought to be the theologians of the congregation, feel abandoned by the scholars who could help them become theologians; and since the pastors are in any case driven by late conventions of the profession to behave as managers and counsellors and precisely *not* as theologians, they are often incapable of filling this gap. And by gap I mean making the transition from the old dogmatic, moralistic, and exclusivistic theologies of the past to theologies that actually engage the life of people here and now.

Fourthly, partly because of this gap—to fill, as it were, the loss of a vital theological center—these same older denominations have become forums for the activity of strong, protesting elements in the society at large. The very liberality of these churches has made them sensitive to voices that have been muted or silenced in the greater culture. Persons concentrated upon various forms of justice, or peace, or environmental concern; persons seeking a forum for racial or gender equality; persons insisting upon the full humanity and the equal treatment of gay and lesbian men and women in both society and church; persons trying to raise their voices for the oppressed and marginalized peoples of neighboring and far-flung societies they count as victims of our own—all such groupings have been able to find a place, though often with difficulty, in these old churches. Fortunately!

I accentuate "fortunately," because in the first place it is precisely these groupings that have given life and vitality to churches that otherwise might have dwindled or died decades ago, and secondly because all of these causes and issues are *necessarily* aspects of the mission and ministry of the community of the crucified one.

At the same time, since we are considering reasons for the peripheralization of the once-mainline denominations, we must recognize that, to the extent to which these churches embrace such *countercultural* or protesting elements; and to the extent to which these churches become identified with such elements; to that extent they will likely repulse many who, under the socio-ecclesial conditions of the past, would have found themselves at home there. Moreover, it can be noticed without difficulty that the denominations in which there is the greatest theological uncertainty and confusion are those most apt to have their whole agendas most strongly influenced by the special interest groupings, and therefore those most apt to experience the sidelining in question.

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[11] "Faith Seeking Understanding: The Renewal of Christian Thinking," in *The Christian Century*, June 29-July 6, 1994, 642f.

Fifthly and finally (and by way of transition to the conclusion), all four of the above observations, plus others that could be mentioned, contribute to the immense difficulty—amounting in many cases to a psychic incapacity—of these older churches to fulfil, any longer, the socio-political role that has been, from the fourth century onwards, the hidden or open mandate of Western Christendom: namely, to provide the cultic cement that is needed by the official culture to hold together its world view, its structures of authority, its aspirations and mores. And here the two areas of change that I have been describing come together and experience—an impasse!

For if I am right in thinking that the demand of the majority culture in this society is for a strong, unambiguous affirmation of its badly scarred and threatened optimistic credo; and if I am right in thinking that the historic churches, having not only achieved sufficient sophistication to suspect any such affirmations of any such credos but even invited into their midst those who bear daily testimony to the bogus nature of such credos, then it is hardly likely that such a society is going to find the legitimation that it needs from such churches.

As it turns out, however, the guardians of the official optimism find they do not need the backing of these old churches anyway; for, in the meantime, and from what must still be considered an unlikely quarter, there has emerged a large and vociferous 'Christian' presence that is more than willing to play the Constantinian role. Ironically, the so-called 'Christian Right,' which in the not-distant past prided itself, in its various and often mutually suspicious expressions, on being the non-conforming, holy-living, biblically-prophetic voice in the wilderness of this evil generation, has stepped forward to fill the void left by the sidelined historic denominations. It—the Christian Right—does not have to dilly dally about good and evil. *It* does not need to fret itself about the ambiguities of history and of human motivation. Its yes is yes and its no is no. And it has even found ways of making its own highly touted negations—like original sin and the damnation of the unrepentant—serve the causes of its new political ally, which is equally keen to identify the social germs that are attacking the health of the body politic. Thus doth history make strange bedfellows.

But now, to conclude.

Conclusion: Possibilities for ministry on the edge of Empire

The incapacity of the old historic churches of New World forms of Christendom to play that role any longer is perceived by many within these denominations in almost tragic terms. Certainly as failure. There is a frantic scrambling in many quarters to recover the lost office of chaplain to power. Not a few are happy to take a leaf out of the notebook of the Christian Right. They cast their nets wide, minimizing their relations with the protesting elements, making use of all the modern gimmickry of communications, and therefore reducing to even more banal forms the happy slogans of a faith devoid of dialectics. (That sort of thing must of course be done by anyone who intends to use the 'hot' media to proclaim gospel. Television wants one-liners and three-minute clips, not in-depth discussions of sin à la Wolfhart Pannenberg or Dorothee Sölle or Rosemary Ruether!)

But the efforts of once-mainline Christianity to recover its Constantinian status are mostly pathetic. So the other favorite game of the chattering classes within these churches is to take pop-shots at the people

who have replaced them in Caesar's court. As Michael Lerner, editor of the Jewish journal, *Tikkun*, wrote in *The Washington Post* in September of last year,

> Some American liberals are about to pass through another cycle of fear that the Christian Right will take over the United States. Their concern about the religious right is legitimate, not because [the Right] has no right to advocate its politics or because in some formal way it violates the Constitution, but because the America it wishes to see is one that would embody a mean-spirited repressiveness.

But rather than fight for their alternative vision of what a good society ought to look like, liberals all too often rally to the same tired solutions: shore up constitutional restrictions on separation of church and state, preach tolerance, and pretend that these positions are somehow 'value free.'

The liberal strategy never asks, "What is it that we are failing to offer?" Instead, it assumes that the growing power of the Christian Right is a reflection of some fundamental irrationality or worse (sexism, racism, homophobia) that is mysteriously sweeping the country.[12]

There is an alternative to both the attempt to reclaim Christendom and complaining about the religious simplism that has usurped that office. It is implied in Michael Lerner's question, 'What is it that we are failing to offer?' and in the observation that follows immediately upon this: "...in my work as a psychotherapist [Lerner writes] I've found that many Americans who are attracted to the right are seeking a framework of meaning and purpose that will give them some sense of self-worth."

Simplistically, and even dangerously (because there are many who suffer greatly because of simplistic affirmations of self-worth on the part of North Americans!), the Christian Right offers a system of meaning, a community of purpose, for many of our fellow North Americans. It combines true-believing, allegedly Bible-faith, with uncritical, feel-good-about-yourself Americanism. The combination is not new, though the ingredients are now reduced to their lowest common denominator. Sydney Mead, the dean of American church historians, claimed that from the middle of the nineteenth century there was a process of identification of Christianity and Americanism.

The efforts of once-mainline Christianity to recover its Constantinian status are mostly pathetic.

The difference now is that the Christianity apparently benefiting from this amalgam is not our kind of Christianity. And the Americanism is not our kind of Americanism, either, and it is not likely to become so. In short, Christendom, for us, is effectively over. We are outsiders to the Dream. We remember it, and we are often nostalgic for it; but a nagging realism has invaded our consciousness. Spiritually, and sometimes

[12] From "The Guardian Weekly," Sept. 4, 1994, *Washington Post*, p. 21. Michael Lerner is editor of *Tikkun* Magazine and author of "Jewish Renewal" published in 1994 by Putnam.

politically as well, we have been pushed to the edges of the empire. This, I think, cannot be changed. It must be accepted... with "serenity."

But may it not even be accepted *with gratitude*? For is not precisely this unchangeable fact, this fact of our virtual exclusion from the halls of great power, the very thing that can, if it is truly and serenely faced by us, become the entree to a new and different ministry within this society? May we not, precisely from the sidelines, exercise a prophetic ministry and mission that may be far more important to the future of this society than anything we, or anyone else, accomplished or *could* accomplish from the center? Are the only 'systems of meaning' accessible to human beings and human communities simplistic ones—systems that confirm human self-worth without questioning human arrogance and overestimation; systems that make us feel good about ourselves without orientating us towards those who do not and cannot feel good about themselves; systems that know only Easter triumph and not Good Friday violence and defeat and death?

Living on the edge of empire, as we Canadians often find, though it is usually frustrating and even frightening, is also a strangely illuminating place to live, for it can provide, on occasion, a point of vantage on our modern global culture that is hard to acquire from positions *within* the imperium. It can even, sometimes, evoke intimations of the "wisdom" that Niebuhr's prayer asks for. It is not accidental that ancient Israel always had to live on the edge of empire, though it too coveted the imperial status. It is not accidental, either, that Jesus emerged from Nazareth, not Jerusalem, and Augustine from Tagaste, not Alexandria, and Luther from a little place nobody ever heard of in the great world, and Reinhold, Helmut and Hulda Niebuhr from some obscure place in (heavens!) the American mid-West!

Perhaps, if we were truly and sincerely to accept the change that historical providence has thrust upon us, closing to us the doors of privilege and prestige and power through proximity to power; perhaps if we were to accept the inevitability of our existence, henceforth, on the edge of empire, we might discover once again the power of truth, and of love, and (as distinct from ideological optimism) of a hope that does not disappoint.

A Theological Proposal for the Church's Response to Its Context

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Introduction

There must have been a diabolical element in the planning of this event, splendid as it is in so many ways; because to ask of me the elaboration—in the space of perhaps fifty minutes—of "a theological proposal for the church's response to its context" is to ask, almost, that I should make a public fool of myself. Nevertheless, I have always believed that the motto of theologians ought to be "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread;" so I shall take up the challenge, and you will have to decide whether I have been a "fool for Christ" or just a fool.

Let me introduce the subject, then, by recapitulating very briefly the substance of my first address, "The Changing North American Context of the Church's Ministry," and in this way leading into the subject-matter of tonight.

As I see it, the change in which as Christians and churches we are involved today is both a societal and an ecclesiastical change. Our social context is characterized by an increasing foreboding and confusion, but because we still insist on being an "officially optimistic society" we continue to repress the negations we experience, identifying their causes with critical, countercultural elements in our midst, and demanding of our leadership and institutions that they restore 'the American Dream' or its paler Canadian version.

That demand is placed upon the churches, too; but the old, historic churches that have heretofore been the religious backbone of the dominant culture, for a variety of reasons are not ready or able to supply this demand. Their whole ethos and self-understanding and the very composition of their membership is too nuanced and diffuse to play any longer the role of establishment religion—and particularly not when the demands placed upon such an official cultus are so blatantly and one-sidedly promotional. Consequently, the role of establishment religion has been taken over increasingly by what, from the standpoint of the classical traditions of the faith, must be regarded as reductionist expressions of Protestant Christianity, which are nevertheless

able to supply what is demanded precisely because of their simplistic and 'true believing' stance.

The old denominations of the so-called mainline, humiliated and quantitatively reduced for other reasons as well, find themselves more and more pushed to the periphery of the majority culture and its structures of authority. They are unused to this positioning vis à vis power, and therefore they tend to alternate between attempts to regain their former status and, on the other hand, indulgence in a legitimate but not very constructive critique of the religious simplifiers who now occupy the office of chaplain to power. What I proposed at the end of the first address, however, was that precisely from the sidelines, or as I sometimes put it, metaphorically, 'from the edge of empire,' these old once-mainline churches can, if we will, develop a ministry to our larger social context that is far more faithful to the original, biblical vision of the mission of Christ's "little flock" than most of what was undertaken by sixteen-odd centuries of Constantinian Christianity. Just *because* we are not part of the establishment in the way we once were, we may become salt, yeast, and light in the midst of our future-shocked and faltering *civitas terrena.*

Now I want to proceed from there to say—insofar as one can say such a thing in such a format—what I think that challenge to the sidelined church could mean, and how it could be responded to with imagination and courage.

Our new freedom!

The first point I wish to make is that before we can rightly address ourselves to questions about our mission and message we must try to acquire a positive understanding of what has happened to us and of our present 'sidelined' position vis à vis power. All over the Western world, there are Christians who spend their time lamenting the demise of Christendom. They can only see the humiliation of the once-powerful, indeed once *exclusively* powerful, Christian religion as abysmal failure. Over against this kind of defeatism, I like to quote Albert van den Heuvel, a Dutch theologian, who said that "the real humiliation of the church is its refusal to be humilitated."[1]

And may I cite another source, whom I shall identify after the quotation, because otherwise you might not believe it:

> My thesis is this: In so far as our outlook is really based on today, and looking towards tomorrow, the present situation of Christians can be characterized as that of a *diaspora*; and this signifies... a "must" from which we may and must draw conclusions about our behavior as Christians.
>
> When [I] say that we have the right to make a cool, dispassionate reckoning with the fact that the Church is a *diaspora*, we mean, understanding it rightly, *the very opposite of resignation and defeatism.* If we once have the courage to give up our defence of the old facades which have nothing or very little behind them; if we cease to maintain, in public, the pretense of a universal Christendom; if we stop straining every nerve to get *everybody* baptized, to get *everybody* married in church ar.d onto our registers (even when success means only, at bottom, a victory for tradition, custom and ancestry, not for true faith and interior conviction); if, by letting all this go, we visibly relieve Christianity of the burdensome impression that it accepts responsibility for everything that goes on under this Christian top-dressing, the impression that Christianity is *natura*

[1] *The Humiliation of the Church* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1967), prologue.

> *sua* a sort of Everyman's Religious Varnish, a folk-religion (at the same level as that of folk-costumes)—*then* we can be free for real missionary adventure and apostolic self-confidence.[2]

I have just cited the most highly respected Roman Catholic theologian of our era, Karl Rahner. That such a voice—not the maverick Hans Küng, but the solidly, if wonderfully imaginative Catholic, Rahner—could offer such an almost-Kierkegaardian counsel is both a wonder and, for me, a source of enormous encouragement. One wishes that the Roman magisterium, which in the face of the downfall of Communism now entertains the thought of re-Catholicizing Europe, would pay attention to this voice from the recent past.

We must stop thinking of the reduction of Christendom as a tragedy! We must learn to interpret it, not on the basis of the imperialistic criteria established by centuries of theological and ecclesiastical triumphalism in the West, but on the basis of the original source, the Bible, and the Christian minorities throughout history that have listened carefully to that source. All the metaphors for the disciple community in the newer Testament (and they are extensions of concepts like election from the older) are minority metaphors: salt, yeast, light, a city set on a hill—but not modern New York or Chicago; little flocks here and there. Not in his wildest dreams (except as temptation!) did Jesus of Nazareth ever envisage such phenomena as the Holy Roman Empire or the United States of America as 'a Christian country' or... "megachurches"!

And there is a fine and demonstrable logic behind his preference for minorities, as well as millennia of Jewish wisdom; for, given the conditions of human history and human sin, there are things that only minorities can or will do—including tending the victims of the majorities, the crucified people. And the majorities *always* create victims.

Let us be quite honest with ourselves: reflecting dispassionately on the long history of Christendom, one generalization colors the whole experience, namely, that the fundamental mandate under which established Christianity in all of its many forms, legal or cultural, has operated, and has had to operate, is the mandate to serve its host-culture well and faithfully. Established religion may be allowed to play the role of moralist (provided it does not go so far as Savonorola!), or the role of the compassionate binder of wounds (provided it does not go so far as Francis and expect the whole Christian *society* to become such a community of compassion), or the role of educator (provided it does not educate the people too unjudiciously in Scripture, so that they begin to question for example the whole institution of property—as happened with Wyclif and his Lollards). In short, the Constantinian church has been permitted its little excesses of spirituality here and there, but in the long haul it must *confirm* and not

We must stop thinking of the reduction of Christendom as a tragedy!

[2] Karl Rahner, S.J., *Mission and Grace*, Vol. I, trans. Cecily Hastings (London, Melbourne and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 1-55. Italics mine.

call in question the main pursuits of its host. And that applies, whether the host is explicitly 'the State', as in the old *de jure* establishments of Europe, or more nebulously 'the dominant culture' with its political, economic, and ethical dimensions, as in the *de facto* establishments of 'New World' forms of the church. This is the yoke of Constantine—and it has not been easy! It has been burdensome, particularly, for those who remembered that the yoke they were called to take upon themselves was that of Jesus Christ!

But the point is: precisely that Constantinian yoke is being—and in principle, if not quite in practice, has already been—lifted from our shoulders, if we will only realize it. In other words: The reduced and probably-soon-to-be-reduced-further oldline churches of North America are *free*, and in a way that they have never been before, even when they spoke much about their freedom, the separation of church and state, and all the rest. We are free, if we will accept it, to evolve a community, and a theology, and an ethic that is faithful to our own foundations and authentic sources, and does not have always to look over its shoulder to find out whether it is acceptable to the governing authorities or the dominant social classes or the educational and other elites and all the rest.

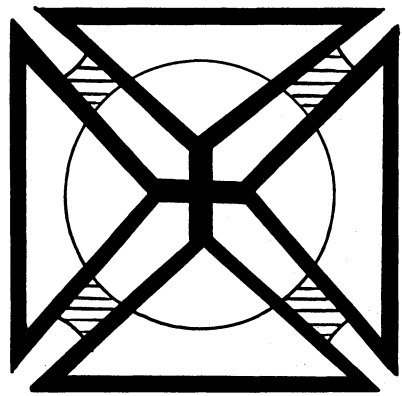
We are free, also, to form our own associations and alliances with whomever we choose, based upon their compatibility with or need for what we, out of our peculiar heritage, have to offer. We do not have to court only the institutions and classes and individuals who are deemed important and influential. We may make friends with some of the critics and even perceived enemies of our governing economic and political structures—not out of spite or love of protestation, but because of the truth that is in these voices from the outside. We too are now (almost) outsiders, if we will only notice the fact; and outside, on the edges of the imperium, we may find all kinds of other people and groupings with whom, in some genuine sense, we may make common cause. For we are not being freed just to become a ghetto, and to sulk on the sidelines, but to find, in our freedom, a new responsibility—responsibility to Jesus Christ, and therefore to all of those in whom Jesus Christ's face is to be seen and the voice of the Good Shepherd is to be heard.

The old Karl Barth wrote something that I love and by which I am daily comforted: "Theology... demands free people."[3] In a moment I am going to speak about our need for theology, and how in my opinion we are in a position, now, perhaps for the first time in North America, to become a real theological community. But "theology demands free people," and so before we can make good the possibility of genuine theology on this continent, which has been a notoriously colonial and borrowing province of the church where theology is concerned, we shall have to realize more fully that we really are free. We do not have to please anybody outside our own community of discipleship; we do not have to confirm anything or legitimate anything or prevent anything extraneous to God's love and providence from falling apart. We are free from the yoke of Constantine. We are free to take up the yoke of Christ, which is (by comparison) easy. It is easy, for one thing, because, bearing it, we can feel at last authentic, 'for real'—true, and not imposters whose rhetoric is continuously betrayed by our deeds and our associations.

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[3] *A Karl Barth Reader*, ed. Roland Joachim Erler and Reiner Marquard (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 112.

Evidences of our freedom



There are already, I believe, some indicators of the freedom that belongs to the post-Constantinian church. We could speak in this connection about what transpired in eastern Europe when Christianity was forcibly and legally denied its established status—how it functioned, for that very reason, as an alternative system of meaning, a framework of critical vigilance for truth and humanity; how it became in time the wise and peaceable organizer of the protest that led, in 1989-90, to the breaking down of an oppressive political regime. *Die Wende* [The Changes!]. Or we could speak of the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec, the most Constantinian of churches on this continent until three decades ago, when the so-called Quiet Revolution ended the hegemony of the church and of its political and economic collaborators; and yet this same "humiliated" church has permitted itself to be humiliated and has assumed, in the society, a servant role that is genuine and not just rhetorical. Or we could speak of courageous and imaginative Christian experiments like Sojourners, or Holden Village, or the deliberate down-sizing of bureaucratic and physical structures on the part of the Lutheran Church in Canada and many other denominations. And so forth.

But I think that the most concrete evidence of the new freedom for ministry that is present in our ecclesiastical context is the incorporation, in all of the old historic denominations of this continent, of those countercultural or protesting elements to which I made some reference in my first address: namely, movements and groups representative of concerns that have been peripheral to or excluded from the program of the greater society; voices that are raised for the silent or silenced or muted voices of persons and classes of persons who have been in one degree or another victimized by the kinds of pursuits, rewards and punishments, and general value-system favored by the dominant segments of our context. The fact that racial and ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, homosexual men and women, immigrants, the poor, the handicapped, single parents, battered women, the unemployed, and others pushed to the sidelines in the onrush of what can still be counted 'the middle class majority' have been able to find a forum in these old, formerly 'establishment' churches; the fact that in all of these churches, partly on account of their familiarity through world-mission with the peoples of the developing world, there are informed and sustained efforts to make the poor of the world present to this still-relatively-affluent society of ours in a way that most secular agencies cannot; the fact, in particular, that women, newly conscious of their more subtle exclusion and determined to realize their full humanity in a still-patriarchal and male-dominated public world have found an openness in these old churches the like of which they cannot count upon in the business and professional world and in most other social strata: such facts of contemporary church

life in these denominations I believe to be strong indicators of our readiness to grasp hold of the freedom that is available to those who no longer have to buttress the status quo. On the sidelines, the churches discover other sidelined people.

On the sidelines, the churches discover other sidelined people.

The status of these others within the churches is of course also indicative of our *hesitation* to take up the position of the free but dis-established community of discipleship. We manifest a certain nervousness still about the presence in the sanctuary of many who, throughout the centuries of Christendom, could never have been found there—not at the center, anyway. For example: all of our denominations have been deeply unsettled by the question of the ordination of homosexual persons, that is, of those who openly admit their orientation. It is not, I think, so much a problem of homophobia as it is the recognition that such an affirmation symbolizes and makes very clear—clearer than we wish!—our readiness to go against the stream of established moral norms for the sake of a justice that transcends our moral norms. Nevertheless, however tentatively, homosexual persons have been received in most of our congregations, and in a way astonishing to any of us who remember the extent to which that was "the love that dared not speak its name." And, *mutatis mutandis*, this would have to be said of most of the other formerly marginalized groups to which I have referred.

What I must go on now to say should not, and I hope will not, be heard as a criticism of this new openness of the old churches to such concerns and special causes. I want unambiguously to affirm and support this Christian inclusion of the socially excluded, and to laud its role in changing the ethos of these old churches. It represents (I have said in my first address) the most concrete evidence we have, in these denominations, of their readiness to relinquish the yoke of Constantine and take up the yoke of Christ.

But one thing concerns me, and it has to do not with the special interest or issue-oriented groups themselves but with the rest of us, who seem to me too prone to place upon these groups and the interests that they represent the whole burden of creating life and thought and action within our congregations and denominational structures. Our problem is certainly not that we are being overwhelmed by feminists and environmentalists and rights activists; our problem, rather, is that the churches are failing to pursue with an enthusiasm equal to that of these protesting elements in their midst the still more inclusive task of developing a ministry to the greater society—and I mean *the very society on whose periphery they now exist!*

Yes! For the purpose of the *de facto dis*establishment of the once-established churches of this continent is not that they should *abandon* the dominant (yes) middle-class culture that was once their mainstay but that they should acquire a sufficient distance from that culture to be able to engage it with something more than stained-glass versions of its own values and pursuits! We are being denied the immediacy of cohabitation with that culture, not be-

cause it is unclean and irredeemable, but because its redemption depends upon a judgment and a mercy that must come from outside the value-system that it so tenaciously clings to. We are being liberated from religious bondage to middle-class morality, bourgeois transcendence and unlimited free-enterprise economics, not so that we can hive off into little communities of countercultural self-righteousness, but so that we may assume a new kind of responsibility for the people who are our neighbors and the society to which, as citizens, we also belong.

When, therefore, we allow the programs and emphases of our churches to be preoccupied with special interests and issues; when our discourse as denominations becomes dominated by tempests and trends that are fodder for the most irresponsible preferences of the media; when we allow ourselves to be polarized and fragmented by moral questions that achieve a life of their own and no longer drive us to deeper biblical and theological reflection; when we pursue matters of justice for specific minorities and do not just as diligently seek for theologies that probe the broad human and societal traumas of our context, we forfeit the freedom that we have, now, to undertake a vital public ministry in a society that, in fact, badly needs some of the wisdom that can be derived from the tradition of Jerusalem. Instead of complaining about the simplism and repressiveness of the Christian Right, we must all ask ourselves why so many Americans and Canadians who are seeking (as Michael Lerner has said) "a framework of meaning" are attracted to that camp. What is it that they are not finding in our communities and our versions of the faith? The freedom we are being given will not have been fully appropriated by us until, beyond our openness and our activism, we have found a gospel that speaks to the deepest spiritual condition of our contemporaries. In the enucleation of such a gospel, the representatives of particular social and ethical concerns have a vital role to play; but the search for gospel must become a search of *the whole community of discipleship*, including those who do not find themselves amongst the special interest groups or the visibly marginalized. For they are apt to understand, better than the marginalized, why the dominant culture struggles so desperately to retain its dominance; what secret fears lie beneath its frantic bid for security; and what subtle forms of humiliation are affecting even those, today, who seem to have 'made it.'

3. Why the theology of the cross?

What I am suggesting, and with this point I conclude, is that the great task of the formerly mainline churches of this continent is to become *theologically* active, alive, and thoughtful. Thought-full! For the only way that we can respond faithfully and pertinently to our context is to become sensitive enough to the pain that permeates our society that we can fashion an evangel that is healing.

It is for that reason that, since the late sixties, I have pursued the theological tradition that Luther named (he did not invent it) *theologia crucis*. Why is this thin, minority, submerged tradition pertinent to our context? To answer that question has been my ambition in all that I have written, and therefore the most foolhardy part of this lecture will undoubtedly be my attempt to answer it now, in five minutes or so! But fools rush in!

As I have maintained in my first address, the fundamental weakness of our society, a society based on the precepts of

Modernity, is that it manifests a consistent and debilitating incapacity to absorb negation. Why do people rush to grasp hold of religious or secular systems of meaning, including the most ludicrous, the most insipid, but sometimes also often dangerous cults and fads? Why do they complain so bitterly (again I quote Lerner) that "the only thing wrong about their world is the people who are telling them there's something wrong"?[4] Why do they demand more and more evidence of the fundamental rightness of the American Dream, and vote into office persons who promise to give it back to them p.d.q.? Why do they adore Forrest Gump and turn Jesus and his story into the original version of Horatio Alger? Why do they devote themselves to the cult of Health, and shun the HIV-positive, and avoid old age like the plague, and deny death, and make their dead appear to be living? Why do they suffer from future shock? Because, quite simply, quite humanly, they do not know what to do with all that negation. They were reared on the 'ever-onward-and-upward' philosophy of the Modern world view, reduced, in most cases, to homespun slogans. Every television commercial still reinforces it. Every popular evangelist gives it off in biblicistic rhetoric. So if there is something wrong with the world, it must be due to others, unbelievers, atheists, abortionists, welfare bums, feminists, gays; or else it must be a matter of *personal* failure. Ironically, most of the failed farmers and laid-off workers and forcibly retired top managers will blame themselves, intuitively, before they ask any political questions. As a people, we do not understand either finitude or sin, either pathos or tragedy.

And, as Wendy Farley has argued in her book, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*,[5] unfortunately the religion that has accompanied us all this way, Christianity, has for the most part forgotten the negations that are there, clearly acknowledged, painstakingly described, at the very center of the Judeo-Christian story, and how, for pre-Modern civilization in the West, those very biblical negations served as positive points of reference for *life's* negations. For the majority forms of the faith that have found a place in this New World have been in the service of Modernity; this was the condition of their establishment. So instead of allowing the cross at the center to retain its real and symbolic centrality, they opted for a resurrectionism that automatically and predictably negated that every negation and thus they produced, at the religious level, a mirror image of the ideology of progress and success that has so seduced the soul of America.

But this ideology has failed—and failed just as miserably as its Marxist cousin, though less conspicuously. It was bound to fail, because the test of any system of meaning is its capacity continuously and unflinchingly to engage and dialogue with that which negates, which the Scriptures name "Death." And so long as life under the conditions of "the Fall" continues; so long as the consummation of Christ's hidden triumph is *awaited*, there will be negation, there will be suffering, there will be death, there will be failure and uncertainty and pain.

The gospel of the cross does not require us to repress the knowledge of all that pain, that darkness, but to accept the grace that allows us to trust the God who is there in the midst of it—*pro nobis*, achieving victories from within, hidden (as Luther would say) beneath their apparent opposite.

And I would say to you, as one outside the historic Lutheran camp, that you and all

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[4] See p. 409 n. 9 in this issue.

[5] Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990.

As a people, we do not understand either finitude or sin, either pathos or tragedy.

of those churches that have retained some memory, however faint, of that 'theology of the cross' bear towards the rest of us and towards the dominant culture that today rushes after false gods and cheap grace a high responsibility. For we, who have favored religious messages that accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, and have little room for "the ambiguities of history" (Niebuhr), need nothing so much as a theological vantage-point from which it is possible "to call the thing what it is."[6] Or, to borrow language from the German physicist and lay-theologian, Carl Friedrich von Weizsacker, we need a frame of reference that permits us to be orientated towards *truth* [*Wahrheitsorientierung*] and less towards superficial "happiness."[7] As the secular thinker, Conner Cruise O'Brien, has recently said, "The enlightenment *we* need is an enlightenment that is aware of the dark, especially the dark in ourselves"[8]—and (I would add) therefore in a position to see the authentic light that shines in the darkness.

But I would also like to say to you: we do not need this enlightenment only as doctrine, as soteriological principle, as Christology and ecclesiology and eschatology; we do not need another 'theology of': we need theology, namely, an informed and passionate witness to the Word of the living God, which means, if you are to help us acquire it, that you, too, will have to become very free. Free (may I say?) from your nervousness about ecumenicity, from your comfortable historic moorings in ethnic groupings and traditions, from a doctrinalism that sometimes functions as a refuge from the confusions of the present, from the piety that too easily reduces the cross to a matter of personal solace or a symbol of Nordic melancholy. You have so much in your tradition that is needed in our time and place! For—to repeat—the test of any system of meaning is its capacity to make itself vulnerable to that which negates. And so much Christianity (especially, it seems to me, in the Anglo-Saxon world, my world) has been so busy repressing and dismissing the negative in favor of an undialectical positive, that we have lost the knack of knowing how to face 'Death' head on without either heroics or sentimentality. Only the theology of the cross, extricated from the dangers in which it, too, has clothed itself historically, can help us find in the darkness light, in the midst of Death life eternal.

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[6] Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 21.

[7] In conversation.

[8] *On The Eve of the Millenium* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1994), 30.

The Church and Its Ministry: Responding to the Changing Context in Worship, Preaching, Education, Outreach

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If the demands of the first and second titles that I was assigned give internal evidence of malevolent intent on the part of the planners, this third title caps them both. I have on my desk a thousand-page manuscript, the many-times-revised draft of the third volume of my trilogy, in which I am trying to figure out what to say about the worship, preaching, education, and outreach—in short, "confessing the faith"—today. I can only plead for mercy, then, if I essay within this little hour to present cogent or even 'interesting' proposals for all these areas of contemporary ecclesiastical concern.

In the course of what I shall say, I hope at least to touch upon all four of the specific matters incorporated in this title. But instead of doing so in a direct and sequential way, I am going to state, and go a little way towards defending, four mini-theses that, I believe, relate directly or indirectly to the basic concerns expressed in the assigned title. All four theses presuppose the analysis of church and society that I have at least hinted at in the previous addresses, and they are addressed to the question implicit in this title, namely: What practical steps can be taken by us here and now to respond faithfully to the opportunities for intentional change that are present in our context?

Communities of discipleship within the churches.

My first proposal, to state it in thesis form, is that we seek to establish, in and around existing congregations and parishes, small communities of serious Christian commitment, which would provide a forum for those who wish to pursue a Christian life more challenging than that of Sunday morn-

ing church attendance, and, perhaps, serve as catalysts to greater commitment amongst the Sunday-morning Christians.

This idea is of course by no means new. Its roots could be traced to post-Constantinian monasticism. And it was given concrete expression in 18th century Protestantism amongst the Pietists, under the nomenclature *ecclesiola in ecclesia* [a little church within the church]. It is exemplified, partly, in the house-church concept. Karl Rahner, whom I quoted in the second address, borrows from Marxism the concept of the 'cell' to make essentially the same point.[1] While this concept of small communities of serious discipleship within the larger religious collectivity is not without its dangers (there is no non-dangerous ecclesiology!), most of these dangers can be anticipated and guarded against if they are recognized and built into the self-awareness of such 'cells'; and, above all, if it is remembered that these minorities, like the church as a whole, are *means* and not ends.

Although the concept has, as I have said, a long history, its significance only becomes obvious at the point where the larger, nominally-Christian body has become less automatic, less meaningful, less viable. Which is to say: Now!

George Lindbeck has described our North American ecclesiastical 'Now' in this way: we are "in the awkwardly intermediate stage of having once been culturally established but... not yet clearly disestablished."[2] I have not come across a more accurate one-sentence definition of our ecclesiological context. I would only want to qualify the latter phrase, "not yet clearly disestablished." It depends where you live, I think. In Canada, which in this respect is more European, our effective disestablishment seems to me quite clear indeed. In the U.S.A., and particularly the southern portion thereof, it is less clear, and even deceptively unclear. Yet the process of de-Constantinianization is in some irrevocable way the reality for all of us, Catholic and Protestant, in the two northern nations of this continent.

And what this means for our present thesis is that there is, and will for an indefinite period of time continue to be, a carry-over from the Christendom past of business-as-usual, Sunday-morning, culture-Christianity. The churches will have still to devote some of their energies to the work that this entails. Ministers will still be called upon to baptize, marry, and bury people who have no real connections with Christian faith. Christmas and Easter and a few lesser feasts will call forth many who have maintained little interest in either the faith or the church. Civic communities will seek clergy to bless their various projects and undertakings. And my own feeling is that such tasks should be accepted, usually, with cheerfulness, compassion and understanding.

But we have reached a point when this kind of demand upon the limited energies and dwindling resources of congregations and clergy ought to assume a less prominent place in ecclesiastical *prioritizing*. For one thing, if the clergy and core laity of congregations continue to neglect the deeper study of the faith, meaningful worship, and involvement with those truly in need, they will have less and less to bring with them to the conventional tasks of *Kulturchristentum*. At this point in time, small Christian cells of learning, prayer and diaconal work in the world are not just an addendum to parish life but the spiritual catalysts without which

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[1] In his essay, "On the Significance in Redemptive History of the Individual Member of the Church," *Mission and Grace*, 170.

[2] *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 134.



all conventional cultic activity can be nothing more than routine and one-dimensional.

Rabbi Irving Greenberg of New York City, in an essay that ought to be read by all Christians who sense something of the diaspora situation we are now entering, has proposed that a parallel exists between what Christians are now experiencing and what happened to Judaism with the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. What occurred then was the birth of rabbinic Judaism—that is, of the synagogue, a place of learning and prayer, where dispersed Jews were enabled to hold onto the wisdom that had been handed over to them and, on the basis of this 'traditioning,' to perform their humanizing vocation in the world, despite the world's (mostly 'Christian'!) resentment of them.[3]

In this as in many other things, there is no better way for Christians to discover how to live in the diaspora situation than to learn more about how the Jews have lived in that situation throughout the triumphalistically Christian centuries, and still today. Above all, we might learn something about the connection between disestablishment and prophetic responsibility, between truth and suffering. It is not accidental that Judaism, which has never been allowed to be imperial (though it has been tempted, too), but which has had to live precisely "on the edge of empire," has achieved a remarkably humanizing role within a society that excluded and persecuted it. (I recently viewed again Ingmar Bergmann's late film, *Fannie and Alexander*. Look at it and note the humanizing presence of the Jew in the midst of an officially Lutheran but increasingly neo-pagan culture.)

There are people and groups of people in and around every congregation who are ready for something more demanding by way of discipleship than what is encouraged, or even possible, within the structures and mores of churches that are still playing—and in some sense having to play—the role of culture religion.

The minister as theologian and pastor

My second thesis is that we must recover and normalize the classical Protestant understanding of the minister as theologian and pastor—though without the false status-consciousness that was attached to this role in the heyday of Protestant orthodoxy.

This thesis too relates, historically, to the experience of Judaism. The synagogue requires a rabbi. The rabbi is not a manager, or an organizer, or a paid professional who does everything so that the laity will be relieved of most ministerial obligations. The rabbi is a teacher and pastor.

Classically—that is, in both the Patristic and Reformation ecclesiologies—that is what Christians, too, have understood to be the role of the clergy. But with the estab-

[3] "The Relationship of Judaism and Christianity: Toward a New Organic Model," *Perspectives*, Quarterly Review; Vol. 4, No. 4 (Winter, 1984), 1-11.

lishment of the Christian religion, the office of priest began quite naturally and even necessarily to be determined by societal patterns of authority and organization.

In our context, that has meant by the business and professional world. Nowhere is the model of the marketplace in the church more evident than in our assumptions about the office of ministry. Somehow, we have come to want managers, not theologians, pastors and priests. And this, it seems to me, is one of the greatest barriers to any viable Christian future. For congregations that are not helped to know the scriptures and traditions of the faith by leaders who have been adequately equipped to assist them in this, and who instead spend their time running offices and meetings and playing psychotherapist can only end by becoming more and more confused about the reason why any of this churchly activity ought to be continued.

When I consider the fact that great minds like Augustine of Hippo, and Anselm of Canterbury, and Thomas Aquinas, and Teresa of Avila, and Simone Weil, and Reinhold Niebuhr were held in thrall by the depths of wisdom of this 'tradition of Jerusalem,' it seems to me appalling how little sound teaching, how little *knowledge*, even (not to speak of wisdom!) is to be found in our churches today. And it is appalling especially because there is an almost palpable readiness, on the part of significant minorities in and around all of these churches, for greater depths of understanding than are available in the usual homily or sloganized moral exhortation or half-hearted Bible study.

Sitting in the pews, as I have done throughout my teaching career, I am driven again and again to the conclusion that we do not believe any longer in the preaching of the Word of God—in (surely I may say this in a Lutheran setting!) the 'sacrament' of the Word. Ministers in most pulpits appear to be slightly embarrassed about being there. Probably they feel naked and ineffectual without all the gimmickry of modern communications to back them up—without that marvellous hallow of light behind them, the secular nimbus of the vacuum tube; without the definitive frame around their persons; without the teleprompter to make their pronouncements seem spontaneous and articulate. If they are up-and-coming, they try to pack as many one-liners as possible into their speeches. They avoid like the plague dialectical thought about any subject, and by point three they must have cleared away any questions introduced in points one and two. Above all, they dare not exceed the fifteen-minute 'clip'—a thing that always reminds me of what my dear teacher of homiletics, Paul Scherer of blessed memory, used to say to us: "Sermonettes make Christianettes."

The same thing pertains to worship. Sitting there in the pew, cynic that I am, I keep thinking, "So, it is true after all what those death-of-God people said: God is dead, and we have come here to entertain one another with the memory of him, or her, or it. And unfortunately the entertainment is mostly boring." I hasten to add that I normally do not worship in Lutheran churches, which are no doubt quite different in this respect.

What I am suggesting, however—and not as a carping criticism but as a means, I hope, of provoking greater originality and courage—is that in our preaching, as in our worship, as in our entire social intercourse, we are being programmed by the idiot box. Perhaps what I am saying is totally inapplicable to you personally, but I sense that somehow, clergy as a class have been so humiliated by the slick world of communications that we think our only chance is to try to appropriate and imitate it. But I would

We are dying of spiritual and intellectual starvation, we are drowning in the shallow waters of pop-culture; plunge us, please, into the baptismal depths of truth!

like to say to you that there are some of us out here—and we are not all aging professors of theology!—who go to church partly just in order to *escape* from this damned world of easy, stupid, deceptive talk and 'music' that is just noise! We are in desperate need of *thoughtful* words, and of the silence and the reverence by which all thoughtful words and deeds must needs be surrounded—like the 'rests' that Mozart said were the most important elements in his music. As a common scriptural plaque appearing on the preacher's side of old-fashioned 19th century pulpits reads, "Sir, we would see Jesus!" We do not need any more moral hype and crass wit and canned laughter and half-literate stories. We are dying of spiritual and intellectual starvation, we are drowning in the shallow waters of pop-culture; plunge us, please, into the baptismal depths of truth! And do not be afraid if you, like Moses, are not a stand-up comedian or, like Jeremiah, feel you would rather not say those things publicly!

And also, please, be pastors! Too many of you have been conditioned by that other great influence upon all the helping professions, therapy, to think that what we want from you if we get so far as to show up in your 'office' (sic!) is some kind of free psychotherapeutic counselling. Sometimes no doubt we do. But more often than you are likely to think, we want and need something quite different from all that. For one thing, we get enough pop-psychology from every sit-com and 'soap' and *Reader's Digest*. For the most part, we are not looking for quick-fixes or answers to anything, but for a place to which to refer our deepest questions. Also, you might ask yourself why some do *not* show up in your 'office'. Let me quote again Karl Rahner:

> If we live in the *diaspora*, then the office-job type of pastor will have to die out. For the only service available from the bureaucratic mentality, which does still exist, is one that has no real care for the public: a service of an institution, not of people. Have we the courage to break away from bureaucracy, office hours, routine, impersonal, nonfunctional organizational clutter and clerical machinery—and just do pastoral work? If a [human being] can find in another [human being] a real Christian, with a heart, someone who cares about him or her and is really delivering the message of God's mercy towards us sinners, then more is happening than if we can hear the impressive and unmistakable hum of bureaucratic machinery. Let us get away from the tyranny of statistics. For the next hundred years they are always going to be against us, if we ever let them speak out of turn. One real conversion in a great city is something more splendid than the spectacle of a whole remote village going to the sacraments.[4]

It would be taking a giant step towards a faithful and viable Christian future if

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[4] *Mission and Grace*, 47-48.

[5] Harper Collins Publishers, 10 East 53rd St., New York, N.Y. 10022; 1992.

ministers and priests stopped patterning themselves on other professionals and became the teaching elders, spiritual guides, and sensitive pastors that we have said, all along, we are. If I were teaching a course in pastoral theology in some seminary today, I would spend a whole semester with my students reading and pondering Georges Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*, or Shusaku Endo's *Silence*, or Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*—with maybe *Elmer Gantry* on the side, for contrast. I would intersperse these literary media with graphic art—Rembrandt, Rouault, Käthe Kollwitz, and the provocative etchings of Dierdre Luzwick, whose book *Endangered Species* I think of as a kind of graphic commentary on the theology of the cross.[5] And we would sit quietly during many classes and just listen to Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, or perhaps Stockhausen's *'Auschwitz.'* What I mean is this: we have got to learn how to translate the theology of the cross into our concept of ministry. Our assumptions in that area are far too consistently uncritical applications of the theology of glory!

Alternatives to stipended ministry

My third thesis, which you can consider a sub-thesis of the second, is that we need seriously to explore alternatives to stipended professional ministry. For thirty years I have been asking, Can we even entertain the notion of there being viable models of an educated and trained ministry that do not assume as their most conspicuous economic basis that clergy, like teachers or bankers or social workers, will all be salaried, with housing allowances and travel allowances and pension plans and the works? I do not propose anything so radical as that every clergy person ought to make a living by some means other than being 'the minister.' But why, I wonder, have we been so very hesitant even to *experiment* along these lines? Or why, when experiments are undertaken (which they sometimes have been) are the successful ones the best kept secrets in the churches? For years and years—ever since I can remember!—there has been talk in all the churches of "tent-making ministries" and the like. But whenever such things are actually tried, they garner very little material or spiritual encouragement, and are seldom even heard about.

Some weeks ago, I received a 'hurt' letter from a minister of the ELCA who told me that he felt betrayed. He had been devoted to my writings for years, and then he encountered this idea of mine (as if it were mine alone!) that younger people considering ministry today ought seriously to entertain the idea of training for a double vocation, and that not all clergy need to be salaried. How could I do this to him?

I fired off, I fear, a rather defensive missive, in which I said to him, in effect, "Dear Friend, if you had to wait for me to communicate to you a question that has been blowing in the wind of Christendom for nearly a century; a question that is unavoidable by readers of the newer Testament who have enough imagination to contemplate the fact that the chief apostle to the Gentiles earned his keep by making tents, then what, pray, have they been teaching you in these seminaries?"

Soon he responded. He said he could feel the heat from my typewriter; he actually thanked me for being candid. And he said (I do not quote verbatim, I paraphrase what I think I needed to hear)—he said something that concretizes the background for my final observation: "You Christian intellectuals and teachers get off all these theological and biblical and historical and

ethical ideas, but you have not prepared us for the world and the parish that we actually encounter from day to day. You yourselves manage on the whole to live the good life; and whether you like it or not, you are our models. If you do not tell us about, and exemplify for us, the ambiguities—at least the ambiguities!—of preaching the word of the cross whilst living a very, very middle-class existence, how do you expect us to go in for all these new kinds of ministry?"

He was right.

Rethinking theological education

Accordingly, my fourth thesis is that in this awkward phase between "never having been quite established" and "being not quite disestablished," Christian educators have the obligation of asking whether their institutions are educating spiritual leaders for the post-Constantinian church, or do our curricula still presuppose a Constantinian context? They—we!—must also surely ask ourselves whether we are prepared to live more nearly as we teach.

One wonders where to begin and where to end in elaborating such an hypothesis; there are so many things to consider. Let me start with this: I suspect that most seminaries and theological colleges and schools are still oriented more explicitly towards the Christian establishment that Lindbeck says we never quite were than they are towards the diaspora that we are becoming. In our classes in Bible, History, Theology, and even Ethics and Practical Theology, we are still quietly assuming that the people we are teaching are going to spend the rest of their lives in manses and parsonages and rectories much like the ones occupied by the ministers of our youth; that they will be doing essentially the same things; that they will encounter essentially the same problems, and so forth. To some extent, we have learned how to incorporate into our presentation of the subject-matter of our ancient disciplines a consciousness of the male-dominance of the whole tradition and a recognition of its Western coloring; but we have not, I think, become sufficiently conscious of the reality that there is very little of the whole tradition that has escaped the conditioning imposed upon it by its need to function as the official religion of empire, one empire after another. We ourselves, even if we have read Kierkegaard and Overbeck, to mention only two such ugly ducklings, have not yet absorbed the fact that when, in the fourth Century C.E., Christianity was transmuted into the religion of empire, assumptions and requirements were imported into every part of it, and that we are still living with them and importing them, silently, into our own reading of the tradition.

Secondly, I have felt for a long time that, beyond the subject-matter of what we teach, most theological curricula fail to recognize, also, the actual profile of the classes we are teaching. There are splendid exceptions; but have we not all caught ourselves, as teachers, assuming that the people listening to us are mostly affable young men, fresh out of college, white, bright, and polite, though a little wet behind the ears, with enough background in history, philosophy, literature and the arts to understand our subtle allusions, and enough familiarity with academic life to be able to follow without difficulty our long lectures on... whatever? Whereas, in fact, there are not only many women, and not only some non-Caucasians, and not only some grey heads in those classrooms of ours, but the average age is 35 or so, and a high percentage of our classes will not have had any philosophy or history, formally, and quite a few will find it enor-

mously taxing to follow a discursive lecture on Augustine for a whole hour because that has not been the world of their experience, though they are by no means stupid! More positively stated, how many of our curricula actually reflect the fact that while these students, candidates for ministry, may not have acquired Masters degrees, or even perhaps Bachelors of Arts or Science, they are bringing to these classrooms a wealth and variety of experience in the world, and of life itself, that would have been unheard of thirty years ago when theological classrooms were full of the affable young men who were not going to be lawyers or doctors or merchant chiefs?

Perhaps we are trying to make the adjustment to this post-Constantinian fact as it stares back at us in our classrooms, but the patterns of education for ministry and priesthood are as entrenched as are any other aspects of established Christianity, fifteen centuries in the making. And until we ourselves gain a greater psychic as well as intellectual grasp of the great transformation that has overtaken Christendom, we shall not, I think, build into our institutions of learning the changes that are mandated by this transformation.

Thirdly (and here I will end), the churches and their professional educators are going to have to apply to themselves what they, at their best, ask of clergy and students of theology: namely, whether it is not time to seriously explore alternatives to theological education in institutions that mirror, and vie with, and in some cases are integrally bound up with secular institutions of learning—the more prestigious the better! And I say this as a professor of McGill University, the Harvard of Canada, that is, as one who teaches Christian theology right in the midst of the allegedly most excellent university in our country!

I know, therefore, that it is easy for me to say this—and especially as one who is about to retire! But one of the things about retiring is that one is permitted not only to glimpse but even sometimes to speak... truth! I confess, therefore, that all the while that I have taught theology in my splendid university, and two others before it, I have wondered: Can it really be done? Can I teach *Christian* theology—well, even the theology of the cross!—in such a place, at such a time?

Whether I have in fact managed sometimes to do so, I shall leave to heaven. But whether what I have done, what my generation of theological teachers has done, in or alongside such institutions, can be or ought to be continued into the future, world without end, and continued as 'the norm,' I seriously doubt. For one thing, I do not know that the world and its institutions will allow it, the pluralism of the culture being what it is and is becoming; and I am by no means convinced that the church, if it is faithful, should desire it—not as the norm, in any case.

Perhaps romantically, but with enough realism, I think, to be evocative of thought that cannot be dismissed, I have held in my mind, ever since I first encountered him in 1949, the image of that young man, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose only significant seminary teaching occurred in an illegal community of prayer and suffering—a community that was not only "on the edge of empire" but the enemy of empire, hunted, and finally shut down. I wonder if at least part of the reason why that seminary at Finkenwalde achieved so very much in the lives of its young participants and in modern Christian history at large, and if at least part of the reason why it still haunts us, is that it had found a way, not only of following Jesus Christ, but of suffering with him and with 'crucified people' in his beloved world.

Response to Douglas John Hall

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Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Douglas John Hall's theological program, as set out in his two books, *Thinking the Faith* and *Professing the Faith*, is ambitious, expansive, visionary, welcome. It contains some much-needed correctives to some of the more problematic trends in American theology, not the least of which is a frequent lack of concrete commitment to the disciple community, the American church. Hall reminds all of us, quite rightly, that the pastor must be, in fact is by definition, a theologian. Perhaps even more importantly, he reminds those of us who teach and research in religion and theology, so-called "professional theologians," that the primary value of our own work is located in its service to the church and its people.

Lutheran readers will appreciate (hopefully) Hall's appropriation of traditionally Lutheran theological themes, such as the law/gospel dialectic and the theology of the cross. It's clear that Hall regards the law/gospel dialectic, as articulated by Luther and others, as important and useful for North American Christians today. And his commitment to a theology of the cross is evident on almost every page of *Thinking the Faith* and *Professing the Faith*, as well as in many of his earlier works. I'd like to think that my own appreciation for his use of these themes arises not out of a sense of denominational chauvinism (denominational chauvinism would not be appropriate here, for as Hall rightly reminds us, Luther did not invent the theology of the cross!), but because they work: they properly describe the dynamics of the relationship between the Triune God and the world. As Luther wrote in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, "The theology of glory calls evil good and good evil; the theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."

Having said this, I do think readers may want to ask whether Hall's use of these themes, particularly his use of the theology of the cross, is not so much a rearticulation as it is a significant variation on that theme. In *Thinking the Faith* Hall makes some preliminary remarks on Christology in the context of a discussion about the theological impact of Auschwitz. To quote,

> At the heart of this "abiding contempt" [for the Jews], there lies, not the (after all) rather uncouth charge against the Jews as "Christ Killers," but the monopolistic implications of our high Christology.

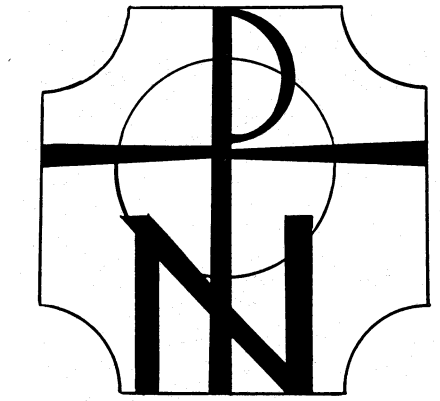
Hall concludes that this demands a radical rethinking of our high Christology, and he warns the reader that "this [rethinking] may be more agonizing than most Christians have yet envisaged." At this point in his theological agenda he and I would have to part company, if I correctly understand the implications of his remarks. But far more serious than a simple disagreement on low vs. high Christology is what I see as a serious compromise of the very power of his foundational theological theme, the theology of the cross. An authentic theology of *the* cross, as understood by Luther and others in the tradition, demands a high Christology. The definite article in that phrase is critical: it is not a theology of *a* cross, or a theology of crosses, but the particularity of that one cross that the Christian Church understands as crucial. Remember, there were three crosses on Golgotha that day, but only one has salvific implications: the one on which was crucified an individual who was both fully God and fully human. Without the particularity of that claim, what we are left with is not so much a theology of the cross as a theology of suffering, and Jesus becomes just another one of the good who died young.

There are two other aspects of Hall's work which I'd like to discuss: his commitment to the context and his concern with the Christian Right.

One of the most basic assumptions behind Hall's work is of course the need to do truly contextual theology in North America. Few theologians would object to this commitment. The difficulty rather lies in trying to ascertain which parts of the context are significant and which are superfluous. Hall outlines in some detail seven realities which he understands as definitive in the North American context: post-Constantinianism, religious pluralism, the theological impact of Auschwitz, Marxism and the revolution of the oppressed, the rebellion of nature in response to human exploitation of it, the nuclear crisis, and apocalyptic consciousness and the rise of religious simplism. I find the choice of these seven issues somewhat surprising. While they are important, most of them are not unique to the North American context but instead seem to have nearly global significance. I'd argue that there are several other factors which are much more specific to the American context and which have uniquely shaped the North American thoughtworld. Let me mention three that I think have been particularly influential:

1. The immigration mentality. The fact is that many, if not most, of the people who came to these shores voluntarily (remembering of course very clearly that a good number did *not* come of their own free will) came fleeing social chaos, economic misfortune, ethnic and racial persecution. One could argue that, initially, many of them came less as conquerors than as conquered. Furthermore, many of these people are still alive today, and their unique experience as immigrants has been and will continue to be imprinted upon the second and even third generations. So it's still accurate today to say that we are in many ways a nation of immigrants. If we want to understand the animating spirit of North America we would do well to ask how the immigrant experience has shaped its people, both individually and collectively.

2. Economic realities. The fact of the matter is that unlike most countries whose standards of living closely approximate ours, there is no real economic safety net for U.S. citizens. Millions of Americans know that through a variety of different circumstances they might at any time find themselves destitute. And many Americans still retain vivid memories of some of those circumstances: the Great Depression, the stock



market crash of '29, and most recently the crash of '87. The problem may not so much be that Americans are lacking in generosity and compassion, unwilling to give to alleviate the sufferings of others. Rather, the problem may be that the brutality of our economic system (savage capitalism as the French call it) grips the American people with a deep fear of economic destitution, and economic insecurity that cannot be overcome, no matter how much stuff one manages to accumulate in one's lifetime. In other words, it's possible that our economic system encourages in people a hoarding mentality: an obsession to accumulate as much as possible to cushion against that economic fall which may be only moments away; and, a fear that the cushion is never quite as big as it should be.

3. The media. Perhaps this is the most puzzling omission on Hall's list of significant contextual realities. The sociologist Wade Clark Roof, among others, reminds us that by the time the average North American Baby Boomer turned 15 years old, he or she had watched 12,000 to 15,000 hours of television. And it was one of Hall's fellow Canadians, Marshall McLuen, who first alerted us to the ways in which this most powerful of all mediums not only reflects the context but also creates it. A theology that has as its primary imperative the necessity of taking seriously the context must take seriously the ways in which the context and the populace have been, are being, and will continue to be artificially manipulated—primarily, we must add, for the sake of profit.

Finally, it is disappointing that Hall, like too many other Christians these days, can't seem to resist taking unnecessary potshots at the Christian Right. Hall seems to me to be overly harsh on the Christian Right, rather more so in *Thinking the Faith* than in the lectures we heard this week. This is not to say that I have particularly warm feelings for either Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson, or for their respective political agendas. Rather, it's simply the case that their follies are really no worse than those of "mainline" Christians. Earlier in the 20th century the spiritual ancestors of the Christian Right both retreated and were shoved to the periphery of American culture, particularly in the aftermath of the Scopes trial. For much of the 20th century they were fairly happy on the margins, playing the role of outsider. But in the last 25 or so years many from this group have overcome their long-standing aversion to any interaction with the wider culture, in order to assume greater responsibility for the direction in which that culture is moving. Whether or not we agree with their cultural diagnoses and the content of their policies, it seems to me that at least we ought to commend them for answering the call to be leaven in the lump. Yet too many other Christians (including Hall) who disagree with their goals tend to question their motives, suggesting that their political involvement is an unholy quest for power and social control, and that they have no right to occupy space in the public square.

Ironically, the fate of post-Constantinian, mainline Protestantism in the late 20th century is beginning to look a lot like the fate of fundamentalism in the early 20th century: both to be shoved and to retreat voluntarily to the sidelines of American culture. If this post-Constantinian trajectory continues, mainline Christians will increasingly find themselves relegated to the margins of North American culture and, like the Religious Right, may well encounter a good deal of hostility if they attempt to reassert and exert their influence on political processes, moral deliberations, and public policy development.

Unfortunately, Lutherans cannot escape the charge of hypocrisy here. Unlike other mainline denominations such as Presbyterians and Episcopalians, which have historically wielded much influence in American culture, Lutherans have never had much social influence at all. But there is evidence in our history that we too have stood on the sidelines and lusted for power and influence in American Culture, though we seem to have had little luck in attaining it. This lust is apparent, for example, in the writings of American Lutheran historians. In 1889 Henry Eyster Jacob's introduction to Edmund Wolf's *The Lutherans in America* stated,

> The American Lutheran Church's influence is destined to be felt far and wide beyond its own boundaries until it is able to take the position which belongs to it from its birthright, as the Mother Church of Protestantism. It has come to America to stay and to assert itself with all the power of its earlier days.

This lament for the lost birthright is not unique to Jacobs. It was still evident some 60 years later in Abdel Ross Wentz's introduction to *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America*. I call this the Lutheran Esau complex, our anguish at having lost our birthright in the transition from the Old World to the New, and our obsession to recover it and wield influence in this culture. Some would argue that this Esau complex is still operative among American Lutherans....

The point is, I think, that the follies of the Christian Right have been and will continue to be our follies, too. As Christians on this side of the second coming, we must realize that it is impossible for any of us in the disciple community to avoid being coopted, diverted, seduced by power, or silenced by our own fear or apathy. We would do well to learn from the mistakes of Christian sisters and brothers who are answering the call to be leaven in the lump, and in the process we must avoid the temptation to claim superior judgment. This side of the second coming, the disciple community, whether radical right, liberal left, or somewhere in between, will always struggle, unsuccessfully, in its attempt to be in the world but not of the world.

Response to Douglas John Hall

Edgar Krentz
Professor of New Testament
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Before I make any other comment let me say that Professor Hall impelled me into the reading of systematic theology, no small accomplishment on a subject like me, buried in the first centuries of the church as I am. And I am grateful for the transmigration into modernity. To that let me add that the lectures yesterday placed a veritable banquet before us, rich in ideas and metaphors, replete with references to data, and formulated with compelling intensity. We all owe Professor Hall thanks for his bringing us to a consideration of church, community, and theology at the end of the twentieth century. What do you do with that banquet? In most cases, eat it! And how do you prevent indigestion? Take a little wine for your stomach's sake. Rethinking the church in the face of change in society and church is a very large task. I hope to provide some wine for enjoyment and exhilaration, add a little oil and vinegar to the salad, and ask whether there might not be one or two ingredients that one might add to the salad—all from the small world of the early church in which I usually travel.

1. Professor Hall uses the strong picture of the death of the Constantinian age of the church. For a New Testament scholar that is, at least in one sense, not a frightening change. For the church in the post-Constantinian era finds itself close to the New Testament church that lived in the pre-Constantinian age, an age in which Christians found the society with its varied cultures strange, forbidding, and often hostile. Life at the edge of society was not foreign to the earliest church. The New Testament therefore presents an early case study in how the church responded to such an environment—which may increase its value as a guide today.

2. Change is inevitable. Not to change is nonetheless to change, since a changing context means a change in the significance of the text. There is no such thing as retaining the past by simply repeating it. Or maintaining the present behind the moat, glacis and walls of an ancient urban system of defense. Christianity began in rural, village Galilee. Jesus did not frequent the major urban centers there, Sepphoris, Tiberias, and the like. Nor did he—with rare exceptions—frequent the cities populated by non-Jews in the ten-city league of Greek cities (the Decapolis) or the largely non-Jewish Mediterranean littoral. Jesus did his ministry among village Jews. Yet within twenty-five years Christianity was an urban phenomenon within the Greek-

speaking cities of Syria, Asia Minor and Greece, to say nothing of Alexandria and Rome itself. That movement involved a change, most likely, in linguistic, religious and cultural environment more sharply divergent than anything that we have seen in our world. 1 Peter testifies to the need to change with changing environment, while John's Apocalypse is a testimony to the problem of a strictly anti-culture stance in the early church.

3. In the twelfth book of his *Confessions* St. Augustine mused on the nature of the language in Genesis 1. Among other things he said:

> For my part I declare resolutely and with all my heart that if I were called upon to write a book which was to be vested with the highest authority, I should prefer to write it in such a way that a reader could find re-echoed in my words whatever truths he was able to apprehend. I would rather write in this way than impose a single true meaning so explicitly that it would exclude all others, even though they contained no falsehood that could give me offense. And if this is what I would choose for myself, I will not be so rash my God, as to suppose that so great a man as Moses deserved a lesser gift from you. (Augustine, *Confessiones* 12.22)

On the basis of St. Augustine and similar passages in Chaucer and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court John Marshall, E. D. Hirsch, one of America's prime literary critics, argued in a recent article[1] that "Interpretation must always go beyond the writer's letter; but never beyond the writer's spirit." (He probably borrowed that antinomy from St. Paul via Augustine's great treatise, *De spiritu ac littera.*) What is important is not that the letter of the text be preserved, but the spirit. "Beyond the letter, but not beyond the Spirit!"—there is something for the church to ponder. But that raises the immediate question for us in the church, What is the spirit of the biblical text that must be preserved? And how does one, to borrow from St. Paul, test the spirits? What is the hermeneutical criterion we use for such maintaining of the biblical basis of the church's faith and life?

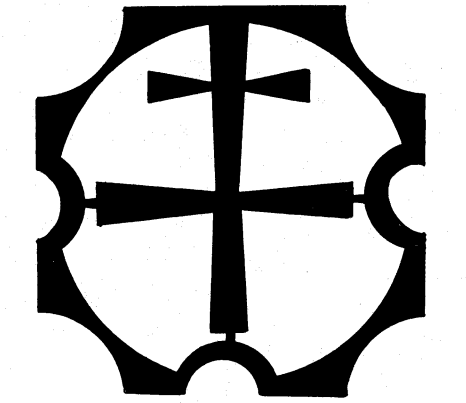
4. The question becomes more important when we recall that we inherit a multifaceted biblical tradition in so many areas of prime concern. Let me list just a few of the antinomies that run through the biblical tradition on into our lives: piety and protest; proclamation and politics; cross and Kosmokrator. Add to that the post-biblical tradition that did not arise under the Constantinian umbrella and the far longer one that did, and the question of letter and spirit becomes highly important.

5. Jody Kretzmann talked yesterday of boundaries and resting pads—which being interpreted in my argot is community maintenance and community creation. Professor Hall spoke of the Christian Right offering community and an interpretation of reality that attracted people today. The question then arises, How do we create community in our world? 1 Peter is an immensely instructive text in this regard. On the one hand the author strives to give his church, under pressure from the surrounding society, an identity that will enable it to survive. The culture around that church in Asia, Cappadocia, Bythinia, and the like had marginalized their former Gentile compatriots. 1 Peter names them resident aliens of the diaspora. In a society which prized antiquity and tradition the writer does it with a vengeance. You are a "chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a

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[1] "Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory," *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation* 25 [1994] 549-67.

holy nation, a people for possession.... Once you were 'not my people,' now you are 'my people,' once 'not mercied,' now 'mercied.'" Writing to Gentiles who are dislocated, marginalized if not ostracized,



resident aliens living alongside the citizen population, without legal rights and often without legal recourse to justice, 1 Peter creates a past for his community by locating its members within the diaspora of Israel as inheritors of Israel's titles of honor. One question, not just for Professor Hall, but for all of us, is: How are we imaging, no not imaging, even more creating the past for our people that frees them to live in the present and look to the future? How does the marginalized church create community? (I see such creating of a past happening in Womanist-Feminist theology, in African-American theology, and among other groups who have been historically marginalized.)

The one book in the newer Testament, as Prof. Hall calls it, that is clearly prophetic, is the Apocalypse. It is not a surprise that it is immensely critical, not only of the religious face of the society of Western Asia Minor, but also of the luxury trade of the Mediterranean world that ends up in Ostia. The threnody, the funeral dirge, of Revelation 18 reveals a deep suspicion of attempts to affirm the cultural context. And poor Jezebel in Thyatira, cursed with the OT accusations of idolatry and sexual immorality, was probably trying to fit into the society of her day with its craft associations that controlled the supply of raw materials and the marketing of goods. The most anti-cultural book of the New Testament is also the most exclusive, calling for distance from the culture. How do we put 1 Peter and John the Seer together?

6. Most important of all, in my opinion, is the last set of questions I have for Prof. Hall. He said that we should not talk of "*the* gospel, but of gospel." I am not certain that I caught the significance of that distinction. Paul found no problem is speaking of his gospel and saying "to hell" with any gospel other than that (Galatians 1)—even though his letters offer messages of immense variety in conceptual structure, linguistic expression, and theological outlook. What underlies this distinction?

7. I resonate to his call for the revitalization of the church's theology, not as abstraction, but as lived faith through the rethinking of Luther's *theologia crucis*. But the moment I say that I am also faced with a problem in correlating the newer Testament's witness with some of the systematic disjunctions that I heard in yesterday's two presentations. Let me instance just one. I heard a dialectical opposition between the theology of the cross and resurrectionism—admittedly an -ism as expressed by Prof. Hall and therefore negative. Here I would appreciate some clearer definition in relation to the biblical witness. On the one hand, the *theologia crucis* is founded biblically in Paul, especially 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans. But Paul—and the rest of the New Testament for that matter—does not play off the resurrection against

the cross of Jesus and the cruciform character of Christian existence as I heard it yesterday. New Testament ethics begins with the proclamation of the resurrected Christ actualized in baptism. Cross and resurrection are either united, as in John, as the great act of the glorification of Christ, or resurrection is understood as the ratification of the sacrificial death of Jesus, as in 1 Corinthians 15, or the resurrection is interpreted as the divine rectification of the evil act of the crucifixion, consistently so in Luke and Acts. How does Hall interpret the resurrection in and for the marginalized church?

My last point flows from the first. Theologically the church is born in one of three places in the New Testament: at the foot of the cross in John, by the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost in Acts, or at the resurrection in most of the NT. And the earliest creeds of the NT are consistently creeds based on the resurrection. Κύριος Ἰησοῦς, the church cried, and thereby recognized Jesus as the resurrected Lord, the Kosmokrator who rules and guides the universe (Colossians 1, Matthew 28:18-20, Hebrews *passim*). It is the resurrection of Jesus that puts us before God as the Lord of life in Romans 4 *ad finem*, while in 1 Thess 1:9-10 it is the resurrection that lies at the heart of the earliest proclamation summary we have in the New Testament. This Lordship of Jesus, his installation as κοσμοκράτωρ, both ties him to Yahweh of the Old Testament and relates him to the cultural context of the new. What of this stress on the universal Lordship of Christ who will, when all things are put under his feet, return the rule and authority to God (1 Cor 15:20-28)? In short, what of the apocalyptic vision?

The End of Christendom and Other Captivities: A Response to Douglas John Hall

Vítor Westhelle
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For two main reasons I find myself in a difficult position to react to Professor Hall's engaging and brilliant presentations. The first is that I do share so many of his own theological commitments and emphases that to really contribute to the debate I must try to sharpen some points in regard to which I do have questions. And even so it might not seem enough to reveal much of disagreement after all. The second reason why it is for me a bit disheartening to respond is that I am a Latin American informed by Latin American teachers, the two theological traditions that Dr. Hall explicitly referred to as being less than helpful models for a North American theology.

Now when I bring these two initial disclaimers together—agreeing with Dr. Hall and representing traditions that North Americans should not be so eager to follow—you can see that I have a problem. To the extent that I agree with him, I risk giving up my identity. To the extent I keep it I must disagree. So if I don't go on exposing all that Professor Hall has taught me through his books and in these lectures, it is just to spare me from further embarrassments.

I will raise four points that are to be read as a reaction to what I take to be Professor Hall's fundamental assumptions both in the presentations and also in his books. One assumption is that we are witnessing the collapse of Christendom which in turn has left the mainline denominations on the sidelines of contemporary culture. This is viewed as a loss in power but potentially an evangelical gain. Another assumption is that his theology is done for the "thieves" and not for those "who have fallen among the thieves." My first point asks whether Hall's naming of the reality he is addressing is really an accurate description. My second and third points have to do with the question of change: what ought to be changed, what ought not, and who defines it. My last point has to do with the theology

of the cross, particularly with the relationship between cross and resurrection.

My first point has to do with the very commitment toward a contextual theology so forcefully presented in these lectures and in Professor Hall's books. My question is, How north American is North America? If the context provides the challenges and raises the relevant issues for a re-sponsible ("pledging back") theological construction, we need not only to define instances of this context, like mainline denominationalism, the Empire, Constantinianism, and the like, but it is important to know also what are the limits of a given context, its margins. And Professor Hall did that, for example, in reference to the political reality of the U.S.A. over against which Canada stands on the periphery. So North America means U.S.A., plus Canada on the margin. That is O.K. with me even if I wonder what happened to Mexico, which is geographically part of North America, or Puerto Rico which is not geographically part of it but is politically part of the U.S.A. I really don't want to be importune in raising geopolitical puzzles. My point here is not related to the appropriateness of naming a given reality, be it North America, mainline churches, Constantinianism, or Christendom, but it has to do with the other question: Who is doing the naming? And, in the naming, who is included/excluded and what are the characteristics that the naming lifts up?

I wonder, for example, whether Constantinianism—if it is primarily defined as a state-church system of patronage, as I take it to be in Professor Hall's use of it—would be the appropriate naming to characterize where the church comes from in a society that has been from its inception proud of the separation of church and state, but has been so conspicuously a participant in, let us say, racism. How operational is the notion of Constantinianism for addressing racism or patriarchalism? How much is Constantinianism descriptive of an amalgamation of religion and culture in which the struggle over power might mean the struggle for the preservation of a white male hegemony, much more than of being a chaplain to the White House? And further, would Constantinianism and its demise be so descriptive as one would expect it to be in a situation in which denominationalism has been and continues to be the free market of private religious choices? How much has the call to overcome the remnants of Christendom been used to buttress the privatization of religion?

If it would be argued, however, that Constantinianism has a broader meaning covering all that pertains to a given way of relating Christ and culture, then, by suggesting that we are at the end of the Constantinian age, would that mean that we are also getting beyond other captivities? If I can agree to any degree that Christendom or Constantinianism is withering, if not dead and over, and that this has put the mainline churches on the sidelines, I must recognize also that there are other regimes of truth and power in relation to which the churches might not only be on the mainstream, but which they continue to buttress vigorously with still largely unchallenged practices. What I am suggesting is that there are more variables than one by which regimes of truth are constituted, and Constantinianism is only one of them. Patriarchalism is older than Constantinianism; and racism, as it shapes itself in modern times, cannot be explained except in connection with the philosophical and theological arguments developed in the 16th century, after Europeans met people they had never seen before. Patriarchalism and racism are just two examples of regimes of truth we are further away from overcoming than this moribund Constantinianism. And I don't mean this as

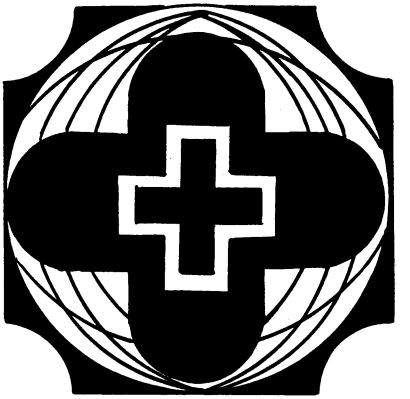
an expression of what Professor Hall would call a southern melancholy. I am just not ready to accept what seems to me to be an ideology of progress by cumulative losses in Professor Hall's "optimistic pessimism." There are changes, and some are very significant. We might have done away with Christendom but we have not been as successful with other systemic expressions of evil. And worse, some of our victories have been Pyrrhic ones as the emergence of a privatistic bourgeois religious phenomenon can show. It was raised over the debris of a former Christendom, but was able, among other feats, to offer the needed ideological support, e.g., to the Holocaust.

This brings me to a second set of remarks. They have to do, I believe, with Niebuhr's prayer that Professor Hall quoted in his opening lecture. I would like to see him addressing the third part of the prayer, the one that asks for wisdom to discern what can and what cannot be changed. The problem as I see it is related to the question of continuity and change. Who defines what can and what cannot be changed? Are the conditions for the possibility of change *a priori* given, and is this judgment a neutral one? Or does the discernment change depending on who is looking at the issue? Let us take the example of the ELCA. What difference does it make in the perception of change if it is looked at from the perspective of the momentous impact of women's ordination within the last 25 years if compared to the ethnic makeup of this same church which has close to 98% of its members as still white European Americans? Can this also be changed? Who says it? Who denies it? And who would lose or who would gain by such a change? Are we really experiencing one single historical phenomenon dubbed as the end of Christendom when, in the midst of many changes, old patterns perpetuate themselves and new ones come into being right in the core also of mainline churches and not only as a reaction of the religious and political Right? The wisdom to discern what can be changed from what cannot is also the knowledge of discerning who wants the change, who does not, and who of these is winning the day.

The reverse question ought also to be raised. What ought *not* to change even if it could? Professor Hall's use of "gospel" without the article refreshes the awareness that gospel has to do with novelty, it is "good news." But it is the good news cast in this old story that talks about the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the prostitutes, the marginalized, those who have been rejected. And those rejected people are the ones to whom the good news is addressed, through whom it is proclaimed, and in whom it is embodied. Ought this to change as well, and has this not been frequently changed in the form of a "gospel" of the nice and the wise? It concerns me quite a lot to see that "change" language is not rarely cast in the liberal ideology of a *laissez-faire*, which assumes that in economy as well as in culture all change is guided by the invisible hand of providence. The engagement with dominant culture Professor Hall has called us to exercise ought to change this culture—we heard it loud and clear. But can there be such an engagement that is not also going to change a church? For if it is an engagement there is no innocence, there is always a give and take. A church that is liberated from the yoke of Christendom might very well have settled for a suit and a tie instead of the yoke of Christ. I am raising this issue because I am somehow puzzled by Professor Hall's move from the inclusion of the excluded to the engagement with dominant culture, a theme that he has emphasized also in his books. I think it is clear that he means that these options of ministry are not an either/or proposition but a both/

and. However, how the two are related is not clear to me. I think I can best put it as a question. What is the role of the excluded in the church's engagement of dominant culture? Or who sets the agenda for this engagement? In Lutheran jargon, it is not only a question of the good news but simultaneously of the law in its denunciatory and condemnatory function. Gospel is not any good news but good for those who have been enslaved and are victims of the law. Can there really be a renewed understanding of the gospel without a simultaneous reassessment of the law?

My final point is related to a theme very close to my own concerns and interest. It is the theology of the cross—or, as it has been called, the power of negative thinking. Leonardo Boff, puzzled by the fatalism so prevalent in popular catholicism in Brazil, noticed that the image of Christ people had was associated with Christ's endless passion. That prompted him to ask whether it was possible to talk about the crucifixion in a crucified world. His answer calls for a closer link between the cross and the resurrection. Among the "crucified" the cross can perpetuate the sublimation and the necessary enduring of suffering. Dr. Hall's "low" doctrine of the resurrection might be something that works for a culture of official optimism (which he called "resurrectionism"). However, does it convey a message of hope for the increasing number of victims of this optimism which are not part even of Hall's Sisyphean predicament, but are better depicted as a Prometheus bound forever to the rock of privatism and having the American Eagle eating his liver every day, a Christ on a permanent cross? Such a Christ does not only miss the third day, but most importantly does not descend even into hell. If the cross is not the battlefield of a God struggling with God in the midst of human history, the result might be a devotion to fatalism. Antonio Machado, a Spanish poet of the beginning of the century, said something like this: "This is not my song: to throw flowers to the Jesus of agony. I don't believe in this Jesus, but in the one who walked over water."



With this I would like to close these remarks thanking Professor Hall for his witness and willingness to engage us all so creatively with a theology that is so uniquely committed to this society and its problems. These comments only reveal that he has touched some of the core themes in our theological endeavors and engaged us in the process. And I think that his patience and careful exposition of the issues reveal yet another analogy with Greek mythology (this master narrative of European thinking!). Not like Hall's Sisyphus, not even like Prometheus, his is the job of Ariadne laying the thread by which we all, like Thesius, might find the way out of this cultural, religious, and social labyrinth of ours.

Response to Douglas John Hall

Julie Lindorff
Director of Music
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Minneapolis, Minnesota

When Professor Hall proclaimed this week that Christendom, as we have known it, is over for us, I must admit to conflicting reactions. My first reaction was one of being quite sobered. His words contained the finality of a door closing to centuries of leadership which has shaped the world—for good or ill. No longer, according to Professor Hall, will the American culture look to mainstream denominations for reinforcement and even shaping of the American Dream. We are relegated to the fringes, no longer regarded as much more than a special interest group.

As a church musician in this tumultuous time, my second reaction was great relief. The dilemmas percolating throughout our sphere of influence—worship—are not as simple as they appear to be: musical issues, issues of style, personal preference, special interest group pressure, and most disturbing of all, the concept of worship as a tool to accomplish some end other than the worship of the living God in Word and Sacrament. Professor Hall made it clear that this tumultuous time is much larger than our petty little "worship wars."

Musicians have been dealing with this cataclysmic shift in positioning of church and culture for quite a while. The Psalms, more than perhaps any other book of the Bible, have been set to music. We know them well; we interpret them well. I think that, because we have the privilege of giving voice to perhaps a more brutally honest portion of the Bible, we are able to resonate a little more easily with the ambiguity of "not quite disestablished/not quite established"—terms which were used this week. We who bear the Word in the aesthetic world of musical sound and silence find ourselves "disoriented"—"disestablished."

Walter Brueggemann's categorization of the Psalms parallels this journey "into exile": Psalms of Orientation, Psalms of Disorientation, and Psalms of a New Orientation. Some of the laments, or psalms of disorientation (we have been careful to edit them out of our corporate worship resources) simply fly in the face of mythical American Optimism.

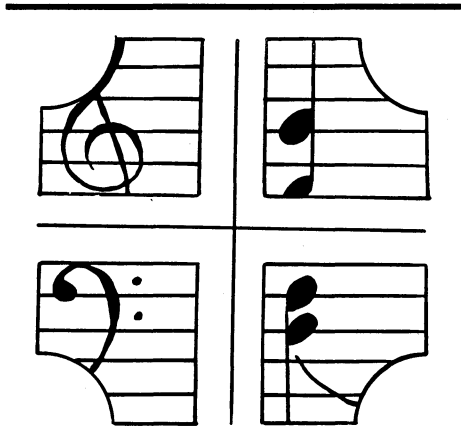
I would like to suggest that the role of the lay minister of music/cantor/church musician has grown beyond the North European training we all received. Each of us began as a would-be "artist" in the practice

room, in the children's choir, or on the organ bench. Yet I have heard during this Association of Lutheran Church Musicians Symposium that we have been slowly letting go of our secure life on the organ bench and have become as vulnerable as Professor Hall's description of the church. We have, these last 10-15 years, become theologians, community builders, teachers, cheerleaders, organizational wizards—squeezing yet another service into an already packed Sunday morning. We are asked (expected??) to be experts in all styles of music, sensitive to all cultures, infinite resource, infinitely flexible.

We have perhaps been caught in the frenzy to react to the symptoms of a church in transition, rather than meet this cataclysmic shift head on. I invite you to allow us to be part of this process. I suggest that we who are Associates in Ministry and church musicians long to be an integral part of the response which the American church makes to her new place in this bigger picture which Professor Hall has helped us to see. Our sense of call is strong.

Helmut Rilling, conductor of the Oregon Bach Festival, told the story of a person from his Stuttgart audience whom he had met following a concert of the works of Arvo Pärt (Estonian-born contemporary composer). This man had lost use of his legs through a mountain-climbing accident and had evidently been quite angry and preoccupied with his disability. However, with a glowing face he described to Herr Rilling that the music of Pärt had helped him rediscover the sense of the transcendent. He said, "I finally remembered why I climbed mountains in the first place."

I don't tell this story to advocate that music is an end in itself, or that it must be respected for its power to manipulate and evoke behavioral change. Our art in shaping worship must always be servant to the



Font, the Book and the Table around which we gather. Our job is simply to provide a seamless and well laid conduit for the faith community's encounter with God.

With courage and creativity we wish to join you in this new era, serving—from the fringes—the One who has called us to this fearful and wonderful time!

Response to Douglas John Hall

Marta L. Poling-Goldenne
Associate Director for Evangelism
Division of Congregational Ministries, ELCA

"You learn more about a road by traveling it, than by consulting all of the maps in the world." To a substantial degree, this sums up the struggle/tension existing within North American Lutheranism in 1995. We've spent substantial time, effort, and funds consulting "maps," debating semantics, and arguing with each other about why the unchurched remain so. For 29 years we've watched the constant stream of people exit our denomination... and few have been courageous enough to ask them, "Why? Why did you leave the Lutheran Church?"

The Church Membership Initiative, a 1993 study of why Lutheran congregations grow or don't grow, found that former Lutherans attributed their exodus to three reasons: conflict with the pastor, staff, or member of the congregation; lack of cultivation of a relationship with God; failure to reconnect. In addition, the baby-boom generation cited these reasons for their departure: church is boring, church is irrelevant, church is money-hungry. And when asked, those who are unchurched say in substantial numbers that they might attend a Lutheran congregation if invited!

Why the crisis? How did the Lutheran Church get to this state?

Professor Hall suggested this week that the great task is to become theologically active and alive to become "thoughtful"—full of thoughts. My response to this is, That has been a part of our problem. We've been full of lots of thoughts—and minimal action. I agree with Dr. Hall that the Lutheran Church does not need enlightenment that is only doctrine. What we do need are members and staff who are filled with the Holy Spirit and willing/able to share their faith with others!

We live in a world of unlimited negation. As a parish pastor, I rarely met people who did not understand finitude or sin. However, I did minister to people who needed hope: people like Sue, who struggled with health issues and how to remain free of her relationship to a man who abused her; people like John, who fought demons of chemical dependency; people like Mary, who daily struggled to make ends meet when her ex-husband missed his child-support payments.

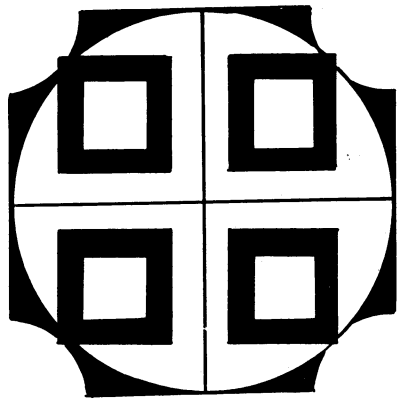
The crisis for the Lutheran Church has

come because we have not heard the cries of those inside or outside our doors. Many of my baby-boom cohorts and their children have left us—or never been invited to join us—because we've been unwilling to respond to their questions. If we know that many drawn to fundamentalism are seeking a system of meaning and community, why are we so afraid or reluctant to offer it? Are we afraid these things aren't "Lutheran" enough? Do we have to ritualize them in order for them to pass the stamp of approval? Why do we continue to insist that people leave their baggage at the door before they enter our congregations? Are we afraid of the questions of those who are unchurched?

I believe we are. In his book, *Thinking the Faith*, Dr. Hall cites several currents in society impacting the church today. They include such things as reductionism, modernism, apocalyptic consciousness and the rise of religious simplism. If these are in fact documentation of the realities of contemporary life, I wonder why we spend so much time and effort ridiculing rather than working within them for God's shalom. We self-righteously snipe at the religious right, but rarely do we engage the culture as they do. Who is on the radio waves? Who is shaping the public image of contemporary Christianity? Where is the Lutheran Church?

If we are to become a viable, engaging voice of Yahweh, we had better make a decision to lean our ladders against the appropriate walls. We had better decide to listen to the unchurched—and then to prayerfully interpret the gospel to them in their language, their dialects, their music. This is, after all, the way in which missionaries assist people in another culture to come to faith. The missionaries take the message of the heart, of the faith, and help interpret it in forms and format of the culture of the people they are trying to reach.

When are we going to begin doing that as Lutherans in North America? If we are going to deal with the despair and negation of our culture, we need theologians who are



willing and able to stop speaking exclusively to each other. What we need are theologians in our time who listen to the questions of the unchurched and help us formulate a genuine congregational response. What does this mean? It means that we do need to radically rethink theological education and especially the models of ministerium produced by seminary education.

President Lesher said at lunch that the seminary is asking the question of theological education, "What is essential?" I believe we need to ask this same question of Lutheranism: What is essentially Lutheran?

I grew up in southern California—in a frontier place back then. I had to learn to articulate the Lutheran Christian faith to people who were theosophists and adherents of a variety of philosophical persuasions. I went to college with people who tried to harness the power of pyramids. Into this kind of confusion and yearning, we need to equip lay members and pastors with

We need congregations that are willing to take the pearls of the Lutheran faith and share them in changing forms.

the ability to articulate our faith. If we had time today, I would ask you to turn to your neighbor and share: "How did you come to be a Christian? Who was a part of your faith formation? Who introduced you to Jesus Christ?" We need congregations that are willing to take the pearls of the Lutheran faith and share them in changing forms. We need to help God be praised in the language and music of all people—across cultures, gender and generations. We need congregations which are truly communities of meaning, disciple formation, and mission outposts of hope grounded in Jesus Christ.

God is so good! The Holy Spirit is working so hard to wake up the Lutheran Church. I have great faith that we can indeed travel the road ahead of us—without the chronic consulting of maps, studies, and debate which so typifies our usual way of doing ministry!

Jesus didn't encourage his disciples to form a committee to discuss the possible strategies for making disciples. Instead, he gave them the command: "Go!"

When the Lutheran Church makes the decision to "go" and make disciples, we will find the Holy Spirit faithfully guiding us on the journey—however unknown—and giving us all that is needful for the task.

I am very hopeful that our denomination can and will rise to the challenges of our day and time. I pray that you will join me on the journey of the Spirit in the future shaping of Lutheranism in North America.

Mark 14:3-9 and the Ordination of Women

Phyllis Anderson
Director for Theological Education
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The Anointing at Bethany is a story about Jesus... it's about getting clear about his death. But this is also a story about a woman and about every believer whose faith in Jesus has pushed him or her beyond the boundaries of convention. It is about everyone who has risked ridicule, rebuke, and rejection for love. It is a story with which every ordained women can identify.

We know very little about this woman—only enough to say she wasn't the notorious sinner as in Luke's version or the sister of Martha as in John's. What was she like?

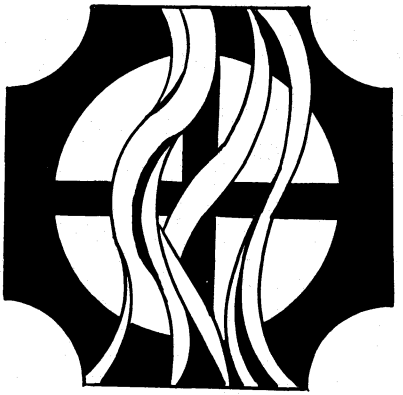
1. Well, for one thing, she was bold. She had the audacity to intrude on the intimacy of a gathering of men at dinner with Jesus. Who knows how long she may have hesitated outside the door? She probably had to battle self-doubt and the dread of going where you have been taught you don't belong. It doesn't matter. She did it! If she sweat and stewed a little, she only goes up in my estimation, and I feel even closer to her.

She was bold! She made an extravagant gesture. She gave not only *her* best, but the best there was as a sign of her love for Jesus. She did not hold anything back. The jar she carried was made of alabaster, and it was filled with ointment reserved for royalty. While those who belonged at table gasped, she broke open the jar and poured the fragrant oil on Jesus' head. She anointed him. She gave no reason. We do not even know if she spoke. But she did act... boldly.

She got the kind of rebuke you'd expect: "Now look what you've done. The waste! Use your head, woman. You have to be practical. We have rules and regulations... obligations to the poor that must be considered. You don't know what you are doing and you don't belong."

This is not only a women's story. This is a story of every prophet, every disciple who risks. But I don't know every disciple, I do know many women in these last twenty-five years who have heard a call to be pastors in this church and have boldly—with fear and trembling—said Yes. And they have embarked on remarkable journeys for Jesus' sake. All of those journeys, however far they go, for the rest of these women's lives carry an echo of the rebuke from Simon the Leper's house: "You don't know what you're doing and you don't belong."

Every movement that opens windows in the church requires leaders who are willing to risk using their own powers to make it happen. We remember the movers and



shakers of all those movements, but today I want to say a special word of thanks to those of you who stuck your necks out on *this* one. There is a litany of bold men and women who fought behind the scenes or put their honor on the line to make the ordination of women possible for Lutherans in this country 25 years ago, who cleared the way and cheered the women on. If you lifted a finger back in the 60s to help move your church to open the ordained ministry of word and sacrament to women, I want this assembly to thank you. Please stand up. If you were at one of the conventions where the vote was taken in 1970—whichever way you voted—please stand up.

You were bold. And the women who have walked through the door you opened have had to be bold, bold like the woman at Bethany.

2. The woman who broke open the jar was bold—but not bold like a bull in a china shop. She did precisely the right thing. Jesus said so. He said to her what we hope against hope that someone will say when we're in over our heads, when we've risked it all and the rug is being pulled out from under us: "Leave her alone. Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me. She has done what she could."

That's not all he said, but let's just focus on those words for now: "She has done what she could." She has done all that could be done... everything in her power. It was within her power to make Christ known as the suffering, dying Lord of all, and she did. Her breaking open the jar turned out to be precisely the right thing at the right time.

Jesus' time was running out. Maybe she knew that. Maybe she didn't. Jesus made the connection explicit. He linked her act of extravagant devotion forever to his own extravagant death. He made her act of blind faith an everlasting proclamation of his kingship and his death. She did what she could... with what was available to her, with what opportunity she had, and he made it more than she could have ever known. He made it right.

Each of us, within the limits of our own personalities, our own gifts, our own station in life, our own moment in history, is asked to do what we can—not more.

I know a woman pastor in Wisconsin who is doing what she can so that the Word of God can be heard through a woman's voice and a woman's experience. She is doing her part in her small place so the bold act of this church 25 years ago will—by the mercy of God—bear fruit. She doesn't strike you as bold when you first meet her. You might wonder if she can hack it. But she has done some amazing ministry, some right ministry, with people in that community who never felt like they belonged in church, whose sorrows had never been caught up in Christ's death and resurrection. What the woman did in silence in Bethany, my friend does with Word and Sacrament week after week. She is doing things she never would have thought possible for her, except that the church said 25 years ago that she could.

There are still things she cannot do.

When a member's mother died a year ago, the family insisted that the neighboring pastor, a man, do the funeral. They wanted a *real* pastor. The sting, the rejection, the rebuke were there all over again. Like the woman in Bethany, she could only do that which was in her power to do, in her time, and her place, with these people—not more.

3. We know the woman at Bethany was bold. She did what she could. We also know that she will be remembered... to the end of time—but not by name. Jesus says: "Wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" ...but not by name. We do not know her name! It was not written down.

This, of course, is a great problem, not knowing her name. Lots of names are lost. Most of our names will be lost. But when it all gets added up, we know more names of men than of women. We know that the house belonged to a man named Simon the Leper. We know the names of the twelve, who never did get it, right to the very end. After this dinner at the home of Simon the Leper, Mark tells us that it was Judas Iscariot who went off to the chief priests to betray Jesus. We know Caiaphas and Pilate by name. We know that Peter, James, and John all fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane. We know that Simon Peter, the Rock, denied Jesus and how many times. We know some names. But the woman at Bethany who anointed Jesus for his burial, we don't know her name.

This namelessness of women is a real problem that needs work. Some of you are doing it. Ask Cynthia Jürisson about her dissertation. New research is unearthing the lives and stories and even the names of women. And women who have moved into positions of leadership are making "names" for themselves. Part of what ordination or being rostered as a lay minister actually effects is that your *name*, for goodness sakes, gets printed in the ELCA Yearbook so people can find you. All that is good and necessary correction.

But if we think getting our names in the book is what discipleship is all about—or ordination for that matter—we are sadly mistaken.

Part of the legacy from the woman of Bethany to us in our time is her very anonymity. Out of all the characters who hover around Jesus and plot behind his back and maneuver to be on his right hand, the writer of Mark goes to great pains to hold up this nameless woman at Bethany as the faithful disciple. She is the one who gets it, despite all her limitations and powerlessness. She is the one who gets it and does it with boldness and imagination, and even with flair... but without glory. She is remembered not by name but for what she did: she honored Jesus in anticipation of his suffering and death. She led, but not as the Gentile leaders do, lording it over.

She is probably the right model of leadership for the time and place in which we are called to ministry, where we are asked to do what we can with all the boldness we can muster and probably with not much thanks. If I know anything about the thought of Douglas John Hall and the context for ministry we are trying to come to terms with this week, we might as well put away our dreams of glory. This is not a season for triumph.

This 25th anniversary of the ordination of women, we are giving rightful recognition to those who have served, counting up what they have done, evening the score a bit, remembering who was first. The woman at Bethany is a timely reminder that in the kingdom she barely glimpsed, the first will be last.

This, after all, is a story about Jesus.

Preaching Helps

Ash Wednesday—The Vigil of Easter, Series A

Onward Christian Shoulders

No, I'm not lisping. I really mean "shoulders" and not "soldiers." It's an arresting image, and I think I misread it the first time I saw it.

It's in an article appearing in the April issue of COMMONWEAL under the title "Why Priests Can't Preach" by Dennis Burke. Mr. Burke is apparently an attentive consumer of sermons preached in Roman Catholic Churches of the San Francisco area in particular. Some of what he says has broad application.

He doesn't use these same words, but in effect he says what all preachers know, that good sermons are the tip of a great iceberg of preparation. He says preparation means taking time to read and to pray. In that context he laments the fact that priests and preachers spend more time in front of a television set watching pictures on a screen than they spend in their study or at their prayer desk.

Here on the threshold of Lent might be a good time for preachers to ponder their homiletic disciplines, as they ponder ways and means of calling congregations to exercise their discipline.

But Mr. Burke goes beyond means and devices. He says good preaching emerges (erupts?) from the desire of the preacher to share with others what has set him or her on fire. Of course, no fire, no desire. He speaks of Moses at the burning bush. And of Jesus foreseeing the fires that will consume Jerusalem, so that he wept over the city which refused to be embraced.

And then the wonderful image: "The great preacher must have the heart of a missionary: the burning desire to ride the shoulders of grace as it spins and turns the souls of the hearers to Christ."

I think we have in this issue two writers who "ride the shoulders of grace."

Monte Luker is Associate Professor of Hebrew Scriptures at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. Monte has what used to be called a "love affair" (nowadays people speak of "committed relationship") with the Hebrew language, the land of ancient Israel, and the church of Jesus Christ. If you want to travel to the Holy Land with him some January, write to him for info. If you want to wrestle with the Hebrew Scriptures and their significance for God's people, then read what he has contributed to this issue. You're dealing with someone who gives the lie to the old chestnut about "ivory tower academics." Monte lives in a different kind of tower. See Habakkuk 2:1 for further information on his address (or see Isaiah 21:8, since I do not wish to imply that Monte is only a minor prophet).

Barbara Wills, pastor of St. Paul's Maple Leaf Lutheran Church in Elma, Iowa, has written for us previously, and it is delightful to have her with her prose and person on board once again. She tells me that she tried hard to avoid commentaries as she did her writing for this issue. She wanted to ponder the texts more personally and directly, without the mediation of other voices. And since we are entering Lent, traditional season of discipline, she deliberately ends each of her contributions with what she calls "an invitation" to some spiritual exercise. She is mindful of the danger of works righteousness on the one side and of cheap grace on the other. But knowing the dangers, she took the risk. I have taken the liberty of setting her "invitations" apart and assigning a title to each of them in order to make them stand out as possible focal points.

Both Barbara and Monte are above all else riders on the shoulders of grace. Thanks to them for their good words. And to all of you, I say:

Onward, Christian Shoulders!

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Ash Wednesday
February 21, 1996

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Psalm 51:1-18
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

First Reading

The life setting of Joel ("The LORD is God") is probably a devastating postexilic locust plague in Judah. He is a prophet who, like Haggai and Zechariah and, to a degree, Isaiah and Ezekiel, has close ties to Jerusalem, the Temple, the priesthood, and the liturgy. Part of the brilliance and conundrum of Joel's work is his uniting of history and eschatology. As if watching some avant-garde theater production, one never quite knows whether he is speaking about the locust plague or the Final Judgment. For Joel, then is now and now is then. This has particular relevance for Lent, since we are telling the story of an event in history which has eschatological significance.

The shofar (vv. 1, 15) had three uses which are relevant to our passage: to lead an army in battle, to sound the alarm for a city under siege, and to call worshipers to the regular Temple liturgy. If someone in your congregation has and can blow a shofar, I encourage you to make use of it in your Ash Wednesday service.

The "Day of the LORD" (vv 1, 11) is a theologically pregnant term from the "Holy War" tradition and dates back to the earliest interpretations of the Exodus. In ancient Near Eastern myth, the warrior-god's "day" was when he descended to save his people by defeating their enemy. It was a day of salvation and light celebrated by festive worship. Amos, in whose tradition Joel stands, turns this metaphor on its head (5:18-20): God has met the enemy but the enemy is... US. Hence, biblically, Good Friday is a Day of the LORD (darkness) and Easter is a Day of the LORD (light). It is a day when God acts decisively re: his people.

The Hebrew term for repentance is not *metanoia* (change your mind) but *shuv* (return, vv. 12-13). Verse 13 is the text, based on the Hebrew definition of God's essential nature (Exod 34:6), of the beautifully haunting Lenten introduction to the Gospel in the Lutheran liturgy. The word translated "merciful" comes from the Hebrew root "womb" and connotes God's "wombness," birthing, succoring, and mothering. "Slow to anger" is literally "long of noses" or "long of face," evidently, "a long time before his face gets red." *Khesed* means "steadfast, unconditional love which never stops no matter what"; there is no word for it in English, though *agape* is close in Greek. The next phrase (the last one of v. 13) literally says, "and is sorry for the evil/disaster." The same word (*nikham*) is used in the first phrase of v. 14. Fortunately, the God of the Bible is one whose nature is ever the same (see above) but who is able to change his mind: hence, prayer and repentance change things; God responds to the human condition.

Note that at the second blast of the shofar in vv. 15-17 *all* are called to repentance: aged, infants, honeymooners, and priests. But the priests (Lutherans, read "pastors") bear a special responsibility for intercession. The last time I was in Israel I was told the story, by a Lutheran pastor, of an Orthodox priest who had watched his entire congregation gradually leave the village because of the current political situation. The Lutheran asked him why he stayed on at the church, to which the Orthodox replied, "You're a priest and you ask such a question? I am here, of course, to pray for my people." LML

Pastoral Reflections

"Where is their God?" This is a question asked, not only by Israel's detractors, quoted by the prophet Joel, but by those of every age who would cast doubt on the people of God. Too often, it is a legitimate question. We ask it ourselves as we see Bosnians and Serbs trying to annihilate each other. We ask it when we see congregations in conflict. We ask it whenever we see perversions of the faith that Jesus taught, the faith that demands love for one's neighbor, whoever that neighbor might be.

Sometimes we get the idea that our piety will prove our faith. If we get out on the street corners and pray in public, people will surely realize that we are Christians. If we make sure everyone knows how much we give to the church, and how many charities we support, they can't help but discern that we are followers of Christ. If we have our names engraved in the walls of a church building or in the sidewalk of a cathedral, showing that we contributed to that ministry, surely that will reflect our faith in God.

But Joel and Jesus speak with one voice. God is not interested in outward acts of piety. "Rend your hearts and not your garments!" "When you pray, pray in secret!" Our God is not honored by flashy bumper stickers, but in broken hearts and humble service. Where is God? In hospitals, prisons, and ghettos, gathered around kitchen tables and altars, in nurseries and shelters for the abused and homeless.

Invitation: Acts of kindness

How shall we reveal God during this season of Lent? When our hearts have broken and we have received the gift of forgiveness and love given to us by God in Christ, then our discreet acts of forgiveness, kindness and generosity will show others where God can be found. BMW

First Sunday in Lent
February 25, 1996

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

First Reading

The Gospel and Law could not be presented more clearly and succinctly than in Gen 2: 15-17. The gracious generosity of God's garden is expressed by employing a Hebrew grammatical device which intensifies the action of the verb (infinitive absolute): "You may *indeed* eat of every tree!" To preserve this paradise, created for God's creature, is one law—stated in the apodictic formulation (*lo*): "From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil *thou shalt not* eat!" Utter freedom with no guideline becomes its own slavery. The inevitable result of the creature's disobeying the Creator's one law is stated also with the intensifying infinitive absolute: "You *shall surely* die!"

The identity of the sacrosanct tree in the middle of the garden has been much discussed. The smart snake says it bestows a new type of knowledge which causes the creatures to "become like gods" (this is the better translation as LXX realized; cf. NRSV note j), and the woman desired the delectable fruit to make her wise. The result of the eating was the loss of utterly innocent dependence on the LORD God and a new type of autonomy for the creatures who were now more distant from their Creator. All of this suggests that "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" represents divine knowledge, wisdom appropriate only to the Creator, not the creature. To eat from this tree was to break the one law which protected the perfect bliss of paradise: the Creator-creature

relationship. To break the one law was to rebel against God. The original sin is wanting to be like God, self-deification. From this sin flow all other sins.

The storyteller moves the hearer from chapter 2 to chapter 3 by employing the homonym *arum*, which means both "naked" and "crafty." "They were naked" provides an inclusio for the snake's temptation story. There is not a sexual connotation here but rather a description of innocence and total dependence, one could call it "perfect faith," which was present in 2:25 but lost in 3:7. We use the word naked in such a sexually neutral way in such expressions as "naked as the day you were born." *Arum* (3:1) means not only crafty but also "sensible," and the word has a quite positive connotation in Proverbs. The woman is not tricked; she knows exactly what she is doing. The snake is smart and sensible, and it seems quite appealing to her to peer into the realm of the Creator, gain divine wisdom, and become a goddess. After all, she had not even been created yet when the one law in the midst of the gospel garden had been uttered to her husband.

It has become a truism to say the woman misquotes the law in v. 3, but it is more probable that her silly husband never explained it to her. One can imagine the man shouting, "Don't go near it, don't even touch it!" The woman is clearly the more thoughtful and proactive of the two human characters, at least carrying on a theological discussion with the sensible serpent. The man simply gobbles down the forbidden fruit without the slightest question or hesitance. LML

Pastoral Reflections

When Eve saw that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was "a delight to the eyes," she ate of its fruit and shared some with Adam. Then "the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked." The serpent had promised that when their eyes were opened they would be "like God, knowing good from evil." That sounded so appealing, so desirable. But the reality was stark—"they knew they were naked." Seeing good and evil made Eve and Adam feel afraid—exposed, vulnerable, and at risk.

Throughout human history we have struggled with good and evil. Knowing good from evil has not made us like God, but has exposed us to dangers to body, mind, and soul. A moment's weakness, an instant of temptation, a brief, insatiable urge for gratification, and human beings were plunged into an abyss of darkness and despair. Our mother, Eve, has bequeathed us the heritage of those who have no choice but to see the good and the evil, and to forever struggle with these powers within ourselves.

But we would have been no more successful than Mother Eve in resisting the temptation, for the serpent is rarely the ugly gargoyle we imagine. Too often, we are tempted to bestow upon ourselves the self-righteous assurance that we are not really like Eve, or even like Adam, who silently followed in her footsteps; that we would see the ugliness of evil looming before us and avoid it. But the serpent most often dangles beautiful golden carrots before our eyes instead of holding big ugly guns to our heads. We are not wise enough to discern, nor strong enough to overcome. If we were, we would not suffer from drug addictions, hangovers, and overdrawn bank accounts.

But thanks be to God, that there is one who is wise enough and strong enough and faithful enough to do what we cannot. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he was able to see that instant gratification is a sham, that putting God to the test will lead only to destruction, and that human power and domination is a delusion. Only the one who could resist the deadly "delight to the

eyes" could save us from ourselves and give us life with God, the eternal delight to our souls.

Invitation: Giving up

How shall we experience this delight of denying ourselves the fleeting pleasure and finding a longer lasting joy and satisfaction? Let us begin by giving up a bad habit, or putting ourselves out for the good of another, or destroying a seductive credit card. For it is in dying to ourselves that we shall find life with Christ. BMW

Second Sunday in Lent
March 3, 1996

Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

First Reading

Just who is Father Abraham anyway? Some scholars doubt his existence; perhaps he is an invented, composite figure. But the shift from Genesis 11 to 12 is a move from myth to saga, and sagas are generally about real, if not embellished, heroes. Recent archeological work is demonstrating that what we are learning about the period of the matriarchs and patriarchs corresponds surprisingly well with what we read about in Genesis (see BAR and BA). While there is no doubt that Abraham has attracted stories to himself (e.g. probably Genesis 22, which was originally a polemic against child sacrifice), I think it is more likely that the Father of the Nation existed than that there was no memory—in such an oral, storytelling society—of the tribal patronym.

As G. von Rad has noted, the "Primeval History" (Genesis 1-11) ends with doom; the Law seems to have the last word: all society is scattered and unable to communicate. He traces the Law and Gospel through the Primeval History. Law: Adam and Eve are thrust out of the garden; Gospel: God sews them leather clothes for protection (some day I'm going to preach a sermon on "God, the Seamstress"). Law: God sends Cain away; Gospel: Cain gets a protective mark. Law: God destroys corrupt human society; Gospel: Noah and his family are saved. Law: God confuses the languages and disperses humankind; Gospel: God calls Abraham who responds in faith. In a very real sense, the rest of the Old Testament, the rest of the Bible, is the gospel response to the Tower of Babel debacle.

Our text, probably J, is amazing indeed. Abraham receives a threefold blessing, and the first two blessings are predictable: he will become a great nation, and he will get a land to place that nation in. It is the third blessing which astounds the ancient and modern hearer of the text: through Abraham all nations will bless themselves or gain a blessing or be blessed, the translation is disputed, but the meaning is clear, I think. Through Father Abraham and subsequent Israel, all nations will some day come to know the one and only God. This occurred through Paul for the Mediterranean and the West. It occurred through Mohammed for the Arab East. We've a way to go, but most of the world knows the only true God through the witness of Father Abraham.

Paul makes much of Gen 15:6: "And [Abraham] had faith in the LORD; and [the LORD] reckoned it to him as righteousness." To "have faith" (*aman*) is a very concrete Hebrew verb. Its cognates include nurse, foster-mother, pillar, trust, faithfulness, fidelity, firmness, steadfastness, support, amen! God did not appear to Abraham and

ask him if he "believed in" a series of attributes: omniscient, ubiquitous, immutable, and omnipotent, to name a few. God challenged Abraham to depend, trust, lean, rely totally on God. "And Abraham totally trusted and depended on the only God, who counted this to him as righteousness." *Tsedakah* means "living in a right relationship with God with the consequence that one lives in a right relationship with other human beings." The tradition lives on in Habakkuk 2:4: "The righteous shall live by faith," i.e., the one accounted in a right relationship with God and others shall be so because of her/his total dependence and trust in the Maker of the Universe. LML

Pastoral Reflections

Abram and Nicodemus provide an interesting contrast in the study of faith. Abram is one of those rare individuals who drops everything at a word from God and steps out in faith. He doesn't debate or question; he leaves behind country, kin, and paternal inheritance to go to the land that the LORD will show. There is no map, only a day by day walk to some as-yet-unknown land.

Nicodemus is more understandable to us. He listens to Jesus' words of promise and invitation, and wants a blueprint—a flow chart—to explain each detail. Nicodemus is not willing to step into a new avenue of faith until he has the fine print deciphered and the contract signed. Give him proof, and then he'll believe.

The only problem is that faith doesn't work that way. That's because "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). Seeing is knowing, not believing. We can touch the bird in the hand and determine its dimensions. But the two birds in the bush are elusive, and our human sense says not to trust that they will be there when we reach for them.

The other reason that Nicodemus' concept of faith won't work is because he has the whole thing turned around backwards. God's promise to Abram was fulfilled *as he followed* the Lord's leading. The lepers Jesus healed received the cleansing *as they went* to show themselves to the priest (Lk 17:11-14). We can talk about faith all day—defining it, debating various theological perspectives of it, and criticizing those who don't seem to have a clear articulation or understanding of it—but the only way faith can be triggered is by acting on it. Jesus is not impressed with our understanding of the concept of faith, but with our living out of faith and showing that we trust him.

Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit given to us as we obey the voice of God and follow in the footsteps of Christ. We can't create faith within ourselves, but we can prepare the soil of our hearts in which faith will thrive.

Invitation: Trust

The challenge that invites us today is to step out in reckless abandon and entrust ourselves in some way to God. Perhaps this is the day to put more money in the collection plate than we think we can afford. Maybe the invitation is calling us to visit a friend or family member with whom we need to seek reconciliation. It might be to simply write a letter or let go of an old prejudice. BMW

Third Sunday in Lent
March 10, 1996

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

First Reading

We can't get very far with the Exodus text historically. We don't know where Rephidim is; Horeb—another name for Mount Sinai—has most probably been introduced secondarily (notice they don't reach Sinai until chapter 19); and the names Massah and Meribah have been combined artificially (there is another version of this story in Num 20:1-13 which mentions only Meribah). But from a literary point of view, this pericope is a masterpiece.

While last week's text was a story about faith, this is a narrative about the lack of faith, as the concluding sentence makes clear: "Is the LORD in our midst or not?" Some scholars have theorized that there was an entire collection of such stories which was later merged into the Exodus narrative. They call it the "murmuring tradition," a tradition still alive on the campuses of seminaries and in local congregations.

Note the structure of the narrative:

The people quarreled (v. 2)
Moses said to them
The people complained (v. 3)
Moses cried out to the LORD
The LORD said (v. 5)
Moses did (v. 6).

Verse 7 is the typical conclusion to an etiological legend, explaining the name(s) associated with the place, using wordplay based on the story just told.

NRSV "quarreled" (RSV "found fault with") is the Hebrew verb *rib* which can represent physical struggle, but almost always rather means an argument with words. Its most common use in the Bible is for a lawsuit. The people are suing Moses. Moses takes this as a "test" (I can't help, writing this in August '95, but think of Judge Ito), *nasa*, the same word used in Genesis 22 of God's testing Abraham. Verse 1 is an historical prologue; so v. 2 is the fist verse of the story, and already the two verbs have been introduced which prepare the hearer for the etiological punch line in v. 7: *nasa*, Massah, test; *rib*, Meribah, quarrel. NRSV "complained" is RSV "murmured" (*lun*). *Rib* and *lun* are both the same type of Hebrew verb (hollow), and for the hearer of the text they would resonate, *vayarev... vayalen* (in most languages the r and the l are closely related—note the Japanese difficulty in distinguishing the two in English): they quarreled and complained. One final note on the storyteller's use of paronomasia: the first word of v. 3, "they thirsted," sounds like the first word of v. 4, "he cried out" (*vayitsma... vayitsak*); the people's thirst leads to Moses' cry.

Now to receive the living water (living water means running water) the narrator has Moses go to Mount Sinai where later the Torah will be received (see the Gospel lesson). This is clearly foreshadowing: the people now obtain the water for physical life; soon in the same place they will get the Torah, the sustenance of spiritual life.

I can't close without noting whom and what Moses took with him, at the command of God, on his mission to stifle the congregation's murmuring: some of the elders and his staff. Not bad advice for a pastor. LML

Pastoral Reflections

When I was in Paris last spring I came to appreciate the ease with which we Americans can quench our thirst. Soft drinks in restaurants were expensive, and even those from walk-up windows and service machines were three to four times the cost of what we pay in Iowa. My situation was not as severe as the plight of the Hebrew people as they wandered in the desert without a drinking fountain or canteen, but liquid refreshment was on my mind a lot when it was not so handy to obtain.

Water is necessary for life. Our bodies are mostly water. A "Star Trek: Next Generation" episode depicts an alien entity describing humanoids as "ugly bags of mostly water." We are conceived in water, carried in water in the womb, and brought forth to need many cups of water a day to live and resist dehydration and death. Even our life with God is often described in terms of H_20. From the primordial creation story with its chaotic, wind-tossed deep, to the waters of baptism in which we receive the restoration of life as God intends it, images of water dominate—purging, cleansing, life-giving water.

The Hebrew people needed water to live in the desert. Their problem was that they didn't trust God to provide it for them without their nagging and whining. On the other hand, when Jesus sought water from a Samaritan woman and offered her living water in return, she eagerly accepted the gift and ran back to her village to share it with others. The Jewish man at the well becomes not just a prophet to her, but the One who gives eternal life, as well. She trusts his word and shares the bounty.

As God's children we sometimes fall into the habit of the Hebrew people wandering in the desert, complaining that there isn't enough water to go around, and wanting to hoard what little we have for ourselves. But as followers of Christ, we are called to see the plenty we have been given, and to share the good news with others. Evangelism has not been a traditional strong suit for Lutherans. But the mandate from Christ is clear: "Go and tell."

Invitation: Share

As a Lenten challenge this week, let's invite someone new to worship with us next Sunday. Let's go with haste and share the news that we have found the Messiah, and that he has water to slake our deepest thirsts.
BMW

Fourth Sunday in Lent March 17, 1996

1 Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

First Reading

The story of Saul in 1 Samuel 16 is indeed a tragedy. It is framed by a relatively unusual Hebrew verb, *tsalakh* "rush," NRSV "come mightily upon," JPS *Tanakh* "grip." It is used in Amos 5:6 of fire. It appears to imply the granting of a supernatural strength or power, as with Samson (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14). When Saul was anointed king, the spirit of the Lord rushed upon him to make him a new man and he spoke in tongues (1 Sam 10:6, 10). It gripped him again during the Jabesh-Gilead incident, after which no one questioned his right to be king (11:6). Sadly, the spirit of the LORD departs from Saul in 16:14, and the verb *tsalakh* is used for the last time in 18:10 when now an evil spirit of God rushes upon him. He is a doomed man. So it is that in our pericope, the strengthening spirit of the LORD rushes on a new man, David (16:13).

Saul was your normal soldier and king: "When he took his stand among the people, he was head and shoulders taller than any of them" (10:23). Saul appealed to human eyes. David, on the other hand, was the runt of the litter. Rosy cheeks and pretty eyes do not a warrior-king make. But he was chosen through divine eyes (it is probably significant that David appears after *seven* of Jesse's sons). This story is so typical of biblical theology; the God of the Bible, unlike the gods of the nations, always sides with the little guy: Moses not Pharaoh, slaves not nobility, peasants not the powerful, Amos not Jeroboam or Amaziah, Judah Maccabee not Antiochus Epiphanes, Jesus of Nazareth not Sadducean princes, a dying Messiah not a Zealot king. The Hebrew word anoint (*mashakh*) means, of course, to "make messiah," and David is surely a faulty prototype of one who is to come who would maintain David's smallness, humility, and pastoral priorities. David the King, however, will be seduced by power, might, selfishness, and violence (see the Succession Narrative: 2 Samuel 9-20, 1 Kings 1-2).

Jesse was from the tribe of Judah, the clan of Ephrathah (see my article in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* if you are interested in how the name became confused), and the village of Bethlehem, which facts also support the biblical theology. Ephrathah was one of the least significant clans in Judah, and Bethlehem was the sticks compared with urbane Jerusalem. That's what Micah is saying in 5:2 (English): the messiah who will come will have his roots in David the runt. He will not come from a famous clan but a minor one, and he will not come from Jerusalem, capital of power, government, wealth, and military might, but he will come from insignificant Bethlehem, poor village of simple shepherds, House of Bread.

One other matter deserves comment. Christians regularly misunderstand the word sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible. Because of the New Testament use of the sacrifice for sin in relation to the interpretation of the crucifixion of Jesus, we have much too sober and somber a notion of the term. In reality, the sin offering was only one of many sacrifices, and the term most often connotes a happy and celebrative feast. To have meat was rare, and it connoted a special event. Since the blood is the life (Genesis 9) the meat had to be prepared in a special way to respect the Creator, and since God was understood as invisibly present, the people prepared themselves for the sacrificial feast

("purify yourselves," JPS *Tanakh*, is better than "sanctify yourselves"; see the instructions in Leviticus). But the point is that this is a party honoring a special guest, and no one will be seated until he comes (16:11). LML

Pastoral Reflections

Seeing with human eyes, looking at outward appearances, has definite limitations. When Samuel looked at the sons of Jesse from his human perspective, he was ready to anoint the wrong son because he looked like one who could lead the people of Israel. The Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature... for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). Instead, the Lord chose the least of Jesse's sons, the youngest son, David, who was not full grown, and who had been left to tend the sheep because it didn't seem important, from a human perspective, to include him in the deliberations. It was David, the least, that Samuel anointed in the Lord's name.

In the lesson from John we find people continuing to judge from a strictly human standpoint. The man born blind was relegated to the outer limits of society, one of the least as far as those in power were concerned. Obviously, since he was blind, he or his parents must have been terrible sinners. It wasn't necessary to notice him or respect him.

But then Jesus came along and looked beneath the surface of his blindness to his heart. Jesus accepted him, anointed his eyes and gave him his sight. After his encounter with Jesus, the man was able to see not only in a human way, but also beneath the surface, to the heart of things. This becomes apparent as we follow his conversations with the temple hierarchy. After being anointed by Jesus, this man finds new meaning and purpose for his life.

It's hard to look beneath the surface and try to find the beauty within a person's heart. When a married couple splits up after thirty-plus years of marriage, and long-denied pain boils out, it's easy to take sides and blame one or the other. It's far more difficult to see that each is vulnerable and suffering; that each needs love and care. When an adolescent begins to act out in dangerous and immoral ways, it's easy to blame the young person or the parents. It's more difficult to look beneath the surface and find the hurt that motivates such actions.

We should not ignore the real evil in the world, nor should we excuse every behavior—too much of that has gone on in our society in past years. But our Lord commands us to love even our enemies and to look with our hearts to see people as God sees them. To judge from a human perspective and condemn those we can't understand or agree with is not the way to combat evil or to correct those who need our help and care.

Invitation: Pray

As part of our Lenten discipline, perhaps we would want to choose a person who is a challenge to us—one who makes us uncomfortable in some way, one who seems to strain the limits of right and wrong, one who seems to us of little value—and pray for that person, seeking to see him or her through the eyes of our Lord Jesus. BMW

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 24, 1996

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

First Reading

When I was a child, I thought I knew what the Ezekiel passage means. Then when I was a seminarian, I thought I knew what it means—something different. Now I am not sure what it means. Did Ezekiel intend to present a vision of individual resurrection or of national resurrection? And then there is the whole question of intentionality: does it even matter what a poet intended when the composition takes on a life of its own?

The standard historical-critical view, the one I learned in seminary, is that this text speaks not about resurrection of the body but about the restoration of the Babylonian exiles to the Holy Land. In support of this view is the interpretation in v. 11, "these bones are the whole house of Israel" (*kol bet yisrael*); the promises in vv. 12 and 14 that God "will bring you back to the land of Israel" and "will place you on your own soil"; and the fact that resurrection of the body is not unambiguously attested in the Hebrew Bible until the Isaiah Apocalypse (24-27) which is probably 50 to 150 years later than Ezekiel.

However, upon rereading this text for this article, I was struck by the emphasis in vv. 1-10 on the individual, the clear implication in the vision of many individual skeletons, and the attention to physical detail: sinews, flesh, skin, breath. Moreover, vv. 12-14 with their systematic listing of steps of action and sheer repetition seem to narrate a series of divine acts which include restoration *and* individual resurrection: "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves... when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves." Verse 14 is quite different from its analogous predecessor in 36:27-28 which speaks of God placing his Spirit within the human heart for the purpose of moral guidance, and concludes that "then you shall *dwell* [*yashav*] in the land that I gave to your ancestors," whereas 37:14 states, "I will put my breath within you, and you shall *live* [*khayah*, i.e. have life]." (The words Spirit, spirit, breath, and wind are all the same in Hebrew [*ruakh*] but the context of v. 14 demands "breath" as JPS *Tanakh* correctly translates. *Pneuma* is similar in Greek; see the second lesson.) From an historical point of view, if only 50 years separate Ezekiel and the Isaiah Apocalypse, that's not much time; besides, the book of Job, which likely predates Ezekiel, argues against resurrection of the body, but obviously does so because there were some supporting the doctrine. In addition, Ezekiel 37-38 conclude the major part of the book with oracles in apocalyptic language!

Perhaps our pericope is best interpreted in its context. Chapter 36 is about the return of the exiles to Israel. Chapter 37 in the verses following our text is eschatological: vv. 15-23 speak of the reunification of the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and vv. 24-28 foresee a restored and perfected Messiah and Temple. In such a context, the Vision of the Dry Bones, it would appear to me, refuses to be tied down to then-time or end-time.

There's another issue here. Christians have trouble understanding the Hebrew mind's connection of theology with the land of Israel. When God revealed himself to Abraham and Moses, it was in the specific and concrete context of giving them the *land* of Israel (Genesis 12; Exodus 15). God chose to make his abode specifically and concretely on *Mount Zion* in Jerusalem. So

I guess it does not surprise me that Ezekiel would speak of resurrection in the context of return to the land. The Jerusalem Talmud, commenting on our pericope, says that Jacob wanted to be buried in the land of Israel so that when the Messiah comes he won't have to roll underground all the way from Egypt to Israel for resurrection. If you've seen the number of graves on the Mount of Olives, you know that Jacob is not alone. LML

Pastoral Reflections

Can these dry bones live? Ezekiel's vision of dry bones scattered across the valley floor is a very powerful resurrection image. Our own dryness, barrenness, and scatteredness cry out in unison, "can these dry bones live?" Our lives, too, are full of emptiness, brokenness, and death.

But then, Ezekiel prophesies to the dry bones, and the quickening breath of the Creator sweeps across the floor of the valley. The bones begin to rattle and shake and move together in a dance of restoration—bone to its bone—flesh and sinew, skin and hair restored to empty skeletons. And then Ezekiel cries to the *ruach* again, and God heaves a final thrust of breath, giving birth once again to new life—breathing oxygen into deflated lungs, sending blood pumping through collapsed veins and arteries, restoring hope and purpose to those who were dead.

To Lazarus, too, the breath of God brought restoration and a new lease on life. Jesus stands outside the tomb of death and cries out to the corpse, calling Lazarus back to life—not yet the new being that will live for eternity, but a foretaste, a glimpse, of the power for life that is stirred into being by the very breath of God.

Can these bones live? Can this corpse rise to new hope? The people of our world struggle for life—some buried by poverty and hopelessness, others smothered by luxury and abundance. Can we live? The life that comes from the breath of God comes to the dead to bring new life. We must be truly dead—to ourselves and our illusions, to our futility and idolatry—before the voice of prophecy and the call of Christ can penetrate and bring us to life.

Invitation: Listen

How does the voice of Ezekiel prophesy to you in your own valley of dry bones? What does the voice of Jesus say to the corpse that dwells within you? Listen! Let the breath of God recreate you in the image of Christ. BMW

Sunday of the Passion
March 31, 1996

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11
Matthew 26:14-27:66

First Reading

Isaiah 50:4-9a. The corporate and/or individual interpretation faces us with this pericope as it did last Sunday. Of course, this is the third of the Suffering Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah; all of them will be assigned in the course of Holy Week, and I will use this occasion as a plug for services every night. You may have only a handful Monday through Wednesday at first, but you will keep the continuity of the lessons going, making Maundy Thursday and Good Friday more meaningful, and besides, it's the right thing to do!

Jews have interpreted the servant as Israel, and Christians as Jesus, and he is probably neither and both. The descriptions of suffering in the songs are so individualized that it is hardly possible that the servant is all Israel, but perhaps the exiles or, more probably, Second Isaiah himself (and his disciples?). At the same time, while the prophecies do not "predict Jesus," neither do they identify their referent; and they are certainly ambiguous and open enough to cry out for fulfillment in later generations.

I absolutely disagree with NRSV's conjecture of "teacher" in v. 4a; there is no evidence or need for such a flippant change of the Hebrew text. The word means "those who are taught" (*limmudim*) i.e. "disciples," and it forms an inclusio with the (same) last word of v. 4c. The translation should read, "The Lord has given me a disciple's (or student's) tongue," the point being that the servant is so in tune with God, his Teacher, that his words mirror God's. The mission of the servant involves suffering. This is at odds with universal mainline theology which states that those in tune with God prosper. Hence, the servant's punishment at human hands: they assume his suffering implies his guilt.

But in the tradition of the lament, the servant expresses his irrepressible faith (v. 7). As is the case with Job's r(R?)edeemer (19:25), it is not clear whether "he who vindicates" is God or another (JPS *Tanakh* capitalizes "my Vindicator"). I'm quite sure, given the following, that it is God. The word in our text means, literally, "to declare righteous" (*tsadak*). The context is a court setting, and in the next phrase we meet our old friend *rib* from the Moses story in Lent 3: "who will bring a lawsuit against me? Let us stand up together in court. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me with their best legal arguments! With the LORD God as my defense attorney, who can declare me guilty?"

The Hebrew Bible nowhere clearly connects the doctrine of the messiah with that of the suffering servant. There are hints, e.g. the late Zechariah Apocalypse, "Behold, your king comes to you... humble and riding on a donkey" (9:9) and perhaps "when they look on him whom they have pierced" (12:10). In the "intertestamental period" there is increasing identification of the righteous sufferer as the one who gains righteousness (e.g. Tobit, 4 Ezra). But it is left for the early church to combine the two doctrines into a suffering servant messiah. Or perhaps it was Jesus himself, born in humble circumstances, educated outside the official pharisaic academies, laborer and peripatetic rabbi, disciple of God and teacher of fishermen, tax collectors, shepherds, and prostitutes, who did so. LML

Pastoral Reflections

When our youngest son was about three years old, he used the phrase, "I don't want to hear that," whenever someone said something to him that he didn't like. The writer of Isaiah, on the other hand, states that God "wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught... and I was not rebellious, I did not turn back." (vv. 4 & 5)

God's word is not an easy word. Isaiah foretells the word of the Lord that will come to the Messiah, an even more difficult word than for others of God's people. But the Anointed will hear the teaching and share it—and bear the consequences of speaking it. Yet even in his greatest suffering, God's chosen One, though treated disgracefully, will not be disgraced. He does God's will and no one else has the authority to declare him guilty.

It is worth noting, as we consider the narrative of our Lord's suffering, that his anointing by the woman at the house of Simon the leper (26:6-13) occurs just before the Passover and Passion. The connection is clear. The anointed One is the suffering servant, and even his anointing—at the hands of a woman, in the home of a leper—declares his humility.

Who will listen to such a One? Not those in positions of power and authority. And who will dare to declare him guilty? Only those who are perjurers and liars, bribed to twist the truth and condemn the innocent. Only those who are greedy for power and seek to be their own god. All these will prevail for the short term, but over the long haul they "will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up" (v. 9b). But the Anointed will pass through their hands and arise, scarred but victorious, beaten down but not destroyed, emerging strengthened, renewed, and eternal.

The hope that hides within the events of our Lord's Passion speaks to us in our trials and suffering. Although the trial may seem to go on forever, it will come to an end. The dark night of pain will give way to the morning of relief and new life. But for now we must live in the pain, experience the suffering, and learn from it. For even in times of sorrow, fear, and frustration, God "wakens [our] ear to listen as those who are taught." If we are to emerge unscathed and strengthened, then we must allow the lesson and not give in to the temptation to rebel. We are to trust the Lord at all times and rely on God alone.

Invitation: Watch and wait

Our challenge for this week might be to consider the trials and suffering of Jesus and to wait for God's voice to speak to us in our own difficulties. BMW

Monday of Holy Week
April 1, 1996

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 36:5-11
Hebrews 9:11-15
John 12:1-11

First Reading

Isaiah 42:1-9. The Suffering Servant Songs are considered autonomous units because of their distinctive content and because, with one possible exception, they do not appear to equate God's servant with the nation of Israel, as is the case in the rest of Deutero-Isaiah. The first servant song comprises 42:1-4 only. This is the servant's "call" or commission. He is anointed with the Spirit and given the specific task of bringing *mishpat* to the nations. *Mishpat* is the unique prin-

ciple of Torah: "justice with compassion" is about as close as we can get in English; JPS *Tanakh* translates, creatively, "the true way." The servant does not achieve his purpose by means of loud preaching or violence. "The coastlands" in Hebrew always means the farthest reaches of the world.

Verses 5-9 can be understood as the divine response to the servant's call. This is vintage Deutero-Isaiah: God as Creator, universal monotheism, recollection of the Exodus and Sinai with "I am the LORD," yet declaration of a new thing. The servant here is probably Israel, as it is in most of the book; v. 6b should probably be translated, "I have given you as a covenant people [and] a light to the nations." In other words, they have been and are a covenant people; now they shall provide a light to the nations. Verses 10-13, in my opinion, are then the people's response. So the structure of the unit 42:1-13 is:

1-4 suffering servant commissioned
5-9 God responds, placing the mission of the suffering servant within the greater mission of God's servant Israel
10-13 The people respond with their own song

Mark is probably the first (though he may be dependent on already established early Christian interpretation) to connect 42:1 with the royal messianic Psalm 2:7 through the proclamation of the divine voice at Jesus' baptism (1:11). For Mark, Jesus' baptism is his anointing as the suffering servant messiah. LML

Pastoral Reflections

The Lord is about to do a new thing, to bring into being a new reality. The embodiment of this new covenant is the servant anointed by the very Spirit of God, the Messiah who brings healing and hope to the nations, the Light who will bring justice to the earth. Jesus has nearly completed his ministry and will face denunciation in a very short time. He will not lift up his voice to defend himself. He will do nothing to thwart the purpose of God, even though it means agonizing suffering and shameful degradation.

In the sorrowful contemplation of this week, a bright spot appears: Mary's act of kindness and devotion as she anoints Jesus' feet with costly scented ointment. We might invite people to think about what such an act of kindness and affirmation would mean to a person facing persecution, betrayal, and death. Who are the people in our communities and our world who are harmed because they stood up for what was right? Who is it among us who is shut off from others by suffering of some kind?

Invitation: Offer

Perhaps we might take a cue from Mary and lavish some kindness on another person—one who struggles to fit in, or someone who suffers in mind or body. A gift of flowers, a basket of fruit, or a card of appreciation may be just the extravagance needed to tell another that she or he is valued and worthwhile. As we offer such comfort to one of these, God's children, we offer it to our Lord. BMW

Tuesday of Holy Week
April 2, 1996

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 71:1-14
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
John 12:20-36

First Reading

Isaiah 49:1-7. Like Jeremiah, the servant was destined as a fetus. God prepared him to speak incisively and to the point and protected him until the *kairos*. Verse 3 is the only place in the servant songs where the servant seems to be equated with Israel, although the word Israel is missing in one manuscript which, on the principle of *lectio difficilior*, may well provide the original reading. Indeed, how is it possible for the suffering servant to have a mission to Israel (v. 5) if he is Israel? In v. 4, again reminiscent of Jeremiah's confessions, the servant gets discouraged yet expresses his faith. Verse 7 is either part of the song, or a divine response as we had after 42:1-4. LML

Pastoral Reflections

God's servant is cut off in the middle of life, and echoes the sage in Ecclesiastes: "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity" (v. 4a). Yet even in the sorrow of that statement is the awareness of God's purpose for his life, called and named by God before birth. And despite the sense of futility there is the affirmation that God is in control and can be trusted.

We, too, caught up in the desperation of busy schedules, chronic illnesses, and damaged relationships, can remember that "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me" (v. 1b). Even in the midst of suffering we can be assured of God's presence and grace because our Lord has opened the way to life for us. In the midst of death and futility God has opened a door of hope and salvation.

Invitation: Encourage

Near the end of his life Jesus was visited by some Greeks who wanted to meet him. As we continue to contemplate the sorrows of this week, perhaps we might encourage people to recall the ways in which they meet Jesus—at work in their lives; in sorrow as well as joy. We might suggest ways in which they can share the light of Christ with others: a letter of encouragement to a suffering friend, a visit to a lonely shut-in, a letter of advocacy to a member of Congress on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. May we do something today to let others see Jesus through us. BMW

Wednesday of Holy Week
April 3, 1996

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 70
Hebrews 12:1-3
John 13:21-32

First Reading

Isaiah 50:4-9a. The first reading from Sunday is repeated, although the other appointed readings are different. LML

Pastoral Reflections

Isaiah's prophecy continues: "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting." (v. 6)

The time of suffering draws ever nearer. Jesus prepares for his betrayal by handing the bread dipped in wine to Judas Iscariot, a token of his acceptance of what is yet to come on that fateful night. He is not rebellious, but will do the will of the Father. And Judas, with the taste of bread and wine on his tongue, goes out to sell his Lord—and his soul—for thirty pieces of silver. He who abhorred Mary's "waste" of money spent on expensive ointment for Jesus' anointing, will soon cast the betrayal money upon the floor of the temple and abandon all hope.

In what ways do we betray our Lord? How often have we gone out with the taste of bread and wine fresh upon our tongues and used those tongues to slander, betray, berate or gossip?

Invitation: Be reconciled

As we contemplate the approaching Passion of our Lord, it would be good to go first and be reconciled to anyone from whom we are estranged, to seek forgiveness from someone we've harmed, or to speak forgiveness to one against whom we have harbored bitter feelings. BMW

Maundy Thursday
April 4, 1996

Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

First Reading

The Exodus is the birthing event of Israel. All before it is prologue; everything after it is denouement. It attracts all the major traditions unto itself: Sinai, Torah, Covenant, Temple, Exile, and Return. The Exodus is like the first cell after conception: it holds within itself all that the newborn will become.

To remember in Hebrew (*zakhar*) means to recall the past, make it one's own, and bring it into the present and future. Another way to define it: to enter into the past event and become part of it, which will have current and future consequences. A remembrance (*zikkaron*) is a multigenerational event combining history and eschatology.

Remember is often accompanied by "take to heart" and/or "do." The Passover is a liturgical event which is both existential and pragmatic. I continue to be amazed by pastors who strip the Eucharist to its bare Verba. As an Episcopalian member of our faculty remarked, "How can you call it the Eucharist if there is no Eucharistic Prayer," i.e. no thanksgiving? The "pink prayer" in the *LBW* is a remarkable summary of the Salvation History perfectly fitted to our Remembrance, reaching back to the past and

into the future; yet pastors continue to ignore it because of "economy" or undisciplined preaching. I would like someone to explain to me how the people of God could better spend that four or five minutes. And what of the doing? The Eucharist is not a bunch of words to be glossed over, but a series of sign-acts which are integral to the Remembrance. Pastors, perhaps with study groups of parishioners, need to pull out their manuals on the liturgy and recall what it is they are doing. Finally, the misuse of sacrificial language surrounding the liturgy at the time of the Reformation is no longer a problem. Perhaps we Lutherans need to consider in what sense the Eucharist is a sacrifice, not meaning that Christ's death on the cross was not once and for all, but because in the liturgy we enter into the event of Christ's sacrifice and bring it to remembrance.

I have mentioned before in these pages that for the Hebrew mind the blood is the life or life-force. In a pre-scientific society it was obvious that blood flowed through a body to keep it alive. Every time an animal was slaughtered, its blood was poured out (never consumed) because the life-force belongs to God. John recounts that when Jesus said, "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you," "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" (John 6:52-71). Indeed, to this day Holy Communion is repugnant to many Jews. As much as Christians and Jews have in common, at the altar they part company. For in this ancient Passover ritual there is something new: Messiah's blood grants supernatural life.

It has become fashionable for Christian congregations to celebrate a Seder meal on Maundy Thursday. There is nothing wrong with this practice, and in so far as it enables people to remember their roots, it is helpful; though we really are not sure to what degree the Seder, a product of Rabbinic Judaism, is in fact the same as the Passover Feast of Second Temple times. When the Temple was destroyed, different institutions replaced it: in Rabbinic Judaism it was the Sabbath; in Christianity it was the Eucharist.

Which leads to my final point, a plea really. To do a Seder is fine; but Christianity has its own Holy Liturgy for Maundy (Command) Thursday. It has its distinctive Gospel reading, and its unique sign-act of remembrance, the washing of feet. This holy, ancient enactment of Messiah's New Commandment occurs in far too few Lutheran churches, and this last Lenten reflection is a heartfelt appeal for its restoration and renewal. LML

Pastoral Reflections

The Passover has arrived, the night on which the people of God remember and celebrate. Long years before, on this very night, God delivered them from the hand of Pharaoh. The story is told. The wine is drunk. The unleavened bread and roasted lamb are eaten. Prayers of praise and thanksgiving are spoken. But on this Passover, God is about to do a new thing, to bring to life a new era of deliverance and salvation.

On this last Passover that Jesus will spend with his disciples, he does something different, something not prescribed by Moses. Jesus, the Master, arises from the table, wraps a towel around his waist, and stoops to wash the feet of his twelve disciples. Peter tries to keep him from doing such a menial task for him, but Jesus warns him that if Peter is to be part of him, he must submit to this service. Judas Iscariot remains silent as his Lord kneels at his feet and ministers to him this one last time.

After Jesus completes his task, and Judas has received the bread and wine and gone to do his nefarious errand, the Lord reclines again with his remaining disciples and be-

gins to teach a new commandment, a commandment to love. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (v. 35).

Jesus has spoken of turning the other cheek, of praying for one's enemies. On this night of deliverance, when he will be delivered into the hands of his enemies—arrested and unjustly condemned—he speaks of being glorified in his suffering. His glory will not come as an easy release, but through enduring disgrace with dignity, forgiving those who harm him, and continuing to love those who betray and deny him.

To his followers, who will soon scatter in fear, Jesus speaks a new commandment: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (v. 35) The last thing the disciples can do for Jesus is to live by the law of love. To hate is to deny Christ. To live by wrath is to betray the glory of his suffering.

We want easy answers and gentle suffering. We are appalled by tales of the torture endured by those who have been unjustly accused. We want revenge—and call it justice.

Invitation: Embrace and endure

But the way of Christ is the way of suffering. Whether it's the suffering of disease to those who have always been "good Christians," or the suffering of being misunderstood, or the suffering of death for one's beliefs, we endure it for the sake of our Lord, and he is glorified by our faithful endurance. We live in a society that has little patience for suffering and which denies the necessity of pain. But until we embrace our grief and own our despair, and offer them up to God's mercy and grace, we can never be free of their power over us. BMW

Good Friday
April 5, 1996

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16-25
John 18:1-19:42

First Reading

The Isaiah text is one of the holiest in Christianity, so much so that, surprisingly, there is little Jewish treatment of it. Judaism chose rather to develop interpretations of Genesis 22 (The Binding of Isaac). I think this was because the Christians so early on claimed this text as their own. (When I say Judaism I am referring to the development of Rabbinic Judaism based on the Mishnah after 200 C.E.; obviously there were numerous Jewish religious groups in the first century, of which the Nazarenes [Christians] were one.) The opening verse (52:13) expresses the early Christian theology of the cross (see *TDNT* on *hupsoo*; John 3:15, Phil 2:9). Many modern congregations have developed their own traditions regarding what they do on Good Friday. Whatever you do in your location, please make sure this text is read, year after year, on this day. Your people should not be able to hear it without thinking of Good Friday, and their Good Friday should feel unfulfilled if they have not heard this text.

What the original historical context was is obscure. This poem is the strongest argument yet that the suffering servant was an individual, perhaps Deutero-Isaiah himself or someone among his disciples. His unassuming demeanor coincides with the description of the servant in the previous songs. He was not attractive; whether from natural causes, beatings, torture, or a disfiguring disease is unclear. At any rate, he is not one

humans would have picked as a savior. These characteristics concur with the biblical "runt of the litter" theology discussed in Lent 4. But because of his afflictions, it was assumed according to popular theology that he was being punished by God for his own sins. He is evidently executed or assassinated. Yet in some way he is vindicated, whether by resurrection, entry into the afterlife, assumption to God in an extraordinary way like Enoch and Elijah (and perhaps Moses); or is the meaning more symbolic and nothing to do with resurrection at all: he is surprisingly vindicated, proved right in the end, and accounted great?

This text is the fullest development of the doctrine of vicarious atonement in the Hebrew Bible. The theology is not new or out of the blue. The doctrine lay behind the theology of the sin offering and the prayers of the priests on behalf of the people, for example. But the greatest influence on our passage is the prophetic tradition itself. The prophets had never separated their message from their person, their word from their body. Amos was thrown out of the country; Hosea suffered a disastrous marriage; Isaiah walked the city naked for three years; Jeremiah's confessions reveal the suffering he endured to proclaim the word of God, and he was eventually kidnapped and probably assassinated; and Ezekiel's entire life is spent in one sign-act after another, including extended catatonic states. Deutero-Isaiah simply takes this tradition to its logical conclusion: the prophet is the message, the suffering servant is the word of God. The word of God is among the people, and as he proclaims to them so he suffers for them. He has such an intimate acquaintance with the divinity that God will account his innocent suffering as healing and forgiveness for the many. LML

Pastoral Reflections

The prophecy is fulfilled; the servant of God must be lifted up very high upon a cross, taken away by a perversion of justice, and stricken for the transgression of the people. He will reach his victory and prosperity through the portal of death, for only by entering into the realm of death can he defeat it forever and redeem those caught in its throes.

The Isaiah text and the recounting of Jesus' Passion from John are so profound that it is not necessary to elaborate too much on them. My favorite way of dealing with Good Friday sermons is simply to dress in a black cassock, stand before the people, and recount the story. It can be done from the perspective of an objective bystander who saw these things take place and wonders what it all means. It can be done from the perspective of one of the Marys who followed Jesus—perhaps Mary of Bethany who anointed his feet or Mary Magdalene who is left grief-stricken with plans to visit his grave as soon as the Sabbath is past. It can be done from the perspective of Peter, with fear in his heart and words of denial upon his lips, standing afar to watch his dreams die with the man he had so recently called, Messiah.

When told in this way, simply and without theatrics, the message strikes the ears as freshly as if it had been told the day after it happened. Once when I did this, a woman in the congregation said she thought at first that I was talking about something that I had heard on the news. (I had referred to Jesus as "a young man" since I was speaking from the perspective of a bystander who had just come to town and didn't know his name.)

Another way it could be handled would be to have a dialogue of sorts, with someone reading a verse or two from the Isaiah text, perhaps from the back of the church, and then the narrator telling the people about an

event of the Passion that fulfills the prophecy. It's best to know the story well so you don't have to read it.

Invitation: Suspend

On this day we are left in darkness to ponder the death of God's own Son. We are left without benediction; with the tension unresolved and the grief uncomforted. To give away the ending of the story too soon would be to rob it of its power and let people off the hook too easily. We must experience the suspense before we can appreciate the resolution. We must live in the pain before we can comprehend the joy of relief. BMW

The Vigil of Easter
April 6, 1996

Genesis 1:1-2:4a;
Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26
Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13;
Psalm 46
Genesis 22:1-18; Psalm 16
Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21;
Exodus 15:1b-13, 17-18
Isaiah 55:1-11; Isaiah 12:2-6
Proverbs 8:1-8, 19-21
(or Baruch 3:9-15, 32-4:4); Psalm 19
Ezekiel 36:24-28; Psalm 42 and 43
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 143
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Psalm 98
Jonah 3:1-10; Jonah 2:1-9
Deuteronomy 31:19-30;
Deuteronomy 32:1-4, 7, 36a, 43a
Daniel 3:1-29

Romans 6:3-11
Psalm 114
Matthew 28:1-10

The Old Testament readings for the Easter Vigil are diverse and carry us through the salvation history of Israel, from the creation of the world through the saving of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, and culminate in the earthquake that heralds the ultimate moment of salvation, the resurrection of Jesus. The various stories of God's saving acts toward the people of Israel might invite us to reflect on God's continual saving acts in our lives.

The resurrection of Christ promises us eternal life with God, but it is also a paradigm of our entire life as God's baptized children. Life is a series of deaths and resurrections. Just as God draws life from the primordial chaos of the wind-swept deep at creation and breathes life into the dry bones of Ezekiel's desert plain, so our Lord continues to pour life into us. God's rescue of Noah and his family in the flood, the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, Jonah from the fish and the people of Ninevah from their corruption, are reminders that God acts to bring renewal and hope in the everyday events and situations of our daily lives. And Jesus' resurrection from the tomb promises us the ultimate hope, the ultimate act of renewal, our resurrection from the dead and eternal life with God. BMW

Book Reviews

They Cried to the Lord. By Patrick D. Miller (Fortress, $24). M. begins with a survey of prayers in the ancient Near East and ends with an exposition of the Lord's Prayer. In between he investigates, with copious examples, prayers for help, God's answers to prayer, praise and thanksgiving, prayers offered by women, blessing and cursing, and much more. He explains how humans can offer blessings to God, the role of the prophets as intercessors, the biblical use and contemporary resistance to cursing in prayers, and the Trinitarian character of Christian prayer. His expositions of the Aaronic benediction and the Lord's Prayer are gems, and throughout one recognizes a superb combination of first-rate exegesis and deep spirituality. He even examines ancient postures during prayer, thus inviting consideration of our own—standing, sitting, eyes closed, head bowed. Great book. RWK

Prolegomena to the History of Israel. By Julius Wellhausen (Scholars Press, $44.95). This reprint, a century after its original publication in 1878, shows the relevance of W. for ongoing research. Wellhausen excelled in both Old and New Testament studies, with significant contributions also in Arabic studies. The centralization of the cult as espoused by the Deuteronomist played a pivotal role for him. After this event, the priests sought to control the populace by establishing a system of law. Before it, religion supposedly thrived, apart from regulations issued and enforced by a dominating authority. Douglas A. Knight notes in his perceptive Foreword that W.'s negative view of Judaism refers only to his reconstruction of Second-Temple Judaism and not to the Talmudic or modern periods. Knight concludes that Prolegomena could only have been written in late 19th century Germany, but it transcends those confines because of the polemical responses it elicited on dogmatic and historical grounds, and because of the questions it posed and continues to pose. RWK

Social World of Ancient Israel, 1250-587 BCE. By Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin (Hendrickson, $24.95). The authors explore the social institutions of Israel, both in their early villages and under the monarchy. In each case they focus on politics, economics, diplomacy, law, and education, and they reconstruct ideal types—such as the farmer, the herder, and the midwife under village economics—to illustrate the fruits of cultural anthropology. A chapter on "the virgin" under state politics deals with married or marriageable women in the royal household who served as living symbols of the state to be protected by the monarch. By raping Tamar, for example, Amnon laid claim to the power, wealth, goods, and service she represented and so forged an alliance between their households against David. Midwives not only helped women bear children, but their examples also taught the whole community how to understand God whose work in creation resembles that of midwife (Isa 26:16-18; Ps 8:1-9; 139:1-24). The authors emphasize the contrast between the biblical and the modern world and present their materials in a most accessible way. RWK

A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint. Part I. A-I. Compiled by J. Lust, E. Eynikel, and K. Hauspie. (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/ American Bible Society, $24). This lexicon covers all the words used in Rahlfs' edition of the Septuagint and provides statistics telling the reader how often a word occurs in each book. Bibliographical references are provided at the end of each entry. "The ideal user of this lexicon should have some knowledge of both Greek and Hebrew in order to understand the compact presentations of the cases in which the Greek differs or seems to differ from the Hebrew of the Masoretic text." RWK

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Pulpit Therapy

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There is a quiet revolution going on in counseling therapy. The new technique is called "the narrative method," and it represents a radical paradigm shift in the therapeutic world. It can not only explain why narrative preaching works so well, but it also can give us a number of new insights on content, organization, and follow-through in our preaching.

In a recent "Lifestyle" article in *Newsweek*, Geoffrey Cowley and Karen Springen write, "A small but growing number of psychotherapists are shedding ideas that have dominated their field for a century. The new approach is still far from orthodox, it's a fundamentally new direction in the therapeutic world named narrative therapy. At the heart of the new approach is the post modernist idea that we don't so much perceive the world as interpret it."

According to Michael White, an Australian therapist who seems to be the father of the movement, "No problem or diagnosis ever captures the whole of a person's experience. The person has other ways of acting and thinking, but they get neglected because they lie in the shadow of the dominant story."

Four elements tend to dominate the narrative therapist's technique. First, the therapist invites the client to personify the problem. Second, the therapist thinks of personal identity as a story that can be retold and redeemed. Third, narrative therapy isn't a secretive transaction between the therapist and the client, but the community is engaged in the renegotiation of identity. Fourth, the therapist writes a letter summing up the learnings of the therapy session and sends it to the counselee. These are called narrative letters; this element of narrative therapy is called "extending the conversation." David Nyland writes: "Narrative letters enable me to have maximum impact in the least number of sessions."[1]

Help for preachers. Preachers can learn a lot from these new insights. Over the years we have fought "like the devil" against any personification of evil and sin; hence our congregants will be surprised when we identify those things that are eating away at our quality of life and give them names. Sin, devil, evil, greed, culture, selfishness, addiction, and guilt are all names for outward forces that attack us. Scripture has a great deal to say about them and about how we can overcome them. Our sermons should do the same. Bill O'Hanlon writes, "Narrative therapists are able to acknowledge the power of labels while both avoiding the trap

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[1] David Nyland and John Thomas, "The Economics of Narrative," *Networker* (Nov/Dec 1994), 39.

of reinforcing people's attachment to them and letting them escape responsibility for their behavior."[2]

The narrative therapist helps clients rework and retell their life story including the small victories as well as the defeats. When preachers tell the biblical stories or the stories of the saints, they can help the sermon listeners formulate their own stories as they hear those recorded in history and the Bible. "This work is not about people discovering their 'true' nature, their 'real' voice," says Mary Sykes Wylie, "but about opening up possibilities for people to become other than who they are."[3] The witness of Scripture is that the presence of Christ can indeed empower people to "become other than they are."

Perhaps the newest and boldest idea in narrative therapy is the use of "extending the conversation." It has a great deal to say to us about sermon follow-up. The therapist writes a letter summarizing the insights gained in the counseling session which is mailed to the client. A client can read and reread a letter days, months, and years after the session.

This throws a radical new light on how we interpret the letters of the Bible—Paul's epistles in particular—in our preaching. Perhaps Paul wrote these follow-up letters after struggling with young Christians. Nearly 2,000 years later they provide something we can read and gain insight from.

Certainly our sermons can be extended by offering such things as discussion groups about the sermon content, printed sermons available after the sermon is delivered, sermon summaries printed in the bulletin, feedback groups that help prepare and evaluate the sermon, and lay people who take part in discussion groups about what has been proclaimed.

Practical applications. There are some very practical implications to this narrative method of therapy. Let's be bolder about naming not only sin in general, but the sins which are the result of the general sin. And instead of beating shame and guilt further into our sermon listeners, let's give them a way out by telling the gospel story and what Christ has done for us in particular in order that we can overcome the demonic seduction. The overarching emphasis ought to be on the power that God gives to get through.

In addition to the many stories of the Bible, we ought to be unafraid to tell our own story and the struggles, victories, and defeats we have experienced. Certainly the news that God gives us an Emmanuel (God With Us) needs to be told again and again as we formulate what it has been like to live in God's presence.

We ought to talk again about conversion. Narrative therapy identifies the fact that we do have considerable control over our lives and that we can change who we are and how we are. We Christians can add: "with God's help." We do have a Spirit that is available to us to bring about dramatic conversion, and that ought to be named and invoked in the pulpit.

A sample sermon outline. The following is a possible outline or sermon plot and moves using the narrative method which is demonstrated in this new therapy:

1. Tell a story. It could be one of the saints, the biblical heroes or heroines, a reformer, a religious hymn writer. Identify the external sins that attacked this person in

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[2] Bill O'Hanlon, "The Promise of Narrative," *The Third Wave, Networker* (Nov/Dec 1994), 24.

[3] Mary Sykes Wylie, "The Promise of Narrative," *Panning for Gold, Networker* (Nov/Dec 1994), 44.

his or her life story; point out how he or she overcame these attacks; read the Scripture and identify how we can use its advice and inspiration to become empowered to overcome the evil one as well.

2. Tell your own story as the preacher. Identify the external forces in your own life and how they influenced you; point out how God has guided you through troubles.

3. Now draw some insights: We all have external forces causing us pain, we all have a life story and may have forgotten the hopeful parts of it and the promises we have as Christians, we all have a communion of believers to help us through.

4. Ask the individual listeners what their story might be. Ask them to identify what powers are trying to spoil their lives; give some hope and encouragement because of the gospel story of what Christ has done for us.

5. Tell your listeners that the body of believers (congregation) is part of our story. We can help each other bring Christ's presence to us; we can remind each other of the promises of Christ; we can affirm our strength and help one another fight the outside powers.

Complete the narrative sermon by returning to the end of the story with which you began the sermon.

Empowering the congregation. I believe this kind of preaching can empower the congregation to minister to each other and take seriously our theology of the ministry of all the baptized. Congregants are pointed to the sacraments, worship, rites, and the fellowship of believers as strengthening ways to help overcome those sins that attack us. The congregation can see itself as a support group for people who struggle with all the things that culture puts upon us during our lifetime.

There's also a therapy going on for the one who preaches the sermon! God has instituted preaching for the preacher's help as well as the congregation's. Formulating and telling our own story and the stories of Scripture certainly shape and redeem the preacher's story as well.

It's also possible for the preacher to externalize the congregation's problems and be reminded of its strength and its good times rather than just those times that are problematic. This will help continue the ministry that is often hard work and can bring healing to the pastor as the people of God struggle to be faithful in their common ministries.

There's also a congregational therapy that must take place when we preach using the narrative method. The congregation hears the sermon and puts the preacher's faults outside the preacher onto a culture and world that is sin-filled and attacking it from every side. It can also give a new view of the congregation and the task of the congregation to support clergy who preach. The congregation hears a story they can identify with in the sermon, and thus they redeem the congregation's history no matter how dismal it may have been from time to time. If this works well it can free the congregation of guilt for its poor track record and even convert a congregation from passivity to mission-mindedness.

As Cowley and Springen described it, "Instead of looking for flaws in people's psyches, narrative therapy works at nurturing their forgotten strengths." We who are preachers have many forgotten strengths to proclaim.

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