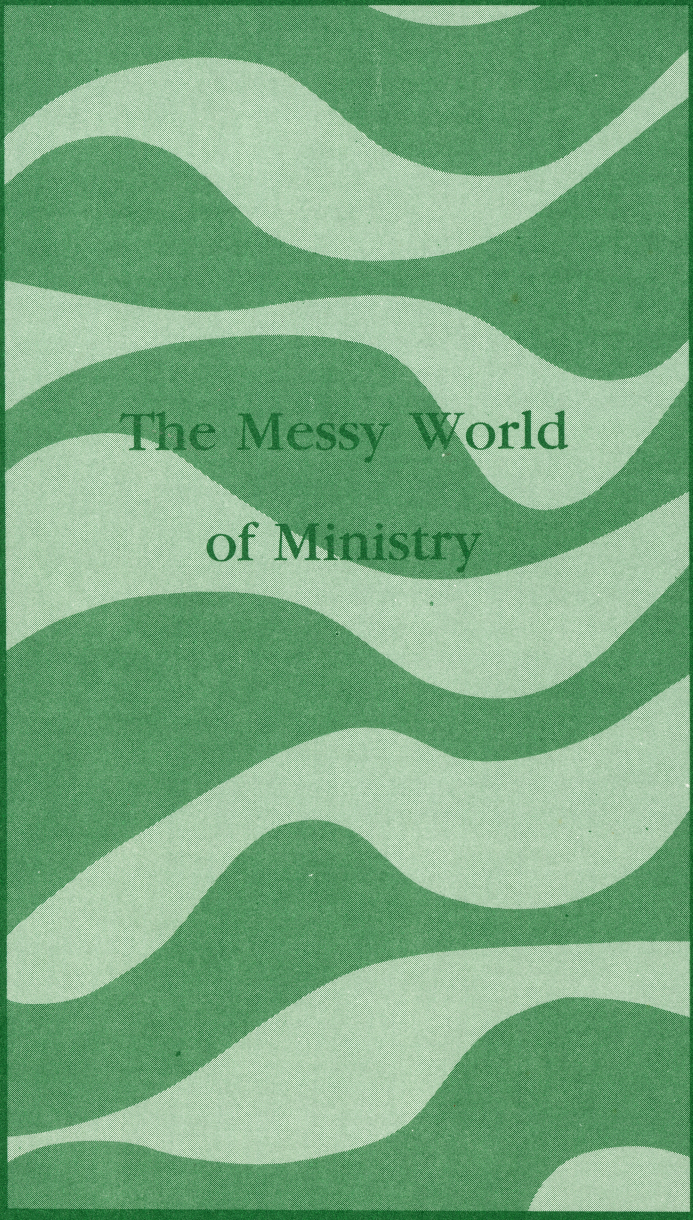
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# The Messy World of Ministry

CURRENTS in Theology and Mission

# Currents

## in Theology and Mission

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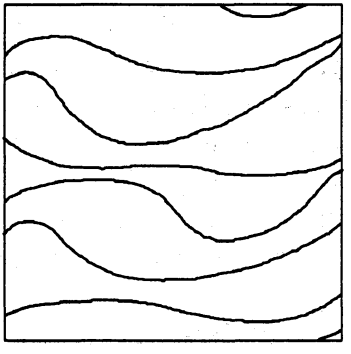
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# The Messy World of Ministry

Your world and mine are often seen by outsiders only at moments of high pageantry. At graduation every student and every professor look like winners, and seminaries appear to be places where spirituality, devotion, love of theology, and sensitivity to every aspect of ministry are as certain as the smile on the graduates' faces. The truth, as they say, is somewhat more complex.

Or go to an ordination service. Each candidate vows unswerving allegiance to Scripture, confessions, and the people in the pew, while family and friends gather around in barely restrainable pride in the candidate. Chances are the church is packed, and the organist is among the synod's finest. Like a mighty army moves this church of God. The truth, as they say....

To recognize the real world as more complex is also to realize the true glory of theological education and pastoral ministry. For it is in the messy world of unmet academic expectations, and in the even messier and more unpredictable world of parish life that our vocations find their true meaning and their greatest challenge. Anyone can teach an A student; anyone can look good at the high festivals. The Christlike view of ministry is to find the glory in the mess.

**Kathleen D. Billman** proposes that the place where both our unexamined assumptions and cherished certainties are most profoundly challenged is the messy world of ministry. Pastoral care is the care that the church extends to its members and to the hungering world through its representatives, a care shaped by its understanding of the kind of ministry Christ demonstrated. Her commitment as a new professor is to

explore with students what it means to walk into the valley of the shadow with isolated and lost persons and to help people find their way home. She also wants to help students use the resources of the human sciences theologically and to urge pastors to be vulnerable to examining themselves as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God's grace.

**David Kuck** believes that Paul shows us a way of faithful thinking about our ambition that will enable us to be clearer about what it is that drives us to succeed in our ministry. In 1 Corinthians 3 and 4, Paul provides an eschatological way of looking at ambition. God will notice work of higher quality in the future judgment although there is no legitimate basis for open competition in the community now. Christian workers strive to earn commendation, but only from God the final judge, not from the present community. Salvation is not the issue here since God judges believers to be righteous solely for the sake of Christ. But if our work is faithful, true, and even ambitious, God will not leave us without recognition.

**William H. King** reminds us that many view science as successful and theology as useless and obsessed with sin, but he holds that technology is a mixed blessing and Christian faith has something crucial to offer in a technological society. Consider the technological paradoxes: we have more knowledge, less understanding; a machine which makes a miner's job safer threatens to eliminate the job altogether; today we have improved communication, but not a greater sense of community. Christianity brings to technological society a commitment to peace and justice and a source of genuine community. The Christian idea of sacrifice in behalf of the other helps many to discover a deeper, more fulfilling life.

**Seth Jersild** has written an imaginary series of reflections by a campus pastor, a college professor, and a young female student dealing with the latter's decision about whether to have an abortion. The campus pastor tries to talk the woman out of it and believes that the constant emphasis on planning in our society is a sign of our inability to face the ambiguities of life here and now. The professor is alienated from the church and resentful of the church's talk about guilt and its reliance on

dogmatic opinions. The woman herself has no relationship to the father of the unborn child and finds herself conflicted by all her diverse options. Such a mess, with no completely satisfactory options, is usually what pastoral care is all about.

**Craig L. Nessan** outlines the five dimensions of life which a congregation brings to a sermon: individual life, family life, the life of the congregation, daily life in the local community, and events in the world at large. The goal of preaching is to enable the multi-dimensional world of those who hear to sparkle with the presence of God. Through good preaching people enter a world in which God's goodness in Christ is real and effective.

**David Housholder** urges an expository style of preaching that draws directly on the Greek text. Pastors who preach in this way will improve their knowledge of Greek and of the Bible itself, place the Bible's message at the core of their ministry, and make visible to their people how homiletical theory and the Sunday sermon relate to each other.

**Meinert Grumm** writes a brief critical commentary on a statement from the Formula of Concord: "The Gospel is that doctrine which teaches what a man should believe in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins from God." Does this sentence reintroduce natural religion, not in the form of good works, but in the form of true doctrine?

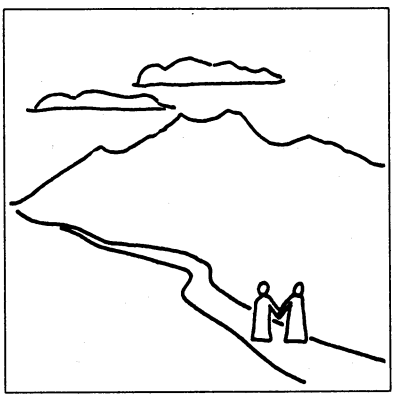
Through the gracious alchemy of Christian ministry, common, ordinary fear, confusion, boredom, and failure are the place where we expect the gospel to shine.

In short, we look for the glory in the mess.

**Ralph W. Klein**
*Editor*

# Integrating Theology and Pastoral Care in Ministry

Kathleen D. Billman
*Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling*
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I have been asked to speak with you this afternoon on the subject, "Integrating Theology and Pastoral Care in Ministry." I am eager to do this, but I must first tell you a little about the assumptions that inform the way I approach this topic.

These assumptions, of course, have emerged not only from my study of theology and pastoral care, but from my personal history and experience of ministry—both as a parishioner and as a pastor.

## The whole cloth of ministry

The fundamental assumption I bring to the subject of integrating theology and pastoral care is that theology and pastoral care are interwoven threads in the "whole cloth" of ministry. It is desirable and necessary at times to distinguish these threads—to examine the nature of each and how they have been woven together over the course of the church's history. While the terms "pastoral care" and "theology" are not identical terms, my basic premise is that they are fundamentally inseparable terms where ministry is concerned. Thus the starting point for me is connection rather than separation. I do not so much *make* this connection as I *discover* it in the practice of Christian life.

This sense of connection has partly to do with my being educated in a seminary in which all pastoral care and counseling courses are situated within a larger enterprise called "pastoral theology." But the seeds of my conviction that there is a vital and reciprocal relationship between theology and pastoral care were sown long before I ever consciously wrestled with the relationship between them. And the place where these seeds were sown was the church.

My father's family was staunchly Lutheran and my mother's family just as staunchly Methodist. My Methodist grandfather was the lay leader of his church, an exuberant practitioner of Christian faith, whose little insurance office on the village square was where people went to tell their troubles or get a much-needed loan, and whose homemade liturgies for family celebrations left us all in puddles of tears. Much to his consternation, *all* of his four children married Lutherans. The families of the three oldest children all attended the Methodist church; my mother, the youngest, joined the Lutheran church my father's mother had helped to charter.

Anyway, I grew up between the strains of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and "I Come to the Garden Alone." But mostly I grew up hearing the strains of "A Mighty Fortress." I grew up in a parish where the rhythms of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost were as familiar as the changing of the seasons; in a context in which words were important enough to be learned by heart and recited publicly, in both liturgy and in the oral exams which were part of confirmation class.

When I read George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* and wrestled with his understanding of religions being like languages that shape life and thought, I remembered Mt. Zion Lutheran Church. "Our primary knowledge," Lindbeck says, "is not *about* religion but how to *be religious*... through ritual, prayer, and the practices of a community of faith."[1]

One of the practices of the Mt. Zion congregation was to go on the first Sunday of the month to the Glen Haven Nursing Home. I remember my first exposure, as a teenager, to the sights and smells of that place—the wrinkled hands that reached out to clasp the smoother hands of the young, the smell of the corridor, the intermingling of strong and faltering voices singing the familiar hymns, the brief glimpses of radiance in time-worn faces as we worshipped and talked with each other.

I was both bruised and healed by those visits. The images of isolation and the reminder that life bounded by what I would now call "finitude" made me want to run away and hide. Part of me dreaded those first Sundays of the month. I did not like the

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[1] See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-liberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 35.

smell of that place. I did not like what I saw. I went because we were told, not just through words but through Christian practices associated with those words, that we would see Christ in those time-worn faces and touch Christ in those arthritic hands. And it was simply what Christians were supposed to do. To be a Christian meant to care, to care passionately and deeply about others.

It was out of these kinds of experiences that the foundation was laid for my continuing struggle to discern the crucial and sometimes elusive relationship between language and practice—between thought, word, and deed. In one sense, I found what I was told that we would find at Glen Haven—the grace of God. That was part of what was so healing. Through the sharing of liturgy and human conversation I felt that all of us, old and young, ill and healthy, were being held and sustained by a power and presence greater than ourselves. The place I had dreaded was not *only* a lonely place, but also a place of grace.

Did I find that because that's what I was told I would find? Because I was in the company of those who were also formed through the language and ethos of the church to expect God in the midst of pain and limitation? Or is there something about the practice of care itself that opens us to the surprising, trustworthy presence of God? And what of those times when we go to such places as Glen Haven and experience the absence of God? When we do not find the place of suffering to be a place of grace?

These kinds of questions occupy me now, but at the time the questions were different. I wondered, as a teenager, why people have to grow old, why people get sick, why they die. Although the church had already given me ways of responding to those questions, it didn't matter that I had theological *responses* until something happened that made the *questions* matter.

I cannot easily separate theology and pastoral care because it was the Christian language about and practice of care, first experienced as a parishioner and later as a pastor, that was the doorway for me into sustained theological inquiry.

I have a very old, Augustinian understanding of what theology means. Theology is faith seeking understanding. It is a task that belongs to the whole people of God, and it occurs whenever and wherever faith encounters what it cannot understand, and seeks passionately to understand. It often grows out of a tension we experience when the assumptions we have made about God, self, neighbor, world, salvation, and the like are challenged. This can and does happen in the classroom. One important task of theological education, I believe, is to challenge and test the understandings of God we already have, whether these be conscious convictions or unrecognized assumptions. We are invited to explore our tacit assumptions and to subject our cherished certainties to the quest for the truth of God. I believe, however, that the place

The place where our unexamined assumptions and cherished certainties are most profoundly challenged is the messy world of ministry.

where both our unexamined assumptions and cherished certainties are most profoundly challenged is the messy world of ministry—in all those situations into which we are called that, to quote a biblical verse, "make our knees smite one against the other."

On the other hand, theological inquiry is not just an exercise of our own restless striving. We also need the resources of another kind of knowing and learning. Through the communal practices of Christian faith—its disciplines of prayer and devotion, its sacraments and proclamation, its social witness and outreach, even its invitation to dance and play—we are encouraged to grow continually in our openness to receive bread for the pilgrimage and to rest beside the still waters.

These rhythms of connection and critical distance, of practicing our faith and reflecting on it, are rather like the rhythms of the sea. At high tide we are caught up in the force of the waves, sometimes being lifted and carried by them, sometimes being knocked down by them. At low tide we can sit on the beach and watch for patterns and rhythms and shells left behind on the shore. But it is the same sea.

Now if all theological inquiry, whether pursued in a seminary or a congregation, is a way of thinking that is grounded in faith but also tests that faith against the realities of our varied experiences in the world; if all theological work involves an interplay of reflection and practice, a rhythm of connection and criticism; then pastoral care, as a theological endeavor, partakes of these same rhythms.

## Pastoral care as solidarity

With this background, I want to give you my present definition of pastoral care and talk about three commitments I bring to the process of preparing pastors to engage in pastoral care as theologians.

I define pastoral care as the care that the church extends to members of its own household of faith and to the hungering world through its representatives; a care which is shaped by its understanding of the kind of care Christ demonstrated through his life, death, and resurrection, but sensitive as well to the biblical story as a whole, and the whole Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Caring is the work of the whole people of God, just as theology is. Pastors are set within communities of faith both to demonstrate care and to nourish and empower others' capacities for care.

One commitment I bring to the task of preparing future pastors for ministry through teaching pastoral care is to explore with them what it means to walk into the valley of the shadow with persons and families who are isolated and lost and what it means to help persons find their way home to community.

This commitment is fueled by my theological conviction that human life is life-in-relationship: a relationship with God, the earth, and all human others. Christian care springs from a way of thinking that sees life as life-in-relationship.

This commitment is also fueled by a growing sense that life in this world of ours is so fragmented, isolated, and overwhelming for many people that the capacity to work pastorally with groups is increasingly crucial. There are several arenas in which I see this need, but I will name two where I see tremendous opportunities:

1. The first arena is where people are struggling with powerful forces of bondage. During my pastorate in Trenton, NJ, from 1977-1985, the drug problem escalated rapidly. At that time there was no Narcotics Anonymous group in the city, and some recovering addicts approached

me about beginning an N.A. group at our church. They came and spoke personally to the Administrative Council and were given permission to use the church. The lay leader and I attended meetings from time to time, and it was in those meetings that I felt that I had truly heard in the flesh the anguished and triumphant voice of the apostle Paul: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." You know it well, the anguished struggle which culminates in the affirmation that Paul has been rescued from a body of death.

With every passing year I am more persuaded that pastoral care involves helping people name the demonic powers which enslave them, and learn to name them in solidarity with others, so that our struggle with evil is not the private, heroic battle of a solitary individual, but rather the shared labor of the people of God—a labor that continually calls us to communal confession, repentance, and renewed commitment to the liberation of the whole human family and to the responsible tending of the whole creation.

What I see in the parishes I have served is that many people, inside and outside the congregation, live lives of quiet desperation. As pastors, we have access to these lives. What will enable us to enter into them faithfully and redemptively? A crucial part is our being vulnerable to our own demons. To wrestle with those things that, as a very old version of the *Book of Common Prayer* says, "go bump in the night." To know that facing great change is sometimes much like facing our death.

Without the capacity to walk in the valley with people, to accompany them into those shadow lands, the idea of encouraging people to join hands in that valley may simply be a way for us to slip out and make our escape. But the other danger is that we may be so caught up in our skill and importance in helping those who journey through the valley that we forget that people need other resources besides what we may have to offer.

Pastoral care does involve the capacity to walk alone into the homes, hospital rooms, nursing homes, psychiatric wards, and prisons where people wander in their valleys. It involves an earnest attempt to incarnate what we have seen and touched and heard about the grace of God. This is only possible because we have discovered that grace exists precisely where the demons dwell. Pastoral care is also the capacity to hear where the common demons and common hopes are—and to help people find one another.

One of the areas this is most needed is where people are struggling with personal pain which is interwoven with the social pain of race, gender, class, and cultural identifications. One of the greatest contributions to both theology and therapy today, I believe, has been made by women and men of color, feminists, and womanists who have refused to draw a line between the personal and the political, as if life is lived in dichotomous worlds. The problems that keep us awake in the night are both inside and outside us. We need strategies to deal with both the internal and social realities of these problems. Helping one another describe the face and the feel of bondage may begin through one faithful relationship; working to change the world requires the solidarity of the many, called to respond to the vision of God's reign.

The parish may truly be the place where people affirm: "Though hordes of devils fill the land, All threatening to devour us, We tremble not, unmoved we stand, They cannot overpower us" (*LBW* #228, stanza 3). Pastoral care, in helping us name the devils together in the places which make us

Caring is more than discrete acts that we do; it is a perspective which can inform all aspects of ministry and deeply nourish the life of the body.

tremble, can help us move toward wholeness, in solidarity with God and one another.

2. The second arena in which pastoral care is deeply personal and also deeply aware that human life is life-in-community is where persons and families reach important milestones in the cycles of their lives. Marriage and other forms of covenant-making, birth, baptism, confirmation, illness, loss, death—these are important milestones in the life cycles of families. Many of these are marked by worship. Even those who do not normally attend worship are drawn to church when these milestones occur.

Each of these milestones invites the kind of pastoral care which is, again, capable of deeply entering the joys and stresses each life change brings, and which is sensitive to the opportunities there may be for nurturing communal bonds. Each of these milestones raises critical theological questions. What do you do when an unchurched family comes to you to "have the baby done," yet doesn't seem to be interested in being part of the life of the church? What do you do when you are sitting by the bedside of a mother whose baby has been stillborn and she asks you, with tears in her eyes, to baptize her baby? We cannot avoid the theological issues raised for us in such situations.

What about the unchurched couple who wants an oceanfront wedding ceremony with you as the officiant? Or the couple who comes and wants to be secretly married? How about the undocumented resident who asks for your help in finding a job, or who is trying to find a way to get more of his family into the U.S. and is nearly perishing of loneliness and poverty?

As we do pre-marriage work with couples, visit the parents and newborn baby in the hospital, give baptismal instruction, sit by the bedside of the dying or in the living room of the bereaved, we are present in those moments when people contemplate a bend in the road or are suddenly thrust into a whole new world. These are moments worthy of great preparation.

These moments are also opportunities to nurture care-in-community. The baptismal class that brings together families who are experiencing all the changes which come with the addition of a new family member can be an instrument of grace, especially when guided by someone who knows how to help families name their struggles, share their joys, and explore their faith. The pastoral care training which equips people to enter hospital rooms willing to offer more than the Sunday flower arrangement and to step through the doorway of the grieving person's home with something in addition to a casserole—this can be a means of grace. And a view of what it means to practice communal care through all activities of ministry—this too is a means of grace.

Several years ago I was asked to design and lead our congregational worship for All

Saints' Day. Throughout my years of pastoral ministry I have been often reminded of the ways in which we continue to ache for people whom we can no longer touch, even when we may have passed through the harsher places in the valley of grief. I also reflected on the number of deaths the St. Paul congregation had experienced in the past year.

A few days before the service we mailed a letter to every worshipping member at St. Paul, telling them that on All Saints' Day we would be remembering and thanking God for all those who had taught us something about the meaning of faith, hope, and love. We asked that people bring in photos or some other tokens of remembrance from loved ones.

That Sunday we were prepared, of course, for communion. On each side of the communion table we had two tables, covered with white cloths. During the opening hymn, "For All the Saints," we asked people to come forward and bring their photos and other mementos and place them on the tables. Nothing prepared me for the power of participating in this communal act. Photos, a beloved Bible, a hand-woven tapestry, a baseball—all these were tenderly placed on the tables. Our diverse congregation—African, Caribbean, white, African-American—all of us were held together in the universal experience of having lost someone we loved. One of the boys in the youth group came forward with a ring that had belonged to his 22-year-old uncle who had died. We were participating in a ritual that crossed generational, as well as racial, cultural, and gender boundaries. As the service moved through tears of remembrance to the affirmation of our common hope, we concluded with something the little ones especially love to do: we lit the candles usually reserved for Christmas Eve service and sang "Pass It On." I will never forget that service. It reminds me that, as Seward Hiltner used to say, caring is more than discrete acts that we do; it is a perspective which can inform all aspects of ministry and deeply nourish the life of the body.

## Pastoral care as conversation

The second commitment I bring to the task of teaching pastoral care is to explore with students how to use the resources of the human sciences theologically.

Ever since the 18th century, the theological disciplines have been wrestling with their relationship to other human discourses. It was in the 18th century that biblical and historical theology began to struggle with their identity in the university in relation to the new historical science, and dogmatic theology assumed the burden of giving a philosophical account of faith. As these disciplines became more theoretical, the split between the theoretical and the practical grew, and made it increasingly difficult, as the age of technology and academic guilds advanced, to remember the whole cloth on which all the threads of theological inquiry are meant to be woven: the ministry of Christ, which is human thought, word, and deed that offers the world the community's response to the grace of God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The so-called "practical" theological disciplines have also engaged in critical conversation with social scientific discourses. In pastoral theology, the conversation has primarily been with psychology, but increasingly we are reading cultural anthropology and sociology as well.

Recently there has been a growing fear that, in a world which is increasingly non-Christian, we have sacrificed too much of our language and tradition in order to con-

verse with academic specialists in other disciplines.

The issue, as I see it, does not turn on whether we should or should not learn the language of other discourses. I have recently been trying to learn the Bassa language, which is a tribal dialect spoken in Liberia. More than that, I am trying to learn something about what words like "loyalty," "God," "mother," and "father" mean to Liberian immigrants. In the terms of Clifford Geertz, I am trying to learn something about the "imaginative universe" in which these words have specific meanings. Or, to use Lindbeck's language, I am trying to learn about the language and ethos of this community; something about its rules and its grammar.

The mystery is that *in encountering difference* I learn more about my own identity than if I had not encountered it. I do not lose my own "beloved language" in learning the language of another. I simply—as though it were simple!—begin to set my worldview alongside that of another and ponder where the connections might be, where the significant differences are, and where some of the opportunities are for meaningful conversation about what matters most in life to us. In other words, I am drawn into a theological conversation.

Psychologies each have their own language. As Don Browning has observed, this language is undergirded by deep metaphors about human life which serve as religions for some people.[2] In order to have a meaningful conversation with a psychology, or any other discourse, I think it is important to examine the fundamental assumptions—or what we may call the assumptive world—which underlies them. We cannot truly understand a psychotherapeutic theory, for example, without asking questions like: What understanding of human nature does this approach assume? What makes change possible? What is the relationship between individual change and social change? What is the relationship between male and female in this approach to change? What does healing or wholeness mean? How does one help people move toward healing? How does this approach understand human resistance to healing?

We not only ask these questions of all psychotherapeutic systems but various theological systems as well. It is at this level, which speaks in plain terms about what is most fundamental, that the critical conversation between discourses is joined, and we discover what some of our own assumptions are: the ones we still wholeheartedly affirm and the ones we leave behind for higher ground.

## Pastoral care as midwifery

A third—and for the purposes of this lecture, final—commitment I bring to teaching pastoral care is the commitment to explore with students ways in which we can be vulnerable to examining ourselves as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God's grace.

This is deeply personal, deeply spiritual work. It is not self-focused in the sense that we are anxious about every word we say. But it is rigorous work in that we explore together the deep images, metaphors, and stories which have shaped our thinking and acting in the world and the unexamined covenants we may have made with God and one another. I will conclude with a personal example of coming to terms with images that have guided and are guiding my practice of pastoral care.

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[2]See Don Browning, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

In not so long-ago days, the images which guided my pastoral work went unrecognized. Whatever I may have said about pastoral care, one image which guided my work was that of a person who bore responsibility for the cure of others; who felt that if she only said and did the right things, people would be helped and God would approve.

More recently I have allowed another image to inform my thinking and acting. It is the image of the *midwife*, and it comes from the story in Exodus 1 about the Hebrew slaves who lived in circumstances that "crushed people's spirits" (Ex 1:11, *Good News Bible*). Much of the drama in this chapter centers around two women named Shiphrah and Puah, whose work was helping women give birth to their babies. In Exodus 1 we learn that the Pharaoh was threatened because, even under great oppression, the Hebrews continued to have children. Afraid that someday he would be outnumbered, he called for Shiphrah and Puah. He gave them a grim command: kill the boy babies while they are being birthed.

Certainly Shiphrah and Puah had to have known that to disobey was dangerous, and that if they failed to comply, Pharaoh would surely find someone else to do his dirty work. But the text tells us that they did not comply. The text simply says, "But the midwives were God-fearing and did not obey the king" (Ex 1:17).

So they simply did their job. They helped women give birth—women who were slaves, and who yet might lose their children. They did it with a certain amount of humor and savvy, according to the text. When Pharaoh asked them why there were boy babies still in the locale, they said, in effect, "Oh, you know those Hebrew women—giving birth is as easy for them as falling off a log. They're finished before we even get there."

How does this image work for me? When I image myself as midwife, I image myself as a co-collaborator in the process of birth; of helping people discover their voices and labor to bring them to birth. I put myself at risk, but it is a shared risk. I am fortunate to have colleagues (the midwives worked as a team—and I imagine them trembling together after leaving Pharaoh's court and laughing together over their cleverness in deflecting his anger). And I imagine myself as God-fearing... as someone who knows that redemption comes from a source beyond our control; we can only be true to God's claim on *our* loyalty. This image, this memory, fragmentary, partial as it is, is a gift of grace to counter the perfect person (who never had a clear name or face) that I imagined God wanted me to be.

I entered the doorway to theological education because family, pastors, teachers, and other traveling companions in the community of faith cared for me and made flesh and blood the grace of God—not because I was primarily interested in constructing a theology. Yet the call to respond to that care and to care in return ultimately led to a search for truth—and for a consistent and integrated theology. I am still searching for that. I image that search not as one undertaken by a lone individual, but as a colleague connected to all the rest, needing the rest. The crises we face in this world call us to forget our silly competitions with each other and to join together in the joy of digging deep in our respective theological disciplines, confident that in the depths we will find one common wellspring. Along the way, perhaps we can learn to better care for one another.

# Paul and Pastoral Ambition: A Reflection on 1 Corinthians 3-4

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*"One would need to be a God to decide which are the failures and which are the successes in this life."* —Anton Chekhov[1]

When God chose to reveal the gospel of Jesus Christ to Saul of Tarsus, the church gained a man with a profoundly complex personality. Consider, for example, the clashing attitudes within Paul concerning his personal investment in his work. Paul describes himself as a slave of Christ Jesus whose job is not to make a name for himself, but to proclaim Jesus. This means that he is also a slave to his hearers. For the sake of gaining more adherents to the gospel Paul willingly enslaves himself to all, seeking the advantage of others rather than his own advantage. He does not even complain (well, maybe a little!) when his enemies proclaim Christ with the unscrupulous purpose of making life more difficult for him in prison. So what? All he cares about is that Christ is preached.

This self-effacing attitude, however, is not the whole story. Time and again in Paul's letters there are statements which could only be made by a person full of ambition for personal success. He "magnifies" his own ministry (Rom 11:13). He is proud of his work in spreading the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyria (Rom 15:17-20). He is pleased to point out to his readers that they are the result of his work (1 Cor 4:15; 9:1-2). He can compare his labor favorably with that of the first apostles (1 Cor 15:10). He reminds his readers of his good conduct

[1] Quoted as the superscription in Joseph Epstein, *Ambition: The Secret Passion* (New York: Dutton, 1980).

and hard work when he first came to Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:5-10). He looks forward with elation to receiving a crown from Christ in the parousia because of his work in the congregation (1 Thess 2:19; see also 2 Cor 1:12, 14; Phil 2:16; 4:1). He is confident that the Corinthians will boast about him (2 Cor 5:12; see also Phil 1:26). In 2 Corinthians 10-12 he shows how proud he is of his endurance of hardships in the service of the gospel, and he will not admit any inferiority to his rival apostles.

To be sure, Paul is always quick to point out that such accomplishments are due to the grace of God working in him. The goal of his ambition is not money, fame, or power, but rather the advancement of the gospel. Nevertheless, Paul often comes across in his letters as proud, sensitive to criticism of his work, eager for recognition, and ambitious for personal success in his task of spreading the gospel to the nations.

Paul's complex attitude toward his work for Christ is mirrored by a similar ambivalence among contemporary clergy. "Ambition," "success," "achievement," and "competition" are words we use only with great hesitation and qualification. Even in our North American context where "church growth" is an ideology attractive to many, we shy away (at least in public) from talking about this or that minister as being ambitious, competitive, or successful.

Yet we would all admit that ambition, or the lack of it, plays an important role in the work we do. For example, one of the fears in the current debate over the equalization of clergy salaries is that without the anticipated reward of higher salary for successful work many ministers might be less motivated to work hard and well. Or again, how much are we motivated by the competitive spirit? I have always suspected that in clergy associations or denominational ministers' gatherings our will to cooperation is sometimes sabotaged by our underlying competitiveness.

Who is to say that such ambition and competitiveness are bad things? Do they not serve to motivate us to advance the gospel? As Paul says, what is important is not the motivation but the fact that Christ is proclaimed (Phil 1:18).[2] On a number of occasions Paul uses the competitive drive to spur his congregations on to greater work (2 Cor 9:2-4; 8:1-6; Phil 4:15-16; 1 Thess 1:7-8). Whether we admit it openly or not, ambition and competitiveness are part of our human nature and play a large role in our formation and conduct as ministers.

There are, of course, many kinds of ambition, many possible standards of achievement and success. What Paul can teach us is that there is a gospel-centered way to speak and think about competitiveness, a way to be ambitious for the sake of Christ, a way to raise the desire for success above the level of self-interest or ideology.[3] This is not to suggest that we become more openly boastful and aggressively ambitious for position among our peers (we would not want to ape the kinds of behavior that became acceptable on Wall Street during the past decade!). Rather, Paul shows us a way of faithful thinking about our own ambition that will enable us to be clearer about what it is that drives us to succeed in our ministry.

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[2] For a positive discussion of religious competition, with qualifications, see Jay Newman, *Competition in Religious Life* (Editions SR 11; Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989). Newman gives an excellent introduction to the psychology of competition, but he deals mainly with competition between denominations rather than between individuals within religious communities.

[3] My thinking has been stimulated by comments made by Paul Goetting on "righteous ambition" in the ministry.

## Competitive factions in Corinth

I propose as our focal text 1 Cor 3:5–4:5.[4] Here are all the elements that bring ambition and competition to the forefront of the discussion: competitive factions forming in the church, apostles held up as rivals, Paul's fear of failure in Corinth, and a congregation only too eager to compare and judge its leaders. Paul here does not deny the role that ambition for reward plays in the minds of the congregation and its leaders, including himself. Rather, he encourages everyone, including himself, to set ambitions for reward in a more adequate perspective, that of God's ultimate judgment. It is this eschatological way of looking at ambition which will enable servants of Christ to work hard and well toward achievement, but without a competitiveness which threatens the unity of the church.

The unity of the congregation is the main goal of Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 1–4. The source of the dissensions seems to be a general tendency on the part of the Corinthian people to compare and contrast past and present leaders, which results in the elevation of one at the expense of another. Lying behind the Corinthian penchant to evaluate, compare, judge, and excel in spiritual achievements is their high regard for the attainment of spiritual wisdom. In 1:18–2:16 Paul shows that in God's judgment the wisdom achieved by humans is of no ultimate value. God's wisdom is of an altogether different story. It is a wisdom that actually seems to be foolishness by the usual societal standards of achievement. This wisdom is revealed most profoundly in the preaching of Christ's cross as the way of God's redemption. This preaching of the cross has a power which puts to shame the vaunted successes of the culture. In 1 Cor 1:18–2:16 Paul is clearing the ground for later admonitions by reminding the Corinthian Christians that God's wisdom as revealed in the cross makes it impossible for a Christian to make faith a matter of human achievement.

In 3:1-4 Paul again reminds his readers of the jealousy and contentiousness which keeps them acting more fleshly than spiritual (a low blow to people who prided themselves on spiritual advancement!). Then Paul takes a new tack in 3:5–4:5, where his rhetorical strategy is to use himself and Apollos as examples (see his explanatory comments in 4:6). Paul points out that, although the Corinthians have used Paul and Apollos as mascots for rival factions, he and Apollos in fact do not regard one another in this competitive way. Paul is not really concerned with Apollos himself, who remains somewhat of a shadowy figure, but with his own way of thinking about other workers in the gospel. When we read 1 Cor 3:5–4:5 as Paul's extended example of how to think in a Christian manner about one's own work in comparison with the work of others, then we see how Paul's words can speak to all who want to place their ambition in the church in a gospel perspective.

Paul begins by reflecting on what it means that he and Apollos, and by implication other leaders, are all servants of God. It means that the Lord ("Lord" here probably refers to Jesus) has assigned to them individually appropriate tasks (such as planting to Paul and watering to Apollos). It also means that any success in those tasks has its

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[4] For the supporting arguments and detailed exegesis see David W. Kuck, "Judgment and Community Conflict: Paul's Use of Apocalyptic Judgment Language in 1 Corinthians 3:5–4:5," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1989 (University Microfilms International, #9010665).

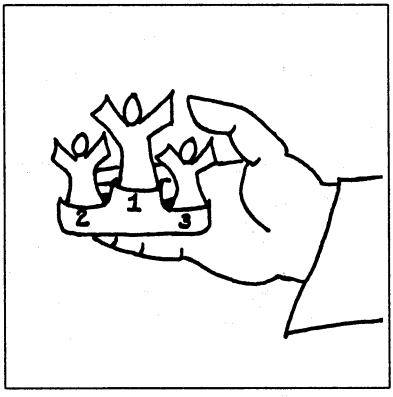
source in God. Therefore, neither planter nor waterer has a higher status than the other. But, somewhat surprisingly, Paul interrupts this egalitarian line of thought with a different slant. "And each will receive his own reward according to his own labor." In other words, not all is equality, for each will receive a different reward from God. On what basis will this individual differentiation be made? Clearly not on the basis of the different tasks assigned, since Paul's whole argument stresses the equality of different tasks. Therefore, "labor" must refer to the *quality* of the work done, whatever the specific task happens to be. "Reward" almost certainly refers to a result of God's eschatological judgment, as it does later in 3:14.[5]

So Paul makes two points in 3:5-9, and they are in creative tension with each other. First, the Lord's servants are to be regarded as equals, since they belong to God; their different tasks come from the same Lord; and they are equally dependent on God for success. Second, the competence with which the assigned task is carried out may vary from person to person; this difference will be recognized and rewarded by God in the future judgment. There is an equality of status among God's servants, but that does not mean that work of higher quality will go unnoticed by God. Paul must regard Apollos as an equal under God, and so also must the Corinthians regard Paul and Apollos as equals. Any difference in the quality of their work is for God alone to reward, at the final judgment. There is no legitimate basis for open competition in the community now.

In verses 10-15 Paul expands on the thought of v. 8b, "Each will receive his own reward according to his own labor." Paul, with some justified pride, points out his own foundational role in the Corinthian church. Those who build on his foundation (the indefinite pronouns show that Paul has not just Apollos in mind but any Christian leader) have a legitimate role, but "Let each take heed how he builds on it." Paul expands on the idea of variable quality in the work of leaders with his list of building materials of descending value—gold, silver, precious gems, wood, grass, straw. The main stress comes in 1 Corinthians 13 with the idea of the eschatological disclosure of the varied quality of the work. "Each one's work will become manifest; for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done." Why such a stress on this point, driven home with no less than four parallel statements in this verse? We can surmise that Paul wants to warn the Corinthians that revealing and evaluating the quality of work of each person in the church is a prerogative of God alone. They have no business making evaluations and judgments about one another, as if they are in a contest.

Revealing and evaluating the quality of work of each person in the church is a prerogative of God alone.

[5] Paul uses "reward" in an eschatological sense only here in 1 Cor 3. The word occurs in this sense in the synoptic Gospels in Mt 5:12=Lk 6:23; Mt 6:1; Mt 10:41-42=Mk 9:41; Lk 6:35. Also in 2 Jn 8; Rev 11:18; 22:12.




Paul's images of judgment in 1 Cor 3: 13-15 have called forth much comment over the centuries. For some these verses have provided a biblical basis for the idea of purgatory.[6] Others have been put off by this harshly "apocalyptic" vision of judgment. Others have simply been puzzled by the seeming jumble of images. For one thing, we should not try to find here a single consistent metaphor. Gold, silver, precious gems, wood, grass, straw—this list in itself is not consistent in terms of whether inherent value or durability in fire is the controlling idea. The point is simply the individual variety in quality of work. In the phrase "it [the day] is revealed with fire" Paul seems to be thinking of fire as a traditional accompaniment of a divine theophany, whereas in the last phrase of v. 13 fire is regarded as the refiner's fire that tests and separates. In any case, there is no idea here at all of a punishment or purifying by fire, so any supposed support of this passage for purgatory evaporates. In verses 14-15 the image of fire is extended in a slightly different way, to speak of a fire that destroys everything that is not made of durable materials. Finally, at the end of v. 15 the phrase "but thus as through fire" seems most likely simply to be equivalent to "a close call" or "a narrow escape."

The question of reward and salvation in 1 Cor 3:14-15 also has called forth much discussion. What is the reward for a Christian leader whose work proves ultimately to be of lasting value before God? In the light of the whole context, it would seem that Paul by "reward" refers to an individual recognition by God. This reward is given above and beyond the gift of salvation by faith, which is affirmed for all, regardless of their reward (v. 15). Paul is not in this passage slipping back into an idea of salvation on the basis of one's works. What about the person whose work proves to be of poor quality and is burned up by the fire? That person will suffer a loss. Of salvation? No, only a loss of his or her reward. Such a person will still be saved, even though it is a close call. In other words, Paul says in vv. 13-15 the same thing he says in 8b, only in more colorful detail. Individuals will be rewarded—or not rewarded, as the case may be—on the basis of the quality of their work in the church. This is not a matter of God's judgment that determines salvation or condemnation. All Christian believers as a body have been made righteous for the sake of Christ and are saved. But Paul suggests that there is another aspect to God's final judgment, one which has to do with assigning rewards for one's labor as a servant of Christ in the church.

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[6] Origen set the pattern for much patristic and medieval interpretation of this passage with his view that Paul here sets forth a complete picture of the final judgment, with salvation as the reward of the righteous and a fiery purgation and final salvation for sinners. See Jacques LeGoff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 8.

What is such a reward? Paul is not here or anywhere else very specific about this. In 1 Cor 4:5 it is God's "praise." Elsewhere it is described as a crown, or boast, or prize; the Christian labors so as not to lose this reward, that is, not to have labored in vain. The clear implication is that Christian workers such as Paul, Apollos, and the others involved in Corinth will indeed be held accountable for the quality of their work. They strive to earn commendation, but only from God the final judge, not from the present community.

Paul hastens to add a disclaimer in vv. 16-17. Although work of varying quality will be accepted by God, some kinds of work are out of bounds. One cannot work so as to destroy the holy community and expect to escape unscathed. Those who destroy God's church will not only suffer the loss of their praise from God; they will be exterminated.

In 1 Cor 3:18-23 the decisive equation is made: what leads the Corinthians to boast about people is self-exaltation in the wisdom of the world. Such boasting demonstrates the competitive spirit that has afflicted the community and thrown it into disunity. Therefore the choice is clear: if you are ambitious to achieve the status of the wise, you are a fool to God. Only by forsaking the wisdom competition can the community find its unity under God.

It all comes down to the question of who is competent to evaluate a servant of God—competent both in the sense of ability and in the sense of legitimacy. Paul answers that question resoundingly and climactically in 1 Cor 4:1-5. Only one has that right and ability, and that is the Lord. On what basis should Christians be evaluated? As one would evaluate a servant, on the basis of faithfulness in carrying out the appointed task, which in this case is the revealing of the mysteries of God. Who can do that evaluating? Other servants? No, only the master. Even the servant's own self-evaluation really means nothing. Only one opinion matters—that of the Lord, the Lord who will make righteous all believers. But the same Lord will also come to bring to light the hidden motives and the quality of the servant's work. Then, and only then, will each servant receive his or her appropriate praise from God.

One can surmise that Paul speaks of God's eschatological praise (he uses this word similarly elsewhere only in Rom 2:29) because the desire for praise is at the root of the Corinthian way of living out their Christianity. This would not be surprising, for praise was the highest goal of an individual in Greco-Roman society. In the words of Stanley Stowers:

> The giving of praise and blame was essential to the working of these institutions in antiquity. To praise meant to bestow honor; to blame meant to take away honor and cause shame. It was through honor that a person's rightful place in society was defined. Honor provided a person with a status in society. It was like a social rating that entitled the person to act and be treated in certain ways. People knew how to locate themselves and behave toward superiors, inferiors, and equals because of the system of honor.[7]

The wealthy made generous donations to civic works so that they would be recognized and praised for their benefactions. Working people joined clubs and guilds at least partly so that within this more limited sphere they could gain some recognition. Such motivations are not foreign to us today who participate in lodges and clubs, politics and even churches, partly in search of some

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[7] Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Westminster, 1986).

arena in which to attain status. There are even numerous poetic epitaphs from the Greco-Roman world that attest to the longing for individual honors and praise in the afterlife, much as in the earthly city. This one, for example, comes from Athens in the third century B.C.E.: "Nurse, I know that the highest honors are in store for you even below the earth with Pluto and Persephone, at least, if the honest ones have their reward."[8] Another example is found on a tombstone from Illyria in the second century C.E.: "Attyris, my glory and delight, may you be known to attain honor even among the dead, as you did among the living."[9]

God alone can truly see the results of one's labor; God alone can look into the heart to discern one's true motives.

It appears that many in the Corinthian congregation were seeing the church as a group within which one could excel and attain recognition. But, as Paul makes abundantly clear, to praise one is to slight another. To see oneself as having attained an advanced wisdom in the faith is to relegate others to a lesser intellectual level. To boast about one's allegiance to one particular leader is to put down those who are the camp followers of another leader. The striving for praise within the congregation was tearing the Corinthian congregation apart. Paul will have no part in that.

When confronted by the reality of the Corinthian competitive spirit Paul makes allowances for the human drive we now call ambition. Not everyone has the same task in the church, nor does everyone do his or her task with the same quality of labor. There is a place for striving for excellence, and the work of some will be solid as gold, while that of others will be as ephemeral as straw. The motivation to receive a reward or praise is not to be denied.

But Paul also sees clearly the destructive potential of this inevitable individual ambition and seeking of reward. It divides, it sets people up as evaluators and judges, it makes some conceited and puts others in a defensive position. That is why, Paul argues, the Christian must look for such reward only as an eschatological determination of God. God alone can truly see the results of one's labor; God alone can look into the heart to discern one's true motives. Therefore God alone, and God only in the final judgment, can be the source of praise for a worker in God's kingdom.

What Paul is encouraging here is what psychologists today would call "delayed gratification."[10] But more is involved than simply calculating that one will get a greater reward by waiting longer to receive it. The calling of a servant of the Lord is to wait on the Lord—this is the basic stance of the Christian life. This life is not a "career" in the ordinary sense in which one plans what

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[8] Richmond Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Illinois Studies in Language and Literature 28:1-2; Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1942), 58.

[9] Lattimore, *Themes in Greek*, 57.

[10] See Roy W. Fairchild, "Delayed Gratification: A Psychological and Religious Analysis," in *Research on Religious Development*, ed. Merton P. Strommen (New York: Hawthorn, 1971), 164, 168-69.

one wants to do and what rewards in pay, power, and perks one wants to work for. The servant of the Lord waits on God for the assignment of the task, for the power to perform that task, for any success that may come in that task, and finally for the hard-earned commendation, "well done, you good and faithful servant" (Mt 25:21). This emphasis on the final reward for one's labor simply recognizes that faith is inevitably bound up with desires and longings for personal validation for one's faithful work.[11] Paul seeks to draw the Corinthians away from their spiritual competitiveness by reminding them to wait on God for the justification of their Christian life, not seek it from one another.

## Justification by faith and the promise of rewards

But here one who has been brought up on Reformation theology will raise an objection. Does not this talk of eschatological rewards smack of "works righteousness"? Are we misunderstanding Paul at this point? Or did Paul himself not consistently follow through on his understanding of justification by faith? To be faithful to Paul, one must think of God's judgment from two perspectives. In its corporate aspect God will judge all believers to be righteous for the sake of Christ. It is the certainty of this justifying judgment that makes a Christian a Christian, simply by virtue of confessing Christ and belonging to the people of God in the church. God's judgment has another aspect, however, an individual aspect. This is certainly not a major emphasis in Paul, but it does come out in certain contexts, especially when Paul is dealing with problems of individuals within the community. The Christian can also anticipate an individual reward, or praise, or crown, or perhaps the loss of reward. But all of this is still within the realm of salvation (1 Cor 3:15). Paul is not setting out a pattern of two separate judgments, but rather one judgment of God looked at in two different ways.

Thus there is no contradiction between "justification by faith" and this anticipation of God's recognition of one's work in the church. In Paul's understanding God has justified us freely by grace through faith, because of Christ. In this all believers share equally. But there is also my own work as a servant of Christ. The motivation and quality of my individual work will be verified and accepted by God. Therefore, I can work with eager ambition in the Lord's church, not for the rewards that the world has to offer, but for the hope of praise from God.

Luther and the Lutheran Confessions recognized "levels of glory" as a legitimate witness of the New Testament. The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* has this to say (note the reference to 1 Cor 3:8):

> We teach that rewards have been offered and promised to the works of the faithful. We teach that good works are meritorious—not for the forgiveness of sins, grace, or justification (for we obtain these only by faith) but for other physical and spiritual rewards in this life and in that which is to come, as Paul says (1 Cor 3:8), "Each shall receive his wages according to his labor." Therefore there will be different rewards for different labors.[12]

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[11] On this point see Gordon Allport, *The Individual and His Religion: A Psychological Interpretation* (New York: MacMillan, 1950), 130-31.

[12] *Apology* 4:194. Similar in *Apology* 4:366. *Apology* 4:355 speaks of "distinctions in the glory of the saints."

Luther has something similar to say on the matter:

> In this sense we concede that Christians have merit and a reward with God, but not in order to make them children of God and heirs of eternal life. Rather it is intended to console believers who already have this, to let them know that He will not leave unrewarded what they suffer here for Christ's sake, but that if they suffer much and labor much, He will adorn them specially on the Last Day, more and more gloriously than the others, as special stars that are greater than others... a recompense of greater glory for greater suffering.[13]

So on the one hand ambition and motivation by the anticipation of rewards is a part of our humanity. On the other hand, ambition and the seeking of excellence can easily undermine the unity of purpose in the church that flows from the one Lord who sets us to the task. There is really only one way that these can be held in creative tension, and that is to think with an eschatological point of view. Our ambitions must all be pointed to that day when our work will be tested against the measure of God's purposes. If our work is faithful and true, God will not leave us without recognition. The standards of success in the world are easily available for us to measure ourselves against—money, influence, numbers, prestige, honors from the powers that be—but this wisdom of the world will appear to be foolishness when it is placed under God's scrutiny. Our true success may now be hidden, but God will reveal it fully in the proper time. Our ambition is pointed to that revealing.

If our work is faithful and true, God will not leave us without recognition.

## Paul's Christian ambition

Paul was ambitious in his service of the Lord—he worked hard to achieve success in the advancement of the gospel. He took pride in his accomplishments. He bristled at criticism and rejection and regarded the success or failure of the gospel as personal success or failure. We can suppose that this was part of Paul's personality as a human being; he hints that such ambition characterized his pre-Christian life as well (Gal 1:14, Phil 3:4-6). But as a Christian Paul's ambition was controlled by three perspectives.

First, he is a steward and servant—the material, scope, and specific task is given to him by his master. Paul is not free to choose

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[13] Luther's Works 21:292-93, similarly on p. 294. On the whole matter see Joseph A. Burgess, "Rewards, But in a Very Different Sense," in *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII* (ed. H. George Anderson et al.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 94-95. Burgess, however, finally denies that there is in the New Testament any idea of "degrees of glory" (p. 105). In the same volume, however, the Roman Catholic and Lutheran "Common Statement" has this to say: "The good works of the justified are meritorious for other spiritual and physical rewards in this life and that which is to come" (p. 54). On the NT evidence considered from a Catholic viewpoint see also in the same volume Jerome D. Quinn, "The Scriptures on Merit," 87-89.

just any theater and role in which to perform. His ambition is to do well in the part he has been assigned. Second, he knows that any success or growth is the work of God's grace, not his own accomplishment. Third, he does not measure himself by any standard of comparison to other Christian workers, or of money, power, praise of the community, wisdom—all the things that are so impressive to the culture of the world and even to the church insofar as it reflects the world. Paul's sights are aimed at the tribunal of God. Only God, from the vantage point of the end of history, can see motives and inspect the long-term quality of a Christian's labor. Paul has harnessed his ambitions to these controlling factors—God's grace and God's judgment. The result is that the destructive potential of such ambition within the human community is thwarted. Ambition does not need to be a dirty word in the church. The church needs leaders with ambition for excellence. Our human drive for success and recognition does not need to be denied. We can strive for excellence in our Christian labor without hesitation. But we must believe, as did Paul, that the power and the praise come only from God.

Paul reminds us to be always mindful of the perfection for which we strive but have not yet reached (Phil 3:12-14). Our ministry is in God's service for the sake of the church; it is not for seeking our own goals (Phil 1:21-26, 1 Cor 9:15-18). We see how Paul's whole understanding of himself as a Christian minister is shot through with the forward-looking perspective which enabled him to give of himself selflessly for the task. But at the same time Paul knows full well that his faithful gift will be recognized by God and that he will receive the ultimate personal satisfaction of honor and praise.

# Paradoxes of Paradise: Christians in a Technological Age

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The German political leader and author August Bebel once observed, "Strictly speaking, the worker who drains sewers to protect humanity from unhealthy miasmas is a very useful member of society, whereas the theologian who seeks to befog the brain with supernatural, transcendent doctrines is an extremely harmful individual." While one may feel Bebel's words are unduly harsh, they are still worth noting, because they articulate basic attitudes with which we have to deal as we develop an understanding of what it means to be Christians in a technological society.

On one hand there is a deep respect, bordering on holy awe, for science and technology in our culture. The history of technology, despite some dark footnotes, is fundamentally a success story of tremendous proportions. We have slashed communication and travel times, eradicated deadly diseases, created agricultural bounty, relieved workers of many tedious and dangerous tasks, and created gadgets galore for our leisure. Technology appeals to us because it is rooted in optimism that says we can solve virtually any problem, given enough time and effort. Everyone involved in delivering new technology, from the engineer who designs the sewer system to the worker who services it, basks in the sunny image which technology has enjoyed.

On the other hand, despite the veneer of respectability it often enjoys, there is a certain suspicion of religion. In contrast to science and technology which are concrete, practical, and successful, religion for many appears abstract, irrelevant, and relatively ineffective. Science said it would put a man on the moon and did it; the great religions call for love but adherents butcher one another to prove who is more sincere. In the popular mind technology evokes our best efforts, while theology reminds us of our sinfulness. In short, religion has often been regarded as useless at worst and pessimistic at best in confronting our most perplexing problems.

It is with these attitudes toward technology and religion that I want to deal. First, I suggest that, as high profile ecological crises have indicated, our technology has proven to be a mixed blessing. Second, contrary to the view of culture at large, I believe we must assert that the Christian faith does indeed have something to offer citizens of the technological society.

Perhaps at this point a definition is in order. What do we mean when we talk about "technology" and a "technological society"? For the average person, "technology" simply means hardware, the products created by science, and indeed one definition of technology is "science applied to human need." That, however, is much too limited a perspective because it ignores the processes by which we get new hardware and the impact which that hardware has on society.

A more comprehensive definition says, "Technology is a social system driven by specialized knowledge and involving all the institutions of our society and their communication linkages."[1] A technological society is thus not merely one which has telephones, computers, and televisions; more importantly, it is a society which is highly dependent on these things and the processes which produce and maintain them. Technology is not just the car, it is also the assembly line philosophy, with all its implications for how workers relate to one another and to their task. So when we talk about living in a technological society we mean we live in a culture where specialized knowledge exercises a pervasive influence over our social, political, economic, and interpersonal lives.

Generally speaking we've been pretty happy with our technological society; it has made us healthier and wealthier than any nation in history. There have always been a few dissenters who have not been sold on technology, but most have felt it was giving us the closest possible approximation of paradise on earth. Lately, however, we've become increasingly aware of the limitations and cost of technology. In his book *Tradeoffs: Imperatives of Choice in a High-Tech World*, Edward Wenk lists what he calls "paradoxes of paradise." These paradoxes can help us get a handle on some of the uneasiness we feel with our society but may not be able to express.

The first paradox is that *we have more knowledge than ever before, yet less understanding*. Two million scientific experiments are reported every year. The knowledge in virtually every field has been doubling every ten years. The Harvard University library adds 800 volumes a day.[2] Without a doubt we have more data. The problem is that this new learning is so specialized and its reporting so jargon-laden as to be virtually inaccessible beyond a small cadre of insiders. It has long been difficult for university faculty to talk across departmental lines; now it is becoming difficult for persons in sub-specialties of a single department to understand one another.

This fragmentation of knowledge is evident in the average undergraduate's educational experience. Rustum Roy, director of the Science, Technology, and Society program at the Pennsylvania State University, compares the typical student's education to being given a model airplane kit and no glue. Students get a piece of philosophy, a piece of chemistry, and a piece of psychology, but nobody supplies something to hold

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[1] Edward Wenk, Jr., *Tradeoffs: Imperatives of Choice in a High-Tech World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 3.

[2] James B. Hofrenning, "What is Old and What is New," *The Eye of the Needle* 15 (July/August 1990): 23.

it all together, something to fit the pieces into a coherent whole.

Educationally the result is that we are prone to produce technicians who know little and care less about the world beyond their narrow field of study. Societally, we have citizens who are intimidated by specialists and unable or unwilling to understand the technology which profoundly affects their lives.

The second paradox is that *technology is intended to reduce risk, but it can also be a source of new risk.* To take a simple example, the crisis we face in population growth is not rooted only in runaway birth rates per given number of people, which remain relatively stable, but also in radically altered third world death rates. The drop in death rates is directly attributable to technology which has raised agricultural output and reduced numbers of deaths due to infectious disease and poor sanitation. In successfully confronting one set of problems we have exacerbated another.

Other examples abound: The machine which makes a miner's job safer threatens to eliminate the job altogether. The nuclear power station which reduces air pollution carries the risk of becoming a Chernobyl. The packaging which makes food distribution safe and convenient threatens to bury us in a mountain of waste. And on the largest scale, the technological society's voracious appetite for energy and raw materials endangers the supply of finite sources, even as it fouls the earth.

There is a sense in which, of course, this is nothing new. Technology always has unintended consequences, both good and bad. The famous London fog, beloved by Victorian novelists, had less to do with meteorology than with massive air pollution ushered in by the Industrial Revolution. What is different is the scale of the risks that technology now presents to us, and the speed with which we must confront them.[3] For the first time through deforestation, ozone depletion, and climatic changes we have the capacity to make fundamental changes in the earth's capacity to sustain life. At the same time, changes are taking place at a pace which can prove irreversible. Like stopping a fully loaded freight train, there is some lag time between deciding the danger is real and controlling the momentum. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know when it will be too late to hit the brakes.

We employ technology to simplify our lives, but another paradox is that *it can also add complications.* The more complicated our technological support structure becomes the more likely there will be a failure due to material fatigue, human error, or sabotage. Anyone who has had the washer, the lawn mower, and the furnace break down in the same week knows how technology can complicate life.

But there is a more subtle sense in which technology complicates our lives. The car obviously simplifies the task of getting from here to there. But the fact that our society (or at least middle-class suburban culture) presumes universal access to a car means that we are expected to get to more places in the same amount of time. That which should work to create leisure actually has the opposite effect. When technology simplifies one task the consequence may simply be increased expectations and greater time pressure.

A fourth contradiction we observe is that *while technology has given us greatly improved communications in terms of speed, range, and capacity, it has not delivered a greater sense of community.* We some-

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[3] Roger Shinn, *Forced Options: Social Decisions for the 21st Century* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982), 4.

times read scenarios of how we are moving toward a global village with a growing sense of interdependence and understanding. The reality often seems to be just the opposite. Instantaneous communication may breed conflict by jamming together conflicting cultures and values without allowing adequate time for understanding to develop. A good example of this is the bitter tension we observe between traditional Islamic cultures and Western nations, particularly the United States.[4]

We also observe the lack of community within our own culture; much of technology seems designed to prevent us from entering into deep, fulfilling relationships. However one evaluates the quality of television programming, it is difficult to dispute that the sheer amount of time devoted to watching in the average household mitigates against meaningful interaction by family members. Rather than actively engaging another person we find ourselves passively preoccupied by the pervasive presence of the tube. The same is true of the Nintendos, which in the mind of some 10-year-olds rank just above food and water as necessities; it is hard for parent and child to have substantive conversation when the fate of Mario or Megaman is in the balance.

Whatever community exists in the workplace is also under siege. Faxes, modems, robotics, and personal computers may increase efficiency, but one cost is reduced interpersonal contact between workers. The sense of shared purpose is easily lost when the office is replaced by modems connected to a central main frame. The worker finds his or her personhood reduced to an electronically transmitted data base.

A fifth paradox is particularly poignant in these recession-filled times. *We find the public demanding lower taxes and less government at the same time it expects greater protection from technology's risks.* Business loudly condemns intrusive regulation and the mountains of paperwork involved in proving compliance to environmental protection laws. Citizens join the chorus, recognizing that regulations ultimately mean higher product costs and taxes to support monitoring. But simultaneously we demand decisive governmental action to protect us from unsafe pharmaceuticals, hazardous wastes, air and water pollution, and contaminated foods. Our dilemma is that we want neither big government nor Love Canal.

**One particularly ironic paradox is that we have more material benefits but no greater satisfaction.**

One particularly ironic paradox is that *we have more material benefits but no greater satisfaction.* The glory of technology has always been that it could deliver what it promised. We live longer, at a higher standard of living, with less physical effort than any society in history. But that has not necessarily meant greater satisfaction with the quality of our lives. American college students are the most materially privileged on the planet, yet the rate of

[4] Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Islamic Rage," *The Atlantic* 266 (September 1990): 47-60.

alcohol abuse on campus climbs yearly.[5] If we see such abuse as self-medication for depression and anxiety, it suggests that technology can indeed deliver an almost limitless number of material enhancements for life—but not something to live for. Distressing divorce, crime, and mental health statistics tell a similar story for the population as a whole. In spite of technology's material largess, we are a searching people plagued by violence and hopelessness.

In spite of technology's material largess, we are a searching people plagued by violence and hopelessness.

Yet another paradox is that *we have more choices but no more time to choose.* We experience this in something as mundane as the VCR. Our hectic schedules prompt us to tape a special or favorite show for later viewing, but then comes the question, "When do you watch it?" The next day and week are just as crammed as the previous ones, and the new tape adds yet one more claimant to the list of things seeking our precious time.

As any freshman college student contemplating a major can tell you, far from bestowing a sense of freedom, virtually unlimited choices can induce a sort of psychic overload which prevents us from acting in constructive ways. The basic issue is that not only does technology create a variety of options for us, it demands that we choose between them at an accelerating pace, simply because the impact of a decision is so far reaching. Take your pick—deforestation, ozone depletion, global warming, hazardous waste disposal, regulation of agricultural chemicals and pharmaceuticals, energy policy, biomedical engineering—each field demands that we make multiple far reaching decisions within a very limited time frame, whether adequate information is available or not. With relative ease technology gives us possibilities, but not the time to choose wisely between them.

The final paradox which Wenk notes is that *though members of the technological society spend steadily more years in school we have neither a more pronounced critical judgment nor a greater sense of social contract.* That technology has given us powerful tools to manipulate the natural order is beyond dispute. What is very much in doubt is whether we will manifest the discernment and commitment to the common good which will make these tools a blessing rather than a curse.

It's precisely at this point that it is appropriate to ask what contribution a Christian perspective can make in coping with the paradoxes of paradise. If what is needed is discernment, wisdom, and commitment to the common good, what does our faith bring to the table as our world wrestles for answers?

First and foremost I would say that we do not bring a blind condemnation of science and technology. Unfortunately, the church's relationship to science and tech-

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[5] The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Campus Life: In Search of Community* (Princeton: Carnegie Foundation, 1990), 38.

nology has often been characterized by antagonism. The religious opposition which Galileo and Darwin encountered has been well documented. Though I think you can make the case that such opposition has been overstated and that the greatest opposition actually came from scientists holding opposing views, the point remains that the church has often dealt with science and technology only in terms of potential threat.

Scientific creationism is a visible—but, in my judgment, ultimately insignificant—example of this attitude. Being both scientifically and theologically indefensible, its impact tends to be minimal in the culture at large. I am much more concerned about an anti-technological trend in certain theological circles which blurs a Christian theology of creation with a romanticism about the past. Underlying the work of theologians such as Matthew Fox and Rosemary Radford Ruether there seems to be a mythology which runs something like this: "Once upon a time the earth was a beautiful pristine place where everyone got along and the planet was ecologically balanced. Then people unleashed a technology which has despoiled and destroyed the creation. Salvation of ourselves and our planet is found in retreating from the desire to control through technology and seeking harmony with creation as in those glorious, innocent days."[6]

Please note, the critique of Fox and Ruether is immensely valuable in that it explicitly confronts our idolatrous and arrogant trust in our own knowledge. It calls us to account for past abuses and challenges us to recapture a too long dormant strand of spirituality within the Christian tradition. But the critique is often overstated and certainly should not form our basic attitude toward technology. The reality is that from the start humanity has been engaged in transforming the planet, in altering it to make it a more hospitable place for people. One may say that perspective is anthropocentric, but it is not merely an invention of the Enlightenment and the rise of modern science. To build shelter, to plant a field, to build a fire is to alter the ecosystem. The issue is not whether we will transform our world by technology, but how and under what circumstances. It is fruitless to hearken back to glory days that never were.

As Christians we must resist an attitude which views all technology with deep suspicion. We do so, first of all, on pragmatic grounds. Technology *has* vastly increased the quantity and material quality of human life in our society; and for persons in the third world, appropriate technology remains a necessity if life is to be other than nasty, brutish, and short. We will not weather many of the ecological problems we face without new technology.

But Christians also have solid theological reasons for resisting romanticism. The Genesis narrative defines Adam and Eve's responsibility as "tilling and caring for the garden." As many have rightly pointed out, that does not mean unmercifully and selfishly exploiting the creation, but neither does it mean sitting on our hands and allowing the creation to remain in its natural state. A Christian theology of creation takes seriously both the power of humanity to transform the earth and the responsibility which goes with that power. The biblical mandate is not to reject our

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[6] See for example Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Motherearth and the Megamachine: A Theology of Liberation in a Feminine, Somatic, and Ecological Perspective" in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), and Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983), 13-15.

technological potential, but to be keenly mindful that we are accountable for its use.

In practical terms this means that the so-called "Christian" position is not necessarily found in opposing the expansion of technology's impact. We may indeed have grave reservations concerning a specific nuclear power plant, genetic engineering project, or wilderness development plan, but our reasons for opposition must extend beyond simply opposing change in the natural order. There may be good reasons for making the alteration.

I have a Far Side cartoon on my office door which pictures a bunch of cavemen sitting around a fire grimacing because they are cooking their chunks of meat by holding them in the fire with bare hands. One of them, pointing to a guy at the next fire who is using a stick to make the first shish kabob, says, "Hey, look what Zog do." Sometimes the best course *is* to adopt new technology; to reject that possibility is to condemn ourselves to burned fingers forever.

Positively, *a commitment to peace and justice is something Christians should bring to the technological society.* C.S. Lewis observed, "What we have called Man's power over nature, turns out to be power exercised by some men over other men with nature as the instrument." His point is that the blessings of technology are not evenly distributed over the whole population. The rich and middle-class of our nation reap the benefits of computer age medical technology, but those machines are of minimal significance to those living in the rural south and inner city north. There the infant mortality rate is comparable to that in many third world nations. In the same way worldwide, with a few exceptions, it is the affluent who primarily benefit from computers, sophisticated communications and data processing systems, labor saving devices, and even agricultural technology. That is true because of a simple fact: it takes money to access most technology. If we see technology as an amplifier of energy and resources we can see how the net effect of technology has been to create an increasing gap between haves and have-nots; the more you can invest up front, the more you get out, which you can in turn reinvest. The longer the game goes on the greater the disparity between the players.

This disparity is most obvious when you consider the relationship of the first and third worlds. In 1974 97% of the world's research and developments funds were spent in developed nations, and 94% of the scientists were located there.[7] Human nature and funding sources being what they are, most of those scientists were working on problems arising in their own culture. So, for example, much of the agricultural research done at universities traditionally has been for the kind of farming which presupposes large tracts of land and virtually unlimited topsoil, petrochemical fertilizer, and abundant, cheap gasoline to run tractors—even though that model is inappropriate for most of the world.

The issue is research priorities and allocation of resources. As Christians we must be committed to seeing that the benefits of technology reach the nation's and world's population with greater equity. W must be concerned when we have 40% of the world's engineers and scientists investing their time in defense projects which siphon some of our best minds from other concerns.[8] We must adopt a pattern in our consumption which reflects a desire that all have necessities before some have luxuries.

We adopt these perspectives, not simply because they are prudent, but because

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[7] Shinn, *Forced Options*, 28.
[8] Shinn, *Forced Options*, 152.

> We must adopt a pattern in our consumption which reflects a desire that all have necessities before some have luxuries.

they grow out of the biblical concern for justice and peace. God is constantly revealed as one who cares for the poor and desires that the faithful use every tool at their disposal to ease the burdens of the weak. In a society that sees no necessary moral dimension to technology, it is crucial that we hold up the vision that technology must serve justice if it is not to become demonic and destructive.

A second thing which we Christians have to offer a technological society is *a source of genuine community.* As noted earlier, one of the paradoxes of paradise is greater communications but less sense of community. That problem is abundantly clear within the typical university. When I first became a campus pastor one of the faculty at Tech approached me and said, "I thought you might like to see the organizational chart for the university." What he handed me was a picture of three outhouses in a vertical line; the top one was labeled "administration," below it "faculty," and finally "students."

The Carnegie Foundation has pointed to the same mood in less graphic but perhaps more scholarly manner in its report, *Campus Life: In Search of Community.* It portrays a mood on campus where students feel their learning is subordinated to faculty research, where faculty feel they confront unmotivated and ill-prepared students, and where the administration feels caught between old expectations to be *in loco parentis* and new social realities. Far from a community of learning, the typical university resembles a confederation of interest groups. In that climate it's easy for individuals to feel isolated and alone. One student in the Carnegie report says, "We don't want the university involved in our lives, but we'd like someone to be concerned occasionally about our lives."[9]

It is precisely this sort of concern that the church can offer to the university community and society at large. It can be a place of healing and nurture for those who are battered by life, whether the battering is a result of budget cuts, tenure pressure, interpersonal relationships, or social isolation. In a society where associations are increasingly functional and utilitarian rather than personal, the church can and must be a place where people are valued simply by virtue of their identity as children of God.

A third thing which Christian faith offers the technological society is *the concept of sacrifice.* The technological society has proceeded on the assumptions that there are virtually infinite resources and therefore maximum consumption is not only acceptable, but economically necessary. We now are running up against two realities which call that into question. On one hand, the third world—which has made Western technology possible by being a cheap source of raw materials—is increasingly demanding the fruits of technology. Politically it will be difficult to maintain the supply of cheap

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[9] Carnegie Foundation,, *Campus Life,* 47.

resources which make our present level of consumption possible. Second, there is ample evidence that we are running up against limitations of resources and the planet's capacity to absorb waste. Scientists may debate the time line, but a growing consensus is that we must reduce consumption and waste or face disaster.

The process of scaling back the American Dream is going to be fraught with tremendous social and political peril. There will be bitterness and the perception among young adults that a birthright has been denied. There will be attempts to find scapegoats; witness the already blatant anti-Japanese sentiment in some quarters. As already noted, technology has tended to widen the gaps between haves and have-nots; as competition for diminished resources grows it appears we can expect that gap to grow and cause social stress.

If our society survives the scaling back of our consumptive behaviors it will be because we grasp the importance of some sacrificing for the good of the whole. Here we as Christians have a contribution to make. For we can offer the vision that far from being a tragedy, sacrifice in behalf of the other is one means by which we discover a deeper, more fulfilling life. Christian social ethics has always had at its core the understanding that peace and security are not found in bigger piles of consumables but in the willingness to invest ourselves in one another out of devotion to God. The changes which finite resources will make a necessity can be given meaning within the Christian understanding of sacrifice. Just as God, in Christ Jesus, made the ultimate sacrifice for all of humanity, so we are called to give ourselves (including our consumptive lifestyle) for the good of all the world's people.

Perhaps the way to summarize what Christian faith has to offer the technological society is to say *it offers alternative values.* Jacques Ellul, in his book *The Technological Society*, has persuasively argued that the one value which dominates modern society is efficiency. There is, says Ellul, an inevitable and almost irresistible drive in the technological culture to find "absolute efficiency," that is, the one best way to do a task.[10] The problem is that nonquantifiable variables quickly get lost in our drive to produce more at less cost. So automation and robotics may improve productivity without taking into account the impact on workers. Computerized social service records allow caseworkers to handle more clients in a day, but the experience is often bureaucratic and dehumanizing for clients. Clear cut forestry is an economic boon but an aesthetic and ecological disaster. A dam is built which provides cheap power but totally destroys a community.

A Christian perspective does not oppose efficiency, but it suggests that there are other values which should be weighed as we make decisions regarding our technology. It is not enough for technology to be efficient if the ultimate effect is to dehumanize persons. While the technological society is prone to ask simply, "Is it efficient? Is it cost-effective?" Christians must also ask, "Is it fair? Is it humane? Is it compassionate? Is it beautiful? Does it respect the creation?" Christians are called to demand that their technology, just as much as their personal conduct, promote the healing, reconciliation, and justice which is at the core of the Christian faith. No technology is free; every one has a human cost. A Christian vision demands that variables other than efficiency be considered, in

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[10] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 79ff. Originally published in French, 1954.

A Christian vision demands that variables other than efficiency be considered, in order to insure that the cost of technological progress is not loss of human dignity.

order to insure that the cost of technological progress is not loss of human dignity.

*Inherit the Wind* is a classic movie based on the play with the same title. It is a thinly veiled dramatization of the famous Scopes Monkey trial in which a Tennessee teacher was charged with teaching evolution. Spencer Tracy plays the character inspired by defense lawyer Clarence Darrow. At one point he makes a dramatic speech which includes these words:

> Progress has never been a bargain; you have to pay for it. Sometimes I think there's a guy who sits behind a counter and says, "All right, you can have a telephone, but you lose privacy and the charm of distance. Madame, you may vote; but you lose the power to retreat behind the powder puff and petticoat. You may conquer the air, but the birds will lose their wonder and clouds will smell of gasoline."

That is another way of saying what I have been trying to suggest: there are always paradoxes in paradise. Technology is as old as humanity, and it is inevitable in that it springs from our entirely laudable desire to meet basic human needs. But just as surely there are costs to be born. When you rub the lamp and ask for three wishes you can never put the genie back. As Christians let us be wise in our wishes, clear about the costs, and bold in demanding that the technological society be a place fit for all God's children to live.

# Three Voices—One Choice: A Decision For or Against Abortion

Seth Jersild
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Three people are involved in this story. *Susan Johnson* is a 22-year-old senior at a small Midwestern college. *Pastor Billings* has been the campus minister at Susan's college for four years; she is 55 years of age. *Professor Long* is a young social science professor. Susan is very fond of him.

In the following, these three reflect on Susan Johnson's pregnancy and her wish to have an abortion.

## Pastor Billings

Susan Johnson came to my office yesterday. She is a pretty young woman—thin with blonde hair and blue eyes. Her makeup was smeared a little; I assumed she had been crying about something. I told her to sit down and tell me what was on her mind. She informed me that she was in "big trouble." A doctor had told her the day before that she was a month pregnant. She looked like she was about to cry. I asked her why being pregnant was "big trouble." She replied, "I'm not married." She is not at all sure of her feelings for the young man who had intercourse with her. Her parents were going to "kill her."

She was afraid to bring up the subject of abortion with me. But that is certainly the question which is most on her mind at this time: whether or not to take the life of her unborn child.

I tried to get her to talk about her situation for a while so that I could get a better idea of the factors involved in making such a decision. I must say, my first reaction to her idea of abortion was very negative. I immediately assumed that she had not acted responsibly in having sex in the first place, and that she and her boyfriend had made the further mistake of being careless about birth control. I kept this to myself, of course. She soon informed me, however, that she and the young man—Steve was his name—had been as careful as possible. In order to keep myself out of

trouble with my initial negative reaction to her, I decided to focus on what to do rather than what she and the young man could have done to avoid this situation.

Here I am, a 55-year-old female minister (a minister now for 15 years) who's been married 27 years to the only man I've ever made love with. I have three kids. Sometimes I wonder why I have this job, since I think some students around here look at me as an old biddy who's out of touch with the times. But I like being here because I've always felt I have something to offer the students, and have felt well-liked. In my youth, of course, kids were having sex and every once in a while you'd hear the story of a woman who got an abortion. But things are different now. "Pro choice" people are marching in the streets, and they wield powerful arguments.

I am sympathetic to many "pro-choice" points. But here at college I see many young people who lack reverence for sex as a gift from God. So often, people isolate their sexuality off into a little compartment and treat it as one commodity among others which they can use for their pleasure or benefit. They don't recognize that their sexuality is rooted in the very heart of their existence. They are not free beings who stand above a bunch of compartments containing personal qualities which they can discard or use as they please. They are whole beings, and every action they take affects their entire existence at once within the field of a thousand changing relationships.

I was the first person Susan told about her pregnancy. Evidently she wanted someone she didn't know too well to hear about it before anyone else. Her father is a judge, and she describes him in glowing terms. I have the feeling that he is very protective of her. She's afraid she's going to disappoint him terribly. Yet at the same time she knows that he will help her. But I wonder *how* he will help her. Will he defend this young woman and keep her away from the consequences of her actions? Will he just give her everything she wants? Will he preserve her from reflecting on this situation by justifying her in everything she does? Susan's mother is another story. Susan pits her parents against each other. She is deathly afraid of what her mother's reaction will be.

Susan's feelings about Steve, the young man, are ambiguous. She has been seeing him for the last two months on what she calls a "casual" basis. I asked her whether sexual intercourse is a casual matter. She was perturbed and snapped, "Of course not." I was sorry for moralizing while she was in such a vulnerable position. I asked her, "What is the worst thing about this situation?" She replied that she simply did not plan on having a child—certainly not with this young man. Having a child will jeopardize her plans to enter graduate school next year. She will have neither the time nor the money to raise a child.

She also seems particularly guilty about the fact that she has been involved in a long-term (four year) relationship with another young man, Jonathan, who is attending college on the East coast. They have even made tentative marriage plans. Her dates with Steve were supposed to have been unimportant, but she had realized as they became more physically intimate that she was "going to have to break it off soon." How is she going to look her long-time boyfriend in the face?

All this leads me to think that Susan is indeed an immature young woman who does not have her feet on the ground. Young people today have the notion that they can choose from a smorgasbord of careers and shrug off those responsibilities which keep them from quickly achieving their personal

goals. They seem unaware of the fact that by virtue of being born into sin, they are bound in a web of a thousand external forces which will make claims on them

> My freedom to "be who I am" is dependent on my involvement in a web of relationships which limit me.

every moment of their lives. Our freedom always takes place in the context of many responsibilities. Young people, it seems, look at freedom as something which gets them out of responsibility.

They want to be free—to be their own bosses—to the point where they chafe under any external authority. That in itself, for me, is a good definition of original sin. None of us is our own authority. The only time we're really our own authorities is when we face death by ourselves. That's not saying much for human authority. We're radically dependent on external powers for our own sense of personal worth. We're always appealing to some higher god in order to justify ourselves. In Susan's case it's the god of "her promising future as a graduate student" who justifies her wish to have an abortion. She would be rebelling against this "higher" god if she were to have a child. Ultimately we mold our gods in a way which makes us feel we are our own authorities. These higher gods are the devil in disguise.

In the same way, we depend on each other for our basic sense of self-worth. I am bound to the judgments of many students and faculty members, and to the bishops and leadership of my church, for my sense that I am doing a good job. I depend on their opinions in order to know that I have the inherent capability to be good at what I do. Thus my own freedom to "be who I am" is dependent on my involvement in a web of relationships which limit me.

The fact that Susan looks at abortion as an option points towards a prevalent attitude among people today: the attitude that life is not an end in itself, but is a means towards getting to some better location beyond the here and now. Where do we all think we're going so fast? What kind of "success" are we working toward? From what kind of society have we learned our goals? And from what are we trying to escape? The liberal tendency to emphasize our ability to transcend the nitty-gritty of our responsibilities in "radical freedom" is merely an attempt to escape from our fundamental shame before God. We never choose outside the context of some ideology we've been taught, no matter how enlightened or modern we sound. Susan is not making any choices on her own. The world has taught her, as it has taught all of us, the possible choices she can make in any given situation.

The way we plan for some ideal future free of worries does not illustrate our radical freedom to choose our fates. If anything, our constant planning is another sign of our inability to face the ambiguities of life in the here and now. The first thing we do to get a handle on existence is to compartmentalize everything in our lives. We want no one to make claims on us, so we assign definite functions to the people around us. Of course we always have to do this to an extent in a governmental sense for the maintenance of order in life. But today we even go to the

extent of saying with Susan that her friend Steve was "just for fun." We begin to use people, as Susan uses her "real" boyfriend at school, as safety valves which enable us to keep ourselves at a distance from immediate relationships which claim our commitment in the here and now.

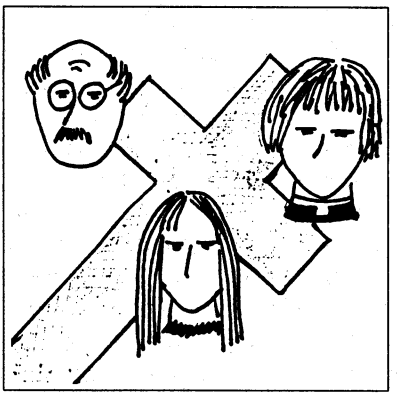
Susan broods over her future education and her responsibility to her "real" boyfriend on the East coast. But her brooding is another way of escaping the weight of her present actions. So often we brood on phantom images of "bettering ourselves" and "mending our ways" in order to avoid the difficult demands of today.

I'm afraid that Susan and many of her peers don't believe that life has begun yet for them. And it's no surprise, since our society does everything it can to convince us that we are not living in a real world. Society tells us that we must always do something, be someone different, or go somewhere else in order to live a real life. Everything in the meantime is non-committal motion through a shadow-world, neither here nor there. A decision for or against abortion loses its weight in such a shadow world, where everyone is avoiding eye contact, preparing for some more "real" life to begin.

One thing I've noticed about young women who've had abortions is that they know they're sacrificing one good (the child) for what they perceive to be a greater good (a future context which will insure a better life for future kids). As life continues, however, the young woman will begin to wonder whether she made the right decision. She will always be looking for that "better context" beyond the one she sees in front of her face. Will it ever come? She will always labor under the illusion that she can by her own efforts create the conditions which will be perfect for raising a child! I've known young women who've had abortions to have difficulty, afterwards, making decisions about even small matters. They hate the fact that they have to make decisions at all. They can never be sure that *any* of their decisions will be for the best, because they will never be sure that the big decision they made one day—for abortion—was right. On that day, they took their futures into their own hands, saying, "it's mine." And as the real future knocks on their doors with all its surprises, the pressure of taking full responsibility for each of their actions mounts and becomes unbearable.

This is where I'm coming from, You can see why I am initially biased against Susan's wish to get an abortion. I asked her at the end of our visit why she came to see a pastor before anyone else. She said she had "heard good things about me," and that I had helped people she knows. I asked her how her faith in Jesus Christ will lead her to make some kind of decision for or against abortion. She got defensive immediately, and said she could tell I'm against her having one. I asked her, "Why do you feel horrible about all this? Is there anything you want to confess?" She looked at me with a thoughtful expression, but I don't think anything registered with her. I asked her to imagine what good might come out of this pregnancy—to try and envision a different kind of future than the one she's been planning for so long. I tried to get her to see that life will always be a day-to-day affair.

Finally, my question is this: Is Susan's situation a "tragic" one to begin with? My feeling is emphatically negative. She is immature, certainly, but what person is ever truly ready to have a child? Are we ever really ready for that momentous responsibility? Who of us does not end up learning from day to day, on our own, gradually and imperfectly, what being an able parent means? Can Susan not put this child up for



adoption? Are her parents unable to support her through this? Must Susan be in such a hurry to achieve her educational goals? Or is she using them as an excuse to get out of this situation? I cannot help but compare Susan's position to much more tragic cases I've come across—rapes, incest, and people who do not have money to buy food for themselves. In comparison I cannot help but see Susan as something of a spoiled young woman. I am afraid she will get an abortion no matter what anyone says.

In situations like these I really feel that I am fighting a losing battle against a powerful liberal ideology which ultimately sees life as a process of hoarding up goods ("spiritual" as well as material), of achieving higher and higher levels of quality in life until we finally reach that beautiful nowhere land of no-responsibility and transcendent freedom. Then (we fantasize) we will be able to say that all of our relationships were means to this beautiful end, and that all of our gifts—our personalities, our sexuality, our talents, our choices, our upbringing, our parents—all of these are not really "us," but things that we have used to achieve this glorious state of being. How do I fight such an ideology? Is my own view necessarily a "Christian" view in opposition to this ideology? I can only pray in the name of Jesus that Susan will live the life which rises out of his cross. Only through the death of faith—faith in what he's done for us through his death and resurrection—will we come into the joy of living how our merciful God intends us to live in this world.

## Professor Long

One of my favorite students, Susan Johnson, came to my office today in tears. She's pregnant. Obviously she was really upset about it. So I took care to listen sympathetically to her reasons for being so horribly distraught. It never ceases to amaze me—the power that religious taboos continue to exert on people's decisions.

She told me that she felt horrible because the campus minister here implied that abortion is "sinful." This really gets my goat. There's a lot of good in religion—I consider myself a believer. But let's face it: the churches are full of characters who perpetuate guilt which has long been obsolete. I suppose they do it in order to keep the church alive. We wouldn't need a church if we didn't have sins, would we? So they live like parasites off of people's guilt. But I wish they would concentrate on real-world problems rather than imaginary ones. All they really do is succeed in making people feel guilty and keeping them from quickly taking logical action which will get them beyond the practical problems which crop up in the here and now.

Of course abortion is a difficult choice. I'm not denying that. Our instincts for self-preservation continue to flare up whenever we see a threat to life. We have not yet fully emerged from the phase of human history which is afraid of science, and which sees the modern world's capability to manipu-

late life as something which treads too near to God's territory. What's wrong? Are we afraid God won't take care of us as we change and move forward for the better? Of course, most of our feelings towards unborn children are sentimental in the first place. The real force behind people's aversion to abortion is not so much a sentimental "feeling" that life is holy as it is the fact that our ability to manipulate biological life is something relatively *new* in history. The ideas of population control and family planning are simply new ideas. We never had the power to plan our families or the necessity of thinking about the overpopulation of the world until the past few decades. Now we're at a point where we're fools not to think of these things.

People are afraid of the ambiguity that change brings. But I am confident that people will get used to abortion once it's been around long enough. The sooner the better. Then we won't have to listen to these futile arguments concerning the point at which an unborn fetus becomes "fully human." We won't have young women like Susan killing themselves with guilt over the fact that they are making a logical decision after carefully weighing all the factors in their situations.

The United States is so backward in comparison with, say, Sweden, where abortion has been legal and widely accepted for many years now. People here think there are some kind of fixed moral standards which exist universally for everyone. People want the standards of the past to make their decisions for them. They don't want to take the trouble of figuring out what's best for them in each individual situation. I've read the Bible myself. Imposing universal standards of right and wrong on people are not what Jesus was about. Jesus accepted people for what they were and helped them in their particular circumstances. That pastor isn't being very Christian, as far as I'm concerned, when she gets down on Susan for trying to do the best thing possible in her specific circumstances.

Why would that pastor treat Susan like she was some kind of immature child to begin with? Susan is 22 years old and far more mature than any student I've known in the last seven years. She is one of the brightest students I've had in any of my classes, with a great future in front of her and great possibilities. I think Susan is at an age where she can make her decisions for herself. Isn't it her body, anyway?

We have to look at the facts of the matter. Susan has been planning on going to graduate school for four years now. She is going to be great in her field. There's little doubt that she will continue to excel academically and make a mark for herself. She is sure that her parents will not be willing to support her and a child more than minimally through more than four years of graduate school. And Susan is already deep in debt because of college. She also says that her mother and father have always adopted opposing stances towards her in everything she does. Her father has supported her going on to graduate school, while her mother thinks Susan has never done anything right in her life. She is sure that this will put even more strain on her parents' already teetering marriage. Most importantly, why would Susan want to have this child when the father-to-be has made it quite clear that he will not support her through it? He has offered to pay for an abortion but has made no promises to support her beyond that. Susan has no love for this man, and while they seem to have remained friendly through this so far, it seems obvious that marriage is out of the question.

Susan already knows what she wants to do, and I assured her that she shouldn't let

the dogmatic opinions of others determine her actions. She is fully capable of figuring out what she should do with her life by herself, as she already has. She has weighed all the possibilities and surveyed the positives and negatives of the situation. She has come to the conclusion that an abortion is the best way to go. The man has agreed to pay for it, and she has chosen a medical center which has the best abortion facilities in the city.

Isn't it a defeatist and sick ideology which advises us to accept our lot in life and take the hard knocks as they come, even when we are fully capable of bettering our situation and negating some obvious negatives? Susan's main battle will be against the guilt that oppressive and outdated moral standards will force upon her. The undeveloped life in her uterus is not yet a child. It should not become a child subjected to a life without loving and willing parents. At this point Susan has the power to make a choice for the better, and it is her choice and no one else's—just as it is her body and no one else's.

## Susan Johnson

I can't believe I'm in this situation. You only think it will happen to other people. When the doctor told me I tried to deny it. Then I wanted to kill myself. I still want to just die. Professor Long, whom I confided in, tries to convince me that "fundamentally" there's nothing wrong with having an abortion. But I can't get myself out of feeling that I've just dirtied myself and everyone around me by even wanting to have one.

But I can not have this child. Steve, the guy who made me pregnant, will not be a father to it. I talked to him after I talked to the campus pastor. He was freaked out. I looked at him as if for the first time and realized how little I wanted to be around him. I almost hate him. He makes me feel sick when I even look at him. Why did I ever get involved with him in the first place? I can't even call it "being involved" when I think of it. We enjoyed each other's company and all, but I always knew deep down that this was a temporary relationship. We didn't make love that much, really—it seems about three or four times in all. And we always were careful.

When I told him I was pregnant I quickly let him know that I didn't expect anything of him. I was almost afraid, I think, that he'd take too much responsibility for the situation and act like he was obligated to ask me to marry him or something. The thought of him really becoming a part of my life nauseated me. But I noticed that when I told him I didn't expect anything from him, he seemed a little relieved—just for an instant. Right then I realized that I *did* expect something from him. He tried to appear concerned for me and acted very upset. I think he's just scared to death. He doesn't want anyone to hear about this. Neither do I.

At first one of the only things I could think about was Jonathan, a guy I've been really involved with for three years now. He's at Dartmouth in New Hampshire. The thought of what I've done to him drove me crazy. In a way I felt worse when I thought of him than when I think of how my parents will react when I tell them. I called Jonathan up about a week after I found out I was pregnant. I didn't know whether I was going to tell him or not. He knew something was wrong. But I just sat there like a lead weight. It wasn't even guilt I felt. It was more a kind of deadness. I would rather commit suicide than feel that deadness. But I feel dead every day now. Not like killing myself—but already dead in the middle of life.

I'll tell you why I will never tell him: I realized that I have never trusted Jonathan or really believed we would be together someday. I realized how shallow our relationship was. Our relationship was just so much exciting talk of commitment and promise concerning the future. But basically I realized that Jonathan was simply someone I could put on hold, on the "back burner," as a safety valve who I could escape to when my love life here at school became unsatisfying in any way. I was telling the campus minister how I felt so guilty about what I'd done to Jonathan. But now, after calling him, I realize I've never loved him.

Why don't I feel I can just go out and have an abortion without anyone having to hear about it? I can't tell my parents. This will kill them. I think they're going to get a divorce. This will push them over the edge for sure. But I've never felt so alone in my life as when I think of having an abortion. Is Professor Long right—do I feel guilty out of some kind of habit? I'll tell you the weirdest thing of all. I feel like this child—this thing—inside me is somehow the only one who understands. That's crazy, I know, but it's the only way I can describe how I feel about it.

I want to die. I want help. I want someone to tell me exactly what to do. But when people do offer advice I feel like killing them and going off all by myself to die. Why does this all depend on me? Why do I have to make all the decisions? I wish I'd never met Steve. Professor Long tells me that it's all my decision and that I shouldn't care what others say. I agree with him, but why does it feel I have no control over this at all? Why do I feel that when I make this decision—to have an abortion—that I will be chained to everything around me, that I'll never have freedom again? I don't get it.

Why do I feel that when I make this decision—to have an abortion—that I will be chained to everything around me, that I'll never have freedom again?

But when I think of raising a child it's worse. I'm not mature enough to be a mother. I've got so much to learn. I would be poor and living alone. The thought of it is too much to bear. All I can see is a big blank—the future as a big nothing—when I think of having this child. I just get a picture of myself nursing it in a bare white room, and I get nauseated because I realize what a big mistake I've made and how stupid I've been, how I've given everything up just by acting like a child. Everything I've ever hoped for and planned for will be nothing.

I hate this life. I hate this world we live in. I can't forgive myself or anyone around me. I'm as good as dead. When I think of having this baby I feel like I'm going to die, and that the weight is too heavy to bear. When I think of getting an abortion I feel like my whole future is a lead weight with everyone expecting things of me forever. An abortion would make my life one long drawn-out act of dying.

Oh Lord, I know that pastor is right. But I know she's totally crazy at the same time. How can she expect me to bear this child? All the facts seem to point against it.

All logic leads me to just get this abortion over with and continue with my life. Sometimes when I think of having the baby I feel this huge cathartic rush, as if having the baby would allow me to stuff dirt in everyone's face—including my own. I love that feeling. Then there would be no one but me, my baby and God with the world going on on its own. But then the specter of all my plans, all my capabilities, all my hopes and dreams comes to put its foot on my neck and suffocate me. I can't stand the thought of the world's condemnation. How can I let go? I'm so deeply bound by all these factors around me. Why is it that when I'm more alone than I've ever been in all my life, when I'm more helpless than ever before, that all the power to make the big choices is put in my court?

## Some personal reflections on this project

In imagining Susan's situation from three different points of view I have learned a number of things. I surprised myself with my initial need to come down hard against abortion. In Professor Long's section I don't think I argued his "evolutionary progressive" view very convincingly because that point of view is so alien to me. But Professor Long impressed me during parts of his speech, as he made some forceful arguments that I could not ignore.

I had planned to make Susan an immature and somewhat whining young woman. I wanted to present her in a way which made it obvious that she's deceiving herself. But as I wrote I began to like her very much and to sympathize with her situation.

Most of all, I think that by forcing myself to present this situation from three different perspectives, all in the first person, I have begun to realize that ethical reflection is not a matter of applying "logical," cut-and-dried principles to every situation. These three people already work within the framework of some basic assumptions about the structure and meaning of the universe. Ethical decision and argument almost begins to seem like an art—a horribly important art where tone of voice and rhetorical skill at presenting a story are every bit as important as reliance on sturdy principles. The basic "mythic structures" of our world views (Professor Long's evolving, upwardly-spiraling world as opposed to Pastor Billings' cross-centered world) won't mean much without the voice of the living person who is constantly integrating the flow of daily experience into these structures.

The two most crucial points in the project for me are (1) when Pastor Billings says that in most of our acts of self-justification we are trying to escape from shame before God, and (2) when Susan says she feels most helpless when she's in the position of most self-authority. As I was writing I realized how vast and intricate are the webs I myself weave as I try to justify my actions.

The act of ethical reflection itself implies that we are not justified "in ourselves," but must constantly reach for an objective narrative which places us in the context of a thousand (communally shared) symbols beyond ourselves. Susan refers to her plans for the future all the time as justification for her wish to escape from her present shame. Professor Long holds onto an ideal of the "pure individual" separated from the social matrix which is, finally, the source of the individual's standards of self-worth. Pastor Billings seems consciously aware of her own dependence on factors outside of her "self."

Susan's important recognition that she is most helpless when she is most "free" to choose for herself points again towards the

same fundamental idea which governs this project. It directly relates to Pastor Billings saying that we are truly our own authorities only in the face of death. We are absolutely dependent, paradoxically, on people, symbols, and powers outside ourselves for a sense of our own authority and self-worth. Pastor Billings does not want to make Susan feel guilty, as Professor Long implies, but rather simply to see the fact of her dependence on others for what it truly is. She doesn't want Susan to run away from having to "face the music" of her dependence on the judgment (and forgiveness) of others. Without this confession of the reality of her dependence, there will not be any chance for Susan to be a sinner, and without that there will never be a chance for her to be forgiven.

Pastor Billings seems to dismiss any idea of an easy conclusion to the matter. No matter what, Susan will continue to live with whatever decision she makes. Billings wants to offer an initial ingredient, faith, which will set Susan on course for a life where problems will never come to a conclusion. Susan's own tortured vacillation between wanting to "rub dirt in the world's face" by having the child and getting an abortion illustrate just how impossible faith fundamentally is: a death to the world as we know it and a trusting in God's will for life. Susan is standing before a cross. The fact that she senses a possible victory in that cross ("rubbing dirt in the world's face") shows that she has some knowledge of a faith which contradicts what the judgment of the world threatens to do with her. *She has come to a cross where something must die.* It is certainly an opportunity for her to trust in the One who has already died for her there.

I had originally planned to have Susan use Professor Long's arguments to justify herself and get an abortion. But I guess she listened to Pastor Billings more than I had expected, because she obviously was having serious doubts about the wisdom of having one. I had the privilege of coming up with characters, situations, and endings which satisfied me. I think Susan was on her way towards having the child. My impression, however, is that there are not many young people who would listen long to Billings' ideas today.

# Sparkling Words: The Nature and Task of Preaching

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## The nature of homiletics

The language of Jesus sparkles. Like diamonds illuminated by beams of light, Jesus' words—his sayings and parables—shine brilliantly. They sparkled then, when first spoken, and they continue to sparkle now among us. The language of the parables: "But while he was yet at a distance, the father saw his wayward son and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." The Beatitudes: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." From the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

What was the bright light shining through Jesus' words? What brought forth this sparkle? Was it not the very presence of God? Jesus preached the gracious involvement of God in lives of people. As he spoke in ordinary terms of the coming of the kingdom, so God's presence drew near. God's power lit up Jesus' words: sins were forgiven, the blind saw, the lame walked, lives were saved from ruin.

At times the words of Jesus could cut to the bone, just as a diamond can cut with its sharp edges. Not only Pharisees, but even his own disciples were sometimes pierced by jagged-edged words from Jesus' mouth: "...get behind me Satan. You are setting your mind not on divine but human things." "Have you been with me so long and still do not understand?" "One of you, who is eating with me, will betray me." Through Jesus' words the dark places of life were disclosed. The shadow of sin appeared distinctly.

Jesus did not come merely to reveal shadows, however. He came so that the light of the gospel might shine on our darkness to make it bright. "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness." "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." "Take heart, your sins are forgiven." Where Jesus' words shone, the shadows gave way to his own brilliant light. The darkness of suspicion gave way to trust. The shadow of ven-

geance surrendered to love. The gloom of despair dissolved into hope. Jesus' words sparkled—then but also now—with good news. They are not *about* good news. They shine with good news. And as the light of God refracts through the gospel diamond of Jesus' words, it falls on us. And we too begin to sparkle.

The point of the analogy is this: As with the words of Jesus, preaching is to be a language that sparkles. That happens not because preachers are necessarily so brilliant but because God's Spirit is at work still today in, with, and under the words they speak. Those who preach need begin with one daring conviction: God can and does work through what I say! Such an assertion ought not make preachers proud but instead very humble. Often it may even be in spite of their lack of insight or preparation that God works. Nevertheless, preaching, to be effective, must be understood as nothing less than a chosen vehicle of God for getting through to us. God's Word lives through the words of a preacher. Preaching is a means of grace; efficacious, performative language.

## The task of preaching

Unfortunately, those who preach are not equal to Jesus. Sparkling gems do not automatically come dancing from their mouths. For all the promise God connects with preaching, the job of the preacher is hard work. It must find its place in the midst of a host of pressing matters.

The need of people for pastoral care always puts pressure on the pastor as caregiver. Administrative tasks and meetings take much time. Confirmation classes need to be taught. Family matters deserve high priority. And amid the host of other responsibilities, a pastor is called to preach. One of the first things one discovers in the parish is how Sundays arrive with relentless regularity. One is scarcely finished with one sermon when there are three more ancient texts beckoning for attention.

Those who preach need begin with one daring conviction: God can and does work through what I say!

Because preaching is a demanding task, one is wise to approach it prayerfully. God would like to use the preacher's words, and so those who preach invite God's Spirit to guide and direct the process. As one begins to consider the weekly lectionary, it is a comfort to realize how God's Spirit has in every age come to enliven these ancient texts. Both in their original speaking and as they have been preached in the church over the generations, God has repeatedly brought new life through the words of Holy Scripture. Preachers do well to prayerfully invite God to send the Spirit also to what they say.

Responsible preaching requires not only an attitude of prayer but acquired skills in exegesis. Proper exegesis guards against arbitrarily reading one's own bias into a passage. Examining a text in its original language does much to set it free from the tendency to read into it conventional truisms. The meaning of a text in its original historical context, as reconstructed through historical critical methods, establishes a

baseline for measuring the adequacy of all subsequent interpretations. Understanding the history of a text—its earliest form, how it was shaped by redactors, its literary function within a particular book—widens the range of possible approaches a preacher might develop in a particular sermon. Through the use of exegetical methods, the preacher should be able to make a reasoned case for a particular interpretation of a text. In the sermon the preacher follows through in developing the intention or trajectory of the text as identified in the exegetical process.

A strong emphasis on responsible exegesis does not, however, mean that sermon preparation takes place in an ivory tower, isolated from the real world. A preacher needs to recognize and reflect on the many and various dimensions of life which are addressed on a Sunday morning.

Imagine a set of five concentric circles. Let these represent five dimensions of life which the gathered congregation brings with them as hearers.

The smallest circle represents the individual. Each individual brings personal problems, needs, and concerns to worship. Some of these are needs common to all, like the need to be loved or to be forgiven. Some of the more particular problems and needs of people are known to the preacher through the privileged relationship as pastor. At this first level, the preacher seeks to be aware of the unique situations of individuals and, in a way that never betrays confidentiality, address them in the sermon.

The second circle represents families, or those who are otherwise committed to one another in close relationships. In the sermon the preacher addresses not isolated individuals, but people bound together by the commitments they have made to one another: spouses, parents, children, extended families, friends. Families today



come in diverse forms, and it requires pastoral sensitivity to speak in ways that address as many people as possible about the quality of their relationships with others.

The third circle encompasses the life of the congregation. The preacher can address God's Word to the particular events—joys, hopes, sadnesses, conflicts, whatever—in the life of the congregation itself. This includes pointing to the meaning of the church year and the liturgy in one's preaching. The sermon may especially articulate how God works through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion as they are celebrated together.

The fourth circle broadens to include the dimension of daily life and especially makes connections with events in the life of the local community or neighborhood, as the case may be. Hearers of sermons are enmeshed in a web of relationships that extend outside the congregation to the larger community where they live. This dimension draws attention to opportunities for witness, evangelism, or service in the realm of everyday life.

The fifth circle stands for events taking place in the world at large. The preacher in

the sermon addresses people who are affected by and concerned about what takes place in other parts of the country and world—New Jersey, the Brazilian rain forest, South Africa, Iraq, and Hong Kong. How does God's Word address what occurs in the world, and how do the events in the headlines impact the church's mission?

The hermeneutics of preaching involves bringing a message from a text to bear on these five dimensions of life (individual, familial, congregation, community, and world). It is important to recognize the complexity of the task of preaching as it builds a bridge between the many-layered world of an ancient text and the multi-dimensional world of the hearer.

Thus, integrity in preaching encompasses (1) a commitment to try to understand texts in their original speaking, (2) compassionate listening to the world, especially to the people of the congregation, and (3) a realistic assessment of one's own identity and ability. It is unfortunate when preaching is marred by a lack of integrity on any of these three fronts: (1) ill preparation of the text, (2) failure to listen to others, or (3) pretense on the part of a preacher who attempts to be someone he or she is not. Preaching with integrity involves drawing upon all one's life experiences—including insightful conversations, lessons of history, news, TV programs watched, novels read, analysis of current events, humorous incidents, stories, imagination, etc.—as raw material for incarnating the living gospel message. The preacher listens not only to the text and to others but to his own heartbeat. Placed in the service of the biblical word, the stuff of everyday life as interpreted by a preacher begins to sparkle with God's grace.

This is the goal of preaching: that the multi-dimensioned world of those who hear begins to sparkle with the presence of God. This happens when the gospel of Jesus Christ—his words, cross and resurrection—comes alive again through the words of the preacher. As people are captured by the possibility—even more, the reality—of God's kindness and love, they can begin to envision their own multi-dimensioned world in a new light. Through good preaching as through liturgy, people enter a world in which God's goodness in Christ is real and effective. They begin to believe in that world where forgiveness is real, and this belief begins to transform what they had previously taken for granted about their own personal identities, their familial relationships, their church, their community, and their world. Preaching of the gospel reorients the entire worldview of those who hear, for they then see God's grace as the decisive factor for interpreting their lives.

Those who have heard this gospel, who trust its transforming power, and who thus have their worldview under reconstruction, are people who themselves have begun to sparkle. Surely sin does return to dull the sparkle. They will need to be polished with gospel preaching time and time again. But it is through sparking people such as these that God has been trying to turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6).

# Preaching from Nestle

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*...then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures...*

—Lk 24:45

There it sits. That little blue book right next to the pen set from Lutheran Brotherhood. The Nestle-Aland 26th Edition of *Novum Testamentum Graece*.[1] You can hold this essence of the apostolic witness in the palm of one hand. And yes, with a little work, you can stand in the midst of the saints and preach from this little blue book, minus the notes and the pulpit. Now that I have your attention and your palms are sweating, we can get to work.

## Why preach from Nestle?

I can think of four reasons. There may be more. *Reason one:* It will improve your Greek. One needs only to attend one pastors' text study to see that this is not a bad idea. Could you pass any of your seminary Greek exams? Most of us use our Greek only when trying to win an argument with a layperson in adult Bible class.

We have all heard the example of the German-American pastors of yesteryear who read a chapter of Greek a day and a chapter of Hebrew a week. But like many new year's resolutions or exercise programs, this one lasts only a handful of days. The Greek New Testament can easily become the literary equivalent of that cycling machine in our garage.

It is really very simple. If you have to stand in front of people on Sunday morning with nothing but the Gospel text in Greek, you will have to find out what it says. And one pericope in Greek does not take long to wade through, even for the rustiest former C-student.

Greek, like muscle tone, is something that must be kept up. Use it or lose it. Flash cards, class notes, grammars and study helps are OK, but as NT professor Edgar Krentz of LSTC stresses: There is no substitute for reading.

Expect other mental benefits. Sharpening a foreign language strengthens the verbal pathways of your mind. Your English will improve as will your ability to speak in public.

*Reason two:* Your biblical knowledge will be improved. In a church which is built on *sola scriptura*, this is worthwhile. The

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1 Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *Nestle-Aland. Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, revised printing 1983).

Bible has authority that you don't. Many preachers face a crisis of authority precisely because they are not fully tapping the power of the Word. The Bible is woven into the very fabric of our culture, literature, music, liturgy, and ethics. Understanding these threads, these biblical ropes and cords, knits you into better touch with just about everything.

Most of our Bible study as pastors is done casually and eclectically, and most of it is second hand. One cannot be casual about a Greek text which one must learn well enough to preach from on Sunday. This sense of professional urgency pulls us deeper into the text. It's going to be you and the Greek Bible in front of a lot of people. You have no choice but to get to know it better.

Along with the better biblical knowledge comes a fresh appreciation for the rich language of pictures, images, and symbols in that little blue book. One begins to see, literally, that the Bible is more of a photo-album of salvation images than anything else.[2] These images connect directly to the faith and emotions of your congregation. Finding the connections is exciting and rewarding.

From a purely practical standpoint, you will become familiar with variant readings (at the bottom of the page) and one of the best cross-reference systems around (in the margins). You will not do it because of scholarly integrity, but rather because the readings preferred by Aland are often arbitrarily chosen and may make you angry as you go off in a huff to the alternate wordings from various manuscripts.

*Reason three:* The people need the Bible, they don't need you. They are not as interested in what you have to say about the Bible as in the narrative itself. They want to be pulled into the story to experience it first hand. There are no "points" to the stories




which must be distilled and dressed up for the congregation. The story *is* the point. They cannot experience it first hand in a sermon if you have not. Should Jesus not return soon, the Bible will be around a lot longer than your interpretation. Give a gift that lasts.

*Reason four:* Preaching theory becomes visible. We all learned that a sermon contains a text (Bible), a context (people), and a preacher. If the act of preaching doe not express this visually, much can be lost. What expresses this theory better than a preacher standing in the midst of the people trying to relate a little blue book to the lives of the gathered saints?

The people are comforted to see that you are indeed preaching from a Bible, not a carefully prepared theological treatise or inspirational manuscript. Your attempt to connect it to their faith, hearts, and feelings will be well received. Your authority as

[2] Eugen Drewermann, *Bilder von Erloesung. Das Markusevangelium* (Olten und Freiburg im Breisgau: Walter-Verlag, 1990), 1-123.

pastor will be enhanced to the extent you mine the riches of an authority *extra nos*, outside of us.

Unfortunately, the pastor is usually the center of attention in the sermon, rather than the most transparent part of the equation. Since I started preaching from *Nestle*, I get fewer and fewer compliments on "my message." Who cares! Now it is rare for a sermon to go by without looking up from the little blue book and seeing tears of joy on the cheeks of saints as they realize that these images of salvation are about and for them.

## What you need at your desk

*Nestle's 26th.* Sure it is flawed by bias against the Byzantine tradition and visions of grandeur by the editors who would like to see it become the new *Textus Receptus*.[3] Still, it is the best and most accurate version of the apostolic witness since the original manuscripts were lost. Also, other versions of the Greek New Testament do not have adequate cross-referencing and alternate readings. (You will need to cover it with clear contact paper or something similar; otherwise you are going to wear it out.)

The three-year lectionary from which you take your bulletin inserts.

Any shorter lexicon of the New Testament. Frederick Danker's is the best. The point here is to avoid aerobic dictionary work for quicker reading.

*BAGD*.[4] The Rolls Royce of Lexicons.

Bromiley's *Little Kittel*.[5] The full set of *TDNT* may be the best way for a parish pastor to waste money. This one volume edition is more than you need unless you are writing an article for *JBL*.

Any Classical Greek lexicon. This enlarges the word fields and helps give non-biblical backgrounds on words. Liddell and Scott have put out versions in several sizes.

Reference works on symbols, iconography, images, metaphors, mythology, comparative religions, etc.

## One method of preparation

There is more than one way to skin a cat. Here is what works for me:

*One.* Learn the words. Look up all the Greek words you do not know.

*Two.* Go over and over the Greek text until you can read it out loud in fluent English.

*Three.* Pray.

*Four.* Get a sheet of paper and write the numbers of the pericope verses spread out along the length of the left column.

*Five.* Go through the Greek text verse for verse, jotting down notes, lexical findings, and illustrations as you go. Include some depth etymologies which get at the roots of the words. Bring out the rich symbolic language of the text. Look for connections between the deepest thoughts and feelings of your parishioners and these words and images.

*Six.* Pray. Read the Greek text. Go through and amend your notes. Repeat step six as many times as necessary until you are absolutely confident and ready to go.

*Seven.* Throw your notes away. (Don't do this until right before worship unless you are braver than I am.)

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[3] Rykle Borger, "Zum Stande der neutestamentlichen Lexicographie," *Goettingischen Gelehrten Anzeigen*. vol. 241, nos. 1/2, 1989.

[4] Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

[5] Geoffery Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

## One method of delivery

*One.* Read the Gospel, the lectionary version, from the center of the gathered saints.

*Two.* Pray a spontaneous, free prayer out loud. Let the people be seated.

*Three.* Put the lectionary down. Open *Nestle.* It's you, the Word, and the people. They can see this, and they begin to get excited.

*Four.* Give the people a brief introduction to the text. Be conversational.

*Five.* Go through the Greek text one verse at a time, each time trying to bring the people into the story and the story into the people. Use the *Nestle* text itself as an outline. Build lots of bridges. Weave their faith and emotions into the story. Convince people that the Bible is about *them.* Don't be afraid to touch people verbally. Your task is to connect the lives of your parishioners with the Good News in the text and then to disappear.

*Six.* Sum up the message of the pericope. Help make it matter to them. You shouldn't need notes for this. Garrison Keillor once had one of his characters say something like this on the radio: "If you don't know what you are going to say in church without having to read it, maybe you should just sit down and think about it for awhile."

*Seven.* Reread the entire original text in fluent English using only *Nestle* as a guide.

*Eight.* Simply sit down at the end of the reading. Allow silence before the hymn of the day.

If you want to preach from the Old Testament or the second lesson, you need only modify a few of the above steps.

Have a good time. What work could be more exciting?

Give them the Word. It will not come back empty.

# I Have a Problem

Meinert Grumm
*Stone Mountain, Georgia*

Recently, in my retirement after a career as a missionary with some seminary teaching in New Testament, I had occasion to do some reference work in the Lutheran Confessions. I even invested in a Tappert, to get along with quoted reference numbers.

After being away for a long time from using this type of theology, I found myself occasionally being rubbed the wrong way by the language of some of the statements, sometimes in the Apology, more often in the Formula of Concord. It made me recall a statement of Rengstorf on *didaskalia*, especially the way it is used in the Pastorals, when he spoke of "the transformation of the apostolic message into traditional teaching, and therefore the incipient ossification of the early Christian kerygma into the dogma of the early Church" (TDNT II, 63).

Herewith I bring a sample quotation from the Formula of Concord and my reactions to it.

> The Gospel is that doctrine which teaches what a man should believe in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins from God, namely, that.... (561.20. Ditto in Epitome 478.5).

**1. "The Gospel is a doctrine..." (*Lehre/doctrina*).** This is not only non-biblical language; it is, as far as I could check, only in the Formula of Concord. Other places in the Formula: 478.6, 561.15, 562.24, 563.27. In the Apology, 108.5: "two chief doctrines, the law and the promises."

The word "doctrine" as it is used here for a summarized statement of beliefs about a biblical topic (similarly as used in the plural "these two doctrines," 562.24) is not so used in the New Testament, except perhaps at Mt 15:9/Mk 7:7, "teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" from Isa 29:13 in the Septuagint (not in the Hebrew).

The translation of "doctrine" fifty times in KJV for *didaskalia* and *didache* has gone down radically in more modern versions—NJB 8; NIV 7; TEV 7. Though there is a definite reification of some uses of *didaskalia* in the Pastoral Epistles, it has no doubt been thought that the word "teaching," which can mean either or both act and content, was more fitting than "doctrine" with its exclusive emphasis on content.

**2. "The Gospel is a doctrine which teaches..."** Though the gospel in the New Testament is a very living term denoting activity, it is not used, except with passive verbs, as the subject of verbs. As a frequent object, it is not used with "teach" but with verbs like "proclaim" and "preach."

In the Bible, doctrines don't teach; not even Scripture teaches. God, Jesus, and people teach.

"Doctrine," if used as a translation of *didaskalia*, is of course associated with the verb *didaskein*, "to teach." But even as an object of "teach," "doctrine" is used thus only in the Septuagint quotation, "doctrines of men."

**3. "...which teaches *what* a man should believe..."** In the NT, with the verb "teach," the direct object (that which is taught) is negligible—"many things," "the things about Jesus," once "the word of God," once "the traditions," which in the context has to do with the life of the disciples rather than with knowledge of facts. The same is true of other uses of the verb, especially with the infinitive.

What is much more prominent is what in English grammar we call the indirect object (in Greek it has the accusative case), "the people, crowds." In Jesus' case it is often "captive audiences" in synagogues or the temple, with the verb in the imperfect tense, indicating an ongoing process.

So, the emphasis is on who, rather than on what, is taught; people rather than content; objective rather than object: to bring about planned changes in people—the teaching was made for man, not man for the message.

**4. "...which teaches what a man *should believe*..."** It is safe to say simply, We are not saved by what we believe but by whom we believe (2 Tim 1:12, Jas 2:19, Lk 4:41, Mt 7:21-23). Therefore any misleading ambiguous statement like this is contra-indicated. A careful study of the use of "believe" in John—believing that/what or whom/in, and the use of the aorist and present tenses—would be helpful here.

In a subsequent paragraph (562.22) the Formula does mention the *fides qua creditur*: "put his confidence solely in the Lord Jesus Christ," but it is still marred by the use of "must"—Latin *debeat, debent*; Greek *dei, opheilein*—words which are normally used in the New Testament not in gospel but in law contexts.

**5. "should believe in order to obtain..."** Once in a meeting in India, when a statement similar to this was made, an educated layman objected at once with the remark, "That's Hinduism!" What he meant was the natural religion of "What must I do in order to...?"—whatever the goal may be, forgiveness of sins, *mukti*, eternal life, and whatever the way, the *markam*, may be: using religion, God, as a means for my end, in this case the *gnana markam*, the way of true doctrine, orthodoxy.

It is ironical that for the basic hermeneutical approach to the New Testament behind this critique I am indebted to the Lutheran Confessions. What happened between 1530 and 1580? In the Reformation after the front door was closed to natural religion by true doctrine, could it be that the same natural religion comes in the back door in the form not of good works but of true doctrine?

# Response

*"Reconceiving Pregnancy," 18:4 (August 1991), 256-62.*

To the Editor:

After waiting through three subsequent issues for someone more competent than I to offer a rebuttal to "Reconceiving Pregnancy" by Patricia Beattie Jung, I feel I must myself point out that the article's argument is not soundly based.

The central point of the article is: if we think of pregnancy and childbirth as if they were organ donation, then we would not wish pregnancy, once begun, to be required to be completed just as, much as we admire organ donation, we do not require it. This metaphor is very weak.

A life in the womb is not really like "a kidney, liver lobe, or bone marrow." In the first place, he or she is genetically individual, is in fact a she or a he. Also, he or she is not a tool, not donatable material which is to serve some goal. She or he is no means to an end but a nascent human life whom expectant parents name, talk to, and love as no one has ever loved a kidney. Of course, it is not parental love which gives the fetus its value, as if our subjective views could change objective reality (that, in fact, is the article's false hope). Rather, the recognition of and love for life inspires these actions from parents.

Really, just because of objective reality, the article's search for a metaphor is moot, since any implications drawn from a metaphor are built on sand. After all, we might as well think childbearing is like a baseball game and sing the national anthem and eat hot dogs. But pregnancy is not a baseball game nor organ donation nor any other metaphor.

We have come far in realizing how oppression is legitimated by de-humanizing the oppressed. Women, native Americans, and African slaves in America have been classified as less than human. One must be grieved that the destruction of children-to-be is legitimated by declaring "not human" those who are defenseless and voiceless. Lord have mercy on them and us.

Sincerely,
Todd Murken

To the Editor:

I wish to thank Reverend Todd Murken for the serious attention he gave to my argument and for the honor he grants me by making public his objections to it. For the courage of his convictions and the gifts he brings to the church's moral deliberations, I thank God.

Reverend Murken is most certainly correct when he argues that a fetus is not really very much like a bodily organ. His understanding however of the metaphor I proposed is mistaken. My analogy between childbearing and organ donation invites the reader to compare (1) the pregnant woman to a donor father, (2) her womb, if not her bodily self, to his transplantable parts, and (3) unborn life to a child in dire need of organ donation. Far from dehumanizing life in the womb the analogy accords to it full human status. The comparison runs the greatest risk of being distortive of pregnant women. Childbearing involves a woman's entire bodily self in a way no other form of organ donation does.

Again Reverend Murken is certainly correct when he argues that childbearing is unique among human activities. I explicitly

state that "*any* metaphorical comparison of it to another activity will fail to illumine all aspects of it and in some respects will distort our understanding of it." Nevertheless, such analogical thinking is *inescapably* a part of moral analysis. Therefore we must surface and critically assess those metaphors which guide our deliberations. Careful attention to Reverend Murken's own response reveals that he thinks of childbearing in significant ways as *like* child rearing. I assessed this metaphor for both its strengths and weakness in my essay. Furthermore he thinks of the prohibition of abortion as being in significant ways *like* the abolition of slavery. This particular analogy has surfaced among many prolife feminists. It deserves careful evaluation in the future.

Sincerely,
Patricia Beattie Jung

# Book Reviews

**Reading in Communion. Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life.** By Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991. 164 pages. Paper. $13.95.

This is an original and, more importantly, theologically necessary book. Fowl and Jones have recaptured with one stroke the inherent interrelation between communal reading of Scripture, ecclesiology, pneumatology, sanctification, and ethics.

The central thesis is that Christians are called to embody Scripture in the various life contexts in which they find themselves. This embodiment begins by faithfully discerning Scripture's claims on our lives as contemporary Christians. They unfold this point by developing a hermeneutical principle borrowed from Bonhoeffer: learning to read Scripture over against ourselves instead of in our own interest. The congregation as the people of God gathered around Word and Sacrament is the locus of both faithful discernment and the testing- and training-field of the faithful embodiment of Scripture's claims.

The guiding interest of the book is to recover a common life as Christians by learning to become a people of character. Christian congregations are called to be interpreters of Scripture who embody their interpretations in the particular practices of a "life together" and in the interaction with the wider society: "Christian practice, as interpretative action, consists in the *performance* of texts which are construed as 'rendering,' bearing witness to, one whose words and deeds, discourse and suffering, 'rendered' the truth of God in human history" (62). It is not surprising that we find a fascinating chapter on Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a model performer of

Scripture at the very end of the book.

This approach bears fruit in the way the authors make sense of otherwise intractable interpretive disputes among Christians, e.g. around homosexuality. A theological horizon is developed in which the church must operate as a community of moral discourse in order to enable discussion and resolution of the dispute. The resolution will be both a faithful witness to and an edification of the community.

The authors undergird their constructive point by interrelating exegetical readings of Jeremiah and Paul with critical readings of contemporary issues, e.g. apartheid in South Africa. Their exegesis is particularly impressive since it is scholarly yet at the same time remains free from a methodological logic which would sever the readings from their ecclesiological context. A model of theologically responsible hermeneutics and exegesis! The book is challenging and stimulating in its exegetical, ecclesiological, and ethical implications since on all three grounds it theologically challenges the dominant yet tacit background concept of individualism. The modern focus on the autonomous and disengaged individual has seriously distorted the exegesis of Scripture, ecclesiology, and Christian ethics to the point of undermining their theological integrity. *Reading in Communion* recovers a core practice which ecclesiologically transcends the modern impasse between individualism and collectivism.

Another strength of the book, besides its high readability, is that it does not offer a "do-it-yourself" methodology by which the insights could be "applied" to a given group of people. Instead, the book helps us understand why this very attempt is ecclesiologically disastrous and why nothing can substitute for the concrete, contingent, and unpredictable faithful practice of communal reading and embodying Scripture. Thus, the book is best read as an exercise in casting out the spirits of the age inside the church, namely the spirits of a managerial and bureaucratic ecclesiology. A highly recommended reading for congregations, seminary teachers, church officials, yet especially for pastors and would-be pastors.

**Reinhard Hütter**
*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

**The Good Society.** By Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991. 306 pages. Cloth. $25.00.

The authors of the by now classic *Habits of the Heart* present a sequel which is both good news and bad news. The good news first.

*Habits of the Heart* was a sociological analysis and moral critique of liberal individualism and its impact on the present USAmerican society. *The Good Society*, in contrast, is the complementary volume about institutions and their crucial importance for a democratic society. The authors present a very readable, thoughtful, compassionate analysis and critique of those institutions which make "America" what it presently is: the family, the corporation, the political party and the federal government, education, and religion. They describe the present crises of these institutions and suggest perspectives for recovering their crucial and constructive role as mediating structures between the individual and the whole of society. The authors convincingly make the case that institutions are the necessary means for a participatory democracy, which in their eyes is urgently needed medicine to overcome the individualism and political passivity rampant in present USAmerican society. The constructive core-thesis of *The Good Society*: All of these institutions are crucial, for in and through them we learn the core-virtue of a participatory democracy, namely "paying attention." A "good society" is one in which attention takes precedence over distraction. The "good" is the participation of all in the common concerns and the ensuing relationality. The authors suggest the timely and very evident paradigm of "cultivation" as basic characteristic of a settled nation over against the paradigm of "exploitation" as the present characteristic of a nation constantly on the move.

The chapters vary in persuasive force and quality. I found the chapters on "The Rise and Fall of the American Century," "The Political Economy: Market and Work," "Government, Law, and Politics," and "America in the World" interesting and thought-provoking, but I was disappointed by the chapter on the "Public

Church" and the last one on "Democracy Means Paying Attention" which are the least constructive in the book. So the "good news" is that, together with *Habits of the Heart*, this book presents a compelling analysis of where USAmerican society is at the end of both the cold war and of this century, in the middle of a crisis which is very serious yet not beyond repair.

If this is not the bad news, what is? The bad news of the book is its *hidden* theological significance. As an "American critique of America" the book displays conventional wisdom about participatory democracy by appealing to the American civil-religious and democratic tradition in order to meet the individualistic and privatistic outgrowths of that same tradition. Yet, on the other hand, the "good" of *The Good Society* remains a "thin," namely, a procedural good, the compelling nature of which is only that it is the best among a series of worse alternatives.

After the breakdown of Communism the world is left with only one of the two utopian projects which grew out of the Enlightenment's two revolutions, the American and the French: the *nous ordo seclorum* of the United States is not just a "given" but has a tacit normativity which governs the whole book. Thus while thoroughly critical of "Lockean individualism" the book is a manifesto of a political liberalism which knows no other borders than that of the globe.

"America" as the utopian project of a "good society" is the overriding concern which places and frames everything else into its all-encompassing horizon, also "God" and "church"—or better, "religion." This is of great importance theologically and ethically: If the "good society" becomes the morally ultimate concern and defining horizon, the result is nothing else than the totalization of politics. This is bad news for the church and her theology because it suggests an ultimate horizon which either co-opts and undermines the church, or which the church has to radically challenge. The authors are blind to the fact that the very liberal placing of the church as "religion" and its resulting fragmentation into denominations is the cause of the complete politicization of the church. In other words, because politics is the ultimate, "religion" has to be politicized. *The Good Society* is a wonderful example of the fact that liberalism at its best displays a tacit and therefore extremely powerful theology which integrates each and every other discourse into the totality of its horizon. And this circumstance remains the core challenge for the church and for Christian theology in a liberal society. Herein lies the hidden theological significance of the book.

**Reinhard Hütter**

**Temptation: A Biblical and Psychological Approach.** By Wayne E. Oates. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991. 109 pages. Paper. $9.95.

Here is the help we need to rehabilitate the language of sin and temptation from its abuse as "Sunday School" moralism.

Oates suggests that the church has emasculated its temptation message because it is busy filling pews and balancing budgets and may see guilt as leverage to get people to join and open their pocketbooks. The good news is that psychologists and therapists are the ones talking about temptation these days. The bad news is that they do it in a language that excludes real human concerns like guilt, God, and eternity. Because of this, "the ultimate concerns of people are amputated from their consciousness."

To do justice to the complex concept of temptation Oates bridges the meaning-worlds of psychodynamics and theology. His rich synthesis should be studied by denizens of both of these worlds.

For Oates, temptation is the crucible of the human character. In the fertile ground of our fantasies of immortality, limitless powers, and impunity grows our desire to kill God and be our own divinity. Out of that root grow the varied branches of temptation: excuse-making and blame, testing of faith under stress, the dread of having to decide between the spiritual high or low roads, and the inertia of remaining ethically asleep. Turning to psychology, Oates elucidates these dynamics through the concepts of approach-avoidance conflict, addiction, anxiety, and projection.

Oates also helps us be specific in our diagnoses and apposite in our treatments of tempta-

tions. We all are tested spiritually, and we all need things like the "virtual prayer" of self-examination confessors, spiritual guides, support groups, and an enlightened, evangelical community of care.

Temptation as persecution merits special attention in the book. Oates discovered that this central biblical concern is not comprehended through the tools of personal piety or psychotherapy. You can smell the blood and tears of the battle over control of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville (where Oates teaches) as he denounces the fundamentalists for tempting Christians to give up faithfulness in favor of simplistic formulas and oppressive oaths. And he helps us learn from people like Gandhi, Laszlo Tökes, and Vaclav Havel (sadly, no women) to resist institutionalized deceptions and violence. This is a lesson our society of optimism must learn before our own feet are put to the fire.

Use this book to inform your counseling, for a sermon series, or as the focus of an adult discussion group. It could have used more stories and fewer examples, more evidence and fewer homilies, and more attention to thought transitions; but on the whole the argument is clear and persuasive.

**John R. Seraphine**
*Interim pastor, Mayfair Lutheran Church*
*Chicago, Illinois*

**Imago Dei. The Byzantine Apologia for Icons.** By Jaroslav Pelikan. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. Bollingen Series XXXV.36. 196 pages. Cloth. $39.95.

Pelikan's literary productivity is more and more astonishing: this major monograph is one of three he published in 1990 after concluding the five-volume history of doctrine the year before. His learned exposition of the theology of icons presents many of Pelikan's familiar strengths, aptly augmented by the fine Bollingen tradition of extensive illustrations and exquisite production. Although these chapters were the 1987 Mullen lectures in the Fine Arts, the author takes the fuller and the Orthodox perspective: the subject of icons cannot be confined to the arts but contains within itself the essence of Christian doctrine, as well as the drama of church history. His six sections are a virtuoso's tour of "Religion and 'Realpolitik' Byzantine Style," the ambiguities of the biblical and patristic sources, the doctrinal complexities of the incarnation and the council of Chalcedon, "The Senses Sanctified," Mary the Mother of God, and, climactically, "The Great Chain of Images: A Cosmology of Icons." Much of this analysis is available elsewhere, as the annotations and bibliography generously grant. But the style is pure Pelikan: ample documentation, graceful prose, clarification of technical terms, and especially the wide-ranging dialogue with the whole history of Christian ideas. Written for a western audience, and originally heard at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the presentation is particularly adept at causally comparing and contrasting the Byzantine Orthodox material with westerners like Augustine, Eriugena, Luther, Shakespeare, Bach, and Pope Pius IX. It is the history of idea, the *whole* history of specific Christian idea, which interests Pelikan.

Over 50 plates illustrate many icons from all periods, but the focal point is a single icon produced before the iconoclastic emperors and their soldiers destroyed whatever they could find. This exemplar is not the face of Christ or the mosaic Transfiguration at St. Catherine's in Sinai, as one might expect, but a woolen tapestry depicting Mary, the infant Christ, the angels, and the apostles, now at Cleveland's Museum of Art. This inspired choice enables Pelikan, aided by Dorothy Shepherd's original study in the Museum's *Bulletin* shortly after the 1968 acquisition, to cover not only the central issues of Christology—how to depict one person with a divine and a human nature—but also the interrelated questions of Mary as Theotokos, the angels and their hierarchy, and the apostles with their successors. The tapestry and the book add up to a "Great Chain of Images," the author's theological twist on Arthur Lovejoy's classic volume *The Great Chain of Being*. This is fitting, for both the subject of icons and the style of Pelikan illustrate the interconnectedness of all things. In theology and in church history, everything has to do with everything else. The only drawback to this excellent book is that Princeton University

Press produced color places only on the dust jacket and the frontispiece, both of the full tapestry. For the detailed close-ups and especially for the rest of the glorious items pictured, the viewer has to settle for black and white.

**Paul Rorem**
*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and The Center for Theological Inquiry*
*Princeton, New Jersey*

**The Simple Gospel: Reflections on Christian Faith.** By Hugh T. Kerr. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991. viii and 75 pages. Paper. $7.95.

Hugh Kerr's "simple gospel" is not simplistic. It derives from a career of over fifty years studying and teaching theology. In this book Kerr sorts through a lifetime of learning and shares with the reader his most basic convictions about the Christian faith. The book exudes wisdom as the author retells the stories that have shaped his theological outlook. Those familiar with Kerr's editorial touch upon the journal *Theology Today*, with its blend of sensitivity to culture and theological depth, will readily appreciate these pages.

Kerr honors readers, first of all, by taking seriously their own experience as an entrance to the world of theology. Kerr builds upon our common humanity as an avenue for approaching the down-to earth concerns of Jesus. Kerr exhorts the church and its seminaries to begin with a strong affirmation of the gifts of particular human persons.

Kerr next leads the reader to a deeper understanding of (1) theology as an interpretive art, (2) the correlation between theology and the shifting temper of the times, and (3) the way in which God works through ordinary people who function as messengers of divine grace. Surveying the current theological scenery, Kerr states his own preference for "a Spirit-centered theology" which does justice to the breadth of God's activity not only in redemption but in the world. Simultaneously, Kerr is driven forward by the same impulse which motivated the Reformers to continually re-examine the tradition in the light of both Christian origins and the needs of the present. Only through a Protestant principle can the flame of the Christian tradition shine brightly and avoid burning into a heap of ashes.

Kerr concludes his book with a beautiful testimony to the grace of God. The primary datum is an experience of grace; worship and praise derive from a prior experience of God's graciousness. Grace escapes quietism by issuing forth in a life of gratitude and thanksgiving. Yet this grace is always disguised by the world's ambiguity.

This is a book to put in the hands of inquirers looking for an introduction to the realm of theology. In genre Kerr's book calls to mind Helmut Thielicke's *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*. Those who read, inquirers both recent and seasoned, will discover here a simple gospel interpreted by a sage.

**Craig L. Nessan**
*St. Mark Lutheran Church*
*Cape Girardeau, Missouri*

**Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology.** By Daniel L. Migliore. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991. 312 pages. Paper. $18.95.

In the conviction that we need theology to save us from "unexamined orthodoxy" and "non-theological professionalism," Migliore offers yet another introduction grounded in mainline content yet inclusive of contemporary trends. Compiled from his lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary, *Faith Seeking Understanding* offers a Reformed reinterpretation of the Christian gospel highlighted with Barthian, Tillichian, and Liberation themes.

Theology is inquiry yoked to prayer, faith seeking understanding that stays close to both the gospel and effective praxis. Revelation, or God's self-disclosure throughout the creation, in Jesus Christ, and in the witness of the Bible and the church, is a disturbing event that calls for a "personal response and appropriation." Scripture is the unique testimony to the liberating and reconciling activity of God in Israel and Jesus Christ, whose authority lies in the life of the community of faith.

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Challenged by new and old problems, Christian thinking about God begins with a Trinitarian doctrine whose "depth grammar" speaks of divine love in electing a people for Godself. As well, responsive to ecological realities, thinking about creation lifts up the coexistence of all things at the hand of a God who creates and values all. Similarly, the persistence of evil tests belief in providence, calling forth a variety of theodicies all of which fail in comparison to the "logic of trinitarian love." Also, following a review of classical views of the person and work of Jesus Christ and some of the problems in this topic, Migliore constructs a liberation Christology placing Jesus and the church in solidarity with the poor.

Building on recent interest in the Holy Spirit, the author suggests a pneumatology that underscores the creative, liberative, and supportive work of God, and a view of Christian life that expresses the dynamics of justification, sanctification, and vocation. Noting NT and current models of the church, the author proposes a Trinitarian ecclesiology that is founded on God's "extravagant outreaching love" and directed by a commitment to mission. Against the background of contemporary despair and misdirected apocalypticism, the closing chapter offers an understanding of Christian hope that is nondualistic, grace-filled, and responsible.

Except for the appendices which contain three delightful imaginary dialogues among recent world-class theologians on the topics of natural theology, resurrection, and political theology, there is not a great deal that is new in this volume. Still, Migliore writes with clarity and good order, and always with a perceptive eye on current challenges to theology.

**Jerry K. Robbins**
*Lutheran Campus Center*
*Morgantown, West Virginia*

**Jesus The Christ: The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine.** By Nils Alstrup Dahl, ed. by Donald H. Juel. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991. 249 pages. Cloth. $24.95.

Donald Juel is right: the publication of Dahl's essays is a significant event (Foreword, p. 7). Dahl influenced a generation of American New Testament scholars as he taught at Yale. He was a major mover in the Society of Biblical Literature in forming the seminar on the form-critical study of Paul's letters and, later, of the Thessalonian correspondence. His major form of publication was the essay, studies eagerly read by his colleagues because they are incisive, original, and frequently suggest directions further research should take. Augsburg issued three paperback collections of essays: *The Crucified Messiah* (1974), *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* (1976), and *Studies in Paul* (1977), all now out of print.

As editor, Juel chose to reprint *The Crucified Messiah* and supplement those essays with five others: "The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology," a plea for the study of the role of God (as distinguished from Jesus and the Spirit); "Julius Wellhausen on the New Testament;" "The Crucified Messiah and the Endangered Promises," on the use of the OT in christological formulae in the NT and in contemporary proclamation; "Trinitarian Baptismal Creeds and New Testament Christology," which concentrates on early post-NT creeds; and "Sources of Christological Language," a survey of modern scholarship and a stimulating analysis of christological models, OT significance, etc. I found the essays on Wellhausen and sources of Christological language especially valuable—possibly because I had read the others before. Certainly the essay on "The Neglected Factor in NT Theology" has been influential in American scholarship.

The added essays make up approximately half of this volume; to have them in one volume is a great boon. I have only one slight reservation. Though *The Crucified Messiah* is out of print, the volume is available in libraries. I wish Juel had published other significant essays still buried in scattered journals. (1) Dahl did exten-

sive research on Ephesians for a commentary in the German Meyer series, but apparently will not complete it. He gave two lectures on Ephesians in St. Louis; one was published in the *Theology Digest*, the other in this journal. They outline his mature interpretation. (2) Hermeneutical issues run throughout the essays in this volume. Dahl published "The Lutheran Exegete and the Confessions of His Church" in *The Lutheran World* 6. Even Lutheran scholars rarely discuss that topic, since it is an in-house Lutheran issue. For that very reason I wish Juel had included it for American Lutheran students to read.

But my wishes are small beer compared to the value of what is given. Juel gives the reader of these essays helpful aids: a useful introduction, bibliographical data for works named in each essay, and an index of references to ancient texts. Dahl is appealing in this new collection.

**Edgar Krentz**
*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

# Briefly Noted

The Sheffield Academic Press continues to issue excellent volumes in its Supplement Series to the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*. The following recently came to this journal. This brief mention is not a negative evaluation. Some of these works have the footnotes properly at the foot of each page; others bury them at the end of the volume. I urge the press to adopt the former as its standard practice in the future.

Martinus C. de Boer examines Paul's apocalyptic language in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 in **The Defeat of Death** (no. 22, $37.50). Paul's language, formed christologically, owes more to Jewish cosmological two-ages eschatology than to forensic eschatology. Christ defeats death, a demonic power that holds humankind in slavery; humans must be "in Christ," living in the tension between the 'already' and the 'not-yet,' to share in this defeat of death. A substantial dissertation written under J. Louis Martyn at Union Seminary, New York.

Michael Prior examines the authenticity of 2 Timothy as an individual letter, not as one of the Pastorals, in **Paul the Letter Writer and Second Timothy** (no. 23, $37.50). He faults earlier scholarship for its statistical studies and for not providing a credibly historical setting for pseudepigraphic composition. Arguing that Paul used amanuenses in his earlier letters, Prior concludes that Paul wrote 2 Timothy himself without an amanuensis during his Roman imprisonment in order to recruit Timothy for his westward expansion when others had deserted him (he has to reinterpret 2 Tim 4:6-8 to accommodate this). Prior has a new, stimulating approach to 2 Timothy that deserves a hearing—though I am not ultimately convinced by his reconstruction.

Stephen E. Fowl's Sheffield dissertation, **The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul** (no. 36, $43.50), examines the theological function of three hymns in the Pauline corpus: Phil 2:6-11, Col 1:15-20, and 1 Tim 3:16b. He questions the form-critical conclusion that they are pre-Pauline hymns without considering any prose hymns from the Greek world. Paul uses them as narrative support for ethical positions, not to argue either Christology or Soteriology. His general conclusion is persuasive, his form-critical analysis not. Provocative.

Romans 1-4 is the special concern of Glenn N. Davies' study, **Faith and Obedience in Romans** (no. 39, $39.50). Paul holds that there is continuity in God's way of dealing with humanity in the two ages before and after Christ's coming. The center of the Mosaic economy was the response of faith, while obedience is as necessary for those in Christ as it was for those under the law. The major discontinuity between the aeons is that after the resurrection one cannot hold faith in God without faith in Christ. A lengthy appendix discusses righteousness and faith in relation to Israel (Rom 9:30-10:13). This Sheffield dissertation's interpretation of Paul on the law is a controversial but useful stimulus to further discussion.

David B. Howell uses narrative criticism to interpret the First Gospel in his Oxford dissertation, **Matthew's Inclusive Story: A Study in the Narrative Rhetoric of the First Gospel** (no. 42, $43.40). After arguing for a combination of historical and narrative criticism, he examines the "emplotment techniques," the implied author and implied reader in Matthew. He concludes that Matthew presents Jesus as a model for disciples within the narrative world that stretches from Abraham to the coming of the Son of Man. Thus aspects of obedience take priority over Heilsgeschichte in Matthaean theology. Howell carries on a comprehensive dialogue with Matthaean scholarship in this book, one of its valuable contributions.

Susanne Lehne makes good use of tradition history in examining one significant aspect of Hebrews in **The New Covenant in Hebrews** (no. 44, $48.00). After surveying the OT covenantal traditions in Hebrews, she evaluates the use of the New Covenant motif in Qumran (the new covenant is otherwise absent in early Jewish literature!), in Paul and the Last Supper accounts, to conclude that Hebrews is unusual in its citation and use of Jer 31:31-34. The New Covenant occupies center stage in Hebrews; it enables the author to reinterpret OT cult christologically and soteriologically (with a surprising absence of eucharistic motifs!). Covenant and newness are the keys to Hebrews theology. Interesting, clear, and persuasive writing.

**Edgar Krentz**

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# Preaching Helps

**Ninth Sunday after Pentecost—Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Series C**

## Word of Mouth

As I write these words, presidential candidates are filling the air with their words. Today is "Junior Tuesday," and next week is "Super Tuesday."

With their words, the candidates try to touch hearts and minds, to grip the imaginations of their listeners, to kindle fresh hopes, to chart a new path for the nation.

Their words are their weapons of offense and defense. With words they would deflect criticism, and with words they go over onto the attack against their rival candidates.

Words reveal the candidates. Words betray their strengths and weaknesses, the power or poverty of their imaginations, the depth or shallowness of their understandings and commitments.

The candidates live or die by their words, and to some extent the fate of the nation hangs in the balance. What words will we live by as an American community? Words that divide or words that unite? Words that blame others for our national ills or words of self-examination and rededication? The "vision thing" is incredibly important, and words articulate a vision for the nation, or words reveal the absence of vision, the lack of a unifying story.

I think of the awesome potential in the knots of people gathered each Sunday to hear words and sing words in congregations up and down the length and breadth of the land. Preachers touched with the Spirit of Pentecost clothe the loving plan of God in words and articulate a story for women and men to live by.

The words of preachers shape imaginations, equipping the faithful to sort out the genuine and the useful from the spurious and hollow in the rhetoric of politicians. Preachers and congregations are an essential and a powerful component in the structure of American culture. People grasped by The Story will demand that their political leaders not sell them some bogus contradictory story.

We are in the middle of our own personal stories, in the middle of the story of America, in the middle of the season of the Pentecostal Spirit pressing us to share The Story, and to do so at least as energetically and unashamedly and enthusiastically as the candidates share theirs.

As helpers in our tellings and retellings here in the midsection of the Pentecost season, we have two seasoned pastors.

Albert L. Neibacher, Jr., has contributed the First Readings for this issue. After earning M.Div. and S.T.M. degrees, Al served in Kalamazoo, Michigan for 15 years, and he is presently pastor at Christ Church Lutheran in Minneapolis, where he has served for over 10 years. His offerings, while attending to the Greek of the texts, are written with warmth and good humor.

Michael L. Collins, Sr., authored the Pastoral Reflections for this issue. After graduating from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary (Columbia, South Carolina), he served congregations in North Carolina from 1978 to 1989. He earned a Doctor of Ministry in Pastoral Counseling at the Graduate Theological Foundation of Notre Dame University (1989). Today Michael is the senior pastor of Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Naples, Florida. His ministry has been marked by extraordinary activity both in church and civic organizations.

Thanks to Al and Michael for their good words, and blessings to all you guardians of The Story.

Yours,

**Robert H. Smith**
Editor of Preaching Helps

# Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 15
Genesis 18:1-10a (10b-14)
Colossians 1:21-28
Luke 10:38-42

## FIRST READING

Compare and contrast the first lesson (Yahwist) with the Eloist parallel account (Gen 17:15-22). In the latter Abraham falls on his face in hysterical laughter. In the former Sarah "laughed to herself." And in both God joins in the laughter by naming the child-to-be "Laughter" (Isaac). Who said God doesn't have a sense of humor? Who else but God would have appointed an octogenarian to bear a nation? Sarah, with one foot in the grave, is about to set the other foot in a maternity room.

More significantly, the annunciation by the three strangers (yet 18:1 reads "the LORD appeared to Abraham") takes place in the context of the most obsequious hospitality. (Could any near eastern person have done anything else?) Abraham who had been *sitting* in the heat now *runs* to meet the strangers, "bowed down *to the ground,*" and *begs* them to stay and refresh themselves with a bit of bread and water. But then he *hastened* to recruit Sarah into cooking up a feast worthy of a queen or king. He *ran* to his herd, chose the *choice* calf and gave it to the servant who *hastened* to prepare it. A bit of bread and water indeed!

Abraham's hospitality is rewarded, and yet Martha's, in today's Gospel, is chided by Jesus; Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet, is praised. Martha is distracted (*periespato*), drawn away with much service (*diakonian*). In the early church "distracted" meant drawn away from the church by the cares of this world. Is there a time to serve and a time to sit? Does this have something to say about our capitalist work, work, work ethic? Or is the problem related to self-justification as opposed to God's justification? Is Martha's problem similar to that of the lawyer in the previous pericope seeking to "justify himself" (10:29)? How often do we clergy try to justify ourselves by our busyness? The alternate prayer of the day is most helpful here.

Also helpful is the second lesson. It is Jesus who takes the initiative to reconcile us hostile ones and to present us "holy and blameless (also used in the day's psalm—verse 2) and irreproachable." We are all the beneficiaries of Jesus' redemptive death. The author is not saying there is anything *missing* in "Christ's afflictions." Perhaps this is a reflection of the view back then that when Christians suffer for the faith, that suffering is redemptive. This would fit the idea of the atoning benefits of the martyrs in the Maccabean struggle (second century B.C.E.). Is this part of the meaning of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53? ALN

## PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

I was blessed as I grew up with a very loving mother and father, a church with grace-filled people who reached out to me, and some very patient teachers. Now, don't misunderstand, I wasn't mean or mischievous. I was, let's say, just very curious and adventurous. Although I never really got into any serious trouble, I was still known as an "inquisitive lad." Therefore, if you traveled to my hometown of Hickory, North Carolina, and told some of those who knew me as a child that I was a Lutheran pastor, some might say: "He's what?" "You're kidding me." "Are you sure we're talking about the same person?" "How do they 'choose' pastors in the Lutheran church?" Well, I am a pastor; nobody's kidding; I'm the same person; the Lutheran Church didn't choose me, God did.

In his letter to the Colossians in today's reading, Paul reminds them of that fact, too: "I became a servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known..." (v. 25). What a powerful story that is for us today in this chaotic world. God chose the least likely character, the archenemy of the church, and "drafted" him to be one of the most powerful voices of the gospel since the church began.

Remember the story? Saul, persecutor of the church, encountered the christophany of Christ

on the Damascus Road, was blinded, visited by Ananias, had his sight restored, and was baptized (Acts 9:1-9). Empowered through his baptism with the gifts of the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit, Paul began his mission suspected by everyone: Christian, Jew, and Gentile alike. The importance, however, was that God chose Paul and, through his baptismal gifts, commissioned Paul as an ambassador and witness for the Risen Christ!

A question for reflection today would, therefore, be: Is not Paul's commissioning also ours? In this lesson is an excellent opportunity to reaffirm the meaning of baptism in our daily lives. We preach that we are chosen and gifted people sent to "make the word of God fully known," but do we live it? Or do we succumb to the pressures of life, to the values and standards of the world, to the lust for power and control?

Clearly in this time, to be a Christian witness in this world conjures up all kinds of doubts, fears, hostilities, and defenses, but as Paul assures the Colossians, we are not alone, for Christ is active and alive in us, through us, and with us. In his own mysterious and miraculous way, God chooses to bring his kingdom of peace, compassion, and love into this pain-filled world through the most unlikely of "chosen instruments"—Jacob, Moses, Jeremiah, a carpenter's son, Luther, Bonhoeffer, Mother Theresa, you, and even this old Hickoryite, with all my faults and imperfections. MLCS

# Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 138
Genesis 18:20-32
Colossians 2:6-15
Luke 11:1-13

## FIRST READING

Abraham bargains with God in persistent prayer. Haggling over the price of a given object is most common in the near east, and this is what Abraham does. What is more amazing is that God is influenced by the prayer. A tiny, righteous minority can make a difference in the world. Even one person. This is why Jesus says, "Ask, search, knock. You *will* receive." "But *how* do you pray?" the disciples ask. "John taught his disciples, won't you teach us?" The example of a prayer which Jesus gives is so simple and brief, one would almost comment, "Of course! Why didn't I think of that?" Keep in mind, Luke is the "Prayer Gospel." Everyone prays in this book, and Jesus also prays more than he does in any other gospel.

The Colossians, on the other hand, are the preyed *upon*. They seem to be swept up by the current culture gods. Gullible, they are buying everything in sight and some unseen things as well. They are like the person who from the car mirror hangs a cross, a star of David, and a St. Christopher medal saying, "These days you can't be too sure." This is why Paul calls them to remain "rooted." He reminds them of their baptism where they took off their dirty clothes ("putting off the body of the flesh"); where they were buried with Christ and raised up with Christ; where they were killed and made alive, and where God canceled all the old I.O.U.'s. The eschatological power of Jesus' resurrection is theirs in baptism.

Abraham is certainly rooted. That is why God comes to him for advice or to talk things over. Since in verse 33 "the LORD went his way," a much better rendering of verse 22 ("Abraham remained standing before the LORD") would be,

"the LORD remained standing before Abraham." Could, or would, an unrooted person dare to haggle with God?

And maybe this rootedness, though not mentioned, is part of today's Gospel. It is in persistent prayer that our roots go deeper. Although we may pray to bend God's will to our own (Abraham does), the primary function is to bend our will to God's. The deeper the roots, the more "unshakable" the faith.

The rootedness is possible because of God's hospitality. Compare the hospitality of the friend (Lk 11:5-8) because of the persistent knocking with the inhospitality of the inhabitants of Sodom. Yes, one of the worst violations of the near east was inhospitality. But if a mere human being would be so hospitable, think of how much more giving a loving divine Father, whom we can call Daddy, Abba, would be. God loves us so much that God spared the world through the destruction of one innocent man. ALN

## PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

The story is told of a scholar who once sat down to write what he believed to be some of the greatest characteristics of the world's religions. His list included the hymns of the I'raman faith, the profound meditations of Buddhism, the battle cry and confession of Islam, and the Psalms and decalogue of Judaism. When he reflected on Christianity, he wrote, "In Christianity, the brightest glory is prayer."

In today's lesson, the preacher has a privileged opportunity to reflect on this "brightest glory." In fact it is one of Luke's themes. Whereas Mark and Matthew talk about the importance of prayer, Luke puts before us repeatedly the centrality and "essentialness" of prayer in Christ's life and in ours. This communication with God is one of the foundations of our relationship with the living Lord. It's talking, confessing, struggling, and searching into the depths of eternity with our Heavenly Father. And then it's listening: hearing with our ears, heart, and soul the Lord's guidance and purpose for our lives.

Luke emphasizes how Christ continually made time for prayer in his life. It was vital in his relationship with his Father. It gave him strength, vision, and courage amidst the trials and temptations of his ministry. If Peter's confession of faith was the "rock" on which to build the church, so too prayer must be the "rock" on which to build our relationship with the one we call "Abba," Father!

Luke records three parables for us about prayer that we don't find in the other Gospels. Today's story about the friend's persistence with his neighbor at midnight is one of these parables. It's important to emphasize, however, that while this person encountered a reluctant neighbor, God is not a reluctant Lord. He hurries there, hearing every word, every "moan too deep for words," every movement of our soul. However, God's answers are not always our answers. Our faith teaches us that God responds in a way that is best not only for his purpose, but for us as well. That's hard for a lot of people to understand in these painful times.

I heard a story that reminded me of an underground spring near my boyhood house in the mountains of North Carolina. The cool water of that spring is refreshing and invigorating to drink. No matter the time of year—whether it's snowing or the sun is shining—that spring offers an opportunity for the quenching of one's thirst. Some come with glasses, some with plastic milk jugs, some even with large jars or coolers. But all leave with their containers full.

So too, with the blessings we receive in prayer. The deeper the commitment, the greater the amount of time spent, the more the "emptying of oneself" to be filled with God's goodness, the richer and fuller our lives become through a grace-filled prayer life. "Ask... Search... Find... Knock... and the door will be opened for you" (v. 9). MLCS

# Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 49:1-11
Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:18-26
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

## FIRST READING

If there is a common thread running through the texts for the day it could be summarized in, "Barns and Noble" (the book store): "barns" as in more and larger barns to house our toys (Lk 12:18), and "noble" as in *noblesse oblige,* which Webster defines as "the moral obligation of the rich... to display honorable or charitable conduct."

The author of the first lesson is not necessarily a happy camper. All is vanity. All is emptiness. If he or she were writing today it might read, "We are a mere collection of genes on our way to oblivion." "Death mocks our labors and turns all our striving into a sick joke." Tote that barge, lift that bale, work all day, and who gets the fruit of your labors? The government and an ungrateful offspring. Maybe we should all eat, drink, and be merry in our work, for tomorrow we die. But the "hidden God" becomes the "revealed God": "but this also I saw is from the hand of God; for apart from God who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" (vv. 24-26). Is this saying God's quest for us sets us on our quest for reality? Once you realize all is vanity, you can relax and enjoy God's benefits.

The gospel is somewhat similar yet very different. Repeated themes in Luke's Gospel are: putting down the rich and lifting up the lowly (2:51-53); the need of the "haves" to share with the "have nots" (3:11-14); rich and poor in God (12-21). Look at all of Luke 12 and its context. Jesus is on his way to die and be raised up. He is talking about being prepared. Our being possessed by possessions can often interfere with that readiness.

The second lesson can offer a good antidote to the sickness revealed in the other two. Note the wonderful alternation in the Greek verbs from aorist to imperative. "You have been raised with Christ" (baptism), therefore "seek the things that are above." "You have died and your life is hidden with Christ," therefore "set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." "When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also...," therefore "put to death whatever in you is earthly," and so on. This is not a call to an ascetic spiritualism, but a reminder that they don't need angels, Shirley MacLaine, and new ageism. You have your baptism into Christ, therefore... *noblesse oblige*, for in Christ all are one and free. ALN

## PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

This parable in today's reading from Luke may well indeed be the height of all irony. For standing there in God's creation, on God's ground, in the midst of a harvest nourished by God's sunshine and rain, this financially rich man spoke of "my crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, my life, and my soil." Certainly, here is a painful story of a fellow whose eyes were focused on the created and not the Creator.

A second grade teacher asked her parochial school class to draw a picture that would show what they would like to do if Jesus suddenly came to spend a day with them. After a short while, industrious little Marie went up to the teacher's desk with her almost completed picture in hand. "Mrs. Harris," she asked, "how do you spell Bloomingdale's?"

Like Marie and the rich man, we sometimes get our priorities in life a little confused. Oswald Chambers once said, "There is only one relationship that matters, and that is your personal relationship with your Redeemer and Lord. Let everything else go, but maintain that relationship at all costs, and God will fulfill his purpose through your life." How easy it is to be entrapped by the enticements of worldly goods and opportunities. Everywhere we're told that to be better or greater or prettier or more likeable, we just need to buy this, to have that, to go there, or to be "in" with those people. We even hear some of the so-called evangelists on television saying we should "expect God to give us money."

However, this parable talks of more than financial holdings. It speaks of investing our selves, our possessions, our very lives in the riches of the kingdom. Therefore, we need to ask, if you think that possessions, power, and prestige will be all you need, where is your real security for living? The gospel proclaims that real security is experienced in a faith relationship with Jesus Christ.

That is more than just going to church or knowing "about" Jesus Christ or helping others. It is embracing our salvation through an active, living, breathing faith, a faith that is energized by a dynamic spiritual foundation that comes from a hunger for God's Word and his likeness in our lives, a faith that embraces both the movement and calmness of life, a faith that grows from prayer, Bible study, worship, koinonia, and by living the fruits of the spirit, a faith that ingests the words of St. Matthew: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and all its righteousness, and all things will be given to you" (Mt 6:33). MLCS

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# Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 33
Genesis 15:1-6
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Luke 12:32-40

## FIRST READING

Believing is seeing. Or should we say, "seeing" (not with the eyes) is believing. In any case, believing is not easy. Abram had followed God, although, like us, he messed up a number of times (remember their experience with an over-sexed pharaoh?). You can understand why Abram would argue with God in this dream. "Sure, God, my reward will be very great. Where have I heard that before? There still is no son, unless of course you're going to use my servant, Eliezer." No, not Eliezer, but a natural-born real live son. Look, Abram. See the stars. Count them. "So shall your descendants be." And Abram looked at God's creation. And Abram saw. And somehow, against all odds, Abram believed. "And it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

The readers of Hebrews also must have found faith difficult. "He said he was coming; where is he? Did he get lost? Hung up in traffic?" So the author first reminds them of the basis for their faith, the sacrifice of the High Priest, Christ (see 9:11-12, 24 and 10:19-22). Then the author offers some role models. Faith is not based on what we see but on what we hope for. Faith makes the promised future a present reality. Look at Abraham and Sarah. Look at Noah. Look at... and see. See what God has prepared for you.

So... today's Gospel. "Have no fear, little flock" (apparently the church growth movement had not yet extended to Luke's readers). Don't worry about what is biodegradable. Use that to take care of the have-nots (a dominant theme in Luke). Be ready and waiting, well-prepared for that which is not yet seen. It is a reality, and it cannot help but happen. Luke seems to be saying here and elsewhere that acts of charity are one way to prepare. Also cf. the injunctions to stay awake with the disciples' falling asleep. "Have no fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you..." wealth? success? power? No, much better: "the kingdom" (that which is not yet seen). So, "see" and believe.

As the prayer of the day says: "Almighty... God" is "always more ready to hear than we are to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve." Come, Lord Jesus. "Seeing" is believing? Or is it, believing is seeing? Or both? In any case they are not easy. They are gifts. ALN

## PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

Today's reading from Hebrews begins a three-Sunday reading in a section of what some have called the "Bible Hall of Fame." We read of the stalwarts of early Judaism and their faith in the God who worked in his own way and time. The author of Hebrews paints their "faith journeys" on a large canvas. Assurance, conviction, trust, power, and obedience are the colors of their faith. Faith is more than something out there to obtain,

but faith is active and alive, a part of our very lives.

However, with these examples of Jacob, Isaac, Sarah, and Abraham before us, today's focus could well be on the whole idea of life itself as a faith pilgrimage. Certainly supported by the highs and lows in these journeys we could tell of people like David, Isaiah, Peter, Thomas, and perhaps add Luther or even ourselves. I know as I have traveled in my journey, I've had many joys and celebrations, encountered some surprises, and experienced unexpected hardships, delays, and sorrows. However, that's where my faith journey finds its deepest roots.

Certainly the Old Testament psalmist spoke in terms of a journey of life. He often envisioned a trip home to Jerusalem, where in the Temple, it was believed, one could experience a closer presence to God. The New Testament identifies a new Jerusalem where God's children are welcomed at the end of this earthly journey.

In fact, in the story of "The Road to Emmaus" we certainly find a striking similarity between those journeymen and us. These two followers had beheld the joy, wonder, and power of Christ. Yet the events of the past days had left them despondent and disillusioned. They tried to run away, but as they ran, Jesus appeared and traveled with them on the road. And in the process of their sharing and talking, and specifically in the eating of the meal, they recognized their living Lord.

Is the Risen One not the same journeyman who walks the roads of life with us? Is he not with us in all that we do? In every experience, every event, every breath, and in the depth of our being? He wills to be with us. In fact, our apathetic attitudes, pompous egos, lust for power ,or prodigal rebellions can not drive away this one called Emmanuel, "God with us."

God is present in the faith pilgrimages of Jacob, Abraham, Peter, and all of us. God touches the brokenness in our lives, giving strength and encouragement to us in our despair and struggle, offering hope and promise to us in our insecurities and weaknesses. So we travel, making our pilgrimages individually and collectively, together with Emmanuel, "God with us." MLCS

# Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 82
Jeremiah 23:23-29
Hebrews 12:1-13
Luke 12:49-53

## FIRST READING

Fire burns, words hurt, God's Word sometimes divides to conquer, and blessed is the piece-maker. The lessons are harsh. Two of them condemn cheap peace (Jeremiah and Luke). God, through Jeremiah, rips to shreds the (White?) house prophets. They preach as the Word of God their own dreams. But these dreams are all wrong. "I'm O.K./You're O.K." To this Jeremiah says, "Absolutely not! Everything is not O.K.; neither will it be tomorrow. God is about to carry out judgment on our sin. God's Word will come like a hammer crashing down on our dull heads, or, to mix the metaphor, like a searing fire."

The last part of the second lesson talks about the suffering of the church as the discipline of a loving Father. If we are not being disciplined maybe we are bastards. Discipline eventually strengthens and leads to the "peaceful fruit of righteousness." Here we must be careful about even hinting that God causes human suffering, or saying that it is deserved. Too many abused people think this way already.

It would be much better to concentrate on the first part of the Hebrews text. We are in the process of running a marathon. To finish the race is to win. So "run with perseverance," shedding any excess weight (sin? Baptism language?). We can do this because we have the role models of Hebrews 11 (that's why chapter 12 begins with "therefore"). We can also do it because along the marathon route we have "so great a cloud of witnesses" (named in chapter 11) cheering us on and encouraging us. But we can do it primarily because we can see Jesus at the end of the course. "Instead of" joy, he endured the cross.

It is this same Jesus who is the piece-maker

in today's Gospel. Not peace, but pieces. A divided household. A new age is being ushered in here. It will cause much controversy in the home and neighborhood just as Jeremiah's message did. "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized...." Contrast this or Lk 3:16 with the angel's Christmas message of peace or Lk 19:38. And yet isn't this what Mary said in the very beginning (Lk 1:51-53)?

Fire burns. It hurts. But it also purifies. And in Luke II (Acts) it is the fire of Pentecost which brings wholeness, birth, new life and hope. ALN

## PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

As I read today's Gospel, I am reminded of the quote (which has been credited to so many that I am really not sure who said it): "The gospel of Jesus Christ comes to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." Jesus makes that second part bluntly plain, "I've come to light a fire, to bring division."

These words of Jesus are some of the most difficult he ever spoke. They certainly challenge my secure picture of Jesus cradling little children, holding a cuddly lamb, speaking words of compassion and care. We worship the one called the Prince of Peace, the Babe of Bethlehem, and the Promised Peacemaker. Ah, yes, a nice comfortable cozy ride down the road to the eternal kingdom. Sounds nice, doesn't it?

After all, that is what the Christian life is about, isn't it? Going to church, dropping our leftovers in the offering plates, participating when it's convenient. And leaving those things "about" justice, compassion, and righteousness to someone else. However, the gospel challenges those people comfortable with the status quo, those people who "fit" their faith around convenient visions of what the Kingdom road should and should not be.

Many have an image of God's peace that involves no struggles, no challenges, no tensions. However, the peace of which Christ speaks might better be defined as "room in which to move around." Peace or shalom is an arena in which we grow and expand, in which we struggle and wrestle with our beliefs, our expectations and our commitments. It's a fire that burns for a clearer vision, a greater faith, a firmer hope.

Ironically, it's this kind of fire we attempt to keep away from our churches. After all, if there's one thing we don't want in our churches, it's struggling, searching people. People who walk to "different drummers" (people like Luther, Augustine, St. Paul, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, and some fellow named Jesus) can be disturbers of our peace.

Christ does not come to bring the peace we initially always envision, for peace is not always just the absence of conflict and war. The peace which Christ brings enables us to enter the struggle, to confront injustice, and to wrestle with pain, precisely because he is with us. His peace empowers us to "listen to the Heavenly Drummer" as we strive to learn how to be his children. MLCS

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# Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 117
Isaiah 66:18-23
Hebrews 12:18-24
Luke 13:22-30

## FIRST READING

The eschatological first, last, and always. The ecstasy and the agony. Or maybe today's psalm (117) could be the peg on which to hang the lessons for the day: "Praise the Lord, *all* you *nations*."

Isaiah assures the people of God (66:12-13) that they shall nurse at God's breast, "be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees" and "comforted as a child is comforted by its mother." In the text for today the author extends that promise to the nations (gentiles). It is the in-gathering of other races and cultures who will parade from their lands to the Temple of Yahweh. And the missionaries who will go out to these nations will be the "survivors" (Jewish? Gentile?). It shall be

a grand day when all flesh shall bow down in God's presence (worship Yahweh). And, even more radically, some of these gentiles will be priests and Levites (v. 21).

The second lesson picks up on this same theme, stressing the accessibility of God to all through the one high priest, Christ. It is not like the "good (?) old days," when you didn't dare even touch the presence (mountain) of God for fear of being executed. Even the animals were killed for coming too close. In this "festal assembly" we will sit in the very presence of God, innumerable angels, the saints in heaven, and Jesus himself. The feast has begun. Holy! Holy! Holy! Therefore (v. 25), "see that you do not refuse the one who is speaking."

And that last verse, not included in the pericope, leads us to the Gospel. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and "someone" asks him, "Will only a few be saved?" The "unanswer": "Strive" (too weak; really, "agonize") "to enter through the narrow door." The picture here is a royal banquet, a locked door, and a knot-hole, where those who are locked out can view the festivity taking place inside.

It is a difficult passage. We want to maintain justification by grace yet avoid "cheap grace." Again, all different nationalities and cultures are at the table (the four corners of the earth). There is room for more, but some are not admitted. Excluded are those who are dependent solely on their graduation certificate from Confirmation 101. Locked out of the banquet hall are those who are resting on their genealogical laurels ("we have Martin Luther or Abraham as our father") or sitting on their theological duffs ("we ate and drank in your presence"). There are no bargain basement sales. Cheap grace is out. Grace may be free to us, but it cost the life of God's Son. And even grace does not eliminate the agonizing we must do. The comfort is that even we "first ones" will be included, even though a bit belatedly (last). ALN

## PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

My children are great fans of Sesame Street. On that program is a character that would remind most adults of the story of Count Dracula. In fact, the character's name is "The Count," but unlike Dracula, The Count is obsessed with just what his name says—counting. He counts everything: the number of kids in a cart, how many light bulbs in a house, the number of horses in a barnyard.

One of the questions in the Gospel today reminds me of The Count. "Will many be saved or only a few?" Jesus responds, "Strive to enter by the narrow door" (v. 24).

Seems to me Jesus is saying, "You can't see the forest for the trees." Is salvation just an end result, or is it part of our journey? Are our eyes so oriented on the heavenly glory that we can't focus on our earthly ministry?

Actually, there are a lot of doors along the way. Robert Lee once said, "There is the door from evil to good, from indifference to commitment, from prejudice to inclusivity, from anger to forgiveness, from cynicism to trust, from doubt to faith. Those doors are always narrow doors, through which we all must go."

But how can we move through those doors if we have spent all our energy focusing on the destination, rather than growth amidst the journey. True evangelism is not simply "winning souls to Christ" as some would say. It's pointing to the doors of life that lead to "The Door." The beauty of the gospel truth is that as we daily move through life's doors trusting God, we discover that he who is "The Door" has been with us all the way.

One day, as H. Richard Niebuhr crossed the Yale campus, a young evangelist stopped him and questioned, "Are you saved?" Niebuhr answered, "Yes." The young questioner pressed him, "When?" Niebuhr looked him gently in the eyes and said, "Every day."

Much like "The Count," today's Gospel questioner is concerned about quantity, but Jesus speaks not of how many, but instead of "who" those would be. It will be those who wrestle with Jesus Christ, those who are touched by Christ's love and compassion, those who seek to travel through the doors of life strengthened and comforted by "The Door" himself. MLCS

# Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 112
Proverbs 25:6-7
Hebrews 13:1-8
Luke 14:1,7-14

## FIRST READING

All three texts point us in the same direction. The world says, "Live it up." The lessons say, "Live it down." Aggressive humility. But there's more here than a divinely-inspired Emily Post or Ms. Manners advice column to social climbers.

The first lesson, quoted by Jesus in the Gospel, reflects sage practical court wisdom: Don't play one-upmanship (one-upperson-ship?) in the presence of royalty. That is not a wise thing to do. Live it down so you won't have a downfall. Question: What is the one thing which when we discover we have it, we lose it? Answer: humility.

This is in part what Jesus is referring to in the Gospel, but it leads us beyond simply wise advice to a gracious host (where Jesus is dining) and to a respectful guest (which Jesus is not). Sandwiched in between the introduction to the sabbath meal at the religious leader's home (v. 1) and the parable which Jesus tells (vv. 7-14) is the story of Jesus' baiting the lawyers and Pharisees who were watching him closely. "Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath or not?" No answer. Jesus heals the man with dropsy. It should be noted that all of these verses (1-14) are unique to Luke. What follows verse 14 is also in Matthew: the parable of the great supper.

The message to the guests (vv. 7-11) follows exactly the same four-part pattern as the message to the host (12-14). Both end with an eschatological application (11 and 14b): the Eucharist, the feast which has no end. In God's economy of things the last are first and the lowest are on top. But didn't Mary already say or sing that in chapter 1? Once again, it is Luke's complete reversal of the way the world views things.

Hebrews spells out what this kind of aggressive humility involves in day to day living. The lead sentence is, "Let mutual love (*philadelphia*) prevail." How? By hospitality to strangers, remembering those in prison, faithfulness in marriage, contentment with what you already have. The text is a healthy and practical application of the theology in chapters 1-12.

We can live it down because we are lifted up with Christ. And we have "proof" of that in the meal. And because of that, in a different sense, we may even be able to live it up a bit. ALN

## PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

On New Year's Eve, my wife and I were invited to a very elegant, formal dinner party. We were excited about going, but a little nervous about knowing the acceptable manners and graces. As the evening progressed, I kept my eyes peeled on the couple who had invited us, imitating their etiquette with precision. Finally about halfway through the evening, the gentleman who had invited us leaned over and said, "Pastor, don't be so nervous. Quit worrying about which fork to use and enjoy yourself."

The beautiful irony of the story in today's Gospel was that while "they were watching him closely" (v.1), Jesus, in fact was watching *them*. And what Jesus saw, he didn't like. The people scurried for the best seats, the places of recognition and honor, seats appropriate to their prominence.

How often have we seen that happen at banquets, lines in restaurants, checking into hotels, or buying tickets for concerts? It always seems we want to have the best of everything. You know the saying, "Nothing's too good for my family."

It's easy to place ourselves, our needs and our concerns ahead of everyone else. We get this distorted view of our selves and our importance. The heck with anyone else; it's what I want. It's somewhat like the pastor who was given a medallion by her church for the humble and loving example she gave to her people. But when she began to wear the medallion, they took it back.

Robert Lee commented on this reading: "For Jesus, there was no more central imperative for a person's life than for that person to see himself or

herself clearly as a child of God—both wonderful and terrible—both redeemed and lost—always caught in the tension between good and evil—between pride and low self-esteem—between faith and doubt—between grace and sin—between feeling good about oneself and being disappointed with oneself!"

We must realize that "the kingdom" is not a destination point but a journey to be traveled. We are not yet *there,* no matter what our worth or status. We are always on the road. It is living on the road, instead of resting exalted beside it, where we encounter the Risen Christ in all his glory, and he empowers us for the journey with his promises of hope and grace. MLCS

## Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 10:12-15, 17-19
Proverbs 9:8-12
Philemon 1:(2-9)10-21
Luke 14:25-33

### FIRST READING

A word to the wise. But will the wise listen? They will if they are wise. If they don't listen they are obviously scoffers.

The first lesson is introduced by wisdom building her house, preparing the feast, and mailing the invitations (Prov 9:1-6). Of course, the scoffers of the world will not accept the invitation. These know-it-alls won't accept correction or wisdom. But the truly wise hunger for more wisdom, yearn to learn more.

Central to Proverbs 1-9 is the statement, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Fear here is not so much being afraid as it is holy awe in the presence of God. Neither Job nor we today would accept verse 11 on a literal level, but it is true that wisdom—this kind of wisdom—enhances (not prolongs) our life in this world.

Is Philemon (second lesson) wise? We don't know. The answer will be determined by how he reacts to Paul's letter and to his returning slave, Onesimus. Paul, as an apostle, could put this letter in the form of a command. But he calls it an "appeal." Goodness cannot be the result of a command or it is not goodness. The apostle is very subtle and persuasive. There's even a touch of humor here. Read between the lines. Paul would really like to have Onesimus back again. In a sense Paul is calling in his chips. Philemon, a leader in the house church, owes the apostle. In a sense Paul is saying, "You have your slave back again, but no longer is he a slave but a brother in Christ." Is the real slave Philemon, who is going to be liberated by his slave-turned-brother, Onesimus? Will Philemon be wise or a scoffer?

In the Gospel Jesus talks about the wisdom of counting the cost. A lowly farmer and a lofty ruler: the first doesn't have enough left to finish the tower and is thoroughly embarrassed; the second is not only embarrassed, but has to surrender to the enemy. Keep in mind here that Jesus is talking to the huge multitudes—groupies—accompanying him. "Do you realize what following (not accompanying) me may really cost you?" The first Jewish/Christian readers of Luke were beginning to see what following Jesus would involve: increasing pressure in the synagogues to renounce Jesus or be disinherited by their own families. Jesus is not encouraging real "hatred" of family here (Matthew softens the phrase). It is a common Semitic hyperbole which exaggerates a contrast in order for it to be seen more clearly. Our response to the demands of discipleship must come first. And what is our response? Well, are we wise or a scoffer? ALN

### PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

For the lectionary purists, today's second lesson offers the only opportunity in the three-year cycle to preach on that "well known" book of Philemon. It is the shortest of Paul's letters and the most personal. It speaks directly of a reconciliation between Paul's old friend Philemon and Philemon's run-away slave, Onesimus. While in prison, Onesimus (which means "useful") became a Christian under Paul's teaching and influ-

ence. Now the time has come for Onesimus to return to his master, Philemon. Paul writes this "letter of recommendation," urging Philemon to receive Onesimus back "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother" (v. 16).

It is a difficult and painful task to turn enemies into friends. The world seems to be moving a little better in that direction after years of the cold war hostilities, but individuals have a much more difficult time. Because we are personally involved, the stakes and risks seem so much higher. Here, therefore, is an opportunity to preach about the need for reconciliation and our responsibility to be reconcilers. God "has entrusted the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Cor 5:19), and that reconciliation has to do with the need to be forgiving and forgiven in relationship with others, with God, and with ourselves.

Many of us, like Philemon, are caught between the standards of society and the call of the gospel. It's a take-care-of-myself kind of world; watch your backside; never trust anyone; once a back-stabber always a back-stabber. Alas, what about the lives of those like the prodigal, the woman at the well, Zacchaeus, Paul, Augustine? Someone reached out with arms of a reconciling love that forgives, heals, and loves, so that these were outcast and lost no longer. Christ, the "Reconciler," brings us back into relationship with God, with each other, and with ourselves.

Frederick Buechner in his book, *Peculiar Treasures*, writes of what might have happened to Onesimus. He speculates that years later, when Paul was long since dead, another saint was in jail, by the name of Ignatius. The Bishop of Ephesus had sent some friends to visit him, and Ignatius wrote asking if a couple of them could be allowed to stay. Ignatius in his letter used some of the same language that Paul had used in his letter to Philemon, almost as if to remind him of something. And what was the name of the Bishop he wrote to? It was Onesimus. There's no proof that he was the same slave-boy grown old and venerable with mitre on his head, but it's very tempting to believe so.

And so it is with all of us who know and experience the gift of reconciliation. We are forgiven and sent forth to be forgivers! MLCS

# Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 51:1-18
Exodus 32:7-14
I Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

## FIRST READING

How do you deal with sinners, apostasy? How does God? The theme could be lifted from today's Psalm (51:1): "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your lovingkindness." And God says, "I do," albeit reluctantly in the first lesson. It takes some fast talking by Moses. For the author of 1 Timothy God's mercy is for the "worst of sinners," the apostle himself. In the Gospel the lack of mercy in the "murmuring" religious leaders is contrasted with the mercy and festal rejoicing of the angels, and, if we read on, the prodigal mercy and festal rejoicing of the prodigally-loving father (Lk 15:11-32). In each lesson the villainy is very understandable.

The "corruption" of the people who made the calf is understandable. They wanted a god they could see. After all, Moses had been gone for so long. A comfort-god, as in comfort-food. After all, everyone else has idols. Why can't we? But God angrily says, "To hell with them!" The debate between Yahweh and Moses has touches of humor as the leader presents his case as a skilled lawyer. "They're your people," God says. "No, they're *your* people!" Moses reminds God. Three other arguments are presented by Moses: 1) These people were redeemed at great cost to God; 2) The Egyptians will only ridicule a God who saves a people only to lead them to destruction; and 3) God promised, swore an oath. What kind of God would renege on a promise? "Repent, Lord," Moses pleads. And God repents and has mercy.

The second lesson also talks about God's mercy which is not necessarily dependent on human repentance. And again the earlier villainy of Paul is understood. He thought he was serving God, a just cause. "But I received mercy because

I had acted ignorantly in unbelief." Once again the grace of God triumphs. The most central thing we can say today (v. 15) is, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners!" The text ends with a doxology (v. 17), which was possibly a common hymn at the turn of the century. As we will learn in the next lesson, the result of God's mercy is our doxology.

The murmuring (I love the onomatopoetic Greek: *diegogguzon*) of the religious leaders is most understandable. They wanted stability in a most unstable world. There could be no stability where there was a breakdown of religious morals and law. The law was clear: a clean person does not eat with an unclean sinner. Sure, if they repented they could receive mercy and be re-admitted to the fold. But again Jesus seems to be saying, God's mercy is sometimes experienced apart from our confession. God's mercy is seen in the person who endangers the 99 sheep while going out in search of the one lost (Matthew has "strayed").

This parable and the one about the woman searching for the lost coin follow the same pattern. On finding what was lost there is great joy (*Xairon*) and the invitation to friends and neighbors to participate in this festal celebration. And the festal joy extends to the heavenly places. Mercy leads to eucharistic rejoicing of all the saints in heaven and on earth. It is as if the joy cannot possibly be celebrated individually, or individualistically. ALN

## PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

A story attributed to Henri Nouwen tells of an old man who would sit on the bank of the Ganges River under a big tree and meditate every morning. On one of these mornings as he was finishing his prayer time, he noticed a scorpion floating helplessly in the stream. As it floated over to the bank, the man tried to rescue the drowning scorpion, but it stung him instead. He tried several more times, and each time the old man was stung.

A stranger passing by happened to notice what was happening and hollered, "Hey, dummy, are you nuts? Only a fool would risk his own life for that worthless creature. You could kill yourself trying to save that ungrateful scorpion!"

The old man looked up at the stranger and responded assuredly, "Good stranger, just because it's the scorpion's nature to sting doesn't change my nature to save or care."

The parables in today's Gospel each talk about "lostness" and the one who comes to save those who are lost. The Pharisees' reaction is much like the "good stranger." He looked on from the outside while just "passing by," and yet he thought enough of himself to offer his "expert" opinion. To these grumblings and complaints, however, Jesus proclaims through the parables, "Rejoice with me."

What a significant proclamation that is of an outpouring of grace for God's people. The "heavenly hand" had been stung countless number of times by a countless number of people for a countless number of years. And yet, God continues to seek our return. The women at the well, Zacchaeus, the prodigal son, the good thief on the cross, Matthew, the one leper out of ten, Peter, Luther, Chilstrom, Collins. We are grasped by the saving hand of grace and snatched from the drowning waters. Saved, simply because it is what God desires and wants to do. And God rejoices when the "lost have been found."

There are many people in our churches lost and searching, hurting and struggling, frightened and wandering. Amidst that "wilderness journey," the Finder comes and says, "You are mine." And because we are his, God bids us, "Come—washed by baptismal water, nourished by eucharistic food, strengthened by the grace-fill Word—come and rejoice with the Father who loves you and desires goodness and purpose for your life. Come, rejoice with me, for once you were lost, but now you have been found." MLCS

# Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 113
Amos 8:4-7
1 Timothy 2:1-8
Luke 16:1-13

## FIRST READING

"Praising God above the Bottom Line" might be a way of tying together today's pericopes beginning with the psalm: "Hallelujah!... Praise the name of the Lord....He lifts up the poor from the ashes. He sets them with the princes" (113:1,6,7).

The Samaritans put the bottom line above praising God. That's why they wanted fewer "holy days" (Amos 8:5), so their places of trade could be open for business more often. "The price is right," they said. But it wasn't. They were tipping the scales and cheating the poor (vv. 5b-6). "Who do you trust?" Certainly not those Samaritan merchants. And for this the whole nation of Israel was in jeopardy, for God said, "Surely I will never forget any of their deeds" (v. 7). Still today the poor seem to pay the bills for the dishonesty of the rich.

"Let's make a deal," the dishonest (?) CPA says to the debtors in the Gospel. There's not much praising God in this lesson, but there's plenty of bottom line. If anyone is praised it's the rich man's steward. But why? Was he fraudulently cheating his master by reducing the debts? Or was he simply reducing his own commission? Or is the answer somewhere in-between, that he was excluding the interest (God's law prohibited interest) which had been figured into the debt?

There would seem to be a linguistic tie-in here with both the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) and the parable of Dives and Lazarus (16:19-31). There is certainly a polemic against the temple as is evidenced by the two verses cut off from the Gospel (vv. 14-15): "The Pharisees who were lovers of money... ridiculed him. So he said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves... for what is prized by human beings [the bottom line again] is an abomination in the sight of God!'" In any case, for the disciple the real bottom line is the service and praise of God, not of wealth (v. 13). It cannot be both/and. It is either/or.

For the author of 1 Timothy the bottom line is the praise of God and order in the community. This praise of God includes intercessions for all people—rich and poor, high and low, royalty and commoner—for it is God's desire that all be included in the community of believers. There is only one God and one mediator who gave himself as a ransom (the price to redeem a slave) for *all* (vv. 5-6). This was probably a well-known credal formulation in the early church. It is because of this ransom that in every place we *can* lift up holy hands in prayer, our hands being holy because they are without "anger or argument" (v. 8).

Praising God *above* the bottom line? Praising God *is* the bottom line. "Praise the name of the Lord." ALN

## PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

Dr Richard Hoefler told me the story years ago of "Smith and Jones," two fellows who owned a men's clothing store. Smith would wait on the customers, while Jones handled things in the back of the store doing alterations. Smith wore a hearing aid, even though he could hear as well as anyone. When he waited on a customer, he would always point to his ear and ask them to speak up, making sure the customer saw the hearing aid.

The routine was always the same. After the customer decided on a suit he liked, he would ask the price. Smith called to his partner in back of the store, "How much is this suit?" Jones replied loud enough so the customer could hear his answer, "One hundred and seventy-nine dollars." Smith would turn to the customer and say, "One hundred and twenty-nine dollars." Immediately, most people bought the suit for what they believed to be a bargain, a one hundred and seventy-nine dollar suit for a hundred and twenty-nine dollars. However, what the customer didn't realize was that the exact suit sold up the street for ninety-nine dollars. How often do we find ourselves in a similar situation in our life—trying to outfox the fox—all because we can "save" money? Has money become a vehicle, a weapon by which to survive?

This parable affords the preacher an oppor-

tunity, as the "stewardship season" begins, to speak not just of money but to the quality of our lives. Treating people fairly, taking care of God's creation, the giving of ourselves in servanthood: these are not just "churchy" qualities, but they are "people" qualities. When Christian stewardship stops at the church parking lot, is it in truth Christian stewardship? Do we participate in church, give a tithe and worship on Sunday only to spend the other days trying to make every nickel possible no matter what the cost?

At the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, the great stained glass window at the back of Christ Chapel has a burning candle at its center. That candle, with the dove of the Holy Spirit in its flame, symbolizes Christ as the light of the world. Significantly, the Christ Candle in that window is made from clear glass. Through Christ we see the world, and through Christ the world sees the church.

Many times in our worldly ways our misguided stewardship causes that clear glass to become mirrored glass. We can't see others, the life-giving "son-light" is kept out, and all we see are reflections or ourselves.

We must come to understand that "stewardship" is not just something we "do" for God and for others, but it is also for ourselves. It frees and opens our hearts to deeper levels of trust, honesty, and grace in our relationships, in our daily doings, and in our revelation of self. MLCS

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# Family Treasures

Jerry L. Schmalenberger
*President and Professor of Parish Ministry*
*Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary*

It was October 20, 1991, and Carol and I were in Morgan Hill, California, where I was preaching, speaking, and giving a keynote address at a congregational stewardship banquet. Those who turned on their televisions at lunch time that day quickly informed me that the Oakland and Berkeley hills were on fire! Shortly thereafter, Campus Pastor Ben Borson phoned to say he could see the fire burning from the campus, although still at a distance.

After a rather short keynote address, we drove our PLTS1 Oldsmobile back to the seminary about as fast as it would go. Coming up on the 880 afforded a spectacular and frightening view of the fires raging out of control in the East Bay hills.

After organizing the campus for a hasty evacuation and getting the computer disks out of the business office, Carol and I had to decide what we would put in our car that we most treasured from our home in case the wind changed and we had to leave during the night. While Carol packed family pictures and her genealogical research, I packed the following four family treasures:

1. The wooden Bible case given to me by a member of my Mansfield, Ohio, congregation—a case purported to have belonged to Henry Melchior Muhlenberg. I treasure it because of the history it represents. I revere Muhlenberg for his pioneering spirit, deep personal piety and gospel witness, and his deep sense of mission as he started congregations and Lutheran institutions. Being directed from the Scripture and Confessions to do mission among the unchurched was a tremendous example for all of us. The eight ELCA seminaries in our church are precious to all of us, also. Each one has its own heritage of being moved by Scripture to carry out mission and ministry in the part of the country where it finds itself. Our seminaries are precious family treasures of the ELCA.

2. A bronze crucifix that I brought back from Costa Rica several years ago. It's special to me because of what it represents. The Christ on the cross is indeed what we hold up high and gather around as God's people at our seminaries. Equipping pastors and lay leaders to go out from the seminaries and hold up that cross so others might see it, that the spirit might attract them to the Christ, is one of our main privileges. The crucifix has been a treasure of our family down through the generations. With well-prepared clergy and lay leaders the church will continue to hold up that cross and gather a community of believers and disciples around it.

3. My rather new presidential medallion. It is a spectacular piece of jewelry, given to me shortly after my inauguration as president of PLTS. It represents the office to which I am called in order to hold up the vision, provide leadership for our mission, raise the necessary funds to do the mission well on God's behalf, and to administer the institution with the finest principles of stew-

ardship possible. It's an enormous task, and all eight of the seminary presidents are giving everything they've got to it. As the national church has had to continue reducing the amount of money it provides to support seminaries, and as synods have not been able to contribute as much as hoped for, an increasing load has been assumed by seminary presidents and staffs to make up the difference. To be in the office of seminary president is a great honor and privilege, and now it is an awesome task to keep these family treasures operating in the black and maintaining their vision, as well as accomplishing their mission in the best possible way.

4. A framed picture of the Lord's Supper done in needlepoint by Lima Schmalenberger, my mother. That Lord's Supper reminds me of how precious it is to be part of family, as well as the wonderful privilege of being called to discipleship—just as those other disciples who gathered at table that night in the upper room. We do care for each other as family, and the seminaries of the church are certainly an integral part of God's family called the ELCA. We prepare those who will call the family together to table to partake in the body and blood of Christ. It is a treasure of the church and a treasure of our families as well.

PLTS1 sat with the keys in the ignition and the family treasures inside it all night. The winds did not change. In the morning we could see the fog's cooling dampness roll through the Golden Gate and up into the hills. The fires subsided. It was almost as if God were saying, "That's close enough. Not my seminary." I unpacked my treasures: a needlepoint of the Lord's Supper, a presidential medallion, a crucifix from Costa Rica, and Muhlenberg's Bible case. The threat was over, and our family treasures were safe.

We are living in times that threaten the very life of our family treasures: our seminaries. Let's pray that God's people in the ELCA will soon find the way to communicate, "That's close enough. Not our seminaries."

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