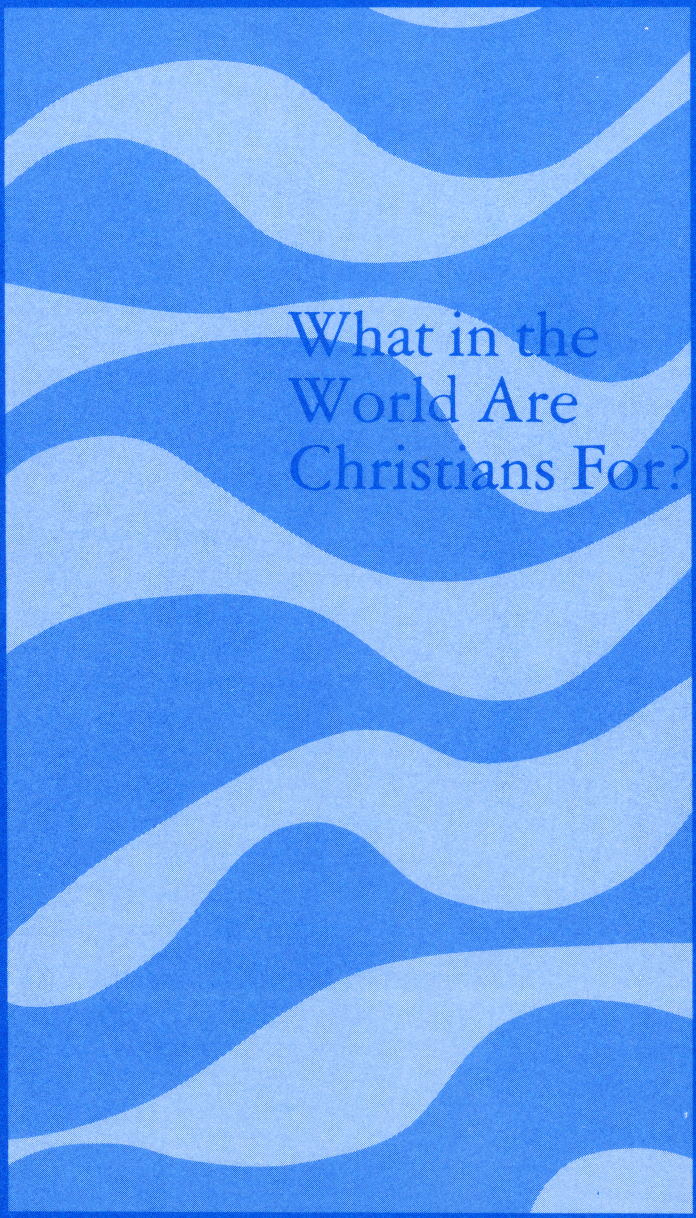
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Contents

What in the World Are Christians For? 322
Ralph W. Klein

God's Merciful Community 325
James L. Bailey and Stanley P. Saunders

The Dynamics of Faithfulness 334
Daniel L. Olson and Lawrence H. Henning

The Paradox of Pluralism: The Church's Vocation in a Public World 345
Norma J. Everist

The Marginalized: Makers of History 354
Winston D. Persaud

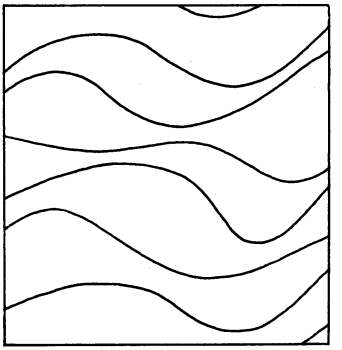
The AIDS Crisis: A Call to Mission Based on 1 Peter 361
Ralph W. Quere

Ripples of Hope 370
Anne Marie Nuechterlein and John Petty

Book Reviews 378

Ecumenism and the Church's Commitment to the World
Roger W. Fjeld Inside Back Cover

Drawings by Scott Holl



Preaching Helps 381
Series B:
First Sunday in Advent—
Second Sunday after Christmas

What in the World Are Christians For?

All of the articles in this issue have been written by colleagues from **Wartburg Theological Seminary** in Dubuque, Iowa. It's mostly luck that their essays appear in the issue dated to the month of the Reformation, though the concerns they discuss are, appropriately enough, prime expressions of the evangelical heritage today. Which way do you understand their thematic question, quoted as the title of this editorial? Are they calling us to a global perspective in an inclusive church? Or are they identifying beliefs and positions that Lutherans and other Christians need to affirm and live out today? If you've answered "yes" twice so far, read on.

James L. Bailey and **Stanley P. Saunders** take a close look at Romans 12–16 and the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. Paul held that as Christians welcome one another and make real genuine community among Gentiles and Jews they express the glory of God. Mission is not part of what the community does, but what it is. Paul's mission: to establish inclusive communities that would draw together as brothers and sisters those who were once enemies. Fundamental to a blessed community in Matthew is the belief that God's ingathering love represents the ultimate reality. Christians act benevolently toward their enemies because they pattern their action after God's way with the world. Both Matthew and Paul invite us to build afresh God's merciful and boundless community.

Daniel L. Olson and **Lawrence H. Henning** review recent psychological research that demonstrates that humans respond better and more faithfully to intrinsic motivation than to extrinsic forces. They suggest that Jesus' concern for intrinsic motivation may be correlated with the centrality of mission in his conception of the people of God. When we love God for God's sake, our relationship stems from freedom and not from necessity or dependency. Those

who are assured of their identity through baptism can even love themselves for God's sake. What are Christians for? To call people out of self-absorption and into freedom for intrinsically motivated discipleship and mission.

Norma J. Everist notes that American Civil Religion has a non-inclusive ecclesiology that fosters individualism and independence. The more clearly we understand and express our Christian identity, the more we will be able to foster interdependence, hospitality, and accessibility. Interdependence strives to enhance the gifts of all without misusing the other or demanding that the outsider assimilate to our image. In the body of Christ we discover diversity in unity, just as—and just because—God is the great barrier-breaker. Paradoxically, by strengthening our particular faith communities we can make it possible for dialogue to take place, and we will be liberated to discover and honor pluralism. Hospitality to strangers may be one of the most radical expressions of what Christians are finally for.

Winston D. Persaud points out that we often reduce the marginalized to those who have physical needs. But when the marginalized hope against hope, in the face of despair, they are creators of a history that offers liberation and human community. Such capacity to hope is God's own work. The marginalized protest against idols of dominance and oppression. If our "God" is one who keeps the marginalized enslaved, such a God needs to be protested against in the name of the God who liberates. A true liberation theologian speaks not only on behalf of the poor and oppressed, but among them. Christ's marginalization, epitomized in his death on a cross outside the city wall, becomes the means whereby the demonic powers inherent in all forms of marginalization are destroyed.

Ralph W. Quere reflects on the AIDS crisis from his reading of 1 Peter. God has called us to be holy and to come to the light; God commands us to be a blessing to those in suffering and to participate in the glory of service. The author finds confusion between law and gospel in much discussion of AIDS and believes that Christians need to speak boldly against homosexual behavior even as they care compassionately for those afflicted with this dread disease. He reaffirms that homosexual behavior is disobedience to the creator and discounts all efforts to understand Scripture in any other way. The Christian community needs to discipline sinners, though its ultimate goal is discipling and the establishment of health.

Anne Marie Nuechterlein and **John Petty** give a fresh perspective on evangelism, though they avoid the word evangelism itself. Christians are to

publish and live the story which God has entrusted to them within their web of relationships that encircle the earth. In Christ, God entered fully into that interconnected web of genetic and environmental relationships that is our reality. As eschatological signs and believers in Christ's death and resurrection, we are ripples of hope. Our lives prefigure the Promised Land.

In his presidential column, **Roger W. Fjeld** insists that the real purpose of our ecumenical commitments is identical with our common Christian vocation: effective ministry in and for the world. We face twin dangers: we can debate with one another or accuse one another and neglect ministry in the world; we can be so wrapped up with ecumenical procedures that we neglect ministry in the world. Our ecumenical goal: to engage the world in the name of Jesus, our common Lord.

Oh, how good and pleasant it is for sisters and brothers to dwell together in unity. In Dubuque and Chicago we are already feasting on the fruit of the ELCA, as partnership grows between Wartburg and LSTC. I wish to express public thanks to Daniel Olson and Stanley Saunders, whose creative and collegial editorial efforts made this issue possible.

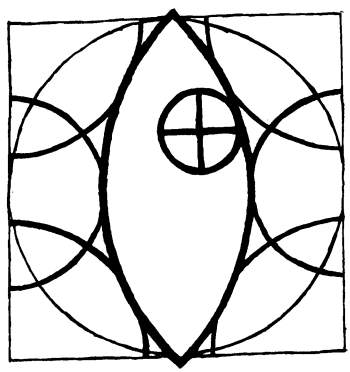
Seeking and publishing the truth—that, too, is what Christians are in the world for.

Ralph W. Klein
Editor

God's Merciful Community

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What in the world are Christians for? Who are we? What do we believe? How are we to order our lives? These questions invite us to examine anew our identities and to articulate our understanding of the nature and purpose of the church. These are the questions that, in some way, every book of the New Testament addresses. In this essay we examine only two books, but books that through the centuries have had major roles in shaping Christian identity—Paul's letter to the Christians at Rome and the Gospel according to Matthew. Both books were written within urban



settings to house churches with diverse memberships that were struggling to understand the nature of Christian community. In different ways each author has sought to formulate images of what the church might be, taking into account the particular situations in which the communities live. We will address each book in turn, beginning with introductory observations and moving to examination of particular texts.

Romans[1]

Paul's letter to the Christians at Rome is widely regarded as the fullest and most mature expression of the Apostle's thinking, the closest Paul comes to a systematic theology. This may indeed be Paul's most mature expression, but Paul by no means intended Romans to be what most of us think of as a systematic theology. Although the precise identification of the character of the letter is still open to further clarification, there is widespread agreement in recent scholarship that we must respect the occasional and contingent nature of the whole.[2] The ideas Paul formulates here are directed to the Christian communities at Rome, communities with very particular problems that the Apostle addresses in direct and carefully organized fashion. Paul is not merely giving expression to grand Christian abstractions for the sake of general edification.

Yet the habit of reading Romans primarily as a sourcebook for Christian theology is well-formed and hard to break. Exegetical courses that stop at chapters eight or eleven, and commentaries that treat chapters 12–16 with relative dispatch, help to set the habit still more firmly. Most of us are conversant with the language and concepts particularly of the first eight chapters of Romans. Fewer of us hold informed positions on the issues Paul addresses in chapters 9–11. But still fewer can discuss at length the content of chapters 12–16, save for certain famous, or infamous, passages such as 12:1–2 or 13:1–7. To read Romans without a clear understanding of the nature and function of these chapters, however, is to seriously impair our understanding of the whole, for it is here that Paul provides the clearest and most concrete expression of what the righteousness of God means for the life of the community. Our reconstruction of Paul's vision for the church at Rome, then, is based primarily on the material in chapters 12–16.

The portions of Paul's writings that we distinguish as "paraenesis" or "ethical instructions" are not merely addenda to his theology; they are, rather, another, albeit more concrete, form of theological expression. To put the matter differently, all of Paul's theological thinking and all of his ethical instructions serve one primary goal: the establishment and maintenance of Christian community.

Two additional observations develop this point. First, Paul's ethical admonitions are not prescriptive so much as they are descriptive. They are illustrations and images that he uses to share his vision of the character of

[1]Recent titles that are particularly helpful in addressing Paul's understanding of the nature of the Christian community and its mission include Robert Jewett, *Christian Tolerance* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982); Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P., *Becoming Human Together* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1982); and on Romans in particular, Brendan Byrne, S.J., *Reckoning with Romans* (Wilmington, Michael Glazier, 1986).

[2]The scholar who recently has pressed this point most urgently is J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

Christian community with those to whom he writes. As such, they are indeed historically conditioned and relative—radically so. But precisely because they are illustrations and images, they invite us to recapture and reenvision for our own contingent realities the precise shape Christian life should take. Second, Paul directs his advice primarily to communities rather than to isolated individuals. By definition, ethics has to do first of all with relationships. For Paul, these are always relationships of mutual accountability and respect, respect even for those with whom one disagrees, and especially for those who are from different ethnic or social backgrounds. Paul addresses matters of personal and individual morality only as these affect the life of the community. More often than not, in fact, Paul views purely personal expressions of piety or morality as threats to the fabric of the community, for such expressions lead to the erection of distinctions that tear the Body apart and isolate its members, rendering the whole powerless.

Paul directs his advice primarily to communities.

The shape of Paul's vision also helps to explain his sometimes confusing statements about the law. It's not that the law itself is evil; rather, Paul regards the law as the expression of God's will. But the law became a device whereby people could measure their self-worth in relation to others, and so divide the people of God. What was intended to express God's will for community, to shape and unite a people, became an agent of divisiveness and human pride. Christ has freed Paul from such empty distinctions, freed him to see once again God's vision for the creation, and empowered him to realize it.

God's Character Defines Christian Community

The climactic statement of Romans 12–16, if not the whole letter, is found in 15:7–13:

> Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to our ancestors, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for God's mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name"; and again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with God's people"; and again, "Praise the Lord, all Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise the Lord"; and further Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in whom the Gentiles shall hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Paul's exhortation here is simple but powerful. He says only that the members of the community are to accept one another as Christ has accepted them. The gospel is the foundation for the ethos of the community. As the Christians at Rome welcome one another, they realize and express the glory of

God. Christ has confirmed God's true and faithful character by becoming a servant to the circumcised, not only for the sake of the elect, but also so that the nations might glorify God on account of God's mercy. The catena of quotations from the Psalms, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah makes clear that the destinies of Israel and the Gentiles are connected as one.

Paul's argument here, as throughout Romans, is decisively *theo*logical. The basis of everything Paul says is the confidence that God is righteous, faithful to the promises to the ancestors, and always merciful. All of these characteristics of God, expressed most clearly when God raises the crucified Christ, in turn shape the identities of the communities that now confess this reality. The most striking thing about this passage, however, is the almost casual juxtaposition of "the glory of God" with the exhortation to "welcome one another." Paul believes that God's glory is nowhere so clearly manifested as in the active realization of genuine community among Gentiles and Jews. In this community, God's righteousness, mercy, and faithfulness continue to find expression. This is the vision that drives Paul's mission and shapes his theology.

Christian Unity Amidst Diversity

The importance of this vision of the unity of the church can be seen still more clearly in the specific admonitions Paul sets forth in chapters 12 through 15. Paul begins this section by calling the Roman Christians to present their bodies as living sacrifices and to be transformed by the renewal of their mind, so that they might prove what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable, and perfect (12:1–2). These words have the ring of religious rhetoric, but in the verses that follow Paul supplies the concrete images that define what the will of God is. First Paul warns against thinking too highly of oneself (12:3), and he reminds the Romans that together, in their diversity, they make up the one body of Christ. The unity of the church is realized only when each member exercises her or his unique gift. But amidst this diversity there is no room for distinctions.

Mission is not part of what the community *does,* but what it *is.*

The exhortations that comprise the second half of chapter twelve further disclose the dimensions of love and mutual respect that are to characterize the community's life together. If any competition is to exist in the community, it is in the realm of showing honor to one another (12:10). Piety includes constant prayer, but it is expressed also in contributions to the needs of the saints and in the practice of hospitality (12:12–13). In a series of admonitions at the end of the chapter Paul calls upon the Christians to live in solidarity and harmony, not seeking revenge on one's enemy, but actively pursuing that enemy's well-being (12:14–21). Here the missionary character of Paul's ethic comes more clearly into view. Paul's churches

are to live in such a way that they are above reproach and without obligation—the point of 13:1–7—for only then can love be genuine (12:9, 13:8–10). This love breaks down barriers and distrust and so fulfills the law. This is the will of God, what is good, acceptable, and perfect.

In 14:1–15:6 Paul's instructions take on a more specific and contingent character. Issues have arisen over matters of opinion and personal conscience. Some eat only vegetables, others eat anything. Some observe special cultic days, others treat every day alike. Paul has little interest, however, in the particulars of the case. His focus, rather, is on the spirit of judgment and condemnation, and the attendant airs of superiority that characterize the behavior of the differing groups. In response, Paul first safeguards freedom of conscience for each member (14:5b). While he may not agree with the position of the "weak," he does not pass down his own opinion from on high. Nor does he seek to harmonize the differences. Paul pursues consensus only concerning the higher principle: love and respect for the dignity of the other is what establishes peace and mutual upbuilding (14:19).

Throughout these chapters, then, Paul seeks unity amidst diversity. This is not a new idea, nor startling. What may startle us is the recognition that this vision of unity within the church is the focal point of Paul's "ethical" exhortation. It is also the practical culmination of Paul's theological work as a whole. Put simply, to live as a Christian in the Pauline church is to pursue unity and mutual upbuilding. But why this vision? Why is the unity of the church such a dominating concern in Romans as well as in the rest of the Pauline corpus? Here we come again to the question of the purpose of the church in the world. What are we here for?

Paul believes that we are here first of all to make real the promises fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He understands that God's work in Christ means the dawning of a new age, the age in which God's Spirit moves among the nations to bring salvation and reconciliation. The Christian community is the place where these gifts are discovered and made manifest.

This in turn means that the community's identity is rooted in mission. Mission is not part of what the community *does,* but what it *is.* When the members of the church together exercise their gifts as one body, when God's Spirit breathes the glory of God into the Body, then mission takes place. Mission is outreach, to be sure, but for Paul it is also ingathering. Paul's mission means nothing other than the establishment of inclusive communities that draw together as brothers and sisters those who once were enemies.

The Gospel of Matthew[3]

The Gospel of Matthew offers us an extended narrative about Jesus, from his birth to death and resurrection. Narrative, as a means to describe episodes unfolding in space and time, places the author in the

[3]In recent years scholars have been focusing more clearly on the literary structure and devices of the Gospel of Matthew as a means to better understand its theological themes. For further study see Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982); John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979); Herman C. Waetjen, *The Origin and Destiny of Humanness* (San Rafael, California: Crystal Press, 1976); and Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

background. The readers discern the author's message only indirectly, by the way the characters are portrayed, the materials arranged, and the transitions created. The author speaks through the movement of the narrative which enlightens, encourages, exhorts, and energizes the audience. Consequently, hearers or readers can arrive at various interpretations since a narrative, like a historical event itself, is ambiguous. A narrative invites a rich range of understandings. This quality of ambiguity contributes to the enduring power of narrative, but at the same time implies that any one interpretation must be evaluated according to its fruitfulness in illuminating the design and purpose of the entire narrative.

We best interpret Matthew, like any Gospel, when we recognize that the stories about Jesus are not merely one-dimensional reports of his early ministry (27–30 C.E.), but ones enriched and nuanced in light of the post-resurrection faith of the church and concrete situations in early Christian communities. Matthew shapes individual stories and the narrative as a whole to address the circumstances of Christian communities in the final quarter of the first century, some years after the traumatic loss of Jerusalem and its temple at the hands of Roman armies. These communities, probably in an urban setting like Antioch, need to understand their religious identity vis-à-vis the neighboring Jewish synagogues and the larger world. Indeed, it is possible that Jewish Christians were forced to cut ties with the synagogues as the two groups were no longer able to coexist as part of Judaism. This can help to explain why Matthew emphasizes Jesus' fulfillment of the Law and Prophets and at the same time highlights the "righteousness" which exceeds that of the "scribes and Pharisees" (5:17–20). By the way he shapes his Gospel, Matthew seeks to demonstrate that Christians have, in Jesus of Nazareth, the Messianic figure who faithfully accomplishes God's will and offers a fresh vision of the character and mission of God's people. This vision is intended as an alternative to that of Pharisaic Judaism after 70 C.E.

Like an elaborate tapestry, the Gospel weaves various themes into an intricate pattern. Because of this complexity, scholars do not fully agree regarding the outline of Matthew. There is little doubt, however, that the evangelist has chosen to insert major blocks of Jesus' teaching into the Markan narrative framework he received, creating an alternating pattern of narrative and discourse sections. In what follows, we concentrate on the Sermon on the Mount, the first discourse section (chs. 5–7), in order to highlight how Matthew intends the Christian community to understand its identity and mission in the world. Though the Sermon on the Mount does not introduce all themes appearing in the Gospel, it does offer us a decisive summary of Jesus' theological vision and expressions of that vision in concrete situations.[4]

God's Ingathering Love

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the beatitudes (5:3–12), and thereby pronounces a present state of blessedness on those who trust Jesus' vision and embodi-

[4]Hans Dieter Betz, "The Sermon on the Mount (5:3–7:27): Its Literary Genre and Function," *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 1–16, argues that Matthew fashions the Sermon on the Mount according to the ancient pattern of the "epitome," designed as a representative abridgment of the whole teaching of an important figure.

ment of God's gracious intervention in history. Just prior to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew describes Jesus declaring his apocalyptic vision, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven (God) is at hand" (4:17). This follows Matthew's insertion of Isaiah 9:1–2, which justifies why Jesus' public ministry unfolds in Galilee, a geographical area populated by Gentiles as well as Jews, rather than at the heart of Judaism in Judea. The reign of God, Jesus announces, restores community for those separated from the people of God or excluded by the leaders of Judaism.

The beatitudes make clear the inclusiveness of God's love, but it's visibility must be understood apocalyptically. All those who depend solely on God (5:3), who lament the contradictions in history to God's purpose (5:4), who act magnanimously in the face of injustices (5:5), and who yearn for divine righteousness to appear on earth (5:6) live in anticipation of the way things will be when God's reign becomes fully manifest. Fundamental to such a blessed community is the faith that God's gracious, ingathering love and mercy represent the ultimate reality.

God's Inclusive Love

Matthew 5:13–16 sounds the same theme we have been describing here but with an added implication. Collectively, Christians ("you" in the plural) are addressed as "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." It is not that they have to "become" salt or light; they "are" salt and light. These two metaphors characterize the nature and purpose of Christian community. The community functions as a preserving and illuminating agent for the sake of the "world." Communities addressed by Matthew's Gospel, even when they are faced with persecution (5:10–12), discover joy because they exist for others and for the glorifying of God in this world (5:16).

The repentance urged on hearers by Jesus (4:17) is to manifest itself in righteous activities, that is, in deeds which accord with God's revelatory action in the world. The pattern of God's righteousness is implied in the structure of the first eight beatitudes (5:3–10). Only because Christians "hunger and thirst" after God's righteousness (5:6) do they become persecuted for their righteous way of living (5:10). God's way in the world has become their way. Their righteousness is a derived righteousness.

Righteousness goes beyond the letter of the law.

In the remainder of chapter 5, Matthew seeks to illustrate this "righteousness" that goes beyond the letter of the Law and that values authentic correspondence between a person's interior motives and exterior action (5:20). It is righteousness that seeks to do what is at the heart of the divine will: love, mercy, and justice (see 22:34–40 and 23:23). The six antitheses in 5:21–48 illustrate what is actually involved in taking the commandments seriously as expressions of God's will. These illustrations reach their climax in the sixth antithesis, which calls for loving enemies, an action explicitly linked to God's impartial love (5:43–47). Christians can act benevolently towards their enemies because they pattern their action after God's

way with the world, not because of their inner strength or "good feelings" about the enemies. In this act of relating kindly to enemies, the Christian community participates in the surprising extravagance of divine love and mercy. If the Greek word for "perfect" *(teleioi)* in the summary verse is best translated "wholehearted" or "undivided," then 5:48 speaks not of moral perfection but of communal living which shares in the wideness of God's mercy.

Thus, the communities addressed by Matthew are to reflect the inclusiveness of God's love. Matthew makes explicit that the "lost sheep" of the house of Israel are the primary recipients of Jesus' earthly ministry (10:5–6 and 15:24). Jesus seeks to include the excluded. Moreover, there are repeated hints in the narrative that Jesus' presence creates a new definition of what it means to be righteous before God (see 9:10–13). Matthew affirms that Jesus' acceptance of Gentiles (15:21–28) and even the despised Romans (8:5–13) is consistent with the purpose of his ministry. That the Matthean church's mission is to include all people under the banner of God's love in Jesus Christ should not surprise the readers (28:16–20). Love that erases barriers and even reaches out to the enemy assumes the solidarity of all people due to the ingathering love of the triune God.

Christian Community in Actions, Words, and Motives

In 6:1–18, Matthew portrays in hyperbolic fashion behavior which represents what is antitypical to Christian discipleship. Christians are to avoid distorting "righteousness," They should not succumb to the tendency of externalizing religion and undertaking pious activities (like almsgiving, praying, and fasting) for human recognition. Those who do so are labeled "hypocrites." They forget that theirs is a derived "righteousness," not self-generated and self-congratulating. They use their pious acts to garner favorable impressions before others and to gain superior positions in the community. They fail to recognize solidarity under God's inclusive mercy and seek to divide community into categories of rank. When they do the right things, it is for the wrong reasons. Matthew caricatures the scribes and the Pharisees, likely representing Jewish leaders of his own time, as falling under this severe indictment (23:1–7). In Matthew, "doing the will of God" requires a vigilant thoughtfulness about the interrelationship of actions, words, and motives.

Clearly, for Matthew, those in Christian communities are not immune to these same tendencies. Matthew 7:21–23 provides a warning to any who calls Jesus "Lord" and claims his power to work miracles without concern for doing God's will. The conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount (7:24–27) reinforces this point: righteous living involves both ***hearing*** and ***doing*** what Jesus teaches.

These Matthean themes, drawn from the Sermon on the Mount, are present throughout the whole Gospel. Matthew wants his hearers to realize that their Christian community springs directly from a divine love which is inclusive. This vision of transforming mercy empowers communities to pattern their activities according to this love, whose character is to forgive and accept all others. Such love sums up the Torah and the Prophets, and is epitomized in the way Jesus lived (5:17 and 22:40). Though Jesus alone

conforms fully to God's love, the Christian community still has the clear responsibility to match words and actions, external behavior with internal motives. The final test, according to Matthew, involves how nearly the vision and activity of Christians, and for that matter all others, have been shaped to the fundamental graciousness of God. Acting benevolently towards the least of the brothers and sisters—ones who appear to have nothing to offer in return—reveals that a Christian community discerns that all of life begins and ends with mercy, divine mercy made visible and vulnerable in Jesus of Nazareth (25:31–46).

And So We Shape the Church Anew

We are accustomed to thinking of Paul and Matthew as occupying different, if not exclusive, positions within the theological spectrum of the New Testament authors. Without doubt, their styles, their audiences, and their situations, as well as many of their theological perspectives are different. We ought not seek in any way to minimize the distinctiveness of their respective works. This study reveals, however, that there are some significant points of congruence between the two. As the contemporary church takes up anew questions of its identity and mission, it is worth noting those places where the New Testament offers coherent and compelling visions of the shape the church might take.

Both Paul and Matthew base their thinking on the perception that God is righteous, gracious, and merciful. This image of God's character is the touchstone for their theological and ethical thinking, and for their visions of Christian community. At the center of God's activity in the world is gracious, ingathering love, epitomized in Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. This love motivates the community to shape its own identity in the image of the Creator, manifested most clearly in Christ. The righteousness of God is mirrored in the faithful life of the church, particularly in active and creative responses of love toward the neighbor, and toward the enemy. Neither Matthew nor Paul places any limits on the dimensions of this love. Both are careful to point out that such love should be directed especially to the "weak" of the community, those whom Matthew calls "little ones," as well as to the lost and estranged people of the world. Both believe that such actions fulfill the will of God and the intent of the law. Torah is misunderstood when one is satisfied merely to observe the commandments for the sake of one's own righteousness, rather than for the sake of others.

Righteous living involves both *hearing* and *doing*.

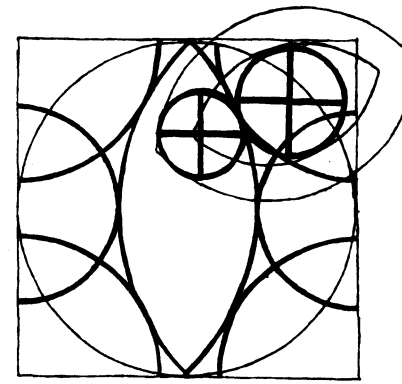
In short, from their perceptions of God's gracious love, Matthew and Paul invite us to build afresh God's merciful and boundless community.

The Dynamics of Faithfulness

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Faithfulness is a perennial problem for the people of God. It is the problem that Jesus was trying to solve when he gathered his disciples together on the eve of his crucifixion. "I have said all this to you to keep you from falling away," is the way he summed up the intent of his address to the Twelve that night (John 16:1).



Jesus was not alone among biblical figures in his concern for the problem of faithfulness. Moses struggled with this problem as he led the children of Israel through the uncertainties and dangers of the wilderness. Jeremiah addressed the problem of faithfulness when he spoke to God's people

amid the distractions of affluence and power. Ezekiel sought to solve the problem of faithfulness among a band of discouraged captives in Babylon, and Nehemiah struggled with the same problem among a disillusioned group of returned exiles in 5th century Jerusalem.

The problem of faithfulness is the problem of persistence; it is the problem of risk-taking. What makes it possible to persist in the face of opposition, obstacles, distraction, disappointment, and delay? What makes it possible to take risks in the face of uncertainty and danger? This is the problem of faithfulness, a problem of central concern throughout the Bible, and a problem that continues to perplex the church. How, indeed, do we "keep from falling away" when the way is beset with discouraging delays, frightening dangers, and beguiling distractions?

In recent years the church has not been alone in experiencing faithfulness as a problem to be solved. Schools have experienced it in the form of rising dropout rates. Military, government, and business organizations have experienced it in the form of diminished loyalty at all levels, with increased incidences of espionage and sabotage. Service organizations have experienced the problem of faithfulness in decreasing membership rolls and diminishing contributions.

Because the problem of faithfulness has come to manifest itself in a wide range of social concerns, it has recently been studied, both as a treatment issue in psychological clinics, and as a research question in psychological laboratories throughout the world. "Task persistence" has been the dependent variable in a variety of fascinating and important research projects that have exposed people to varied experiences of failure, rejection, uncertainty, and delay, and then have sought to answer the question, "What are the internal and external conditions that make it more or less likely that people will persist rather than quit?"

We believe this psychological research on faithfulness ("task persistence") has important implications for the way the church understands, communicates, and lives out its theology. However, in committing ourselves to the dialogue between theology and psychology, we also want to present our biases as to how such dialogue should proceed. We find troublesome any procedure which uses psychology to set the theological agenda. Rather, we commit ourselves to a methodology in which God's address sets the agenda and *then* uses contemporary psychology to shed light on the psychology implicit in all theology, in all "faith seeking understanding."

In this article we will first examine some current psychological research as it relates to faithfulness. Secondly, we will reflect theologically on "repentance" in order to explore how the church's proclamation can empower faithful discipleship for God's mission.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

For the past 15 years Edward Deci of the University of Rochester and his associates have been taking a new scientific look at an old commonsense distinction: intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation.[1] Most of us use this dis-

[1]Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-determination in Human Behavior* (New York: Plenum Press, 1985).

tinction intuitively, even though we may not be familiar with the terminology. As an example, at the age of fourteen Mozart was heavily involved in music. So was the son of the first author of this article. My son became interested in music because he had a problem to solve: how could he get fourteen-year-old girls to notice him? An electric guitar and a neighborhood rock band were his first (but not last!) approach to solving that problem. Mozart, however, was involved in music because music was the only way that he could authentically express what it meant to be Mozart. It is no doubt clear who is extrinsically motivated and who is intrinsically motivated.

What Deci and others have done that is new and important with this commonsense distinction is to take it into the psychological laboratory and experimentally ask the question, "What happens when you change an individual's motivation from intrinsic to extrinsic?" Deci and his associates have asked that question in dozens of experiments, involving people of all ages, sexes, and cultural backgrounds. They have asked the question over and over in a remarkably clever series of experimental designs, and every time they have asked it, the answer has been the same: when motivation is changed from intrinsic to extrinsic, the individual's capacity to be faithful to an activity is undermined.

Two examples from the research, both involving children, will illustrate the point. In the first experiment 3- and 4-year-old preschoolers were given attractive magic markers and paper to draw on. Half of the children were told that they would receive an award (a gold star with the child's name and a red ribbon) if they did some drawings for the experimenter. For the other half there was no mention of an award. Several days later, in a "free-choice" situation the children who received no award played for a significantly greater amount of time with the art materials than did the "award" group.[2] In the second study the experimenter gave marshmallows as a reward to nursery school children for playing with a drum. The result was a significant decrease in interest in the drum during a later free-choice period.[3] According to the tenets of behavioral psychology, children "reinforced" with awards or marshmallows for playing with particular toys should increase their interest in playing with those toys. But surprisingly, the results of the experiments were precisely opposite to what behaviorists would have predicted. In fact, children rewarded for playing or drawing in the experiments seemed after "reinforcement" to lose interest in the activity.

How are these results to be explained? Deci argues that external rewards effectively alter the way people understand their own behavior. They cease to experience behavior in terms of interest, choice, or some other intrinsic attraction that an activity had for them and instead come to see it as a means for getting a reward or for satisfying an external demand. What is abundantly clear in the research is that whether due to a loss of interest or to resistance, the capacity to persist at an activity is effectively undermined when

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[2]M. R. Lepper, D. Greene, and R. E. Nisbett, "Undermining Children's Intrinsic Interest with Extrinsic Rewards: A Test of the 'Overjustification' Hypothesis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 28 (1973): 129–37.

[3]M. Ross, "Salience of Reward and Intrinsic Motivation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32 (1975): 245–54.

motivation is changed from intrinsic to extrinsic.

Deci suggests that we can see this phenomenon in the world of sports. Think of a kid who loves baseball and plays the game on the blacktop playground of the neighborhood school every daylight hour, all summer long, caring nothing for bloody knees and skinned elbows. And when night falls, he watches baseball on television and sorts through his baseball cards. Then, he gets to be very good at the game, and a few years later we see him as a young man playing in the major leagues for $750,000 per season. But now we see him sullenly malingering in center field, and angrily refusing to run out a routine ground ball to first base. What we are looking at, suggests Deci, is an individual whose motivation for playing baseball has changed from intrinsic to extrinsic, with the accompanying resistance and loss of interest.

When motivation is changed to extrinsic, the capacity to be faithful is undermined.

This phenomenon, which only very recently became the interest of scientific study, has been illustrated by folklore for centuries. Consider the following American-Jewish folktale:

In a little Southern town where the Klan was riding again, a Jewish tailor had the temerity to open his little shop on the main street. To drive him out of the town the Kleagle of the Klan sent a gang of little ragamuffins to annoy him. Day after day they stood at the entrance of his shop. "Jew! Jew!" they hooted at him. The situation looked serious for the tailor. He took the matter so much to heart that he began to brood and spent sleepless nights over it. Finally out of desperation he evolved a plan.

The following day when the little hoodlums came to jeer at him, he came to the door and said to them, "From today on any boy who calls me 'Jew' will get a dime from me." Then he put his hand in his pocket and gave each boy a dime. Delighted with their booty, the boys came back the following day and began to shrill, "Jew! Jew!" The tailor came out smiling. He put his hand in his pocket and gave each of the boys a nickel, saying, "A dime is too much—I can only afford a nickel today." The boys went away satisfied because, after all, a nickel was money too.

However, when they returned the next day to hoot at him, the tailor gave them only a penny each. "Why do we get only a penny today?" they yelled.

"That's all I can afford."

"But two days ago you gave us a dime, and yesterday we got a nickel. It's not fair mister."

"Take it or leave it. That's all you're going to get!"

"Do you think we're going to call you 'Jew' for one lousy penny?"

"So don't!"

And they didn't.[4]

[4]N. Ausable, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* (New York: Crown Publishing, 1948, 1976), 440.

Intrinsic Motivation as a Biblical Theme

It would be preposterous to suggest of Jesus, or of any other biblical figure, an awareness of contemporary psychological constructs. However, the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is not a creation of modern psychology; it is only the terminology and its status as an object of scientific scrutiny that are new. We are convinced that it is an important theme, both in biblical literature and in the writings of the early church. We also believe that this biblical theme has been misunderstood or overlooked in much of the recent history of the church, and that Deci's research can help us recover it as a liberating and empowering message for today.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus inveighed against the religious behavior of his opponents, not because they were doing it wrong or because they ought not to be doing it at all, but because they were extrinsically motivated when they did it. He accused them of giving alms, praying, and fasting "in order to be seen" by others. As for his disciples, it was absolutely crucial that they guard themselves against such extrinsic motivants when they "practiced their piety." They were to look cheerful when fasting, give alms in secret, and pray alone behind closed doors (Matt 6:2, 5, 16).

A similar concern seems to lie behind the familiar contrast between servants and sons and daughters. It is interesting to compare the activities of hired hands with those of sons and daughters on farms here in the agricultural heartland. What the hired help does is to cultivate the corn fields, clean out the barn, pick the eggs, and milk the cows. What the kids do, on the other hand, is to cultivate the corn fields, clean out the barn, pick the eggs, and milk the cows. There is simply no difference between the activities of hired hands and those of sons and daughters on the farm: there is only a difference of motivation. The help does it for reward; the kids do it because this is the family farm, and they are members of the family.

Mission and service are products of the identity of disciples.

It seems clear that the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation was crucial for Jesus. But why? And what was the nature of his response to it? It has often been assumed that people who are intrinsically motivated are in some sense morally superior to those who are extrinsically motivated, and that it was out of a recognition of this moral superiority that Jesus' concern arose. It has also been assumed that Jesus' response took the form of a demand for intrinsic motivation on the part of his followers. We are convinced that neither of these assumptions is true. Jesus' concern for intrinsic motivation on the part of his disciples comes not from any belief about the moral superiority of intrinsic motivation, but from the absolute centrality of mission in his conception of the people of God, and from a very pragmatic de-

sire to help disciples to be faithful in their mission. In John 10, Jesus shows a clear recognition of the fact that extrinsic motivation undermines faithfulness. In comparing the shepherd to the hireling, Jesus says that the problem with the hireling is unfaithfulness—he runs away and leaves the sheep alone when the wolf comes. Jesus also indicates clearly that the hireling's unfaithfulness—what Deci might call "task-persistence deficits"—is an effect of extrinsic motivation: "This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep" (John 10:13).

The problem with extrinsic motivation is not that it is immoral and should be condemned, but that it has several well-documented effects which undermine effective discipleship and mission: (1) loss of intrinsic interest in the motivated activity, (2) resistance, (3) self-focused attention and self-absorption, as reflected in common cognitions accompanying extrinsic motivation such as "How am I doing?" "Am I being justly recognized and rewarded?" and "How do I compare with others?", (4) the motivated activity itself is "contaminated" by extrinsic motivation in a way that is particularly destructive when the activity involves loving service of another. We believe that it was out of considerations such as these that Jesus invoked as the central motivational image for his disciples trees bearing fruit. As fruit is a product of the identity of the tree that bears it, so it is that mission and service are products of the identity of disciples. This is intrinsic motivation at its most powerful. We are most likely to be persistent in the face of obstacles, distractions, and delays, and to take risks in the face of uncertainty and danger, when we experience what we are doing as proceeding out of a deep inner sense of identity and mission. Perhaps this is the concern and awareness behind Paul's contrast between works and grace. Not that it was important to Paul to present correctly the way of salvation to God's people, but that it was important to liberate the people whom God had already saved for effective and faithful service in the mission of God. The demand for works evokes extrinsic motivation: resistance, loss of interest, self-absorption, and contaminated activity. God's gracious gift of "new creaturehood," baptismal identity in the crucifixion, resurrection, and mission of Jesus, out of which God's people are invited to live and love and serve, becomes the basis for lives of intrinsically motivated service.

Repentance

But, how are the people of God to be set free for intrinsically motivated discipleship? How are the people of God to be liberated from self-absorption, and empowered to live out of their baptismal identity as God's sons and daughters in Christ? Biblically, the answer begins with repentance. In repentance the Spirit drowns the Old Adam and Eve in one's baptism and creates the New Person in faith whose identity is secure in Christ and is thus freed for mission. Repentance, however, was not and is not always experienced as liberation. Rather, the church's proclamation often effects "repentance" as enslavement, helplessness, passivity, and self-absorbed "wormhood." What accounts for these dichotomous experiences of repentance, of freedom on one hand or enslavement on the other? We argue that a key discriminant between the two experiences of

repentance is the basic view of our relationship to God which undergirds the proclamation in each case. Our thesis is that proclamation grounded in the necessity of God paralyzes, while freeing proclamation is grounded in a view of God as "more than necessary."[5]

The Necessity of God

Bernard of Clairvaux in his book *On the Love of God (De Diligendo Deo)* distinguishes between four types ("degrees") of love in relation to God.[6] Bernard presents these as rungs on a mystical ladder toward union with God. Problematic as these types are as "progression," they remain highly useful in clarifying the presuppositions that underlie our proclamation.

The first type is the human love of self for self's sake. This is the self turned inward, the narcissistically absorbed self, in sinful alienation from God and others. However, the label "narcissism" can lead to fundamental misconceptions if its paradoxical character is not kept in mind. For the "self-love" of narcissism thinly veils the self bent on compensating for an underlying "poverty of self" (Kohut). This poverty results from the sinful denial of one's relational identity, from one's God-given capacity to be in relationship with God, others, and the world. The paradoxical result of this self-absorption is that the self, having denied its relational identity, becomes alienated from itself. Thus, it seeks to compensate for its impoverished identity through the acquisition of wealth, power, and applause.

As paradoxically bound as the self is in the "love" of self for self's sake, it is arguably less bound than is the self in the next of Bernard's types: the love of God for self's sake. This is the self convinced of its helpless dependence on God. The benign-sounding theological term for this type is "gratitude": it is supposed to motivate mission by the "grateful response." However, the pejorative but more accurate label is "neurotic dependency." Erich Fromm characterizes infantile "love" with the declaration, "I love you because I need you."[7] An example of this would be the love of one's spouse, not for who he or she is, but because one is dependent on the spouse to make up for some perceived deficiency in oneself. It is important to note, as marital counselors well know, that underlying this dependent "love" is rage because of the power and control yielded to the other.

We maintain that the church has often taken this neurotic dependency, so destructive in human relationships, and projected it as our ideal relationship with God. Thus, "repentance" comes to mean the recognition of worthlessness and helplessness, of "wormhood" without God so as to realize one's utter dependence upon God. In short, repentance grounded in the necessity of God becomes a call into self-hatred.

Repentance grounded in the necessity of God is supposed to achieve self-denial, a turn away from self-absorption so that the Old Adam and Eve thus negated ("drowned")

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[5]Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 14–35.

[6]Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Love of God,* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1915).

[7]Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1956), 41.

makes room for the New Self created *sola gratia, sola fide.* The old self passes away *in order* to be justified (not *because* it is justified).[8] However, this "repentance" as dependence paradoxically does not achieve self-denial but rather an even greater self-absorption; it does not lead to a New Self created *sola gratia,* but leaves the old self under a law more burdensome than any of the Mosaic 613: "Deny yourself!" Why this demand is burdensome can be clarified by examining the powerful behavioral effects of paradox, which have been recognized in recent years.[9]

Repentance grounded in the necessity of God becomes a call into self-hatred.

Paradox results from violating Russell and Whitehead's Theory of Logical Types. The theory states that "whatever involves all of a collection must not be one of the collection."[10] Or, to restate it, a statement about a class of things cannot itself be a member of that class. The demand to "deny yourself" produces paradoxical effects because it is both a statement about a set of behaviors (i.e. those focused on oneself—self-justification, self-gratification) and is simultaneously a member of that set (i.e. the statement itself calls attention to the self to be denied). The cruel aspect of paradox is that the more one tries to fulfill the demand and the more one has at stake (e.g. eternal life), the more profound the paradoxical effects. The harder one attempts to "achieve" self-denial in order to be justified, the more self-absorbed one becomes. The demand to realize how one cannot justify oneself by works becomes a demand for the *work* of self-denial, the *work* of dependence. The results can be oppressive, as in the case of those who live out their "servanthood" not from freedom but from a need to demonstrate their selflessness and who thus need "needy" and grateful recipients.

Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor[11] also grounded his theology in the necessity of God. He, however, had no illusions about dependence leading to any kind of freedom. In fact, precisely because it kept people in bondage did he stress the theology of God's necessity. When the Grand Inquisitor meets Christ who has quietly returned after 1500 years he chastises him:

> For fifteen hundred years we were pestered by that notion of freedom but in the end we succeeded in getting rid of it. . . . You did not come down from the cross when they shouted, taunting

[8]See Jüngel's critique on this understanding, *God as the Mystery,* n. 175.

[9]The most thorough discussion of these effects is in Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: Norton, 1967).

[10]Alfred N. Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, *Principia Mathematica,* 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910–13), vol. 1, 37.

[11]Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* tr. Andrew MacAndrew (Toronto: Bantam, 1981), 297–319.

> and challenging You, "Come down from the cross and we will believe that You are He." You did not come down, again because You did not want to bring man [*sic*] to You by miracles, because You wanted their freely given love rather than the servile rapture of slaves subdued forever by a display of power.[12]

Bonhoeffer, who decidedly rejected theology grounded in the necessity of God, also recognized the paralyzing effects of repentance based in human dependence upon God:

> When Jesus blessed sinners they were real sinners, but Jesus did not make everyone a sinner first. He called them away from their sin, not into their sin. . . . Never did he question a man's [*sic*] health, vigor, or happiness regarded in themselves, or regard them as evil fruits; else why should he heal the sick and restore strength to the weak?[13]

Bonhoeffer and Jüngel's critique of the necessity of God is concerned with its infringement not only on human freedom but also on the freedom of God. In spite of the best of intentions to avoid "projection," they see theology starting with human need as necessarily setting parameters on the "answer" (i.e. "God"). As against a theology that starts with human questions, Bonhoeffer states:

> It is necessary to free oneself from the way of thinking which sets out from human problems and which asks for solutions on that basis. Such thinking is unbiblical. The way of Jesus Christ, and therefore the way of all Christian thinking, leads not from the world to God but from God to the world.[14]

Bonhoeffer and Jüngel want to start with God's address which summons forth its own questions.[15] Above all, Jüngel wants to preserve and not abrogate the scandal of the cross.[16] Theology that seeks to start with God's address rather than with human questions (need) has been relegated to the "catacombs" (Niebuhr regarding Barth). We, however, argue for the importance of this approach precisely as a way to operate in the "marketplace."

God is More than Necessary

Jüngel's contention, which he admits is confusing,[17] that God is not necessary but more than necessary can be clarified by returning to Bernard. The third type of love is the love of God for God's sake. "So loves he [*sic*] who says: Give praise to the Lord, for He is good. He who gives praise to the Lord, not for that He is good to him, but for that He is good, he truly loveth God for Himself and not for his own sake."[18] This is relationship lived from freedom and not from necessity or dependency. This is relationship that does not motivate discipleship through reward (extrinsic) but through the living out of relational identity (intrinsic) in love for the other *(soli deo gloria)*. The motivational dynamics

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[12]Dostoevsky, 302, 308.

[13]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* enlarged edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 341–42.

[14]Bonhoeffer, *Ethics,* (New York: Macmillan, 1955; Collier Books, 1986), 356.

[15]Bonhoeffer, *Ethics,* 355 and Jüngel, 247.

[16]Jüngel, xiv.

[17]Jüngel, 24.

[18]Bernard of Clairvaux, 97.

expressed in this type of love for God parallel similar dynamics in the love of others and the world: love of the other *for the other* and not for what one might receive in return.

But how is it possible to love God (or the other) for God's (and the other's) sake? How are we to move beyond our self-absorbed narcissism or dependency? Jüngel states this relationship is made possible by the creative power of God:

> If God has created man [*sic*] as the one elected *for love,* then man is what he is *for his own sake.* For one is loved for his own sake or not at all. In this regard, the difference between God and man is in the fact that God can *create* what then as something created is *loved* by its creator for its own sake, whereas man, although his love is creative in a certain sense, does not first create what he loves. If then man is the one elected for love, he is what he is in a relationship to God which is determined by freedom. This relationship could only be diminished by any talk of the necessity of God for man. Love bursts apart the relationship of necessity by surpassing it.[19]

By surpassing it! This is God who is not less but *more* than necessary. These are the "seeds" of Bonhoeffer worked out not negatively (Thielicke's concern) as in the Death of God movement, but positively.

But we do not live out our relational identity in freedom as God makes possible in creation. We are in bondage to self-absorption. Therefore, again, how is the love of God for God's sake possible? *Sola gratia, sola fide.* Our critique of theology grounded in God's necessity is no synergistic slighting of forgiveness *propter Christum.* On the contrary, we contend that forgiveness is too often not proclaimed radically enough. In our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, our sins are not just washed away; we are not simply given a reprieve but then left in our "wormhood." We are created anew! (2 Cor 5:17) We are given a new identity, an identity that is not less real *because* of its eschatological character received in faith, but is therefore *ultimately* real.[20] This baptismal identity gives us freedom to love God for God's

Forgiveness is too often not proclaimed radically enough.

sake (and the neighbor for the neighbor's sake) because the "need" to establish our own identity is surpassed. (The old has passed away!) Every day we deny this identity and make idols (objects) of things, others, ourselves, and "God" in order to establish an identity that has already been given. Every day we are called to repent, called to return to who we have been created in baptism, to a relationship with God that surpasses the boundaries of necessity. Every day we are called to turn not into but out of helplessness and dependency and into freedom for discipleship.

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[19]Jüngel, 38.

[20]Gerhard Forde, "The Viability of Luther Today: A North American Perspective," *Word and World* 7 (1987): 24.

In this regard, it is powerful to hear international students from oppressive societies bear witness to the God who, even in the most desperate of situations, does not seek to render them helplessly dependent; who does not seek to become another oppressor, albeit "benevolent." They witness to a God who is a source of joy and freedom and identity, who is concerned about human "needs" but who does not establish a relationship on that basis. Their struggle, to which we are enjoined, is to loose the oppressive structures that seek to deny the free exercise of the *wealth* of their baptismal identity. Theirs is a powerful witness to the God who is not less, but *more* than necessary.

The last of Bernard's types is the love of self for God's sake. The love of self! Is this not a return full circle to a different form of narcissism? No, this is not the self in a self-absorbed quest to establish its identity. This is the self assured of its identity created in baptism. This is the self expressing itself as gift, as free to live out its essential relational character. This is not self-consciousness but "joyful self-forgetfulness."

This is not a contradiction of the love of God (or others) for God's (or others') sake but is integrally related to it. For here too the self is freed from self-concern, and freed for intrinsically motivated, persistent, and risk-taking discipleship. Here too God is not necessary, but more than necessary. In this relationship gratitude takes on an entirely different character—not as demand for helpless dependence but as the joyful "by-product" of the freeing gift of identity as child of God in Christ. In this regard, Jüngel's interpretation of Luther's last words is instructive:

> This confession, "We are beggars, that is true," is not an act of self-recognition which then leads to the beginning of the knowledge of God, but rather a self-recognition which comes about because of the encounter with God.[21]

God gives us identity in which we indeed do "need" each other and God (as God "needs" us?) but not in order to *establish* our identity but to *live* it out.

Conclusion

In Ephesians 2 is an exhortation to remember, "Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ (v. 12). . . . But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ (v. 13). . . . So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (v. 19). Remember! That is the task of the church's proclamation. We are to call people out of self-absorption into the remembrance of their *ultimate* (eschatological) identity as those who have been drowned and created anew. We are to call the people of God back into their baptismal identity and thus into freedom for intrinsically motivated discipleship for the mission God has set before us.

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[21]Jüngel, n. 156.

The Paradox of Pluralism: The Church's Vocation in a Public World

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On January 1, 1988, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will take its place in the public world. What difference will the ELCA make in the lives of the members as they live out their vocations in their private and public spheres? Does the Church, corporately and through its members, have a vocation in the pluralistic, public world?

A permanent bulletin board at Wartburg Seminary is entitled "Interdependence in God's Public World." We live in a diverse and very dangerous world. Interdependence is verbalized, yet nations and neighborhoods fear one another. People are tempted to become privatized rather than risk encounter with the stranger. Congregations and denominations are isolated in the private sphere, abdicating their influence in the public sphere to business corporations and political agencies.

For some, "pluralism" is a negative term meaning a society without moral absolutes. Yet pluralism is a reality of the public world in which this new church is situated. I define pluralism as the state of society in which people diverse in religion, race, ethnicity, class, sex, age, and ability maintain that diversity and yet autonomously participate in the common society. Instead of ignoring or deriding the pluralism in which we participate, I propose we examine our calling within such a society, believing that interdependence may be part of that calling.

Some people look to American civil religion as a belief system to unify values and ethics in a pluralistic society. I believe American civil religion is a misguided belief system and an inadequate ecclesiology. What is the nature and meaning of community? What are the deeper problems of xenophobia and sep-

aration of private and public spheres? What is the nature and vocation of the Christian Church in this society?

The paradox of pluralism may be that the call to live more decisively in the public world is not a call to meld with that society, but a call to be more distinctly who we are as Lutherans and thereby become more visible and more helpful in the public world. Such a paradoxical approach has significance both within the ELCA and as the ELCA in the wider society. Rather than "forgetting" our differences, we can remember more clearly our identity. With Parker Palmer we suggest that we not too quickly turn the stranger into friend, and in so doing deal with diversity by recreating the stranger in one's own image.[1] The call to community in a diverse, pluralistic culture is a call to enter with our particularity knowing God's call to interdependence within God's public world.

The Problem and the Paradox

Religion is eminently social. If religion is essentially social, so, too, society presupposes religion. A religious community becomes the source of interpretation of reality, of the universe and even of its own history. If religion is a unified system of beliefs which unites a community and if religion is that which societies hold to be sacred, we may see pluralism only as a problem.

In a pluralistic society, can we have community at all, or will we have just a collection of individuals or faith communities? Modernity with technology and bureaucracy increases anonymity and powerless passivity presenting an expansion of choices, a kaleidoscope of interpretations of life and the universe. Since pluralism is not limited to formal religious ideology, religious groups compete with other meaning-defining groups including business and civil and social associations. Allegiance to one's church elicits certain beliefs and behaviors while allegiance to one's employer elicits another set altogether.[2]

Because religious symbols no longer overarch all sectors of social experience, pluralization means institutionally the privatization of religion. The consequence is that people suffer from a dependent condition of "homelessness."[3] Religion can be in the home, but people cannot be "at home" in the public world.

Anomie and anonymity of modernization increase the need for meaning. Pluralism represents a freedom of choice and a diversity of beliefs, but such freedom of choice can become a bondage of choice. The religious freedom of a pluralistic society can become a heresy because constant choosing becomes imperative.[4]

Religion, in its creedal and ritual particularity, has become almost exclusively part of the private sphere. The word "private" liter-

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[1]Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 40.

[2]Joan D. Chittister and Martin E. Marty, *Faith and Ferment* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983.)

[3]Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind* (New York: Random House, 1973), 80–82.

[4]Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 28. Berger reminds us that the English word "heresy" comes from a Greek word meaning "to choose." In premodern society one was a heretic in relation to religious authority. The modern world of multiple authorities necessitates choosing, or "heresy."

ally means "to be deprived of a public life." We do not downplay the private realm, however, but argue for the renewal of the private life and the recovery of the public sphere.[5] Otherwise, the unreality of the private sphere, combined with the privatization of religion, results in decisions and actions of churches being considered mere personal preference and trivial.

More options have increased pluralism, and society is more eclectic. We need to help people connect their private and public worlds in order not to become overpowered by the bewildering effects of pluralism. Such internal connection can help individuals be at home with their faith in the various arenas of their lives. Strengthening one's particular faith stance may help one function more clearly within the pluralistic culture.

Freedom of choice can become a bondage of choice.

American Civil Religion

The pluralistic heritage of this nation, whether planned or pragmatic, set the stage historically and philosophically for more diversity than people have often been willing to recognize. In spite of this, "an underlying unity—expressed in what came to be called 'civil religion' or 'the religion of the republic' remained, though sorely tested."[6] Some believe this nation's unity is fostered and expressed through a civil religion "through which it interprets its historical experience in the light of transcendent reality."[7]

A society, in order to become a community of meaning, needs a unified system of beliefs, symbols, and rituals. Nationalization was a process by which Americans came to see themselves as a single nation. Pluralism was a symbol of the nation's oneness. Nationalism, however, holds that the particularities of one's nation are not the result of history, but rooted in the eternal nature of things. Since the nation is blessed, its will should and ought to prevail around the world.[8]

One might hold that pluralism hinders national unity and that therefore the particularities of religious groups must be relinquished. Emile Durkheim's civil religion theory is often understood to mean that to the degree a collection of people is a society it will exhibit a common or civil religion. But "religion is more the expression of an integrated society than it is the source of a society's integration."[9] American civil religion therefore need not be the primary source of this nation's ethic.

Civil religion in this country was an attempt to create a nation, using symbols of

[5]Palmer, *The Company of Strangers,* 18–19.

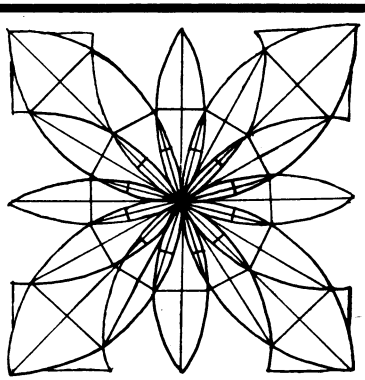
[6]Winthrop Hudson, *Religion in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), viii.

[7]Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 3.

[8]Glen T. Miller, *Religious Liberty in America* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 120–21.

[9]Robert N. Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 139.

Puritanism and the Enlightenment. Gradually, biblical and classical themes were overshadowed by America's dependence upon its own myth of divine election. During the Civil War, Scriptures were quoted to prove God was on both sides. The significance of the epic of deliverance from Egypt used to justify the Revolutionary War was lost in the nineteenth century to the slave issue—except to the slaves themselves. For 50 years after the Civil War the picture was self-congratulatory. Because repentance was withheld, renewal was distorted. The question of race and of being a diverse but united people had not been settled.



Although repentance was absent, renewal and rebirth were central creeds of American civil religion. America did not need a Redeemer; it needed to be a Redeemer nation to the world. The mythology of chosenness, America's belief in itself, was heightened during the period of Manifest Destiny. And in 1900 Senator Albert J. Beveridge delivered a speech in the Senate:

> God has . . . made us master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigned. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and senile people . . . He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the redemption of the world.[10]

American civil religion, which sometimes made an idol of its own image, became the public religion and the denominations became religious expressions in the private sphere. The nation emerged as the primary agent of God's meaningful activity in history.

Whereas white Christians in the 19th century began to separate the public and private faith, for Blacks the life shaped by biblical narrative was the means by which they created a public life for themselves. Paradoxically, their lack of inclusion in the ecclesiology of the civil faith allowed them to carry their own creedal convictions into the public arena.

July 4, 1976, the nation's bicentennial, a Sunday, a celebration of unified renewal was expressed through civil religion, as the nation hungered for healing after the wrenching of civil riots, Viet Nam, and Watergate. A few years later, the United States described itself as "held hostage" by Iran. In January, 1980, the nation celebrated the release of the captives with the "liturgical" color of yellow ribbons and a large sign in the "sanctuary" of the Superbowl boasting "U.S. 52, Iran, 0." That week the nation inaugurated a president who, more than any other in recent history, calls forth belief in the civil faith, perhaps accounting for his continuing popularity re-

[10]Bellah, *The Broken Covenant,* 38.

gardless of his questionable actions. In February, 1986, the nation's faith in its own immortality would be tested again in the Challenger explosion. There was disbelief that Americans heading towards the heavens could die.

In the summer of 1986 the nation ritually celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty. However, when "Lady Liberty" came to this country, women could not vote. A prize-winning quilter took note. In the background stitching, almost unnoticed behind the bold design, are the names of women kept "safe" in the private sphere, contributors to the nations' history who had never been fully visible.[11]

The civil religion continues as an expression of unity of this nation, celebrating in 1987 the 200th anniversary of the Constitution. There are, however, few public arenas for genuine inclusion of all and for careful study of this "holy writ." The public schools have often been the only institution to transmit the civil faith, explaining why many national problems from integration to censorship to English as the "national" language are focused there. The nation and its neighborhoods need more arenas for public forum, so that people of many faiths, of all ages, can dialogue in shaping civil creeds which foster national and global interdependence.

Probing the Problem

American civil religion provides a noninclusive ecclesiology and an inappropriate creed and yet continues to be a religious expression of this society's integration. There are deeper problems with this religion of the public sphere. One is xenophobia. Relegating faith particularities to the private sphere does not make us immune, for the complexity of componential existence creates a sense of alienation even within particular faith communities made up of like people. Pluralization brings with it fear of the stranger. But in a pluralistic culture, when people look upon their variety of worlds without benefit of interpretation, one becomes a stranger even to oneself. Disconnectedness is sometimes almost unbearable and the resulting lack of meaning and vision contribute to the epidemic of suicides, particularly among our young.

One could be tempted to say that individuals function best in small homogeneous groups, but this may intensify their alienation from the world in which they were created to live. Continuation of unified but exclusive congregational ethnic enclaves is not the answer. Pluralism is a fact in the world. The stranger exists, everywhere and even inside one's community and self. To ignore the stranger is to remain "ignorant," to be deprived of a part of the self, just as to remain private is to be deprived of the public life. A more helpful course is to find a way to encounter the stranger.

Paradoxically, the way towards community either within a particular church or within the society is to not too quickly turn the stranger into friend. To do so may promise intimacy, but may deny and do violence to that other.

> The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create an emptiness, not a

[11]Robert Bishop and Carter Houck, *All Flags Flying: American Patriotic Quilts as Expression of Liberty* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1986), 75.

> fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created . . . Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyles of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.[12]

Parker Palmer writes:

> The paradox has special application to our relations in the public life. Hospitality means letting the stranger remain a stranger while offering acceptance nonetheless . . . It means valuing the strangeness of the stranger, resisting the temptation to reduce the relation to some lowest common denominator.[13]

One can deal with the stranger in a number of ways. An individual or a group can remain alienated. The dominant group can expect the stranger to become assimilated, to be "like" the ones already "American" in language, customs, and belief. The dominant can demand amalgamation, or practice the more violent annihilation, an approach followed with Native Americans. But other possibilities include accessibility, being open to one another in a variety of associations, in which no one is assimilated, but all come with their uniquely diverse gifts.

Accessibility recognizes the "alien" nature of the other and speaks to the need for interaction and interdependence. The word is used most commonly today in regard to the differently abled who need accessibility to public places. Handicapism symbolizes our fear of the alien other:

> My first fear is that somehow this disability of the other individual is catching. It might actually infect me. The person represents the unknown, and it symbolizes my own weakness and my own inability. I am now torn within myself.[14]

Becoming visible, in public, means others are open to the influence of the differently abled. Interdependence is coming together in a way which takes nothing from the stranger. Interdependence strives to enhance the gifts of all and is free from domination or dependency. Dependency hinders the development of the gifts of all. Domination romanticizes the poor and keeps them dependent. Only Jesus is Lord and he did not use his *dominus* except in solidarity with the weak.[15] Both domination and dependency are disbelief. "United in relationship implies mutuality: in relationship with one another we both give and receive our essential being."[16]

The Church

If American civil religion offers an inappropriate ecclesiology for community, what can we learn from the ecclesiology of the Christian Church? We speak from particularity within the pluralistic culture when we speak of God's activity through the church.

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[12]Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 51.

[13]Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, 68.

[14]Harold H. Wilke, *Creating the Caring Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 17.

[15]Dorothee Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 29, 30, 43.

[16]Phil Wogamon, *A Christian Method of Moral Judgment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 95–96.

To speak is to believe that God exists and is at work creating the church as a communion of alienating strangers. This God creates meaning in community and unity in diversity.

The church is the community of justified sinners, the fellowship of those liberated by Christ, who experience salvation and live in thanksgiving. It has its eyes fixed on Christ and takes its place in history.[17] The church is a place where people become reconciled and their alienation is removed. Love for the stranger in the public world is not simply charity. Christ is present in the world, even and especially in the stranger. The church is

God creates meaning in community and unity in diversity.

God's activity in Christ, creating community in God's world.

Alienation and homelessness are not merely a product of technological and bureaucratic modernization. God created human beings in a direct relationship with God-self, absolutely unique and separate from others. With the loss of community with the Creator God, the social community is also lost.[18] False attempts at community characterized by domination, assimilation, and exclusivity continue to seem to triumph. But Easter and Pentecost are a reality. Christ dies in loneliness. His death isolates individuals. The Holy Spirit approaches each person in that person's singularity, making each lonely. The Spirit then places people in community so that the members no longer see others as claim, but as gift.[19]

Wilhelm Loehe says "The Church is the very opposite of loneliness."[20] God's love wills community. Loehe's vision saw the mission, the vocation, of the church as breaking down barriers. God continues to break down walls of alienation. God's grace makes barriers unnecessary, but human relationships need boundaries. These, however, are not ultimate. Denominations and congregations which cut themselves off by building high walls and thick fences are not the church. The vocation of Christians and of the church itself is imaged by people moving out from the center into the world. Boundaries are necessary, but they are permeable.

There are many images and models for the church.[21] Some reflect inclusivity and interdependence more authentically than others. The Body of Christ imagery holds great promise for diversity in unity and interdependence. This image should not be used to excuse division, "but to stimulate the imagination . . . so that people might strive to create among themselves the kind of coopera-

[17]Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 22, 33.

[18]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

[19]Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints,* 106–20.

[20]Wilhelm Loehe, *Three Books About the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 51.

[21]Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), lists at least 80.

tion, integration and affiliation that would make them truly one."[22]

The liberating church empowers people to see their individual and corporate vocations in the public world, and liberation theologians have proposed models of the church with that purpose. But American civil religion with its ecclesiology of domination may need a different form of liberating imagery than Latin American Christians living in economic and political oppression. Susan Thistlethwaite writes that if the most radical thing for Latin Americans facing a Christendom mentality is to formulate base Christian communities, then the most radical thing for North American Christians is to talk about the church Universal.[23]

Vocation is centered in forgiveness.

In his forward to *The Company of Strangers,* Martin E. Marty calls for the care of the public as public:

> This is the test of the public realm: does the church only make little raids into it, or is there a theology and a pattern of care for it? Is the Church that set of people who, a la a W. H. Auden parody, are in effect saying "We are all in the world to save all the other people—what all the other people are in the world for we haven't the faintest idea"?[24]

What is the action of the people of God as they move through the very boundaries which define their community? Such activity of God is beyond human conception, but it can be trusted. Failure to trust in the boundless and therefore "boundaryless" activity of a gracious God is unbelief. Human beings in their fear fall back to their intense concern about the boundaries of the church, and a "Redeemer nation" becomes preoccupied with guarding its borders. We are called to believe in God's activity of peacemaking, of barrier-breaking, and of turning alienation and loneliness into solitude which the Spirit turns into community. "God's peaceful kingdom . . . comes not by positing a common human morality, but by our faithfulness as a peaceful community that fears not our differences."[25]

Such faithfulness does not mean less conviction, a melding, an assimilation, or a formulation of a civil religion with inappropriate creeds of self-transcendence and domination. Rather it means a strengthening of conviction, and of particularity by going to the heart and core of the spiritual being, both individually and communally. Such radicality empowers one for servanthood, beyond boundaries, towards interdependence in God's public world.

The Church in a Pluralistic, Public World

As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America enters this public arena, the evan-

[22]Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Metaphors for the Contemporary Church* (New York: Pilgrim, 1983) 23.

[23]Thisthlewaite, *Metaphors*, 62.

[24]Palmer, *The Company of Strangers,* 13.

[25]Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) 12.

gelical approach will not be to ignore our strengths, trying to assimilate into American civil religion, nor to ignore the public world, tending to our own business. The ELCA, by more deeply believing its creeds, is called to live out its vocation, corporately and individually in private and public spheres. This calling is to the gospel and this calling is to the world.

> The church has to rediscover again and again its vocation, its corporate vocation as the witnessing community taken out of the world, set apart for God, but set apart in order to be again sent to the world.[26]

Vocation is centered in forgiveness. "Life organized around the forgiveness of sins is Luther's idea of the call."[27] We as a church are called to a vocation of hospitality to the stranger in the public world. We are called to help each other within the church make crossings and connections[28] as we discern our vocations in all spheres so that the homelessness we sense and the bondage of choices are not bewildering and petrifying, but so that our individual gifts are named and nourished for liberating and empowering servanthood.

By discovering and honoring the pluralism that already exists within a congregation and within the ELCA, one can discern the problems and the possibilities of relating to the larger pluralistic society. By strengthening the diversity rather than diluting it, a viable faith stance is claimed and reaffirmed. The task is not easy because differences continue to be divisive and fears can quickly escalate into a need to annihilate the stranger. We resort to domination or dependency in unbelief and guard our boundaries and borders once more.

By returning once again to the Christ, who takes our alienation and makes us one body, and by claiming the liberating power of forgiveness to live out our vocation, we can genuinely receive one another in the church in our diversity. A single person at any given moment may seem alone vocationally. But that one never stands alone, for we carry a message of community and call new communities into being.[29]

Taking our place as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will not always be clear or easy. We will be tempted to consider our own separate identity an end in itself or to succumb to a process of assimilation, losing our identity in the civil faith. But our vocation is to claim the cross and resurrection, and to be the church not only in the private sphere but in the public sphere as well. American civil religion then, rather than being the glue that holds us together can become a glue that holds us safely apart. Nationalism is not our god nor American civil religion our ecclesiology. We are challenged to an evangelical vocation of radical gospel which produces hospitality to the stranger.

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[26]Suzanne de Dietrich, *The Witnessing Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 16.

[27]Einar Billing, *Our Calling* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Press, 1958), 16.

[28]Two resources for this task are: Robert W. Bertram and Edward H. Schroeder, *Crossings,* 6337 Clayton Road, St. Louis, Missouri, 63117; and Norma J. Everist and Nelvin Vos, *Connections* (Philadelphia: Parish Life Press, 1985).

[29]de Dietrich, *The Witnessing Community,* 14.

The Marginalized: Makers of History*

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When theology is done from the standpoint of those whose lives are characterized by misery, oppression, de-humanization, and powerlessness, it takes on a different hue. I have come to this conclusion after a prolonged preoccupation with two provocative questions: Whose history are we studying when we study Caribbean history? Who decides the rules by which we play the game of history of the Caribbean? Like the history of so many places, Caribbean history is dominated by a disproportionately "invisible" minority who had vast powers over a disproportionate mass who were visibly present. It is a history of sugar in which the lands and people were useful and valuable not because they were a part of God's creation, but because they "sweetened" and enriched the lives of the minority. In that situation, when history was used to record the dominance of the minority, "official" theology interpreted conversion and sanctification as domestication and submission. Both secular history and sacred theology portrayed the dominant minority class as the principal architects of history. Of course, God was presumed to be providentially at work in the process of such history of the status quo.

In our contemporary world, it would appear that the principal history makers are the powerful, not the weak and marginalized. I have observed that almost invariably the only time the marginalized make news is when they are presented as a problem. When they make headline news, they are seen as the problem of those who are in power and who have to deal with them. They are seldom presented as human beings with equal rights and equal voice.

The use of the term "Third World" poignantly illustrates our argument. "Third World" is used to describe masses of people who have not been consulted as to whether they belong to the "Third World." In an insightful article, Shiva Naipaul insists that the "Third World" does not exist. He points out that the nomenclature does an injustice to the poor by presenting them as a homogenous lot. Nothing could be further from the

*This paper is an edited and adapted version of a lecture which was given on February 27, 1987 in Miami, Florida at a Coalition Building Conference sponsored by the Division for Parish Services of the Lutheran Church in America.

truth, even when the criteria are economics, culture, politics, etc. Naipaul writes:

> The longer I live, the more convinced I become that one of the greatest honors we can confer on other people is to see them as they are, to recognize not only that they exist but that they exist in specific ways and have specific realities. The idea of a Third World, despite its congenial simplicity, is too shadowy to be of any use.[1]

Whose appellation is "Third World"? Those who are globally marginalized are powerless to determine how they will be described. The power of language allows us to use concepts which stereotype others and define them in ways that do not lead to their freedom but promote subjugation, domestication, and dependence. Naipaul continues:

> The Third World is an artificial construction of the West, an ideological empire on which the sun is always setting. What images come to mind when we think of it? Sunburned relief workers telling television interviewers how civilly they have been treated by their guerilla captors, tempestuous confrontations with the International Monetary Fund, here a modest irrigation scheme, over there a windmill, down the road a tiny medical dispensary of unplastered brick, hailed as a triumph for the principle of self-help, and subliminally, those slow-moving files of refugees in stony landscapes, those immobile babes-in-arms with flies clustered round closed eyes. *I am not denying that people need windmills and dispensaries and all the rest. What I do deny is that these needs adequately sum up the human condition of those-quarters of [hu-] mankind*[2] (emphasis added).

History of the marginalized should show them as dreamers of a "New World" in which, for example, there are no starving people. But improved physical realities are not all they dream of, as Naipaul explains:

> We impute to the "starving millions" the elementary physical desires suggested by their elementary physical needs. But it is also important to understand their dreams, for these dreams may transcend the provision of unpolluted water supplies, decent roads, and hospitals.[3]

Human beings were not created to live by bread alone. This is no less true of the marginalized. Within them, too, the Spirit of life instills a longing for wholeness and human liberation. It is therefore an injustice to them and an indignity to God to reduce the marginalized to physical needs.

Our argument that the marginalized are powerless to determine how they are (will be) described prompts us to ask: What, then, is history? Charles A. Beard's answer is instructive:

> History as past actuality includes, to be sure, all that has been done, said, felt, and thought by human beings on this

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[1]Shiva Naipaul, "The 'Third World' Does Not Exist," *World Encounter* Vol. 24, No. 1 (Fall, 1986): 3.

[2]Naipaul, "Third World," 3.

[3]Naipaul, "Third World," 2.

> planet since humanity began its long career. History as record embraces the monuments, documents, and symbols which provide such knowledge as we have or can find respecting past actuality.[4]

It is clear, however, that history is not the record of everything that has happened. It is the record about some by others who have been very selective about what history is. It inevitably reflects the *Sitz im Leben* of the historian. Beard continues:

> Every student of history knows that his [*sic*] colleagues have been influenced in their selection and ordering of materials by their biases, prejudices, beliefs, affections, general upbringing, and experience, particularly social and economic; and if he has a sense of propriety, to say nothing of humor, he applies the canon to himself, leaving no exceptions to the rule.[5]

The historical conditioning of the secular historian is no less applicable to the Christian theologian. When we theologize without taking into consideration the socio-economic and political implications of what we say, and without recognizing that such theologizing arises out of particular conditions, we distort reality. In the name of the God who liberates all humanity in Jesus Christ we perpetrate and perpetuate unliberating ways of looking at reality. We do so because we have the power to define what is authentic and what is not. This may lead to despair instead of hope, especially among the marginalized who are powerless to effect any significant change.

Now when the marginalized, in the face of such despair and hopelessness, hope against hope, they are creators of history that offers liberation and human community. Hope against hope is a sign of divine transcendence in our midst, because the capacity to hope and to declare a new reality in which all are invited to participate comes from God who gives hope precisely in history and not outside of it.

The marginalized make history when they refuse to accept their own and others' condition of powerlessness, alienation, and oppression as normative and unalterable. This new vision and the concomitant impetus for change do not come from the marginalized, but from God who gives life through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Every time the Christian community declares that there is no power greater than God's power in Jesus Christ, it is saying that all societal structures and systems are temporal and transitory. Consequently, in the name of the liberating God, the marginalized and those who would stand with them in solidarity are given the freedom to change those structures and systems on behalf of human beings and their freedom.

One of the tragedies of marginalization is that the marginalized as victims fatalistically accept their condition as normative or even ontological! When the marginalized do so, their acceptance should be seen as a symptom of the tragedy and should not be used as an excuse for saying: "But they do not want to change their condition—they like it as it is." It should not be used as a legitimization of the tragedy.

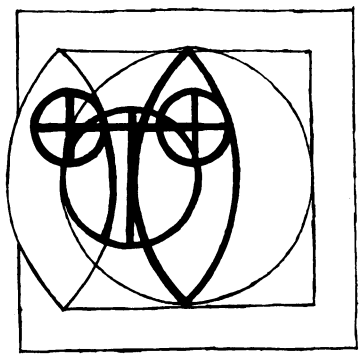
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[4]Charles A. Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," *The American Historical Review* 39 (1934): 219.

[5]Beard, "Written History," 220.

In their struggle for liberation in the concreteness of their historical existence, the marginalized might legitimately and evangelically adopt a historical and transitory posture of "protest atheism" in the name of the God who both suffers and liberates. It is quite evangelical for them to say, "If your god is one who keeps us enslaved and marginalized, then we protest against you and your god, in the name of the God who liberates." This kind of protest was part of the fabric of Old Testament theology. The prophets were ever protesting in the name of Yahweh, who brought freedom through the destruction of the idols that would make Israel accept a false security. Even the Israelites in their covenantal life with Yahweh had to learn that Yahweh would not settle for their oppression of others. The gods to whom Israel turned were being toppled from their places by Yahweh. Such a form of evangelical "protest atheism" is a protest against the idols of dominance and security through which people are oppressed and marginalized. Every protest in the name of freedom, in the name of God who came in Jesus Christ, is, in fact, a protest against idolatry. It is a proclamation-through-protest of the fundamental Christian conviction that God, who raised Jesus from the dead, is the source of our life and our freedom.

History of the marginalized, is, therefore, history that critiques and undermines the dominant ideological notion of history. The marginalized and those who stand in solidarity with them need to raise questions of ideological and evangelical suspicion about the ways in which history is viewed. When the marginalized begin to be heard, the dominant ideological notions of history will begin to be undermined. That would be salutary. One of the primary reasons that human history is incomplete is not only because the future remains open, but because the marginalized are absent from the records of what is meaningful history. If they are present, it is in obscurity.



Their story is subverted, distorted and even omitted because to remember them appropriately is to judge ourselves and our values. The memory of them haunts us and we would rather forget. To remember would mean an end to our cosmetic and artificial security. History remains open because God's future is still to come in its fullness, and in that future the history of the absent, powerless majority is yet to be told. It must be told so that human history may indeed be human and liberating.

If theology is truly human language about God's revelation in history, culminating in the decisive and definitive event in Jesus Christ, then the language of the marginalized, in their experience of God, is equally appropriate for theological reflection. If God, indeed, is God made flesh, then the story of the marginalized in their concreteness is the story of human reflection on God's revelation. What this means is that the Holy Spirit does not speak the language of the dominant

and powerful to the exclusion of the voices of the voiceless. If the marginalized wish to speak theologically, they do not first have to learn the language of the dominant and the powerful. Otherwise, they will have simply capitulated to the old way. Their experience of anguish, pain, and suffering are authentic signals of the presence of God in weakness and shame. God will not let them be pushed out to the periphery. To hear them is to recognize them as makers of history, not theirs only, but human history which is shaped, energized, judged, and redeemed by the divine initiative. Philip Potter gives us a timely reminder when he says:

> If theology is the love of God-and-humankind in action, then all who are branches of the vine, all who accept God in Christ in love, are engaged in doing theology. . . . Third World theologians . . . do not do theology *for* the people but *with* the people. The poor themselves in the grassroots Christian communities are doing theology in their own stories as they relate the biblical story to their own cultural stories, legends, myths, songs, and theater that have arisen from their lived history of struggling for justice. These communities are creating new songs, new liturgies, new prayers, and are forming new groups of solidarity for their rights as human beings with and for others.[6]

To speak of the marginalized as makers of history means fundamentally that their stories of pain and misery, of longing for and dreaming of liberation, are legitimate stories for theological reflection. Of central significance to them is the question: "If God exists and is gracious and loving, why are we in such misery?"

In the Old Testament (as in the New), Yahweh is the decisive history-maker. There is no question that the story that unfolds is a story of history-making with God as the primary maker of history. But it is not the story of Yahweh as history-maker apart from human beings. Rather, Yahweh makes history by using weak, frail human beings, who continue to be characterized more by infidelity to the covenant rather than by fidelity. In this vein Walter Brueggemann writes:

> Yahweh is not a history-maker in a "supernaturalist" sense. Yahweh's way of history-making is through the processes and agency of human interaction. More specifically, the history-making process in ancient Israel is done through *the voice of marginality* which is carried by prophetic figures and those with whom they make common cause.[7]

God is at work always undermining any notion that the status quo can be equated with the Kingdom of God. God works through human beings whose protests, because they have fallen through to the bottom which is bottomless, remind us that Yahweh is not satisfied with the status quo. History, then, "is the arena of the Holy One allied with the marginal people to create newness."[8]

Human beings are sinful before God. The marginalized, as well as the powerful, are

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[6]Philip Potter, "Doing Theology in a Divided World," in *Doing Theology in a Divided World,* ed. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 15.

[7]Walter Brueggemann, *Hope Within History* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 55.

[8]Brueggemann, *Hope Within History,* 69.

sinners. When we talk about the marginalized as makers of history, we are not talking about history as their self-creation over against the rest of humanity. Rather, we are talking about something new which brings about an inclusiveness which is not already there.

In positing the marginalized as makers of history, we have been calling for a radical ethic in response to Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." The basis for such a radical Christian ethic is the radical gospel of unconditional forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Anything short of this leads to moralism and works righteousness. On the other hand, a radical gospel without a radical imperative makes God irrelevant to the world, or, at best, the supporter and masseur/masseuse of the prevailing order with all its oppression, sin, and destruction. Any form of thinking of God *de facto* as a masseur/masseuse of the status quo is idolatrous.

> Yahweh makes history by using frail human beings.

A *bona fide* theologian of liberation is one who not only speaks on behalf of the poor and the oppressed, but one who speaks from among the poor and oppressed. The theologian of liberation cannot simply teach, but needs to be taught by, the "grassroots" theologians. The marginalized become makers of history when they begin teaching us theologically not only about their hopes and their pains, but how it is they continue to hope against hope in a world of misery. Thereby, we are evangelically taught. The current development in Latin American liberation theology aptly illustrates our argument here. In an insightful lecture, Juan Luis Segundo observes that a shift has taken place within Latin American theology. The first phase of Latin American theology was influenced by middle-class students and university intellectuals who questioned the status quo as a result of reading Marx's critique of ideology. They were the voices for the poor. Segundo explains:

> The first theology of liberation had raised hopes, enthusiasm and conversion only among the middle classes which were integrated into a European culture. It is true that their concern for the poor and oppressed had made them dangerous for the status quo, but the persecution of middle-class leftists all over Latin America did not fill the gap between them and the grass-roots people.[9]

This deficiency is being corrected by the emergence of the Church of the poor. Leonardo Boff writes:

> In a church that has opted for the people, for the poor and for their libera-

[9]Juan Luis Segundo, S.J., "The Shift Within Latin American Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 52 (1985): 23.

> tion, the *principal learning of theology* comes from the contact with [grass-root] people. Who evangelizes the theologian? The faith witnessed by faithful people, their capacity to introduce God in all their struggling, their resistance against the oppression they customarily have to suffer [*sic*].[10]

We will be authentic only insofar as we have our groundings with those in whose name we speak in order that they might themselves tell their stories. Our theological reflections lack credibility if we lack the vision that includes the history of the marginalized.

Jesus' power over marginalization on the cross gives new life.

Jesus Christ is forced out of this world in his bid to save the whole creation. Although he created the world, he was "marginalized" in his earthly life. Paradoxically his marginalization, epitomized in his death on a cross outside the city wall and in his cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" becomes the means whereby the demonic power of all forms of marginalization are destroyed. Precisely in Jesus' marginalization, those who are marginalized are empowered to struggle against the demons in this world who continue to marginalize them and others. Jesus' power over marginalization on the cross gives new life, wholeness, and healing to all creation. In worship and liturgy the Spirit prompts us to dream dreams we had never dreamt before. One such dream is of a world in which the marginalized are empowered to help create a new community, a community brought about through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

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[10]Leonardo Boff, "Teologia à Escuta do Povo," *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 41 (Marco, 1981): 55.

The AIDS Crisis: A Call to Mission Based on 1 Peter

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The AIDS epidemic has been compared to the Black Death which wiped out one-fourth of Europe's population in the 14th century. Estimates of persons infected are over one million in America—mostly among homosexuals and intravenous drug users; several million in Africa—mostly among heterosexuals; and ten million world-wide. In America, out of some 35,000 cases of AIDS, there have been about 20,000 deaths. By the end of 1991, it is predicted there may be almost 180,000 deaths—as many in that one year as our total death-toll in Vietnam. This is a crisis for the world and for the church! For the church, it is a crisis of (1) confusion, (2) compassion, and (3) community. My reflections are based on the following themes from 1 Peter: (I) God has called us to be holy. (II) God has called us to the light. (III) God has called us to blessing in suffering. (IV) God has called us to glory. Crisis and call are interwoven in what follows, in terms of ethics and evangelism, theology of the cross and of glory.

I recently reread Jaroslav Pelikan's little classic, *Fools for Christ,* and pondered his intriguing interpretation of Romanticism.[1] He argues that Nietzsche's final years[2] are a rejection of the equation of the Holy and the Beautiful, which had so attracted him in his earlier life.[3] I puzzle over this in light of the grudging admission of Karl Barth (the arch-enemy of Schleiermacher's Romantic theology), which I believe is unfortunately true: we are all Romantics! That mystery has begun to unravel for me with the help of the brilliant analysis of *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah *et al.*[4] Romantic "expressive individualism," typified in the 19th century

[1]Jaroslav Pelikan, *Fools for Christ* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1955), esp. chaps. I, III, and V.

[2]Pelikan, *Fools for Christ,* 133–44.

[3]Pelikan, *Fools for Christ,* 118–33.

[4]Robert Bellah *et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 1–8, 13–17, 33–35.

by Walt Whitman, has made therapy the "model relationship" in the 20th century for virtually all of life, including marriage, work, and politics. Based on a view of love as a feeling, starting with self-love and eschewing self-sacrifice, the "therapeutic view" contends "selfishness is essential to love." Bellah points to the difficulty, if not impossibility, of building community with this therapeutic model, questioning whether one should speak of the gay "community" or "lifestyle enclave." The therapist sees the goal of living as a "combination of occupation and 'lifestyle' that is economically possible and psychically tolerable." How can a people be holy on the basis of the view of beauty espoused by Whitman or the young Nietzsche, or with the view of love espoused by Bellah's "therapist"? The Beautiful is not the Holy and love is not God!

In many ways the young Augustine was a typical Romantic. He confessed in his spiritual autobiography: "I came to Carthage where a cauldron of shameful lusts seethed. . . . I was not yet in love but I was in love with love. . . . Therefore my soul did not grow healthy but was full of ulcers. . . . To love and to be loved was sweet to me and all the more if I enjoyed my loved one's body. . . . I plunged headlong into love, whose captive I desired to be. . . . But in my joy I was bound with painful chains of iron. . . ."[5] In his burning passion Augustine discovered his human bondage—that his free will was a captive free will! But Augustine also discovered what most Romantics sought in vain: the God who liberates and delivers from darkness and bondage. His prayer reflects the pain and the joy of finally recognizing real Beauty and true Love:

> Too late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new, too late have I loved you! Behold you were within me, but I was outside: it was there that I sought you and . . . rushed headlong upon these things of beauty you have made. . . . They kept me far from you, those fair things which, if they were not in you, would not exist at all. You have called to me, and have cried out, and have shattered my deafness. You have blazed forth with light, and have shown upon me, and you put my blindness to flight! . . . You have touched me and I have burned for your peace.[6]

What Augustine came to love was the Beauty of holiness.[7]

Called to Be Holy

The first theme I want to treat from 1 Peter is God's call to be holy. The Holy One of Israel who called his son out of Egypt (Hos 1:1, Ex 4:22, Matt 2:15) also called his sons and daughters to be holy (Lev 11:44–45). Like them, we have been called and brought out of bondage to sin and death and confronted by the holy God. Like them, we are chosen by God the Father, sanctified and made holy by God the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ! Like them, we are exiles who live in hope by God's mercy and through Christ's resurrection (1 Pet 1:1–2). Through his resurrection we are born anew to hope (v. 3) and holiness (vv. 13–15).

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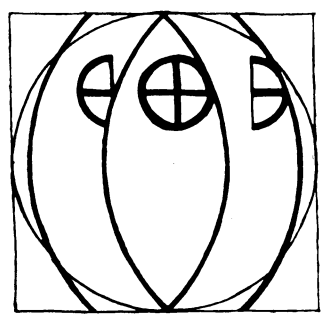
[5]Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City: Doubleday Image Books, 1960), 77 [translation modified].

[6]Augustine, *The Confessions*, 254f.

[7]Cf. Pelikan, *Fools for Christ*, 145ff.

God says to us as he said to Israel: "I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:45). To be holy means, first of all, to belong to God and, because we belong to God, we are set apart to be different and to live differently. In Leviticus, there are sets of regulations—many of them regarding diet, hygiene, and health. Others deal with central moral and religious duties and relationships to God and neighbors—reiterating or expanding on the 10 Commandments. Most of the dietary, ritual, and ceremonial laws have been set aside by the New Testament, but the interpretations of adultery, murder, and stealing can still be helpful to us today to interpret sexual ethics, as well as love and care for the neighbor. This "holiness code" from Leviticus also helps us understand what it means to live holy lives. For the Holy One who *called* us commands us to "be holy for I am holy" (1 Pet 1:15–16). So as "obedient children" we "*call* upon" (RSV "invoke") our impartial judge as "Father." That two-way "call" is the link that enables holy conduct (vv. 15 and 17)—not being conformed to former passions (v. 14).

The first eucharistic prayer in the Lutheran Book of Worship, like the *Sanctus*, expresses our awe before the Father's holiness: "Holy God, mighty Lord, gracious Father. . . ." Or again in the prayer of Hippolytus we pray the simple words, "We give you thanks, Father, through Jesus Christ, your beloved Son . . ." (*LBW Minister's Edition*, p. 226). If we do not so praise and invoke God as gracious Father, we are left, in the words of Peter, with "the One who judges impartially" (v. 17), whom Luther calls the ***hidden*** God of creation, providence, and predestination! If we do not call on the God revealed by Jesus as Father, we have only the *Deus absconditus* as judge! Praising and thanking the holy God sets us up, like Isaiah in Chapter 6, for the experience of our own unholiness. Our unrighteousness touches not only our words but our thoughts and deeds as well. The holiness code of Leviticus has a focus on sexual deeds, as does Paul's description of the degeneration of the ungodliness of humans into the unrighteousness of homosexual relations to which "God gave them up" in wrath (Rom 1:18–27). Over against such unholiness and unrighteousness, Peter calls us to "conduct yourselves in fear"—not only regarding sexual passions (v. 14; of 4:3–4) but also regarding malice, guile, insincerity, envy, and slander (2:1; cf. Rom 1:28–32).



However, it is also clear that following the regulations of the holiness code is not how we ***become*** holy. That happened when we were "ransomed from futile ways" inherited from our parents "not with silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ." Like a "lamb, without spot or blemish, destined before the foundation of the world but manifest at the end of times for your sake" (1 Pet

2:18f). Christ's "innocent suffering and death," as Luther says in the Small Catechism, "was all . . . done that I might be his own." That is where holiness starts: belonging to Jesus Christ, living under him in his Kingdom, serving him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness: these are the marks of holiness! The power for such holiness comes from confident faith in "God who raised Christ from the dead" and glorified him so that our faith may also hope in God! (v. 21) The holy God who brings life out of death can make unholy people holy. We have this hope and confidence because "Christ is risen from the dead, lives and rules eternally."

It seems clear to me that the AIDS epidemic is a "crisis" for the church in the biblical sense of "judgment." After identifying the Father as the one doing the judging (1:17), Peter announces that "the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God" (4:17). The kind of crisis of judgment we face today involves (1) a crisis of confusion. Exegetical, ethical, and theological distinctions are blurred. There may be questions about all the sins of Sodom, but the attempt at homosexual gang-rape of the angelic visitors is painfully clear (Gen 19:5–9). Equally clear is the prohibition of homosexual intercourse in Leviticus 18:22; the warning is sharp: the land will vomit you out (vv. 24–30); and the punishment is harsh (20:13). This Levitical holiness code is *law,* not gospel; it belongs to the Old Covenant and much—but not all of that code—is set aside. What is said about incest, adultery and child-sacrifice is also still true (18:6–23). Again, though one may argue about the meaning of terms in 1 Cor 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:10, Paul in Romans 1 is explicit, clear and detailed in his condemnation of homosexual behavior. I have read some feeble attempts to explain away Paul's language from context, but the text is clear: homosexual behavior—like other sins—is unrighteousness and stands under the wrath of God. But where do we go from there?

Paul says that "men committing shameless acts with men [receive] in their own persons the *due penalty* of their error" (Rom 1:27), "due penalty" connoting a kind of reciprocal transaction of action-reaction—like a tail following a dog. In that sense, venereal disease or AIDS, resultant from sexual promiscuity, is an expression of God's judgment and wrath. That is law! However, we have a word of gospel for such sinners and, indeed for all sinners.

Called to the Light

Peter speaks of (II) God's call to "declare the wonderful deeds of the One who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9). The darkness includes the "futile ways" inherited from our parents (1:18)

The crisis of judgment we face today involves a crisis of confusion.

and "the passions of your former ignorance" (1:14) which "wage war against your soul" (2:11). In that darkness of sin and death we experience no mercy or pity; in that darkness

of loneliness and hopelessness, we are alienated from God's presence and God's people. However, the wondrous light we see turns out to be the "true light who enlightens everyone" entering the world (John 1:9). Christ is not like a flashlight that can be turned off at will (cf. John 3:19–21). In Christ's light we see the light of the gospel of God's deliverance. We are called to declare and share that great good news with a world still stumbling and searching in the dark. The good news includes God's creation of a new people. As members of that new people, we are also "aliens and exiles" in this world who are to fight off the fleshly passions that attack us. The good we affirm in attitudes and actions may then glorify God "on the day of visitation" (1 Pet 2:11–12).

Thus the church's evangelistic task does not mean "full acceptance" of the homosexual person and his or her behavior, such as James Nelson called for in *Embodiment*:[8] that would mean accepting not only the sinner but also the sin. The church's message of forgiveness brings deliverance from such darkness! Paul also makes that clear in Romans 6.

The church has been stumbling around trying to find an evangelical stance toward homosexual persons—open, understanding, compassionate, non-judgmental, inclusive, etc. However, we have been speaking gospel where we should have spoken law—first decrying and defining sin, next proclaiming a gospel of deliverance, then discipling and disciplining sinners, absolving or retaining their sins! We must beware of the cheap grace that justifies sin as well as sinners.

The danger that lurks in what I am proposing is one that Paul deals with in Romans 2. He warns that "when you judge another . . . you condemn yourself" (v. 1). The point is *not* that the numerous biblical warnings against judging cancel out the biblical judgments against sins, but that we do not regard *ourselves* as final judges who can "pronounce judgment before the time" (1 Cor 4:5). Rather we stand among the accused who are also to be judged by God (Rom 3:19–20) "for all have sinned" (3:23). We deal with one another as sinners who all need God's grace and forgiveness, but that does not rule out pastoral care (1 Pet 5:2–5; 4:8; James 5:19–20) or discipline. That brings us to the next crisis and call.

Called to Blessing in Suffering

AIDS has produced for the church (2) a crisis of compassion. Recognizing the large numbers of *innocent* victims—blood transfusion recipients, health-care workers, faithful spouses infected by adulterous mates, babies born to infected mothers—as well as the promiscuous and intravenous drug-users who are *not* innocent, we must be clear that to *all* these the church has a mission of outreach. For (III) God has called us to blessing in suffering. Peter says we are to live as free people "yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil" (I Pet 2:16). He makes a clear distinction between suffering for wrongdoing and suffering for doing right (vv. 19–20; 3:17; 4:12–16). Luther's "theology of the cross" speaks to those who "suffer for righteousness' sake" and promises blessing

[8]James B. Nelson, *Embodiment* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), 197–210.

in suffering (3:14) because we "follow in [Christ's] steps" (2:21–25). This distinction between "innocent" sufferers—those who live "by the will of God" and still suffer—and those who live "by human passions" and thus face human and divine judgment (4:1–5) drives us back to Christ's cross. "Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" and God forgives our sins and accepts us for even the "innocent" are not sinless. It is sinners, not sins, that God loves and approves. For Christ died so "that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (2:24).

God's call is sometimes a call to suffering.

Whether they are "innocent" or not, the church is to help all AIDS victims get the kind of physical and spiritual care they need. If they are not Christian, we bring them the good news of Christ's salvation in the context of expressed concern and careful listening. The Service of the Word of Healing and/or the Laying on of Hands and Anointing the Sick from *Occasional Services,* as well as instruction for Baptism, can be helpful for evangelistic ministry.

Compassionate pastoral care for Christians who are AIDS victims is more complex. Helping innocent victims deal with the anger against others and God raises tough questions about the problem of evil and the innocent suffering because of and along with the guilty—tragic consequences of original sin. The resources of the healing rites, Individual Confession and Forgiveness, Holy Communion, the Psalms, Lessons and Prayers and finally the Commendation of the Dying may all be appropriate and helpful.

Much more difficult may be the approach to a gay parishioner who has contracted AIDS. I cannot begin to discuss the variety of situations and relationships that affect one's approach. All one's pastoral skill, plus prayer (and fasting!), will be needed. What is also needed is a clear sense that homosexual behavior is wrong and that the person stands in need of repentance. Rationalization on the part of the victim or the pastor—even absolution without contrite confession—is out of place. The pastor must stand ready, as a last resort, to "retain" sin if the person continues in impenitence, always remembering that the goal of such discipline is to bring repentance and reconciliation. Glossing over such sin violates one's ordination charge by giving occasion for "false security or illusory hope" (*Occasional Services,* p. 197). The warning against judging in Romans 2 is for those who think that because of their circumcision—or baptism—they can sin with impunity and still judge others (vv. 2–11). The point for all sinners is that "God's kindness is meant to lead to repentance" (v. 4).

This promise of blessing in suffering is the preface to another call to give an account, to make a defense, to explain why—especially in the midst of suffering—we have hope. Regarding one's enemies, Peter says: "Do not be afraid of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence [set apart] *Christ* as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense [to give a reason] to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, with gentleness and fear" (3:15). This is

a call to witness in the midst of suffering—something all of us probably fear we could not do. The focus of this witness is hope; the motive of this witness is the Christ who suffered and the power of this witness is the Christ who rose! "Keep your conscience clear so that when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame; for it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong" (v. 17). That is the challenge and here is the strength to meet the challenge: "Christ also died for sins once and for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (v. 18). God's call is sometimes a call to suffering, as well as blessing—sometimes suffering but always blessing, even and especially in the midst of suffering.

The third crisis AIDS has precipitated is a (3) crisis of community. This is also related to the issue of discipline—*church* discipline. Melanchthon had defined the church as the assembly of believers marked by Word and Sacrament. 16th century Reformed churches also regarded *discipline* as a mark of the church. Although the Lutheran Confessions do not designate it as a mark, Luther's Smalcald Articles explain that the power of the keys and "mutual conversation and consolation" of Christians is the gospel's "counsel and help against sin" (Part III, Article IV).[9] The discipline of "open and manifest sinners" is to lead them to repentance (cf. 2 Cor 7:9–10). However, discipline is also for the discipling and indeed the health of the community. The classic discipline text in Matthew 18 and its context demonstrate this community concern (Matt 18:5–22). Paul's dealings with the Corinthian congregation link a warning against premature judgment (1 Cor 4:5) and an exhortation to imitate him (4:16) with a seemingly harsh example of discipline (5:1–5). Paul makes it clear that Christians are to *judge* the conduct of insiders—brothers and sisters in Christ—leaving outsiders for God to judge (vv. 11–12). The warning that follows against bodily sins is because the body is "for the Lord" (v. 13), a member of Christ (v. 15), and a temple of the Holy Spirit (v. 19; cf. 3:16–17").

Israel's experience of being "broken off" God's olive tree is used by Paul as a warning to Christians (Rom 11:17–22). Peter points to Israel's experience during the exile to show the seriousness of the spiritual adultery of idolatry (1 Pet 2:10). In view in this verse is the story of the prophet Hosea, whom God told to marry a prostitute (Hos 1:2). The Lord named their third child Lo-Ammi which meant "un-people" or "no people" or "not my people"—a message to Israel: "You are not my people and I am not your God!" (v. 9) His older sister the Lord named Lo-Ruhamah meaning "unpitied" or "not pitied" or "no mercy," thus God is saying: "I will no more have pity on the house of Israel" (v. 6). Yet finally God promises: "I will have pity on 'Not pitied' and I will say to 'Not my people,' 'You are my people' " (2:23). After such a lesson, God's people should not be presumptuous about their standing before God. The priesthood of all believers becomes good news and gracious gift—not a right we take for granted. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people"—or more literally a people that has

[9]T. E. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 310.

become God's property or possession. The tacit assumption becomes gospel: "Once you were no people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy" (2:9–10).

The "common-sense" response of our society to the AIDS plague is "safe sex" i.e. use of condoms. A student writing in an alumni magazine spoke of the "boldest move" taken by the University to combat AIDS: selling condoms to undergraduates at the infirmary. Has the church anything better to say? Should pastors assist, as some have done, in the distribution of condoms, as military chaplains have also sometimes done? The military analog is appropriate because we are probably in the final phase(s) of the moral decline that seems to follow every war. But for the communal health of church and society, something other than this common-sense "safe-sex" approach is needed. Bellah warns that the new attitudes toward marriage and same sex relationships render our relationships "fragile and vulnerable."[10] With AIDS, the issue is no longer just spiritual and physical health, but life and death. It is time for the church to rediscover the "tough love" that groups like AA have learned from the Christian faith. We need to say regarding so-called "safe sex": No, it is not good enough! Chastity or marriage are the only Christian alternatives! To the promiscuous, heterosexual, or homosexual, we must say: No, your sin is destroying you and others along with you. That is suicidal and murderous. Repent and live!

The church has a message of hope in this crisis.

Jesus may not have addressed the issue of homosexuality as such but he does offer an alternative to homosexual behavior: celibacy! "There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this, receive it" (Matt 19:12). Protestants need to rediscover this answer, so that we have alternatives to present to those tempted and driven by sexual passions. Our current problem is that the church has followed the primrose path identified by Karl Menninger in *Whatever Became of Sin?* Sin was first redefined as a crime, then as a symptom of a sickness.[11] Now that the American Psychiatric Association no longer classifies homosexuality as a mental illness and most states do not make homosexual acts between consenting adults a crime, the church seems at a loss what to say. Theories suggesting homosexual orientation may have a biological basis with genetic (perhaps chromosomal) aberrations, adaptations, or at least some predisposition reinforced by psychosocial factors—these possibilities have intimidated the church! Just because something is biologically based does not mean it is part of God's will for creation, e.g. birth defects and congenital diseases. Homosexuality

[10]Bellah, *Habits of the Heart,* 110.

[11]Karl A. Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn, 1978), 25–27, 50–93.

is indeed a part of the brokenness of creation; homosexual behavior is disobedience to the Creator. Whether or not it has a biological base or is regarded as a sickness or crime, it is—according to Scripture—understood in terms of sin.

We need to come to clarity in this crisis about our (1) confusion over law and gospel, our (2) compassion in our reaching out to *all* AIDS victims, and (3) discipline in our community—for our spiritual and physical "wellness"!

Even if the "pale rider"—the fourth horseman of the Apocalypse—rides again, bringing pestilential plague in his train (Rev 6:8), the church has a message of hope in this crisis. Even to the dying, the church has a message—a word of life eternal!

Called to Glory

Finally (IV), God has called us to glory. That is described by Peter in a way that should not surprise us by now: "Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4:13). The way that leads to glory passes by way of Calvary! "If you are reproached for the name of Christ," Peter says, "you are blessed because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you!" (v. 14) Ah, now that is a new twist: it is not just a "glory road" in the sense that it leads to heavenly glory at the end. "Glory" is now. Glory is "on the road"! The "spirit of glory"—God's holy and powerful and life-giving Spirit—rests on us and goes with us!

So the road of glory we are called to is here and now. Lutherans know that it is okay to talk about a "theology of the cross" but talking about a "theology of glory" makes us nervous. This is not the glory of success we are describing, but the glory of service. Peter says: "Tend the flock of God that is in your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly" (5:2). But Peter has a further word for pastors: they are to lead, not by domineering, controlling or manipulating, but by example (v. 3). Then again comes the promise: "When the Chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory!" (5:4) Now Peter is, of course, discussing the end—the goal to which we are led, following Christ the Chief Shepherd. Then we hear this word of encouragement from Peter: "After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish and strengthen you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen" (5:10–11).

Ripples of Hope

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What in the World Are Christians For?

Christians don't appear to be any nicer, better, or more righteous than anyone else. In fact, on the personal righteousness scale, we seem to be about in the middle. Criminally destructive behavior is rare among Christians (though occasional), but, on the other hand, truly altruistic behavior seems to be no more frequent among Christians than among secular humanists.

Second, one could argue, as has been argued many times by impious but truthful souls, that religious faith can get out of hand. This applies not to Christians alone, but to the fanatically devoted of many faiths. The terrorist who drove a carful of explosives into the American embassy perhaps truly believed he was serving Allah. And we have no reason to doubt that many of the Crusaders, many of the witch-hunters, many of the Conquistadores, and many of the Inquisitors honestly believed they were serving their Lord Jesus Christ. Religious people of all faiths seem to get rather more dangerous when they set out to reform the world.

Ironically, Christians often perform their greatest service when, it seems, they do not realize what they are doing. The mysterious and sheltered monasteries of the Dark Ages turned out, in retrospect, to have been lonely sparks that managed to keep the fires of western civilization from being snuffed out. It was the polyglot group of early Christians, with their belief that everyone stood equal before God, that gave radical democracy a tenuous toehold in the subliminal consciousness of the west. And is it not ironic that the notoriously quietistic Lutherans of Northern Europe have fashioned what is perhaps among the more progressive and socially conscious political societies on earth?

In some cases where history has given Christians credit for positive social change, the situation appears more ambiguous when considered from a different perspective. History abounds with examples of good intentions later gone awry. Perhaps the most obvious is prohibition. It is hard to dispute that the world would be better without the tremendous social costs of alcohol. Yet, who would call for a return to prohibition?

Should Christians be so paralyzed by the complexities of social problems that they succumb to what Martin Luther King called

"the paralysis of analysis?" As St. Paul would undoubtedly respond, "By no means!" But it does suggest that the situations we encounter are sufficiently ambiguous that we need the clearest possible sense of who we are in order to chart more clearly our course in a world where truth is often elusive, and reality can hide behind many masks.

First, last, and always, we are Christians. Our identity is formed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. That may seem a statement of the obvious, a statement so axiomatic that one wonders what possible point could come from it. But the truth is that it is by no means easy to remember who we are. There is a cacophony of competing claims on us. Every day, we are subject to a variety of influences, some of them quite subtle, that define who we are. These influences may be bad or good, constructive or destructive. What they have in common is that they are all, to some extent, illusory. None of them is exactly true—none, that is, except the gospel. The Christian is claimed by God at baptism. No longer defined and bound solely by the categories of the world, the Christian is defined by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This definition has enormous consequences because the same gospel tells us that history has meaning and goal. The future is one of resurrection and new creation, all outward appearances to the contrary. It is those appearances, however, that form the primary world-view of modern life. Increasingly, our age seems driven to distraction and triviality by a future that appears to be going nowhere—or up in smoke. To speak of hope for new life often seems hopelessly naive when planetary disaster of one kind or another seems certain.

Significant portions of the modern world have avoided Christianity, but not necessarily because the message is foolish or naive. The modern world falls for many things that are a lot crazier than Christianity. This is not to blame the modern world, however. Rather, we assume that the gospel has power, and since the gospel is for all people, it is relevant for all people. It applies to their lives whether they know it or not. And, in fact, if they do not know it, the fault lies not with them necessarily, but with the bearers of the message. It has not been expressed in such a way that it intersects with the reality they perceive.

Apparently, we could be doing a better job of it. That there are significant portions of people, particularly in the industrialized west, for whom Christianity is nothing more than a quaint medieval artifact is a judgment on our ability to relate the story of God's work to the modern situation. Fred Buechner says that Christians are no better than anyone else, just better informed. We have been entrusted with "the story"—the story that tells the truth about who we are and what's in store. It is a great honor—the highest honor—to carry this creative and redeeming story in our words, actions, and lives. The question is how we can share that "story." How can we do better?

Jesus Saves

First of all, let us remind ourselves of some fundamentals (and perhaps reclaim a good word). God's action for us and for all is Jesus Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life. God has given us a written revelation of God's work. It is the-story-written-down—the *Holy* Bible. Let us not be confused and

distracted by the (endless) debate revolving around the merits and problems of historical criticism and the arcane world of inerrancy. But let us affirm one simple and crucial point: The Bible is true, and it accurately describes reality.

What is that reality? What is "the story"? What does the biblical story of God's action in Christ have to do with modern world views? Simply put, this: God is God. That is what the resurrection of Jesus is about. The philosopher Jean Paul has written that the dead Christ proclaims there is no god.[1] The dead Christ proclaims that death is the strongest power. The last word about existence is death.

But the resurrection asserts that death is not the final fact of the universe. In the Risen Jesus, God is revealed as God—the one who has ultimate mastery over the forces of decay and death. Death is not the last word. God is.

It is that question of "ultimate mastery" that is crucial. It means that God is not simply the creator of a universe long ago who dropped back in for a time to be killed and resurrected. It means that God is a god of the future, and that God has, in St. Paul's words, "a plan for the fullness of time."

Saved for What?

When we say that we are saved by the death and resurrection of Christ, the world might properly ask: "Saved for what?" Both the Old and New Testaments provide visions of what God has planned. There will be a new heaven, a new earth, a New Jerusalem. This tells us some important things. The whole cosmos will be transformed, not only human life. And also, the New Jerusalem is a city, a society. In addition, God will dwell with God's people in unimpeded measure. "I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people" (Isa 65:17–19).

Some might suggest that this sounds suspiciously like a theology of glory. Well, yes and no—mostly no. Luther always insisted that the *theologia crucis* is seen from this side of Easter. The Resurrected Lord is the Crucified. The Resurrection reveals God's power, and Crucifixion reveals that God's power is made perfect in weakness—the weakness of a love which spends itself for sinners.

We do indeed "preach Christ crucified," but St. Paul would never have written those words if the Crucified was not Risen. To preach the Cross alone, without the Resurrection, is to preach atheism. The Cross alone proclaims there is no god. Likewise, to preach resurrection alone, without the Cross, is to shy away from sin and remain in doubt about the extent of God's love and power. Resurrection alone proclaims that God either does not care enough about our world to enter it fully, or dares not do so. That, too, winds up in atheism.

Ripples of Eschatological Hope

What does this mean for faith and life? As stated earlier, it is precisely this: God is God. We know this on the basis of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Protestant tradition, in particular, has asserted that, because

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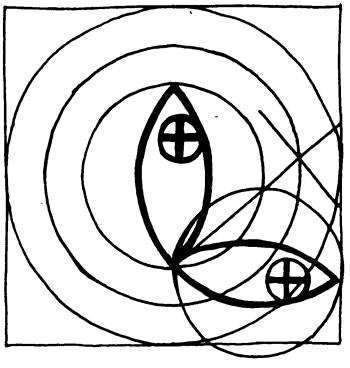
[1]Jean Paul, *Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces*, Book II (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892), 259–65. Cited in Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 84.

of this, our salvation is totally God's work, and that recognition of this truth through faith means salvation and eternal life. This interpretation has prompted some of its adherents to focus almost exclusively on individual salvation. While certainly true enough, there can be problems with this view if it is not carefully thought through. It can too easily lend itself to a world view which is essentially Gnostic. The saved are "transported" out of this world. They go "up" to heaven. The world is bad and evil to such an extent that one's focus is on getting out of it. The world is going to hell, a fate it richly deserves. But some will be rescued.

In this Gnostic view of the world, salvation is heavily spiritualized and disconnected from the corrupt material world. Modern listeners find this view unattractive, except, interestingly enough, those who are intrigued by eastern religions. More important, such a view has difficulty in credibly asserting God's love and care for creation. God so loved the world—not an idealized, spiritual world some place else. It is precisely this sinful world that God entered, and it was sinful people for whom Christ died.

A second criticism is that salvation itself becomes too future-oriented. In focusing on the world to come, one loses sight of the world today. But this criticism has somewhat less legitimacy, for a variety of reasons. First of all, depreciating the place of eternal life in the life of the Christian leads eventually to a position of hopelessness. This is because it whittles down the work of Christ, who, after all, came to bring us everlasting life. Second, it might be well to consider what possible reason a person could have for being a Christian if this faith did not offer everlasting life. One might as well be a Republican or a Shriner or a vegetarian. They at least have *some*thing to offer.

We recommend a different path, one that resurrects an emphasis on creation. Luther's view was that creation is God's gift. God provides for every need, and makes creation produce all that is necessary for life. This was not accomplished in a single grandiose act, but is rather an activity of God in every moment. God created the world "very good"—



not perfect, but very good. That is to say, the world was created with potential. God works in creation to actualize those potentialities and to direct creation toward God's future of a "new heaven and a new earth." God created out of nothing, holds the universe in existence at all times, and directs it towards God's plan for the fullness of time.

One of the aspects of creation that has been overlooked in the stress on individual salvation is the interrelatedness—the "community"—of creation. It does not take an ecologist to figure this out. Anyone raised on a farm knows that the rhythms of nature and work of the animals fit together, a complex counterpoint of actions that initiate and feed off each other.

This seems to be the way God built the world. For centuries, scientists have hunted

for an elemental building block of matter. Yet, the closer they investigate, the more they find that the subatomic world is a dizzying array of minute particles that interact with each other. Further, scientists have found that they can no longer consider themselves as simple observers. They are a part of the world they examine. Examination itself becomes an influence.

Human beings fit into this patterning. We are not strangers from outer space. In terms of genetics alone, we share in the history of our planet. We are linked in a vast chain that stretches back to the beginning and across a variety of cultures.

In the present day as well, we constantly take in information from others and from our environment. These things affect us profoundly, mostly in ways that presently are not obvious. Such a seemingly simple thing as natural light, for example, can influence our mood. Its absence can exacerbate depression, and its presence can aid in mood elevation.

Further, we are born with a need for human contact. Studies done in orphanages have shown that a baby who does not have human contact in the form of holding, touching, and attention is at risk, and may even die. As we grow up, our identity is formed partly by the messages about ourselves that we take in from others. A person who lives in an atmosphere of love and affirmation learns that the world is a positive place, and is encouraged to interact with more of it. Conversely, a person who lives in the presence of indifference and other forms of hostility is affected by that. They, quite literally, take it personally, and begin to disconnect from a world that seems hurtful and rejecting.

As we grow older, we learn work. We have a vocation. This, too, is part of creation. Luther likes to point out that our clothes do not come ready-made. The wool is taken from the sheep. It is worked with human hands, and brought to market by human effort. One could argue that this is even more true in today's industrial age than it was in Luther's time. Daily commerce in today's world is more interrelated than ever, and grows more so all the time. While it is certainly true, for example, that America values independence and self-reliance, it is also true that the mass production and mass marketing that goes into the sustenance of the modern industrial state is a highly collective enterprise.

Amid all the turmoil of the world, there is hope.

Our ego—our sense of ourselves—is created by this continual interplay between ourselves, others, and our history. It forms who we are. We need to pay more attention to this than we do. All of us play a part in each other's lives. We either build up or break down. Mostly, we do this in simple ways—the way we greet each other in the morning, the small talk over coffee, the touch on the arm or the slap on the back we give (or don't give), our sense of responsibility, integrity, and care at work. In the vast scheme of things, any one of these actions is likely to be

more important than such "major" things as the house we buy or the vote we cast for President.

Christianity teaches that God's intention in creation is frustrated by human sin through which death has been given power. Sin interferes with our relationships with each other, with the world, and with ourselves. It closes us off. This is contrary to God's will for us in creation. Thus, because of sin, we are less than human because we are less than we were created to be.

God's final answer to the problem of human sin is Jesus Christ. In Christ, God entered fully into that interconnected web of genetic and environmental relationships that is our reality. He is, literally, our brother. His death on the Cross is his sharing in the sinfulness of our world. It's what killed him.

It is easy to look back from this side of Easter and view Easter as a kind of foregone conclusion. After all, God is God, and of course, God is stronger than death. But that is a kind of discounting. Perhaps the faith of Jesus was *not* a foregone conclusion. Perhaps God took a risk in Jesus. Perhaps the salvation of our world was not just something that God did on some kind of altruistic whim. Perhaps instead, God put God's self on the line in Jesus. If Christ is not raised from the dead, then death is the final word, and God is not God.

The Resurrection reveals that God's power is greater than our sin, and greater than death. The Crucified and Risen Jesus is what our future looks like. He is the "pioneer of our salvation," and, because of him, we will be like him in the age to come.

That is why it makes more sense to envision God as God-of-the-future than God "up there." God does not enter our world as an alien. God comes to us from the future. The culmination of history is revealed in the Crucified and Risen Jesus. History has meaning and goal. The world is *not* going to hell. It is going to God.

And so, amid all the turmoil and disarray of the world we experience, there is hope. Death is not the last word about who we are and what's in store for us. Jesus Christ is.

That is the story that God has entrusted to us. As Luther said, "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." We are the stewards of that story. We are the ones "in the world" who point to Jesus Christ, and we spread his word and power in all that we are and do. We become "eschatological signs"—ripples of hope of the coming New Jerusalem. In the words of the hymnwriter, "we stand among the saints and sing the glory that we see."

Sharing, living, and being stewards of living the story is a task of life and death importance; it is how God brings God's word among us. We may consider our own lives. For most of us, that story didn't drop out of the sky. God worked through others to bring it to us. For many, our parents were the first people to share it with us. For others, it was pastors and Sunday School teachers. For still others, it was neighbors, or relatives, or a total stranger who spoke of Christ to us. In any case, God brought the story to us through others. They were "ripples of hope." Maybe they didn't realize it, but they were. Maybe their theology wasn't so great either, but the central figure—Jesus Christ—was in it. They brought the gift of eternal life to us. Even if we became Christians by reading a Gideon Bible in a Howard Johnson Motel, God used

other people to bring it to us—Jeremiah and Matthew and Paul, the translators, the nameless monks of the middle ages who preserved it, the Gideon Bible Society.

"What in the world are Christians for?" They are to circulate and live the story which God has entrusted to them, throughout and within the web of relationships that encircle the earth.

Of course there is sin and evil that continue in the world. A glance at any daily newspaper can tell us that. Yet, this world is also a place where people are saved and redeemed. In the Crucified and Risen Jesus, there is hope. Hope changes people. We don't need psychologists and doctors to tell us that (even though that is precisely what they do say.) Christians have a vision of the future,

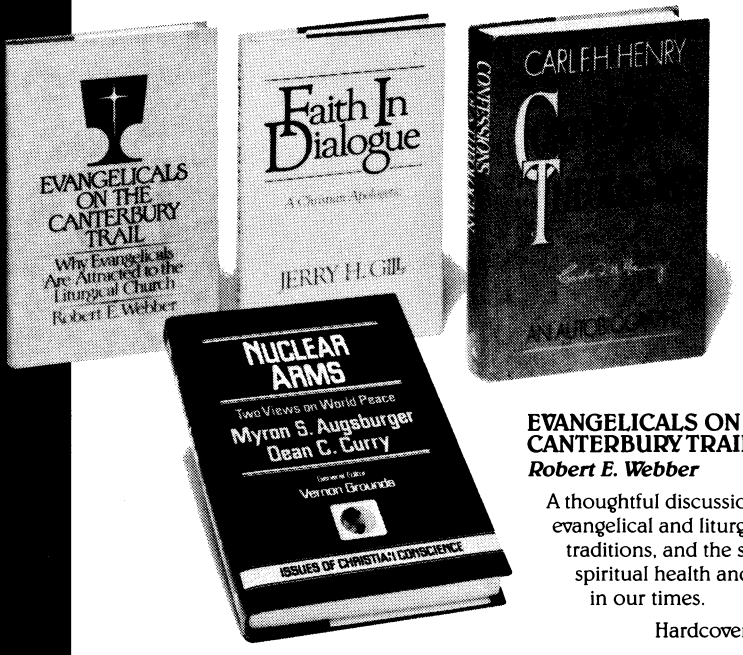
Hope can transform our world.

given to us through Jesus, that is New Jerusalem—a society, a community—in which God, who is the power of that future, will live directly with God's people.

To live in the power of the resurrection is to live as a "ripple" of that hope. The Christian life is a metaphor of the Kingdom. It is partial and fragmentary, to be sure. We are still sinners. But it is precisely our sinful lives which have been reclaimed, and been entrusted with being stewards of the gospel and a "ripple of hope" in our neighborhoods and shops and factories.

To be a "ripple of hope" means faith in Christ's death and resurrection, and it means that the Promised Land is prefigured in our lives. It means that when we engage with others and with our environment, we build up. Gifts of attention and care are exchanged in our homes and churches and among the people we encounter in the course of our daily lives—a son or daughter, a mechanic, a teacher, a store clerk, a Congresswoman. It is that vision that will finally change the world, if it will be changed. It is that hope that can transform our world so that people in all lands, and in all manner of circumstances, claim the name of the One whose power and love we proclaim. As comedian Dick Gregory used to say, "When you have something good, you don't have to force it down people's throats. They'll come and steal it from you."

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Book Reviews

RELIGIONS OF CHINA: THE WORLD AS A LIVING SYSTEM. By Daniel Overmyer. Religious Traditions of the World Series. Edited by H. Byron Earhart. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986. 125 pages. Paper. $6.95.

Daniel Overmyer's book is presented as a brief introduction to the religious traditions of China. As such, it has the drawback of being sometimes *too* brief in its discussion of religious developments in China and of their impact on contemporary life on the mainland, in Hong Kong, and on Taiwan. An unfortunate result is that the book's treatment of some important topics tends toward superficiality.

For example, the section on "Foreign Religions in China Besides Buddhism" deals with Christian and Islamic influences in a mere two pages. Although the author makes reference to these religions elsewhere, such brevity is unfair to two important traditions that have played notable roles in shaping China's religious life. Such cursory treatment also occasionally leads Overmyer to make some incorrect generalizations. He writes of Christianity at one point, "Before long, other Roman Catholic missionaries were admitted to China as well, and the church grew rapidly" (p. 55); however, it is doubtful whether at any point in the history of Christian mission in China it could be said that "the church grew rapidly."

Still, Overmyer does successfully present recurring themes in Chinese religious life such as interdependence, familial duty, and the unity of all things and thus conveys a concise understanding of Chinese world views and humanistic emphases. The book also does well at describing indigenous religion's role in the development of Chinese culture historically and so proves useful on the whole as an introduction. The book includes several black-and-white illustrations, a helpful glossary and a selected reading list.

Wi Jo Kang
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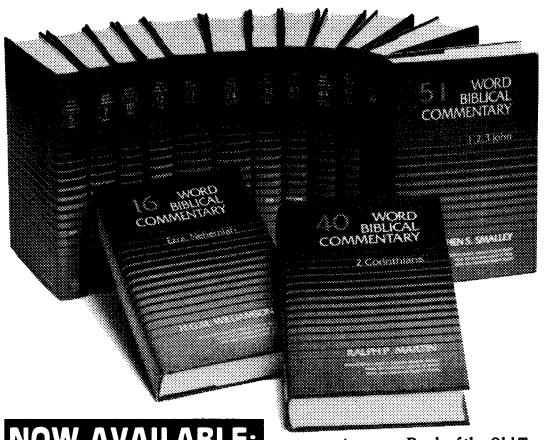
LIBERATION THEOLOGY: FROM CONFRONTATION TO DIALOGUE. By Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff. Translated by Robert R. Barr. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986. viii and 100 pages. Paper. $8.95.

Leonardo Boff, a Franciscan, and his brother, Clodovis Boff, a member of the Order of Servants of Mary, have provided us with a brief but insightful defense of the theology of liberation. The book consists of three sections: I. "Liberation Theology" by Clodovis Boff; II. "Dialogue" by Leonardo and Clodovis Boff; III. "Summons to Rome: A Personal Testimony" by Leonardo Boff and "The Values of Resistance" by Clodovis Boff.

In his "Personal Testimony" to the official, polemical reaction to his *Church—Charism and Power: Essays in Militant Ecclesiology,* 1981, Leonardo Boff provides a helpful summary of what it means to do theology that is premised on a "commitment to the poor, to the profound social changes that are so necessary, and to the liberation of the oppressed":

> It means to "think God" as the One who maintains an intimate involvement with the human journey in search of higher and more excellent forms of fellowship and communion in justice, peace, and participation. And it means "thinking the human pilgrimage,"

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> marked by such iniquity, along with such generosity, in the light of God and his historical revelation in the Old and New Testaments, a revelation preserved in the historical Christian community of today. Theology can represent one of the most estimable forms—the most excellent, surely—of the identification of human destiny in history and in the realm of the transcendent (p. 90).

Throughout this work, the reader is constantly reminded that the theology of liberation is a theology of a preferential option for the poor. It is in the poor that authentic encounter with God occurs. "It is the boast of the poor, not the rich," Clodovis Boff tells us, "that Jesus belonged to their social and economic class." Jesus' death was therefore a consequence of his preferential option for the poor. "Jesus is the historical *victim of a plot laid by the mighty* of his time. . . . [I]t was by *this* route, death on a cross, that the Son of God revealed and realized the salvation of human beings" (C. Boff, pp. 26–27).

The reader will search in vain for a precise definition of faith: how it is both gift worked in us by the Holy Spirit and response of trust. Yet, there are suggestions as to what faith is. For example, Clodovis Boff writes: "The grand inspiration of liberation theology's specific endeavor is the correct 'partial' identification of social liberation with salvation, and the correct subordination of the former to the latter—the correct interrelationship between praxis and faith" (p. 24). In the end the call to conversion, of both persons and structures, both within the Church and without, is a call not to create faith, but to live out radical trust in God, who was incarnated in Jesus, so that structures that enslave and dehumanize are transformed into ones that conduce to concrete expressions of human liberation.

This little book will undoubtedly provoke further thinking (and action?) among lay and clergy about what it means to confess, in a world plagued by poverty, hunger, oppression, and exploitation, that indeed Jesus the Christ has come into this world to give life in all its fullness.

Winston D. Persaud
Wartburg Theological Seminary
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THE RESTLESS HEART: THE LIFE AND INFLUENCE OF ST. AUGUSTINE. By Michael Marshall. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987. 152 pages. Cloth. $19.95.

The sixteen-hundredth anniversary of St. Augustine's baptism at the Easter Vigil of 387 C.E. in Milan has prompted several gatherings and publications, including this slender illustrated biography by the Anglican Bishop Michael Marshall. The author admits that his book's highest ambition is to "fire others to read Peter Brown's biography" (p. 8), his principal and dominating source. Good advice. Marshall's own book will appeal to those who wish a quicker overview of Augustine's life, accompanied by the sixty photographs of ruins and artwork taken by the Bishop's companion on his pilgrimage through North Africa and Italy, the Rev. Charles Bewick. The title's promise of "influence" applies only to Augustine's own lifetime. Since the text itself is completely dependent upon Peter Brown's magisterial *Augustine of Hippo,* interested pastors and literate lay people would save time and money with a paperback Brown.

Paul Rorem
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Preaching Helps

First Sunday in Advent—Second Sunday after Christmas, Series B

Mantles and Coping

George Hoyer has cast his mantle on me, and some day I may be able to cope with it. Maybe. I have not yet seen George ascend into heaven in whirlwind and fiery chariot, nor do I crave that vision any time soon. I really cherish his hanging on and hanging around. So even though I sorely need it, it turns out to be unkind and mean for me to lust after a double measure of his Spirit!

As I take up the task laid down by George I appreciate anew the contribution he has made for the past 14 years. That many? Yes, that many. Deserving of a triple "Selah" at minimum!

George's way of doing "Preaching Helps" reflected his vocation as preacher and teacher of preaching—one of the best, I may add, for the sake of those two or three of you out there who did not know that.

My way of doing "Preaching Helps," at least here at the beginning, will reveal that I am a different person, found more often at a desk or in an exegetical classroom than in a pulpit.

I say "here at the beginning" because this may change as you chat back at me. But I hope to offer resources, raw material, stuff freshly dug from the mine, before too much sifting and refining.

For now the stuff will fall into three or four classes:

1) Exegesis or let's call it A FIRST READING OF THE TEXTS.

2) A second reading, PASTORAL REFLECTIONS. The texts start to read the reader. In this issue the Reflections come from the heart and head of Donna Duensing, Pastor of St. James Lutheran Church in Richmond, California.

3) PROPHETIC WORD. Someone working in a special ministry, rubbing shoulders with the disenfranchised or marginalized, rereads the texts and shares thoughts about peace and justice, about politics and the economy. For the past few years Don Prange, Pastor in Nora, Virginia, has been publishing

"Perspectives on Economic Justice," commenting on the lectionary from the perspective of his work with Appalachian Ministries in Economic Justice. We offer short excerpts. Write him at Box 311, Nora, VA 24272 to receive the full treatment.

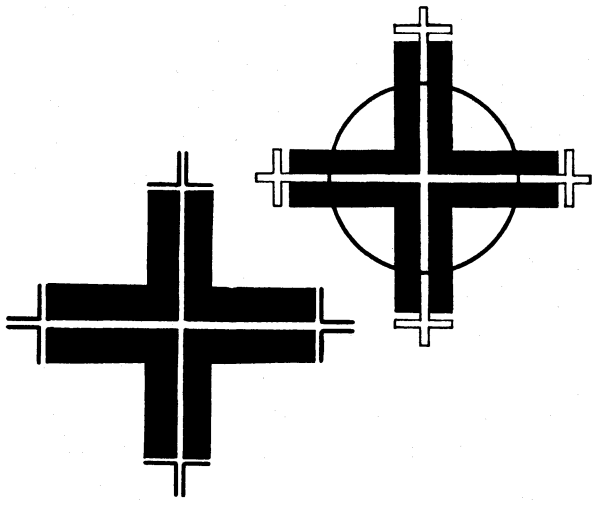
4) OTHER VOICES, a few lines crafted by some known writer, ancient or modern, or some writer who deserves our knowing.

These are tentative moves, not taken lightly, but still tentative. Thanks are due to colleague Michael Aune for input already given and also promised for the future. And I cordially invite your ideas and contributions. Warning: Because of the lead time involved in producing the journal, any comment you ship off to me the very day you read this (say late September, early October) cannot have an impact before the February or even the April issue. So don't delay!

Who knows? With a little bit of help from my friends, friends of the Good Word, I may be able at least to start dragging George's mantle around behind me, like a kind of security blanket, even if my shoulders will not yet bear its full weight.

With best wishes for your Good Words!

Robert H. Smith
Preaching Helps Editor



Advent: Story Time and Real Time

"The Sanctification of Time" is the title of an intriguing set of paragraphs in the *Manual on the Liturgy*. The context of the phrase is a discussion of worship at the opening and close of day. Worship at dawn and at dusk "sanctifies or redeems time by transforming our experience of it."

What is our unsanctified, unredeemed experience of time? We are told that it is full of "absurdities and frustrations."

Certain moderns, like playwright Samuel Beckett, insist on absurdity and ridicule the human habit for talking about the "story" of the universe or the human "story." They say there is no "story." All our talk of "story" has as much reality as the emperor's talk about his new clothes. Human beings impose their arbitrary patterns on the welter of events, the explosion of events, the billions upon billions of events occurring daily to unnumbered human beings throughout our world.

Beckett and company, wanting to be realists, affirm absurdity and deny the existence of meaningful connections. They say we only invent stories and concoct connections to keep from going stark, raving mad. There actually is no story, they say, and that is the same as saying there is no God.

Back to the aim of worship as "the sanctification of time." Worship at daybreak and at sundown, worship at high noon and deepest midnight, worship through the cycle of the hours and worship through the year of grace stretching from the first Sunday in Advent through the last Sunday in Pentecost is an act of faith. Beckett's right about that! Christians have seized upon a single complex moment amid the nearly infinite number of moments. We seize upon Jesus of Nazareth and say, "He is Alpha and Omega, the Living One; he died and behold he is alive forevermore, and he holds the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev 1:17–18). Or rather, that One has seized us and will not let us go.

So worship sanctifies, redeems time. Ordinary time is "restored as a time of communion with God." The *Manual* explains that time at worship is a chunk of life "in which our entire vocation and service are intensified and seen in a larger context."

More than that, the Church Year itself is sacramental. It seizes worshipers and connects us with the life of Jesus Christ, a real life in real time, rubs our noses in his life and in his time, beams us up into his life for a few moments, a few hours, gives us the feel of really human and really divine life, sacrificial but undying life, coaxes and woos us into trying on that life, into confessing and living that life.

The Church Year is a story, full of strange adventures and acts of daring, full of poetry and parables, full of faith and imagination, and yet it is not a romance or concoction of fevered brains. It is the truth. It stands in honest conflict with the story that there is no story and in conflict with a host of alternative stories by which human beings order their thinking and their living and their hoping: stories of national or racial destiny, stories of hard work and eventual success. "Rocky" and "Rambo" are simple-minded variations on basic American stories. The drama of the Church's Year presents a story at once more honest and more satisfying. RHS

First Sunday in Advent November 29, 1987

Psalm 80:1–7
Isaiah 63:16b–17; 64:1–8
1 Corinthians 1:3–9
Mark 13:33–37

"Your Power, O Lord!"

A FIRST READING

We call *Mark 13:33–37* "the Gospel" for the day, but is it good news? Is it even a unit? It is a segment introduced by a word so odd, so embarrassing, so intractable, that it has been simply omitted from the lection. But maybe we need the hard word. Jesus said, "Of that day or that hour (of the end and climax of history when heaven and earth as we know them will pass away)—of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

What's going on here? Maybe Jesus does not want to know the time of the end. Or maybe he knows something more important. His final words about the end have nothing to do with calculating the time, nothing about trying to figure out how near or far we are from the end. Even though that is a favorite indoor sport of many American Christians. No timetable. What then? A summons to watchfulness.

And this is not just the old business of the song, "You better watch out, you better not pout, Santa Claus is coming to town."

Jesus tells a parable and it can surely be taken in different ways. A man going on a journey leaves servants behind with various tasks. To the doorkeeper he says, "Be ready to jump up and open the door when I return. Don't go to sleep on me and make me stand outside in the dark, banging and shouting to get into my own house. Watch!"

A tough parable. It compares the people of God to servants set to all kinds of menial tasks in a lordly manor, and the Lord of the house talks the way lords and masters usually talk: bossy.

But it is a parable. Christians are not literally slaves and doorkeepers, and Jesus is not literally a petty tyrant or landowner.

Watch! The Good News is that we are not where we moderns are often tempted to imagine we are: alone in a world that seems on the brink of darkness or destruction. Nor is our world running itself like some monstrous and exotic piece of machinery. The cosmos is no clockwork orange. Something—Someone—is there, worth watching and waiting for.

The good word is that we are not alone, not adrift on the cosmic sea, not specks of dust blown along by a wind coming from no place and headed nowhere. We are something like servants awaiting the return of Jesus Christ, who is something like the temporarily absent master of an estate. It would be a big mistake to take the parable as a literal description of how things are, and it would be a bigger mistake to imagine that we are alone, unseen, unknown, adrift, and heading nowhere.

Pictures of the end of history, views of the future offered by moviemakers and even those produced by well-meaning American evangelists often sound like science fiction. The Lessons for Advent 1 do not teach a timetable nor do they offer a set of instructions about bizarre events that must unroll one by one in the future. They address the children of God, reminding them of who they are, calling them to examine their hopes and fears, edit their hoping and their striving: What are we looking for? What do we ache and yearn for? And what are we afraid of? To the Hopeful: Examine your hoping. And to the Hopeless: The universe is house-like, and the Master is coming.

And if we ask, "What is the coming Master like?" We can turn for answers to the whole Gospel of Mark preceding this paragraph, where Jesus heals the sick, cleanses the lepers, casts out demons, feeds the hungry. Or to the

close of the Gospel, following this paragraph, and watch this same Jesus going to death, giving his life as a ransom for the many. Or the words of Isaiah and Paul fill in the blanks.

Isaiah 63:16b–17; 64:1–8. Israel's hope is both fulfilled and unfulfilled. The faithful have returned to Jerusalem from their terrible captivity. But Jerusalem and the Temple are a heap of ruins. Where is the hoped-for new reality, the new world, the new creation fresh from the hand of God? The prophet is at the end of his rope, near despair.

63:15. God is not listening, has turned away, is looking in the wrong direction. "Over here, God!" "Look down from heaven and see!"

64:1. The prophet prays God to tear apart the sky, remove the distance, destroy the barrier between humanity and God. Descend to earth!

If God would grant that prayer, what would happen? How would we sense God's presence? At God's coming the rocks of the mountains would quake. The presence of God would be felt the way dry brush feels the presence of fire, the way water signals the presence of fire by its own boiling. The action the prophet really wants is for God to make "the nations" tremble.

64:3. Once God did come down, and the mountains quaked—at a time when God's people did not even ask for it. But now the prophet is begging.

64:4–5. Then the prophet begins to define "waiting for God." It means to "remember thee in thy ways." It means "joyfully working righteousness."

With that definition in mind, the prophet confesses that God's absence and anger are justified, for the people have sinned. All our so-called righteous deeds are like polluted rags, disgusting. Because of sin, the people fade like autumn leaves. Our own sin is like a wind that blows the leaves away.

The Lesson is bounded fore and aft with the same confession: God is "Father" (63:16; 64:8), a name somewhat out of favor these days. The point is that we have not made ourselves and we are not alone. God took clay of the earth and formed us, as a potter forms vessels. Our lives are in the hands of a creating and caring God.

1 Corinthians 1:3–9. It would require pages to discuss the subtle irony of Paul who here loads the opening paragraph of his letter to Corinth with his entire case against the Corinthians. Instead focus on an Advent motif. "You wait," he says. Something is coming. We wait for "the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" who feeds and upholds us to the end, and in the end will enable us to stand and to live. The end is his "day," not the day of death or the day of evil or the day of monstrous destruction—but his own day, "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." RHS

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

Planning Advent worship and the sanctification of time, the pastor may be all too keenly aware of the role of the servant left behind to watch. It can feel as though we are the only servant watching for Christ's coming. Going down with the count . . . 26, 25, 24 shopping days till Christmas . . . the rest of the world is all caught up in Christmas, not Advent. Shopping, parties, card lists, frantic preparations intrude into this quiet season of hope. And members get exasperated with a pastor who is such a traditionalist as to call them to observe this out-moded season of Advent! Many parishioners are filled with feelings of "hope gone numb." Thanksgiving was reality therapy for many families. The empty chair left by the death of a loved one stands as witness to unanswered prayers. As another holiday approaches, divorced couples steel themselves for the warring over who gets to have the children on which days. Singles feel left out with all the talk of family and togetherness. Maybe the old slogan is best: "Blessed are they who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed."

Will God intervene in the here and now? Too often it appears that God is an absent landlord letting our lives deteriorate. "O, that you would rend the heavens and come down!"

Some in the pews are full of hope of a kind that deflects them from watching for Christ's advent. They have escaped into the fantasy world and sentimentality of TV's Christmas specials. They will surround their families with things, the giving and receiving of things, and seal themselves off from any other hope.

The prayer is serious: "Stir up your power, O Lord, and come! Protect us by your strength and save us from . . . our turning away from God, our isolation, our things, our distractions, our false hopes."

Even before we ask, God answers. Good News breaks in. Time is sanctified, and so we are the waiting servants. Preacher and parishioners, with all their hopes and complaints, are already in the hands of a creating, caring God, who formed us as lovingly as a skillful potter.

We are "sustained to the end," and so we wait and watch for the coming Christ, the Bringer of hope to people who long for the Good Word. We servants will be empowered to awaken all who secretly yearn for the transformation of their ordinary hopeless time. We will discover that we are not the only waiters and watchers after all. The windows of the house are filled with faces bright with expectation . . . looking for the Coming One. DD

PROPHETIC WORD

What's our perspective as we prepare to celebrate "kingdom of God" in the context of our church and worship life—or in our work and public life? The perspective of Isaiah 63 and 64 is that of political prisoners and political exiles. Our own political and economic situation contributes to how we see "kingdom of God" and what kind of Lord we expect to be revealed.

What kind of Lord do those living under oppression and injustice wait for? Nowhere in Scripture is the Lord the champion of the oppressor. God enters the struggles of life only as the Lord of the oppressed. And the kind of Lord they are led to anticipate is a Lord of revolution, a Lord creating "new heavens and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17). To expect anything else is almost heresy. DP

OTHER VOICES

"It is usually said that sin in its original form is wanting to be as God. But that is only the one side of sin. The other side of such pride is hopelessness, resignation, inertia and melancholy. . . . Among the sinners whose future is eternal death in Rev 21:8, the 'fearful' are mentioned before unbelievers, idolaters, murderers and the rest. For the Epistle to the Hebrews, falling away from the living hope, in the sense of being disobedient to the promise, in time of oppression, . . . is the great sin which threatens the hopeful on their way" (Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope,* 22).

Second Sunday in Advent December 6, 1987

Psalm 85
Isaiah 40:1–11
2 Peter 3:8–14
Mark 1:1–8

"Shed light on our path"

A FIRST READING

Mark 1:1–8. This short unit begins and ends with prophecy. Mark's Gospel does not open with a genealogy (Matthew) or with a historical preface presenting the author's credentials (Luke) or with a hymn or meditation on the Word of God (John).

Mark announces the goal and climax of history. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, that

goal is the coming of the Lord, coming to be with God's people, oppressed by foreign captors and feeling like anything but the people of God. Indeed they felt "forsaken," and that word also aptly describes the feeling of the Christians for whom Mark first wrote (cf. Mark 15:34).

Mark recalls how Second Isaiah prophesied the coming of another prophet, another voice, at the end of the time of forsakenness. And John the Baptizer came fulfilling that prophecy, already more than 500 years old. And then John as the prophesied voice spoke up and uttered his own prophecy. After all, the voice was to come to prepare the way of the Lord. So John prophesied the coming of one infinitely stronger and more worthy than himself, one who would douse people not with earthly matter like Jordan's water but with the heavenly stuff of the Holy Spirit.

But the Holy Spirit, Breath of God, Whirlwind of God, is strong stuff. What does it mean that God will once more, as on creation's first morning, breathe upon the world, brood over the universe, sighing and pouring out Holy Breath, Holy Wind?

Isaiah 40:1–11. "Comfort, comfort my people" with the news that her time of bondage and days of punishment are over. "Speak tenderly," to the heart, lover to beloved. God is coming not to chastise, not to destroy, no more to punish. Days of punishment are at an end. Enough!

A voice announces a new Exodus, not from Egyptian slavery but from years of captivity in Babylon. The voice cries, "Build the way of the Lord straight across the desert; prepare a highway for our God. Fill the valleys, cut the mountains, and make the roadway smooth."

And the glory of the Lord seen at Sinai and at the tabernacle and temple (Ex 14:4, 18; 40:34–35; 1 Kings 8:10–12) will be revealed and all flesh, all beings, will see it together (Ps 96:3, 7–8; 97:6).

But the people are grass. When the breath of the Lord blows upon it, the grass withers and the flower fades. Can the people endure the coming of the Lord?

God's glory burns with a terrible intensity, but God's coming is all joy. The word of God's approach is good tidings, gospel. Let Zion and Jerusalem say to all the cities of Judah, "Behold your God." "Your God comes." God comes with might, and with rewards. God will feed his flock like a shepherd, gather the lambs in his arms, carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Isaiah spoke gospel to Jerusalem and Judah 2500 years ago, and both John and Jesus, Forerunner and Fulfiller, came long after Isaiah and long before our own day, nearly 2000 years in the past. Where is the glory? Where the salvation of the Lord? When will God break out of hiddenness so that we will see, instead of bad days and evil times, "the day of the Lord"? Faithful in every generation raise the cry (*2 Pet 3:8–14*). And their old answers to that old question may help us. "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." The delay is a sign not of God's indifference but of divine patience. Such arguments and musings may or may not impress us, but the vision of the goal of history retains its power to grip the imagination and shape daily life: "We wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." RHS

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

"Prepare the Way!" Preparations, preparations, preparations! If only one day *were* like a thousand years! Maybe there would be time!

Make the paths straight? In an age of freeways that promote our rushing nowhere fast, these words work better back there in biblical times than here and now. Straight paths and faster trips just mean we encounter fewer people on our way. In fact our straight paths are quick ways to get from one conflict in our lives to another. And in our rush we easily make a mess of yet another relationship.

"Comfort, comfort ye my people." These are the words of the Coming Sovereign, full of divine patience, waiting for us to come to our senses, eager for us to stop rushing away from genuine comfort.

A fit of impatience sometimes seizes us, and we begin to think that church and world most of all need a tongue-lashing such as John the Baptist knew how to give, and a whole lot of water to wash out the dirt. But the prophet says "Comfort." And that reminds us that even John the Baptist spoke of the coming one as mightier, greater, different. He will do better than destroy us in a flood of water; he will baptize us with the Holy Spirit.

The same Spirit created light on the world's first morning. The Power who brings light out of darkness, universe out of nothingness, will wash over us and fill us. That Power will "shed light on our path" and make sense in a nonsense world. The wind of this Spirit will blow out the brush fires of conflict in our lives, and will bring the warming fire and light of divine Power for cold and dark December days.

With almighty gentleness God will accomplish our repentance. The word will come tenderly, wooingly. Our warfare is ended. Our iniquity is pardoned. God comes to gather us in comforting arms. DD

PROPHETIC WORD

Waiting for the coming of the Lord, either in the here and now or ultimately, at the end of the world, requires a special kind of preparation. To paraphrase Peter a bit, in view of a Lord who promises to come with power to subdue oppressors and to liberate the oppressed, what kind of preparations ought we be making?

John the Baptizer speaks of revolution, doesn't he? That is what "repentance" is all about, putting the past behind and being opening to a new future. Now if the values of society are rooted in racist, sexist, classist principles, what kind of preparations are we making to celebrate the coming of the Lord?

If the economics of a society are not geared first of all to meeting human need and caring for the creation, and are instead exploiting human labor and destroying natural resources, what kind of preparations ought we to be making to celebrate the coming of the Lord? How are we repenting and preparing for the kingdom of God? DP

OTHER VOICES

"The late Erich Fromm once wrote, 'Those whose hope is weak settle for comfort or for violence.' The comfort of consumerism and the violence of militarism which dominate our times would suggest that we are a people with little or no hope" (Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing,* 18).

Third Sunday in Advent December 13, 1987

Luke 1:46b–55
Isaiah 61:1–3, 10–11
1 Thessalonians 5:16–24
John 1:6–8, 19–28

"Wisdom to see your purpose"

A FIRST READING

Isaiah 61:1–3, 10–11. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Does the prophet speak of himself, of the messianic king (Isa 11:1–2), of the people as a whole (Joel 3; Zech 12:10), or of another? The earliest Christians said: "Another!" Isaiah prophesies the coming of the incomparably great Other, at the climax of history, who would say, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . ." (Luke 4:18–19).

And what is the mission of the one anointed

by the Spirit? To bring good news (Isa 40:9; 41:27) to the afflicted, to bind up the brokenhearted (not just bind the wounds of the physically wounded but bring salves and ointments to cure broken hearts and broken hopes), to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of prison. Prisoners of war dragged into terrible captivities are set free, and great rejoicing results. Out of dark dungeons into freedom's light. It is the promised Year of Jubilee, universal amnesty (Isa 49:8).

They exchange ashes and mourning and a faint spirit for garlands of flowers, oil of gladness, and "glad rags" (garments of rejoicing and praise). The Lord strips tattered rags from the prisoners and clothes them with garments of salvation, robes of righteousness, like brides and grooms in wedding finery (Isa 54:1–10; Jer 33:11; Rev 19:6–9; Matt 22:11–14).

John 1:6–8, 19–28. This is John the Baptist's story. But it is told largely in negatives. He is not the light, not the Christ, not Elijah, not the prophet. He is the voice, a witness, one pointing away from himself to another.

And he deals in signs of things past and things to come, signs like pouring water on people. His baptizing reminds of creation's watery and chaotic beginnings, of Noah and the flood, of Moses and the Red Sea, Joshua and the Jordan. And that water makes people think of new creation and new exodus and raises questions: "Why are you baptizing?"

John freely confesses that he is only the Great Baptizer's advance agent. He does not himself bestow the Spirit but is only one who knows where the Spirit is, where the life of God is, where newness of life is to be found. Such knowledge is a precious gift!

The Gospel ends abruptly before John's positive words of testimony to Jesus as Lamb of God, as pre-existent, as bearer of the Spirit.

In *1 Thessalonians 5:16–24* Paul admonishes us, "Do not quench the Spirit." The Forerunner has spoken, the Great Baptizer (Jesus) has come, and, no matter how unaltered the face of the world may seem, the Spirit has been poured out in history. It is tempting to complain of God's ineffectiveness in history, or of our sense of being alone and forsaken. But the lessons point to the Creative Power and Spirit of God poured out in history in Jesus and to our task of receiving the gift and nurturing every sign of God's presence and life, as we wait for the full unveiling of God's victory "at the coming of Jesus Christ."

John the Baptist spoke some powerful "Noes." But now God has spoken not only "in Jesus" but has "spoken Jesus" as everlasting "Yes." And it is time for the church to don the garments of praise and rejoicing, and not quench the Spirit or despise with our complaining what God has already given. RHS

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

Finally John the Baptist stopped spouting, "I am not, not, not . . ." and hinted at the coming of the Great Other: "There is one among you." "Don't look at me," he says. "Look! There is one among you, and you don't even know him."

This season also offers its hints of the new age, its odd moments that make us hope for the coming reign of Christ. People who normally don't care about the homeless, the shut-ins, the prisoners, begin to reach out to them. The evening news brings stories of compassion almost daily. Offerings of toys, food, clothing, and money mount up. Signs of sharing break out in a greedy society. But it never brings the promised Year of Jubilee. When the Christmas trimmings come down, the reality of January moves in with its blues and bills, and the poor and the needy are again forgotten. Once more Christmas comes and goes, and we seem as far from the kingdom as ever.

But John says, "There is one among you." Isaiah paints him as bringer of justice. He offers the afflicted and brokenhearted something more than the temporary fix of holiday distraction, more durable than the dead Christmas

tree that gets tossed out before December ends. This One brings the year of the Lord's favor, forgiveness for debtors, freedom for prisoners, garments of salvation for all the oppressed.

"There is one among you." But do we really want his presence? And are we ready for his fuller coming? Maybe we are comfortable without him, at ease with the usual arrangement whereby the "haves" live at the expense of the "have-nots." But we know that is not the justice of his kingdom. So we pray, "Grant us the wisdom to see your purpose and the openness to hear your will." DD

PROPHETIC WORD

Strip-mining, clear-cutting the forests, maximizing profits, policing the Persian Gulf. Are these the infallible marks of the American Revolution? To "love justice" and to "hate robbery and all that is wrong" (Isa 61:8) is our true "revolutionary" heritage as people with roots in Scripture and in the American experience. John the Baptizer prepared the way for people to begin thinking about just such revolutionary concepts. His life style was simple, and he proclaimed values which contradicted and transcended the status quo. When voices like John's appear out of the wilderness today—from Appalachia, from Native Americans, from Blacks, from Chicanos—from Third World nations such as Namibia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, or even Cuba—we must remember Paul's word of caution to the Thessalonians: "Never try to suppress the Spirit or treat the gift of prophecy with contempt; think before you do anything. . . . Hold on to what is good and avoid every form of evil." DP

OTHER VOICES

"There is no less danger and darkness in the Gospel than there is in the Brothers Grimm, but beyond and above all there is the joy of it, this tale of a light breaking into the world that not even the darkness can overcome. That is the Gospel, this meeting of darkness and light and the final victory of light. That is the fairy tale of the Gospel with, of course, the one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that the claim made for it is that it is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still" (Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth,* 90).

Fourth Sunday in Advent December 20, 1987

Psalm 89:1–4, 14–18
2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16
Romans 16:25–27
Luke 1:26–38

"And serve you always."

A FIRST READING

The Oracle of Nathan (2 Sam 7; cf. 1 Chr 17:1–27) plays with the word "house." David lived in a house of cedar, a regular palace, but the ark of the covenant still languished in a portable tent. David decided that he would do something for God: he would build a temple, replacing the old tent, constructing something solid, substantial, impressive. Of course it was also something for David. David's project was to build himself a kingdom like other kingdoms, with palace fit for a king and temple fit for a god. David wanted to identify God with his own person and his own family. Jerusalem was David's city, and David wanted to shore up his

city and his own rule by establishing the permanent residence of God in his city. He would get God on his side.

God countered. God also has a project. He would build a house. He would take David, egotism and all, and make him into a truly extraordinary "house" or dynasty, surpassing all earthly royal houses, all human dynasties. God promised to lay creative hands on David and bring forth from him and his descendants a throne surpassing all thrones, a house or kingdom or throne that would endure for every.

David had a dream in which God had a little part; God had a dream in which David had a little part.

Luke 1:26–38. God's dream began to come true a thousand years after David when Gabriel appeared to Mary announcing: "You, Mary, will have a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be called the Son of the Most High, and God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob, over the people of God, for ever. His kingdom, his rule, his sovereignty will have no end."

Fully accepting, Mary was still full of questions: "How can any of this be? How can I have a child? How can my child become the mighty Son of God and ruler of the universe?" Answer: The Holy Spirit, the power of the Most High, will overshadow you. In other words, God will intervene in history to shape events. Then the archangel puts it another way: "With God nothing will be impossible." That is in fact a theme of Luke-Acts from start to finish. People constantly find themselves in hopeless situations, and God keeps rescuing them. Hatred, persecution, beatings, jailings, shipwrecks, stonings—God steps in and brushes aside opposition. Jesus' birth in the beginning and his resurrection from the tomb at the end are miracles of God bracketing his life, miracles with a message of hope for every reader.

As Paul says (*Rom 16:25–27*), the life of Jesus is "the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages." In that life, bracketed by miracles, a miracle itself, people are permitted to pull aside the veil and to stare straight into the heart and mind of God. And we see the mystery of God's own working in contrary and small ways, in a young maiden of Nazareth, in the fresh and fragile life stirring in her womb. And God's working is gracious and powerful, whatever the appearances. RHS

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

Houses are symbols of security and well-being. Where and how we live says a lot about who we are. Most of us would have had the same reaction as Nathan when he heard David's plan to build God a house of fine cedar. "Just like my own," said David. "Great idea," said Nathan.

But overnight God changed Nathan's mind, and God altered all the plans of David. First God made clear just who has been in charge all along: "I took you from the pasture . . . I have been with you . . . I will care for you in the future." David is not in charge of God's life or God's dwelling. On the contrary! God declares, "I will make you a house."

David's intentions were good enough. But his tendency, like our own, is to forget just who is in charge around here. We get all wrapped up in ourselves and begin to think that God lives like us, looks like us, acts like us, and thinks like us. Surely God shares our hard-working, middle-class, white American values. Certainly our God does not want to live in a tent, in temporary quarters, on welfare or skid row!

Where and how people live says a lot about them. And God sets us straight. "You don't build me a house. You don't control me or plan my life. And I don't conform to your style. I will build you a house. I will come and dwell with you."

And so God comes. "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you." God chooses to make God's home in the womb of a poor young girl

from Nazareth. "How can this be?" This is no place for God!

But the angel rearranges Mary's thinking, and Mary declares herself willing to be God's handmaid, however God may choose to use her.

To move from the style and thinking of King David to that of lowly Mary takes divine intervention, and so we pray, "Stir up your power, O Lord, and come. Take away the hindrance of our sins and make us ready." DD

PROPHETIC WORD

The Virgin Birth is not a demonstration of the supernatural. Rather it is a demonstration of the natural instinct of God to respond in a revolutionary manner to conditions of injustice and oppression. One of the major contradictions in contemporary American political life (to say nothing of a similar attitude in ecclesiastical institutions) is the manner in which people who supposedly possess good will can rationalize their way out of the revolutionary imperatives of the kingdom of God by limiting their talk to "the art of the possible." A major truth of Luke's narrative is the revolutionary principle that "with God nothing is impossible." DP

OTHER VOICES

"Hope alone is to be called 'realistic,' because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught. . . . The world is full of all kinds of possibilities, namely all the possibilities of the God of hope. Christian hope sees reality and mankind in the hand of him whose voice calls into history from its end, saying, 'Behold, I make all things new,' and from hearing this word of promise it acquires the freedom to renew life here and to change the face of the world" (Jürgen Moltman, *Theology of Hope,* 25–26).

Christmas Day
December 25, 1987

Psalm 97
Isaiah 52:7–10
Hebrews 1:1–9
John 1:1–14

"Set us free"

A FIRST READING

Isaiah 52:7–10. Wake up! Listen! A messenger runs on the mountains shouting for all to hear, "Peace." How beautiful to hear, "Your God reigns." For people condemned to live in waste places, in the rubble left by the scourge of war, that really is "good tidings of good." "Your God reigns" is the opposite of "Your enemies reign" or "Evil reigns." The place of destruction has become the Lord's own throne room.

Watchmen on the shattered city walls pick up the cry and sing for joy as they see the return of the Lord to Zion. (52:1–2. The city is called to get up out of the dust, cast off its chains and its servile behavior; wash faces and don garments of beauty.) For the Lord has comforted the people (Isa 40), has redeemed Jerusalem. At a time when all the nations taunted Jerusalem with mock mourning as though Jerusalem were a corpse (Isa 52:3–6; Ps 42:11), the Lord bared his holy arm and displayed salvation in the sight of all nations.

John 1:1–14. Meditation, hymn, soaring prose? In any case this grand opening to the Gospel according to St. John penetrates behind the events of the first Christmas: instead of talk of the birth of a child it speaks of the sudden appearance in our world of God's own true voice and word; instead of a trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem it talks of movement from heaven to earth, from the world of deity and invisibility to the world of flesh and materiality; instead of Joseph and Mary and shepherds and wise men

we hear of God alone and God's connection with Jesus, the connection of Speaker and Spoken. Instead of an infant laid in a crib wrapped in swaddling clothes, John tells the story of light, eternal and divine light, life-giving light wrapped in human flesh. And his flesh is a sacred tabernacle of grace and truth and glory. Jesus Christ is new sanctuary, new temple, new tent of meeting. He is Jacob's ladder, linking heaven and earth.

He is light; without him, darkness. He is word; without him silence. He is place of God's presence; without him, superstition, for in the absence of God, people inevitably manufacture false gods.

Hebrews 1:1–9. God has spoken and continues to speak outside of Jesus Christ, but all that other speech is "many and various," piecemeal and fragmentary, broken and stuttering, partial and imperfect, coming at us like a foreign language spoken too fast for us to catch the drift let alone the nuances.

But "in these last days" God has spoken to us by One who is not just prophet or patriarch, seer or sage, but Son. "Son" means "of the same stuff" ("of one substance with") as God. Such statements are designed to assure us of the trustworthiness of what we see and hear and experience in Jesus; the heart of God, the voice of God, the salvation of God. Nothing less. And we need nothing more. RHS

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

Ever have the experience of talking without being heard? Ever have your words fall on deaf ears? Ever frustrated at not being able to make someone understand what you are trying to say? Even though we have had such experiences, it is still hard to imagine the experience of the "Word" of which John speaks in the Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word . . . all things were made through the Word." God's Word becomes a verb, God's action in creation. God speaks, and all creation comes into being. Because God's Word is so quick and powerful, who would think that Word could ever fall on deaf ears? And yet generation after generation has failed to hear God.

People working with small children are encouraged to touch the children when they want them to listen. Stoop down to their level and put your arms on their shoulders. Then they will stop wiggling and pay attention to your words. Partners in marriage who are having difficulty communicating are encouraged to touch one another while speaking. Words that may sound judgmental or angry become less threatening if they are accompanied by a tender touch of the hand. Touch communicates better than words alone.

"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our ancestors by the prophets" (Heb 1). But God's people were just like an unheeding child or unhearing spouse. They had Moses, Elijah, Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah. But the Word that created heaven and earth made no lasting impact.

So the Word became flesh. God stoops to our level and grabs hold of us to help us listen. God speaks to us of love, forgiveness, new beginnings. The same Word that brought order from chaos at creation's dawning now brings order to our erratic, chaotic world. God reaches down, not with a fleeting touch or glancing blow. But the Word becomes flesh and pitches a tent among us. God speaks not to our ears alone but courts all our senses.

The Word in the flesh would not be put off by rejection or violence but would reach out arms, even in death, to open up our ears to the loving voice of God, "full of grace and truth." The Word in the flesh woos us, embraces us, nurtures us: "Take and eat . . . My body . . . for forgiveness." DD

PROPHETIC WORD

No one is created poor. People are born into oppressive conditions, and poverty is a

manifestation of oppression. The powerlessness and injustices which go hand in hand with poverty are not "accidents of history." People experience those conditions because there are oppressors.

In revolutionary contrast to every form of oppression and imperialism, the birth of Jesus, by its association with the oppressed, by its humility and by its laying aside the prerogatives of power and wealth, establishes the revolutionary principle of God's grace, liberating us "from all wickedness" and freeing us "to do good" (Titus 2:11–14). DP

OTHER VOICES

"The stable is true; so mean an origin is not invented for a founder. Myths do not paint misery, and surely not a misery that lasts a lifetime. The stable, the carpenter's son, the fantast among little people, the gallows at the end—this is historical stuff. . . . The mystery (of the stable) reveals to us that for God it is just as natural to be lowly as it is to be high, to be near as it is to be far, to be little as it is to be great" (Ernst Bloch, quoted by John Macquarrie, *Christian Hope,* 61).

St. John, Apostle and Evangelist December 27, 1987

Psalm 116: 10–17
Genesis 1:1–5, 26–31
1 John 1:1–2:2
John 21:20–25

"The brightness of your light"

A FIRST READING

Genesis 1:1–5, 26–31. "In the beginning . . . God. . . ." And because God is maker and doer and giver and provider, "in the beginning God created." God created in the power of the spirit, and the first of all the creatures of God was light. And when the days had passed and the world was ready, God created human beings as a sign of God's own sovereignty over creation and as the voice of creation under God. And the world, the creation of things visible and invisible, ruled by God, inhabited by human beings responsive to God, was very good. Good. Harmony and peace reigned supreme in all relations among God and nature and humankind.

Genesis chapter one is a great vision of a world without sin, without rebellion, without need, without greed or murder or war, without deep rifts between races and nations and social classes. A world at peace under God's wing. And that vision nourishes hope.

John 21:20–25. John's Gospel begins the way the whole Bible begins: "In the beginning . . ." "In the beginning was God's creative, life-giving, light-spreading Word, peace-yielding, joy-producing Word." And that Word of God and that Breath of God was incarnate once again in new creation that has gone wild with rebellion against God, pitting humanity against God, against nature and against fellow human beings.

John's Gospel begins the way it does because John believes that God, the Creator, is acting in Jesus to re-create, to restore, to give us Genesis all over again.

At the end of the Gospel in its final verses the resurrected Jesus walks on the shore of the sea of Galilee with Peter and the Beloved Disciple, traditionally identified as "John Apostle and Evangelist." Peter has just been told that he will die a martyr's death, and now Peter wants to know about the Beloved Disciple. What will his fate be? Jesus answers cryptically, so that some came to believe that the Beloved Disciple would remain alive until the parousia, the second coming, of Jesus. But the final editor of the Gospel of John says that Jesus was speaking hypothetically. Jesus was telling Peter, and every disciple ancient and modern, that he, Jesus, has a different plan for each of us, and each of us

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must be faithful in whatever lot happens to be ours.

The ancient editor of the Gospel continues by pointing to the form of the discipleship of John: "This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things," to all the things about Jesus, and is in fact the one who stands behind the written record of the Gospel. And he says, "We know that his testimony is true." Of course there are many other things which Jesus said and did, and the record of those things, together with the effects of the words and deeds of Jesus and the consequences and the meditations upon them, are so many and so weighty that the world could not hold them, should they all be committed to writing.

At the end of the preceding chapter the evangelist summed up his own work, describing his own purpose: "These are written that you, you readers and hearers, may come to faith and deepen in faith, and that believing you may have life, true life, life with God."

Scripture is the book of life. Christmas is the festival of new Genesis, new life, regeneration. John is the apostle of life, eternal life.

1 John 1:1–2:2 emphasizes the earthiness and the glory of Jesus. So earthy was his presence that he was heard with human ears and seen with eyes and touched by human hands. But at the same time he is the one in whom we receive the glorious gift of life, eternal life, life in the light of the presence of God, free from the iron grip of death, darkness and sin, free from cold isolation, free for truth and for fellowship with God and with one another. RHS

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

"And it was good, very good." Genesis, the beginning. How often we long to go back to a time that was good, very good. Today folks talk of this as the desire to return to the womb. That's where we experienced wholeness, completeness. Some professionals even set up a simulation of the womb to help stressed people find peace. On this 27th of December many would like to have rest and peace . . . especially the preacher.

John points to Jesus as the place of new beginning. And he uses the sounds and images of Genesis to describe Jesus' coming in the womb of Mary. God's light enters the world in new form, and it is very good. Through this Word made flesh, all the stressed-out inhabitants of this world may find real peace. This Word calls into being that which did not previously exist.

This Sunday, in the afterglow of Christmas lights, would be a good time for us people of God to reflect on our own experiences of the Word made flesh. A good time for us to tell our stories. How have we heard and seen and touched the Word dwelling among us? What signs might we recount? Can we see ourselves as "beloved disciples"?

What form would this Sunday take if we, preachers and people alike, would begin to share our personal stories? "What we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you and we together may share in a common life, that life which we share with God and God's Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

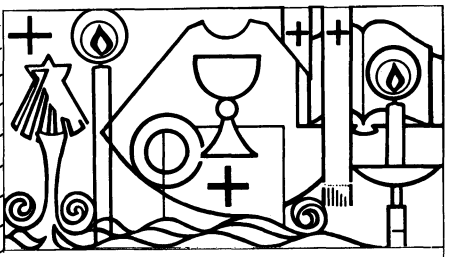
And what medium would we choose for communicating these new appearances of God's Light and God's Word in our world? Would we dare to be as dramatic as John? Or dance the way the stars dance in the sky as they declare God's glory?

Jesus has shined on the darkness not of Saint John only but on our darkness. John and all of us who occupy pulpits and pews share the new life given by God in Jesus Christ. All of us together are beloved disciples, and apostles and evangelists. DD

PROPHETIC WORD

Jesus was born into a situation in which the official religious community was caught up in the triumphalism of status, materialism and power. The institutionalized religious community into which Jesus was born paid its formal respects to Moses and the prophets, but it had

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abandoned the substance of God's desire for people: mercy, not sacrifice. DP

OTHER VOICES

"Christ too is not in the past nor exclusively in the future, but is as present as we are to the cosmos, to the divine blessing. . . , to the salvation that compassion always brings about. That is why Meister Eckhart could say in his sermon on Christmas night, 'What good is it to me if Mary gave birth to the Son of God 1400 years ago and I don't give birth to God's Son in my person and my culture and my times?' " (Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing,* 106)

Second Sunday after Christmas January 3, 1988

Psalm 147:12–20
Isaiah 61:10–62:3
Ephesians 1:3–6, 15–18
John 1:1–18

"The light of our faith"

A FIRST READING

Isaiah 61:10–62:3. (61:10–11 used on Advent 3; John 1:1–14 used on Christmas Day, and recalled on First Sunday after Christmas, St John, Apostle and Evangelist.) Here these texts function as bridge to Epiphany themes: the light is not for the church, not for you or me only, but for the world. Isaiah 61:11—"the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations." Jerusalem's rise from the ashes of defeat and captivity, her vindication and rebirth, is not for Jerusalem alone but is witness to the nations, like a burning torch or signal fire. Isaiah 62:2—"The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory."

God is not a tribal deity nor only "my personal savior." God is Lord of all history and all nations, all times and all peoples. God's movement into time is ecumenical, embracing all persons and places, all institutions and powers.

John 1:1–18. The Word we deal with is the reality of the Creator of the Universe, the Lord of History, who in Jesus acted to enlighten every human being, not just some, not just those of one class or one time, but every human being who ever has entered or will enter God's world.

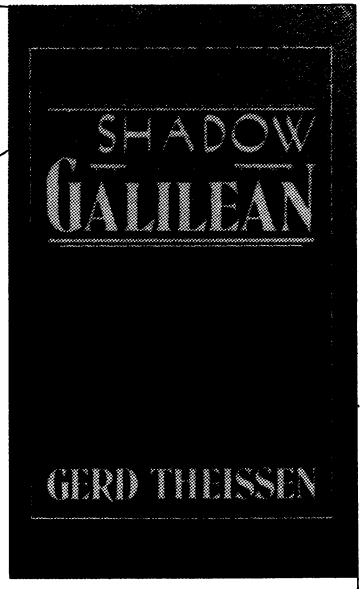
No one has ever seen God, but many act as though they have. Many little centers, many loyalties, many cults, many tribes, many ideologies, many politics. But Jesus is the one link between heaven and earth. The one son, the only one who is exegete of God. Solid connection between heaven and earth, sure revealer of God and fulfiller of human life. The tragedy is that the world (also the world in the church and in each of us) keeps accepting substitutes.

God has uttered Jesus as Speech, as Self-Expression. And the community of believers is called to re-word that Speech and express that Speech in its life in the midst of the world, for the world.

In "the Beloved" God has seized people and destined them to become children of God (John 1:12–13; Ephesians 1:4–6) with "the eyes of their hearts enlightened" (Ephesians 1:18), fully open to the grandeur of the hope and the tasks to which the church is called. RHS

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

In the Collect we thank God for "the new light of the Word made flesh" and pray that "light" may "shine in all we do." But by the Second Sunday after Christmas I begin to feel that the only ideas rattling in mind are full of "old light" and are doing little in the way of shining. For the third time in three trips to the pulpit the Gospel is John 1. Attendance is down



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and I wonder if words or the Word are making any difference.

I found helpful an image Ron Glusenkamp shared in these pages a year ago, and I hope he does not mind my expanding on it a little bit. He wondered whether he could be a window through which any "new light" might shine. And he discovered that "God does windows."

We were destined in love to be God's children in Jesus Christ. God bestowed on us that glorious grace, grace upon grace. And grace transforms cracked dull windows into glorious stained glass works of art and lets "the light of faith shine in all we do."

God did not stand at a distance, just shining light down into our dark world from high above. The Word that is Light entered our deadly world and took a body of flesh. God's Light and Word came among us, as vulnerable as we ourselves are. It is as though God's very own perfect window were handed over to our careless world, like swaddling fine crystal in a few old rags and storing it in a barn. The crystal became dirty, then cracked and finally shattered by our own rough handling. But "God does windows." God picks up the shattered pieces and raises them to an exalted piece of art, a leaded stained glass window. And the glory of God's love for us comes pouring through that Window to us.

And God keeps on doing windows, no matter how you feel: broken, scratched, dirty, dull, forgotten. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing." Grace upon grace. God takes the shattered pieces of our lives and makes windows, and then God streams light through them to the world. DD

PROPHETIC WORD

Jesus was born into a world of indiscriminate madness. A genuine celebration of his birth will go far beyond any liberal offering of charity to the "holy innocents" of our day. The birth of Jesus is the eternal peace symbol which says it is time to put an end to the social, economic, and political oppression which produces the innocent victims and leaves them for dead along the wayside. DP

OTHER VOICES

"The various theological interpretations of Christian hope, some individual, some social, some cosmic, some this-worldly, some other-worldly, some evolutionary, some revolutionary, some looking to the present, others to the future, are not so much rivals to each other as rather fragments of an inclusive vision that escapes us. We cannot synthesize all these theologies, but neither can we choose one of them and reject all the others. We have got to let them confront one another, correct one another, even conflict with one another, and in this dialectical procedure, both the strengths and the weaknesses of the different positions will come to light and we may hope to come closer to the total vision" (John Macquarrie, *Christian Hope,* 103–4).

"God never seems to weary of trying to get himself across. Word after word he tries in search of the right word. When the Creation itself doesn't seem to say it right—sun, moon, stars, all of it—he tries flesh and blood" (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*).

Ecumenism and the Church's Commitment to the World

Roger W. Fjeld
President, Wartburg Theological Seminary

My colleagues have underscored, in a number of ways, the central importance of the church's commitment to the world. The church is called beyond its own needs to live and serve in the world and for the sake of others. In the reflections which follow, I speak to that same concern in relation to the way we approach ecumenism. The question is: Do we approach ecumenism for the sake of more effective service in the world or from other motives?

Why ask such a question? Why can't ecumenism be a separate priority, even as ministry in the world is a priority? The easy way to think of these is as two discrete priorities, but there is reason to challenge that easy answer.

One is the fear that ecumenism has become, for many American Christians, a new way to avoid encountering the world! That pattern of avoidance is an old one in American church life. New England Puritans welcomed only other professing Puritans, while barring Anglicans, Quakers, and Roman Catholics. Eighteenth-century Deists heaped contempt on orthodox Christianity. The Second Great Awakening, in turn, took furious exception to Deism and the enlightenment mentality which it represented. Then the argument shifted to a perennial and continuing conflict between groups who label each other as Fundamentalists and Liberals.

Lutherans have been all too willing to engage in this sort of conflict among Christians . . . both with other Lutherans and with other groups of Christians. The energy and the fierceness of those arguments by and among Lutherans suggests how much we have savored the conflict. It is my perception that mission in and for the world has suffered as a result.

What does all of this have to do with contemporary American ecumenism? At first blush, the ecumenical initiative should be a welcome corrective to such interdenominational conflict. Much of the debris from that conflict is being cleared away as Christians rethink their understanding of the church and the churches. Through dialogue, through common agencies, and through fel-

lowship declarations, those who formerly fought have begun to make common cause. All of that deserves to be celebrated!

The problem comes when we examine some of the content of that common cause. Too often Christians who used to neglect the world while fighting each other now neglect the world while embracing each other! It need not be so. Discovery of each other, dialogue, and fellowship are necessary and important steps toward common mission.

But for many, the steps have become the goal. Many Christians are inclined to define ecumenical goals in symbolic and relationship terms rather than mission and ministry ones. In a potentially perverse way, Christians are funneling interest and energy into talking with other Christians while neglecting ministry in and for the world. Again the examples are not difficult to name. There are the dialogues themselves, when they are seen as ends in themselves. There are joint worship services, when they are seen as the only or best expressions of the ecumenical impulse!

In a more clearly perverse way, partners in emerging ecumenical relationships are increasingly trying to persuade each other with regard to such matters as church order and worship patterns. Those who congratulated themselves on overcoming the barriers to the unity of the church may, in fact, be erecting new, more subtle barriers.

All of which is to say that we need to discipline our ecumenical commitments in order to insure that the real result is more effective ministry in and for the world. The old pattern of animosity not only neglected the world, but also broadcast a negative witness to the world. The new ecumenical climate goes far to remove that liability. It is now our task to build on that new climate, moving to common mission whenever and wherever common mission will be more effective than separate efforts.

This is not an argument against dialogue and ecumenical celebration of the unity of the Church. These are crucial first steps toward unity in mission. But, mindful of our tendency to engage each other while neglecting the world, let us press ourselves and our ecumenical partners to move quickly and vigorously to engage the world in the name of Jesus, our common Lord. That is, after all, what Christians are in the world for!

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