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CURRENTS
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Currents

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Preaching Helps

A Time of Transition

In the fall of 1974, my academic Dean, John Damm, asked me to take over the duties of editing *Currents in Theology and Mission. Currents* is a descendant of the *Concordia Theological Monthly (CTM),* the journal of the faculty of Concordia Seminary that began in the 1930s. When the Missouri Synod controversy came to a head in 1974 and Christ Seminary-Seminex was formed, it was decided by the Seminex faculty that we would publish our own journal, and the words of the name of this journal would maintain the initials CTM.

I decided to downplay that heritage and have consistently referred to this journal as *Currents,* not CTM. I began editing with volume 1, number 2, and this issue is volume 36, number 2. I never knew that this would be a thirty-five year assignment, but it has indeed lasted that long. I also decided early on that this would not be an organ of the Missouri Synod controversy, but it would publish articles that would help pastors and laity throughout the church carry on their ministries well informed, and with eyes focused on ministry and mission, and affirming wherever possible the unity of the church.

In 1983 *Currents* moved with me to Chicago. As now, *Currents* came out six times a year, but in the other six months *Preaching Helps* was published as a separate magazine. After a couple years in Chicago, *Preaching Helps* was merged into *Currents,* since postal rate increases were killing us. The deployment of Seminex meant that *Currents* would now be published by LSTC, in cooperation with Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and Wartburg Theological Seminary, a cooperative effort that continues until today.

This will be the last issue of *Currents* that I will edit, and this comes at my request. With more than 200 issues under my belt, I think I have done my share (I have always been a fan of litotes). I must say I have enjoyed these thirty-five years, soliciting and editing articles, and introducing all the issues with these editorials in which I tried to write gracefully and hopefully, and even with an occasional bit of humor. I hope you enjoy this last feast that I serve up in the following pages.

Richard D. Nelson argues that public theology must be publicly persuasive**.** Public theology is *theology*, that is, it is founded on and advocates values derived from our religious tradition, but it seeks to coordinate that tradition with values that an outside audience already shares with us. The Old Testament reminds us of important truths that must inform our work and it is a well-known classic text, with powerful stories such as Exodus 16, powerful characters such as Bathsheba and Nehemiah, and a captivating poetic vision such as Genesis 1 and Psalm 104. In the Old Testament, religion was not predominantly a private affair as it has increasingly been thought among us. Any public theologian who reads the stories of the Old Testament will resist letting privilege define truth. Because the Old Testament shares so much context with modern life, it can shed light on our dilemmas in a non-authoritarian way.

Ralph W. Klein presented the Lutheran Heritage Lecture at LSTC in 2008 and

now publishes it for *Currents* readers. We Lutherans read the Old Testament *with* Martin Luther since we take the Bible literally, acknowledge that there are passages in the canon that do not urge Christ or that contradict the gospel, find the Bible's central message in its word of promise, and recognize the ongoing activity of the Spirit in Scripture and in inspired tradition. We depart from Luther in recognizing in Judaism a faithful understanding of the Old Testament, in reading the text with the tools of modern biblical criticism, and in learning more about God from a distinctively Old Testament perspective, confident that that knowledge will complement and expand the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ,

Paul A. Tidemann calls attention to a freedom song "Maccabee Version" by Rastafarian Max Romeo. This song describes what happened to slaves who were forcibly translated to the West Indies and elsewhere in the new world. Max Romeo charged that white people fashioned dangerous weapons in order to kill resistant and rebellious Black slaves. Even as the British slave trade was coming to an end, the London Missionary Society sent preachers to use the gospel to make the existing slaves more compliant. In 1827 the British and Foreign Bible Society decided to print Bibles without the Apocrypha, lest books like 1 and 2 Maccabees give slaves too many ideas about freedom. Some slaves, nevertheless, identified with Judas Maccabaeus and with Moses. The Bible has been abused and can continue to be so used by powerful forces of oppression.

Julius Mutugi Gathogo demonstrates that African Religion is a force to reckon with even after globalization. The concept of *Ubuntu* (humanness) can be exploited for the good of all. Various elements in African Religion may require revision so as to be compliant with the realities that are defining the people of modern Africa. This essay revisits the definitions of African Religion and the environment within which African Religion is done. Study of African religion provides an understanding of the African personality and is essential to make meaningful religious dialogue.

Luther A. Gotwald, Jr. tells a fascinating story about his great-grandfather, Luther Gotwald, a professor at Wittenberg College and Seminary. Wittenberg had been established by the General Synod, which at one time followed the teachings of S. S. Schmucker that departed in some sense from a strict Lutheran Confessional position. The more confessionally loyal Lutheran denomination was called the General Council. Gotwald was charged by three accusers of teaching General Council theology in a General Synod seminary. The article maintains that the General Synod had long since departed from Schmucker's teaching and solidly affirmed the Augsburg Confession. In a sense Gotwald was accused of being too conservative in a school with a "liberal" tradition. In any case, Gotwald was acquitted. The author adds an epilog in which he advocates that the ELCA should follow the theology of his great-grandfather in its ecumenical activities. (From the start I have never insisted that articles follow my own viewpoints).

On November 9, 2006, as part of a commemoration of Kristallnacht, LSTC also reflected on the Barmen Declaration of 1934. The following addresses were given on that occasion.

Victoria Barnett reflects on the altered landscape between Christians and Jews brought about by the Holocaust in general and Kristallnacht in particular. Some 2,500 synagogues were destroyed throughout the German Reich in 1938, and these dreadful events still have far-reaching consequences today. The continued violence against people and the misuse

of religion and religious space in our time require people of all faiths to walk this altered landscape together.

Robert A. Cathey points to other confessions that followed the courageous precedent of the Barmen Declaration. The Presbyterian Confession of 1967 addressed questions of reconciliation between formerly segregated African Americans in the southern states and between middle class whites in the suburbs and urban poor in the inner cities. Even more important was the *Kairos Document* of 1985 that criticized the claims to legitimacy by the South African government, based on Romans 13, argued that neither Scripture nor Christian tradition rejected lethal force in every situation of aggression, and called for social action to bring down the ruling South African regime and create a new society. Barmen and *Kairos* still speak disturbing words of comfort and hope.

Kurt Hendel describes the historical conditions that led up to the Barmen Declaration, beginning with the racist policies of Hitler, who was criticized by the Pastors' Emergency League. By the end of 1933, the German Christian movement, favorable to the Nazis, was opposed by the Confessing Church, and the church struggle had begun. The Barmen Declaration was issued in 1934, but it does not specifically mention the persecution of the Jews. The Confessing Church was not effective in defending the Jews, and there was little response in the German church to the events of Kristallnacht.

Vítor Westhelle calls attention to the importance of understanding the context of the Barmen Declaration. It spoke to Christians within a Christian context, and a similar document today could not make such exclusivistic claims. Its central point that God makes a claim upon our whole life, of course, was well taken in targeting Nazi idolatry. It also criticized the notion that reason was autonomous, not subject to the control of beliefs, emotions, dispositions, or aesthetic values. This notion of autonomy had been used by Hitler to extend the power of the state into affairs of the church. In a different, non-totalitarian and pluralistic circumstance, the Barmen strategy would represent a totalitarianism of the church and its mission. Barmen needs to be celebrated within its context so that we might have the vision to detect the cracks and fissures that need to be exposed in the dominant systems of our day.

Beginning with the June issue of *Currents*, a new editorial team will take over, composed of LSTC colleagues Kathleen D. (Kadi) Billman, Kurt K. Hendel, and Mark Swanson. I look forward eagerly to what they will do. At the same time, I suspect that you have not heard the last of me. I hope to publish essays here from time to time, and continue my review of books, primarily dealing with the Old Testament.

The Germans have a wonderful word for it: *Gott befohlen!* May you be entrusted to God's care!

Indeed!

Ralph W. Klein, *editor*

The Old Testament and Public Theology

Richard D. Nelson
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I. What is public theology and why should we practice it?

Luther sets the standard for us as a theologian who was never shy about sounding off in the public square. He exploited the new technology of the printing press to expand what one might call the consumer audience for theology in treatises that put forward what today we would call public theology: "Trade and Usury" (1524), "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can be Saved" (1526), and his notorious "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of the Peasants" (1525). A more accessible example is his Large Catechism with its pointed views on the political and social order.

As public leaders, pastors can hardly justify limiting their theological communication to the pulpit and the congregation's adult forum. Opportunities offer themselves constantly, in occasions for public prayer, panels, public forums, meetings of school boards and town councils, high school baccalaureate services, chaplaincy for volunteer fire departments, chances to write a column for the local paper—to say nothing of pastoral leadership at those church-based events that attract audiences from the whole community such as weddings and funerals.

Four perspectives on public theology undergird my conviction that the Old Testament can serve as a resource for public theological leadership.

1) When doing public theology, the church is thinking theologically with the common good in mind and communicating its thinking in public in order to influence public opinion and public policy.

2) Public theology is the church's critical reflection on the specific topic of public life in order to help transform public life.

3) Public theology involves inviting the public into thoughtful conversations with the church about matters of public significance.

4) Public theology does not seek so much to tell people how to behave but to inculcate thoughtful virtue in the citizenry, whatever their religious convictions or loyalties may be.

This last point means that public theology addresses a religiously mixed audience, one that includes the religiously indifferent and adherents of non-Christian religions. For this reason, public theology must be *publicly persuasive*. To be in any sense effective, its argumentation cannot be based on claims to possess specially revealed truths, nor can it be founded on scriptural proof in any sort of propositional sense or on appeals to any tradition that is exclusively Christian. The assertion "life begins at conception" is a religiously-derived precept and has little per-

suasive power except among those already committed to the proposition. However, the argument "we owe humane justice and fairness to the potential for full humanity embodied in every fetus" could serve as an effective argument because it resonates with core values shared by most Americans. As a corollary to this principle, when the Bible is involved in our public theology, our exegesis must be publicly accessible and acceptable.

Public theology remains *theology*, that is to say, it is founded on and advocates values derived from our religious tradition. However, it seeks to coordinate that tradition with values that an outside audience or public already shares with us, or at least are potentially acceptable to them. The church speaks out of its own tradition and theology, but seeks shared ground around shared core values. The public theologian seeks persuasively to offer a Christian world-view in the market place of options as a reasonable, possible choice, as a genuine option for the public to consider.

Democracies need critical voices to survive and flourish. Christian public theology offers the American democratic experiment a free-standing, outside voice—a prophetic voice, if you will—backed up by publicly accessible arguments offered to the public as a choice they might reasonably embrace.

The goal of public theology should not be seen as limited to the passing or blocking of certain laws or centered only on ethical controversies. A genuinely public theology will seek to go beyond specific issues to engender public virtue in general and to help form a moral ethos that can be shared by this nation's ever more fragmented citizenry. As the "American way" continues to evolve, the American church must seek to help shape it. Consequently, public theological leadership goes far beyond whatever lobbying churches may do in Washington and transcends the current hot button ethical issues.

What might be characteristic of an identifiably *Lutheran* public theology? It will be informed by the notion of two kingdoms, that God rules humanity out of a single divine will but through a two-fold manner in two realms. It will remember that God rules universally through locally and temporally particular civic structures and thus bestows on them a limited but very real value. It will remember that fair justice driven by accountability represents God's mandate to those public, civic structures. It will remember that acts of civil righteousness may be performed by citizens who may or may not have any self-conscious relationship to God. It will assert that citizenship is a vocation to which God calls both Christians and others. A Lutheran public theology will be informed by a robust appreciation for the virulence, intractability, and pervasiveness of personal and corporate sin. Finally, a Lutheran public theology dares not forget that many who made up an earlier generation of Lutheran theologians in Nazi-era Germany have been weighed in the balance of history and found wanting.

Some words of admonition and warning are in order. First, the Golden Rule requires us to grant those whom we address the same hearing we hope to receive. Second, the church's public practice must correspond to its public pronouncements. Financial or sexual scandals are not just public relations debacles, but they undermine the public's confidence that anything we have to say is worth hearing. Our public audience has the right to demand consistency between our speech and actions. Third, our audience will demand that we apply our principles across varying cases, so that if we invoke "sanctity of life" in the case of abortion we will be asked whether we do so also in regard to capital punishment. Fourth, it will expect of us the integrity to offer our dissent even when it is out of favor, even

in the face of a majority consensus that opposes us—and even when our message happens to be popular among groups whom otherwise we abhor.

II. Can the Old Testament speak in the public square?

Finding value in the OT as a resource for public theology is not the easiest case to make. Obstacles range from the "kill a Canaanite for Yahweh" ideology of the book of Joshua to OT notions of theocracy, divinely-elected monarchy, and divinely-revealed law, concepts about as far as one can get from the ethos of Western democracy. Moreover, the biblical concept of "chosen people" has at times encouraged the worst elements of the American self-image.

Because the arguments and reasoning of an effective public theology must be publicly accessible and publicly persuasive, the public theologian can hardly use the OT as a source of special revelation or divinely assured truths. The fatuousness of quoting Leviticus 18:22 in a public debate on gay rights can only be exceeded by the pervasive application of the divine favor shown Israel in 2 Chronicles 7:14 to the United States. Such references may help cement the opinions of Christian social conservatives, but will justifiably be met with polite indifference or outright derision in the open marketplace of ideas in the public square.

However, the OT can serve as a valuable resource for public theology in at least two ways. First, the OT speaks directly to us who are engaged in the task of public theology, reminding us of important truths that must inform our work. Second, the OT can be used with our public audience in the public square—not as Holy Scripture per se—but as a well-known, classic text with powerful stories and characters and captivating poetic vision.

III. The Old Testament informs our work as public theologians

Practitioners of public theology can learn some valuable things from the OT. First, the OT gives permission to move beyond theological formulas inherited from the past and "write the tradition forward."[1] In many ways, the OT that has come down to us is a "second, revised edition" of Israel's religious heritage. Much, perhaps most, of the OT came into being as a rethinking of inherited religious practice and tradition under the pressure of cataclysmic defeat, exile, and foreign domination by first Babylon and then Persia. These traumas shook Israel's world view to its very core. Consider, for example, how Second Isaiah radically rethinks and rewrites creation and exodus traditions in order to speak to a new situation (Isa 43:18-19; 48:6b-8b).

Second, the OT reminds us that the public square is not to be equated simply with government and the state. In the world of the OT there were many spheres of activity that one would label as public, including worship at the sanctuary, the life of the street and the market, and life "in the gate" and "at the well." Priests and prophets, and not just judges and kings, occupied public offices. Moreover, ancient Israel confronts us with a society in which the line between private and public was drawn quite differently from the way it is in our culture. Religion was public at the temple and private in personal prayer and piety. There was a spatial and even a gender component to the public/private divide. Life inside the house was private and largely the domain of women. The street, square, gateway, and field were public and

1. The German verb used by Biblical scholars is *fortschreiben*.

there men wielded power, although women were not excluded. There were also kinship dimensions to this divide, with the private realm of the "father's house" operating in tension with the larger, public units of clan and tribe. These examples should remind us to avoid making the mistake of collapsing the notion of "public" into that of "government." America's public sphere includes voluntary associations, non-governmental organizations, charities, corporations, scout troops, PTA's, and bowling leagues. It also includes church-related hospitals, colleges, and social service agencies.

Third, religion was not *predominantly* a private affair as it has increasingly been thought to be among us. In the monarchic period the king served as the nation's chief religious officer, supervising and reforming the temple and on occasion performing sacrifice. Temple sacrifices were offered for the Persian sovereign and Greco-Roman kings and emperors. Thus, the theologian does not have to take for granted the hardened structural division between private church and public state that evolved as the enlightenment and modernity developed. Recent court decisions concerning the First Amendment have tended to treat the free exercise of religion mostly as a matter of private choice and private conscience. The OT reminds us that we should not take this for granted nor let our courts and legislatures do so unopposed. One can certainly argue that the free exercise of religion requires space for communal assembly, zoning that permits religiously-motivated social service, and unrestricted collective public speech by religious organizations on political matters.

Fourth, public theology informed by the OT will have a given, hard-wired value in seeking to broaden the public conversation to included suppressed voices. The OT is alive with voices crying out. The blood of Abel, the first victim of violence, cries from the ground in protest. Slaves in Pharaoh's brickyard groan and complain and God hears them. The grievance of two cannibal mothers in 2 Kings 6 blows the lid off the royal administration's official line that all is well in besieged Samaria. Any public theologian who regularly reads such stories will resist letting privilege define truth or allow power to silence or discount those voices in the public realm who lack the money to fund lobbyists and buy television time or the status to command respect and attention.

However, we need to nuance this last point. Scholars recognize that the OT was chiefly an elitist production, created by those with the learning, leisure, and sometimes governmental support to produce time-consuming and sophisticated documents on expensive materials. So what one often hears on the surface of OT texts are the voices of kings, rulers, priests, and men. However, the sensitive interpreter who listens patiently and carefully can also hear traces of other voices—those of slaves, day laborers, sojourners, victims of war, and women. Even the prophets, whom we romantically view as countercultural loners, all had support groups, occasionally quite powerful ones. Their prophetic words sometimes undermined the status quo that benefited the elites, but sometimes were co-opted by the powerful. In using the OT one must pay close attention and not let the loud language of hierarchy, patriarchy, monarchy, centralized temple priesthood, and imperialism drown out the softer background voices of other witnesses.

Fifth, the intricate complexity of the biblical canon is not a negative thing but offers us a positive model. The OT models a public theological discourse that, when taken as a whole, stops far short of giving single, dominant, pure answers. Theology as practiced within the OT itself was a conversation over time. Similar to the theological

saga of the church, it can be thought of as "faith seeking understanding through conflict." The OT offers up to its readers both light and dark, brutal violence and soaring poetry. Yahweh is a tribal war god who is also a tender shepherd who brings exiles home. All this is presented under the umbrella of the repeated confessional statement that Yahweh is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exod 34:6 and elsewhere)[2]—but still in no way offers us a theology that pretends to have all the answers or even suggests that having all the answers would be a good thing. It is just this dialogical, provisional, non-authoritarian style of theologizing that is incumbent on those who speak theologically in the public square.

Sixth, as a corollary to this last point, public theology informed by the OT will be inherently subversive. It will offer alternatives to the common wisdom of the status quo. It will suggest perspectives different from those promoted by the powerful. Amos saw that an economic system that brought prosperity to the lucky few systemically entailed oppression, debt, and slavery for the landless and small farmers. Hosea perceived the rot and decay under the smooth surface of Israel's royal administration and impressive religiosity. Another striking example of theological subversion is the OT's mixed view on kingship. Kingship was as a rule thought to be a beneficent gift sent down by the gods, and that was certainly the view promoted by royal, Davidic theology. In 1 Samuel, however, kingship is judged to be a faithless product of human desire, human design, and human need, salvaged only by God's flexible willingness to accept it and adopt it to the divine plan.

2. Terrence L. Fretheim, "God Who Acts: An Old Testament Perspective," *Theology Today* 54 (1997), 6-18.

As a seventh and final point, both public theologians and the OT operate within a poly-religious environment. Public theologians address an audience that is religiously diverse and is growing ever more so. On the surface one might assume that the OT, with its exclusivist hostility to uncircumcised idol worshippers would have little potential to be helpful here. But, in fact, Israel's faith was able to incorporate elements of the worship of other gods, notably the Canaanite god El in his various local manifestations. One of these was the pre-Israelite god of Jerusalem, El Elyon (God Most High), whose name, ideology, and ritual became part of the religion and theology of the Jerusalem temple. Integration of some elements of the goddess Asherah and the disallowing of others is another fascinating story, still incompletely understood. In contrast, Yahweh's rival god Baal was soundly rejected, along with all his works and all his ways, at least by those groups in Israel who composed the OT. Through these examples, the OT models how to perform the difficult balancing act of honoring what is positive in other faith traditions, while at the same time being willing to object to and judge what is destructive in them. The public theologian needs to value the role that human religion can play as an expression of God's will and work in governing the world, without disregarding the creedal assertion of "one Lord, Jesus Christ."

IV. Turning the Old Testament loose in the public square

The OT can speak in the public square to the public because it is a well-known, classic text with powerful stories and characters and a captivating poetic vision. This assertion rests on David Tracy's notion of a "classic text," one that has achieved a degree of "public-ness" through long usage and widespread familiarity. Classic texts attain this

status because they are seen to be grounded in a shared experience that reflects what it means to be human. Classic texts disclose deep meanings and truths and have the potential to be transformative.[3]

The OT has value as a resource for public theology addressed to the public square because it has the status of a classic text. Most people in United States are still able to understand portions of it and can be moved by its religious imagery. Certainly the day will come when other texts and stories will join it as classic texts—the Mahabharata, Mohammed's flight from Mecca, or the Buddha's quest for enlightenment—and dilute its status as a classic in the American self-consciousness. But for now even the most biblical illiterate recognize what is going on in a picture of a naked man and woman standing around an apple tree with a snake in it, a boat with two giraffe heads sticking out of a window, or a garden-like scene of a lion and lamb and other animals grouped together in tranquil peace. Moses and David remain figures in the public consciousness. And those elements of the public who know art history or literature or cinema share an acquaintance with large portions of this classic text with believers in church and synagogue. Popular books such as Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* show that the stories and characters of the OT can connect at a deep level with the modern reader.

The OT has power to persuade because its narratives and characters, with their human-centered realism, have the power to produce imagination. We recognize our lives and situations in theirs. We sense the compelling nature of characters like Ruth, David, or Jeremiah. Moreover, the OT sometimes allows subjugated voices to speak, the voices of the economic and social underdogs with whom many in the public realm will be able to identify. Because it shares so much context with modern life, the OT can shed light in a non-authoritarian way on our dilemmas and circumstances, not as a revealed dogma promulgated by some alien, outside authority, but as an alternate point of view offered persuasively for public consideration.

Classic story and archetypical character have the potential to transcend and rise above theological and ideological barriers. Think of Jesus. The church claims him as Son of God, but Jesus himself is a public, historical character, respected by Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. This non-churchly Jesus is an awesomely compelling figure in his own right, and the stories told about him have the power to transform the ethical imagination. There is no Jesus in the OT, of course, but that may be an advantage to its value as a classic text in the public marketplace of ideas. Offering a truly biblical theology with no visible Jesus front and center may in some ways be more appropriate as a resource in the public square. The OT can function as a classic text in at least three ways: through its stories, characters, and poetry.

Story. A public theologian who wishes to advocate the positive value of healthy human sexuality could do no better than tell the "love at first sight" story of Genesis 2 and recite some of the panting, bodice-ripping drama of the Song of Songs. The story of the Exodus is the core text of liberation theology and has transformed the political consciousness of Latin American peasants and African-American urban communities. The Passover ritual demonstrates how powerfully shared public story enacted in ceremony can communicate community virtues and values.

As a test case for the power of OT story

3. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 99-229.

to stimulate the economic and social imagination, consider the account of manna in the wilderness (Exod 16). The schedule and style of God's provision of manna evokes a counter-cultural economic system. Everybody who goes out to gather gathers exactly what they need for their household, no more, no less. Entrepreneurs who try to gather more than their fair share end up with the same *per capita* result as everyone else. Manna cannot be saved or hoarded or invested or willed to the next generation. It goes rotten and gets wormy overnight. On Friday, those who gather accumulate twice the ration of daily bread to tide them over the Sabbath. Overachievers who seek to gather on the Sabbath find nothing. In my experience this story invariably excites hearers' imagination to think non-traditional thoughts about economics, who produces, who consumes, who wins, who loses.

Character. What more effective reflection on the corrosive effects of political power, blithe unawareness of one's own misconduct, and the power of confrontational judgment to institute change could one desire than the unfolding of David's character in the incidents with Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan? I would also nominate Jephthah, Samson, Saul, Ahab, Naomi, and Esther as characters with persuasive power. Nehemiah's autobiography, with his community project for the common good in the face of internal and external threat, discloses a powerful and evocative character in the context of public leadership.

Poetry. In advocating for a public environmental theology, one could employ the potent poetry of Genesis 1 or Psalm 104. Consider the power of Psalm 137 in a world of refugees and political exiles: "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? …Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock" (vv. 4, 9).

V. Specific examples

Humanity's Dark Side. Public theology will seek to remind its comfortable and perhaps apathetic audience of life's harshest realities, violence, atrocity, famine, and pandemic. The OT refuses to be silent about these themes because its authors and readers lived them out. One example is the common practice of rape as a consequence of warfare, an outrage characteristic of the Bosnian conflict or the tragedy in Darfur. We would rather not think about such a thing, but the OT will not let us ignore it and alludes to this almost universal atrocity numerous times. Consider the mother of the enemy general Sisera in Judges, waiting for her son to come home, but advised by her ladies-in-waiting that the boys are just being boys, each seizing a girl or two as battle plunder. And lest we miss the implications, the biblical author uses a crude, obscene word for those raped girls—"a womb or two for every man" (Judg 5:30). This same brutal reality is exposed in Second Isaiah's description of the fall of Babylon (Isa 47:1-3) and by Zechariah and Lamentations describing the fall of Jerusalem (Lam 5:11; Zech 14:2). Joel links warfare with sexual slavery (3:3). The grief of old people left behind after the troops have swept through, mourning for their lost children, killed or kidnapped as slaves, is evoked by Micah (1:16), and several texts explore the horrors of famine caused by war (Deut 28:53-57; Lam 4:4-5, 10).

In Amos, chapters 1 and 2, the prophet condemns the war crimes of various nations, excoriating each in the name of the God who demands just punishment. The neighbors of Israel have violated accepted standards of international conduct. But then, in a rhetorical *tour de force*, the prophet reverses course and turns the lens of divine judgment on Israel itself. You, too, are as guilty as they. Dictators and ter-

rorists have committed terrible atrocities, the prophet might as well be saying. You may have high ideals enshrined in your Constitution and your mythic, self-congratulatory view of history, but how have you really behaved in the critical moment of perilous crisis?

God. If theologians have nothing else to offer to the public discussion, one imagines that they will be talking about God. Indeed, the most persistent and fundamental message of the OT is about God. There is one God. God lives and God will be God. The "I am who I am" name revealed to Moses can be taken to mean "I will be what I choose to be and will do what I choose to do" (Exod 3:14). No God could be farther from the domesticated god entrapped by churchly dogma or the moribund, vaguely beneficent god one encounters sometimes in the public square. As the prophets knew, God is up to something in this world and things are not out of God's control. All people within or outside of the community of faith are affected by what God is up to, whether they know it or not. Paul's "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess" (Phil 2:10-11) is a quotation from Isaiah 45:23. At the same time, of course, one needs to be alert to the dark side of monotheism, that is, its imperialistic, patriarchal tendencies.

The God of the OT is a responsive and accessible *person*, not a philosophical abstraction. God is not only a creator active at the beginning of things, now pretty much retired from the scene, but an active sustainer to whom the eyes of all look, who opens up a generous hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing (Ps 145:16). Yet in spite of this, there is plenty of causational distance between the biblical God and the particulars of reality and the daily events of our world. Just as we learn from modern physics, a lot of contingency and openness is built into the dynamic structure of the universe. In the OT God sometimes puts away the tools of direct, miraculous intervention and works behind the scenes in hidden ways to accomplish the divine will. Ruth just happens to come to the field of Boaz to glean (Ruth 2:3). Esther just happened to be Queen of Persia. Concerning all the wicked machinations of Joseph's jealous brothers, Joseph could declare "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive" (Gen 50:20).

According to the OT, God's plans for redemption involve the concrete things of the here and now, not just abstracts and eschatological promise. Yahweh's blessing consists of real land, real children, real oil and wine. At the same time, God is just and demands change, calling forth both structural and personal repentance and reformation.

Creation. Conversations about the environment loom ever larger in the public arena. Here again, the stories and poetry of the OT can be a key resource. The resonant poetry of Genesis 1 tells of a Creator who does not create a static, structured order like that notorious Deist watch maker, but one who has built dynamism and self-generation into heaven and earth. God does not say, "Let there be plants." Rather Earth itself brings forth plants and then living creatures (vv. 11-12, 20, 24). Plants have seeds so that creation has a self-sustaining momentum. Humans are given an executive function as administrators of earth and its plants and animals (vv. 26, 28).

Genesis 2 and 3 refocus the picture onto the human scale but continue to show God's concern for the earth. There is a little noticed but important detail in the framework for the Eden story. The problem presented at the start of the narrative is that "there was no plant of the field…for there was no one to till the ground" (Gen 2:5).

God forms Man to meet *earth's* need in this regard (v. 15). The following story of disobedience and expulsion from Eden may have been a tragedy for humanity, but the careful reader will note that God's purpose for the earth is met as a result: "the Lord God sent him forth…to till the ground (3:23). These bookends indicate that, although we read this story focusing on Man, Woman, and Snake, the real center of God's attention seems to have been on the earth all along. Another powerful point for the communication of an ecologically responsible public theology is that the word we translate as "to till" (ʿ*abad*) has the more general meaning "to serve." We were created to serve the ground, not kick it around as some translations of Genesis 1:28 seem to suggest.

Creation is not just about nature. It also testifies to our common humanity. Humans are held together in an interconnected web that universalizes our shared humanity and devalues particular ethnicities or nations. The OT offers the powerful picture of Noah as ancestor of the worldwide human community and Abraham, father of many nations. At the same time, the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11 portrays God's desire to push humans beyond comfortable, defensive, mono-cultural, monolinguistic configurations into a rich variety of scattered peoples. Recognizing our common humanity does not justify imposing globalization or cultural totalitarianism.[4]

Wisdom. Ancient wisdom was an international affair, a shared multi-cultural treasury of understanding and good judgment. Its source was not special, divine revelation, but the careful observation of nature and human behavior. Wisdom is something publicly accessible to all who were astute enough to perceive and prudent enough to put what they have learned into practice. Wisdom is open-minded, not sectarian. It takes seriously both nature and human experience. It encompasses oppositions, sometimes setting forth contradictory proverbs side by side for the wise person to choose which one is right in a given situation. An appreciation for biblical wisdom helps counter the myth that religion is intrinsically irrational or non-rational and that it is inherently divisive and intolerant.

Wisdom insists that there are universal human moral values that exist under God, even if not all recognize this. The OT speaks of these foundational humane values in terms of "fear of God." The midwives of Egypt did not kill the baby Hebrew boys because they "feared God" (Exod 1:21), and the "fear of the Lord," that is basic morality, is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7).

Prophets. Then there are the prophets, with their passion for justice, their fervent vision of God's impending future, and their powerful rhetoric. A caution here is that one needs to use their rhetoric in a way that corresponds to their historical situation. When passionately quoting Isaiah on beating swords into plowshares (Isa 2:4), it would be honest to remember that in a different situation Joel advocated beating "plowshares into swords" (Joel 3:10).

Law. Of course, extending OT law into universal moral principles is fraught with danger. There are, to be sure, the Ten Commandments, which at least when read through the lens of Luther's Small and Large Catechism, are pretty close to being universal. There are problems implicit in prohibiting religious images and promoting Sabbath in the public, multi-religious arena, but the courts seem to be willing to see the Ten Commandments as one of the

4. Richard D. Nelson, *From Eden to Babel: An Adventure in Bible Study* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2006), 25-66 (on Genesis 2-3), 127-42 (on Genesis 11).

foundational documents of our common legal tradition. At the same time they are hardly self-explanatory. Waving signs proclaiming "thou shalt not kill" around abortion clinics and executions is not conducive to rational public debate.

Consider the book of Deuteronomy, however, which uses humanitarian arguments to motivate obedience to socially enlightened laws. Deuteronomy's law is not merely a shield to protect the rich and powerful (although there are places where their rights are taken into account), but protects dispossessed widows, orphans, immigrants, slaves, and daily wage laborers.

- You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge [for a loan]. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. (24:17-18)
- You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (10:19)
- Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns.…the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill. (14:28-29)
- When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. (24:19)

VI. Some cautions

First, one ought never to get too romantic about ancient Israel. Israel was a society like any other and operated according to the same economic and sociological rules as any other. Viewed objectively, Israel was just another Iron Age ancient west Asian tribal ethnic group that developed into a small-scale monarchy and then became the subject people of successive world empires. What we see in the Bible is a product of extraordinary faith overlaid onto ordinary historical reality.

Second, one must be careful to note just how often one's exegesis or theological thinking happens to square precisely with one's politics. The Bible can be taken to mean all sorts of things in the hands of a determined, creative interpreter, and the OT has been used to support apartheid, slavery, homophobia, and the repudiation of human rights.

Finally, public theology ought not to be driven only by the issues of the day, nor should ethical decision-making be its sole concern. Public theological leadership seeks to promote a framework for understanding and organizing the deep structure nature of things. The real task of public theology is to encourage critical reflection on and transformation of the whole of public life. It offers a theocentric, Christian worldview in a persuasive way in the public marketplace of ideas as a reasonable, genuine option. It does this in conscious competition with other competing, compelling worldviews. When it comes to ethics, it seeks most of all to inculcate those public virtues which can guide the public in its political and ethical deliberations and decisions: fidelity, tolerance, responsibility, courage, fairness, and independence.

Reading the Old Testament with Martin Luther—and Without Him

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The Lutheran Heritage Lecture Series at LSTC seeks to discover what it might mean in the twenty-first century to be faithful—and critical!—daughters and sons of the Lutheran Reformation of the 16th century. An old Latin proverb went this way *ecclesia semper reformanda,* that is the church is always in need of reform. So faithful and critical leaders of today's church also recognize that the call for reform applies to their church and to themselves as leaders.

As I have read Luther and works about Luther in preparation for this essay, I have been struck by the enormity of the subject and the finitude of time. A much more modest title for this lecture would be Some Reflections, after forty-two years of college and seminary teaching, on reading the Old Testament with Martin Luther, and without him.

The several Luthers

Heinrich Bornkamm has pointed out that if Luther were a member of a modern theological faculty, he would be called a professor of Old Testament. In thirty two years of teaching, Luther devoted seven eighths of his time to the Old Testament, one eighth to the New. But Bornkamm goes on to point out that in the Middle Ages and even up to the 19th century a professor of Bible was concerned for Scripture in its totality, and Luther finds much more of the New Testament in the Old that most of us would today. No title can quite contain the man Luther. Jaroslav Pelikan points out that even the common cliché that Luther was not a systematic theologian depends on what you mean by systematic theologian. Pelikan observes that if by a system one means that there is in a person's thought a central authority, a pervasive style, a way of bringing every theme and judgment and problem under the rays of that central illumination, then it must be said that history shows few people of comparable integration.

Bornkamm points out the central irony, one might almost say tragedy, that this professor of Old Testament showed passionate opposition to the Jews as blasphemers of Christ on the one hand, and deep love for the Old Testament on the other. Luther contrasted the old pious Israel to whom God's promise had been given with Judaism upon whom God's curse lay. Luther expressed this most vitriolically in his 1543 treatise "On the Jews and their Lies," but he generally shows disdain for the rabbis and has an almost paranoic fear that the Massoretes had used the addition of vowel points to deform the Bible and make of it something which did not conform to the New Testament. He urged Christian Old Testament scholars therefore to take back

from "the thieves" that which the rabbis had shamelessly stolen during the previous fifteen hundred years.

What is the relationship between Scripture and tradition, in Luther and in the Lutheran church? I was reminded of the contemporary urgency of this question last month when I attended a joint lecture in Downers Grove by Marcus Borg and Jon Dominic Crossan. Borg and Crossan are able scholars and effective communicators, and I listened as they reconstructed a Jesus of history or a Jesus of pre-Scriptural tradition, quite different from the Jesus of the New Testament, let alone the Christ of Christian tradition. In my mind, the jury is still out on whether this reconstructed Jesus of pre-scriptural tradition trumps the Christ of Scripture or the Christ of the Christian creedal confession. Crossan and Borg implied that the changes effected by tradition were mistakes. Pelikan points out the complicated relationship between Luther and tradition. The Western and the Eastern church display a history of interlocking authorities—Scripture, tradition, and episcopacy.[1] Luther claimed to be defending Scripture against the fathers, and he claimed to be defending the Fathers against those who had perverted them. What had checked the excesses of allegorical interpretation was the tradition! Once the tradition was removed as an arbiter over theology, the way seemed to be open for an endless variety of opinions, all claiming to be derived from the Scriptures. In opposing traditionalism, Luther claimed to be opposing the abuse of tradition. When Martin Chemnitz later criticized the Council of Trent, he claimed that this council had done violence to the tradition, while the Reformation had been faithful to the best in the tradition by being faithful to the Scriptures.

Taking the Bible literally

We will be talking more later about the fourfold exegesis of Scripture that was typical of the Middle Ages, but Luther is justly famous for exalting the literal sense of Scripture. The poll takers ask us, "Do you take the Bible literally?" I find that question impossible to answer yes or no. If by taking the Bible literally, you mean considering the world to be 6,000 years old and the Bible to be inerrant historically and geographically, then I do not take the Bible literally. But if you mean that words are to be understood in context, both literary and historical, and the meaning of biblical texts can be debated according to acceptable scholarly philological criteria, in seminars, journal articles, and churchwide assemblies, to determine their meaning, then yes, I take Scripture literally. In my many lectures dealing with Christian attitudes toward homosexuality, I have read the text literally to show that the few strictures these passages propose are not applicable today. Barbara Rossing, a few years ago, suggested to me that by literal we really mean contextual, and that point is well taken. But she would agree with me, I think, that if one answers no to reading the Bible literally one finally denies the Reformation and opens the door to unbridled subjectivity. The magnitude of Luther's contribution here cannot be overstated.

Finally, in these preliminary remarks, let us consider Luther and the canon. In my work with the LSTC rare book collection, I have come to examine closely Luther's September Testament of 1522, his first translation of the New Testament. The Table of Contents lists all 27 books, but only the first 23 are given numbers. Unnumbered and put at the end of the order

1. In a denomination like the ELCA, the Episcopal function is played by bishops and by pastors, by congregations that retain the right to judge the teaching of their pastors, and, I suppose, by the churchwide assembly.

are Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. Luther's hesitation about these four books in part deals with questions of apostolic authorship, but also with questions of great substance. In Luther's reading, the book of Hebrews denies and forbids to sinners any repentance after baptism and this, again in his view, is contrary to all the Gospels and Paul's epistles. When it comes to James, he protests that it is flatly against the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works, and he faults it for omitting mention of the passion, resurrection, and the Spirit of Christ. He even protests the book's outline: "Besides, James throws things together so chaotically that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man, who took a few sayings from the disciples of the apostles and thus tossed them off on paper." A few term papers over the last forty-two years come to my mind.

But Luther's ambivalence toward the canon, and the silence of the Book of Concord about which books are actually in the canon, is a tremendous help to us today. Luther's canon within a canon can be defined as "that which urges Christ." It is conceivable that things within the canon do not urge Christ or even contradict that Christ. Our twenty-first century reading of Scripture, for example, needs to be occupied with and critical of the Bible's patriarchy, not just because it is out of step with modern feminism, but also especially because it is out of step with Galatians 3:28 and many other passages in both testaments that assert the full equality of women and men. At the last, the Bible's patriarchy is out of step with the gospel. We are free to, we are bound to, condemn this patriarchy as severely as we condemn the anti Jewish rants of Luther. So Luther's ambivalent view of canon, or his belief that it is the gospel that gives the Scriptures their authority, not their canonicity, was an epochal breakthrough, from which we all profit.

In discussing Reading the Scriptures with Luther and without him, that is in critical solidarity with him, I now turn to examine two specific texts.

> In my mind, the jury is still out on whether this reconstructed Jesus of pre-scriptural tradition trumps the Christ of Scripture or the Christ of the Christian creedal confession.

Luther's lectures on the Psalms

The first text is Luther's lectures on the Psalms, delivered in a two year course he offered in 1513-1515, two years before the date often chosen to mark the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation. In his Harvard dissertation on these lectures, in the 1960s, James Samuel Preus studied Luther's hermeneutical development and changing position during this two year course.[2] Rather than study each of his lec-

2. James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise. Old Testament Interpretation from*

tures on each of the Psalms, Preus focused only on the seven penitential Psalms,[3] arguing that since medieval Christians, like Luther, would read these Psalms as preparation for confession, one would anticipate that Luther's exegetical approach would be similar for each of them. At the beginning of this course, Luther was fully immersed in the fourfold medieval hermeneutic, that spoke of the literal, allegorical, tropological (or moral), and eschatological meanings of each passage. Luther radicalized the christological interpretation of the Old Testament. He argued that the Old Testament cannot be understood without the New, otherwise the New Testament would have been given in vain.

The events being described in the Psalter, at least in the first months of this course, are totally removed from any relation to David's own time and situation. The speaker in many of the Psalms is taken to be Christ himself. The New Testament then reveals the normative literal meaning of the Old Testament and of pre Christian history. The Old Testament is only umbra (shadow), *figura*, and *signum*; its sole theological relevance is in New Testament antitypes. Put differently, there is no need to understand the Old Testament historically since all matters of theological interest are found in the New.

During the course of Luther's lectures—remember that they were held over a two year period—there was a shift in his opinion from Christ and the church being the subject matter and the speaker in the Psalms to a focus on the actual Old Testament situation before the Advent of Christ. The Old Testament then gets its theological value not so much from the Christ it hiddenly describes as from the salvation it promises, and from the faith of the faithful whom this word invites.

The text of the Old Testament is still interpreted christologically, indeed much too christologically, from twenty-first century standards. But Christ is no longer considered the speaker in the Psalms. Rather, Christ is the one who is promised and awaited, so that at all times, God's word to God's people is promise. No longer does Luther urge the tropological identification of the reader with Christ, but rather a tropological identity of the reader with the Old Testament faithful.

In the earliest Luther, as in the Middle Ages in general, God spoke in figures to the Old Testament people, so that one thing was said, but another was to be understood.

But there was a change in the midst of Luther's course on the Psalms. The spiritual promises of the Old Testament, chief of which in Luther's opinion is the promise of Christ, now function as the normative literal sense of the Old Testament. The promises given to the Old Testament faithful were to make them believe, and not just serve as a shadow or sign to be unpacked in New Testament time. The Old Testament community and Old Testament faith become a model and example for the self-understanding of the Christian community.

According to the medieval Luther, the prophet's contemporaries were in the dark about the true importance of the prophet's words. As Luther changed, the prophet becomes less a seer and more a preacher to his own people. The prophetic sense of the Psalms is not Christ, but the Old Testament text itself as testimony and promise. Luther in these lectures was still using the tropological or moral method of interpretation. The human believer is not conformed, as Gerhard Ebeling would have it, to Christ

Augustine to the Young Luther. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969.

3. Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.

and to Christ's faith. For Christ is neither a pure human being nor does Christ have guilt. Christ goes through hell, but he knows he will not stay there. Trust in the naked word of promise is not the sole ground of his hope. As both God and human, Christ is not one of us humans. There can be no complete identification of Christ and people as believers. Rather, Christians are tropologically conformed to what Luther described as the faithful synagogue. Christ becomes the object of faith and not its exemplary subject.

The medieval hermeneutical structure presupposed that the events of the Old Testament were to prefigure or signify the New Testament events. "But somehow Luther grasped the fact that all those promises he was finding in the Old Testament were being addressed to the people who were hearing them." Luther had to break out of the traditional hermeneutic to see that whatever one needs to stand before God—for example, righteousness—comes because it is promised by God himself and by Christ himself

But of course 16th century exegesis, including Luther's, was still pre-critical and, in my judgment, excessively christological. Still the hermeneutic developed by Luther in the course of these lectures enables us as 21st century Christians to appropriate the Old Testament in a Lutheran way and in complete faithfulness to the results of the critical method. In the Formula of Concord, for example, there are lines like the following, which we know are not true, and yet this does not undercut the point that the Formula is trying to make. I refer to these sentences: "The descendants of the holy patriarchs, like the patriarchs themselves, constantly reminded themselves not only how man in the beginning was created righteous and holy by God and through the deceit of the serpent transgressed God's laws, became a sinner, corrupted himself and all his descendants…but they also revived their courage and comforted themselves with the proclamation of the woman's seed, who would bruise the serpent's head." The Formula of Concord goes on to state: "We believe and confess that these two doctrines—they mean law and gospel—must be urged constantly and diligently in the church of God until the end of the world…"[4]

The confessors here presuppose the truth of the exegetical approach to Genesis 3:15, which had been around since at least the time of Irenaeus in the 2nd century. This well-intentioned exegesis wanted to retain the Old Testament in the Bible of the church, but made a number of assumptions that we now know are misleading if not downright wrong. The authors of the Formula assumed, for example, that the snake in the garden was the spokesperson, if not also the incarnation of the Devil, for which there is no evidence in the Old Testament, an assumption that goes directly counter to the point the author of Genesis 3 is asserting. Genesis 3 exposes the attempt of the man to put the blame for his sin on the woman and on God himself: The woman you [God] gave me, she tricked me and I ate. It's hard to be chauvinistic and blasphemous in one sentence but the male figure in Genesis 3 pulls it off. Several other exegetical conclusions about Genesis 3 in the Formula of Concord are also wrong. Irenaeus and his heirs concluded that the seed/descendants of the snake were the Satanic hosts, and the seed/descendant of the woman is Jesus. But it is perfectly clear that the descendants of the serpent are all those snakes which often make us humans afraid. So also the descendants of the woman are all those women and men who, like myself, are deathly afraid of snakes. Thirdly, the Irenaean exegesis, which is presupposed in the

4. FC Solid Declaration, Article VI, par. 23.

Formula and used by Luther as well, also assumes that in the mortal battle between the hosts of Satan and the Christ, the Satan gains a temporary victory by putting Christ to death, by "bruising" his heel. Not only does this ignore the fact that snakes' mortal attacks on humans and human mortal attacks on snakes are equally fatal and final on both sides, but it also escalates unnecessarily and unhelpfully, in my opinion, Satan's role in the death of Jesus. But the better, more important point of the Formula of Concord is that throughout the Scriptures and therefore throughout the life of the church law and gospel, judgment and promise are to be proclaimed and maintained as the church's double witness. I will pass over the need to justify preaching the law, but I will support the confessors' insistence on proclaiming Gospel, proclaiming God's promise. If the gospel is God's good news for our bad situations, then one finds that faithful Israel trusted that promise that was given to them, as we are called to trust the promise given to us. If Cain's bad situation was the legitimate fear that everyone who saw him would want to kill him as the world's first murderer, God's good news for his bad situation was that God placed his own mark of ownership on Cain to preserve him from all harm. If the bad situation of Noah and his wife was the fear that another flood might come at any time to wipe out all flesh and that therefore they ought to winterize the boat and be in constant and terror-filled anticipation of a flood that would far transcend any hurricane Katrina or Ike…If that was their bad situation, then God's promise that as long as the earth would exist, there would be seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, but there would never again be such a flood. Abram and Sarai's bad situation was their inability to conceive a child, which could not be remedied by in vitro fertilization, adoption of Eliezer, or turning Hagar into a surrogate womb. The first two of these—in vitro fertilization and adoption—have resolved frustration for millions of subsequent couples, but the particular problem that Sarai and Abram faced was that God had reneged on God's promise. The badness of their situation was not their infertility or not just their infertility. The badness of their situation, enough to lead to despair, was their sorrow dread that God was dead. And so Yahweh took Abram outside, repeated the promise and even upped the ante—*Your children will be as many as the stars.* And so they believed and were accounted righteous, doing what is expected when receiving a promise by trusting it. Or, as a number of scholars have argued in recent years, Gen 15:6 could also be translated *They believed,* that is, they accounted God to be righteous in that God stuck by God's promise. God lived up to the obligations of the relationship God had with them. God was righteous.

This exegesis comes to quite distinct conclusions from those of Luther or other 16th century exegetes. But I find it fully in agreement with Luther's understanding, already in 1515, that our stance *vis a vis* God's promise is exactly like that of Old Testament believers.

How Christians should regard Moses

I would like to continue my reflection on Luther as interpreter by reviewing a second document by him, this time a sermon Luther preached in 1525 entitled "How Christians Should Regard Moses."[5] This was a year of high tension for Luther, featuring his attack on Karlstadt in his essay "Against the Heavenly Prophets" and his controversial opposition to the peasants'

5. LW 35:161-174.

revolt led by Thomas Müntzer. Luther was also critical of certain pastors who were urging the Saxon princes to substitute the laws of the Old Testament for their current civil law. In the course of this sermon Luther developed three points about Moses, that is, about what we would call the Pentateuch, some of which are quite helpful and some I find problematic.

Luther's first point is that the laws of the Pentateuch apply only to the Jews and not to the Gentiles. Some of his points we would all agree to. Tithing, for example, is not a law which we Gentile Christians must follow although Luther thought it might be a decent policy for the state to adopt since with the giving of a tenth to the government the need for all other taxes would be eliminated. He clearly had not heard about the 10.75% Cook County Sales Tax, let alone our income taxes which also are considerably above ten percent. Luther also cited the law about the Levirate marriage and the Jubilee law that property would be restored to the original owner in the Jubilee year as irrelevant to Gentiles. These laws are not obligations for Christians or others who are not Jews although Luther again notes that they contain very fine ethical principles. More surprisingly, he argues that the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us, or rather that they pertain to us only insofar as they agree with what he called natural law. Luther held that it was "natural" to honor God, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to perjure oneself in court, not to murder and the like. Whether or not there is such a natural law, Luther is certainly right that civilized nations everywhere build their ethics around similar precepts. Luther recognized that the Ten Commandments only gain authority from their opening clause, what Jews call the first commandment, namely, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt." Without this introduction, there is nothing particularly unique about most of the ten commandments, as I have long argued. Since that introduction could never be part of what could be posted on a court house wall or a school bulletin board, there is no legitimacy or even persuasive reason to post them in such public places. More problematic, however, is Luther's assertion that these commandments do not pertain to us Christians since God never led us out of Egypt, and I also find unhelpful his short, apodictic statements about Moses: Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came. He is of no further service. I think Luther's position here is basically supersessionistic. I think the relationship between Christianity and Judaism is much more like the famous tree in one of the Ravenna Mosaics, which shows that Christianity has been grafted into a living stump, which is Judaism. Therefore, the saving acts experienced by ancient Israel, or at least such a saving act as the Exodus, becomes a saving act for us as well and provides another rationale, in addition to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, for us to consider ourselves part of God's covenant community and therefore to take up as part of our calling the Ten Commandments. I have not had the time to resolve what seems to me to be a conflict between Luther's position here in this sermon on Exodus and the central role he gave to the Decalogue in both of his Catechisms. Perhaps there are some in the audience that could help resolve this apparent conflict.

Luther's third point about the enduring value of Moses is much less controversial and quite helpful. That is, Luther finds in the fathers—Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and all the rest—beautiful examples of faith and love. One could fault him, of course, for not citing by name the mothers and the sisters, but that is an oversight that Luther shared with

almost all of his contemporaries. But there are also, according to Luther, examples of the godless in the Pentateuch—Cain, Ishmael, Esau, the whole pre-flood world, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc. Again one might want to quibble about some of these, for example, Ishmael, as godless. After all, he was circumcised and did bury his father, which I assume was a religious act. His own faith life should not be called into question because Sarah and Abraham kicked him and his mother Hagar out. Didn't God, after all, even hear the voice of his prayer in ch. 21? Luther's essay is only a sermon and not a systematic theology, and Luther would probably not want to argue with my point that some of the people he cites as examples—I think of Abraham and Jacob—could also be cited as examples of inappropriate behavior. But this brief third reason that Luther proposes to make us value Moses/the Pentateuch is basically well taken.

Luther's second point about Moses, however, requires further reflection five hundred years after this sermon. While Luther held that the Mosaic laws no longer apply, Luther held that the promises or pledges of the Pentateuch do have abiding authority. In principle, I strongly support his position since the God of Sarah and Abraham is the same God who became incarnate in Jesus, and I would hold that this God's basic characteristics remain the same throughout both testaments. The trouble with Luther's assertion, however, is the way that it is expressed, pre-critically, and, to my view, in an excessively christological fashion. When Luther states God has promised that his Son should be born in the flesh and that this is the most important thing in Moses which pertains to us, it is telling that Luther cites no specific passage, in the Pentateuch or anywhere else in the OT, to support that claim. Another promise that sustains faith in Luther's view is the Protevangel of Gen 3:15, which we have already dealt with. A third comes in Gen 22:18, after the near sacrifice of Isaac, where we find the statement made to Abraham, "In your descendants shall all the nations be blessed." Luther glosses that verse with this comment: That is, through Christ the gospel is to arise. A minor problem is the English translation in the American edition of Luther's Works. After all, the Hebrew for descendants here is seed, and the German original reads *Samen*. Luther would probably have been thinking of the one seed of Abraham, namely Jesus, who would bring blessings to the nations. Much more problematic for us in the twenty-first century, however, is his explicitly christological understanding of this passage. This verse, which has a number of close variants in Genesis, is the promise made to Sarah and Abraham of descendants or of land, what I would describe as God's good news for their bad situations, which not only called forth their faith, as in Gen 15 (Abram believed Yahweh and Yahweh considered him righteous), but it also outlined what the ethical consequence of this promise and their election might be, namely, that through them all the families of the earth would gain blessing. We saw in our discussion of Luther's lectures on the Psalms that he had come to recognize that the promise was made specifically for the Old Testament believers or, in Luther's somewhat unhelpful notion, for the faithful synagogue, which implied, of course, that most of the synagogue was unfaithful. What we do today is to try to understand the good news for the matriarchs and patriarchs as good news or promise for their own context. Similarly, Luther cites the promise of Deut 18:15-16 when Yahweh promises to raise up again and again a prophet like Moses. The good news in the seventh century B.C.E. was that the word of God, that had proved to be too scary to be heard di-

rectly by Israel at Sinai, would be communicated to it by divine spokespersons who could serve as a kind of Mosaic or prophetic buffer between the awe-filled majesty of God and frail human recipients. Of course this promise of an ongoing line of prophets gained an eschatological connotation, already in Old Testament times, that God would someday send a prophet who would play the Mosaic role for the people.

Of Luther's three points about Moses, therefore, I come to a mixed verdict. On his taking Old Testament characters as examples or warnings, I am in basic agreement. On the Mosaic law not applying to New Testament people, we all would agree on matters like tithing, Levirate marriage, and property rights. Where I differ is finding myself as a Christian in close continuity with the Israelite-Jewish community with regard to the Decalogue, and finding an address that includes me in the words "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt." Therefore I find the Decalogue of abiding ethical significance, and not just because it corresponds to natural law.

On the second point, I agree that promises made to Old Testament worthies can still evoke our faith or even our faith active in love. An honest reading of the text, however, prevents us from reading into it explicit, christological affirmations.

Reading the OT with Luther

So what does it mean to read the Old Testament *with* Martin Luther?

It means to read the text of the Old Testament literally, or at least contextually.

It means that we acknowledge that there are passages in the canon that do not urge Christ or the gospel and that can even contradict that gospel.

It means the central message that evokes and empowers our faith is God's word of promise, God's great *I am with you,* in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and in that same deity who already in the Old Testament promised and indeed contradicted divine wrath with divine love.

It means that we recognize the ongoing activity of the Spirit, not only in the Scripture, but also in inspired tradition.

Reading the OT without Luther

So what does it mean to read the Old Testament *without* Luther?

It means that we recognize in Judaism a faithful understanding of the Old Testament and that we condemn any proposal that Jews live under God's curse.

It means that we read the Old Testament critically, with the full panoply of the tools of modern biblical criticism.

It means that we recognize that the Old Testament does not literally proclaim Christ. Rather, following Luther's insight that the Old Testament was first of all delivered to people in need before the advent of Christ, we try to learn more about God from a distinctively Old Testament perspective, confident that that knowledge will complement and expand our knowledge of the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ.

What would Luther think of reading the Old Testament with him and without him? I think Luther would be proud—or at least he should be.

Reggae Reveals Church Involvement in Slavery

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It was a little more than 200 years ago this year, specifically on March 25, 1807, that the Abolition of the Slave Trade was passed in Britain, thus marking the beginning of the end of the virulent capturing and transporting of African people to be the slaves of the white plantation owners in North and South America and the Caribbean.

Only about 6% of the slaves exported from Africa ended up in the United States. The vast majority of those who survived the incredibly harsh and abusive voyage were sold to landowners in the West Indies and Brazil. The conditions and slave practices which West Indian slaves had to endure are said to have been much more harsh and abusive than in the United States.

In 1976, when I was serving as pastor missionary of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Georgetown and directing the Guyana Extension Seminary, I was listening to the radio in Guyana, South America, when a song was broadcast by noted Jamaican reggae composer and singer, Max Romeo. I was quite intrigued with its lyrics and obtained a recording and transcribed them. The song is called "Maccabee Version" and the way I transcribed it was like this:

"Yu gave I King James Version;
King James was a White Man.
Yu built I dang'rous weapon
To kill I all de Black Man.
Yu sold de land God gave I
And taught I to be covetous.
What other wicked deeds
Have yu got in mind?
Tell me, what are yu gonna do
To stop dese daily crimes?

Bring back Maccabee Version
Dat God gave to Black Man.
Give back King James Version
Dat belongs to de White Man.
Black Man get up, stan' up
Fin' yu foot
And give Black God de glory.
Black Man get up, stan' up
Fin' yu foot
And give Black God de glory.

Yu suffer I and yu rob I;
Yu starve I, den yu kill I.
But what are yu gonna do
Now dat yu sword have turned
against yu?
Black Man get up, stan' up
Fin' yu foot
And give Black God de glory.
Black Man get up, stan' up
Fin' yu foot
And give Black God de glory.

Bring back Maccabee Version
Dat God gave to Black man.
Give back King James Version
Dat belongs to de White Man.
Black Man get up, stan' up
Fin' yu foot
And give Black God de glory.
Black Man get up, stan' up
Fin' yu foot
And give Black God de glory.

Max Romeo is a Rastafarian, a Jamaican religious group which began in the 1930s and declares that Ethiopia's late Emperor, Haile Selassie, was divine and a savior, that Ethiopia is Eden, and that Blacks will eventually be repatriated to Africa. To understand what gave rise to Max Romeo's "Maccabee Version" one must understand the deep roots of both Romeo and the Rastafari movement among African working-class, peasant people in Jamaica. Reggae in Caribbean culture has had a way of combining the beat and rhythm, the joys and sorrows, the frustrations and dreams of Caribbean peoples. At its best, reggae drives to the heart of a matter.

The language of "Maccabee Version" is pretty understandable, but may bear some interpretation. Romeo is describing what happened to slaves that were forcibly transported to the West Indies and elsewhere in the "new world." First, we note the traditional Rasta language that uses the word "I." The Rastafarian never uses the word "me," because that word is the language of Satan. "I" is often duplicated in the phrase "I and I" which is a way of stating that the true person of Jah is not alone or unconnected in this world but is party of a divine community of Jah, who created life, the heavens, and the earth simply by saying so, by speaking words. It is also important to understand that Rasta language uses "I" because their messiah figure, His Imperial Majesty, Haile Selassie I, even has "I" as part of his title, and the word Rastafari ends with "I." [1]

Rastas use word sounds to create their power because speaking in biblical language almost transports them back beyond history of enslavement and oppression, to a time when their dignity was natural and not acquired or striven for.[2]

Max Romeo's reggae describes how the white man fashioned dangerous weapons, such as guns, cannons and other weapons of war to kill resistant and rebellious Black slaves. The white man stole the Black man's land in Africa and even in the new world when the slaves were freed but often were prohibited from owning or retaining land.

Romeo states that the white man, even after the abolition of the slave trade and slave emancipation wreaked deep suffering on Black people, robbed them of dignity and possessions. White people, especially the landowners, were indignant when slaves rebelled. It is important to note that while British law abolished the slave trade in 1807, British captains who were caught continuing to transport slaves were fined £100 for every slave found on board. If slave-ships were in danger of being captured by the British navy, captains often reduced the fines they had to pay by ordering the slaves to be thrown into the sea.

British leaders involved in the anti-slave trade campaign such as Thomas Clarkson and Thomas Fowell Buxton determined that the only way to end the suffering of the slaves was to make slavery illegal, but it took until 1833 for the British Parliament to pass the Slavery Abolition Act. That Act became effective on August 1, 1834, but

1. Nicholas, Tracy. *Rastafari. A Way of Life*. (Chicago: Research Associates School Times Publication, 1996), 38.

2. Ibid, 40.

it took until 1838 for slaves in the British colonies to be declared free.[3]

We cannot be proud of the fact that it took another thirty years for slaves to be freed in the United States by means of the Emancipation Proclamation, the executive order of President Abraham Lincoln, which was effective in 1863.

In the period between 1807 and the declaration of the British Parliament in 1833. the slaves in the British colonies became increasingly angry and rebellious. Missionaries sent from Britain by the London Missionary Society were given strict orders: "The Holy Gospel you preach will render the Slaves who receive it the more diligent, faithful, patient and useful Servants, will render severe discipline unnecessary, and make them the most valuable Slaves on the Estates, and thus you will recommend yourself and your Ministry even to those Gentlemen who may have been averse to the religious instruction of the Negroes."[4]

One such person, John Smith, became known as the "Demerara Martyr" because he died in prison in 1824 while under indictment for inciting the 1823 rebellion among the slaves. Demerara was one of the British colonies that joined together to become British Guiana. It was located near the mouth of the Demerara River. Today Demerara is one of the three counties that make up Guyana. Interestingly, in light of Max Romeo's reggae, it was a slave named Romeo who testified on behalf of the Rev. John Smith, trying to establish the case that the missionary did not preach in such a way as to cause the slaves to rebel against their masters.

Max Romeo's Rasta Reggae is correct. The Bible *was* the white man's book from the point of view of slaves who began arriving in Jamaica, Guyana and other West Indian colonies in the 1780s. Of course, it was the King James Version of the Bible that was extant in English in those days. At the time the King James Bible was printed in 1611 it contained the Old and New Testaments, but also the Apocrypha, a word meaning "hidden writings." The books which form the Apocrypha were written from the time of the last writing of what has been called the Old Testament, about 400 B.C., up until the time of Christ. Generally speaking, they form an accurate history of the Jewish people during those four centuries, though some authorities have questions about their spiritual value. During much of Christian history these books were, nevertheless, considered part of Christian Scripture.

While some printings of the Bible in the 17th century did not include the Apocrypha, still many Bibles did include these books. During the days of slavery, missionaries came to the West Indies to evangelize the slaves and in so doing taught the slaves to read. This became a source of deep concern and suspicion among the slave owners. They were worried that the slaves would learn things about freedom and life beyond enforced servitude. For example, the book of Exodus in the Old Testament, if slaves read it, would give them an idea that Moses was led by God to bring the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land. This would raise the question of why West Indian slaves should not be similarly freed.

In 1827 the British and Foreign Bible Society decided never to print or circulate copies of the King James Version containing the Apocrypha. The reason was that

3. Raymond T. Smith, "Chapter III, History: British Rule Up to 1928," *British Guiana,* (Reprinted by Greenwood Press, Connecticut. 1980).

4. Wallbridge, Edwin A., "The Demerara Martyr," 1848, Guiana Edition No.6, *Daily Chronicle,* 1943, v.

among the books of the Apocrypha are the four books of the Maccabees. The Maccabees detail the glorious exploits of Judas Maccabaeus, a Jewish guerrilla leader, descended from a well-known priest, Mattathias. Maccabaeus led the rebellion of the Jews against Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes IV, whose armies occupied Israel in the first century before Jesus. Judas Maccabeus' rebellion saved the Jewish religion and people, and restored the Temple at Jerusalem through a series of magnificent military victories, bringing independence to Israel for about 100 years from 166 to 63 B.C.

The slaves of the West Indies came to identify as deeply with Judas Maccabaeus of the books of the Maccabees in the Apocrypha as they did with Moses of the Exodus. The decision of the British mission society to prohibit the printing of these books in Bibles meant that in one way or another knowledge of them became part of the folk wisdom of the Black people and when these actual writings became known they were seen as uniquely "Black." The reggae by Max Romeo, coming out of the strong Black-consciousness of Jamaican Rastafarianism, manifests such a theme.

We continue to have much to learn about how the Bible has been and can continue to be used and abused when manipulated in both interpretation and even translation and printing at the hands of the powerful and oppressive.

The slaves of the West Indies came to identify as deeply with Judas Maccabaeus of the books of the Maccabees in the Apocrypha as they did with Moses of the Exodus.

The Reason for Studying African Religion in Post-colonial Africa

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Culture, as Jesse Mugambi[1] observes, has six main pillars: politics, economics, ethics, aesthetics, kinship and religion. And out of these, religion "is by far the richest part of the African heritage."[2] It shapes their cultures, their social life, their politics, and their economics and is at the same time shaped by this same way of life.

J. O. Awolalu attempts a definition of African Religion when he says,

> When we speak of African Traditional Religion we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forbears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practising it.[3]

African Traditional Religion (ATR) as a contested phrase

In most publications, African Religion is commonly referred to as African Traditional Religion (ATR). This designation is, however, a contested description of African religiosity. To some, the term "traditional" betrays Christian bias, meant to portray African religiosity as old fashioned and outdated; hence irrelevant. Some have the view that it should simply be referred to as "African Religion," just as there is, for instance, Muslim Religion or Hindu Religion.

Some have even argued that with the center of Christian gravity having shifted to Africa, it is imprecise to talk of African Religion (AR) since Christianity has also become an African Religion.[4] Others would talk of Islam as an African religion. So how do we tell the difference between Christianity and the pre-Christian or pre-Muslim religious discourses in Africa?

For our purposes African Religion refers to an indigenous system of beliefs and practices that are integrated into the culture and the worldviews of the African peoples.[5] As in other primal religions, one is born into it as a way of life with its cultural manifestations and religious implications.

1. Jesse Mugambi. *Religion and Social Construction of Reality* (Nairobi: University Press, 1996), 32; and *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1989), 128.

2. John S. Mbiti. *An Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 9.

3. J.O. Awolalu. "Sin and its Removal in African Traditional Religion." *JAAR* 44 (1976), 275.

4. See Kwame Bediako. *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture Upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992).

5. See A. O. Hance and H. A. O. Mwakabana, eds., *Theological Perspectives on Other Faiths*, LWF Documentation 47/1997 (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1997), 21-24.

In general, African indigenous religion

i) Cultivates the whole person. African religion permeates all departments of life.
ii) It provides people with a view of the world.
iii) It answers some questions that nothing else can.
iv) It provides humanity with moral values by which to live.
v) It gives food for spiritual hunger.
vi) It has inspired great ideas.
vii) It is a means of communication.
viii) It pays attention to the key moments in the life of the individual.
ix) It celebrates life.
x) It shows people their limitations.[6]

It is a unique religion whose sources include: sacred places and religious objects such as rocks, hills, mountains, trees, caves and other holy places; rituals, ceremonies and festivals of the people; art and symbols; music and dance; proverbs, riddles, and wise sayings; and names of people and places. In Nigeria, for example, the name Babatunde means "father returns." It is given to a male child born immediately after the death of his grandfather. Beliefs cover topics such as God, spirits, birth, death, the hereafter, magic, and witchcraft. Religion, in the African indigenous context, permeates all departments of life.

Is it African Religions or African Religion?

John S. Mbiti explains that "we speak of African traditional religions in the plural because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system."[7] He cites the fact that there are numerous different peoples in Africa, each having a very different religious system. Conversely, Mbiti considers African philosophy as another matter; for while the religious expressions in the African context are observable, one cannot claim the same thing about the philosophy behind them. Thus, to Mbiti, the philosophy underlying the religious expression of the African people is singular in form.

This is contested by Nokuzola Mndende, a South African, who holds that it should be referred to as "African Religion," as "no religion is monolithic but people look at the common features." She says, "We never hear people talking about Christianities, Islams, Hinduisms etc. We cannot, for example, talk about Zulu Religion or Xhosa Religion[8]—African Religion is one. While there are differences in some of the customs and objects used to perform rituals, the underlying principle remains the same."[9]

6. See J.S. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975); E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A definition* (London: S.C.M Press, 1973).

7. J.S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: E.A.E.P, 1969), 1; cf. E. Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha, Nigeria: IMICO Publishers, 1975), 5-10.

8. If we look for example at the concept of God in various regions of Africa we will find more commonalities than differences. For example the terms (for God) *uMdali, uHlanga, uMenzi, iNkosi yezulu*, *uMvelingqanqi* and *uNkulunkulu* were commonly found among the branches of the Nguni, the Zulu-speaking as well as the Xhosa-speaking people (See Janet Hodgson. *The God of the Xhosa: A study of the origins and development of the traditional concepts of the Supreme Being* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1982), 62.

9. Nokuzola Mndende. "Ancestors and Healing in African Religion: A South African Context" in *Ancestors, Spirits and Healing in Africa and Asia: A Challenge to the Church* (ed. Ingo Wulfhorst; Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2005), 13.

Mndende builds on her credentials as an authority in her field of African Religion when she says, "I am writing from the perspective of a believer in and practitioner of African Religion. I am not a Christian. Christianity constitutes one but not the only way to God; there are many ways and African Religion is one of them."[10]

Mndende's contention finds some support from some African Christian theologians who argue, in their diverse ways, that "the God of Africa is as good as the God of Christendom, if not better." They include Samuel Kibicho, John Gatu, Gabba and Gabriel Setiloane. [11]

In general, there is a regular rhythm in the pattern of the people's beliefs and practices. And this regular rhythm is the universal belief in the Supreme Being as "an integral part of African world view and practical religion."[12] And in the words of Bolaji Idowu, "We find that in Africa, the real cohesive factor of religion is the living God and that without this one factor, all things would fall to pieces. And it is on this ground especially—this identical concept that we can speak of the religion of Africa in the singular."[13]

If we take for example, the case of the Xhosa community of South Africa, we will find that their world-view has it that *Qamata* (God) was approached through the ancestors. In addition, the ancestral spirits have always acted as mediators between human beings, who stood at the bottom, and *Qamata*, who stood at the top.[14] This imagery, like many others, is a wide-spread notion; for even among the Kikuyu of East Africa the ancestral spirits acted as mediators between human beings and God *(Ngai)*. This shows that the African religiosity has fundamental commonalities that make it African Religion rather than African Religions.

In recent times, most African scholars of African religion, including Mbiti, have agreed that "African Religion is one in essence."[15] For despite its varieties, there is undeniably, a "basic world-view which fundamentally is everywhere the same."[16]

The plural context in doing African Religion

We must acknowledge that any religious discourse in Africa will have to be done within the context of religio-social pluralism; for indeed, Africa is full of plural faith traditions. The dominant ones are: African (Indigenous) Religion, Christianity, and Islam. Even within the traditional religions, John Mbiti rightly says that "Traditional religions are not universal: they are tribal or national. Each religion is bound and limited to the people among whom it has

10. Mndende, "Ancestors and Healing," 13.

11. Tinyiko Sam Maluleke. "The Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans: An Emerging paradigm of Post-cold war and Post-apartheid Black and African theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108 (2000), 25.

12. P.A Dopamu, "Towards understanding African Traditional Religion" *Readings in African Traditional Religion: Structure, Meaning, Relevance, Future* (ed. E. M. Uka; New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 23.

13. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A definition* (London: S.C.M Press, 1973), 6-8.

14. Janet Hodgson, *The God of the Xhosa: A Study of the Origins and Development of the Traditional Concepts of the Supreme Being* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1982), 85.

15. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion, The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Mary Knoll: Orbis, 1997), 16

16. John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 19.

evolved. One traditional religion cannot be propagated in another tribal group. This does not rule out the fact that religious ideas may spread from one people to another. But such ideas, spread spontaneously, especially through migrations, intermarriage, conquest, or expert knowledge being sought by individuals of one tribal group from another. Traditional religions have no missionaries to propagate them; and one individual does not preach his (or her) religion to another."[17]

Even within the Christian churches, African diversity can also be experienced. African Christianity is, too often, described in terms of Catholicism, Protestantism and African Instituted churches. And in view of this diversity in Africa, some African theologians have expressed the view that the terms "Africa" and "African" should be interpreted ideologically rather than racially.[18]

The diversity of the African people is further compounded by the history of the colonial experience in each particular African state. That is, the fact that we have Lusophone Africa, Anglophone Africa, Francophone Africa, Arabphone Africa and the immediate post-Apartheid South Africa and Namibia, which were under the Boers up to the early 1990s, adds to the diversity of Africa as different powers had different ways of orienting their subjects.[19] The Arab slave traders, for example, in the East Coast of Africa intermarried with the local inhabitants and their intermarriage produced the Swahili people.

Apart from the colonial history, the migrational patterns of the people of Africa themselves also contributes to the diversity of Africa. For example, while colonial powers partitioned Africa after the Berlin Conference of 1884/5, thereby dividing the various African communities, the internal rivalries and warfare among the African people themselves also contributed to the current diversity that defines Africa today. An illustration of this: after colonialism, the Maasai found themselves in Kenya and Tanzania; the Luo found themselves in Uganda, Kenya and Sudan; the Chewa found themselves in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. On the other hand, Shaka the Zulu wars of the 19th century saw the Nguni speakers migrate from South Africa to Malawi, Zambia, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania, among other places.

Homogeneity in doing African Religion: a pointer to its relevance?

Walter Rodney rightly emphasizes that what has commonly characterized Africa in "recent history is its political and economic exploitation."[20] Rodney was alluding to how Europe was "continuously under developing Africa." Curiously, Africa is still marginalized in the New World Order, as affirmed by Tinyiko Maluleke and Mercy Oduyoye.[21]

Africa's religio-cultural diversity can be said to have been exaggerated at the expense of its religio-cultural unity; and this can be explained by addressing the *Ubuntu* philosophy, which, in my opinion, would best describe the African homogeneity. Au-

17. J.S Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy,* 4.

18. See Jesse Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton, 2003), 113.

19. See Jesse Mugambi, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1989), 4.

20. Quoted in Jesse Mugambi 1989, 6.

21. Tinyiko Sam Maluleke. "The Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans," 25, and M. A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

gustine Shutte observes that the concept of *Ubuntu*, which is a Zulu word for humanness, was developed over many centuries in traditional African culture. This culture was pre-literate, pre-scientific and pre-industrial.[22] The concept of *Ubuntu* was originally expressed in the songs and stories, the customs and the institutions of the people. As an African philosophy, *Ubuntu* is well summed up in Mbiti's words, "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." Mbiti's summary of the African philosophy is sharply opposed to "I think therefore I exist" by Rene Descartes, the French Philosopher who can be said to have summed up the Western philosophy.[23]

Mbiti appears to be building on the *Ubuntu* philosophy when he says, "Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his (or her) own being, his (or her) own duties, his (or her) privileges and responsibilities towards himself (or herself) and towards other people. When he (or she) suffers, he (or she) does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he (or she) rejoices, he (or she) rejoices not alone but with his (or her) kinsmen (or kinswomen), his (or her) neighbors and his (or her) relatives whether dead or living. When he (or she) married, he (or she) is not alone; neither does the wife (or husband) 'belong' to him (or her) alone. So also the children belong to the corporate body of kinsmen (or kinswomen), even if they bear only their father's name. Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual."[24]

The strength of this philosophy in our modern African society is seen in Shutte's contention that since many of the old customs would be a betrayal to the spirit of *Ubuntu* in our contemporary society, it is important for us (in Africa) to find a way of "living *Ubuntu* in a society where the dominant culture is European, not African, and where many other cultures from other parts of the world exist together." Shutte's view, however, does not mean that there is nothing uniquely African today, as this paper is seeking to show, rather, he means that, as a result of socio-historical factors, African cultural systems have been greatly affected by the dominant European culture that mainly came to Africa through the process of acculturation.

As a spiritual foundation of African societies, *Ubuntu* is a unifying vision or worldview enshrined in the Zulu Maxim *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, that is, "a person is a person through other persons."[25] This *Ubuntu* concept is also found in other African communities, even though there are different vocabularies and phrases that are used to describe it. This African aphorism articulates a basic respect and compassion for others as its bottom line. *Ubuntu* has a certain Africanness and religious commitment in the welfare of fellow human beings that is manifestly African in essence. Indeed, while Western humanism tends to underestimate or even deny the importance of religious beliefs, *Ubuntu* or African humanism is resiliently religious.[26]

22. Augustine Shutte, *Ubuntu: An ethic for a New South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), 9.

23. See Julius Gathogo Mutugi. *The Truth About African Hospitality: Is There Hope for Africa?* (Mombasa: The Salt, 2001), 21.

24. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy,* 108

25. Augustine Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa* (Rondebosch, South Africa: UCT Press, 1993), 46.

26. E.D. Prinsloo, *Ubuntu from a Eurocen-*

While to the Westerner, the Maxim "a person is a person through other persons" has no obvious religious connotations, the maxim has a deep religious meaning in African tradition. When Julius Nyerere coined his *Ujamaa* concept (from *Jamii*—meaning family), he was talking from this *Ubuntu* background. He saw Africa as one family and the whole world as an extended family. It is in this same spirit that the whole clan is seen as a family. Most Africans still think of themselves in the context of this extended relationship.

Another distinctive quality of the *Ubuntu* philosophy is the African emphasis on consensus. Indeed, the African traditional culture has, seemingly, an almost infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and reconciliation.[27] Democracy in the African way does not simply boil down to majority rule since it operates in the form of discussions geared towards a consensus.

This view is clearly captured by Jesse Mugambi when he says that, "The traditional court would appreciate the views of every participant, and weigh the opinions of everyone irrespective of social status." Decisions are reached through consensus, as there is no voting. Whenever there are "irreconcilable difference, decision is postponed until a consensus emerges." [28] This important aim of consensus building rather than dividing the people along the lines of "winners versus losers" is expressed by words like *twī hamwe* (Kikuyu for "we are together") *tuko nawewe* (Swahili for "you are not alone") *Simunye* (We are one), (that is, Unity is strength), and slogans like "an injury to one is an injury to all."[29]

Despite *Ubuntu's* articulation of important values such as respect, human dignity and compassion, it can be exploited to enforce group solidarity and therefore fail to safeguard the rights and opinions of individuals and the minority. True *Ubuntu* however requires an authentic respect for individual rights and values and an honest appreciation of diversities amongst the people. Whatever the argument, *Ubuntu*, best illustrates the African homogeneity which can be exploited for the good of Africa in the 21st century.

It is disheartening to note that *Ubuntu,* in our modern times, is undermined by the violent ethnic and political conflicts that have plagued sub-Saharan Africa. Of course, it is a result of a failure to adhere to the original ideals of the philosophy, which sees every "neighbor" as part of the extended family, and thus treats him or her with lots of African hospitality. Nevertheless, Maphisa argues that South Africans are slowly re-discovering their common humanity. He says, "Gone are the days when people were stripped of their dignity (*ubuntu*) through harsh laws, gone are the days when people had to use *ubulwane* (that is, animal like behavior) to uphold or reinforce those laws. I suggest that the transformation of an apartheid South Africa into a democracy is a rediscovery of *ubuntu."* [30]

Ubuntu is clearly in need of revitalization in the hearts and minds of the African people so that its ethos can be truly a gift

tric and Afrocentric Perspective and its Influence on Leadership (Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 1995), 4.

27. J. Teffo, *The Concept of Ubuntu as a Cohesive Moral Value* (Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 1994), 4.

28. Jesse Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: Africa after the Cold War* (Nairobi: E.AE.P., 1995), 132.

29. See J. Broodryk, *Ubuntu Management and Motivation* (Johannesburg: Gauteng Department of Welfare, 1997), 5, 7, 9.

30. S. Maphisa. *Man in constant search of Ubuntu: a dramatist's obsession* (Pretoria: *Ubuntu* School of Philosophy, 1994), 8.

that African philosophy can bequeath to other philosophies of the world.

An acknowledgement that every culture has its dark and dangerous side as well helps the *Ubuntu* philosophy today to absorb the strength of the European cultural emphasis on freedom of the individual while at the same time building on the strength of the African cultural emphasis on the idea of community. This acknowledgement helps to produce a synthesis that is true to the African tradition while at the same time it can also be applied to the new world that European science and technology is in the process of creating."

The influence of African Religion

Apart from the South African religious notion of *Ubuntu*, whose philosophical emphasis is found in the rest of Africa, the influence of African Religion among the people of Africa is seen in Laurenti Magesa's contention that most of the time, African Christians "seek comfort in their own religious symbol systems, even though these may not correspond exactly to those inculcated and expected by their Christian leaders. Indeed, these are often symbols and rituals that church leaders have explicitly condemned."[31]

Aylward Shorter has described this situation further when he says that the African Christian repudiates "remarkably little of his former non-Christian outlook." Consequently, the African Christian operates with "two thought-systems at once, and both of them are closed to each other. Each is only superficially modified by the other." [32]

Writing in 1960, the Nigerian Chief Obafemi Awolowo made substantially the same point with reference to his own country. He pointed out that "Christian and Moslem beliefs and practices are, with many a Nigerian, nothing but veneers and social facades: at heart and in the privacy of their lives, most Nigerian Christians and Moslems" are African religious traditionalists.[33]

According to John M. Waliggo, Christian evangelizers convinced themselves that the Baganda had been "civilized," that is, completely won over to Christianity. But when Kabaka Mutesa II, their king, was exiled in 1953, many Baganda Christians identified with traditionalists, rejecting Christian prayers as ineffective in bringing him back. Again in 1961, many Buganda Catholics "turned a deaf ear" to Archbishop Kiwanuka's letter against the traditionalist-tinted political party Kabaka Yekka (which literally means Kabaka alone!) and continued to support it. And despite the phenomenal spread of Christianity in Buganda, many expressions of African Religion such as divination and the use of healing practices continue even though Christianity expressly forbids them.[34] This draws its parallelism with Gwinyai Muzorewa's experience. He says: "I was surprised when many Christians in Zimbabwe reverted to traditionalism. Some members of the clergy also turned to traditionalism during the seven years war (1972-1979) in the country.

31. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion*, 7.

32. Aylward Shorter. "Problems and Possibilities for the Church's Dialogue With African Traditional Religion," in *Dialogue with the African Traditional Religions* (ed. A. Shorter; Kampala: Gaba Publications, 1975), 7.

33. V. E. A. Okwuosa, *In the Name of Christianity: The Missionaries in Africa* (Philadelphia and Ardmore: Dorrance & Company, 1977), 26.

34. J.M. Waliggo. "Ganda Traditional Religion and Catholicism in Buganda, 1948-75," in Fashole-Luke et al., eds. 1978. *Christianity in Independent Africa* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1978) 34-42.

They were persuaded to believe that their ancestor spirit has a major part to play in the whole experience."[35] Similarly, Samuel G. Kibicho shows the role that the Kikuyu conception of God *(Ngai)* played in their struggle against colonialism in the 1950s and how it has been an important factor in their response to Christian evangelization from the beginning.[36]

In their book, David Chidester, Chirevo Kwenda, Robert Petty, Judy Tobler, and Darrel Wratten have attempted to show the influence of African Religion amongst the indigenous people of Africa when they say that, "The popular version of African traditional religion is what Africans (including some elites, though mostly the masses) do with no regard for what Westerners, or anyone else, may or may not think about it. It is what Africans do when they are just Africans. Now this does not mean that such a practice is completely untouched by alien influences, be they religious (such as Christianity or Islam) or secular (such as modernity); what it means is that in full cognizance of their historical context Africans do what they do for their own reasons rather than to impress someone else. In other words, while talking to the West is unavoidable—for the elite—and talking back to the West may be progressive, it is only through turning away from and not talking to the West that the possibility of considering African traditional religion in its own right translates into a reality."[37]

Laurenti Magesa builds on the premise that the importance of African religion in Africa cannot be downplayed, for even the African converts to Christianity (or Islam) still retain their inner motivation for their religious life in African religion. Mbiti graphically captures this view when he says that Africans "come out of African religion but they don't take off their traditional religiosity. They come as they are. They come as people whose world view is shaped according to African religion."[38]

If there are any changes during this process, Mbiti perceptively points out, that they "are generally on the surface, affecting the material side of life, and only beginning to reach the deeper levels of thinking pattern, language content, mental images, emotions, beliefs and response in situations of need. Traditional concepts still form the essential background of many African peoples…"[39] In other words, their inner religious drive remains overwhelmingly part of African religion. Consequently, the convert may publicly claim the new intended meaning while unconsciously ascribing to them a different one—that is African religion. Thus, there is every need for everyone who is interested in knowing more about the African personality to first and foremost study African religion.

The need to study African Religion is strengthened by the contention that religion is the axis around which life in Af-

35. Gwinyai Muzorewa, "The Future of African Theology," *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 4, 1990, 50-51.

36. Samuel G. Kibicho. "The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Case-study," in E. Fashole-Luke et al., Eds 1978. *Christianity in Independent Africa* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1978), 370-88.

37 *African Traditional Religion in South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography* (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), 2.

38. B.W. Burleson, *John Mbiti*: *The Dialogue of an African Theologian with African Religion* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1986), 12.

39. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion,* xii.

rica revolves. It gains further weight in J.S. Mbiti's assertion that "Africans are notoriously religious."[40] This statement has become something of a truism in the study of religion in Africa.

African Religion as an agent of social reconstruction

African Religion provides people with a view of the world that inspires new ideas. That means that African Religion is a good agent of social reconstruction. As Aquiline Tarimo rightly says, "Naturally, all human beings are endowed with the gift of reason and as such are capable of anticipating the future with hope and a certain degree of dynamism. Metaphysical figures of speech, symbols, rituals, and spiritualities can easily demonstrate this assertion. A static culture does not exist. Everything is subject to change. What happened in the course of African history is that external forces of political and religious domination suppressed cultural and religious dynamics. Consequently, concerns about self-defense and self-preservation became important."[41]

Jesse Mugambi sees the notion of social reconstruction as belonging to the social sciences. Consequently, he borrows from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann[42] who describe social reconstruction as "the reorganization of some aspects of a society in order to make it more responsive to changed circumstances."[43] Like Berger and Luckmann, Mugambi is convinced that religion has an important role in the social reconstruction of a society. As both object and agent of social reconstruction, he feels that, "religion provides the world view which synthesizes everything cherished by the individuals as corporate members of the community."[44] He thus exudes confidence that religion is the most vital project for the people who are undergoing a rapid change, as in post-colonial Africa.

In his theology of reconstruction, Mugambi is greatly influenced by Karl Jaspers' positive appraisal of mythical thinking; for according to him, "the myth tells a story and expresses intuitive insights, rather than universal concepts."[45] This prompts him to argue that, "a society which is incapable of making its own myths or re-interpreting its old ones, becomes extinct."[46] In view of this, Mugambi defines the vision of the theology of reconstruction, in Africa, as a project of "re-mythologization, in which the theologian thus engaged, discerns new symbols and new metaphors in which to recast the central Message of the Gospel."[47]

40. J.S Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion,* 1.

41. Aquiline Tarimo. *Applied Ethics and Africa's Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton, 2005), 20.

42 See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. *Social Reconstruction of Reality* (New York: Penguin Books, 1967).

43. J. Njoroge wa Ngugi, *Creation in "The catechism of the Catholic Church": A Basis for Catechesis in post-colonial Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa. 2007), 73.

44. Jesse Mugambi. *From Liberation to Reconstruction,* 17.

45. K. Jaspers, "Myth and Religion" in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (E. Hans-Werner Bartsch, ed.; London: SPCK, 1972), 144.

46. Jesse Mugambi. *From Liberation to Reconstruction,* 37.

47. Jesse Mugambi. "The Bible and Ecumenism in African Christianity," in Hannah Kinoti and John Waliggo (Eds) 1997. *The Bible in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1997), 75.

Consequently, he differs strongly with scholars like Bultmann whose theory of demythologization is contrasted with his "remythologization." He says, of Bultmann, "In (his) attempt to satisfy scientific positivism by denouncing myth (he) ends up destroying the reality of religion as a pillar of culture." For Jesse Mugambi, as with Jaspers, "myth is indispensable in cultural constructions of reality." For him, therefore, the idea of social reconstruction in post apartheid South Africa or in post Cold War Africa is tantamount to beginning to make new myths, and reinterpreting the old ones, for the survival of the African peoples. He says that, "a vanishing people must be replaced by the myth of a resurgent, or resilient people," while the myth of a "desperate people must be replaced by the myth of a people *(who are)* full of hope. The myth of a hungry people must be replaced by the myth of a people capable of feeding themselves, and so on."[48]

All in all, the proponents of religion as an agent of social transformation fail to acknowledge that religion can also be misused to cause division in society. It can equally be used to "underdevelop" people. It can be used as a tool of instability where blind adherence to religious convictions leads to suspicions, pride and even violence.

Conclusion

The significance of religion in African society should not be downplayed; and as Paul F. Knitter notes, nothing comes before people's religious identity and convictions. If this identity is threatened, everything must be sacrificed or ventured in order to preserve it.[49] This also agrees with Paul Tillich's assertion that, "Religion is our Ultimate Concern. Nothing is more ultimate."

A study of African Religion is tantamount to a religious dialogue. If it is done by Christian theologians, it amounts to a dialogue between Christianity and African religion. As Hans Küng says, "There will be no peace among nations without peace among religions. And no peace among religions without greater dialogue among religions."[50] He goes on to say, "We need a more intensive philosophical and theological dialogue of theologians and specialists in religion which takes religious plurality seriously in theological terms, accepts the challenge of the other religions, and investigates their significance for each person's own religion."[51]

This dialogue is crucial considering that the dialogue between, for instance, Christianity and African religion has never been a real conversation. For as Laurenti Magesa says, the "Contact between Christianity and African Religion has historically been predominantly a monologue, bedevilled by assumptions prejudicial against the latter, with Christianity culturally more vocal and ideologically more aggressive. Therefore, what we have heard until now is largely Christianity speaking about African Religion, not African Religion speaking for itself."[52]

Thus there is need to study African Religion as a way of making it enter into a form of dialogue with other religions—as it is in this way that Africa will experience genuine shalom. It is this shalom that will bring wholeness in the Africa of the twenty-first century. We all have a duty to usher in a new dawn in Africa today.

48. Jesse Mugambi. *From Liberation to Reconstruction,* 37-38.

49. P.F. Knitter, "Religion, Power, Dialogue" in *Swedish Missiological Themes*, 93, 1 (2005), 30.

50. Hans Küng. *Global Responsibility: In search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xv.

51. Hans Küng , *Global Responsibility,* 137-8

52. *African Religion,* 5.

The Trial of Luther A. Gotwald

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This essay was first presented to the Annual Meeting of the Lutheran Historical Society of Gettysburg, on April 17, 1993.

One hundred years ago, on the Tuesday and Wednesday after Easter in 1893, the trial of Luther Gotwald was held at Wittenberg College, Springfield, Ohio.

The story behind the trial of Luther Gotwald begins with the founding of the General Synod on October 20, 1820, when six synods banded together into the first Lutheran denomination in the United States. Six years later it founded its seminary at Gettysburg, with Samuel Simon Schmucker as its first professor.

The General Synod made a deliberate effort to become an Americanized Protestant body. Its leaders wanted it to be a church which would be efficient at winning people to Christ. However, many among the new waves of Lutheran immigrants did not feel at home in this American version of Lutheranism.

Thus the General Synod soon had internal problems by 1845, when the General Synod met in Philadelphia, where a lone delegate from the Synod of the West made a bold appeal that the synod either renounce the name "Lutheran" or reject utterly the un-Lutheran…Popular Theology…of Schmucker. There was not a single voice to join him. Without predecessor or without successors, Germany-born Friedrich Konrad Dietrich Wyneken stood alone.

To justify its theological position, that same convention appointed a special committee to answer similar charges originating in Germany, namely, that the American churches were not really Lutheran. The committee answered, in part, that the General Synod requires only essential agreement in doctrinal views, strict conformity being impossible in America.

Later that same year, when the General Synod refused to acknowledge its errors, Wyneken denounced the General Synod as "Reformed in doctrine, Methodistic in practice, and laboring for the ruin of the Church, whose name she falsely bears." He then became instrumental in organizing the denomination known today as The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Another schism took place within the General Synod attributable to the tensions which brought on the Civil War. On May 20, 1863, three synods withdrew to form the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Confederate States of America.

The third schism began to take place a year later with the formation of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia on May 25, 1864. That seminary's design was to provide pastors who where not under the influence of Schmucker of Gettysburg and his Americanized form of Lutheranism.

A year later this third schism was provoked when the Pennsylvania Synod delegates objected to the reception of the

Frankean Synod which had not adopted the Augsburg Confession. By November 1867, the schism was complete with the formation of another Lutheran denomination—the General Council.

A quarter of a century later, his accusers alleged that Luther Gotwald, Professor of Practical Theology at Wittenberg College, was teaching General Council Lutheranism in a General Synod Seminary.

What was really at stake in this trial was the identity of these Lutherans. Were there really significant differences among the General Synod of the South, the General Council, and the General Synod? The accusers thought Yes, the accused thought No. The Court had to decide between the two. Preserving the identity of Lutherans was an issue.

In developing his theological stance, Schmucker had done at least three things. First, he must be given credit for having raised the Augsburg Confession out of the dust. He made a vow to do so while still a student at Princeton University. Second, he confirmed that vow in the oath of office which he both wrote and took upon becoming the first professor at Gettysburg Seminary. Third, to Schmucker's credit, it should be noted that, as professor, he published his 1834 text book, entitled *Elements of Popular Theology; with Occasional Reference to the Doctrines of the Reformation as Avowed before the Diet at Augsburg, in MDXXX*….

Consistent with this lengthy title, with his promise, and with his oath of office, Schmucker quoted portions of the Augsburg Confession in piecemeal fashion with expositions of its articles.

Schmucker wrote the following as introduction to his textbook: "On matters of non-fundamental importance, Christians should agree to controvert with lenity, and differ in peace. Entire harmony of opinion was not an attribute of the church even under apostolic guidance; nor have we any evidence, that diversity of view on minor

points was regarded as a barrier to ecclesiastical communion. Fundamental errorists, indeed, ought to be the subjects of uncompromising controversy, and of exclusion from church privileges….

"There is little doubt that in each of the several denominations termed orthodox, there are and always have been members living in harmony, who differ from each other as much as the symbols of these several churches. As the great head of the church has so extensively owned the labours

of all these denominations, the ground held by them in common should be considered fundamental, and the points of difference regarded in a secondary light as legitimate subjects for free inquiry."

The word "fundamental" was the cornerstone in building an Americanized Lutheran church which allowed the homogenization of its teachings with the other major Protestant churches. Schmucker left out many of the Confession's condemnations of those denominations which held differing theological positions. In condensing longer passages of the Confession, he left out some important arguments in favor of positions which he opposed. The Augsburg Confession is but one small, but basic, part of the Lutheran Book of Concord. However, here in America, the Book of Concord was not available in English until the Henkels of New Market, Virginia, published it in 1851.

As early as two years after the publication of the Book of Concord in English, Schmucker's brother-in-law, Samuel Sprecher, who at that time was president of Wittenberg College, sensed that times were changing. As early as 1853, he wrote, "A Creed we must have…old Lutheran men and synods [are] gaining control of the General Synod…friends of [the] American Lutheran Church must define the doctrine which they do hold and what they reject… [either] adopt the symbols of the church or form a new symbol which shall embrace all that is fundamental…"

Another two years later, 1855, the General Synod met in First Lutheran Church, Dayton, Ohio, the congregation from which came Gotwald's three accusers. At this time the accusers Alexander and Joseph Gebhart were 33 and 25 years old respectively. Accuser Baker was not even born at this time. Gotwald was a college student at Gettsyburg. At that convention about twenty pastors asked Schmucker to write that "new symbol."

Schmucker went home to Gettysburg and wrote "The Definite Synodical Platform." It was an Americanized Confession rejecting certain articles of the Augsburg Confession. It was published anonymously and widely circulated. Schmucker simply articulated the views which the Ohio and many other Lutherans really held.

Schmucker had enough influence with synods in Pennsylvania that two of them adopted The Definite Synodical Platform. The Alleghany Synod of 1842–1938 was one of them and illustrates how men of honor could contradict themselves. It did this at its 1856 Convention held at McConnellsburg. There, in one breath, it voted to support the Doctrinal Basis of the General Synod which upheld the Augsburg Confession as a "substantially correct" explanation of the Christian faith. In the next breath, they adopted The Definite Platform, voting to "renounce and openly affirm that we have no sympathy with and reject the following errors: … approval of the ceremonies of the Mass… private confession and absolution…denial of the divine obligations of the Sabbath… baptismal regeneration…the real presence of the body and blood of our Savior in the Eucharist." In so doing, the Alleghany Synod hoped to purge things which they considered "too catholic."

Thirteen years later, however, at its 1869 meeting in Bedford, the Alleghany Synod re-aligned itself again with the doctrinal basis of the General Synod. That new position read, in part, that the General Synod regarded the Augsburg Confession as a "…correct exhibition of the Fundamental Doctrines of the Word of God, and the Faith of our Church founded upon that Word." There again is that pesky word "fundamental."

Wittenberg College's theological foundations were laid by the teachings of Schmucker at Gettysburg. Sprecher wrote an oath of office for the faculty of Wittenberg College. In that oath the Board of Directors asked its professors to "… sincerely reject…" the five errors identified in The Definite Synodical Platform referred to earlier. This oath of office was used for 30 years, from 1855 to 1885. That's 16 years after the General Synod regarded the Augsburg Confession as a "…correct exhibition of the Fundamental Doctrines of the Word of God, and the Faith of our Church founded upon that Word." Sprecher's oath was not changed until Dr. James Richard, Gotwald's predecessor on the faculty, refused to take an oath which espoused The Definite Synodical Platform's theology. The Board of Directors then bound Richard to the General Synod's 1869 doctrinal basis.

The General Synod had officially renounced The Definite Synodical Platform in 1869, but during the next two decades Schmucker's and Sprecher's teachings lingered on strongly enough to prompt the Pastor of First Lutheran Church, Dayton, and two of his laymen, all members of the Board of Trustees of Wittenberg College, to bring charges against its Professor of Practical Theology, saying, in part…

"The said Luther A. Gotwald, D. D… [was not teaching]…the type of Lutheranism that dictated the establishment of Wittenberg College, that animated its founders in undertaking it, and in whose interests the original trust was created."

Part of that "original trust" was $21,000 given by the Gebharts of Dayton in a financial campaign held thirty years earlier in the early 1860s. Three members of the Board of Trustees, on February 9, 1893, brought formal charges of disloyalty against Wittenberg's Professor of Practical Theology, Luther Alexander Gotwald. They were Alexander Gebhart, Joseph R. Gebhart, his cousin, and their pastor, the Rev. Ernest E. Baker. These three were all members of the prestigious First Lutheran Church, Dayton.

When First Church built their second building during the Civil War, it was the largest church building in the state of Ohio. Its tower rose to an impressive 154 feet. It seated 750 and had a pulpit-centered sanctuary, a choir space behind the preacher, a brand new pipe organ and a set of carillon bells in its tower.

The congregation twice hosted the Convention of the General Synod: the first in their small first building in 1855, from which Schmucker left to write The Definite Synodical Platform, and again in 1871, the first convention after the General Synod had adopted its "correct exhibition" statement regarding the Augsburg Confession. Thus their two buildings figured physically in the opening and closing chapters of The Definite Synodical Platform fiasco.

Alexander Gebhart was a long-time member of the Board of Trustees of Wittenberg College and its treasurer, a tour of duty he began under the Gotwald pastorate. This Gebhart and his cousin Joseph were prominent business men and one was the president of a Dayton bank.

These two Gebharts came to Dayton as youths when their parents moved from Somerset County of Pennsylvania. The father of Alexander, Frederick Gebhart, is known to have accompanied his Pastor, C.F. Heyer, when he left Somerset County in Pennsylvania on a visit to the Cincinnati Area in December of 1835. That trip may have opened these Gebharts' eyes to the business opportunities in Ohio. By 1839, Frederick Gebhart was a charter member of First Church, Dayton. In fact, its organization took place in his hardware store. These two accusing Gebharts knew Gotwald per-

sonally for 18 years, three and one-half of them as their pastor.

The other accuser, Pastor Ernest Baker, a recent graduate of Wittenberg College and Seminary, knew Gotwald as the parish pastor of Second Lutheran Church of Springfield and as seminary professor. In the Miami Synod's life, Baker quickly rose to prominence: elected as delegate to the General Synod Convention in Lebanon, named as member to the Board of Directors of Wittenberg, and elected secretary and then president of the Miami Synod.

The Dayton congregation had a long history of not using the worship services recommended by the General Synod. In fact, during the Baker pastorate the congregation was using the Presbyterian hymnal. At the General Synod convention in Lebanon in 1891, the last convention held immediately before the trial, a motion had been made that the church provide two hymnals, one with the Common Service and the other without it. Both Gotwald and Baker were delegates to that convention. Gotwald voted with the majority to maintain the hymnal with the Common Service. Baker voted on the minority side. To First Lutheran Church's credit, on more than one occasion they tried using the General Synod's orders for worship but a month or two after each try they went back to using a rather informal service. They learned of their freedom to do this from the Augsburg Confession:

"…And to the true unity of the Church, it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike…."

The two Gebharts in this story must have been persuaded by their pastor to join him in bringing accusations.

To make public their views in opposition to Gotwald, about one year before the trial, Alexander Gebhart, Ernest Baker, two college professors, H. R. Geiger and Charles Ehrenfeld, and two others, became the incorporators of *The Lutheran Evangelist*, a weekly paper published in Springfield, Ohio. In its pages, the 72-year old Editor Geiger, a retired Wittenberg professor who served almost from its founding days, called for the return of Wittenberg College to the Lutheranism of its founders. It did not matter to them that for over twenty years the General Synod had adopted a position regarding the Augsburg Confession that affirmed it as a correct exhibition of fundamental doctrines of the Scriptures.

Their published diatribes against Gotwald inspired a rival paper. The *Lutheran Witness* of the Missouri Lutherans five times mentioned *The Lutheran Evangelist* paper as "The Lutheran Methodist commonly called *The Lutheran Evangelist*."

The accusers first tried to have the Board of Directors of the college censure Gotwald in June of 1892. After a long heated debate, the Board voted their confidence in all of their faculty members in the Theological Department.

Their next move was to have the Miami Synod censure Gotwald. This they did by submitting a minority report which took exception to the Board's recent action in regard to Gotwald's professorship. One elderly visitor, Pastor Christian Spielmann, who attended that Miami Synod convention, wrote for the *Lutheran Standard*, "Dr. Gotwald was not present but was ably defended…. It reminds me of our struggling efforts for a sounder Lutheran position of forty and fifty years ago."

Rebuffed by the Miami Synod, their home synod, the three accusers from Dayton were determined all the more to bring this matter to the Wittenberg Board of Di-

rectors for final resolution in a formal heresy trial in the Spring of 1893.

Another person figured in the bringing of the charges. Only after the trial it was learned that Charles Ehrenfeld was the real author of the charges. Ehrenfeld had recently resigned his professorship after 66 students of Wittenberg College and Seminary signed petitions asking for his resignation. The students complained that he could not maintain discipline in his classes and he came to them unprepared. Ehrenfeld may have thought that if he could be forced out of office by students, surely Gotwald could be forced out of office by formal charges presented to the Board of Directors.

When Daniel Gotwald and his wife Susanna Crone Gotwald became parents of their eighth child on January 31, 1833, they were living in the Lutheran parsonage at Petersburg, present-day York Springs, which was about eleven miles north of Gettysburg.

With Gettysburg being so close to Petersburg, Daniel and Susanna asked Professor Schmucker to baptize their newly born son and gave him the name Luther Alexander Gotwald.

In September of 1838 Daniel accepted a call to serve the Penns Valley Parish in the wilds of Centre County where he burned himself out in five years by serving 14 preaching points ranging from Aaronsburg to as far as Luthersburg, about 80 miles away through Pennsylvania's mountainous west. He also organized at least two new congregations during those five years.

When father Daniel was on this death bed in 1843, he called his ten-year old son Luther to his side and committed him and his mother to praying for and seeing that the boy enter the Gospel Ministry.

Nine years later Luther enrolled in Wittenberg College, Springfield, Ohio, with $14 in his pocket. Sprecher had been president of Wittenberg only three years when the nineteen-year-old Luther A. Gotwald enrolled in the Commercial Department in the Spring of 1852.

For providential reasons, he transferred to Pennsylvania College in Gettysburg. Two providential reasons are known to the family. One was that his father had been one of the fifty original donors who put up one sixth of their annual salary to help establish the Gettysburg college with a promise that his sons could attend there tuition free. The other was that he had met Mary Elizabeth King, the sister of three of his classmates in Springfield, and since by then he was studying for the Gospel Ministry, he did not want her to be a distraction from his studies.

Following college he enrolled in the Gettysburg Seminary where he studied theology under the man who baptized him. Graduating in the year 1859 meant that Luther was in Gettysburg when The Definite Synodical Platform issue was at its height. Luther wrote in his daily journal that he considered himself "a strict Lutheran." His theological texts, however, had included Schmucker's…Popular Theology….

In October, following his graduation, he returned to Springfield and, standing in the bay window of the King's living room, was married to Mary Elizabeth King by both her Presbyterian pastor and College President Samuel Sprecher.

In his autobiography, Gotwald praised Schmucker, yet had to record:
"[Schmucker's]…strong personality and his theological views greatly influenced me during my early ministry, but in later years, I was compelled to considerably modify my views, after a fuller study of the Church's teachings."

When Gotwald came to Second Lutheran Church, Springfield, in 1885, he and the church council agreed that he would be using the liturgy of the General Synod, namely, the

Common Service as it had developed up to that point. This was the service which his accusers did not use at First Lutheran Church, Dayton, and which their Pastor Baker would vote to have deleted from the church hymnal in a separate edition.

The Lutheran Evangelist portrayed Gotwald as not only in favor of the Common Service but that he also recommended the use of a gown. When Second Church was built, the sanctuary had an altar at its center with the pulpit to the side. The Gotwald family donated those two pieces of "high church" furniture.

From Second Lutheran Church, Springfield, Luther Gotwald was called by the Wittenberg Seminary to serve as their Professor of Practical Theology—a newly developed concept of theological training. He must have entered that task with a sense of foreboding. He recorded in his Pastoral Record:

"November 25th 1888 closes my ministry in Springfield, and closes as far as I know, my ministry as a pastor altogether. Almost thirty years have been spent in Preaching Christ. Delightful years! God: I thank Thee for them! The future, with its new work is all uncertain. God, I trust it all into Thy hands!"

On the Tuesday after Easter, A.D. 1893, the Board of Directors of Wittenberg College assembled in Wittenberg College's Recitation Hall for the specially called meeting to hear what the three accusers, Baker, Gebhart and Gebhart, had to say about their charges of disloyalty of Wittenberg's Professor of Practical Theology.

The board members served as the entire court: as the prosecutors of the charges, as counsels for the defense, and as the jury in this trial. The president of the Board, a lawyer named John L. Zimmerman, served as presiding judge. Initially the Secretary of the Board, D. H. Bauslin, served as the recorder. The accusers had a fellow board member, Pastor E. D. Smith serve as prosecutor. The accused was present. Pastor G. M. Grau and Judge A. W. Adair, served as counsels for the defense.

Secretary Bauslin read the original charges, which were couched in vague general terms which claimed that this offending professor was teaching General Council Lutheranism in a General Synod Seminary, that he was not teaching the Lutheranism of those who founded Wittenberg, and more specifically that he believed and taught baptismal regeneration to his students.

The counsel for the defense asked the court to make the charges more specific so that they could be spoken to, such as when, where, what, and to whom did he say or teach what was inappropriate. They also asked the accusers to define their use of the word "fundamental." Point by point, the board, now acting as the court, ordered the accusers to comply with their demand to have more specific charges. The defense also asked that Gotwald not be tried on his faithfulness to the Lutheranism of the founders of Wittenberg College, rather, that he be tried on his faithfulness to the Lutheranism of the General Synod as things stood while Gotwald taught. This was the identity issue on which the entire case hinged. For 24 years the General Synod had officially renounced Schmucker's vague "substantially correct" attitude toward the Augsburg Confession and held that the Augsburg Confession was a correct exhibition of the fundamental teachings of the divine Word of God. The Court agreed to this request and ordered the three accusers to have their more specific charges ready when they reconvened the next morning.

The next morning the trial continued haltingly. The accusers refused to bring amended charges claiming that to alter the charges would make them no longer their charges.

At this session the word "fundamental" enters the controversy and is crucial to understanding how men of integrity could lop off entire portions of the Augsburg Confession and still consider themselves to be good Lutherans. Gotwald's defenders had asked the accusers to define the meaning of that word as they understood it.

Baker complained, "…We come here now and find that everything we have charged has been taken away and an impossible condition has been rested upon us, for example, an impossible condition of defining the term 'fundamental.' By action of the Board we have been asked to do something the General Synod itself has never done…."

Since the accusers did not comply with the order of the court to submit amended charges as required by the Board, some board members were ready to adjourn. Instead, the court appointed a committee to revise the charges so that the case could move forward.

At 1:30 p.m. the Board reconvened and accepted the committee's amended charges with but one minor change. Judge Adair read the hastily prepared opening statement of the defendant to the revised charges. Gotwald claimed that there were no substantial differences between the General Council and the General Synod. The differences were that the General Council accepted the entire Book of Concord as its doctrinal basis whereas the General Synod placed only the Augsburg Confession in that status. The other difference was the General Council adopted the Galesburg Rule which stated "Lutheran pulpits are for Lutheran ministers only. Lutheran altars are for Lutheran communicants only…." Neither the General Synod nor Gotwald agreed with this rule.

The next problem was to find someone to prosecute the charges since the three original accusers would have nothing to do with the case claiming that it was no longer their case, and, if it were, they did not have time to prepare their amended case.

President Zimmerman ruled that the same case was before the court and the accusers would be allowed to present everything which they had prepared. Still "nothing doing" was their attitude.

Reluctantly Pastor M. J. Firey, chairman of the committee which revised the charges, agreed to serve as prosecutor of the amended charges. Witnesses were called. The first three witnesses to be called were the three accusers. They refused to testify. The editor of *The Lutheran Evangelist*, Geiger, was summoned to come and testify. He refused to come. The recently resigned Professor Ehrenfeld was summoned to testify and he refused to come.

Witnesses were then called, each of whom supported the accused. They included board members, the college president, the secretary of the board, and seminary students all of whom supported Gotwald. Gotwald took the stand briefly to clarify his position on baptismal regeneration. Gotwald never presented his defense but rested his case on what the witnesses had testified.

The court, including all the counsels for the prosecutors, voted unanimously to acquit Gotwald. The three accusers abstained from voting. Later in their account of the trial in *The Lutheran Evangelist*, Baker, Gebhart and Gebhart suggested that the matter would be taken to the Ohio Supreme Court.

In the reporting of this trial to the Wittenberg Synod, the original prosecutor. Pastor E. D. Smith, said that he learned only after the trial that the accusers had suppressed a letter from former college President Sprecher. In that letter Sprecher indicated that indeed the Lutheran Church was standing on different theological ground from that

of the college's founders.

The accusers returned to Dayton and led the congregation in boycotting the General Synod. Five years later, when Baker resigned as their pastor, he became a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Cleveland and later moved to California and entered secular work. The Gebharts loyally kept up their membership in their Dayton congregation.

Significantly, later in the same year of the trial, both the General Synod and the General Council appointed similar committees, to which the General Synod… South also joined later, which began the process which led to the merger known as the United Lutheran Church in America in 1918. The widespread publicity which attended the trial made it clear that there were no insurmountable differences among these Lutherans.

> Are all the doctrinal articles of the confession essential, vital, important, necessary, 'fundamental' in the same sense?

Gotwald continued to serve as professor of practical theology for another two-and-one-half years until he suffered a stroke and submitted his resignation due to this illness. His grandson, Luther Gotwald wrote:

"On the evening of September 15, 1900, as he sat in his chair by his desk, he had just asked his wife to open the Bible and read their evening lesson together. Suddenly as a result of another heart attack, he passed away, painlessly and quietly."

My mother, Ethel Bare Gotwald, the wife of the grandson of the accused, upon reading the transcript of the trial, suggested that Professor Luther Gotwald be designated as the "Father of the United Lutheran Church in America." If that is valid, it means that there was a gestation period of a quarter of a century, for that merger did not take place until 1918. But a quarter of a century is fast in church merger matters.

Epilog

Today, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is on trial.[1] Lutheran identity was at the heart of that two-thirds of a century between The Definite Synodical Platform and the founding of the United Lutheran Church in America.

Lutheran identity still elusively stalks the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Among the issues before these Lutherans is the tension between adhering to the Augsburg Confession as a valid expression of the Christian Faith and their effort to be an ecumenical church seeking rapprochement with such diverse denominations as the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Episcopal Churches on the one side, and the many Reformed churches on the other

There are two approaches emerging simultaneously. To the first group the approach is "We are Evangelical Catholics, no different from you. Let's recognize each others' ministries of word and sacraments." They worked to present documents of agreement.

Less than one month ago the ELCA

1. It must be remembered that this address was written in 1993.

and three Reformed Denominations published their report on ecumenical conversations in the book *A Common Calling, The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today.* To this observer, the work of that study group espouses a Lutheranism not much different from that of Schmucker. That work even uses the previously outlawed word "fundamental" in the same sense that Schmucker used it.

In contrast to these approaches there is a third approach, that of sticking to the testimony of the Augsburg confessors. It is there as plain as day. It is a correct exhibition of the things that are fundamentally taught by the Holy Scriptures.

Perhaps I should not have used that outlawed word again, however, listen to how Professor Gotwald defined the word "fundamental" in his opening statement at the trial:

"But the question now recurs: 'Fundamental' in what sense? Are all the doctrinal articles of the confession essential, vital, important, necessary, 'fundamental' in the same sense? Are they all fundamental to the same degree, that is equally fundamental? I answer that in the negative. I do not hold all to be fundamental in the same sense, all are not equally fundamental. To say that each one of the articles of the confession is fundamental in the sense that no man can be saved who does not accept it, I do not think of asserting.

"I hold that the soul, that, with a sense of its guilt and danger of eternal death, trusts itself, as the Gospel invites it, to Jesus Christ, as its Divine and only Savior, is a saved soul, whether its knowledge and faith correspond in all minute points with our confession or not. 'He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life,' even if he never saw the Augsburg Confession, or does not know that such a confession exists.

"I hold that in some sense, however, all the articles of the confession are fundamental. Some of them, I may say, are essential or fundamental, first of all, to the integrity of the Christian System, so that by denying them, the system ceases to be Christian distinctively, and becomes Jewish or Mohammedan or Pagan. Some of them, again, are essential or fundamental to the Protestant system so that by denying them the system is no longer Protestant, but is the doctrinal system of the Roman Catholic or Greek Catholic church. Some of them are essential or fundamental to the Lutheran Doctrinal system, so that by denying them the doctrinal system ceases to be distinctively Lutheran, and becomes Zwinglian, or Calvinistic, or something else in its character. And I hold some of them fundamental to the good order and development of the Lutheran Church."

Today I concur with my namesake-great-grandfather and rest my case.

Kristallnacht—Sixty-eight Years Later, Nov. 9, 2006

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This anniversary reminds us of how the desecration of religious spaces changes much more than just the landscape. But I'd like to begin this morning by describing that changed landscape.

The estimates of the number of destroyed and vandalized synagogues vary—it's important to remember that there were Jewish synagogues and community centers destroyed in the years before and after November 1938—but it's clear that over 2,500 synagogues were destroyed in 1938 throughout the "Reich," which included Austria, the Sudetenland, and Poland.

Statistics for what happened after 1945 to these sites are harder to come by, but a look at one region of Germany is instructive. In the region of Württemberg, there were forty-four synagogues in 1933. Twelve were completely burned down, twenty-six were vandalized and damaged, six were untouched. In 1966, a group studied what had happened after 1945 to these sites.[1]

Of those thirty-two remaining synagogues, this is what exists today on these sites:

> Nine were completely torn down. Of the remaining twenty-three buildings where some part of the original building remained, five were memorials, four were apartment houses, one was a school, two were barns, one was a concert hall, one was a youth home, one was a movie theater, two were warehouses, one was a wine cellar, one was a Catholic church, one was a Protestant church, one was a youth hostel, one was a carpentry shop, one (in Stuttgart) had been rebuilt and was a synagogue.

Over thirty years have passed since this summary, and many things have changed. Today, there are nine new synagogues in Württemberg. Over the course of the last fifteen years, the Jewish population in Germany has grown from around 30 thousand to over 200 thousand, largely as a result of the emigration of Jews from Russia. Many of these new residents are not religious, yet there has been a renewal of religious education and the creation of new community centers. And in September of this year,

1. The following figures are from a study printed in Paul Sauer, *Die jüdischen Gemeinden in Württemberg*. The entire study is cited in Hartmut Metzger, *Kristallnacht: Dokumente von gestern zum Gedenken heute* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1978), pp. 26-27.

three rabbis were ordained for the first time in Germany since 1940.

So today, as we commemorate this event sixty-eight years later, much has changed again in that landscape. Several years ago, when I visited South Africa, I saw a painting that portrayed the view out of a car window. On the side rear view mirror were the words: "Events in the rear-view mirror closer than they appear." Those words, I think, are just as appropriate when we remember the Holocaust. Even significant changes don't undo the past, because what happens in history changes not just landscapes, but human beings and human relationships. On the anniversary of Kristallnacht, we naturally think not only of burned buildings and shattered glass, but of the human beings who were murdered, the terrible violence done to the bodies and souls of millions of innocent people because they were Jewish. Those of us who are Christian must remember, too, that the churches' overwhelming response was to remain silent—or even to justify what had happened in the name of Christian theology.

Those of us who are Christian must remember, too, that the churches' overwhelming response was to remain silent—or even to justify what had happened in the name of Christian theology.

The altered landscape brought about by Kristallnacht affects how Christians and Jews speak to one another up to the present day. In a 1985 essay, Albrecht Goes (a Württemberg pastor who hid Jews in his parsonage) wrote this about Jewish-Christian dialogue in Germany: "I want to say: uninhibited speech, after all that has happened, is not possible. A double-edged pain forces its way into all expressions of affection: the pain of the one who gives, the pain of the one who receives. Margarete Susman, [Martin] Buber's assistant in earlier days, wrote about this 'between us' late in her life: 'He was our neighbor. We lived with him and loved him. How can we make amends for this dreadful transformation? Forgiveness is His who will judge; ours is only limitless, inextinguishable grief.'"[2]

Sixty-eight years later, we have far too many newer examples from around the world of violence against human beings, the misuse of religion, and the desecration of religious space along the fault lines of religion and ethnicity and nation. But we know what this will leave behind—an altered landscape, and a changed and guarded conversation. Yet people of all faiths really have no other option but to travel that altered landscape together.

2. Cited in Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 293.

What Can the Barmen Declaration Teach Us Today?

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The Barmen Declaration became one of the roots of the Confession of 1967 that was crafted by the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Both Barmen and the Confession of 1967 were published in the Book of Confessions approved as the confessional standards of the largest of the Presbyterian denominations in the U.S. In the midst of the movements of the 1960s for free speech, civil rights, protests against the Vietnam War, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Cold War, Barmen and the Confession of 1967 were published alongside the historic creeds of the early Church and Reformed confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Confession of 1967 took as its central theme the reconciling work of God in Christ as the heart of the Christian message and the form of the church's ministry to a world in revolution. This message spoke to a generation of Presbyterians and other Christians in North America who were deeply engaged in ministries of reconciliation between formerly segregated African Americans and Euro-Americans in the southern states, and between middle class whites in the suburbs and the urban poor in the inner cities who revolted. It fit well in the era of the ministry of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr.'s message of non-violent civil disobedience on behalf of dismantling racial segregation and poverty.

But already by 1979, Presbyterians had begun to wonder if the message of reconciliation was the most prophetic Christian word for this age. The emergence of diverse movements and theologies of political and social liberation among

- Christian-based communities in Latin America,
- Black Power movements that pressed beyond integration toward cultural and economic liberation for all in the pan-African Diaspora,
- the women's liberation and gay rights movements,
- local and national movements for greater political and economic freedoms in
  - —South Korea and the Philippines,
  - —Czechoslovakia and Poland,
  - —Northern Ireland, Palestine/Israel, and Africa…

All these posed new challenges for the mission of the church. How could there be reconciliation between peoples and groups long estranged by racism, poverty, sexism, and political oppression without liberation from social structures that inscribed violence and degradation into everyday life?

When I was a seminarian and graduate student in the late 1970s and the early 1980s in New Jersey and New York, the struggle to end the apartheid regime in South Africa was the most gripping movement. It called upon American Presbyterians to ask, were we now in a situation of *status confessionis*?

Had we reached a moment of *Kairos* when the church must either confess its faith and endure the consequences or fail to be the church of Christ? Was it time for institutions of higher and theological education, for denominations, labor unions, and public pension funds to divest their holdings from corporations like IBM that profited from the sale of products that were used by the South African minority government to maintain the apparatus of apartheid over the majority population?

The theological document that emerged out of the struggle in South Africa in the 1980s and that bears the strongest resemblance to several of the themes of the Barmen Declaration was the *Kairos Document* of September 1985.

The *Kairos Document* is a distinctive theological statement. It was drafted, debated, and signed by a truly ecumenical collective of Christians, Protestant and Roman Catholic, pastors, lay theologians, and academics in South Africa who were already engaged in the liberation struggle. It is presented to its readers as an open-ended document for discussion and debate. Readers are challenged to test its claims against Scripture and social analysis of facts on the ground in South Africa.

The *Kairos* Christians critiqued two forms of theology that they found already operative in their situation, and proposed a third radical alternative.

Their first critique was leveled at "state theology" that appealed to Romans 13 as the foundation of the legitimacy of the South African government. In our context, we might refer to "state theology" as the codification of civil religion in North America. Notions that the apartheid government was divinely ordained, that the maintenance of law and order necessitated the brutal repression of the majority population when it revolted in the townships, the portrayal of all movements of resistance as Communist or Socialist and therefore evil, and the elevation of the national security state above the common good produced a new idol, the "God of the State." The ideology of the apartheid regime, its allusions to Scripture in its constitution, its appeals to God and need for Christian chaplains to serve in its military and police forces are all rejected as expressions of idolatry.

The second critique is leveled at "church theology." The target was those Christian churches and ministers who saw their role as reconcilers and moderates between the brutality of the state and the violence of the people's revolution. The ministers of "church theology" drew upon three themes from the Christian tradition: reconciliation, justice, and non-violence. They appealed to these three as absolutes that Christians must apply to every situation regardless of the imbalances of power. The authors of the *Kairos* document argue that neither Scripture nor the Christian tradition call for an absolute rejection of lethal force or coercion in every situation of aggression and tyranny. In this regard, *Kairos* sets itself clearly within the western Christian tradition of justified war under circumstances of aggression and the Reformed tradition of justified revolution against states that defy the commandments of God. Christian appeals for reconciliation between a tyrannical government and oppressed peoples, verbal affirmations of justice as an abstract principle, and passive non-violence easily play into the tactics of the tyrants who need a passive, non-violent church to subvert the revolution of the people.

Beyond state and church theology, *Kairos* calls for a prophetic theology. Such theology is rooted in the rhythm of social action, analysis, and critical reflection on the concrete situations where the word of God must be faithfully proclaimed and dra-

matically performed. By an exegetical study of terms for oppression in the Bible, and historical reflection on Christian critiques of tyranny as the enemy of the common good and therefore always illegitimate as a form of government, *Kairos* builds a case for hopeful action to bring down the ruling regime and create a new society.

In its final challenge to action, the document does not dictate that all prophetic Christians should take up arms against their oppressors or engage in non-violent civil disobedience. Rather, the confessors call Christians into local dialogues about what would be the most appropriate forms of ministry and actions for social justice under the circumstances of tyranny. Surprisingly, their call is for South Africans to take up the struggle without an explicit appeal to Christians outside South Africa to trigger the revolution through divestment or other means.

Their theological theme in this section and throughout the document is that the God of the Bible is Yahweh who takes sides with the slaves and oppressed. In Jesus of Nazareth, God has sided with his oppressed people to the point of suffering and death as an enemy of the tyrannical state. The language of this document is one of binary oppositions: oppressor and oppressed, a just God and an unjust state, taking sides with evil or revolution, idolatry versus the struggle for liberation. In this regard, *Kairos* echoes the binary opposition of true and false doctrine in Barmen.

In this first decade of the twenty-first century, both Barmen and *Kairos* should profoundly disturb us. Contemporary Christians in Hyde Park pride our selves on being late modernists or radical postmodernists. We have given up on all binary oppositions as too simple, too exclusive to fit the ambiguities of moral and political choice today.

Yet many of us, but not all of us, live in a social world where most of the enemies we have limit their opposition to verbal attacks and passive–aggressive manipulation. In times and places where persons have real enemies bent upon the destruction of the church and the subversion of civil liberties and civil rights, Barmen and *Kairos* still speak words of hope and comfort. These are documents for bleeding Christians and defiant churches who seek to follow in the path of Jesus and the company of the saints. May their words disturb us as we remember the brutality of mass murderers like Saddam Hussein, and the invasions and occupations of other nations by our own nation.

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The Historical Context of the Barmen Declaration

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The relatively short period from the beginning of 1933 until the end of 1946 is clearly the most dreadful and tragic time in German history and, arguably, one of the most horrendous moments in all of human history. It is a puzzling, disturbing, and complex time which dare never be forgotten since it serves as a startling manifestation of humanity's brokenness and of the pervasive power of sin and evil in our lives. It is also a constant reminder to people of faith how easily religious ideals and beliefs can be perverted; how readily even believers fall into the trap of idolatry; how crucial it is to distinguish between Christ and culture; how powerful a sin racism is; and how a sense of being wronged can blind people to the atrocities which they are willing to perpetrate on others. It is also a time which witnesses to the courage of people, including people of faith; to the ambiguities of ethical behavior; and to the power of the gospel and of faith in people's lives.

Adolf Hitler officially came to power on January 30, 1933. Initially Hitler's election was supported and welcomed by the majority of Christians in Germany because his ascension to power was accompanied by the promise and hope of economic recovery, social stability, and the restoration of order. However, the true nature of Hitler's vision and programs soon became apparent. He immediately initiated his policy of *Gleichschaltung* (equalization; synchronization; coordination) whose purpose was to place all of Germany's political, social, cultural, and religious institutions under the authority and control of the Nazi regime. On February 28, 1933, individual rights granted by the Constitution of the Weimar Republic were abolished. As a result, anyone could be arrested, even without showing cause. On April 7, 1933, the infamous Aryan paragraph was introduced as part of the *Gleichschaltung* efforts. Its ultimate goal was to remove Jews, even if they had become Christians, from leadership positions, especially in the government, economic institutions, universities, and the church.

Other legislation and administrative measures directed against the Jewish population of Germany followed during the course of the 1930s. However, the Aryan paragraph was the immediate impetus for opposition to Hitler within the Lutheran, Reformed, and Union Churches of Germany. On September 21, 1933, the *Pfarrernotbund*, or Pastors' Emergency League, was begun in Wittenberg by three pastors from Berlin; Herbert Goltzen, Günther Jacob and Eugen Weschke. Two other Berlin pastors, Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, especially the former, quickly emerged as leaders of the League. The stated purpose of the *Pfarrernotbund* was to oppose the Aryan paragraph, to resist the

removal of Jewish pastors, and to support these pastors and their families in whatever way possible. The first official meeting of the *Pfarrernotbund* occurred on October 20, 1933, and it quickly attracted a substantial number of pastors. Within four months, the League numbered 7,036 members or about twenty percent of evangelical pastors in Germany. However, support for the League diminished as Hitler's policies were implemented, and fewer than five thousand members remained active by 1938. Ironically, only a few of the pastors made opposition to the racist policies of the Nazi regime a high priority. Indeed, even Martin Niemöller expressed anti-Semitic opinions in some of his sermons, although his critique was voiced specifically against Jews who had refused to convert to Christianity. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the leading spokesperson of those who ardently and consistently opposed Nazi anti-Semitism, but he and his cohorts were clearly in the minority, even in the Pastors' Emergency League and in the ecclesiastical movement which it inspired, namely, the Confessing Church.

Even as the *Pfarrernotbund* began to express its opposition to the Nazis, the National Socialist government continued its effort to gain control of all aspects of German society, including the church. The various territorial churches were united into a German Protestant Reich church, the *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche*. It merged twenty-nine territorial churches, and one of its chief agenda items was to purify the Christian church from all Jewish vestiges, including the Old Testament. On September 27, 1933, Ludwig Müller was appointed *Reichsbischof.* He was an ardent Nazi and espoused the Nazi theme of one *Volk,* one *Reich* and one church. The German Christian movement, as it ironically came to be called, and its opponents, who eventually came to be known as the Confessing Church, were realities by the end of 1933, and the *Kirchenkampf,* or church struggle, had begun. While the German Church was never able to implement its programs completely and thus to eradicate traditional Christianity, it did succeed in making most German Christians quietists in the face of Nazi atrocities, especially against the Jews. Müller was never an effective leader, and by 1937 Hitler seems to have lost interest in his ecclesiastical agenda. This reality may have had something to do with the fact that he was fully in control of German society by that time and frankly did not need the institutional church in order to carry out his political, social, and military agendas. It is important to note, however, that many people suffered as a result of the policies of the German Christians, and many more must have experienced significant spiritual crises as they acquiesced to Hitler's religious demands, either because of fear or convenience, but recognized the incompatibility of the German Christian movement with their faith traditions.

As I have indicated, however, there were those who refused to submit to the ideology and policies of the German Christian movement. Indeed, they opposed them, sometimes actively and sometimes passively, through their participation in the *Kirchenkampf* and the Confessing Church. The official beginning of the Confessing Church is usually identified with the meeting of the Confessing Synod of German Evangelical Churches in Barmen from May 29-31, 1934. It was, of course, at Barmen that the Confessing Church adopted the Barmen Declaration. The document itself was produced by Hans Asmussen, a Lutheran, and by Karl Barth, a Swiss Reformed theologian teaching in Germany at the time. Barth was, of course, the leading spirit behind the Barmen Declaration.

While the German Christians experi-

enced various difficulties, so did the Confessing Church, and divisions resulted. Bonhoeffer and Barth, surely the most important theological voices within the Confessing Church, often disagreed with one another. Barth also left Germany and returned to his native Switzerland where he began an illustrious teaching and writing career at the University of Basel. Although he continued to correspond with leaders of the Confessing Church, he was not present in Germany to provide personal leadership. Not surprisingly, the congregations, pastors, and academic theologians who joined the Confessing Church often disagreed about the nature of their response to Hitler's religious, social, and political policies and actions. Some were more willing to cooperate with the government than others, often because of professed loyalties to the *Vaterland.* Others were convinced that ardent opposition to Hitler was absolutely essential and necessitated by the Christian faith. Although Hitler's anti-Semitism served as the initial impetus for organizing the *Pfarrernotbund* and ultimately the Confessing Church, it is important to note that the Barmen Declaration does not specifically mention the persecution of the Jews. The majority of the Confessing Church was also not inclined to make the Nazi treatment of the Jews a high priority in its opposition to Hitler. Bonhoeffer was the leading spokesperson of those who persistently voiced opposition to Nazi anti-Semitic policies. There were, of course, others like Pastor Paul Schneider, the "preacher of Buchenwald," who lost his life in that concentration camp, and Pastor Heinrich Grüber, who was the leader of an effort to hide Jews, whether they were baptized or not, or to help them escape from Germany. His underground movement functioned until 1943 when the Nazis were able to stop these efforts.

The ineffectiveness of the Confessing Church in defending the Jews and resisting the anti-Semitic policies of Hitler is apparent in the fact that there was very little response in Germany to the events of *Kristallnacht* on November 9, 1938, and minimal outrage as the realities of Hitler's "final solution" to the Jewish question became apparent. It must be noted that Bonhoeffer and some of his close friends and relatives did pursue diplomatic efforts which were intended to remove Hitler from power. Eventually, some of these individuals, including Bonhoeffer, became involved in a series of plots against Hitler's life. While these efforts did not succeed, they are an indication of the lengths to which individual Germans, including those who were ultimately motivated by

Some were more willing to cooperate with the government than others, often because of professed loyalties to the *Vaterland*. Others were convinced that ardent opposition to Hitler was absolutely essential and necessitated by the Christian faith.

their faith, were willing to go for the sake of Germany, for the sake of civilization, and, at least in Bonhoeffer's case, for the sake of the Jewish people.

My colleagues will reflect on the theological and ecclesiastical significance of the Barmen Declaration. I simply offer this concluding comment regarding the Synod and the Declaration of Barmen. Neither the Synod nor the Declaration has crucial historical significance, in my opinion. The course of history was not changed by the events or the message of Barmen. Hitler's regime was not toppled. The Confessing Church often forgot the ultimate meaning of the Declaration during the course of the next decade and a half. Most Germans were not persuaded by the claims of the Declaration. The events of the years immediately following Barmen were not decisively shaped by the spirit and content of the Barmen Declaration. I do believe, however, that the Barmen Synod and the Barmen Declaration had and still have significant ecclesiastical and theological significance. Those few days mark an important moment when Christian people were willing to take a public stand inspired by and consistent with their most profound theological and faith convictions. That is worth celebrating and remembering as a challenge and encouragement to the community of faith in any particular context or at any particular moment. Barmen continues to remind us that there are times when we should, indeed, must, make a confession. In addition, the particular confession articulated so concisely and boldly in the Declaration is essential, if the church seeks to proclaim a message that is consistent with the very center of its faith and desires to live in ways that reflect this faith.

The Barmen Theological Declaration: On Celebrating a Text Out of Context 75 Years Later

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Theological declarations and confessions are most often best celebrated than explained or translated from one context to another. The contexts in which they were formulated are nearly impossible to recover in times and places other than when and where they were birthed. In other words, crucial aspects of the content may be transposable but the context as such is not entirely available to us, thus turning the translated text into a counterfeit when applied to different context. Between the text and the context there is a mutual correlation that influences both and largely determines not only the relevance of the text but also the gist of the argument. To use an illustration from photography, in another context the "portrait" (text) becomes out of focus; something is still visible and recognizable but the sharpness of the image is no longer there, leading one to incorporate images that might not have been originally there. However, what can be recognized is the intent of the photographer; if the *substance* is not entirely available there, the *principle,* the gesture that led to the shot is what is left and passed on. And that is what we celebrate.

The Barmen Declaration is such a case in point. Therefore, my attempt here will be to make a brief but critical case of what I regard to be the nucleus of the declaration and a few elements of its context, largely unknown to us in the twenty-first century, without forgetting to touch upon its nuances and idiosyncrasies. This year, 2009, marks the 75th anniversary of the declaration, a proper occasion for a celebration. A sketch of the significance of its observance and punctual relevance as a historical marker of a moment of creative, even revolutionary theological dissonance will then follow.

The Barmen Theological Declaration, though issued under the auspices of the Confessing Church movement in a meeting of several of its theologians, was originally drafted by Karl Barth, who penned it, "fortified by strong coffee and one or two Brazil cigars,"[1] while his Lutheran co-workers had their afternoon siesta.[2] The document follows the conventional form of declarations and confessions in its written format. It begins with an epigraph, which is a quotation from the Scriptures or a canonic document. A fundamental theological thesis is then proposed. Finally an anathema is issued. It is the latter that indicates the road

1. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 245.

2. Karl Barth: *A Theologian of Freedom* (ed. Clifford Green,; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 148.

not taken and gives us a glimpse into the context being addressed. The text, following its preamble, presents six theses. Thesis 2 is the theological and polemical center, the pivot on which the rest of the text gravitates. In this thesis the theological groundings that mark the divide between the German Christians and the Confessing Church are presented. For this reason, I confine my brief remarks to this thesis as it reads:

> 2. "Christ Jesus, whom God has made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." (1 Cor 1:30.)
>
> Jesus Christ is God's assurance [*Zuspruch*] of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God's mighty claim [*Anspruch*] upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures.
>
> We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords [*Herren*]—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.[3]

This thesis forms the theological nucleus of the declaration. Its basic claim is that Christ is the only Lord. Hence, it is proposed that there is nothing over which he does not have a claim or authority, even though it might be recognized that the declaration of forgiveness is not accepted by all. But herein lies the problem: while this thesis may be effective in targeting Nazi idolatry, if used literally in other contexts it will cause significant collateral damage. The Barmen declaration, one of the most important documents that caused a representative portion of the Protestant church in Germany to show solidarity with those who where being the victims of the Nazi regime, above all the Jews, has at its theological core an exclusivist and Christocentric statement. Its effectiveness was so momentous because of the politico-theological and ecclesial context in which it was pronounced.

Theologians at the time, many of Lutheran persuasion, were working with a sociological category, developed by Max Weber and followed by significant theological voices at the time,[4] that there were spheres of life in an age of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*), particularly in politics and economics, in which reason was autonomous, not subject to the control of beliefs, emotions, dispositions, or aesthetic values. It is worth remembering here that in Lutheran circles the expression "two spheres" or "realms" was already common currency throughout the nineteenth century.[5] But it was just a year before the Barmen Declaration that the expression "Two Kingdoms Doctrine" (*Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*)[6] was first used in a technical sense, and elevated to the status of "doctrine," often in order to buttress this separation of spheres. The motivating force of the Barmen Declaration was to fight against this autonomy of the realm of reason from the realm of faith, but it did it by imposing an absolute Christocentric focus.

With the establishment of the Nazi regime, this notion of autonomy was used

3. *The Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934: The Archeology of a Confessional Text* (ed. Rolf Ahlers; Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1986), art. 2

4. See Ulrich Duchrow, *Christenheit und Weltverantwortung: Tradditionsgeschichte und systematische Struktur der Zweireichelehre* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1970), 582-84.

5. See Uwe Rieske-Braun, *Zwei-Bereiche-Lehre und christlicher Staat* (Güttersloh: Verlaghaus, 1993).

6. Franz Lau, *"Äusserliche Ordnung" und "weltlich Ding" in Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933).

to extend the power of the state even into affairs of the church, which is clarified and critiqued in Thesis 3. The circumstantial effectiveness of Barmen under a totalitarian state can only be read under the conditions in which it was brought about. Taken out of context, and reading it as a theological and universally valid theological axiom, can produce, in other circumstances, precisely the opposite of what was intended. The declaration was concerned to not allow the separation of creation from salvation, the realm of responsibility from the realm of redemption. This was the same plight that early dialectical theology, which was the driving force behind Barmen, criticized in nineteenth century theology.[7] However, what Barmen evoked so effectively to counter a political totalitarianism can be read in different, non-totalitarian, and above all pluralistic circumstances, as an exclusivistic claim of the Christian faith and a "totalitarianism" of the church and its mission. The presence of the majority of Christians now in the twenty- first century in societies that are very pluralistic should make this point self-evident. Even the language that is used, "Lord," "Master," etc., betrays this exclusivitic tendency toward a Christomonism. And this might be a lesson for us to learn about the contextuality of theology: Do not try to make a claim that emerges in its own circumstances by recruiting some past in order to justify it. What we call "tradition" either in a positive or a negative sense is a form of appealing to a selective past in order to underwrite the present. This is what Karl Barth himself did only some months before he put his pen to work at Barmen, even as he spares Luther and Calvin.

> The error which has broken out today in the theology and Church politics of the German-Christians originated neither in the school of Luther nor of Calvin, but rather (Schleiermacher, R. Roth, W. Beyschlag might be named among its particular fathers) the typical error of the final phase of that "Union" of the nineteenth century.[8]

Barmen, by the very exclusivist claims it makes, is able to keep ethics and world responsibility within the theological realm. This is above all Barth's (its main author) accomplishment. By doing so, at least at the time of the Barmen Declaration, he exiles all reality that has not received the assurance (*Zuspruch*) of forgiveness by Christ alone from the claim (*Anspruch*) God has upon all of life. But all of life is claimed by God, the creator, even without recognizing the assurance of the forgiveness by Christ—also life beyond Christendom. The proverbial defenestration of the baby with the bath water illustrates the problem. Barmen restricts God's *Anspruch* (claim) to

7. Incidentally, this was what Bonhoeffer did in his practice and his theology, when he called for a reading of the Scripture being not only, nor even uniquely, a narrative of redemption, at least not an extra-historical redemption. See his *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1971), 337: "The decisive factor is said to be that in Christianity the hope of resurrection is proclaimed, and that means the emergence of a genuine religion of redemption…in a better world beyond the grave. But is this really the essential character of the proclamation of Christ in the gospels and by Paul? I should say not.…The Christian, unlike the devotees of the redemption myths, has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but like Christ himself ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"), he must drink the earthy cup to the dregs, and only in his doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ. *This world must not be prematurely written off; in this the Old and New Testaments are at one.*"

8. "On the Situation 1933-34," in Karl Barth, *The German Church Conflict* (trans. P. T. A. Parker; Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), 27.

the redeeming *Zuspruch* (assurance or declaration) by Christ. The target of Barmen is clear; God's *Anspruch* cannot be divided into different realms of jurisdiction as the German-Christians were doing within a Christian cultural context. But against the backdrop of the pluralistic contexts as those we are in now, Barmen's aim sadly is off target. That is, in a multi-religious context to secure the undivided claim of God by Christ's assurance of forgiveness severs precisely the claim that God has over the entire creation. While it is crucial that we recognize the danger of keeping the spheres of reason and faith, the secular and the religious autonomously apart and thus dividing the claim or the sources of God's authority toward all that is created—one pertaining to all humanity and the other to the redeemed by Christ—it is equally pertinent that we not surrender the freedom of all creatures in response to the claims of God, lest we reduce creation theology to a neo-orthodox Christology. Certainly Christians do accept God's claim *because of and within* the declaration of forgiveness in Christ; yet the non-acceptance of the *Zuspruch* (the assurance of forgiveness) of God through Christ does not cancel God's *Anspruch* (God's claim over all creation).

The celebration of Barmen in our own circumstances is vital because we might have the vision to detect the cracks and fissures that need to be exposed in the dominant systems of our day.

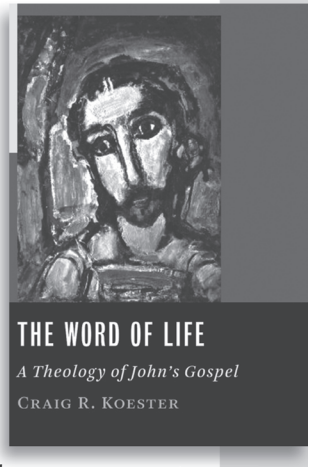
Whilst recognizing the contextual nature of even such a memorable document as Barmen, the translation of which to other circumstances creates insurmountable difficulties, it is equally pertinent to celebrate its timely and prophetic insurgence. As I read the present and current state of affairs, it would be wrong to say that Barmen has to be celebrated in spite of its limiting circumstances; it needs, however, to be celebrated because and in remembrance of the limits of its context. The celebration of Barmen in our own circumstances is vital because we might have the vision to detect the cracks and fissures that need to be exposed in the dominant systems of our day. It might also lay bare the pain and suffering it might entail and dissonance it causes within the theological systems we construe. Those theologians and church people gathered in Barmen with their swords of pen were able to see and name it for their time when most of the people did not see it. This is why we ought to celebrate it so that we might do the same for our time and detect the fissures and cracks in the systems, and name the powers that are so skilled in disguising them. These cracks, to use an expression of Walter Benjamin, once laid bare are "chips of messianic time…the small gates through which the messiah might enter."[9] And she might even come as a little Dalit Hindu girl.

9. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 264.

THE WORD OF LIFE

A Theology of John's Gospel

CRAIG R. KOESTER



This accessible, engaging work explores the major theological dimensions of John's Gospel, including God, the world and its people, Jesus, the crucifixion and resurrection, the Spirit, faith, and discipleship. *The Word of Life* is notable for its comprehensive treatment of themes and its close, careful focus on the biblical text, on the narrative itself. Craig Koester interacts throughout with the best of current research and makes creative proposals about how to understand the many aspects of John's theology.

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Book Reviews

A Beginner's Guide to the Study of Religion. By Bradley L. Herling. New York: Continuum, 2007. xii + 135 pages. Paper. $13.95.

This is a handy little book for those who are looking for a quick overview of the terrain of religious studies that goes beyond an encyclopedia entry, but is not nearly so densely forested as a more complete volume on theories of religion such as *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* or Ivan Strenski's *Thinking About Religion.* Herling does not pretend to be exhaustive. His intention is to "get beginning students ready for learning about religion by presenting the most significant aspects of a methodical and theoretical approach to it." Herling's ultimate goal is to provide the reader with tools to understand religious data (i.e. doctrines, beliefs, texts, rituals, experiences, testimonies, symbols, and art). Herling wants his readers to be familiar with the variety of ways that we can think about religion. He aims to be concise and clear. If you are looking for an extended discussion of the merits and weaknesses of say, Emile Durkheim, this is the wrong book for you.

The first chapter provides an argument for studying religion and defines terms and concepts (self-consciousness, comparison, defamiliarization, and empathy). Chapter 2 explains what a "theory" is (particularly in the study of religion) as well as describing how a theory helps us interpret religion by indicating what it does (i.e. definition, description, explanation, and prediction). Chapters 3 and 4 provide brief overviews of a range of theories about religion. Some of his sketches succeed admirably in his aim of being clear and concise. On Durkheim, he says "religion is not rooted in an individual experience because the social community generates all religion (and thus all religious experience) in the same way that an individual inherits a language he has not made: no one person invents a language; it is society that has done so." On Eliade, Herling says, by means of symbol, myth, and ritual, "the sacred and its appearances come to provide an organizing principle for human life." His sketches of Jung, Turner, and Smart were, I thought, done especially well. The final chapter points to some emerging issues in the study of religion (e.g. perspective, gender, race and identity, globalization). His discussion here is frequently incisive. On embodiment, for example, Herling states, religious traditions "employ the imagery of the body to clarify and explain our position in the world—conceiving it, for example, as the body of God/a god, or marking off sacred places as locations where the divine body made contact with it." Likewise his discussion of globalization, immigrants, pluralism and diaspora is as fine an introduction as I've seen in the space of 3 paragraphs or so.

This is the type of book that I could imagine using at the beginning of a world religions course in order to help students understand how scholars seek to understand religions. Or it might be used in course on research and methods. It is not a theology text per se, but it helps those of us who are theologians understand both our discipline and the location of our discipline in relation to the larger field of religious studies. I recommend it heartily!

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Fortress Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States. By Nancy Koester. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. 250 pages. Paper. $ 18.00.

Reading this volume is like visiting a national park, as Nancy Koester promised. It is a quick but exhaustive visit, traversing different significant trails in the history of American religion. This book narrates the story of American Christianity—how America shaped its Christianity and how Christianity impacted American history. Indeed, it is a stunning narration of the intellectual history of American Christianity. Although

cursory in its commentary, the book guides its readers to helpful library and web resources. It incorporates stories of ethnic and confessional minorities such as African Americans, Hispanics, Quakers and Mormons. Koester weaves together the issues of gender and women's religious activism throughout the book.

The book traces the beginnings of American Christianity to the European Reformation and New England Puritans and also identifies indigenous factors, such as the Amerindian religions, slavery and confessional pluralism, in the evolution of American Christianity. Describing how the Great Awakenings, Enlightenment, and the American Revolution influenced religion in the continent, Koester also highlights the role of Christianity in movements for and against slavery. She construes the labor movement, the Social Gospel, revivalism, Adventism, and Pentecostalism as various responses to Modernity. While the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy and the movements for Temperance and Women's Suffrage dominated Christianity between the Second World War and the Cold War, the Civil Rights movement, the sexual revolution, and revivalism, represented by preachers such as Billy Graham, characterized the last four decades of the twentieth century.

This volume is a valuable and easy-to-read textbook for college and seminary students with helpful suggestions for further research. Neatly woven trails, vividly identified connections and appropriate introductions to communities and movements make the book a pleasure to read. College students and scholars interested in the intellectual history of American Christianity will find it very helpful.

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The Future of Lutheranism in a Global Context. Edited by Arland Jacobson and James Aageson. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008. xi + 205 pages. Paper. $17.99.

This volume, consisting of thirteen essays by leaders in world Lutheranism, presents an overview of the challenges and opportunities faced by Lutherans throughout the world, especially those in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Europe. The book is the result of a conference held at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, in 2004. It is valuable for pastors, seminarians, and laity, since it indicates that Lutheranism is a growing movement in Africa and Asia despite the fact that it appears to be in decline in North America and Europe.

In the opening essay, Jan Pranger (Concordia, Moorhead) points out that "statistically speaking, Christianity today is a non-Western religion. Of the roughly two billion Christians living in the year 2000, Africa (360 million), Asia (313 million) and Latin America (480 million) make up 42 percent. The shift toward the South is only expected to be more pronounced over time…" (11). For Christians in "the South," the Bible is read in new ways. The biblical message of liberation of the oppressed "provides a direct source of empowerment" (12). These Christians are also apt to read biblical, "supernatural" events, such as healing and exorcism, as speaking to their needs. Lutheranism has grown in Africa and Asia "from 8.54 million in 1989 to 22.3 million in 2006, with the greatest growth clearly in Africa where the number of Lutherans tripled in these eighteen years" (17). Likewise, in Asia, the Protestant Christian Batak Church of Indonesia, a Lutheran body, is rapidly growing.

Such growth comes with challenges. In his essay, Musimbi Kanyoro (Kenya) indicates that African Christianity must face the reality of poverty and religious pluralism (30-31). Elelwani Bethuel Farisani (South Africa) also notes the need of the church to specifically address ethnic conflict (44). And, Pongsak Limthongviratn (ELCA churchwide office) claims that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers opens opportunities for ministry among Asian Lutherans, but that patriarchy has hindered the equal role of women in ministry (47-58). J. Paul Rajashekar (Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia) focuses on the mission of Lutheranism in India, particularly its ministry to the Dalits (outcasts), which has been opposed by traditional Hindus (72).

With respect to South America, Winston Persuad (Wartburg Seminary) addresses the witness of Lutheranism in the Caribbean and intertwines a strong sense of social justice with an equally strong confessional theology: "justification by faith is both evangelical proclamation…and a necessary hermeneutic to distinguish between the gospel and distortions of it" (89). With respect to ethnic pluralism, he points out that "the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Guyana (ELCG) has a majority East-Indian membership and a significant minority Afro-Guyanese membership, due to the replacement of African slaves as laborers on sugar plantations with East Indian immigrants between 1838 and 1917" (82). And, Victoria Cortez Rodriguez (Bishop, Nicaragua) provides an overview of the work of the church in El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Looking to the Middle East and Europe, Munib Younan (Bishop, Jerusalem) indicates the role of the Lutheran Church in health and social work in Palestine, as well as a robust theology of the cross (103). Maria Jepsen (Bishop, Germany) provides a fine overview of the Protestant territorial churches in Germany; the governance of these churches is often unknown to German-Americans. And, Per Lønning (Bishop, Norway) argues that the Lutheran World Federation needs to keep globalism at the forefront of its ventures.

Voicing the concerns of North Americans, Phyllis Anderson (Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary) presents the challenges Lutheranism faces in the secular outlook of the West Coast, highlighting integrity and humility as strengths for ministry (143). Mark Hanson (Presiding Bishop, ELCA) convincingly contends that Lutheranism offers a resilient theology for North Americans as we move into the twenty-first century, a belief shared with his counterpart, Raymond Schultz, in Canada.

All in all, this is an outstanding book to spend time with, one which keeps our own ministries in perspective, as we sense God working in many races, languages, and cultures.

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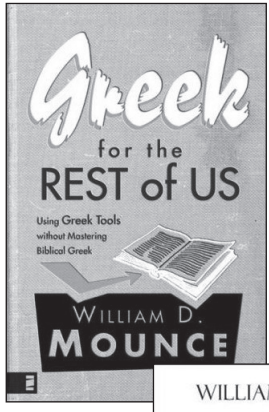
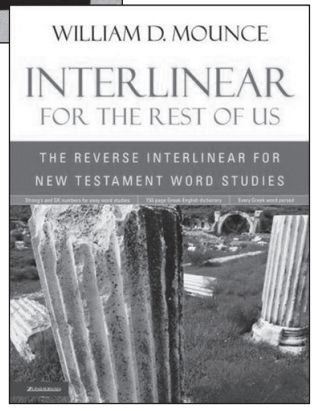
Studying the Bible without (Much) Knowledge of Greek (or Hebrew): A Conversation with William D. Mounce's *Greek for the Rest of Us* and *Reverse Interlinear*

Greek for the Rest of Us: Mastering Bible Study without Mastering Biblical Languages. By William D. Mounce. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003. 320 pages. Cloth. $34.99.

Interlinear for the Rest of Us: The Reverse Interlinear for New Testament Word Studies. By William D. Mounce. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006. 928 pages. Cloth. $49.99.

In a perfect world with unlimited time and resources for seminary education and formation, future pastors and other interested lay people would have two years (or more) to study both biblical Greek and Hebrew. Not all of us have





that calling or leisure, however. To "the rest of us," William D. Mounce (M) offers two resources with much promise and potential. In Summer 2005 I used Greek for the Rest of Us and portions of M's Reverse Interlinear in a lay education course for the Lutheran School of Theology in St. Louis. The following remarks reflect both my and the students' reactions to these books.

While teaching at LSTC (1998-2000), I used M's serviceable introduction to biblical Greek, which has since appeared in a second edition (Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar [Zondervan, 2003]). M offers Greek for the Rest of Us as a companion to his NIV English-Greek New Testament: A Reverse Interlinear. Thus Greek for the Rest of Us is of valuable use. To his credit, M humbly cautions what Greek for the Rest of Us cannot offer and notes aptly that there is no substitute for a thorough introduction to Koine Greek. The book begins with an introduction to the Greek language, alphabet and pronunciation. Most chapters are devoted to offering basic principles of Greek semantics—easily digestible introductions to the most common uses of Greek conjunctions, adjectives, phrases, clauses, verb tenses and moods, and noun cases (nominative, genitive, etc.), and how each of these compares with English uses. These chapters are mostly clear and well written and offer a helpful reference to which students can return time and again. In addition, M disperses throughout the volume several essays, which can be read and appreciated independently of the chapters on Greek semantics. The essays concern English Bible translations and translation theory; a Bible study method that M calls "Phrasing" (two essays); using reference books (e.g., concordances) and computer Bible software; word studies; how to read a Bible commentary; and textual criticism. For those interested in a similar approach to biblical Hebrew, M offers a twenty-one page appendix on "Hebrew for the Rest of Us." The CD-Rom included with the book offers recordings of M's lectures and guides for pronouncing Greek, among other resources. Some students shared with me that reading Greek for the Rest of Us gave them greater motivation for (read: less anxiety about) learning Greek in the future; doubtless others will have a similar reaction.

Without a thorough knowledge of Greek, what skills for Bible study can one gain from Greek for the Rest of Us? I wish M had addressed this question more clearly throughout his volume. Let me share what I think M wishes to accomplish and how the students and I that summer used this book in conjunction with other resources. After one has worked through *Greek for the Rest of Us*, I would highly recommend the following three steps and additional resources.

Step One: Any of us can compare two (or more) divergent English translations and wonder why they are different. The main purpose of a reverse interlinear is to rearrange the original word order of the Greek (or Hebrew) according to the word order of a contemporary translation. Then one can readily see which English word(s) correspond to which Greek word(s). M's *Reverse Interlinear* also parses each word in the Greek New Testament (for example, identifying a word as a noun in the dative case, singular and feminine; or a verb in the imperfect tense, active voice, third person and singular). With this information from M's interlinear, the student can consult Greek for the Rest of Us and ascertain that two translations differ because, for example, of different construals of the dative case, the imperfect tense, or a particular type of participle or infinitive. Instead of the NIV, I would have preferred a reverse interlinear based on the NRSV. Nevertheless, M's reverse interlinear is useful even to those unfamiliar with the NIV. Comparing the NIV and NRSV, among other translations, on matters of Christology and gender inclusivity offers much food for thought indeed. One can do so with greater insight because of these two books by M.

Step Two: In M's interlinear each Greek word is assigned a number (Goodrick/Kohlenberger's numbers). For example, both ἀποκαλυφθήσεται (Matt 10:26) and ἀπεκάλυψεν (1 Cor 2:10) have the same number (636), since they are forms of the same verb. One can look up that number to

find the lexical (i.e., dictionary) form of the Greek word (in this case, ἀποκαλύπτω) in a resource such as John R. Kohlenberger III et al., eds., *The Greek English Concordance to the New Testament* (Zondervan, 1997). Such a concordance will also list every occurrence of that Greek term in the New Testament and allow for study of the term (in English translation) in other contexts. Upon looking up ἀποκαλύπτω under its number (636), the student will find twenty-six occurrences in the New Testament-four in Matthew, five in Luke, one in John, nine in the undisputed Pauline letters, one in Ephesians, three in 2 Thessalonians, three in 1 Peter and, interestingly, none in Mark or Revelation.

Step Three: Finding the lexical term in a Greek-English concordance allows one to look up the word in Frederick W. Danker's lexicon, which offers a wealth of additional information (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000]). Danker has completed the manuscript for a shorter lexicon of New Testament Greek that will appear from the University of Chicago Press in the near future (precise title not yet known). The only prerequisite is knowledge of the Greek alphabet, which M introduces at the beginning of *Greek for the Rest of Us*.

The good news is that that these four resources-*Greek for the Rest of Us,* a reverse interlinear, an English-Greek concordance and Danker's lexicon-can be used with great profit even by those who have not learned Greek. For that matter, they offer much to pastors who may have forgotten (most of) their Greek years ago. In a perfect world such resources would be unnecessary. Given that all of us must now be content with imperfect knowledge and, as the apostle Paul says, seeing through a glass darkly (cf. 1 Cor 13:12a), our thanks are due to M, who offers to many the opportunity to see and learn so much more than is possible with only English language resources. I look forward to using again with students M's Greek for the Rest of Us along with his revised reverse interlinear.

James A. Kelhoffer
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Briefly Noted

In ***The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins*** (Erdmans, $20)**,** Hurtado examines manuscripts used by early Christians as artifacts that reveal aspects of early Christianity: the earliest texts of Old and New Testament; the preference for the codex over the scroll; the use of nomina sacra (abbreviations for sacred names); the staurogram (the chi–rho as the earliest symbol of the cross), and the size of codices. It is not a work of textual criticism, but of theological and social history. Hurtado includes a table of 246 second and third century manuscripts (92 OT; 85 NT, and 49 other texts—plus a few from the fourth century). This clearly written, interesting book illuminates an otherwise overlooked source for early Christian culture and faith. *Edgar Krentz*

John E. Wilson's ***Introduction to Modern Theology: Trajectories in the German Tradition*** (Westminster John Knox Press, $29.95) surveys German theology from Kant to Pannenberg and Jüngel. Along the way he includes discussions of Whitehead, Tillich, Reinhard and Richard Niebuhr, and Martin Luther King Jr. Useful for understanding the state of theological research today. A good read. *EK*

Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Living a Generous Life's seven chapters (Eerdmans, $13.00), by Mark Powell, are a readable guide to a life of stewardship. Each chapter ends with good questions for discussion and a good bibliography that will provide additional resources for the leader. This book deserves a place in parish libraries and wide use. *EK*

Preaching Helps

The Holy Trinity—Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 17 (Proper 12)

"What Sunday after Pentecost is It?"

"So what Sunday is it?" I find myself increasingly asked as we round the corner from Trinity Sunday into summer. Or, more precisely, "What happened to the Sundays after Pentecost?" While the lectionaries that preceded the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) used a variety of numbering systems for the weeks after Epiphany and Pentecost, including "*N*th Sunday after," "proper," and "ordinary time," the RCL suggests two systems: the Arabic lectionary number (Lectionary 15) or the calendar date range for the set of readings (Sunday, July 9-16). Yet, old habits die hard. ELCA congregations appear to be so attached to the designation "*N*th Sunday after Pentecost" that you can find "conversion charts" to help negotiate these various numbering systems at the denomination's worship web page (http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Worship/Lectionary.aspx). In five columns, the charts tell you that

If today is…"	…it falls within this date range…	The "lectionary" number assigned to this date range in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* is…"	…which is equivalent to "proper ___" in previous printed lectionaries.	In 2009, this Sunday is numerically the '____ Sunday after Pentecost.

Look up the calendar date in the first column and you will find the correct "Sunday after Pentecost" in the last column.

During these Sundays after Pentecost, preachers also ask me why the readings don't fit together so well. While for much of the year, the Old Testament reading is closely related to the Gospel reading, from the first Sunday after Trinity Sunday to the end of the church year, the RCL provides both a continuation of the complimentary Old Testament readings and a semi-continuous pattern of Old Testament readings. This year, the semi-continuous readings from the Old Testament focus on the covenant of David and Wisdom literature. Similarly, epistle readings, which are from 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, James, and Hebrews, are intended to provide a semi-continuous reading of these letters rather than correspond to the Gospel. Depending on what readings are selected, the congregation might hear three parallel reading tracks, which are not intended to fit together. During this time of the year, making the readings fit together frequently requires very "creative" exegesis, and should therefore be avoided.

If you wonder where the Revised Common Lectionary came from, another question I am frequently asked, it is the work of the Consultation on Common Texts, an ecumenical consultation of liturgical scholars and denominational representatives from the United

States and Canada who produce liturgical texts for use in common by North American Christian Churches (http://www.commontexts.org/). Gail Ramshaw's *A Three-Year Banquet* (Augsburg Fortress, 2004) explains how the Revised Common Lectionary was developed and how the gospels, the first readings and the epistles are assigned. I find Fritz West's *Scripture and Memory: The Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionary* (Liturgical Press, 1997) very helpful. An outline of the lecture "Lectionary Patterns and Strategies," which is part of the required preaching course I teach and includes strategies for departing from the lectionary, is available on my web site. Visit http://craigasatterlee.com and click the Preaching tab.

Amy R. Becker guides us through the first leg of our journey through ordinary time. Amy, a 2005 LSTC graduate, is the pastor of Unity Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, WI. Her experiences—first as a Lutheran Volunteer and then as a staff member at Nativity House, a daytime homeless shelter in Tacoma, WA—continue to have an impact on her life and ministry. Amy's belief that worship and service inspire one another is lived out at Unity. The congregation holds a weekly Soup Kitchen, houses a Free Clinic and hosts a weekly Senior Center. These ministries, along with experiences in SE Clergy and EcCo, an interfaith group in her area, Anti-Racism training, and the Milwaukee Coalition energize Amy's search for the various ways that God communicates with humanity. As my student, Amy always gave me something meaningful to think about. I find myself pondering this quip from these Preaching Helps: "Although we may not be scurrying around to catch up with a traveling healer or rabbi, we certainly can recognize the ways that we yearn for a Lord."

I am a lectionary preacher because the lectionary compels me to listen to God before I dare to say anything. I get really frustrated when preachers spend sermon time bashing the lectionary; what is most obvious to me is that they do not understand what the lectionary is (and is not) designed to do. As we begin this "ordinary time," when the lectionary becomes a bit less ordinary, preaching is richer for the congregation and more joyous for the preacher when the preacher understands what the lectionary is trying to do.

As you find time away this summer, I pray that you hear good preaching.

Craig A. Satterlee, Editor, Preaching Helps
http://craigasatterlee.com

The Holy Trinity
June 7, 2009

Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 29
Romans 8:12-17
John 3:1-17

First Reading

Jesus says to Nicodemus, "…we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" (3:11-12). Isaiah's call, with God overflowing from a temple, seraphs flying, and the house filled with smoke seems to come straight out of science fiction. This description would not fall under the "earthly things" category that Jesus mentions. It is dramatic and alarming. Isaiah is overwhelmed with the fullness of God's glory and is struck with his unworthiness. Isaiah's earthshaking, dramatic call includes the startling image of being cleansed with a burning coal. Isaiah is not called until he is purified, in a cringe-inducing ritual. But, he knows that he is no longer "a man of unclean lips."

Paul writes to the Romans about being led by the Spirit of God, rather than "according to the flesh." At the end of the previous chapter, Paul had been confessing his inability to do what he wants, and the ease in which sin takes over. In the text for this Holy Trinity Sunday, we hear that in crying to the Father, and having been adopted and made heirs with Christ, we are led by the Spirit of God. A triune explanation of how God claims us, redeems us by joining us with Christ, and leads us. It calls us to draw our attention away from the earthly things, and focus on the heavenly things, or rather, the heavenly being.

Nicodemus is a fun character study in John because although he has some power, as a Pharisee, he carries that power rather meekly. In our text for this Sunday, he approaches Jesus under the cover of darkness and never really seems to grasp what Jesus is saying. The next time we see Nicodemus, in 7:45-51, he starts to stand up for Jesus, but when he is ridiculed does not continue. Finally, with an also-secretive Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus anoints and buries Jesus' body, following the crucifixion (19:38-42). Here, in the one person-to-person interaction, Jesus speaks and testifies, but Nicodemus does not grasp the meanings. Yet, something in his interaction with Jesus encouraged him first to attempt to defend Jesus and then to care for the crucified body.

Nicodemus may not be able to reason it all out, and yet this journey of faith is not only worked out within one's mind. Jesus speaks of birth and rebirth. Birth certainly takes work, but not work of the one being born. Nicodemus is being reborn throughout John. In the same way that this rebirth is not through our action, neither does being made a child of God happen through our action, but rather through the action of the Spirit of God.

Pastoral Reflection

The readings for Holy Trinity Sunday talk of extraordinary faith tenets that are difficult to tangibly prove. No one else witnessed Isaiah's call; he had only his testimony. Not one of us can provide legalized adoption papers to indicate that we have been adopted as children of God and joint heirs with Christ. I wonder how many of us think we actually know how to go about being born from above. Of course, we also have the additional challenge of capturing imaginations with, or at least making some sense of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Isaiah's cry of "Woe is me! I am lost…" may apply in more than one way.

In a world where information and proof is always being sought after, how does a preacher or teacher speak of these "heavenly things"? One way would be to follow the example of Jesus (always…). Jesus uses something Nichodemus would know —Moses lifting…Jesus approached this discussion in such a way that Nichodemus could connect to it.

You will know your context, but this is not only a question for how to prepare a sermon, but how anyone might approach conversation about heavenly things. In Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *The Poisonwood Bible,* the father of a family of missionaries makes many patronizing mistakes, including attempting to baptize the Congolese amongst whom he lives, only to fail to understand that they will not go into the river where a crocodile recently killed a girl.[1] How do we fail to recognize what connects and blocks people in our own communities? When are we more concerned with our own words, than others' experiences?

Finally, what is most important this Trinity Sunday, is recognizing what God does in these readings. God calls and purifies Isaiah, readying him to prophecy. God the Father makes the Romans, Paul, and us children, joins us with Christ in inheriting from God, and the Spirit leads. God became incarnate out of love for humanity and out of a desire to save the world. Jesus teaches Nicodemus, even though he does not seem to understand. We, like the face-covering seraphs in Isaiah, may not be able to take in the wholeness of God, or have a full grasp of God's existence and ways of communicating. But, we do know these and other ways in which God has and continues to make Godself known. ARB

1. Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 81.

Time after Pentecost— Lectionary 11 (Proper 6) June 14, 2009

Ezekiel 17:22-24
Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15
2 Corinthians 5:6-17
Mark 4:26-34

First Reading

As Ezekiel casts a vision for Israel, both of what has been and what God will make to be, he uses vivid imagery of animals and plant life to refer to particular people and events. The text for Proper 6 follows a section in which the word of the Lord inspired Ezekiel to "propound a riddle, and speak an allegory to the house of Israel" (17:2) about an eagle (Nebuchadnezzar) who takes the topmost shoot (Jehoiachin) of the cedar (Lebanon) and transplants it—where it becomes a vine that then stretches towards another eagle (the pharaoh, Psammetichus II).[2]

God, however, will step in to act, taking a shoot from the top of the cedar, planting it so that it may produce fruit and become a noble cedar under which every kind of bird will live. God will restore Israel, and all (every kind of bird) will be gathered into it.

In 2 Cor 5:6-17, the worshiper will also hear proclaimed that God is bringing about new creation. Paul juxtaposes being at home in the body with being at home with the Lord. He proposes that because Christ died and was raised for all, all may now live for Christ. What this means, then, is the way in which a follower of Christ perceives others has changed.

Paul's words may elicit a feeling of

2 David L Petersen, Ezekiel, *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Wayne A. Meeks, ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 1247.

longing for this earthly existence to end and an eagerness to be rid of the hindrances of the body. As he talks about being away from or at home with the Lord (vs 6-9), Paul makes it clear that he does not think it is possible to both be "at home" in the body at the same time one is at home with the Lord. He speaks, in verse 13, of being "besides ourselves" which may refer to mystical experiences,[3] giving another possible description of what Paul meant by being "at home" and "away" from the body.

Prior to our Gospel pericope, Jesus has informed the disciples that they have been given the "secret of the kingdom of God" (4:10-12). As he speaks in parables, only his disciples receive the benefit of a later explanation. The parables of the growing seed and of the mustard seed describe the kingdom of God as both a person and as a seed.

In the first case, the kingdom of God is like a person who scatters seed that grows of its own accord. After the seeds have grown and ripened, the person goes back to harvest, having had nothing to do with the actual production of the grain. In the second case, the kingdom of God, like the mustard seed, grows disproportionately to the size at which it begins. Here, like in Ezekiel, birds of the air nest in the shade of the small shoot grown large.

In all three of our texts for this day, God brings about something great from very little.

Pastoral Reflection

In my preaching, I regularly feel the tension of naming things for a community while at the same time recognizing that my point of view may very well be different from many sitting in the pews. Is what I say and name an authentic experience for the 80-year-old that is going in for surgery tomorrow, or the 25-year-old who feels like her recently chosen career might not be the right choice?

In community life and in personal life, it seems that most conflicts rise due to differing points of view. Different experiences, expectations and needs can all contribute to communication that doesn't quite connect. In Ezekiel, it seems Nebuchadnezzer had a different hope for Israel than Israel did itself, as the community reached toward another "eagle." In Mark, one can only imagine what those who heard the parables, but not the explanations, understood of what Jesus said. To that end, one might wonder what the disciples who *did* receive the explanations understood.

Paul writes of the human point of view. He does so after expressing the confidence that because Christ died for all, the purpose of the follower of Christ is no longer to live for his or herself. The purpose is to live for Christ. This changes the very viewpoint of how one perceives another.

A question a sermon might explore is, "how is the divine point of view different than the human one?" Ezekiel tells us that God will take a sprig and bring about a noble cedar under which every kind of winged creature will nest. Mark tells us that the kingdom of God is surprisingly abundant in its growth and that sometimes it comes about without full understanding of how that will happen.

Paul, in 2 Corinthians, says that in Christ, everything is made new and that "we regard no one from a human point of view" (5:16). What might this mean for conflicts? When the abundance of God's creation is surprisingly fruitful? What might this mean for our engagement in decision making as communities with various points of view coming together?

3. John T. Fitzgerald, 2 Corinthians, *The Harper Collins Study Bible,* Wayne A. Meeks, ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 2172.

In my own life, in those times of conflict and tension, I have taken to using a sort of mantra when in the midst of the conflict. When dealing with difficult situations and people, I repeat to myself "he/she is God's beloved child." Eventually, it leads me to a different point of view. It helps me to respond to the other person out of God's love, even if my own is not immediately available.

Another take on these texts might be to talk about the impatience we might have with the imperfectness of this world. When reading the 2 Corinthians text, I hear the echoes of conversations with people who wonder at their purpose on earth. I hear elderly folk who have buried their closest loved ones and for whom bodily aches now monopolize their thoughts. I hear the voices of younger people who experience profound loneliness, depression and wonder about their sense of purpose. In view of these experiences, Paul may be fortunate; he knows what his purpose is, even if he "would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (vs 8).

The promise here is that new creation (2 Cor 5:17) that the Lord will accomplish (Ezekiel 17:24), often in ways that surprise us without us knowing how (Mark 4:27, 32)—though we may need a new point of view to recognize it. ARB

Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 12 (Proper 7) June 21, 2009

Job 38:1-11
Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32
2 Corinthians 6:1-13
Mark 4:35-41

First Reading

In our texts this day, God explains to Job how God put order to chaos, Paul assures that God has listened and helped, and God incarnate calms a storm. Essentially, in the midst of details and in-the-moment occurrences, these texts assure us that God's bigger picture holds all of these moments, fears, and sufferings, and that God's big picture breaking into humanity's experience brings order, calm and salvation.

In the first 37 chapters of Job, Job experienced his entire life being ripped away, and complained about it. Three friends debate with him about why this has happened, and a fourth friend preaches to him, rebuking him for complaining. Finally, from the midst of a whirlwind, the Lord confronts Job.

Today's scripture is only the beginning of the description of the Lord's creative and powerful work. This first section continues through chapter 39, until chapter 40 when Job is given the opportunity to respond, at which point he states, "See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you?" The Lord picks up the challenge again for another 2 chapters when Job again responds with, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted…" (42:2) and repents. The beginning of the Lord's response to Job describes a creative power who laid the earth's foundation, figured out its size, laid its cornerstone (to the delight of all the heavenly beings), and contained the sea.

The selection from Mark also talks about a great wind and a divine power containing the sea's destructive power. Some commentaries refer to ancient Near Eastern mythology's understanding of a storm god reigning in the monster of chaos, as well as alluding to Old Testament examples of God's power over water such as Ps 89:8-9,

106:8-9, Isa 51:9-10 as well as Jonah's maritime experience.[4] This selection follows the very beginning of Jesus' ministry in which he performs various miracles and exorcisms and teaches through parables. Jesus has shown that he is able to exorcise people of unclean spirits (1:26, 3:11), heal (1:31-34, 2:12, 3:5), cleanse (1:42) and forgive (3:5), all extraordinary acts, but not other-worldly. Now, the disciples have a frightening experience in which even the hearty fishermen believe they are perishing. Jesus rebukes the wind and calms the sea and then rebukes the disciples. They who witnessed all of these acts now finally wonder who this is in their presence.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul describes the challenges of his life, witnessing to the ways in which God gives help and hope as Paul committed himself to God in every way despite great hardship. Paul describes this so that the Corinthians will accept God's grace and Paul wills for it to produce reconciliation with him.

Pastoral Reflection

Oh! The petty details that cause angst! Oh! The not so petty details that cause despair! Where is God in the storms and in those times of life that require great endurance? Where do we catch glimpses of the big picture, even as we are struggling to take one step forward at a time? I imagine Frodo in the midst of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by Tolkein, endlessly plodding through impossible terrain, being worn down by the loss of friends, the magnitude of the journey, the various obstacles he encounters, and the very essence of evil that he seeks to destroy.

Or, the fear of a crashing market, the loss of employment, the inability to provide basic essentials for oneself, let alone looking to care for the poor, the widow, the orphan. In the face of this, God says, "I laid the foundation of the earth….I… prescribed bounds for (the sea)…and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no father…" (Job 38:4-11).

Into this stormy reality Jesus says, "Peace! Be still!" and "Why are you afraid?" In the midst of hardships, sleepless nights, hunger, Paul proclaims that now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation in which God reconciles, God listens, God helps.

These scripture passages help us to see the big picture in the midst of our moments of fear. There is promise of God being in control, of the big picture, of kairos time instead of kronos. Yet what is this promise? How do we experience it? How does that promise help us? How do we know the calming presence of God even as we're in the midst of a big storm?

The promise is that God has graced us with reversals—though it may seem like we are dying, through Christ we are living; though it may seem as if we are sorrowful, in Christ we rejoice; though it may seem like we have nothing, because of Christ we have everything. Even though it might not look like it, *now* is the day of salvation! Each and every day we receive this promise anew. Recognizing that, as God continues to create, as God remembers all promises, we are reborn daily.

The phrase in the first verse of the epistle "not to accept the grace of God in vain" catches my attention as I wonder what these texts mean beyond personal comfort. There is action on behalf of the one *accepting* God's grace. How do we then refrain from accepting in vain? ARB

4. Pheme Perkins, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 8: The Gospel of Mark (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 580; John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina, The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 160-161.

Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 13 (Proper 8) June 28, 2009

Lamentations 3:22-33 or
Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15, 2:23-24
Psalm 30
2 Corinthians 8:7-15
Mark 5:21-43

First Reading

Today's texts contain the dual themes of abundance and one's intent, or as Paul mentions, eagerness. In the Wisdom of Solomon, we hear an affirmation of the creation of the world and the ways in which the world supports itself. God created all things so that they might exist, and it is only the "devil's envy" that causes destruction and corruption. What are the "generative forces" of the world?[5] What is humanity's place in all of this? The Wisdom of Solomon leads us to consider our role in the destructive forces at work in the world.

As Paul writes to the Corinthians, asking for monetary support for the church in Jerusalem, he offers the image of manna in the wilderness (in vs 15, which quotes from Exod 16:18). In that episode in Israel's history, God provided enough food. No matter how much was gathered, when it was measured, it was the same amount. So too does God work with what we have to offer.

Paul might as well be writing to a Capital Campaign committee in the midst of a campaign. He applauds the steps the Corinthians have taken, and encourages them to keep it up. A paraphrase of verse 12 might be, "if you put your effort into it, it will be enough." This is not a promise for wealth, but a promise that one is able to help another. Though Paul is making an argument for monetary support, he also is calling for spiritual support—faith, speech, knowledge—in which the Corinthians excel. He reminds the Corinthians that Jesus Christ gave away everything, so that they (and we) may have everything. Though some prosperity theologians may disagree with me, everything does not mean things or money, but life itself.

The Gospel too talks about both abundance and one's intent. Many different avenues can be explored in regards to Jesus' encounter with the woman with a hemorrhage. Although she had been suffering with the hemorrhage for twelve years and had spent all she had in the quest for health, she continued in her eagerness. She was so eager, that she took the chance of breaking societal norms in order to be healed. Jesus was able to feel that he healed her, as he was "immediately aware that power had gone forth from him" (vs 30). In Luke's version (Luke 8:40-56), Jesus actually says, "I noticed the power had gone out from me." How does that interact with the notion of abundance? Power left Jesus, did it diminish his power?

Pastoral Reflection

As one who attempts to live with a mind to how my actions impact God's creation around me, I fully recognize that one can always do something more. Sure, I recycle. But, do I need to really purchase those products that use that much packaging? Yes, I attempt to use cleaning products that don't harm the environment, but I also drive a car.

It seems like the attempts at being more eco-friendly, or at addressing any so-

5. Is it reading too much into it to say that the world is created with the God-given ability to regenerate itself, and it is only the sinful, destructive powers that taint this goodness?

cial justice issue, are never enough. I am unable to save the planet, end racism, stop gun violence, heal our hurting world by my own efforts and ability. Praise the Lord it is not all up to me! However, here again is the balance of abundance and one's intent or attempts.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that "the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have" (v 12). A wise friend of mine once reminded me prior to an important interview, "God has created and called you to be you, not someone else." We are each created and called. We are each given the richness of life by Christ. We are each called into sharing the abundance of what Christ has given us.

Yet, there are hindrances. We may be like the people weeping and wailing outside of Jarius' home—who laugh at Jesus' assertion that Jarius' daughter is merely asleep. We might have a hard time believing that God can and will act. We may encounter, either as oppressor or as oppressed, hindrances of society—that name people unclean. We may not recognize the forces at work that keep people from living into the potential of who God created them to be. We may not recognize how we are a part of those very same forces.

Jesus restored the hemorrhaging woman not only to health, but to the community, removing the label of "untouchable." Jesus took the hand of a dead girl, breaking all the rules of purity. Instead of being defiled himself, he enlivened the girl. What stories of transformation do these formerly "unclean" ones have to share? How can their stories transform a community?

In the same ways that we might not recognize how we are part of a larger problem, we also may not recognize how our brothers and sisters whom we set out to serve are part of what God has created to be enough. Paul encourages the Corinthians to keep working, with eagerness, towards what they began. He is pretty clear that they are not "in this together," but are sharing abundance with one another. God has given us the abundance we need. We, as a whole, are enough. I wonder how often our feelings of scarcity stem from the ways in which we have declared many offerings "unclean." ARB

Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 14 (Proper 9) July 5, 2009

Ezekiel 2:1-5
Psalm 123
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13

First Reading

We who pick up *Currents* and read the "Preaching Helps" have something to say and Good News to proclaim. But, we are hardly the first voices to reach the ears of the people who hear our proclamations. We are but some of the myriad of voices by which the world is bombarded daily.

Not only do those people who hear our proclamations hear many others, but they are proclaimers themselves. They communicate worth onto other people. They spread news that is important to them and others. They use words and actions to communicate. Sometimes what we preachers communicate is God's desire for relationship and love for the world. Sometimes what we communicate may be akin to the warning about "Super Apostles" that Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians, immediately following today's text (12:11). Sometimes what we preach is shaped by what others are

saying. I wonder how often we get caught up in proclaiming against what others are doing rather than proclaiming about what God has, is and will do.

Any venture into the Old Testament will show prophet upon prophet calling for kings and Israel to repent. God is constantly saying "come back to me" to a people and leadership who just does not succeed in faithfulness to God. But, God is certainly faithful. God sends prophet after prophet, inspired word after inspired word to the people.

This Sunday's readings almost give the sense that this proclamation is sometimes a fruitless effort, and yet God doesn't give up. Ezekiel is given a vision that calls Israel a multitude of names; "a nation of rebels," "impudent and stubborn." Ezekiel is told that they may very well refuse to hear him, but that does not make his proclamation unproductive. At the very least, they will know that a prophet has been in their midst.

Paul writes to the Corinthians recognizing that other voices have been proclaiming. Regardless of whether or not these voices contradict his,[6] Paul first asserts that he has the proper credentials (he too has been "caught up to the third heaven"), but neither those credentials nor his sufferings make Paul's message matter. What matters is that God's grace and power are enough. Again, it's not about Paul and what has happened in his life, it's about God.

Finally, the Gospel shows Jesus being received in his hometown with disbelief and disdain, and then sending the disciples out. He warns that if they enter into a place that will not hear them, they are to leave, and "shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them" (Mk 6:11). They are to proclaim and exorcise and cure only those who will receive it. God's message of repentance is offered everywhere, but some will not receive it. Regardless, the last verse of the reading from Ezekiel may speak to the Gospel as well: "Whether they hear or refuse to hear…they shall know that there has been a prophet among them" (2:5).

Pastoral Reflection

As our ears may still be ringing from Independence Day fire works, what will our ears be open to hearing this Sunday? What is to be proclaimed? Ezekiel and Jesus' disciples all proclaimed for the people to repent. Yet, this is a call that is not easily heard. As people have gathered around picnic tables and parade routes, what have been the other messages they have heard and spread? What leads us away from God? What leads us back?

I imagine many of the characters in today's Scripture readings experienced frustration and doubt of their efficacy. Jesus experienced others' unbelief. The twelve were sent out with the understanding that they might receive some less-than-enthusiastic welcomes. Paul makes sure they know that he too experienced a vision, but that was not key to his testimony. Part of the Lord's instruction to Ezekiel includes assurance that something has been accomplished, even if all Ezekiel does is go to be among the house of Israel.

If these Bible greats have difficulty sharing God's grace and calling people to repent, how are we as church able to do any better? I recognize that for myself, even as a pastor, it sometimes takes quite some time for me to have a conversation about

6. Raymond Brown writes that there is "no clear doctrinal fallacy" evident, however Paul may have been responding to the "false apostles' claims about themselves." Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 555.

my faith with friends. People are coached to not talk about religion or politics when first meeting someone or in situations where these conversations have become problems. Being a proclaimer, outside of worship, is challenging for many, including me.

Yet, God sends out ordinary people. God sends prophet after prophet to Israel. God speaks through many voices, though each voice will not reach everyone. God doesn't call us because of our perfection or skill, but because of God's grace and our experience of it. We are given the best fodder for our proclamation in our weakness: in the ways in which we've needed God, in the ways in which we've seen God work in our lives. This is not something reserved for the pulpit, and perhaps often not appropriate for the pulpit. But it is something to be shared among friends and with relatives. Some places to start would be, "When have you heard the words of a prophet?" "When have you known strength in weakness?" or "Who has told you about God?" ARB

Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 15 (Proper 10) July 12, 2009

Amos 7:7-15
Psalm 85:8-13
Ephesians 1:3-14
Mark 6:14-29

First Reading

It can be dangerous to speak against those in authority, even if what one speaks is the truth. Our texts for this Sunday feature some incredible examples of this danger—Amos, who was almost run out of town by Amaziah, and John the Baptist, who was imprisoned and then beheaded by Herod. As recounted three weeks ago, in 2 Corinthians 6, we know much about the sufferings Paul endured for the sake of the gospel. Yet, despite the danger, there are those who hear the message; Paul mentions that the Ephesians "heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation."

The authority one has to speak is notable in each of our readings for today. Amos is clear that it's not lineage that gives him authority to speak, but the Lord's command. He isn't speaking up against Jeroboam because he's just supposed to prophesy something. He is not "prophet-eering," as Amaziah's comment about fleeing to Judah and earning his bread through prophecy suggests. Amos is skilled at other labor, and so he speaks these words as something other than an effort to make a living.

Herod knew John to be a "righteous and holy man" and feared him in spite, or maybe because John told Herod that he was acting against the law in marrying Herodias. Although it was not his initial intent to kill John, it was John's words against Herod that got him both arrested and beheaded. Can there be any sympathy for Herod as one who felt he needed to follow through with the request for John's head "out of regard for his oaths and for the guests"? History has many examples in which people in power took just action even when it did not benefit them politically. Archbishop Oscar Romero is one example of someone who responded to injustice out of a position of power. It cost him his life. Herod made the choice to keep the oaths he made, which in most circumstances would be considered honorable. Is it considered so here?

John the Baptist's identity was known to Herod; however, Jesus' was not. Because of his experience with John, Herod assumed the one about whom everyone was talking was the same person that he had

killed. Jesus was being given some authority that was based on other people's experiences with people who preceded him, rather than what Jesus actually did or who he actually was. Their expectations or previous experiences gave them some framework to consider who Jesus might be. For some, Jesus' identity was tied to the authority of those who had gone before.

Paul encourages the Ephesians, reminding them that due to having been adopted as God's children, due to receiving the promise of redemption, they are able to live for the praise of God's glory. What it comes down to is the identity as God's child that gives the Ephesians, and us, the basis on which to speak and act.

Pastoral Reflections

One can find plenty of modern day examples of people who have boldly spoken against ways of the world that do not honor or allow for dignity for all people. Many have faced resistance, hardship and, for some, untimely death. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Elie Wiesel, Marian Wright Edelman, Jane Jacobs, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Sister Dianna Ortiz are just a few examples of people who have risked publicly to bring about justice and to better the world. What has God done through public challenges of individual and systemic injustice? How is God involved when people speak up and act against injustice?

Amos is not a prophet by trade, but rather a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. Yet God calls him to prophesy to Israel. The model constitution for the ELCA, on which many congregational constitutions are based, includes as part of the statement of purpose that the congregation will "respond to human need, work for justice and peace, care for the sick and the suffering, and participate responsibly in society."[7] What does our baptismal call of working for justice and peace include? John the Baptist spoke out against Herod, and was arrested and beheaded. What are the risks we as church and as individuals face in speaking up?

On the other hand, when do we need to hear these criticisms? We may not be the most receptive to hearing declarations of how we (as church or as individuals) have hurt or excluded people. We may not easily hear constructive criticisms about our own practices and ethics. How do we receive wisdom and insight into "the mystery of [God's] will" (Eph 1:9)? How do we respond differently than Herod did? Since God has called us, in Christ, "to be holy and blameless before him in love" (Eph 1:4), what happens when we are not?

God has adopted us, and through Christ we are inheriting redemption. However, the world is not holy and blameless. As part of the world, we often fail in this regard too. As God continues "to gather up all things in him" we recognize the ways in which we and others fail to honor God and God's creation. As we respond to God's gift of life, we are both called to hear and to speak words that call us back to God. ARB

7. http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/Congregation-Administration/Model-Constitution-for-Congregations.aspx, Jan 1, 2009.

Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 16 (Proper 11) July 19, 2009

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 23
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

First Reading

Even though many of us have not experienced the national revolts and upheavals that Judah experienced, the message of woe about shepherds who scatter the sheep and the promise of a shepherd in which we are drawn back to one another certainly can be heard in our own social location. Even if we are not worried about who is in or out based on circumcision, we can identify other ways in which we determine who is in or out and hear the promise of being brought together, no longer separated from one another. Although we may not be scurrying around to catch up with a traveling healer or rabbi, we certainly can recognize the ways that we yearn for a Lord.

Jeremiah proclaims that God will gather the remnant, those who have been driven away by rulers who have scattered God's people. Although the kings on whom Jeremiah proclaims woe were on different ends of the spectrum when it came to placing God as central to Judah's life, the woe Jeremiah proclaims on the shepherds seems to have more to do with outcome than intent. Judah has been scattered by the shepherds, and driven into separate lands by God. God will raise up shepherds who will do what shepherds are supposed to do, protect and care for the sheep. With these shepherds, God's people will not fear any longer, nor will they be dismayed or go missing.

It will not only be shepherds who will care for the sheep of the Lord's pasture, but the Lord will raise up one who will be called "The Lord is our righteousness," who will reign as king. Even if Psalm 23 were not assigned for this day, we may very well hear the words of God's gathering, as the Lord leading one beside still waters and having a table prepared in the presence of enemies.

Hundreds of years after Jeremiah, the Ephesians are scattered not by distance, but by practice. Paul teaches them about what it is that Christ has done. Paul uses imagery of distance and of structure. Christ has gathered both of these groups from their separate places, both needing reconciliation with God. As with most conflicts, it wasn't that one party was right and the other was wrong.

Paul notes that Christ is both breaking down and building up. The wall of the law that divided the two sides has been broken. In its place a holy temple is growing, "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" and with a cornerstone of Christ. The Ephesians, both those who were aliens and those who were strangers are now "built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God." Both are part of this holy structure.

In Mark, we see how Jesus received similar responses on both sides of the lake. We miss Jesus feeding the multitudes and walking on water, but what this edited lectionary reading calls to attention is that people both within and beyond Galilee responded to Jesus similarly. Wherever Jesus went, people recognized him and sought to be in his presence, be taught by him, and healed. Here again is the imagery of a shepherd to the people, but in this case, the sheep yearned for a shepherd and sought out Jesus.

Pastoral Reflection

Now too, people are searching, looking

for someone to guide them. I am so very thankful that, although I have a rudimentary understanding of these things, I can trust those people who pay attention to my investments and tune up my car and are in charge of the heating system at church. In all of these instances, people guide me, and sometimes even repair what was once sick. However, Christ is not in the business of making suggestions. Christ has already acted and continues to reconcile humanity with God and one another.

I wonder how often we are really searching for a shepherd and Lord rather than someone who can just repair us and send us back out onto the road to go whichever direction we want. It seems to me that often we scatter ourselves, building up our own dividing walls against those with whom we disagree.

We are separated by language and economic class. We divide ourselves by politics and generation. We have a difficult time getting beyond the idea of us as individuals, rather than as part of a larger body. For this reason, I believe, we all need to be reminded of our incapacity to reconcile ourselves and our inability to be our own shepherd. For this reason, we need to be reminded that Christ proclaims peace to all regardless of how far off or near we are. Christ's reconciliation isn't only for those who are on the "inside" and isn't only for those who are on the "outside."

What does it mean that we are all, as ones reconciled with God and one another, called to be a dwelling-place for God, as a gathered body? How does this manifest itself in our lives? This is not one of those questions with a definite answer, but is a question for the journey of the church. ARB

Time after Pentecost—Lectionary 17 (Proper 12) July 26, 2009

2 Kings 4:42-44
Psalm 145:10-18
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

First Reading

As we enter into John we hear of signs Jesus has been performing that have caught the attention of the crowds. These signs are why so many gathered at this mountain. It is the sign of the abundance of food that prompts the crowd to say that Jesus is a prophet and, at least as John describes it, to attempt to force Jesus to be their king. Following a sign to the multitudes, Jesus walks on water, another sign, but this time only in front of his disciples.

Most of the sixth chapter of John, in which we will stay until the end of August, has to do with bread. Our text today is different than the rest as after today the scripture talks about bread in terms of "bread of life" and "bread from heaven." Bread in this Sunday's scripture may be looked at metaphorically, but is certainly intended to be taken at face value as well. People needed food on that day as they followed Jesus on the mountain, and from five barley loaves and two fish thousands placed food in their mouths and ate until they were satisfied.

John also gives the setting as near Passover time, and Jesus takes loaves and gives thanks for them before passing them out to all who sat on the grass around him. With the obvious connections to Passover, to the Exodus event and to the Last Supper, one might choose to connect to the ways in which God has saved, and continues to save, God's people.

The reading from 2 Kings is so similar to the basics of the Gospel reading and parallel accounts of Jesus feeding a multitude. Perhaps because it is shorter, the different actions of the individuals are more obvious. The servant questions, Elisha affirms, and "a man" brings his first fruits that are more than enough. Both this reading and the Gospel report amazing experiences of abundance.

The epistle also speaks of abundance, but it is the abundance of God. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians is that they may know something that is far bigger than they can comprehend, that they may know the vastness of God. That kind of comprehension requires Spirit-given power, since the vastness of God surpasses what human understanding or imagination are capable of grasping. God accomplishes more than we can fathom, and it takes something more than logic to trust in that.

Pastoral Reflections

Following college, I volunteered in a homeless shelter in Tacoma, Washington. One of the principles of this shelter, which was posted in the office for all to see, was NO SCARCITY. There were days, when staffing was low and need was high, when I hated these words. I heard them as criticism of my faith and of my ability to cope.

The message of God's abundance rings a much more positive tone with me. However, I continue to wrestle with how to live in it. For me, it takes many reminders of what God has already done, both as taught in Scripture and through the church, but also in my own life. Perhaps, you faithful preachers do not have similar trouble, but I would bet I am not the only faithful servant who needs examples and reassurances when it comes to living with faith in God's abundance.

The other thing I wrestle with in regards to any reading where Jesus feeds the multitudes, is making it too logical. One genuinely faithful angle suggests that God uses the gifts that people offer. I do believe that God inspires people to be generous in response to God's many gifts: being created, brought into the family of Christ, and saved. I believe that God created us all with something to offer and that, for the most part, we desire to contribute to something bigger than ourselves. It could have happened that the boy's offering of five barley loaves and two fish inspired many others to take out their supplies and share. It could be that Ephesians 3:20 sums up everything as it proclaims, "…to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine…."

However, I have a difficult time landing here, saying this is the only way. I want to believe that God's abundance happens in unexplainable ways as well. This working understanding of God's abundance does not lend itself to monetary wealth, and may very well require that we be "strengthened in [our] inner being with power through [the Father's] spirit" (Eph 3:16). How do we name abundance? Especially as we have experience with a tentative and frightening economy. How do we also name the very real fear of not having enough? A fear that does become reality for many worldwide and in our own communities who go without food and shelter and safe drinking water?

Finally, I take some comfort in Philip who does not pass the test Jesus poses for him, as he attempts to figure out how to purchase bread. Philip continued to be welcomed as a disciple of Jesus, despite his failure to imagine the power at work in Jesus. That there is no scarcity to forgiveness or welcome is an abundance I am almost able to comprehend, and for which I am thankful. ARB

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