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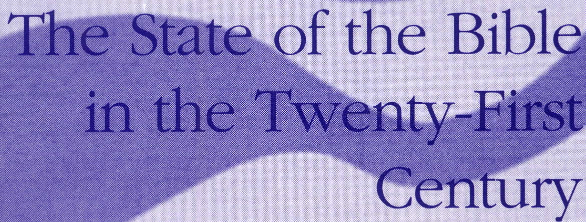

The State of the Bible in the Twenty-First Century

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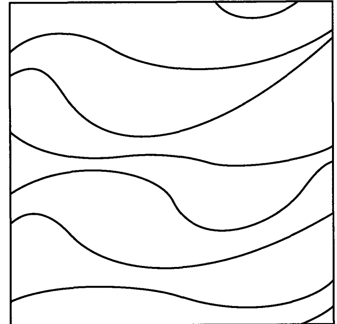

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The State of the Bible in the Twenty-First Century

Lutherans are not the only Christians who are celebrating, worrying about, and trying to attend to the role of the Bible in the life of the Christian church. I just returned from the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion, where some 8,000+ scholars listened to or read papers that not only reached back to what the Bible meant but in many cases also reached forward to what the Bible might mean for theology, ethics, and life in the church (and synagogue) today.

The Hein Fry lectures at the eight ELCA seminaries in 2006 were delivered by two outstanding New Testament scholars, and *Currents* is pleased once more to make this lecture series available to an even wider audience. Donald A. Hagner is an evangelical; Donald Senior, C. P., is Roman Catholic. Let all who have ears, hear!

Donald A. Hagner reports on the state of the Bible from his position as a leading evangelical scholar and begins by identifying a number of recent surveys of hermeneutical issues. He notes the widespread retreat from history and traditional methods of interpretation to the new obsessive focus on the reader rather than the text. For many the Bible is no longer the book of books, but a book among many books. While the Bible is widely attacked by those outside the church, it also suffers from abuse of the Bible by (mainly) conservative Christians. The article offers an explanation for the Bible's loss of authority and why the Bible is no longer heard as the written word of God. The historical-critical method is necessary, however, precisely because the Bible is the story of God's acts in history. Nevertheless, the historical method has been destructive of the Bible. For this reason the naturalistic presuppositions of the historical-critical method must change, leaving room for God to act in history. In its pure form the literary approach is totally hostile to history, insisting on understanding the text as a self-contained world and as strictly nonreferential. Postmodernism has issued a justified critique of modernism (belief in the ability of human reason to know everything; inflated claims for objectivity). But postmodernism can lead to the impossibility of knowledge altogether and a dismissal of the idea of truth. All that is available then is opinion, and yours is as good as mine. Some of the polemics of postmodernists against historical

criticism is unfair. Traditional exegetes are not as dumb as some postmodern writers make them out to be. Some of the new insights of postmodernism are compatible with a tempered historical-critical exegesis. For evangelicals the historical-critical method is fundamentally important. Christianity cannot be merely story, merely idea, merely concepts, merely images, merely ethics. Most exegetes are ultimately questing after the same thing: to make it possible to hear the voice of God in the Scriptures. Our interpretation of the Bible must be in line with the tradition of the church, the faithful who have preceded us, and a hermeneutic provided by the *regula fidei*. The implied interpreter of the Christian Scripture is a disciple. A theological interpretation will unleash the potential of Scripture because this kind of reading is characterized by an openness to hear and to know God in the texts.

In his second essay, **Donald A. Hagner** emphasizes the recent interest in the theological interpretation of Scripture, that is, exegesis done with faith presuppositions up front. Historical-critical exegesis maintains its importance, tempered by an openness to and an interest in theological reality. Charges that the Bible has no stable meaning are faced with the fact that exegetes agree on the meaning of texts 70–80 percent of the time. Biblical authors intend to say rather specific things, and they succeed in expressing themselves much or most of the time. If we are going to be open to deeper or "spiritual" senses of Scripture, we need to have our feet firmly planted in the exegesis of the plain meaning of the texts. John Shelby Spong is flatfooted in his approach to the Bible and does not see that many who take the Bible "literally" have dealt intelligently with the problems he raises. It is apparently a bad thing for Marcus Borg that "Being a Christian meant believing Christianity's central doctrinal teachings." The church must learn again the autonomy of the text of the Bible—that is, the text has sovereignty over the interpreter. Faith and the creeds are the key to correct understanding. At seminaries there must be a fundamental agreement in theology and on what the seminary is called to do—and at least some agreement on how it is to do it. There should be more required courses in exegesis and an effort to stress exegesis throughout the curriculum. The sermon is the main vehicle by which the word of God is mediated to the congregation. Therefore, we cannot afford sermons that are not biblically based, and exegetical in nature. If pastors are to preach effectively, they need to budget a good number of hours per week for the study of Scripture and for sermon preparation. We also need a robust program of adult Bible study in all of our churches. The Bible is God's gift to the church, one of her most important resources, and we must do all we can to bring it back to the church. The word of God remains our sure anchor among the confusing voices of this lost world.

Donald Senior, C.P., surveys the lively field of New Testament studies today and then concentrates on three theses developed by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. In its document "On the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," the Commission held that there must be an affinity between the interpreter and the biblical text itself that includes love, reverence, and respect for the biblical text. Other items: the Scriptures are inspired, but fully human productions; the Bible has multiple layers of meaning; the Scriptures speak to us, and not just to me; the Scriptures are in harmony with ecclesial tradition; every passage is to be read in the light of the entire canon and in the light of Christ and the teaching authority of the church; and the church must seek to incarnate its meaning into the life and mission of the church. As to the relationship of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, the Commission asked, Can Christians still lay claim to the heritage of the Old Testament after the Holocaust, and does the New Testament itself contribute toward hostility toward the Jews? The Commission shows how the New Testament itself recognizes the authority of the Old Testament, traces major motifs through both Testaments, and concentrates on the portrayal of Jews and Judaism in the New Testament. It insists that the New Testament never taught a definitive separation from Israel or that the church substituted for Israel. The Commission noted the fundamental continuity between the Testaments but also takes full account of discontinuities. New Testament polemical texts have to do with concrete historical contexts and are never meant to be applied to Jews of all times and places. The document draws on half a century of scholarship on first-century Judaism and embraces the historical-critical method and the essentially communitarian and ecclesial context of biblical interpretation. In its document on the relationship of the Bible and morality, the Commission highlighted the role of the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount. It noted a characteristic moral horizon in Scripture, the dialogue in Scripture between revealed moral values and those drawn from reflection on human experience and reason, the critical stance of the biblical tradition toward some assumptions of human cultures, and a certain progression or development within the biblical tradition on some moral issues. Distinctions are drawn between permanent principles and those which are time-bound, but the Bible assumes a stance of social responsibility and gives a strong eschatological cast to moral reflection.

In his second lecture, **Donald Senior, C.P.**, notes that in our age the church is experiencing itself as truly universal in character. Indigenous churches throughout the world have a sense of their own cultural context and potential contribution to the whole. Other conditioning factors are cultural diversity, secularization, and interreligious relationships. Paul and Matthew had to negotiate the tensions between community identity and community

outreach. Implicit in the call of Isaiah and Jeremiah to go to the nations was Israel's conviction, emphatically repeated by Paul in Romans, that the God of Israel was also the God of the nations. The paradox of God choosing to bring about the world's salvation through a crucified Messiah helped Paul realize that before this God all were on the same footing and all would be offered salvation through the graciousness of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Encounter with the crucified and risen Christ enabled Paul to retrieve his Jewish convictions and to see them as a call to transcend the traditional boundaries of his own faith community. Matthew portrays Jesus in Jewish tonalities, as the person who fulfills at every turn the promise of the Hebrew Scriptures and whose disputes with the religious authorities are a conflict over the interpretation of the law, not abrogation of the law. But Matthew ends his Gospel by looking out toward the nations. The initial restriction of mission to the house of Israel falls away beyond the earthly lifetime of Jesus. One impetus for this newly configured mission was triggered by the experience of actual Gentiles whose faith in the Christian message enabled them to shoulder their way into the community and thus change its historical horizon. The consistent emphasis in Matthew on doing the works of righteousness is illustrated in the Sermon on the Mount. The so-called contrast statements in the Sermon move the level of ethical respose to a deeper and more heroic response that does not abrogate the intent of the law. Acting with integrity and love, even to loving the enemy, makes one perfect or complete as God is complete. Acting in accord with the teaching of Jesus aligns one with the will of God and enables one to enter the reign of God. The author concludes with four proposals to extend the common ground between Paul and Matthew as we face our own mission challenges. Paul and Matthew show us ways to be faithful to our past and open to God's future.

The current ELCA emphasis—Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible—is primarily internal, encouraging Bible study throughout this church and also asking how our Lutheran heritage should shape our reading of Scripture, also in our time. But this centripetal focus is also centrifugal, because mission is always the church's middle name and because our focus on Scripture should benefit in many ways the whole people of God. Finally, this issue of *Currents* reminds us of the great joy of ecumenicity, namely, that we have much to learn from dear sisters and brothers who do not bear the name Lutheran but who love the Lord and the Scriptures at least as much as we do.

Welcome them!

Ralph W. Klein, Editor

The State of the Bible in the Twenty-First Century

Donald A. Hagner
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When I told a British NT colleague about the assigned topic of these lectures, he responded "That sounds like a tall order!" And indeed it is at least that, if not an impossible one. I can do no more than give you my personal take on these matters as an evangelical, but I suppose and hope that this is what you are interested in and why I was invited to give these lectures.

Every generation, it seems, has worried about the state of the Bible and has addressed the issue of the apparent ineffectiveness of the Bible in the church. As a sampling, I mention the following publications. In 1969 the Netherlands Reformed Church produced a volume titled *The Bible Speaks Again* (Minneapolis: Augsburg), designed "to bridge the gap that has developed continuously during the last hundred years between the biblical scholars and the man in the pew" (p. 10). The basic thought of the book "is the Reformed insight *that the Bible carries its own authority*" (p. 10). In the following year, James D. Smart published *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970). Smart argued that modern biblical scholarship has the potential to liberate the Bible to speak more meaningfully to church members and enable them to engage the important theological issues. An ecumenical conference in 1988 brought forth the volume *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church* (ed. Richard John Neuhaus; Eerdmans, 1989), with essays from quite different perspectives, Ratzinger accepting only a qualified use of the historical-critical method, and George Lindbeck emphasizing consensus and community building.

Of particular interest to me, given the locations of these lectures, are two volumes involving Lutherans. The first, growing out of conferences sponsored by the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., is *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*.[1] This volume focused on the propriety and problematic of the historical-critical method and reflected the pain of the divisions occurring among Lutherans in the preceding years. The discussion seems rather tame by today's standards. The second volume, *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), grew out of a conference jointly sponsored by the Center of Catholic and Evangelical Theology and the Ameri-

1. An earlier series of conferences sponsored by the Lutheran Council dedicated to hermeneutics took place in 1968, although from these only a few essays were separately published. See *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), x.

can Lutheran Publicity Bureau. The editors' preface speaks of the "crisis of biblical authority and interpretation in the church" and observes that "the Bible seems to have lost its voice" (p. ix).

As helpful as this book is, perhaps twelve years ago was just a little early for it to confront the hermeneutical crisis currently facing the church, posed particularly by the emergence of postmodernism.[2] I got excited when I discovered the book *What Have They Done to the Bible? A History of Modern Biblical Interpretation* by John Sandys-Wunsch (Liturgical Press, 2005), because this is the question I am interested in. But the book focuses on the beginnings of the historical-critical method and takes us only to the nineteenth century. How much more now in the twenty-first century must we ask "What have they done to the Bible?"

Among significant church statements on scripture we especially note the Roman Catholic statement "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1993),[3] which affirms the indispensability of the historical-critical method to the interpretation of the scriptures, and the various statements of the Presbyterian Church USA.[4]

Others have undertaken to address my topic and to assay the situation facing us in the new millennium. Edgar Krentz did so prophetically in his 1993 article "Biblical Interpretation for a New Millennium" (*Currents in Theology and Mission* 20:345–59). As more representative of the avant garde, I mention only five books: *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* by Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); *New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millennium*, ed. Robert M. Fowler, Edith Blumhofer, and Fernando F. Segovia (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004); *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, essays by A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson (Grand Rapids, Baker: 2006); and *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).[5] Finally, I call attention to the remarkable new book by Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006). We will have occasion to refer to some of these books, and especially the Bockmuehl volume, later in this lecture.

In the twenty-first century we are in fact experiencing a revolution in the approach to the biblical text. John Dominic Crossan has likened the changes occurring in biblical criticism to a revolution as con-

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2. Another largely Lutheran volume that should be noted is *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, ed. John Reumann (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), which concerns itself largely with the paradigm shift from the historical to the literary/narrative study of the Bible.

3. See especially Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church": Text and Commentary* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1995). Also to be noted: J. L. Houlden, ed., *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (London: SCM, 1995), with text and a variety of responses.

4. *Biblical Authority and Interpretation* (1982); *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture* (1983).

5. On this subject we also must take note of the "Scripture and Hermeneutics Series" published by Zondervan. Vol. 1, *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig Bartholomew et al.), was published in 2000. The last two volumes of the series are vol. 7, *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig Bartholomew et al.), published in 2006, and vol. 8, *The Bible and the University* (ed. David L. Jeffrey and C. Stephen Evans), in 2007.

sequential as that which took place in the eighteenth century with the introduction of the historical-critical method itself.[6] This was true already with the impinging of a variety of new disciplines upon the study of the Bible, which is what Crossan had in mind. These new approaches can be regarded as adjunctive to and enriching of the historical critical method rather than necessarily undermining it. Now, however, the dimensions of the revolution appear much larger and perhaps even ominous.

I am referring, of course, to the hermeneutical crisis caused by the retreat from history and traditional methods of interpretation to the new, one might say obsessive, focus on the reader rather than the text. In an attempt to address the apparent barrenness of historical-critical method, the offered remedy, postmodernism and its offspring, poststructuralism and reader-response interpretation, seems to many, including myself, to be medicine worse than the disease itself. What was meant in all good faith has, I argue, turned out to not be a help but to sink us further into a morass of confused and confusing jargon. These recent trends have hardly enabled the word of God to speak again.

What I propose to do in this lecture is first to consider the problem, then look at its roots in historical criticism and postmodernism. Examination of the positive and negative aspects of these approaches to the Bible will lead to a discussion of the new emergence of what is called theological exegesis. I then offer some concluding thoughts.

A brief look at the problem

There is no little irony in the fact that the Bible is the best-selling book of all time, *and* perhaps the poorest understood and least heeded book of all time. According to an interesting article in *The New Yorker* ("The Good Book Business: Why Publishers Love the Bible," by Daniel Radosh, [December 18, 2006, 54–59]), by a conservative estimate, Americans purchased 25 million Bibles in 2005 (60 percent of these were purchased as gifts). There is at least one Bible in 91 percent of American households, and the average household has four. The article refers to a survey by the Barna Group showing that 47 percent of Americans read the Bible every week. But despite these remarkable statistics everyone seems to agree that we have reached an all-time low, at least in modern times, as far as knowledge of the Bible goes, to say nothing of *understanding* the Bible.[7] It is another question, but not unrelated, how such a large percentage of Americans can describe themselves as "born again" or as "evangelicals," and be counted as active Bible readers, when the country, the culture, and even the church give such little evidence of actual obedience to the Bible.

If people are less familiar with their Bibles today, it would also seem that they trust it less implicitly than in past days. In fact, as we all know, the authority of the Bible has suffered increasingly over the last century. For most people, the Bible is basically a good book, of course, but its

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6. As noted in the Preface to the second edition of Richard N. Soulen's *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, now available in a third revised and expanded edition, with R. Kendall Soulen (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

7. The *New Yorker* article mentions another point relevant to our concerns, though I do not pursue it here, namely the difference in translation philosophy between formal and functional equivalence. The former preserves something of the distance between the world of the Bible and the modern reader, while the latter attempts to erase that difference, arguing that if the Bible is allowed to speak in modern idiom it will communicate better.

authority is hardly to be accepted by modern Westerners without further ado. As with many other good books, we have to pick and choose what we like from its contents. In short, the Bible is no longer heard for what it is, the written word of God. It is no longer the book of books, but *a* book among many books. Still, it might be a good idea to have it around as a kind of talisman for protection, security, and good luck!

The reasons for this erosion of authority are not difficult to discern. We live in an increasingly secular world where science seems to have trumped the Bible. Thanks to sensationalist exposés ranging from the Jesus Seminar to *The DaVinci Code* and *The Gospel of Judas*—matters that constantly catch the attention of the media—people are led to believe that the Bible does not tell the truth, or at least not the whole truth. What the Christian church has believed for two millennia now turns out, it is alleged, to be but one stream of late thinking that became dominant through a power play that designated and oppressed earlier christianities as heresy. There remains the widespread, lingering suspicion that *real* scholarship has debunked the Bible.[8]

A further aspect of the problem is the relativistic ethos of our times. In religion as in politics it is difficult if not impossible to speak of *truth*. The operative word when it comes to religion is *opinion*. The idea of *revealed truth*, so vital to the Bible, is even less acceptable.

In addition to attacks from without, a key difficulty also arises from within, namely, the abuse of the Bible by (mainly) conservative Christians. There is a yawning gap between the best scholarship and popular conservative Bible reading.[9] And not only lay persons misuse the texts. A variety of dubious clergy appear on TV stations and regularly show little ability to do better with the Bible. The idea that

There is no little irony in the fact that the Bible is the best-selling book of all time, *and* perhaps the poorest understood and least heeded.

springs immediately to mind is the conclusion that the teaching of the Bible about creation is incompatible with the idea of evolution. There are many other issues, a number of them very controversial, such as the place of women in the church, the unqualified support of Israel, and the sexuality question. This misuse of the Bible, together with the ongoing reality of vying interpretations of the same passages, raise the issue of hermeneutics, something that will necessarily be a central concern later in this lecture.

One of the symptoms of the present malaise, as seen in the guild of biblical scholarship, is a turning away from the study of the Bible itself. This is a point pursued energetically by Bockmuehl. The study of the Bible has lost its subject. A

8. I am reminded of how the Jesus Seminar constantly uses the word "scholarship" as a weapon to beat its readers into submission. Their views are the views of "scholars," their methodology sets forth the "pillars of scholarship," their translation is the "Scholar's Version," and so forth.

9. This is something that James Smart called attention to in *The Strange Silence of the Bible*.

quick perusal of the November 2006 program of the annual joint meeting of the AAR and SBL confirms this conclusion. Here one finds everything one ever wanted for itching ears. A sample of the AAR subjects on offer: contemplation, religion as a human phenomenon, globalization, economics, victimization, disabilities, healing and religion, homosexuality, symbolization, political power, esotericism, and pluralism. Even the SBL, which had as its theme "foster biblical scholarship," offered relatively little direct study of the Bible. Instead we get such things as reconstruction theology, oral subjectivity theory, social status inversion, social location, colonial eschatologies, myth, and gender boundaries. Oddly enough, the noncanonical literature seems to fare better than the canonical. So too the context of the NT better than the NT itself.[10]

In what follows I present in effect an etiology of the Bible's loss of authority and why the Bible is no longer heard for what it is, namely the written word of God.

Historical criticism: bane or blessing?

In a book whose influence was entirely out of proportion to its quality, Harold Lindsell, not to be confused with Hal Lindsey (author of a not much better but similarly influential book of a different kind), attacked the historical-critical method. In a second book, *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), he dedicated a chapter to "Biblical Criticism: The Bible's Deadly Enemy." The initial book was *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) and the author, himself not a biblical scholar, was one of the founding faculty members of Fuller Seminary in 1947. The book caused a great deal of pain in denominations and seminaries in this country by drawing a line in the sand, insisting that subscription to a particularly hard-nosed, doctrinaire kind of inerrancy was vital to the preservation of evangelical orthodoxy. Lindsell's unrealistic notion of inerrancy could not be reconciled with even a moderate practice of biblical criticism, hence his opposition to it. When Fuller Seminary dropped the word "inerrant" from its description of scripture in its statement of faith, Lindsell left the seminary with considerable bitterness.[11]

In 1967, nearly ten years before Lindsell's first book, Fuller professor George Eldon Ladd had written a book titled *The New Testament and Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) in which he defended the use of critical Bible study. Indeed, describing the Bible as the word of God in the words of human beings, Ladd regarded the historical-critical method as not only useful but indispensable.[12] For many evangelical students this book was a godsend, for it demonstrated that one could be both a committed believer and a critical scholar.[13]

The historical method is indispensable precisely because the Bible is the story of God's acts in history. Theology and history are inseparably bound together. The salvation historical narrative that begins in Gen-

10. Strikingly parallel is the study of the historical Jesus, which has shed far more light on the context of Jesus than on Jesus himself.

11. The interesting story can be found in George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 208–23.

12. As Ladd puts it toward the end of his book, "an evangelical faith demands a critical methodology in the reconstruction of the historical side of the process of revelation" *(The New Testament and Criticism*, 215).

13. For documentation of the impact of Ladd's perspective see Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

esis comes to its climax in the NT account of the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, in Palestine during the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius, the governorship of Pontius Pilate, the rule of the tetrarchs Herod, Philip, and Lysanius, and the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas (the Lukan notice [3:1f.] is as specific as could be). To understand this story and its meaning it is therefore vitally important to immerse oneself in the history of that time and that culture. As the NT tells us, the salvation of the world itself depends upon the historical events of the death and resurrection of this same Jesus.[14] Of key importance too is the fact that the records and narratives of these salvation-historical acts of God in the Bible are themselves products of history, written by specific individuals located in specific times and places. All of this, if it is to be understood, must therefore be studied historically, using the tools and methods of historical research. To me this seems hardly a debatable point.

But what are we to do with the fact that the historical method has been so destructive of the Bible? The negative appraisals of the historicity of extensive portions of the Biblical narrative, including some of its most important content, has steadily eaten away at the authority of the Bible. Is not the historical-critical method the Bible's deadly enemy? Such are the negative results of historical criticism that there has been a strong movement away from it on the part not only of very conservative theologians[15] but also of more reasonable and even "liberal" scholars. The method is widely regarded as unproductive, indeed bankrupt.[16] As with the premature announcement of the death of biblical theology, the historical-critical method is now also widely being pronounced dead.

It can hardly be a surprise to anyone that this method, spawned by Enlightenment rationalism and its accompanying presuppositions, would be unproductive in the study of the Bible. It would be hard to devise a match worse than so-called scientific historiography and the Bible, where the method itself cancels out its subject matter a priori.

It would seem, then, that we are in a situation somewhat like that of quarreling lovers, where we can't live with historical criticism and we can't live without it. It is obvious, at least to believers, that if something must change it has to be the naturalistic presuppositions of the historical-critical method. For some, of course, it is exactly this particular bias against the supernatural that is essential to the historical-critical method. Modification of any kind is unthinkable without violating the method at its heart. Historical research, after all, has no access to causation from beyond this world. The historian, for example, can say nothing, qua historian, about the resurrection of Jesus. Yet the historian *can* show the inadequacies of certain attempts to explain the empty tomb. It also can at least assess

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14. "The rootedness of Christianity in history is not negotiable," states N. T. Wright in *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 9.

15. A particularly interesting case is Gerhard Maier's *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (ET, St. Louis: Concordia, 1977). Unlike Lindsell, Maier is a professional biblical scholar and affirms a great deal of critical study of the Bible that Lindsell would have regarded as anathema. Maier argues not against criticism per se but against *Sachkritik, "content* criticism"—the questioning or rejection of what the Bible teaches, once that has been established on exegetical grounds. A worse example is Eta Linnemann's reactionary *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* (ET, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

16. So, famously, Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 1.

the strength of the testimony concerning the resurrection[17] and other miraculous deeds reported in the Gospels.[18]

What cannot be tolerated is a historical-critical method that a priori dismisses the very possibility of the transcendent within history—what the Bible is in reality about. Therefore the historical-critical method must somehow be tempered. Scholars have put forward a variety of ways to do this. Raymond A. Brown speaks of a "moderate criticism"[19] and Joseph Fitzmyer of "the presupposition of faith."[20] George Ladd advocated what he called a "historical-theological method." Peter Stuhlmacher speaks of "openness to transcendence"[21] and Karl Paul Donfried of a "Trinitarian hermeneutic"[22] If historical-critical study of the Bible is absolutely necessary, it must be a chastened critical study that leaves room for God to act in history.

There is, however, even in matters not touching on the supernatural, an unmistakably hostile attitude to the Bible on part of some practitioners of biblical criticism. In their hands the historical-critical method is hardly fair-handed; it is used *against* the Bible. We must remind ourselves that the "assured results" of these scholars are not always so assured. On the other hand, that the method can be positive and productive is clear from numerous well-known scholars, whose work many of us often find persuasive and illuminating. An arbitrary and partial list for NT: Hengel, Stuhlmacher, Brown, Fitzmyer, Dunn, Stanton, Wright, Bauckham, Hurtado, Gerhardsson. As scholars like this have shown us, purged from unjustifiable presuppositions, the historical-critical method provides wonderful tools to help us to understand the Bible. And why should the Christian not prefer the use of the historical-critical method that is congenial rather than hostile to the story of the Bible?

But now we come to the revolutionary turn, already alluded to, wherein the whole enterprise of traditional historical-critical scholarship has come into disrepute. The move away from exclusively historical and theological questions began gently enough with the application of new disciplines to the study of the Bible. Preeminently one thinks of sociology and anthropology, rhetorical and narrative criticism, the appreciation of the Bible as literature. Although these new approaches are not necessarily antithetical to historical study of scripture, they can become so if they are used in a reductionist manner. The same can be said of special-interest hermeneutics such as feminist and liberation approaches. Unfortunately, however, proponents of these approaches often have been highly critical of the historical approach.

But it is especially the so-called new literary criticism that has posed itself as the displacing alternative to historical criticism. To quote Jack Reumann's striking lan-

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17. N. T. Wright, evaluating historical evidence, is remarkably able to conclude that the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Jesus come "in the same category, of historical probability so high as to be virtually certain, as the death of Augustus in AD 14 or the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70." *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 710.

18. See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

19. *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,* ed. R. J. Neuhaus, 34.

20. *Scripture, the Soul of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1994), 29.

21. *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, trans. with introduction by Roy A Harrisville (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 89.

22. *Who Owns the Bible? Toward the Recovery of a Christian Hermeneutic* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 8.

guage: "signs were posted on the Literary/ Narrative Expressway to use the Historical Highway as little as possible or to avoid it completely."[23] In its pure form the literary approach is totally hostile to history, insisting on understanding the text as a self-contained world and as strictly nonreferential.

I attended the last meeting of the new literary critical group at SBL, quite a few years ago now, when it finished that particular cycle of annual meetings. The members of the group—some of them very well known names in the guild—reminisced about their discovery of the literary approach. It was as much like an evangelistic testimony meeting as anything I had ever seen. Each person talked about how he or she had been weaned away from historical study and had discovered the new world of the Bible as literature. I half expected an altar call to be given to those of us still mired in the darkness of historical study to come forward and receive the new freedom offered by the literary approach.

Oddly enough, even some evangelicals have jumped onto the docetic bandwagon of story but not history. The idea of retaining the Bible's message without having to wrestle with the nitty-gritty and the uncertainties of history is just too appealing to them and perhaps reflects a lurking suspicion that the historical basis of Christianity is too fragile to depend on.

In much of the guild, nowadays, historical interests have been moved to the back burner if they haven't fallen off the stove altogether. It is not uncommon to hear boasting that the hegemony of the historical-critical method that has ruled the discipline of biblical study has come to an end. The influence of postmodernism is being more and more widely felt, whether it be through the new literary criticism, poststructuralism, or reader-response interpretation.

Postmodernism: good or bad?

It should go without saying—but it is important nevertheless to make it clear—that there is much that is good about postmodernism and even much that can be used in support of Christian faith. Let us begin with its justified critique of modernism. As the product of Enlightenment euphoria, modernism embodied an overconfident belief in the ability of autonomous human reason to know everything and to know it absolutely. Further inflating its sense of self-importance, modernism claimed full objectivity for its knowledge. Oblivious to its own presuppositions, it avowedly came to its conclusions from a neutral, unbiased perspective.

In its heady self-confidence it felt a new courage to challenge all authority, especially the authority of the church. Modernism thus became the equivalent of unbelief, and it destroyed the faith of many.

Postmodernism challenges the entire edifice of modernism. It rightly indicates, first, that there is no possibility of complete objectivity or neutrality in our quest for knowledge. We all bring our own biased perspectives and presuppositions to the task of knowing, whether we are aware of it or not. Second, all of our knowledge is necessarily fragmentary and short of absolute. All human knowledge is therefore necessarily partial and imperfect. So far so good, we may say. But when these insights are pushed to their extreme, they can lead to the impossibility of knowledge altogether, to agnosticism and even nihilism. The very idea of truth must be dismissed; all that is available to us is opinion, and yours is as good as mine.

All of this, of course, has had a huge impact upon the interpretation of scripture.

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23. *The Promise and Practice of Biblical Theology*, 189.

We have witnessed in recent years an interesting succession that has moved our attention from what lies behind the text (the historical approach) to what lies within the text (the literary approach) and now to what is in front of the text, namely, the reader. Since the possibility of exegesis that truly gets at the intention of the author no longer exists, all that readers can do is to construct meaning, or, more accurately, impose meaning upon texts. Thus we have reader-response interpretation, where all attention seems devoted to the process of reading itself rather than to the text being read. Meaning lies in the reader and not in the text. The reader is so turned in upon herself that there is little chance of hearing anything other than her own thoughts, imagining that she sees them in the text. It seems a little like contemplating one's navel.

To get a sense of the hermeneutical malaise that is descending upon the interpretation of the Bible, at least in certain circles, let us sample some recent writing. David J. A. Clines[24] of the University of Sheffield has emerged as one of the most radical advocates of the postmodern study of the Bible. In his view the academy should study not the Bible, but the readers of the Bible (*The Bible and the Modern World*, 17). And the church must face squarely the inescapable reality of a plurality of interpretations and as well as its increasingly pluralistic context. The church must heed the fact that "texts not only do not have determinate meanings, they do not 'have' meanings at all" (p. 92); "there is no objective standard by which we can know whether one interpretation is right . . . there are no universally agreed upon legitimate interpretations" (p. 93). All we have is the assent of various communities. The same points are made by A. K. M. Adam,[25] another well-known champion of the postmodern study of the Bible. We need to "allow that no lode of meaning lies embedded in our texts, that we (and not our texts) sponsor and permit interpretations" and to note "that a given expression may mean several different things."[26]

Although their critique of modernism seems clear enough, what postmodern proponents have to offer positively—not to imply that they agree on this!—often lacks clarity, even to one who would read sympathetically. One has to cope not merely with the complex but also with the abstract, the abstruse, and wagonloads of jargon. I hesitate to pick on anyone here, but the examples are legion. Focus on the reader and the process of reading has turned scholars to esoteric discussion of understanding, the meaning of understanding, the meaning of meaning, and so forth.

Luke Timothy Johnson,[27] much of whose work I admire, in a postmodern vein speaks critically of the hegemony of the historical paradigm, sidesteps the historical question altogether, as is his wont, and issues a call to "live within the imaginative world of Scripture . . . to constitute an alternative reality" (*The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship,* 33). How this imagining relates to the "real" world and how it differs from fantasy remains unclear to me.

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24. *The Bible and the Modern World* (Sheffield: Academic, 1997). See also his provocative essay "The Pyramid and the Net: The Postmodern Adventure in Biblical Studies," in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays 1967–1998* (Sheffield: Academic, 1998), 1:138–57.

25. *Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006); *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); ed., *Handbook for Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000).

26. Adam, *Faithful Interpretation*, 3.

27. With William S. Kurz, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Turning down the rhetoric in favor of a synthesis?

Can we find any middle ground here? Or must we choose between the historical and the postmodern? I have a strong feeling that much of the discussion is unnecessarily polarized.

The sort of historical method that the postmoderns regularly speak of, I too would reject. Let us return, however, to the idea of a tempered historical-critical method. When I first read the classic article by Clines ("The Pyramid and the Net: The Postmodern Adventure in Biblical Studies") it occurred to me that he had little feeling for the historical-critical exegesis that I knew, and that the exegetical method I was taught was already sensitive to, and already answered, the objections he raised in the name of postmodernism.[27] For example, with regard to the postmodern refusal of "totalization," we already knew to appreciate the variety of scripture, not as an embarrassment but as an enrichment; to avoid harmonization and homogenizing of scripture; to arrive at the meaning of a word from its use in the sentence and not from the lexicon. And as for history being "what is remembered," we already knew that there is no such thing as uninterpreted history, that every historian has a perspective that affects how she writes, and that the narratives of the Bible were far from being neutral, exhaustive chronologies. Evangelical exegesis is not interested in the meaning of the text for its own sake, without caring about what the ethical response should be, as Clines seems to think. When the historical-critical exegesis I learned labored to find the intent of the author in the text, it could hardly be called an "essentially antiquarian question." Far from it: as the meaning of the word of God it was to be taken with the utmost seriousness, especially in the call to obedience.

A few other important points need to be mentioned here. Sensitive exegesis is apprised of the "intentional fallacy." If the traditional exegete seeks the intention of the author, it is not the intention *behind* the text, in the mind of the author, but the intention as embodied *in* the text that is the goal. Sensitive historical-critical exegesis furthermore knows well that the exegete is never without presuppositions and therefore has always spoken of the tremendous importance of the so-called hermeneutical circle. Finally, good historical-critical exegetes never regard their interpretations as absolute or final. Every exegesis is at best an attempt to understand the text aright; sometimes we are more successful than others. And so the honest exegete will be marked by humility.

The point I have been trying to make is that traditional exegetes are seldom as dumb as some postmodern writers make them out to be. But if postmodernists misunderstand traditional exegesis by picking on the worst examples, perhaps traditional exegetes, like myself, need to be more careful in their critique of postmodernism.

Postmodernists, for example, do not necessarily reject the historical-critical method altogether. I was interested to note this point in the editor's preface to one of Adam's books. Quoting a sentence from Adam, "New Testament theology *need not* be founded on warrants derived from historical-critical reasoning," Charles Mabee notes that the emphasis is his and then continues:

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27. I discuss this in more detail in my "The Place of Exegesis in the Postmodern World," in *History and Exegesis: New Testament Essays in Honor of Dr. E. Earle Ellis for his 80th Birthday*, ed. San-Won (Aaron) Son (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 292–308, upon which I depend for the remainder of this paragraph.

As such, Adam's book is not to be taken as an attack upon the historical-critical method. Rather, it is directed toward the problem of hegemony itself in New Testament studies. The target is historical criticism because of the pretentious role it plays in modern biblical studies, not because it has no legitimate role to play.[28]

Furthermore, no postmodernist who is committed to reader-response criticism concludes that any and every interpretation of a passage, however foolish, is acceptable. Polyvalence simply argues that there may be a number of legitimate interpretations of a single passage. And finally, if readers have an important role in the construction of meaning, they do so in interaction with the text, not in a vacuum.

Nevertheless, the hyped-up rhetoric continues, on both sides. Often in our attempts to be persuasive we present a caricature of the view we are arguing against, refusing to acknowledge the truth or strength the other side may possess. Is it possible that with a little more charity on each side the moderates can be brought closer together? I have tried to show that many of the new and helpful insights of postmodernism are compatible with a tempered historical-critical exegesis. Is not a tempered postmodernism[29] possible that need not end up in epistemological paralysis and that would still allow notions of truth and metanarrative?

I like to think that something like this is also possible, for example, in the unfortunate polarity that has developed between historical-critical exegesis and the newer literary criticism. The new appreciation of the Bible as literature has brought countless rewards in new and better understanding of the narrative portions of the Bible. Surely we do not need to choose between the Bible as history and the Bible as story.[30] Why must one exclude the other? Is not the Bible history told in the form of a story? If so, it needs to be studied as both. The only insuperable difficulty here would be the insistence of some purists on the nonreferential interpretation of the text.

A tempered historical-critical method and a tempered postmodernism may not be that far apart. But in the end, undeniable and insuperable differences may remain that cannot be bridged. From my evangelical point of view, the historical-critical method, while it is hardly the only method to be used, is fundamentally important. So, too, because of the importance of history, is (tempered) historical-critical exegesis. I clearly privilege this approach and regard all other methods and approaches to the interpretation of scripture as adjunctive or supplementary. This endorsement of the hegemony of the historical clearly will put me in disfavor of those eager to dethrone it. For me Christianity cannot be merely story, merely ideas, merely concepts, merely images, merely ethics. In my view, as I have already said, Christianity is utterly dependent upon the reality of historical events. With all the good will in the world, it is hardly possible for me to accept any of the following: that texts have no meaning; that the variety of interpretations is therefore virtually without number, and that there is no way to adjudicate between them; that historical knowledge is not possible; or that claims of truth are disallowed.

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28. Charles Mabee, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology: "Modern" Problems and Prospects* (Macon: Mercer, 1995), vii.

29. Some writers have made a distinction between a destructivist (hard-core) and constructivist (soft-core) postmodernism. See C. F. H. Henry, "Postmodernism: The New Spectre?" in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David Dockery, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 34–52.

30. See the excellent work of Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story*, WUNT 123 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

The promise of theological interpretation

Those who adamantly oppose the paradigm of the historical-critical study of the Bible do so with good intentions. Although I frequently have difficulty understanding exactly what they advocate in its place, it seems that they want to clear the ground for theology and feel that the historical approach as such constitutes an obstacle of some kind. It is doubtful that they will find my idea of a tempered historical methodology convincing.

The sad paradox is that most of us are ultimately questing after the same thing: to make room for the theological—that is, to make it possible to hear the voice of God in the scriptures. I believe that a tempered historical-critical exegesis is the way to do this. Without this kind of exegesis we will hear only our own voice or at best the voice of our community, but we will not be in a position to hear a word from beyond. To engage in theological exegesis is to open oneself up to that word. If, as the Bible tells us, God has acted in history for our salvation, it is a mistake to think that we must choose between history and theology. God deigned to give the written word to the church in the form of historical documents, and they are to be understood as such. The Bible is the word of God in the words of human beings.

At the same time it is true that we do not approach these documents with supposed neutrality. On the contrary, we choose to approach them in faith, as documents that address us with a unique authority. We read them furthermore as a sacred canon given to the community of faith, scripture interpreting scripture, in the context of the worshiping church. Our interpretation of the Bible is in line with the tradition of the church, the faithful who have preceded us, by the *sensus fidelium*, with our hermeneutic provided by the *regula fidei*, as our basic paradigm. None of this, however, is to be regarded as a shortcutting of our call to study these human documents with the best tools of historical-critical scholarship. It is, however, a call to a second, informed naivete, marked above all by an openness to the text of the Bible as God's word. To the question of whether the Bible should be read and studied "like any other book" (one of the key emphases of the modern critical study of the Bible), my answer is: Insofar as it is composed of the words of human beings, Yes; insofar as it is the word of God, the answer must be No. It is just this resultant complexity that has caused so much confusion in the study of the Bible.

> Most of us are ultimately questing after the same thing: to make room for the theological—that is, to make it possible to hear the voice of God in the scriptures.

Bockmuehl concludes that "the implied reader may turn out to be in a better position to understand the text than the aloof or the distrusting interpreter (*Seeing the Word*, 74). He goes on to say that "the implied interpreter of the Christian Scripture is a *disciple*" (p. 92). Such a reader has a wonderful hermeneutical advantage over other readers. Thus Bockmuehl speaks of

"the wisdom of the implied exegete" (the title of chapter 2).

It is theological interpretation that will unleash the potential of the text of scripture, because this kind of reading of the Bible is characterized by an openness to hear and to know God in the texts. Reading to hear God includes a willingness to hear and, in addition, not only a "critical realism" but also a hermeneutics of action, attention, faithfulness, and obedience.[31] The goal is reading the Bible "for a blessing," "for the sake of human flourishing, for the individual and the social 'good,'" as Kevin J. Vanhoozer says in the introduction to a new dictionary devoted just to this approach to the Bible.[32]

Concluding thoughts

In this lecture we have addressed the subject of the state of the Bible in the twenty-first century. We have seen how the Bible has evidently lost its authority in our day. The beginnings of this loss go back to the period of the Enlightenment with the origin of the historical-critical method. An analysis of the method led us to the reactive emphases of postmodernism. We undertook to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of both the historical-critical method and postmodernism, and wondered openly about the possibility of a rapprochement between the two. Finally, a brief discussion of the newly emerging attention to so-called theological exegesis seemed to point in a promising direction.

The historical-critical method, albeit in tempered form, remains of crucial importance to the health of the church, in my opinion. Postmodernism has brought with it many helpful and, indeed, vitally important insights. At the same time there are strands of it that are highly problematic from the standpoint of the Bible's perspective. Just when postmodernism adds enormous complexity to our understanding of the task of interpretation, along comes theological interpretation with its beguiling simplicity, appealing to us just to listen to what God says in the text.

In the next lecture I carry this discussion further, particularly by looking at the implications of this discussion for the church and in particular seminary education. Are there any limits to be imposed upon theological interpretation? How can we know what God says to us and distinguish that from what we are saying to ourselves? How important is exegesis, given the insights of postmodernism? What is the difference between a responsible and irresponsible use of the Bible? What is incumbent upon the church if it is to bring the Bible as the authoritative word of God, with all of its edifying power, back to the people in the churches?

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31. Thus Klyne Snodgrass, "Reading to Hear: A Hermeneutics of Hearing," *HorBT* 24 (2002): 1–32.

32. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.) in the introduction to *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids/ London: Baker/SPCK, 2005), 24.

The Bible: God's Gift to the Church of the Twenty-First Century

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In the first lecture we looked at the state of the Bible today, focusing on its loss of authority because of the influence of a particular kind of historical criticism and because of the rise of postmodernism. We ended with a brief discussion of an emerging approach to the Bible called theological interpretation. In the present lecture we look further at theological interpretation and raise the question of exegesis within theological interpretation. This will lead us again to insist on the importance of exegesis, especially for those who aspire to take the Bible seriously, which in turn will cause us to take up some loose ends from our discussion of postmodernism. Finally, we will look at some practical suggestions for the church in light of the content of the two lectures together.

Theological interpretation: promise and peril?

Nothing has been as heartwarming in the field of biblical studies over the past few years as the new emphasis on the theological interpretation of scripture. Thanks in part to insights of postmodernism, believing interpreters of the Bible now have permission—with all other readers of all other texts—to come to the task of interpreting the Bible with their faith presuppositions up front, so to speak. No one, we now realize, comes to the task of interpretation as a blank page, with objectivity and neutrality. Because the Bible consists of documents of faith, faith on the part of the interpreter may be seen to be not a disadvantage but an advantage enabling a more effective understanding. Texts of faith open themselves up to readers of faith. They make themselves accessible to contemporary readers who are like the implied readers of these texts because they share in the faith and commitment of the church. "The implied interpreter of the Christian Scripture is a *disciple*," writes Markus Bockmuehl.[1] And we can learn a lot more from the inside than from the outside. As Bockmuehl strikingly puts it, "there are limits to how much you can usefully say about the stained glass windows of King's College Chapel without actually going in to see them from the inside."[2]

Theological interpretation brings readers' aims into play in the process of interpretation. The primary aim of the believing reader is to hear the voice of God in the scriptures—and not merely to hear but to hear responsively, in a transforming way, and in a way that issues forth in obedience. Thus theological interpretation desires to

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1. Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 92.
2. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word,* 74.

approach scripture "on its own terms," that is, in keeping with its own intentions. Readers who engage in theological interpretation are receptive readers. We are dealing primarily here with reading with openness to the claims of the text. Theological readers accept the whole of the canon as sacred scripture, presuppose its essential unity, and in its interpretation employ the "rule of faith," the tradition of interpretation established by the Christian community from the earliest centuries, but also the community within which interpreters are presently located. Another way of making the same point is to say that theological interpreters are those who "indwell the world of the text"[3] or who "inhabit Scripture's own story."[4]

Now, without question all of this sounds appealing—at least to believing interpreters—but does it not raise important questions that beg answering? The one that springs immediately to my mind is whether there is not a danger that the believer may impose his or her theological meaning upon otherwise "innocent" texts. The circularity of the interpretive process, where one gains theology from text, tradition, and community and then reads it back into the text, also comes to mind. And there are other questions and unresolved issues.

The increasing popularity and significance of theological interpretation is evident from the publication of the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids and London: Baker/SPCK, 2005). In the Introduction, Vanhoozer assures readers that theological interpretation "is not an imposition of a theological system or confessional grid onto the biblical text," nor is it "an imposition of a general hermeneutic or theory of interpretation onto the biblical text" (p. 19). Further on he comforts us:

> One should not abandon scholarly tools and approaches in order to interpret the Bible theologically. On the contrary, modern and postmodern tools and methods may be usefully employed in theological interpretation to the extent that they are oriented to illumining the text rather than something that lay "behind" it (e.g., what actually happened) or "before" it (e.g., the ideological concerns of an interpretative community). (p. 22)

It clearly is a healthy trend to bring theology back into the exegetical enterprise; after all, the texts have to do with God! At the same time, there are risks involved in this practice. In his solid article on "exegesis" in the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation*, Klyne Snodgrass rightly stresses that "the attempt not to impose our theologies on texts is demanded by fair exegesis," and, speaking of theological interpretation, cautions that "while much benefit is possible, the danger is that interpreters impose on texts a theology unrelated to their function. Such 'spiritual exegesis' was often present throughout the church's history, but is more meditation on the text than exegesis of it" (p. 206).

Acknowledging that the new theological interpretation is only in its infancy and has no agreed-upon methodology, Vanhoozer mentions three distinct types of theological interpretation (pp. 22f.). Of the three only Vanhoozer's own approach, with its interest in divine authorship and the communicative intent of the text, puts a high premium on exegesis. Other approaches place interest in the final form of the text as a self-contained entity (Lind-

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3. Kevin Vanhoozer, "Body-Piercing, the Natural Sense, and the Task of Theological Interpretation: A Hermeneutical Homily on John 19:34," *ExAuditu* 16 (2000): 25.

4. Joel B. Green, "Scripture and Theology: Uniting the Two So Long Divided," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning NT Studies and Systematic Theology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 42.

beck) and in "the reading and reception of the Bible in the believing community today" (Fowl). These differences are hardly insignificant and indicate that theological interpretation can mean quite different things to different people.

The ongoing vital importance of exegesis

I return to the ongoing importance of historical-critical exegesis, tempered as it must be by openness to and interest in theological reality. Oxford theologian Robert Morgan puts my concern well when he asserts, "The historical exegesis cultivated by normal biblical scholarship is indispensable to any critical theological interpretation of Scripture (and therefore integral to theological education)."[5] The well-known but lately much-maligned article of Krister Stendahl on biblical theology concluded:

> For the life of the church such a consistent descriptive approach [focusing what the text "meant"] is a great and promising asset that enables the church, its teaching and preaching ministry, to be exposed to the Bible in its original intention and intensity, as an ever-new challenge to thought, faith and response.[6]

To my mind, without (tempered) historical-critical exegesis the church is bound to lose its way. Theological interpretation can ill afford to bypass the hard work of exegesis. But, given the critique launched by postmodernism, can we afford to depend so vitally upon exegesis? We need here to look more closely at a few of the key problems that have been raised.

As we saw in the last lecture, there are some who deny the very possibility of exegesis in any meaningful sense of the word. They emphasize the existence of problems on both sides of the interpretation process—with the text and with the reader.

If we leave aside the more extreme claim that texts contain *no* meaning and that therefore the reader can do little more than supply the text with its meaning, we can turn directly to the related argument that texts contain no *stable* meaning. All texts are intrinsically multivalent, and they are multivalent to such an extent that interpreters never can agree on the meaning of a text. This common argument is much exaggerated, in my opinion. It would be interesting to do a survey of a dozen of the most respected commentators on a particular book of the NT. I suspect that the agreement among them would be much greater than we might think. We tend to notice differences rather than agreements. It would not surprise me if they agreed as much as 70 to 80 percent of the time. Perhaps only 20 to 30 percent of the content is intrinsically difficult enough to produce a high variety of different opinions of any significance.

Even if my figures are too optimistic, I think it is fair to say that there is not a great difference between exegetes on significant portions of the central content of the NT. This would suggest that given half a chance —that is, interpreted using the standard grammatico-historical method of exegesis—the message of the NT (and the Bible) is to a large extent relatively clear. This is what the reformers had in mind when they spoke of the perspicuity of Scripture.[7] Read

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5. "Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God (2)" in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology*, ed. David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 23.

6. "Biblical Theology: A Program," in *Meanings: The Bible as Document and Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 44. Originally published in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962) 1:418–32.

7. "Luther thought the Bible was 'clear,' that is, that taking the book as a whole, and allowing time for reading and rereading, we could be confident of making out its meaning." Robert W. Jenson, in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K.

in its plain sense, the Bible is clear on the essentials of salvation and more. Poorly educated grandmothers in rural settings often have done rather well with the main content of the Bible, although of course they too often misuse the Bible.

The reader is the other side of the problem. Putting aside the argument of some that the reader creates meaning, practically *ex nihilo*, a common claim is that because neutrality or objectivity is not possible, the reader will inevitably distort the text, probably in ways that favor his or her interests. We argued in the previous lecture that the sensitive exegete will be conscious of the hermeneutical circle and be on guard against abusing the text in this way. But because we all have our backgrounds and commitments does not necessarily make it impossible for us to understand what a text wants to say. This is an unwarranted pessimism. As Snodgrass rightly says, "We cannot come to the text without presuppositions, but we can come to the text without presupposing what its meaning is."[8]

The relatively new emphasis these days on *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the "history of effects" of a text, that is, the history of the interpretation of texts throughout the history of the church, has strengthened the idea of the inevitable plurality of meanings. *Wirkungsgeschichte* shows that the same text can be understood differently in different eras of the church. Ulrich Luz's brilliant Matthew commentary in the Hermeneia series collects very interesting material concerning the understanding of passage after passage in the history of the church. Luz has not been slow to draw large conclusions from these data. He concludes: "biblical texts do not have a simple fixed meaning, which would be identical with their original meaning; they have *power* to create new meanings for and with new people in new situations."[9] It follows from this that "*there is no uniquely true interpretation of a text*" (p. 26). "Interpretations depend on situations and interpreters, and must change with them" (p. 28).[10]

Because of this realization of the reality of a plurality of interpretations in the history of the church, Luz no longer has the courage to say that any reading of the text is incorrect (or correct). As he realizes, this raises the question of truth. He offers two criteria to judge truth. One is correspondence to essentials of the history of Jesus (not exactly unproblematic), and the other is correspondence with love, which Luz finds to be the center of the biblical message. The bottom line for Luz is dialogue undertaken in love (dialogue "as a way between relativity and absolute truth").

Now, I would not deny for a moment that these are good things. Whether they represent the NT well and whether the church can survive, let alone thrive, on them is another question. God may be able to speak in Luz's paradigm, but he cannot say very much, and only what can pass the very general test of Jesus and love. In this relativistic and postmodern age, not many are willing, or not many have the courage, to speak unflinchingly of truth.[11]

McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 284.

8. "Exegesis," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 203.

9. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence, and Effects* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 19.

10. This approach, argues Luz, delivers us from "the three main problems of historical criticism," namely "the barrier between past and present, the barrier between objective meaning of a text and personal interpretation, and the problem of plurality in the Bible itself" (*Matthew in History*, 37).

11. A very helpful collection of essays can be found in *But Is It All True? The Bible and the Question of Truth*, ed. Alan G. Padgett

To my mind, some readings of texts are correct and others are not. Despite all of the qualifications that have to be made, I still optimistically, perhaps naively, believe that authors intend to say rather specific things and that they succeed in expressing themselves much or most of the time, and further, that if we work at it with the available tools, we have a very good chance of understanding what they meant. There can be correction of bad exegesis by good exegesis. I think of the way in which, by means of better exegesis on both sides, Protestants and Catholics have drawn together in recent decades to a point that could hardly have been believed in a previous era. This is not the result of saying that the same text can mean different things to different people! When I teach Romans these days I use the Anchor Bible Commentary by Joseph Fitzmyer, a Jesuit, just because it provides such good exegesis. We are in large agreement on what Paul meant, and therefore on what the word of God says.[12]

In defending his perspective, Luz appeals to the fourfold sense of scripture in the fathers. Over the past few years I have been gaining a new appreciation for deeper levels of meaning in scripture, and even a new, if guarded, openness to allegory. Our texts often have what might be called a surplus of meaning not exhausted by historical-critical exegesis. The very use of the OT in the NT bears witness to that fact. *Sensus plenior* involves meaning in texts that goes beyond the intention of the authors. But the way that Luz appeals to the fourfold sense to justify his conclusions is hardly fair. For, unless I am mistaken, the literal sense of the passage was always given priority by the fathers and served as a kind of anchor for the tropological, allegorical, and anagogical senses of the text. If we are going to be open to deeper or "spiritual" senses of scripture, as I would like to suggest, we need to have our feet firmly planted in the exegesis of the plain meaning of the texts.

What, finally, shall we say about the problem of plurality of interpretations? First, in all frankness, plenty of them are simply wrong! But once we dismiss these, judged by the recognized standards of exegesis, others remain. Some are due to the intrinsic obscurity of the passage or the nature of the passage, and some to the fact that we simply do not know enough to be able to decide one way or the other. Other passages may legitimately be interpreted in different ways. My Fuller colleague John Goldingay notes that (1) "all texts have some degree of openness;" (2) some texts deliberately employ ambiguity to accomplish their purpose; (3) "many stories are rich and complex;" and (4) "a text may have one intrinsic meaning . . . but many significances or applications."[13]

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and Patrick R. Keifert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

12. The 1995 statement of the Roman Catholic church is rather good. After allowing that fresh meanings can be derived from scripture ("re-readings"), they add: "It does not follow from this that we can attribute to a biblical text whatever meaning we like, interpreting it in a wholly subjective way. On the contrary, one must reject as unauthentic every interpretation alien to the meaning expressed by the human authors in their written text. To admit the possibility of such alien meanings would be equivalent to cutting off the biblical message from its root, which is the Word of God in its historical communication; it would also mean opening the door to interpretation of a wildly subjective nature." *The Biblical Commission's Document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church"* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1995), 124.

13. See his helpful discussion of the question "Why is there diversity in the way people understand texts?" in *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1995), 50–55.

The possibility of different legitimate readings should not be a great surprise. Here the best thing to do, if possible, is to let scripture interpret scripture; let the clear passage throw light on the less clear passage. We also can employ the rule of faith as a help. Of course, in the last analysis, even when we think we know the meaning of a passage, we may be wrong. Humility therefore always becomes the exegete! But we must never give up in our hunt for the author's intended meaning in the text. And we must never become so prepossessed with the difficult passages that we forget the large extent to which we *do* know the meaning of the Bible.

Recovering the Bible for the church

It is time to turn to the important question: What can we do to restore a sense of the authority of the Bible? This widely recognized need is being addressed in a variety of ways. One suggestion comes from the left and calls for a dramatic revision of the traditional understanding of the Bible. In his provocative book *Rescuing the Bible from the Fundamentalists: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) John Shelby Spong proposes "to rescue the Bible from the exclusive hands of those who demand that it be literal truth and second to open that sacred story to levels of insight and beauty that, in my experience, literalism has never produced" (p. 10). According to Spong, who sounds very much like Bultmann here, modern human beings can no longer believe that what the Bible says is literally true. The answer apparently is to trim everything down to dimensions acceptable to the modern liberal mind. "Neither Bible nor creeds are to be taken literally or treated as if somehow objective truth has been captured in human words" (p. 233). The Christ event does involve "an ultimate truth—namely, that somehow in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth the reality of God has become an experience in human history that is universally available" (p. 237). "The call of Christ is an eternal call to the affirmation of that which is. . . . To have the courage to be oneself, to claim the ability to define oneself, to live one's life in freedom and with power is the essence of the human experience. . .True Christianity ultimately issues in a deeper humanism" (p. 242).

Spong here sounds rather like Paul Tillich. Even though Spong's straw man literalist is about as stupid as imaginable, he would at least have the sense to know that Spong's claim that Paul was gay is ludicrous and without a shred of support. It is surprising that someone as educated as Spong can be so flatfooted in his approach to the Bible and not see that many who take the Bible "literally" have dealt intelligently with the problems he so proudly raises. In the end, some of us will not be blamed for thinking that the Bible needs to be rescued from Spong!

The book written by Marcus Borg some ten years later is no better than Spong's. *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001) is very similar in its argument, as the subtitle indicates. Borg believes that we can no longer accept the old way of seeing the Bible, that is, as a unique book derived from God that is necessarily true and authoritative. Nor can we accept as true what the Bible says really happened. Borg advocates in place of this view of the Bible what he calls a "postcritical naivete" (but I must say it's a pretty sophisticated naivete!), that is, "the ability to hear the biblical stories once again as true stories, even as one knows that they may not be factually true

and that their truth does not depend upon their factuality" (p. 50). "But what I cannot do as a historian," Borg insists, "is to say that Jesus could do such things even though nobody else has ever been able to. Thus I regard these as purely metaphorical narratives" (p. 47). Borg can regard the Bible only as a human book and not as the word of God. "As we read the Bible, then, we should ask not 'What is God saying?' but 'What is the ancient author or community saying?'" (p. 28)

I can share Borg's rejection of an older Christianity that was literalistic, moralistic, patriarchal, exclusivistic, and afterlife-oriented, but when he includes the word "doctrinal" in this list, I must say I am astonished. It is apparently a bad thing to Borg that "Being a Christian meant believing Christianity's central doctrinal teachings" (p. 11). The laughable irony is that Borg notes that "many people who went to seminary or graduate school in biblical studies motivated by a strong sense of Christian vocation and love for the Bible have experienced modern biblical scholarship as taking the Bible away from them" (p. 40). What Borg has done in this book seems to do the job as well as or better than the seminaries and the grad schools! And what does Borg offer to put in place of the doctrine of the church? Vague notions such as "the reality of the sacred" and "a sacred Mystery at the center of life," with "the Bible as a lens for seeing life with God" and "as a finger pointing to the moon"—a Buddhist metaphor for the teaching of the Buddha (pp. 299, 301).

Spong and Borg, although they make good points, hardly represent a viable way to bring the Bible back to the church. (By the way, whatever happened to *the mighty acts of God*?) Spong and Borg serve us at least by calling attention to the all-too-frequent abuse of the Bible especially by conservative readers. It *is* a distressing paradox that those who would most honor and obey the Bible often end up abusing it badly. There is a responsible and an irresponsible use of the Bible.

I regularly teach adult education classes on Sunday mornings in churches in the Los Angeles area. When in a class I happen to mention "biblicism" negatively, as an abuse of the Bible, I usually generate a lot of interest. These people, after all, are highly motivated and are well aware that the Bible is often misused, and they would like to know how to avoid misusing it.

The word "biblicism" is of course used differently by different people. I use it as an umbrella term to describe a variety of abuses. In general it is an approach that regards the Bible as a great repository or data bank of texts that are treated as so many distinct bits of truth. It gives rise to the worst kind of mindless proof-texting, where texts are used without exegesis, without regard to their purpose, origin, or genre and without regard to their context, immediate or canonical.[14] The people who do this usually mean well, but they are poorly informed. They read the text flatly, often literalistically, and may use it as a weapon when it seems to make the point *they* want to make. They think they are being biblical, whereas in truth they often end up dishonoring the Bible and disobeying God. One of the worst types of biblicism is when, for example, the teaching of Jesus is imposed in rigid fashion as a new kind of law, quite

14. Karl Paul Donfried refers to "interpretations that simply play 'Bible Land,' the precarious game that allows one to pick and choose texts uncritically and at will without attention either to the context or the relationship with the central events of the New Testament." *Who Owns the Bible? Toward Recovery of a Christian Hermeneutic* (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 6.

out of keeping with the spirit of his teaching. The ethical teaching of Jesus is thereby transformed into an inflexible nomism. The idealistic ethic of the Sermon on the Mount becomes a merciless law code.

In light of the abuse of the Bible—the sort of things that Spong and Borg seize upon—we are led back to the importance of good exegesis. But can we teach exegesis even to lay people? My answer is By all means! We not only can but should do so. This is the way we must bring the Bible back to the church.

The oddity is that we have an inspired—some would say infallible—Bible, the authentic word of God, yet we lack an inspired or infallible interpreter. This is precisely why our hermeneutic must be well founded and why we must strive for the best possible exegetical skills. Reckless use of the Bible has led to the widespread conclusion that "you can prove anything from the Bible." This in turn has cast a cloud of suspicion over the authority of the Bible. We must do all that we can to cultivate responsible interpretation. It is distressing to hear professional scholars saying that exegesis is not only not needed but actually impossible, that we have no need of exegesis courses or courses in exegetical method! The very thing I try to protect against is now encouraged—indeed, is said to be all we can do: impressionistic Bible "study," that is, sitting around the coffee table saying "This is what the text means to me; what does it mean to you?" My interpretation is OK, and your interpretation is OK too. I am reminded of the little rhyme: "Wonderful things in the Bible I see, some put there by you and some by me." Not even on the horizon is there any disciplined attempt to discern what the author actually wants to say in the text.

The church must learn again of the autonomy of the text of the Bible. By this I mean that the text has sovereignty over the interpreter. This is not at all the way in which the "autonomy of the text" is understood in the newer literary criticism. There it refers to the text, once having been written, as having a life and meaning of its own, like a work of art, quite independent of the intention of its author, which therefore becomes irrelevant. The autonomy of the text for me is the absolute authority the text, as the word of God, has over the interpreter. Because it is the word of God it obliges the reader to hear what it wants to say—and demands response if it is to be read rightly. And to the responsive reader, as we have already noted, the text opens itself up more effectively than ever. It is simply a lie that faith and the creeds prevent true understanding of the Bible. Quite the contrary: They are the key to correct understanding. In the words of Paul Jewett,

> One discerns the essential message of Scripture only in the act of believing it . . . the efficacy of Scripture is wrought by the Spirit, who not only inspired the original authors but so illumines the minds of those who hear their message that their hearing becomes the hearing of faith, their understanding a saving understanding.[15]

What the church should do about the present situation

In keeping with my assignment, I now turn from the theoretical to the practical. In light of what we have been describing in this and the previous lecture, what can the church do to help matters? How can the church reestablish the authority of the Bible, and how can it bring the written word of God back to the people and enliven them again to become truly people of the word?

I will speak generally of the church, because I do not know that the specifically

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15. Paul King Jewett, *God, Creation, and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 148.

Lutheran church can do anything unique—although, come to think of it, if the Lutheran church were to renew its commitment to the fixed centralities of Martin Luther's theology and make a new effort to emphasize them, this would go a long way toward rejuvenating the church. When I am in the doldrums spiritually I turn to Bach's cantatas with their rich expression of Luther's theology. Nothing quite ministers to my soul like these cantatas, where the marvelous solidity of the music matches so thoroughly the rock-solid theology of Luther, which in turn is so firmly rooted in the exegesis of the Bible! I would dream for the Lutheran Church a new realization of Luther's bold, no-nonsense commitment to the truth of the Bible read in faith.

I have no intention of discussing here the philosophy of theological education, which has been much discussed in recent years[16] and which, in any event, is beyond my ability. Instead I want to focus on a few specific items. It seems to me that our bottom-line goal has to be to bring the Bible back to the people—especially in the church but also in the world—in as effective a way as possible.

There is no magical way and no easy way of doing this. We must begin with an agreed philosophy and a common commitment to the goal and then turn to methods of implementation. Focusing on the latter, we begin the present discussion with the seminaries, their professors, and their curricula, then move to the churches, their pastors, and their programs. It will be hard to say anything in what follows that is not already fairly obvious and well known, but that does not mean it is not worth saying!

The seminaries. I suppose it goes without saying that seminaries are of the highest strategic importance, not only because they set the theological tone for the churches but, more important, because of their role in educating pastors, who finally are the hands-on persons in the local churches, and educating scholars, who will in turn become educators. Where seminaries fail, churches will fail. Seminaries fail when their professors fail. Just for this reason perhaps the crucial thing is care in the hiring of new faculty. This hardly means that we must be carbon copies of one another, exactly the same in every respect. There must be room for differences and for being stretched by new ideas and approaches or we will exclude the possibility of growth. If we do not allow for diversity we will be impoverished. On the other hand, there can be danger in pushing the envelope too far or at least in having too many on a faculty who do so. Above all there must be a fundamental agreement in theology as well as in what the seminary is called to do, and at least some agreement on how it is to do it. Sometimes the mere signing of a statement of faith, important as that may be, is not sufficient to ensure these matters.

Let us turn to the matter of curriculum. Given what I have said, it will surprise no one that I think a premium needs to be put on the teaching of exegesis. Whatever else we want to produce through seminary education, we must work harder on turning out

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16. Among books to be mentioned: Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); idem, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological about a Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); idem, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

persons who are skilled in determining the meaning of the Bible. The typical seminary curriculum includes many good things. But if it does not put its graduates in a strong position to handle the Bible responsibly—that is, know how to exegete well—it will have failed them at the most crucial point. I have in mind primarily exegesis of the Greek NT, but even those programs that do not require Greek must teach students exegesis and put them on a track to use the Bible correctly.

A single introductory course in exegesis is hardly sufficient to accomplish this goal. Other courses must provide opportunity for the practice of exegesis and the honing of exegetical skills. Indeed, virtually every course in the curriculum should have an obvious and explicit exegetical basis or component. It is astonishing to see the misuse of scripture on the typical seminary campus, even in the materials used in courses. Texts are too often quoted just because it seems good for serious Christians to provide "biblical support," to throw in a verse that appears on the surface to favor or support the particular point or appeal being made. The classic gaff for well-meaning students, especially in contexts that use the KJV, is to produce t-shirts with 2 Tim 2:15 printed on them, "Study to show thyself approved unto God," supporting their claim in a powerful and quite unexpected way that they *really should* study. Other misuse of scripture is more subtle. Besides being wrong, the frivolous use of scripture texts presents bad modeling for everybody on campus.

To my mind the responsible use of scripture could help restore appreciation for the authority of the Bible. We must strive to get away from the idea that nobody can really interpret the Bible correctly and that you can prove anything from the Bible! So basic is exegesis, in my opinion, that we must prioritize it, increase the number of required courses in exegesis, and make an effort to stress it throughout the curriculum and not just in biblical courses. Let us have responsible biblical interpretation in every course we offer.

An obvious and natural course in which to stress exegesis is homiletics. Not a few seminaries have linked courses in exegesis and homiletics closely for some time now. Where they are not linked in terms of actual courses, we must at least expect a stress on exegesis to be a major component in homiletics classes, just as the preaching potential of exegeted texts should be indicated in biblical courses. This is crucially important, for, as I argue in the next section, the church appears to be starving for biblical preaching. We cannot do the job of bringing the Bible back to the people in any meaningful sense unless we can produce pastors *who love the word of God, base their lives on its authority, and know how to preach biblically.*

Another area that deserves to be linked closely with exegesis is systematic theology. Exegesis provides the possibility of biblical theology, and biblical theology provides the raw data for the work of systematic theology. Blessed is the seminary where the faculty of the systematic theology department see eye to eye with the faculty of the biblical department!

One area that many seminaries feel guilt over—and rightly so, it seems to me—is their failure in the area of spiritual formation. We want to send out graduates who are more than just well-educated. We want them to be people who know more than simply words, people who have begun to experience in their personal lives something of the reality behind the words, people not merely of the head but of the heart, people of prayer and power, people whose lives are formed by obedience and service,

women and men of earnest commitment to Christ and his church. Three main ways of moving toward this goal are prayer, the word, and the sacraments. All of these are important, but as a Protestant I can do no other than give priority to the word. Above all what enlivens the spiritual dimension is the study of the word. But this is putting it too weakly; what I mean is an *immersion* in the word, a meditative, responsive dwelling upon and in the word. Something we could well practice in seminary and in all of our life is *lectio divina*, the practice of reading scripture in order to receive it as the word of God, "leading, at the prompting of the Spirit, to meditation, prayer and contemplation" (The Biblical Commission's Document *"The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,"* 182). *Lectio divina* is thus a classic form of what we earlier spoke of as theological interpretation.

Good, true exegesis is not a panacea, of course, but if the goal of theological education can be characterized as arriving at "true understanding of God," to use David Kelsey's language (see note 16), can there be a more effective way of doing this than by exegesis of the revealed word? Indeed, is there *any* other way? To be sure, we can learn about God from nature, from our experience, from tradition, and so on, but we cannot learn *enough* in these ways. Christianity that is authentic must rely on the Bible for its doctrine and for its life.

The churches. It is above all in the worship services of the local church that the majority of Christians encounter the word and the sacraments. Although we must encourage church members to become daily Bible readers, even Bible students, for many the hour and a half in church on Sunday mornings will remain the only input from the Bible they have in a week. This time must be maximized. In this secular world Christians are bombarded with a steady stream of the world's distorted values and perspectives. It is hardly possible to counteract this with our one and a half hours per week, but we cannot afford to squander the time we have available. Like most people in our society, whether or not they would express themselves this way, they are hungry for God. The thriving success of what has been called "generic spirituality" is evidence of this hunger. Christianity has so much to offer people of which they are quite unaware. It is up to us to make it known.

> Blessed is the seminary where the faculty of the systematic theology department see eye to eye with the faculty of the biblical department!

The sermon, by the sheer fact of the time given to it, even in the ten- or fifteen-minute version, is the main vehicle by which the word of God is mediated to the congregation. Given the situation I have described, we cannot afford sermons that are not biblically based and exegetical in nature. The preacher is under a holy obligation to preach the word of God, *not* the word of human beings, however edifying. The people must hear the Bible, not only in the lectionary readings of the worship service but also in the sermon, and they must know without question that it is the Bible that they are hearing. Luther is quite good on this:

Here on this pulpit it is our duty to preach the Word which has not been invented by man but has been sent from heaven. Then a Christian can say that he derived his faith and message, not from the philosophers of Persia, Greece, or Rome but from the Word of God, which came from heaven. (*Luther's Works* 22:478)

Many congregations seem to think that the pastor is the one who is to do the work of ministry.

The shepherd (= pastor) must feed his or her flock. Paul's linking of the words pastor (*poimēn*) and teacher (*didaskalos*) under a single definite article in his listing of church offices in Eph 4:11 is deliberate. The pastor is to be one who studies in order to teach, and that with the goal of equipping "the saints for the work of ministry."

Many congregations have this exactly backward. They seem to think that the pastor is the one who is to do the work of ministry. They pay the pastor to do what in fact they should be doing, so that they can remain passive. A large Presbyterian church in Pasadena has it right when in its Sunday bulletin under "ministers" it says "all members of this church." How sad it is, and how common, too, to see the pastor bogged down with running the church: administration of every kind, calendar, programs, personnel, budget—you name it. Meanwhile the flock is not fed adequately. Sermon preparation has to be squeezed in where possible and certainly cannot take the time that a fresh exegetically based sermon would require. If they are to preach effectively, pastors need to have budgeted as sacred time a good number of hours per week for the study of scripture and for sermon preparation. If we could correct only this problem, the situation of the church would be greatly improved.

In all honesty, however, that half-hour-or-less sermon once a week is not going to be adequate to teach our people the wonderful riches of the Bible and how to interpret it responsibly. We need a robust program of adult Bible study in all of our churches. Even in America, where people are still somewhat accustomed to attending church every Sunday, it is difficult to get people to come to church more than once a week (although I am old enough to remember when Sunday evening services and Wednesday night prayer meetings were well attended). The best solution may be for the hour of adult education to be either directly before or directly after the Sunday morning worship service.

It is not enough merely to make these classes available or simply to announce them from time to time. They can be so significant to the life of the congregation that they must be promoted vigorously, almost to the point of making them mandatory. They should not be thought of as a nice option, designed for superachievers, but as vitally important for all church members. The pastor must urge the congregation Sunday after Sunday to attend these classes and stress how important they are. I am often astonished that pastors seem to have such little appreciation for adult education. I wonder whether they perceive this sort of a class as competition against the sermon or fear having a good Bible teacher show how weak their sermons are from a biblical perspective!

It is probably asking too much to have the pastor teach these classes, although it is not impossible if there can be coordination

between the passages studied in class and those preached in the worship service. This latter arrangement in some instances would seem ideal: Pastors need to work on their sermons and ensure that they are biblically based, and the classes need to be taught by someone who is knowledgeable.

Not everyone is capable of doing this kind of teaching. Admittedly it may not always be possible to find someone in the church, although surprisingly often there are lay people in the congregation who have some seminary training. Depending on the location of the church, there may be academics in the area who would be willing to teach Bible classes. During the whole of my academic career I have regularly taught adult classes in churches. Recently I finished a three-month class in a large Presbyterian church. The class averaged around one hundred attendees, but it should have been much larger given the size of the church. Being in the Los Angeles area, the church has many resources to draw from, and they cycle through a roster of teachers on an annual basis. This class has been going on for several years, and results are becoming evident. Their knowledge of the Bible is increasing, and, more important, members of the class show evidence of learning how to interpret the Bible responsibly. What I see happening in classes like this one I long to see throughout the church.

Another teaching resource that should be tapped is the pool of PhDs in biblical studies who are unable to find teaching positions in a glutted market. Although this is probably feasible only in larger churches, these trained men and women could be hired onto church staffs as ministers of education. Such persons could devote all of their energy to organizing and running an educational program for the church and do much of the teaching themselves.

Conclusion

Allow me to very briefly summarize the central argument of these lectures concerning the state of the Bible in the twenty-first century.

There is growing ignorance of the Bible not only in society in general but also in the church. The authority of the Bible may be said to be in shambles. The untempered historical-critical method has had a widely known disastrous effect. Reactive postmodernism has found little to put in its place and suffers in its bolder manifestations from epistemological nihilism. The interpretation of the Bible in academia is increasingly bogged down in a hermeneutical quagmire. The interpretation of the Bible in the churches, both on the right and on the left, is increasingly irresponsible and has itself contributed to the waning authority of the Bible in our day.

All of this has made it more and more difficult for the church to hear the Bible as truly the word of God. But the Bible is God's gift to the church, one of her most important—indeed, indispensable—resources, and we must do all we can to bring it back to the church. This can be done by strengthening our commitment to the importance of sound exegesis. We must again hear the word of God ourselves and then help all of God's people to hear that word, for the word of God remains our sure anchor among the confusing voices of this lost world.

The State of the Bible in North America and Its Significance for Communities of Faith

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I must confess that I have come to appreciate—and fear—the organizers of the Hein Fry lecture series! The formidable topics assigned for the series this past year were: (1) The State of the Bible in North America; and (2) What this state of the Bible might mean for Lutherans. Yes, that's correct, "for Lutherans." As one who puzzles what the Bible means for Roman Catholics, you can imagine how competent I felt about saying what it might mean for the Lutheran Church! My first temptation was to say: The state of the Bible is fine, and it is good for Lutherans to continue to read it! But of course I will say more, although the bottom line may not be far from this summary statement.

Scanning the landscape

One of my pleasant tasks is to serve as the book review editor of a bi-monthly journal called *The Bible Today* published by The Liturgical Press in Collegeville, Minnesota. I have been doing the New Testament segment of this review article for many years now, and never in that time have the shelves of books waiting to be reviewed even approached being empty. Books on the Bible—scholarly, popular, and in-between—appear at a steady pace, with no end in sight. Religious publishing companies may live on the margin, and some go out of existence or merge, but the number of authors who are eager to publish continues to abound. Not only is there an unending supply of monographs on various topics, but there are increasing numbers of works that assist congregations and teachers in bringing the Bible to a wider audience: one-volume study Bibles and dictionaries, numerous series of commentaries and study guides designed for popular audiences, commentaries on CDs, a vast amount of software to assist biblical study on the part of pastors and educators, and so on.

From a New Testament perspective alone, the topics that seem to dominate at the beginning of the twenty-first century include some of the following. I cite these in a very preliminary fashion and later will single out what I consider to be key issues.

- The never-ending quest for the historical Jesus, now according to some observers in its "third" phase since its eruption at the end of the nineteenth century, remains a topic of great interest for biblical scholarship. In my own perhaps optimistic view, I sense that more balance is coming into the picture, with more centrist scholars such as Sean Freyne, N. T. Wright, James Dunn, and others making significant contributions that give the gospel materials

more historical credibility while also acknowledging the significant role of theological interpretation on the part of the early Christian community.[1] Significant, too, is the increasing attention to the results of archaeology, particularly in Galilee, and its implications for understanding the social, religious, and economic context of Jesus' ministry.[2]

• To the question of the historical Jesus we should add the question of the "historical Paul." Of particular importance for biblical scholarship over the past few years remains the question of how to situate Paul in relation to his Jewish and Greco-Roman background.[3] Did he reject the Jewish law and his Jewish heritage? Does justification by grace alone remain a valid way of assessing the heart of Pauline theology?

• Similarly, there is increasing and well-informed attention to the wider social and religious context of Jesus' time and the emergence of the early Christian community. Biblical scholarship has come a very long way in self-correcting its understanding of first-century Judaism, and this has had a significant impact on biblical studies, including studies of the historical Jesus and also of Paul and other New Testament writings. More recent is renewed attention to the impact of imperial Rome and its power on the life and perspective of the early Christian communities. While this impact was evident in the case of such texts as Revelation and 1 Peter, now scholars are attempting to trace its influence on the gospels and Acts.[4] Following the lead of secular historians and the parallel impact of the positive sciences such as sociology, cultural anthropology, and economic theory, biblical interpreters have paid more attention to the ordinary lives of early Christians as citizens of the empire or inhabitants of the provinces. New and informative books are appearing on slavery, family life, meals, the economic and social conditions in the first-century Mediterranean world, and so on—all of which gives a clearer insight into the experience and theology of the biblical texts.[5]

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1. See Sean Freyne, *Jesus a Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus Story* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004); James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making*. Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory* of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996). See also the multi-volume work in progress of John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991). The provocative work of Markus Bockmuehl considers the entire state of New Testament study from this perspective: *Seeing the World: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

2. For example, Jonathan Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000); James Charlesworth, ed., *Jesus and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Mark A. Chancey, *The Myth of a Gentile Galilee* (SNTSMS 118; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006).

3. For example, J. Paul Sampley, ed., *Paul in the Greco-Roman World* (Harrisburg: TPI, 2003); Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Chris VanLandingham, *Judgment and Justification in Early Judaism and the Apostle Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006); Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1998); N. T. Wright, *Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005); Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

4. See Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg: TPI, 2001).

5. For example, David Balch and Carolyn Osiek, eds., *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*

• The literary character of the Bible in general and the New Testament in particular continues to be a great source of interest. While most authors assume the validity of the historical-critical method, a majority of publications appear to be more attracted to the literary features of the biblical texts: the gospels as narratives, the unending interest in the nature of the parables as a literary form, and the rhetorical dynamics of Paul's writings, to name a few hardy perennials. But interest is surging also in related topics such as the nature of orality and its relationship to the written text and how this affected the evolution of the gospel literature. There also is a lot of speculation about the actual circumstances and methods in which the gospels as well as the Pauline and other New Testament epistles were first encountered by their audiences. Were they read or recited or enacted? Another interesting question is raised by Richard Bauckham and others: Did the evangelists compose their gospels only for a local community, or did they write, in effect, for the whole church or at least for a series of Christian communities which they knew would eventually receive their texts?[6]

• Finally, in this preliminary survey we should note a key question that goes to the heart of biblical interpretation and biblical authority and is of increasing interest to modern biblical and theological scholarship—namely, the question of canonicity. In recent decades, biblical scholarship has become much more aware of the extracanonical literature and its relationship to the canonical writings. The discovery and eventual publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi texts, increasing refinement of our reading of the extracanonical Jewish literature, and the growing interest in the early apostolic and patristic writings all have led to the realization that the canonical texts were not an isolated phenomenon but floated in a wider sea of Jewish and early Christian literature that reflected the diversity and dynamism of the formative centuries of the church.

Awareness of extracanonical literature has raised important questions about the canonical process and, indeed, the authority of the biblical texts themselves. How and why were these sacred texts given canonical status and others were not? Who decided these kinds of issues? What were the respective roles of ecclesiastical authority, community usage, and simple happenstance in this process? What sociological model should be used to understand this process? One proposal, in the writings of Elaine Pagels and others, creates a scenario in which conformist ecclesiastical leaders, in collaboration with imperial authorities, snuff out the creativity and charismatic authority of the extracanonical type of writings. Or was this process more organic and had more to do with reception of these texts by believing communities and thus involving not only ecclesiastical and civic leadership but the discernment of Christian communities who revered these texts, circulated them, and maintained them?

Beyond this more sociological way of framing the issue is a massive theological question: In what way are these texts inspired? And what is the role of the Holy Spirit in the formation of texts which the church considers revelatory?

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Carolyn Osiek, Margaret Y. MacDonald, with Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

6. Richard Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); and *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

Issues of biblical interpretation for communities of faith

These latter theological questions, important to communities of faith, lead me into the heart of the subject of this article. I am particularly concerned about what the issues that command the attention of biblical scholarship today mean for believing Christian communities, for the church. How are we to be faithful to authentic historical, social-scientific, and literary scholarship and yet read the Bible as the Word of God? These, of course, are questions that seminaries and schools of theology must wrestle with, much more I presume than any university divinity school or religious studies department must.

Obviously one cannot take up all of these issues and do any of them justice. In selecting among them, I have decided to use a very peculiar filter. For the past few years I have been a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, a group of twenty biblical scholars appointed by the Pope to advise the Pope and the Vatican on issues of biblical interpretation. That usually takes the form of substantial "white papers" on key topics that are prepared over a couple of years, then presented to the Pope, and, if he concurs—as he invariably does—the papers are published for the sake of the wider church. Potential topics are discussed between the commission's leadership and the Pope, and then a topic is assigned to the commission to study. In the past few years the Biblical Commission has published three such texts, and as I was preparing the Hein Fry lectures it occurred to me that this represents one church's perspective on several of the key issues that concern biblical scholarship and biblical interpretation in a context of faith today.

So, I thought I would present the key thesis of each of these texts for your consideration. Two of them have already been published, and the third is on the launching pad and should see the light of day in the next year or so. The first is the 1993 statement "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church"; the second is a 2002 statement, "The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible"; and the unofficial title of the third as yet unpublished one concerns "The Bible and Morality."

Each of these texts deals with issues of biblical interpretation, and each resulted from the impact of modern biblical scholarship on the life of the church.

"The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1993)[7]

The occasion for this statement was the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Pope Pius XII's encyclical letter, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, which is rightly considered the "Magna Carta" of modern biblical scholarship for the Roman Catholic community. Its liberating influence would be evident in the doctrinal statement of the Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, which presented a most positive and strongly pastoral portrayal of the Bible in the life of the church. For most of the twentieth century leading up to Pius XII's statement, the official stance of the Catholic Church on modern biblical scholarship and specifically the historical-critical method was, to put it mildly, suspicious that such methodology originated from a rationalistic and reductionist spirit intent on dismantling the historical and religious significance of the Bible. Over time, however, the heroic witness and integrity of genuine scholars such as the Dominican Pére Marie Joseph Lagrange, the founder

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7. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993).

of the Jerusalem Ecole Biblique, or scholars at Rome's Biblical Institute such as Stanislaus Lyonnet and Maximilian Zerwick demonstrated to church authorities that one could be both scientifically rigorous and faithfully Catholic.

The 1993 statement of the Biblical Commission reviewed the fifty years of Catholic biblical scholarship since Pius XII's liberating statement but went beyond that to consider the whole horizon of biblical methodologies, including constructive assessments not only of historical criticism but also of such methods as rhetorical analysis, narrative criticism, semiotic approaches, use of social scientific methods, canonical criticism and, much to the surprise of some Vatican observers, liberationist and feminist perspectives (although in the latter case there is a footnote recording that four of the twenty members of the commission voted not to include feminist perspectives!).

The major concern of the document, as its title implies, was what impact modern biblical methodologies could have on the life of the church. Put another way, what were the guidelines or principles for an interpretation of the biblical text from the perspective of a faith community? Allow me to quickly summarize the document's conclusions in this regard. I am offering not a series of direct quotations from the document but an extrapolation of its contents.

Prior to listing some of its principles, the document notes that there needs to be what it calls a kind of "pre-understanding" before the work of interpretation begins. That pre-understanding for Catholic exegetes, it states, "holds closely together modern scientific culture and the religious tradition emanating from Israel and from the early Christian community." This results in an "affinity between the interpreter and the object, an affinity which constitutes, in fact, one of the conditions that makes the entire exegetical enterprise possible." I suppose another way of putting this would be that a "pre-understanding" or supposition that the Christian exegete brings to the task of interpreting the Bible is one of love, reverence, and respect for the biblical text.[8] The document goes on to list what it considers seven (of course, a biblical number) theological and operational principles important for interpreting the Bible within the community of faith (understood in this context as the Roman Catholic community of faith):

1. A fundamental conviction is that the Scriptures are the inspired word of God in that their ultimate source is found in God. At the same time, the Scriptures are written in human words and with full human instrumentality. This quasi-sacramental perspective of the divine revealed in and through the human is fundamental for Catholicism and ultimately paves the way for acceptance of historical-critical and other scientific methods of interpretation. The Scriptures are sacred and inspired, but they are also fully human productions and therefore subject to all of the limitations and dynamics of any humanly produced cultural and literary artifact. The commission's document explicitly rules out a view of the Bible that would see it as somehow a revealed text that circumvents human authorship and instrumentality.

2. The Bible, as with any classical text, has multiple levels of meaning. The document cites by way of example the

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8. See the comments of Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 47–60. He notes that premodern interpreters viewed the apparent contradictions and obscurities of the biblical text with love and "generosity" rather than the suspicion and even outrage that sometimes characterize the modern approach.

classical patristic perspective that identified the literal, allegorical, anagogical (or mystical), and tropological (or moral) readings of the biblical text. While this coincides with modern biblical scholarship's growing interest in other methodologies beyond that of the historical-critical method, the document strongly affirms that the literal or historical meaning of the text has pride of place and serves as a kind of parameter to which other approaches to the text must relate and cohere. Thus, if an "allegorical" or "mystical" interpretation has no discernible connection or harmony with what was the likely literal meaning of the text in its historical context, its validity is suspect.

3. The Scriptures and their interpretation are to be rooted in and resonate with the collective wisdom of the community of faith. In other words, authentic ecclesial interpretation of the Bible should ask what the Scriptures say to *us* and not simply what it means to *me*. The document cites the origin of the biblical texts within a community of faith and the essential communitarian nature of the biblical witness and the need for ecclesial wisdom to provide a context for healthy interpretation.

4. The document affirms something that is important to Catholic ecclesiology—that the Scriptures are essentially linked to and in harmony with ecclesial tradition. A doctrinal formulation of this is found in the Vatican II decree, *Dei Verbum*, which states that the one word of God is expressed both in Scripture and in Tradition. The "both . . . and" formulation is key. There are not two separate sources of revelation but one living Word of God found in the Scriptures and in the ongoing teaching authority of the church, which is essentially bound to the scriptural witness.

5. The document affirms the canonical nature of the Scriptures as essential to their proper interpretation for the community of faith. Thus, any single passage of Scripture is to be read and understood in the light of the entire canon of Scripture.

The Scriptures and their interpretation are to be rooted in and resonate with the collective wisdom of the community of faith.

6. Because the church that holds the canon of Scripture as its own is the church of Jesus Christ, all of Scripture must be read and understood in the light of Christ and the teaching authority of the church. The document carefully notes that this should not mean devaluing the Old Testament or collapsing its meaning only to a preparation for the coming of Christ. The Old Testament Scriptures have validity in their own right as the Word of God. Nevertheless, interpretation of the Bible for the life of the church must be made in the light of Christ and his teaching. From this point of view, both the Old and the New Testaments are "Christian" Scriptures and not in fact a combination of the "Hebrew Scriptures" and the New Testament.

7. The biblical text must be "actualized" by what the document calls an "attentive community," that is, a church that stands alertly and obediently before the Word of God revealed in the Scriptures and seeks to incarnate its meaning into the life and mission of the community. At the same

time, the document notes, the church is diverse in its makeup, and the biblical message will be heard in different ways and with differing meanings depending on the particular cultural experience of its members. That is why the Scriptures must be heard and interpreted by the whole community of the church in all its diversity so that the full richness of the biblical message can be heard and actualized.

It is evident, I believe, in these principles that fundamental to Catholic tradition is, first, acceptance of the authentically human nature of the biblical text without denying its sacred character, a conviction that makes room for rigorous scientific and historical inquiry concerning the biblical text and its meaning. There also is a strong emphasis on the communal nature of the biblical enterprise in the production of the biblical text, in its inherent values, in its coherence with the magisterium of the ecclesial community, and in the communal wisdom that should constantly moderate individual interpretation of the text.

"The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible" (2002)[9]

The second document of the Biblical Commission also relates to the historical nature of the Scriptures and their interpretation today.

One of the most remarkable historical developments in modern Catholicism is the transformation of the church's relationship with Judaism. Vatican II's revolutionary declaration *Nostra Aetate*, published forty years ago, charted the way for this change. And the leadership of the papacy, beginning with the initiatives of John XXIII and advancing with the extraordinary example of John Paul II and now Benedict XVI, along with years of patient and responsible work in local and national dialogues—particularly, but not exclusively, in the United States—has furthered this development.

In the fall of 2001, at the request of Pope John Paul II, the Pontifical Biblical Commission added another milestone to the church's official teaching on this matter. Titled "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible," the document focuses on the relationship of the Jewish and the Christian Scriptures. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then president of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where the Pontifical Biblical Commission is seated, noted in his laudatory preface, two challenging questions are posed for the church in the post-Shoah age: Can Christians in good conscience still lay claim to the heritage of the Old Testament? And, does the New Testament itself contribute to hostility toward the Jews?

These two questions are in fact the major points addressed in the document. Some early critics of the text were disappointed that it does not more thoroughly address the present relationship between Jews and Christians or have a more pastoral tone. The document deliberately takes a narrower, but still crucial, historical focus. It notes at the outset that the key to understanding the profound, complex relationship between Jews and Christians is to grasp the circumstances of the historical origin of Christianity and its sacred Scriptures. It quotes the statement of John Paul II, made during his 1980 visit to the synagogue of Mainz, in which he noted that the relationship between Christianity and Judaism is mirrored in the internal relationship between the Old and the New Testaments.

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9. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002).

"The encounter between the people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been abrogated by God (see Rom 11:29), and that of the New Covenant is also an *internal* dialogue in our church, similar to that between the first and second part of the Bible."

The document is divided into four major sections.

1. It begins by documenting how the New Testament writings themselves both implicitly and explicitly recognize the authority of the Old Testament, which, it emphasizes, was the "Scriptures" not only of Judaism but of the early church. In this section it also traces the parallel formation of the Jewish and Christian canons and notes the debt the New Testament and early Christianity owed to Jewish methods of interpretation.

2. A second major section explores the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments by tracing major motifs that run through both: convictions about God and about the nature of the human person, and key concepts such as the election of Israel, the covenant, the Law, messianic expectations, worship, land, temple, and so on. In each instance, the document demonstrates how the relationship between the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament is marked by *continuity*—that is, a similarity of content, values, and perspectives; by *discontinuity*—that is, changes, omissions, and differing emphases traceable primarily to Christian faith in Jesus; and by what it calls, from the Christian vantage point, *progression*—that is, development of understanding or fuller meaning given to texts, motifs, or events as read in the light of Christian faith.

3. A third section concentrates on the portrayal of Jews and Judaism in the New Testament texts. The document first traces the historical context of postexilic Judaism, tracking the different stages in the Roman period and noting the gradually evolving and complex relationship between first-century rabbinic Judaism and Jewish and Hellenistic Christianity. It surveys each of the New Testament writings and assesses their portrayal of Jews and Judaism.

4. The document concludes with final reflections and pastoral implications.

The document is too rich and too extensive to summarize briefly, but some of its most significant assertions are worth noting:

At every turn, the statement underscores that Christianity and its Scriptures are inseparably related to Judaism and its Bible. While clearly recognizing that Christians read the Old Testament in a different manner than Jews because of Christian faith in Christ as the "interpretive key," the document insists on the value and validity of the Jewish Scriptures in and of themselves and not just as a preface to or anticipation of the New Testament. "The Old Testament in itself has great value as the Word of God. To read the Old Testament as Christians then does not mean wishing to find everywhere direct reference to Jesus and to Christian realities." Furthermore, it affirms that

> Christians can and ought to admit that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion. Both readings are bound up with the vision of their respective faiths, of which the readings are the result and expression. Consequently, both are irreducible.

Taking its cue primarily from Paul's reflections in Romans 9–11, the text also insists that the New Testament never presumed or taught a definitive separation from Israel or that the church substituted for Israel. God's promises to Israel, including the covenant, remain valid, and the

ultimate relationship between Judaism and Christianity will be resolved only in the eschaton. The document returns to this theme in its conclusion:

In the past, the break between the Jewish people and the church of Christ Jesus could sometimes, in certain times and places, give the impression of being complete. In the light of the Scriptures, this should never have occurred. For a complete break between the church and the synagogue contradicts sacred Scripture.

In its review of the New Testament's portrayal of Jews and Judaism, the document takes a more optimistic view than do some modern interpreters.

The text corrects what is a common popular misconception about the messianic expectations of Judaism. The notion of a human agent of future salvation was not fixed or uniform in such a manner that it was the fault of Israel to "miss" the messiah when he appeared in the form of Jesus. As the document notes, "Although messianic hope continued to be part of the traditions of Judaism, it did not appear in all currents as a central and integral theme, even as a special indicator."

The document also asserts that Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain. This comes in the middle section, where it traces major themes. It notes that it would be wrong to consider the prophecies of the Old Testament as some kind of photographic anticipations of future events. All the texts, including those which later were read as messianic prophecies, already had an immediate import and meaning for their contemporaries before attaining a fuller meaning for future hearers. The messiahship of Jesus has a meaning that is new and original.

"Accordingly," the text concludes,

excessive insistence, characteristic of a certain apologetic, on the probative value attributable to the fulfillment of prophecy must be discarded. This insistence has contributed to harsh judgements by Christians of Jews and their reading of the Old Testament: the more reference to Christ is found in Old Testament texts, the more the incredulity of the Jews is considered inexcusable and obstinate."

Here the Biblical Commission adds a key comment:

Insistence on discontinuity between both Testaments and going beyond former perspectives should not, however, lead to a one-sided spiritualization. What has already been accomplished in Christ must be accomplished in us and in the world. The definitive fulfillment will be at the end with the resurrection of the dead, a new heaven and a new earth. Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain. It can become for us Christians a powerful stimulant to keep alive the eschatological dimension of our faith. Like them, we too live in expectation. The difference is that for us the One who is to come will have the traits of the Jesus who has already come and is already present and active among us.

In light of this, surely one of the most difficult New Testament concepts to interpret in this light is that of "fulfillment." Traditionally, the notion that Christianity "fulfilled" Judaism meant that Christianity succeeded Judaism and, in effect, made it obsolete and superfluous. The document refuses to understand the notion of fulfillment in this supersessionist manner. While it affirms Christian faith in Jesus as the Son of God and as God's messiah—a funda-

mental Christian doctrine that, on one level, implies a completion of and a progression in the promises made to Israel—it insists that even this type of progression or development finds a parallel in developments within the Old Testament itself. There, earlier notions and symbols are given new interpretations, and even new refinement, in later periods of Jewish history as reflected in the Bible.

For example, "covenant" is a key concept for both the Jewish Scriptures and the Christian Bible. Within the Old Testament, the notion of covenant evolved through a series of covenants, from Noah to David, with recurring patterns of infidelity and restoration. With Jeremiah, and in a similar fashion in Ezekiel, there emerges the notion of a "new covenant." For the New Testament, also, the notion of covenant is important, but it is now interpreted in the light of Christ's death and resurrection. The document notes that there is a "progressive fundamental continuity," a *continuity* in that the covenant between God and Israel is not broken but extended to the Christian community as well. There is also a *discontinuity*, in that certain institutions that expressed the covenant relationship for Israel are not taken up or are changed by Christianity. And there is "fulfillment" or *progression* from the vantage point of Christian faith, in that the New Covenant in Christ is deepened and broadened. But even though a Christian reading of the Old Testament finds there a "fuller meaning" because of faith in Christ, this does not mean that the Old Testament texts have value only because of their potential meaning for Christian faith or that the Jews who first encountered these texts would be expected to find there a pointing to Christ.

In its review of the New Testament's portrayal of Jews and Judaism, the document thus takes a more optimistic view than do some modern interpreters. The New Testament view of Jews and Judaism, it asserts, is fundamentally positive. Both the teaching of Jesus and most of the theologies of the New Testament writings assume the validity of Israel's relationship with God, its unique historical role, and the value of its ethical teaching and corporate structures (much of which the early church adopted as its own). While there are negative portrayals of the Jewish religious leaders or Jewish practice, such references are to be interpreted in the light of historical context in which the texts were formed and do not apply to Jews of all times. It is worth quoting the document at length here:

> Real anti-Jewish feeling, that is, an attitude of contempt, hostility, and persecution of the Jews as Jews, is not found in any New Testament text and is incompatible with its teaching. What is found are reproaches addressed to certain categories of Jews for religious reasons, as well as polemical texts to defend the Christian apostolate against Jews who oppose it. But it must be admitted that many of these passages are capable of providing a pretext for anti-Jewish sentiment and have in fact been used in this way. To avoid mistakes of this kind, it must be kept in mind that the New Testament polemical texts, even those expressed in general terms, have to do with concrete historical contexts and are never meant to be applied to Jews of all times and places merely because they are Jews. The tendency to speak in general terms, to accentuate the adversaries' negative side, and to pass over the positive in silence, failure to consider their motivations and their ultimate good faith, these are characteristics of all polemical language throughout antiquity, and are no less evident in Judaism and primitive Christianity against all kinds of dissidents.

The document ends on a frank and important note that I take as a sign of the growing maturity of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue:

> The fact that the New Testament is essentially a proclamation of the fulfillment of God's plan in Jesus Christ, puts it in serious disagreement with

the vast majority of the Jewish people who do not accept this fulfillment. The New Testament then expresses at one and the same time its attachment to the Old Testament revelation and its disagreement with the synagogue. This discord is not be taken as "anti-Jewish sentiment," for it is disagreement at the level of faith, the source of religious controversy between two human groups that take their point of departure from the same Old Testament faith basis, but are in disagreement on how to conceive the final development of that faith. Although profound, such disagreement in no way implies reciprocal hostility. The example of Paul in Romans 9–11 shows that, on the contrary, an attitude of respect, esteem, and love for the Jewish people is the only truly Christian attitude in a situation which is mysteriously part of the beneficent and positive plan of God.

In this text can be found a convergence of two vital concerns of biblical scholarship at the service of the church. First, it draws on the result of more than fifty years of biblical scholarship's reassessment of first-century Judaism. This document could not have been written prior to World War II and the consequent impact of the shock and horror of the Shoah on the collective conscience of biblical scholarship in its portrayals of Judaism. Evident, too, are the fruits of modern historical biblical scholarship about the evolution of the gospel literature, the relationship between Jewish Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism in their formative periods, and the rhetorical devices of ancient Greco-Roman literature. Second, the document's interpretation of the Scriptures and its comparison to the role of the Hebrew Scriptures for the Jewish community assumes the principles enunciated in the previous document on Interpretation within the context of the church—namely, the embrace of the historical-critical method in interpreting sacred texts that are thoroughly human in character, and the essentially communitarian and ecclesial context of biblical interpretation.

"The Bible and Morality"

Allow me to conclude this survey with a brief look at a third Biblical Commission document on the Bible and Morality.

Just as the text on the relationship of the Christian Bible to Judaism and its Scriptures represents an exercise in biblical interpretation triggered by a revision of history and modern experience, so, too, is this text, which examines the relationship between our biblical heritage and modern moral discernment. The Biblical Commission went down several paths on the way to deciding how to approach this question. Ultimately it landed on the side of hermeneutics—exploring the principles that legitimately link an ancient text to modern moral reflection rather than, for example, taking up specific moral issues such as violence, stem cell research, or euthanasia and trying to provide some biblical application to these thorny issues. While the document will suggest links between the biblical materials and some of these issues, its focus is on the biblical text itself and guidelines for its interpretation in questions of moral discernment.

The first major section of the text is something of a narrative approach, moving through the saga of Israel as presented in the biblical canon, noting how fundamental moral issues are pervasive in the text, from the foundational institutions of the covenant to questions of violence, care for the needy, the quest for justice and equity, and the search for integrity and holiness. The same course is taken with the New Testament materials, scanning the gospels, the Pauline letters, and the other New Testament writings for their particular moral horizon. Two classic biblical texts that stand out in this survey are the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount—each of which provides a distillation of many of the characteristic moral concerns of the Scriptures

and have had a profound impact on Christian moral reflection.

The second half of the document considers principles of interpretation of Scripture, drawn in part from the opening survey of the biblical epic as well as from the tradition of ecclesial interpretation cited above in the Commission's 1993 text. I summarize and paraphrase some of these principles here.

1. Tracing the biblical story in both the Old and the New Testaments reveals a characteristic "moral horizon" in the Scriptures. Among the possible array of moral issues or concerns, the Bible returns again and again to certain values and concerns. Among these are the sacredness and inherent dignity of human life created in the divine image, the notion of the land as a gift to be cared for, the longing for justice and equity within the community of Israel and the church itself, concern for the poor and the vulnerable and the concomitant lure of wealth ("the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner"). The use of the Bible in the church's liturgy and teaching and the narrative and poetic power of the biblical text help inform the conscience of the Christian community and repeatedly turn the attention of the church to such moral concerns.

2. There is a certain "dialogue" apparent within the Scriptures between what could be considered characteristically "revealed" moral values and those moral values drawn from reflection on human experience and the work of human reason. This is found, for instance, in the coherence between some of the law codes of Israel and the surrounding cultures or in Paul's use of household codes and lists of virtues and vices drawn from the wider context of the Greco-Roman world. This is a prevailing concern in Catholic moral theology, namely to address the assumed rapport between moral values drawn from the Scripture and "natural morality" drawn from the best instincts of human culture and thereby to be able to interact on moral issues with people of good will beyond the Christian community. Ancient Judaism believed in the fundamental harmony between the moral teaching of the Torah and the uncorrupted moral inclinations of the human heart (in Rom 1:18–32 Paul laments that this natural harmony is wounded by sin), a harmony rooted in the fact that God created the world and humanity itself in harmony with the teaching of the Law.

3. At the same time, the biblical tradition takes a negative or critical stance toward certain evils in human experience and stands over against some of the false assumptions of various human cultures and societies. Thus, the Bible attacks human allegiance to false gods or false values. The prophetic tradition rails against injustice and the exploitation of the poor and defenseless. Jesus sharply condemns religious hypocrisy and the indifference of the wealthy to the suffering of the poor. Paul condemns those who violate the unity and trusting love that should bind the community together.

4. There is a certain progression or development within the biblical tradition concerning some moral issues. Such evolution is discernible concerning issues of violence, as one moves from the sometime violent anthropomorphic portrayals of God and God's will in certain Old Testament traditions to the teachings of Jesus about how victims of violence are to respond in the Sermon on the Mount. The same is true with such concerns as collective responsibility for evil and the moral evaluation of slavery.

5. As with all biblical interpretation, a certain sense of discernment has to be employed in appealing to Scripture concerning moral issues, such as the distinction

between permanent and enduring principles that reoccur across the span of the Scriptures and those that are time-bound and culturally limited. There is, in fact, a certain hierarchy of authority in biblical texts that emerges when one considers the overall canon of Scripture, the various literary and contextual aspects of specific biblical texts, and the prevailing wisdom of the interpreting community.

6. Over and above the Bible's addressing specific moral concerns, the biblical witness assumes a moral community that enables and sustains the moral person and brings a strong communal perspective to the consideration of moral issues. There is an assumption, for example, of social responsibility under the terms of the covenant for Israel. And Paul is driven, in part because of his reflection on biblical texts such as Isaiah 49, to proclaim that the God of Israel is also the God of the Gentiles and therefore salvation is open to all, and one has a moral obligation toward others, even those beyond the confines of family and clan.

7. There is a strong eschatological or teleological cast to biblical moral reflection. The Bible foresees a fulfillment of human life through the power of God at the end of time. Thus the moral life of the Christian disciple, for example, is developmental. The human person is "on the way" to achieving holiness and full moral integrity and not yet there. At the same time, the vision of the future Reign of God can suffuse the moral imagination of the biblical community, enabling it to see a moral life beyond the limitations, sin, and suffering of the present time and, therefore, to direct moral striving in the right direction and to anticipate at least in part now the conditions of the longed-for future.

Conclusion

I trust that this review of biblical interpretation both in theory and practice as seen from the Roman Catholic perspective is not impertinent or too narrow on my part. What I have been trying to illustrate is that the issues raised by modern biblical scholarship about the historical context of the Scriptures, about the essential link between Judaism and early Christianity, and about the literary and social context of the Scriptures have an impact on the life of the church. While in some contexts biblical scholars may be free to ply their trade without concern for the meaning of their exploration, it cannot be so for those of us who view the Bible as a sacred text that holds religious authority for our communities of faith. Far from being a detriment to the life of faith or the relevance of the Bible today, I am convinced that the concerns and methods of modern biblical scholarship at the outset of the twenty-first century can bring new life to the church. That is what I have tried to illustrate by showing one church's struggle with these issues on an official level.

Living Together in the Twenty-First Century: Some Biblical Probes

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In the second of this year's Hein Fry lectures I was asked to consider what the state of the Bible in the twenty-first century might mean for the Lutheran Church—a mighty challenge for a Roman Catholic to say the least! I will try my best, but what I am going to say does not pretend to be wisdom doled out by a sage Roman Catholic to docile and uninstructed Lutheran brothers and sisters. Rather, allow me to wrestle for a bit with a reality that I think both of our communities face and for which the wisdom of the biblical witness has something to say.

Shortly after the close of the Second Vatican Council, one of its preeminent theological advisors, Karl Rahner, delivered a commencement address at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Boston that was later published in the journal *Theological Studies*.[1] He titled it "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II." Rahner was attempting to probe beneath the surface issues that dominated the Council—liturgy, ecclesiology, biblical renewal, and so on—to discover if there were an underlying theological current giving impetus to all the rest. He believed he discovered that underlying dynamic in the movement of the church to authentic universality.

Rahner noted that one could, in macro-terms, divide church history into three great historical periods. The first was the Jewish-Christian period when the church was still profoundly Jewish in character, its ordinary language Hebrew, its center of focus Jerusalem, and its dominant theological and pastoral perspectives Jewish-Christian. This first period, he suggests, lasted more or less from 30 A.D. to 70 A.D. With the Christian movement surging more and more to the West, the second period of church history begins. Now Rome rather than Jerusalem is the point of reference, the dominant language and theological perspectives become more and more Greco-Roman and eventually Latin, the Christian population becomes predominantly Gentile, and Christianity is on its way to being thoroughly rooted in Western culture. This second period of the church, Rahner suggests, lasted from 70 A.D. to around 1960! Admittedly, many profound changes occurred in Western culture during that period, but the changes were in the unfolding context of a single cultural stream. While the Catholic community (and, of course, other Christian denominations) spread around the world, the architecture, rituals, theology, and liturgical language remained European and Western.

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1. Karl Rahner, S.J., "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 716–27.

But, Rahner observed, because of profound changes that can be traced at least back to the Enlightenment, with the emergence of a self-conscious historical sense and awareness of culture, with the breakup of the colonial system, with the tragic chaos of World War II, with the advent of the United Nations and the flourishing of so many new nations, and many other factors, the church suddenly found itself in a new moment. Here begins, in Rahner's schema, a third period of church history that is only starting to unfold—a period in which, for the first time, the church is experiencing itself as truly universal in character. Now indigenous churches throughout the world had a sense of their own cultural context and potential contribution to the whole. Use of the vernacular in the liturgy, local cultural influence in such things as ritual and architecture, the emergence of a native clergy and hierarchy—all of these were symptoms of the new universal experience. Equally important, these new local churches were beginning to have an impact on the center of the church's consciousness.

Rahner went on to say that the only analogy we have for the profound and even radical changes in store for the church as it begins to live in this third period of the church's history is what happened when it moved from the first to the second period, namely, from a thoroughly Jewish-Christian church to a Gentile and Western-dominated church. It is this fundamental dynamic of cultural change that prompted the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and would engage the church for many decades to come as it lives into this new moment of its history. The impact of the church's cultural diversity is felt not only in the array of local churches throughout the world but in most of our major cities and their congregations as well. In the Archdiocese of Chicago, for example, the challenge for the diocesan seminary used to be to prepare pastors who could serve in Latino parishes, which meant, of course, fluency in Spanish and some appreciation for the dynamism and diversity of Hispanic cultures. Now, significant portions of Latino Catholics are moving to the suburbs and no longer living solely in predominantly Hispanic areas. The parishes they belong to are multicultural, and the challenge for the pastor is how to form a community out of diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, and experience—a very different type of leadership challenge, to say the least!

While Rahner's overarching vision of church history cries out for nuance and refinement, nevertheless I think it is a valid and seminal insight, not only for the Catholic Church's recent experience but also for many of our Christian communities. While Rahner's focus was mainly on the internal dynamics of change within the church's consciousness, it strikes me that there are other forces at work that need to be named.

The profound impact of secularization is one of them. One could make the case that a secular worldview is, in a paradoxical way, the child of Christianity itself. The emergence of science, the flourishing of the arts, the emphasis on personalism—each of these can be seen as an emergent from Christianity. But secularism has its own dynamics and captivating force, with its emphasis on the empirical, its optimistic view of scientific progress, its focus on the individual, and its aversion to the mythical and the transcendent. Each of our communities, especially those in the Western world, has felt the impact of this cultural force. But the global nature of the world economy and the impact of technology and the media are rapidly bringing the force of secularization into more traditional cultures as well.

At the same time we are becoming aware of a new dynamic facing the church

and its identity—that of interreligious relationships. The tragedy of 9/11 may have moved closer to the center of our consciousness a reality that has played an increasing role in the twenty-first–century landscape, namely the rising tide of religious conflicts and turbulences. The relationship of Christianity to Islam is a case in point. With a sizeable portion of the globe's population made up of Christians and Muslims, the relationship between these two religious traditions will affect the future well-being of humanity itself. The strife in the Middle East and the controversial role of the United States in all of this provide fuel for those who want to interpret the long-term relationship of Christianity and Islam as an inevitable "clash of civilizations." While the Christian-Jewish relationship has a longer and more mature history since World War II, here, too, tensions have increased because of world politics and made relations more fragile.

Cultural diversity within Christian communities, both local and worldwide, as well as the relationship of Christianity to other world religions are not abstract questions for the church today but real questions with important consequences. These issues, plus the challenge posed by secularization, particularly for the West, raise important questions about the balance between identity and outreach, between the need to build strong, coherent communities of faith and the need to be in dialogue and communion with those outside the Christian community.

These are not new questions for the Christian Church, even if they are posed in a new way. In his wonderful book *Unity and Plurality* Lucien Legrand illustrates how the tension between identity and outreach was already woven into Israel's history.[2] The biblical saga clearly tracks Israel's somewhat tortured path to becoming a people with a distinct religious identity. The Exodus story, the forging of the covenant at Sinai, the purification in the desert, the acquisition of the land, the creation of the monarchy, the establishment of the temple and its rituals, the proclamation of the law—all of these were intended to bind Israel together into a people set apart. At the same time, Israel had to constantly wrestle with the question of its relationship to the "nations." Even as it affirmed its unique identity as a chosen and elect people set apart, Israel believed that the God of Israel was also the God of the nations. Such Old Testament traditions as the Psalms of Zion that envisioned the nations worshipping the God of Israel, the expanding horizons of Deutero-Isaiah such as the famed passage of Isa 49:6 that foresees God's salvation extending to the nations, and the message of Jonah, which directly challenges the exclusive ethnocentrism of Israel, are examples of this other pole, establishing a creative tension between identity and out-

> **A third period of church history is starting to unfold—a period in which, for the first time, the church is experiencing itself as truly universal in character.**

2. Lucien Legrand, *Unity and Plurality: Mission in the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990).

reach, between the elect Israel and the nations, that would extend into the world of the New Testament as well. Jesus' own ministry, Legrand observes, moved along the fault lines of this tension—calling Israel to a new consciousness of its identity as the faithful people of God yet also reaching across the boundaries to those cast to the margins: the sick, the poor, the outcast, even the occasional Gentile.

In moments of crisis and as the church faces new moments in its consciousness, it is right and just that we turn to the Scriptures for wisdom. Let us probe two New Testament examples that I think have a particular wisdom for us as we wrestle in our time with the questions of identity and outreach posed by the forces of cultural diversity, secularism, and the challenge of interreligious relationships.

The theology of Paul and that of Matthew's Gospel have frequently been compared, but often by way of contrast over the issue of the law. While Paul is portrayed as eschewing the works of the law in favor of grace, Matthew is sometimes pictured as a regression to a law/works portrayal of Christian discipleship. We know, of course, that this is a caricature of both New Testament works. Paul emphasized that salvation is a gift of God in Christ not earned by works but also affirmed that works of righteousness were the proper expression of a life seized by grace. Matthew is intent on doing the will of God and on the particulars of the law as interpreted by Jesus, but his overall theology, too, is a theology of grace. Those called by Christ are forgiven their sins by the blood of the cross and sustained by the presence of the Risen Christ in the community so that they can live fully Christian lives.

Yet both Paul and Matthew had to negotiate the tensions between community identity and community outreach—Paul on the front side of the 70 A.D. dividing line identified by Rahner, and Matthew presumably on the post-70 A.D. side. Each in distinctive ways revered his religious heritage and was concerned about community identity. But each, too, felt compelled to turn to the nations and to make room within the community of faith and their vision of God's salvation for a new and unanticipated advent of peoples joining the community of faith.

For both New Testament authors the situation is substantially different from our own. Paul and Matthew struggled to justify the prospect of non-Jews entering the Christian community. Theirs was a missionary challenge in a classical sense. The non-Jewish and Gentile world, while filled with various religious movements, was viewed as the pagan world whose religious experience was at best misguided and for the main part inauthentic and without value. Paul's dismissive description of pagan religious practices in Rom 1:20–25 is typical. The question for Matthew and Paul was whether one should go to the Gentiles at all and, if so, on what terms they could be allowed to enter the Christian community, whose roots were firmly planted in Judaism.

For us, I believe, the challenge is to build healthy multicultural communities—something of an overlap with the challenges of Matthew and Paul—but also how to relate in peace and mutual respect to world religions such as Islam and Judaism for the sake of our common humanity, without the real prospect of conversion or incorporation within the Christian community and without diminishing our Christian identity.

The vision of Paul

Without attempting to cover the whole Pauline landscape, I want to consider some of the dynamics and sources of Paul's sense of mission that led him from someone who,

in his own testimony, apparently fiercely resisted the prospect of an outreach to the Gentiles to someone who would identify himself as apostle to the Gentiles. What animated Paul to his new "calling" or "conversion," whichever terminology you prefer, for Paul's change of perspective?

Current biblical scholarship has helped us rule out the notion that Paul was disillusioned with his Jewish heritage or found fidelity to the law an intolerable burden from which he sought liberation. Paul's own proud assessment of his robust Jewish faith and practice, as in Phil 3:4–5 or Gal 1:13–14, 2 Cor 2:22, and Rom 3:1–2 rule out such a motivation. And despite his own background as a Hellenistic Jew, there is little evidence that Paul had special sympathy for the Gentile world and its plight prior to his Christian experience.

If we take Paul's own word into account (as well as the testimony of Acts), his change of heart was provoked by a profound and singular religious experience that convinced him that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was in fact God's Messiah and in the same moment recalled for him the expansive scope of God's salvation already anticipated in the words of Isa 49:1–6, to which Paul alludes in his account of his inaugural experience in Gal 1:15:

> The Lord called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name. He made me a sharp-edged sword and concealed me in the shadow of his arm. He made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me. You are my servant, he said to me, Israel, through whom I show my glory . . .
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> "It is too little," he says, "for you to be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, and that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." (Isa 49:1–6)

This is echoed in Jeremiah:

> The word of the Lord came to me thus: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you." (Jer 1:4–5)

Implicit in the call of Isaiah and Jeremiah to go "to the nations" was Israel's longstanding conviction, which Paul would emphatically repeat in his letter to the Romans, that the God of Israel was also the God of the nations (Rom 3:29–30). Paul does not separate these two components—recognition that Jesus was the Messiah and that he was called to the Gentiles. No doubt this insight developed and expanded in the years that Paul would spend before beginning his mission, but he is consistent in attributing the inaugural impulse to this moment.

Within the conviction that Jesus was the Messiah lies another important component of Paul's theological vision, namely that God had chosen as Messiah one who was crucified and raised from death. This, too, was a profound insight for Paul that made him rethink his own theodicy and to retrieve what may have been a neglected portion of his Jewish religious heritage: that God is the "God of the ungodly," the one who "gives life to the dead" and "calls into existence things that do not exist." These phrases are from Paul's reflections in Roman 4, and to these he adds a poignant meditation on the figure of Abraham and the patriarch's experience in Genesis 17. Abraham believed in the saving power of God and God's ability to create new life in "a body that was as good as dead" and even in the "barrenness of Sarah's womb" (Rom 4:19).

Thus the paradox of God choosing to effect the world's salvation through a Crucified Messiah, making godly what humans would judged as condemned and ungodly, and giving life to what would be judged to be barren and without life, helped

Paul realize that before this God all—both Jew and Gentile—were on the same footing and all would be offered salvation through the graciousness of God revealed in Jesus Christ and through no other means. Salvation, in other words, was not to be ethnically defined. In fact all—both Jews, who hold privilege as God's chosen people and to whom was uniquely given the law, and Gentiles, who were not obliged to the law and lived in ignorance and idolatry—belonged to the one God of Abraham, creator of the world, and all were wounded by sin and failed in righteousness. From these insights, rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and brought to new intensity by the revelation of the Crucified Christ, Paul would forge his message of a law-free gospel for the Gentiles:

> . . . but we proclaim Christ Crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor 1:23–25).

We need to add that this foundational conviction of Paul about the offer of salvation to the Gentiles and the resulting fierce determination of Paul not to place obstacles such as law observance or diet or circumcision in the way of accepting Gentiles into the community of faith did not mean that he viewed Jews and Gentiles on the entirely same level or that he had no concern for the traditions of his own faith community. Paul struggles with this in the entire letter to the Romans but most intensely in chapters 9–11. The historic role of Israel is to be remembered and honored. The Gentiles are a branch grafted onto the original olive tree beloved by God and must forever be grateful to their Jewish heritage. God's promises revealed in Israel's history as an elect people are not in vain. And, something I appreciate as a president of a theology school, Paul took up a collection among the Gentile churches to drive this theological conviction home!

Thus Paul was driven to imagine the future of God's world in a way that had never occurred to him prior to his mission experience. As Paul intimates in Romans 15, his own mission would be to plant churches throughout the Gentile world, thereby provoking Israel to holy jealousy and prompting his beloved people to accept the Christ, and then the entire world—both Jews and Greeks now brought into communion through a vast ecumenism—could be given over to Christ who would give it over to God. And so the end would come.

These insights and this imagining of the future were new for Paul, yet they were rooted in his Jewish heritage. The convictions that God was on the side of the vulnerable, that God brought liberation from slavery and despair, that God was the God of the nations, that God brought life where there was barrenness, that law observance and ritual were meaningless without purity of heart—all of these were abiding insights of Jewish biblical faith. Paul's encounter with the Crucified and Risen Christ was the catalyst that enabled him to retrieve these convictions and see them in a new way as a call to transcend the traditional boundaries of his own faith community to make way for a new people and a new experience of God's future. For Paul, the ground of continuity rested on the very nature of God, who is God of both Jew and Gentile and who reveals his desired relationship with humanity and the very nature of the divine being through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the communities created in his name. At stake was not just the survival and well-being of these communities but, for Paul, the very destiny of the world, both the human family and the created world itself.

The vision of Matthew

In the case of Matthew's Gospel, we do not have the benefit of the evangelist's letters and his autobiographical reflections as we do in the case of Paul. But we still may surmise from the evidence of the gospel narrative some of the foundational convictions about the Gentile mission characteristic of Matthew and his community.

Many contemporary interpreters of Matthew believe that his community was located in the cosmopolitan city of Antioch, the third largest city in the Roman Empire with a mix of Gentiles and a sizeable Jewish community. Matthew most likely writes his Gospel sometime after the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. and the dispersal of the Jerusalem Jewish Christian community. For this predominantly Jewish Christian community of Matthew it was a time of substantial transition. Both Paul's description of his dispute with Peter about table fellowship in Gal 2:11–14 and Luke's account of the delegation that is sent to determine the situation in Antioch in Acts 10:19–26 testify to some of the tensions within the community over the issue of incorporating Gentiles into the predominantly Jewish Christian community there.

Matthew's literary mode for conveying his theological vision is, of course, by means of narrative. The evangelist appears to work on two different streams in his attempt to account for the Gentile mission. The first of these is what we could call a salvation-history approach, not unlike Paul's reflections about the primacy of Israel in Romans 9–11. Matthew takes great pains to portray Jesus in Jewish tonalities: whose origin is thoroughly rooted in Israel (1:1–18), who fulfills at every turn in his life the promise of the Hebrew Scriptures, whose inaugural preaching stresses continuity and fulfillment of the law, and whose disputes with the religious authorities are presented as conflict over interpretation of the law, not abrogation of it. Clearly, Jesus is the obedient Son of God and the promised Messiah who recapitulates the defining experiences of Moses and Israel in the infancy narrative—miraculously saved from a tyrant's murderous intent, finding refuge in Egypt, then called out of Egypt by God and settling in the land of Israel to fulfill God's promise. This same Jesus, more faithful than Israel itself, resists the seductions of demon in the desert in obedience to the commands of Deuteronomy and carries out his God-given mission with fidelity even unto death. His death and vindication by God evoke the dry-bones vision of Ezekiel and stir from the grave the holy ones of Israel (Matt 27:51–53).

If Matthew's Gospel begins by looking back to Israel, it ends looking out toward the nations. The final mountaintop scene portrays the Risen and Exalted Christ sending his community out on a universal mission with the promise that he will be with them until the end of time (28:16–20). In the body of the Gospel, true to Matthew's initial historical focus on the elect people Israel, the Matthean Jesus instructs his disciples *not* to go to the Gentiles but to restrict their mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (10:5); he reaffirms this restriction in the encounter with the Canaanite woman in 15:24. However, the reader begins to realize that beyond the lifetime of the earthly Jesus and in the final age of resurrection this restriction is to fall away. Harbingers of this occur early in the Gospel: Magi from the east come to pay homage to the newborn Messiah guided by the signs of nature and an angel, in stark contrast to a Jewish king and his court who seek to destroy Jesus. The centurion of Capernaum on behalf of his slave (8:5–13) and the desperate Canaanite mother on behalf of her sick child (15:21–28) are also anticipations of

the kind of faith that would be discovered on the Gentile mission of the post-Easter church. These incidents and the teaching of Jesus on compassion and forgiveness that abounds in the narrative and his vigorous healing mission to the sick and the outcasts suggest that the distance is not great between the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" and the nations beyond the borders of Israel. The new age that breaks into the world with the turning point of Jesus' death and resurrection marks the moment when God's grace revealed in the mission of Jesus would extend to all nations.

Acting in accord with the teaching of Jesus—whether conscious or not—aligns one with the will of God and enables one to enter the reign of God.

Thus, one track that enabled Matthew and his community to move from a mission directed only to Israel to a mission that also included Gentiles was a evolutionary "historical" track that provided a rationale for a past mission experience confined to God's elect people but now, in the final age of salvation, would also break out to the Gentiles. No doubt some of the impetus for this newly imagined mission was not simply deduced from a reflection on Israel's history and latent theology but also triggered by the experience of actual Gentiles whose faith in the Christian message and admiration of the Christian community experience (which was also medicinal) enabled them to shoulder their way into the community and thus change its historical horizon. The Gentile characters in Matthew's story—the magi, the centurion, and the Canaanite woman—all take the initiative to approach Jesus and, in the case of the centurion and Canaanite woman, experience his healing power.

Another theological trajectory runs through the Gospel of Matthew that, I think, paved the way for the inclusion of Gentiles within the orbit of the Christian community. This is what we might call the ethical dimension of Matthew's theology. At several points in the narrative, the Matthean Jesus stresses that the doing of good deeds, rather than simply enunciating the right words or taking the right religious posture, are decisive for inclusion in the reign of God. This teaching on actually doing the will of God concludes the Sermon on the Mount: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matt 5:21). It is reaffirmed in uniquely Matthean parables such as the story of the two sons, one of whom after an initial refusal obeys his father and goes into the vineyard to work, while the other says Yes but does not do the work (21:28–32), or the classic parable of the sheep and the goats in 25:31–46 where those who don't even recognize Jesus but carry out his commands for mercy and compassion are included among the blessed.

This consistent emphasis on doing the works of righteousness as the authentic sign of belonging to the reign of God is illustrated in a profound way in the Sermon on the Mount, the heart of the Gospel's ethical teaching. Here a series of "antith-

eses" or, better named, "contrast statements" in 5:21–28 illustrate what Jesus means in speaking of fulfilling the law and demonstrating the "greater righteousness" of those called to the reign of God inaugurated by Jesus (5:17–20). Each of the contrast statements moves the level of ethical response from the level of traditional Torah teaching to a deeper and more heroic ethical response that does not abrogate the intent of the law but brings it to its full potential. The last and climactic set in this series of six contrast statements is 5:43–48 with its teaching on love of enemies, a teaching recognized as particularly characteristic of the historical Jesus and expressing the summit of human ethical behavior.

Revealing in this final antithesis or contrast statement is the motivation that Jesus enjoins for finding the strength and courage to love even an enemy or persecutor:

> . . . so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. . . . Be perfect therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5:45–48)

God is supremely ethical, and the divine righteousness is ultimately expressed in the indiscriminate and gracious love that is lavished on good and bad alike. In other places Matthew will underscore the primacy of the love command, that is, love of God and neighbor, as the epitome of law righteousness (see 7:12; 22:34–40).

A true theology therefore underwrites the ethical teaching of the Gospel. Acting with integrity and love, even to the point of not retaliating for injury and loving the enemy, makes one "perfect" or "complete" (*teleios*) as God is complete. This harmony between the human and the divine, which is one of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew ("your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," 6:10) gives a new understanding to the importance of good deeds as an expression of the human spirit. As Ulrich Luz has noted, for Matthew the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is not a sectarian ethic valid only for the Christian community but is a disclosure of the divine will for all humanity and an insight into the kind of action that represents the truest and noblest expression of the human person before God.[3]

Thus, acting in accord with the teaching of Jesus—whether conscious or not—aligns one with the will of God and enables one to enter the reign of God. Without doubt, this was one line of theological reflection that enabled Matthew and his community to justify opening the frontiers of the Jewish Christian community to righteous Gentiles, an instinct already present in Judaism where for many Jewish thinkers righteous Gentiles could have a place, however peripheral, within the community of Israel and hope for God's salvation. Through his story line and his incorporation of the ethical teaching of Jesus into the discourses and parables of the Gospel, Matthew bolsters the perspective of those who were in favor of a generous Gentile mission. Thus "many would come from east and west and eat with Abraham and Isaac in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 8:11). The traditional motif of the "procession of the nations" to Israel is now reinterpreted to underwrite a new theology of mission and inclusion.

Conclusion

Under the impact of religious experience and the encounter with peoples whose religious experience and religious history were far different from their own, both Paul and Matthew retrieved intuitions embedded in

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3. Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge University Press, 1995), 42–45.

their religious heritage—a retrieval driven by their experience of the Risen Christ present to them in their communities—and forged these intuitions into a new mode of understanding the present and imagining the future. Both authors were conscious of their religious and cultural heritage and prized it. They also were faced with the pastoral challenge of opening their communities to a new reality posed by a people different both culturally and religiously and had to find a deeper and to some degree underdeveloped level of their tradition that would enable them to move to new ground. Matthew may hint at this process in Jesus' description of the "scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven" at the conclusion of the parable discourse in 13:52: "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Are there lessons here, even a biblical warrant for bolder thinking about our own very different situation but one with some analogies to those early Christian generations that had to navigate between worlds? The common ground between Paul and Matthew on this process of adaptation, I think, indicates at least these elements to consider:

1. The need to probe deeply into our religious heritage in the light of our experience to find the essential points of continuity and inspiration at moments of profound transition as well as the language and narrative themes that enable us to express that continuity.

2. The invitation to reflect intently on our image of God, revealed in our biblical and theological tradition and now manifest anew in the light of present experience, and engage in dialogue with those who seek God but from a religious tradition and experience different than our own.

3. The need to search for common ground in those virtues and acts of justice and compassion that bridge different religious traditions and can be points of unity.

4. A commitment to drawing from the wellsprings of our collective heritage and our religious experience in order to imagine a new future in which God can gather humanity from the four winds.

Despite emerging from an ethnocentric tradition, early Christianity was able ultimately to move beyond those cultural and religious boundaries to embrace and include a new people. The realization of this was not perfect, as the later submergence of Jewish Christianity would demonstrate. And neither Paul nor Matthew would witness the fulfillment of their vision. Paul was hounded about his law-free gospel and the full inclusion of Gentiles as Gentiles into the community until his death, and suffered anguish for it. Matthew may have thought that Gentiles would "come in" and adapt their customs and religious sensitivities to a still dominant Jewish-Christian mode of life, but it was not to be.[4] Despite all of this, both early Christian theologians show us the way to being faithful to our past and open to God's future.

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4. See Donald Senior, "Between Two Worlds: Gentiles and Jewish Christians in Matthew's Gospel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 (1999): 1–23.

Book Reviews

Sleuthing the Divine: The Nexus of Science and Spirit. By Kevin Sharpe. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000. xi and 180 pages. Paper. $16.00.

Kevin Sharpe, Professor in the Graduate College of the Union Institute, is editor of *Science and Spirit* and the Fortress Press series Theology and the Sciences. In this book, he discusses a new image for the Divine as the subuniverse. He forgoes the term *pregeometry* and uses what he calls "the more neutral and simpler term: *subuniverse*" (p. 36).

This new model for the Divine instructs the religion-and-science dialogue under the guise of mutual relevance. Scientific and religious thought refer to an underlying order which is the subuniverse, the starting point for mutual relevance. Through his acute understanding of cosmological, neural, and cognitive research, Sharpe weaves a convincing argument for this new understanding of the Divine. He provides simple, yet adept, analogies that drive his point across to the reader.

At the start, Sharpe recaps the historical schism between the science and religion worlds. In the second part of his discussion, he lays the groundwork for his use of the term *subuniverse*. This section contains a discussion on the characteristics of the Divine while preserving the Divine's mystery. In Section 3, "Searching Morality," Sharpe moves through his argument by discussing evolution and its influence on morality, specifically transkin altruism and its influence on developing a morality. In the final section, Sharpe ties his argument together within a Western Christian context. For this dialogue about the Divine to continue in depth, Sharpe writes, "The spiritual requires the knowledge of science. Science requires the wisdom of spiritual thought as a spring of ideas to explore" (p. 167).

Sharpe's discussion is accessible not only to clergy but to lay readers as well. With his use of everyday language and colorful analogies, Sharpe's book is a good starting point into the science-and-religion discussion.

Joseph E. Gaston
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Surprises at the Table. By Else Schardt. Mansfield, OH: BookMasters, 2006. 116 pages. Paper. $10.00.

In this delightful, carefully crafted, and inspiring book, Else Schardt offers the reader the eyes to see the presence of God in the ordinary and everyday experiences of life. The context of the story is anything but ordinary. Schardt was born to Australian missionary parents in Papua New Guinea where her early childhood was enriched by the vivid sights, sounds, and relationships of this memorable culture. After her marriage to Ron (to whom the book is dedicated), they returned to PNG for twenty-six years of ministry engaged in missionary service. Throughout these memoirs the people of PNG take center stage. This people's devotion to God, practices of communal well-being, and distinctive way of life shine through the author's colorful snapshots of life together.

Chapters of the book are thematically organized around table, whether at the table in the Schardt's home, a table in the schools where she taught, or at makeshift tables wherever people gathered. Around the table people eat foods lovingly prepared, forge life-giving relationships, and always make room for more. Schardt describes the transforming impact of gathering and eating together. While the food at the table may appear exotic to us from a distance (we hear about a tropical diet that can include even crocodile meat), the deep bonds among the guests at the table are manifestations of God's gracious presence in our midst. One cannot help but discern that these are all extensions of the Eucharistic table where food and drink are shared freely and Christ appears in the breaking of the bread.

Schardt paints a picture of PNG in vivid detail, including the scenic vistas and lush veg-

etation of the country. But most of all the reader recognizes the deep respect for the people of this land, who have undergone dramatic and, often, traumatic challenges since Western civilization was first encountered in the late nineteenth century. The character and dignity of the people of PNG become most apparent when the community faces crisis or loss, as the book describes both times of natural disaster and death at an early age. The inclusion of several photos enhances the reader's imagination of the story told. The narrative provides a description of the very best of what mission as accompaniment can mean for the global church.

Since 1991 the Schardts have been in service to the community of Dubuque, Iowa, and particularly at Wartburg Theological Seminary. They have continued to invite others to meet Christ in community around the table in their home or in the seminary refectory. This book provides testimony to lives that value what is most important: seeing God at work in daily life among the relationships that in our busyness we are tempted to take for granted. We learn from this story to slow down and cherish the surprises God desires to grant us around the table.

For purchase information, please e-mail *surpatab@juno.com.* Cost is $10 per copy plus $1.60 postage for 1–3 copies mailed to the same address within the United States.

Craig L. Nessan
Wartburg Theological Seminary

The Power of Team Leadership: Achieving Success through Shared Responsibility. By George Barna. Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2001. vi and 216 pages. $19.95.

The Rev. Dr. George Barna, author of more than thirty-five books, is president and founder of the Barna Research Group, Ltd., whose primary goal is to be a "Christian catalyst for spiritual transformation in the United States." This book was previously released as *Building Effective Lay Team Leadership.*

Barna states that "during the past two decades there has been a continual decline in the satisfaction with leadership in churches" which often is attributed to either a general malaise about the minimal impact of leaders on systems or the failure of the system to adequately identify or train the most qualified leaders (p. 4–7). Barna attributes this decline to an inherent flaw in the system itself. He posits that quality leadership does not lie in unearthing more superhero leaders; rather, leadership is best served when "it is provided by teams of gifted leaders serving together in pursuit of a clear and compelling vision . . . whose results almost always transcend what any individual from that team could have produced alone" (p. 8–11).

What is a leadership team? A leadership team is "a small group of leaders who possess complementary gifts and skills" (p. 24). This group of four to six people, each of whom possesses calling, character, and competencies, needs to be committed to the vision, growth, and success of the ministry. They do not need to be friends, but they do need to be committed to one another's personal growth and maturation as well as to mutual and collective accountability. Barna's research shows that these leadership teams are essential in both large and small churches so that members do not become mere ministry consumers. He uses the biblical example of Moses to remind us that individual leadership can take the group only as far as the individual's capacities.

The third chapter, "Vision without leadership," makes the familiar case for the development of the unique and significant vision for each ministry site that both states the ministry's primary mission and demonstrates how each program and team fits with in it.

Barna goes on to state that in spite of the compelling research supporting the effectiveness of leadership teams, most churches persist in solo leadership. The research includes the desire for simplicity and the need for control and tradition among the ten most common reasons for this paralysis. He counters these with the ten reasons churches should use team leadership such as less stress, the priesthood of all believers, and biblical endorsement.

What would be included in the toolbox of an effective team ministry leader? In a nonexhaustive list Barna declares that research says the most important competencies needed in team members include the ability to identify and ar-

ticulate a vision, to coach and develop other leaders, to motivate others, and to resolve conflict, as well as to mobilize others and model Christian commitment and character. This toolbox needs to be present in the team, not one individual. Each team also needs at least one person with an aptitude for directing or visioning, strategic planning, team building, or operational competencies. The four "best practices" of these teams are: creating a viable leadership partnership that includes signing a leadership covenant, developing a culture that supports lay leadership teams, enabling high performance by sharing responsibility, tasking risks and developing a narrow focus, and equipping teams by providing continuous, ongoing, hands-on training. Also, each leadership team needs a captain who can keep the team focused on the vision, facilitate relationships among members, acquire resources, and demonstrate productivity.

"The transition to lay leadership teams will tax the patience, resources and the will of [any] church" (p. 153). The pastor is the key to a successful transition. The pastor's leadership is essential to change a church's culture. He or she needs to offer a high degree of predictability and consistency to this process along with the ability to handle any unrealistic or harmful expectations that develop. The pastor also needs to give input to the allocation of congregational resources and lead the communication process. This will help to avoid some of the land mines that can derail this transformation. Common land mines include demanding too much too soon, giving teams more than one mandate, teams "hoarding" resources for their part of the ministry, and confusing work groups (teams of gifted lay people serving under the direction of a gifted leader) with lay-leadership teams (teams of leaders working together).

Barna closes this work with one series of questions about whether an individual can serve better as a solo leader or in a team leadership model and another series of questions about the ministry's readiness for making the transformational move to lay team leadership.

This book makes a thorough, though not necessarily strong, case for the move to lay leadership teams for effective congregational ministry. It is an easy read. The author's writing style of stating and then expanding lists makes the book read like an extended outline. Also, even though there is a promise of material from current church research, the author only hints at findings and does not footnote the material or its findings. The book uses few examples. All in all, I recommend this book only to those new to the field of team leadership.

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Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation. By George W. E. Nickelsburg. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003. xxii and 284 pages. Paper. $23.00.

George Nickelsburg, a leading scholar of early Jewish literature, applies his detailed knowledge of that literature to describe the indebtedness of New Testament writers to it and, at the same time, to line out what marks them off from it.

After a brief general introduction Nickelsburg orients the reader to what significance the Hebrew Scriptures and tradition had in Judaism and how both were interpreted. He then turns to the status and use of the Torah in a righteous life in Judaism, the understanding of how God effects salvation, the agents of God's actions (king, priest, and prophet among humans; angelic or heavenly figures), Wisdom, Son of Man in Enoch, and the suffering and exalted righteous ones. The final three chapters discuss eschatological visions, "Contexts and Settings" (geography, Judaism and Hellenism, Temple, synagogue, and Jewish sects) and a final chapter that gives his summary of the preceding chapters. He stresses the variety and diversity in first-century Judaism and summarizes the way in which early Christianity diverged from its Jewish matrix.

This illuminating, stimulating book deserves wide reading by clergy and laity. It is accessible to readers who come without specialized knowledge of Judaism. At the same time, the notes and bibliography will lead interested readers to additional resources. It certainly will lead to revisions in the way most of us describe early Judaism and react to it. Nickelsburg is a sure guide, a skilled writer, and an outstanding

communicator, characteristics that lead to an outstanding book.

Edgar Krentz

Paul's Offer of Leniency (2 Cor 10:1): Populist Ideology and Rhetoric in a Pauline Letter Fragment. By Donald Dale Walker. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2002. xvi and 443 pages. Cloth. $115.00.

This book is a slightly revised 1998 doctoral dissertation written at the University of Chicago under the direction of Hans Dieter Betz. It presents an in-depth interpretation of 2 Cor 10:1: "I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!" However, not only does Walker's exegesis of 2 Cor 10:1 serve as a basis for a reading of 2 Cor 10–13 as a whole, but by situating the vocabulary of this verse in the context of Greco-Roman political and philosophical discourse his study has broader implications for understanding the relationship between Paul's Christology, apostolic leadership, and rhetorical strategy.

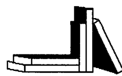
The primary focus of the book is a semantic investigation of the Greek terms for "meekness" and "gentleness." Walker maintains that translations of these terms have been too influenced by the Septuagint, so the first ninety pages of the book are devoted to a comprehensive analysis of the use of these terms in Greco-Roman texts. In accordance with Aristotle's use, the word "meek" was consistently used to describe the appropriate response to and control of anger, which was a key measure of moral virtue. The term for "gentleness" typically was used to depict the actions of a social superior toward an inferior and connoted a reasoned self-control that avoided severity. Walker finds a few instances in Plutarch where the terms are used together and argues that they should be translated as a pair as "leniency."

More often than not these terms were employed with reference to good rulers who were restrained in their use of power in punishing offenders, and Walker maintains that this the force it has in 2 Cor 10. In response to opponents in Corinth who behave as tyrants by enslaving and even hitting Corinthian believers (11:20), Paul demonstrates virtue by restraining himself and extending friendship and goodwill. In his attempt to mend his strained relationship with Corinthian believers he keeps his anger in check and offers "leniency and clemency" rather than the insult and shame connoted by enslavement and slapping they suffered at the hands of his opponents. The fact that he appeals to them "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ," which Walker takes to be a subjective genitive, means that Paul acts as a representative of Christ the good king.

Walker's treatment of Paul's Christology of kingship is one of the more interesting aspects of the book. He argues that the royal *topoi* in Paul's letters (1 Cor 15:24–25; Phil 2:6–11; Rom 1:3–4; 14:9) are more than "royal messianism" and should be interpreted in terms of the ideology of good rule that was well known and widespread in Greco-Roman society and was associated with populists and democratic themes. Not only does Christ embody virtues such as fairness and leniency in the administration of his kingdom, he also is a ruler who struggles with hardship to champion the cause of his people and shares their suffering. This ideology of rule also illuminates the political and even cosmic implications of Christ's rule. Christ is installed not just as a Jewish king but as a universal divine king whose rule results in the incorporation of the nations into God's people. In 2 Cor 10–13 Paul presents himself as a virtuous broker of Christ's authority—a clement authority—and uses Socratic irony to show that in continuity with Christ's rule divine power operates through his modesty and weakness.

This is a very technical and expensive book written primarily for scholars. Walker's interpretation is consistent with recent scholarship and does not offer any staggering new insights. But like his mentor Hans Dieter Betz, he has a made a strong case for understanding Paul's rhetoric and Christology as part of and in light of political and moral discourse current in Greco-Roman society. I would like to see the implications of his work teased out even further and for that reason hope it finds it way into libraries and receives a wide reading.

Ray Pickett
Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest



The Holy Spirit and the Renewal of All Things: Pneumatology in Paul and Jürgen Moltmann. By T. David Beck. Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2007. viii and 270 pages. Paper. $31.00.

This dissertation, submitted to and approved by Southern Methodist University, compares and contrasts two thinkers of quite a different time and nature. Yet, on reading the monograph, one learns that there is a close connection and that this endeavor is not in vain. The book is characterized by unusual readability. It does not even look like a dissertation because it has a limited number of footnotes. There is a list of abbreviations and a bibliography at the end of the book. (However, what would be desirable are an index of scripture passages and an index of modern authors.)

In reviewing pneumatology in the Protestant tradition, Beck starts with Barth and believes that Barth's centering on Christ makes pneumatology vanish because the Spirit is just an extension of Christ. Wesley assigns justification to Christ and sanctification to the Holy Spirit. Also, with emphasis on experience, the Holy Spirit's work is strongly related to the individual believer. Barth and Wesley are the only theologians discussed here; is this really all that can be said about the Protestant tradition?

According to Beck, an eschatological orientation for pneumatology has to be adopted. He discusses three kinds of eschatology: consistent (Schweitzer), realized (Dodd), and inaugurated (Ladd a.o.).

For his Pauline section, he relies on the seven letters generally recognized as authentic. In Pauline theology, the eschatological tension between the already and the not yet is an essential element as is shown in his metaphors of first fruits, down payment, and seal.

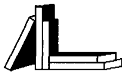
Chapter 3 discusses the eschatological characteristics of Pauline pneumatology. The Spirit is the agent of liberation for all who come to new life under the new covenant while the Law is associated with the old covenant. The church is the eschatological community in which the gifts of the Spirit are manifested, especially love. For the individual, life "according to the flesh" is opposed to the life "according to the Spirit," but believers are likely to fall back into the fleshly life. In the struggles of the present, Christians look forward in hope to the time when they will join their Lord in glory. For Paul, the new age has been inaugurated but not yet consummated. The Spirit is active both here and in eternity.

In Chapter 4, Beck turns to Moltmann. He describes chronologically the various volumes of Moltmann's work. Beck believes that Moltmann recognized the Western weakness regarding the theology of the Holy Spirit. Moltmann's trinitarian model is his doctrine of the "social Trinity." Trinitarian thinking does not begin with a concept of the unified divine Substance, but it is a Trinity of communion between the three persons. Moltmann describes his Christology as "christology in the eschatological history of God." This is based on the resurrection of Christ, which has to be kept in mind along with the crucifixion. Beck presents many insights into Moltmann that cannot be mentioned in this brief review. But important is the view of theology as oriented toward political action but different from liberation theology.

Moltmann's eschatology is not historicized or transcendental or apocalypticism because they neglect hope. Christian hope believes that God will do a new thing as eschatological surprise. Moltmann works out eschatology in four concentric circles: eternal life (personal), the kingdom of God (historical), the new creation of all things (cosmic), and the glory of God (divine eschatology). The hope is based on the coming of the Holy Spirit. Beck works this out in detail and offers little criticism of Moltmann.

In Chapter 6, Beck speaks of the Holy Spirit and Human Communities. Christ transitions from "Spirit-bearer" to "Spirit-sender." The Spirit permeates all the activities of the church: fellowship, sacraments, spiritual gifts, work toward justice. Beck believes—different from Barth—that in Moltmann the Spirit is not subordinate to Christ but that there is a mutuality between Christ and the Spirit.

But the Spirit is also active in the individual life (Chapter 7). Here, Beck is critical of Moltmann. Moltmann accepts religious experience of individual Christians, but Beck believes that this opposes laity and clergy or even experience



and Scripture and tradition. According to Moltmann, the Spirit works in the individual: justification, rebirth, personhood, relationships with others, sanctification. The removing of the filioque clause would rectify the understanding of the Trinity.

In Chapter 8, Beck describes Moltmann's understanding of the Spirit's action in creation, not only in the original creation but also in its preservation and the coming renewal. Again and again it is emphasized that eschatology begins with the resurrection of Christ but its final consummation is still outstanding. In his early work, Beck believes, Moltmann was deficient, neglecting the present eschatology and the Holy Spirit. In comparing once more Paul and Moltmann, Beck states, "the Pauline idea of the indwelling of the Spirit is an eschatological idea, whereas Moltmann's reasoning from the omnipresence of the Spirit in all of creation is not."

The book is very readable, yet it may leave the reader confused about the exact relationship of eschatology and pneumatology in Moltmann. However, it contains many worthwhile insights and gives an overview of Moltmann's extensive work.

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Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications. By Robin A. Leaver. Lutheran Quarterly Books. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007. xiv and 485 pages. Paper. $32.00.

Robin Leaver, professor of sacred music at Westminster Choir College of Rider University, gives an excellent study of Martin Luther and music. Music was a formative feature in Luther's life from childhood; music was also an important, indeed central, feature of Luther's evangelical reform of worship.

In part one, Leaver traces the place of music in Luther's life from childhood through his life as monk, professor, and reformer. In all stages music played an important role for Luther. Leaver shows that Luther was much more than a dilettante or interested amateur. He then treats Luther's theology of music; his musical analysis of the *Deutsche Messe* shows the great care that Luther gave to the music of this revised Mass so that it would express the theology of the reforming church.

Part two consists of eight brief chapters under the heading "Musical Catechesis." They look at Luther's six hymns related to the parts of the catechism and two other catechetical hymns. Leaver analyzes both text and tune for each hymn, describing their use in evangelical congregations. He shows that Luther highly valued the catechetical possibilities in hymn singing, and questions whether the Lutheran Church today is weakened because we have lost this use.

Part three contains a chapter each on musical hermeneutics, liturgical pedagogy, and liturgical chant. Each expands on the sometimes simplistic understanding of Luther as the one who introduced hymn singing; Leaver clearly shows how Luther understood and used music as a tool for hermeneutics and that he advocated and facilitated the continued use of chant for German psalms and biblical canticles. This more complete picture of Luther continues in part four, which treats musical forms: the Sequence (which led to the *Graduallied* or Hymn of the Day) and Responsory, and biblical canticles.

In part five Leaver turns to implications and consequences, tracing Luther's theology of music and his *Deutsche Messe* in later Lutheranism (through the time of Bach).

Among the most intriguing parts of the book are those places where the reader is encouraged, either directly or indirectly, to answer the question "What does this mean?" Well-written and mostly avoiding musical jargon, with quotations in original languages and translation, and with charts and copious notes to satisfy the needs of the scholar, this book is a welcome contribution to a neglected area of Luther scholarship. Highly recommended.

Michael Krentz, Cantor
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Emmaus, Pennsylvania

Of Widows and Meals: Communal Meals in the Book of Acts. By Reta Halteman Finger. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007. x and 326 pages. $28.00.

Reta Halteman Finger, colleague from the West Side of Chicago (Circle Urban Ministries and LaSalle Street Church), and Assistant Professor of New Testament at Messiah College, has penned a significant study on common meals in the early church, specifically as found in the Book of Acts. While she deals extensively with the history of interpretation and the sociohistorical background, her major contribution is an exegetical study of the Greek texts found in Acts 2:41–47 and 5:42–6:6.

In regards to contemporary interpretation of Acts 2:41–47 and its parallel 4:32–37, hardly any author would conclude that the Jerusalem Christians actually had all possessions in common and ate a common meal every day. The reasons for doubting the historicity of the meals lie primarily in the present context of the critic. Churches closely connected with the State can hardly be expected to affirm a communal meal for an entire nation. So scholars assume Luke used the meals to describe a utopian existence that at best implied sharing with the poor, that is, giving alms. Speaking sociohistorically, post-Reformation exegetes lacked, or overlooked, data that could have altered their opinion. Because of their own culture, perhaps, they had assumed there were many wealthy or middle-class Jerusalemites who could have shared with the poor. In fact, most Jerusalem people barely lived at a subsistence level, so that sharing was not a sacrifice but a necessity. Prior to Jesus, in many Palestinian towns communal groups already existed. According to Philo and Josephus small groups of Essenes had formed communal groups in which goods were shared, while members worked for wages or paid a group tax. One should assume that the Jesus group knew the local Essenes and formed a similar commune. In her exegesis of Acts 2:41–47, Finger indeed concludes that the Jerusalem church formed such a community of goods.

Acts 5:42–6:6 creates quite a different set of issues. To be sure, it reflects a communal meal in the Jerusalem church; however, it appears to support the modern view that these meals were for the poor, that is, almsgiving. The apparent poor in the text were the Hellenistic women who were neglected in the distribution of food (6:1). To counteract this nearly unanimous perception, Finger does a sociohistorical redefinition of *diakonia*. *Diakonia* can refer to service received or service done. A major honorable role for women in the Hellenistic world was to serve. In this passage widows were being deprived of their role as servers (6:1). Strangely enough, it would appear the apostles had taken over the female food distribution function (6:2–4) and now were willing to give up the serving role in order to preach the Word. As a result of this decision they neither served as Jesus did (Luke 22:27) nor preached the Word as they felt called (p. 266).

Finger's interpretation of 5:42–6:6 makes the three texts agree that meals were communal, not a service to the poor. While she cannot determine how long such meals continued, though Didache 4:8 and Barnabas 19:8 imply communal meals, in later history some of our foreparents like the Hutterites (and the modern Brüderhof) did return to the New Testament community of goods and common meals. Finger describes some other modern religious communities, such as the Catholic Worker movement, that stress the commonality of meal. Her major final point is that, as in Acts, communal meals today create and celebrate the unity of the Jesus group.

This is a stimulating and insightful study. Finger makes it convincing that the first Christians did own things in common and did eat at a communal table. She also makes it convincing that women played a prominent role in that common life. Her sociohistorical analysis of the two meal texts offers us insights not easily available from theological or literary readings of the text.

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Two Reformers: Martin Luther and Mary Daly as Political Theologians. By Caryn D. Riswold. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2007. x and 205 pages. Paper. $24.00.

Caryn Riswold pursues an ambitious agenda in this compact volume. She seeks to demonstrate that both Martin Luther and Mary Daly are political theologians while also offering a comparative analysis of the thought and utopian visions of these influential thinkers.

The thesis that both are political theologians is convincingly argued. Their contexts clearly impact both Luther and Daly, and both address those contexts as they formulate their theology or, in Daly's case, philosophy. In his quest for spiritual freedom, Luther criticizes the hierarchical church, specifically the papacy, in light of his understanding of the gospel. In her quest for the freedom of women, Daly initially attacks the patriarchal Roman Catholic Church, then rejects all religious institutions and expressions, and ultimately turns her attention to the manifestations and abuses of patriarchy in various cultures throughout the world. In challenging these obstacles to freedom, both Luther and Daly employ words artistically and polemically as they confront the abuse of power in the ecclesiastical and public spheres.

Riswold's comparative analysis of Luther's and Daly's thought confirms the obvious, namely, that they are radically different thinkers whose theology and philosophy provide little basis for constructive dialogue. While it is possible to point out some similarities in their biographies, methodologies, and utopian visions, their perspectives and priorities differ profoundly. Although he was excommunicated by the papacy, Luther spoke as a theologian of the church, was centered in the tradition, and was intent on reforming the Christian community. His ultimate authority was the word of God, particularly the gospel, and he envisioned a divine utopia, the realm of God, which has room for all. Those whom he excluded were rejected not because of race or political activity, as Riswold suggests, but because they despised the gospel and thus denied Christ and God's gift of faith. While Daly was educated and taught almost exclusively in Roman Catholic academic institutions, she rejected the Roman Church, Christianity, and religion in general and now speaks as a philosopher rather than a theologian. Her ultimate authorities are her own experiences as a woman and her creative mind. She redefines words and uses them to describe a utopia where Original Woman is free to be who she is, and she excludes all men on the basis of their gender.

This is a book well worth reading. It offers incisive insights into the thought of two seminal thinkers. Those interested in Daly's work will appreciate Riswold's balanced analysis of this leading apologist for radical feminism. The interpretation of Luther as a political thinker is also incisive. However, Riswold's examination of both thinkers needs to be nuanced more carefully.

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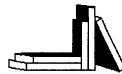
The Sacred Scriptures and the Luther Confessions: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn. Volume 2. Edited by Philip J. Secker. Mansfield, CT: CEC, 2007. xlviii and 313 pages. Paper. $21.95.

This is the second of an eventual four-volume series of Piepkorn's "Kleine Schriften." The first volume, published in 1993, dealt with his writings on the church. A third volume will deal with ministry, sacrament, and unity, and a fourth with worship and the Christian life. All can be purchased through CEC, 76 Willowbrook Road, Mansfield, CT 06268-2205, or via the Web site *www.Piepkorn.info*.

With a doctorate in Assyriology, Piepkorn (1907–1973) had a distinguished career as military chaplain, parish pastor, and professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. A strong advocate of ecumenism (a member of the Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue in its early years) and liturgical renewal, his academic specialties were the Lutheran Confessions and the study of American Christian denominations, leading to the publication of his magnum opus *Profiles in Belief,* which was published posthumously.

A man of encyclopedic knowledge, Piepkorn read the Lutheran Confessions in their original German and Latin for about an hour a



day for at least ten years. Piepkorn was among the forty-five members of the Concordia faculty attacked by the administration of J. A. O. Preus, the president of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. Shortly after he and six others had been forcibly retired by the seminary's Board of Control, he died of a heart attack in December, 1973. One of the essays in this volume, "I Believe," was a statement to Preus's "Fact-Finding Committee," explaining the breadth of his faith and defending himself against ten charges.

Piepkorn argued that the doctrine of inerrancy was a secondary doctrine designed to protect the doctrine of inspiration and hence referred to the ultimate irrelevance of this doctrine. He also held that many details of the practice and position of Lutheranism "are based upon decisions of the seventeenth and subsequent centuries, rather than upon definitive determinations of the sixteenth." Piepkorn noted that the term "canonical" is not defined in either Scripture or the Lutheran Symbols and was never fixed for the whole church by an ecumenical council. He suggested that lessons from the deuterocanonical Old Testament books could be included in the lectionary "if only to assert our Christian liberty against the Biblicists who say that we cannot do so."

Piepkorn frequently observed that Philip Melanchthon, a lay person, wrote about forty percent of the *Book of Concord*, far more than came from Luther himself. Lutherans, he felt, "need to be concerned about the barriers that divide Christians from each other and must listen to other Christians for what the Holy Spirit may have to say through them." He warned against absolutizing post-Reformation dogmatic traditions. He believed that "the Symbolical Books sometimes appear to be speaking at points where they cannot fully and fairly cite the Sacred Scriptures in support of their assertions." While holding to a *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, Piepkorn contended that Lutherans do not subscribe to formulations of eternal truths divorced from their historic situation, do not subscribe to specific interpretations that the Symbols place on particular passages from Scripture, do not subscribe to meanings that later generations have imported into the words of an earlier generation of confessors, and do not subscribe to the line of logical argument that the authors of the Symbols may have used to reinforce a theological conclusion.

The editor is to be congratulated and encouraged in his mission to bring together these precious essays for a new generation. He was the last student to earn a doctorate under Piepkorn and now lives in retirement in Connecticut.

Ralph W. Klein

Briefly Noted

N. T. Wright, Bishop of Durham, England, presents his reading of Paul's thought in ***Paul: In Fresh Perspective*** (Fortress, $25). He operates with the assumption, expressed often earlier, that Paul assumes a covenant narrative from the Old Testament as the underlying basis of his interpretation of God, Christ, the church, Christianity and the Roman empire, and eschatology. Based on the Hulsean lectures at Cambridge University, Wright gives a consistent, well-written, clear interpretation of Paul. He provides minimal reference to modern scholarship and a basic bibliography. Even those who think he overstresses this covenant narrative that under-evaluates the new in Paul will be stimulated by this book. *Edgar Krentz*

The Petrine Ministry: Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue, edited by Cardinal Walter Kasper; translated by the Staff of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (The Newman Press, $24.95), presents the papers and summarizes the discussion of a symposium of Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox theologians. It allows the reader to eavesdrop on a significant conversation. With implications for all interested in the ideas of apostolic succession and ministry in an ecumenical context, this report has valuable historical information for all interested in the understanding of ministry. *EK*

Preaching Helps

Third Sunday of Easter—Proper 3, Series A

Preaching Acts during Easter

One of the critiques that some preachers and scholars level against the Revised Common Lectionary is that during the Easter season the first readings are from Acts rather than the Hebrew Bible. The critique is that, by including Acts at that point, the lectionary suggests that the apostolic church *replaces* God's people of the Hebrew Bible. A second critique asserts that the Acts readings do not complement the Gospel readings as the Old Testament texts do. A third is that Acts is less relevant today.

Pastor **Jim Honig**, author of these Preaching Helps, uses Acts as his entree into preaching during the Easter season. He writes: "When the liturgical calendar rolls around to the Easter season each year, I become intrigued with the readings from the Acts of the Apostles." According to Pastor Honig, rather than replacing the Hebrew Bible, "Luke intended this work to be a continuation of the story of Jesus—not a separate story but the ongoing story of Jesus. This time the story would be told not through the person Jesus of Nazareth but through those who would now carry on his ministry. In that sense, the gospel story goes on, first through the eleven apostles, then through Paul, and then through an ever-widening band of early church leaders. For that matter, the story continues today, through the generations of Christ's followers who occupy the pulpits and sit in the pews of our congregations."

Pastor Honig notes that scholarship, both inside and outside the church, has documented the power of story to both form and inspire us. He sees Acts as *our* story. "I know the church in Acts is not intended to be prescriptive for the church today," he writes, "but when I read the stories in Acts, I inevitably end up asking questions about my own ministry and the congregation I serve. What are the similarities? What are the differences? More important, how do I make application as I, like Peter and Paul and the other saints who inhabit the pages of Acts, live with and minister with the community of saints who are continually dying and rising?"

Like me, Pastor Honig celebrated the twentieth anniversary of his ordination last summer. He is a graduate of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, receiving the

M. Div. in 1987 and S.T.M. in 1995. He spent his first fifteen years of parish ministry in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, primarily in Florida. In 2002, after being approved for candidacy in the ELCA, he accepted a call as Senior Pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, where he continues to serve. Over the years, Jim's passions have been worship and especially worship as the formation for our life in the world. He always has been actively involved in ecumenical ministry and community outreach. He has served on the Board of Directors of The Association of Lutheran Church Musicians and currently serves on the Advisory Council of the Institute of Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso University. Jim is married to Sheryl, who is on the faculty at Valparaiso. They have two sons, Chris and Tim, who are both in college.

For more on Acts and on preaching from Acts, Jim invites us to consult the excellent introduction in William Willimon's Commentary on Acts in the Interpretation series.[1]

My newest insight into preaching in general and Easter preaching in particular came in October and November, after I spent three days in the hospital for what the doctors are now calling "a mild heart attack." Listening to sermons in those weeks, I became aware of what Wes Allen calls the "cumulative effect of preaching," which I describe as "the small but significant ways sermons change people and faith communities over weeks, years, and lifetimes."[2] After listening to several anthrocentric sermons in which humans were active and God was passive, my chest felt heavy, my mood was cranky, and I was ready for a nap. Christ-centered preaching about a loving and active God left me feeling light, optimistic, and energized. That is what Easter preaching ought to do.

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

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1. William Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 1–17.
2. O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 57; Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through You: How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2007).

Third Sunday of Easter April 6, 2008

Acts 2:14a, 36–41
1 Peter 1:17–23
Psalm 116:1–4, 12–19
Luke 24:13–35

First Reading
The psalm is a portion of Psalm 116, a first-person song of thanksgiving for God's help in a time of distress. The writer was apparently at death's door but has been rescued. We hear the familiar ring of the second half of the song; it's the source of one of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* offering canticles. The first section and last verses form an interesting juxtaposition: The one who has been pulled back from the clutches of death now expresses the profound truth that the death of the faithful ones is precious to the Lord. With Christ's death and resurrection still fresh on our minds, we cannot help but hear of Christ in this psalm.

The semicontinuous reading of the First Letter of Peter began last week on the Second Sunday of Easter. In that reading, the author established the foundation for the whole letter; it is by God's mercy that God's people receive salvation. Today's reading is again from the first chapter. Here, the author goes on to encourage holy living based on the gift of rebirth that comes through the word of God.

The Gospel reading recounts the powerful story of Jesus walking on the road to Emmaus with two unknown disciples. The challenge again is to hear this familiar story again for the first time.

The Acts reading gives us a brief episode pulled out of the longer account of the first Pentecost. It includes the end of Peter's sermon, the cut-to-the-heart response of the crowd, and Peter's instructions. Peter's sermon chronicled the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. Now we come to the confident, dramatic conclusion to Peter's sermon: God made this Jesus both Lord and Messiah. The response to Peter's sermon comes with no delay, no dilly-dallying around by the crowd. "They were cut to the heart" and asked directly what they should do (v. 37).

Pastoral Reflection
This Sunday's readings present a great opportunity to preach about preaching. Mention the word *sermon* and people's eyes glaze over. Most would not include sermons in the category of Exciting Things I Can't Do Without; instead, they might include it on the list of Things That Put Me to Sleep. Peter's sermon, however, was apparently anything but boring. What must it be like to preach a sermon that cuts to the heart? Does it happen anymore? Does it happen in my ministry, in my congregation?

Luke is careful to point out here that the power is not in Peter's homiletical skill or even in the deep yearning of the crowd for relationship with God. The power is the power of the Holy Spirit. What saves the people is not the excellence of Peter's preaching but their getting connected with the same story that Jesus tells in the Gospel reading, the story of Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified and on the third day was raised.

In Jesus, there was a power loose and at work in Peter's preaching. In Jesus, there is a power loose and at work in the world. In Jesus, there is a power loose and at work in our preaching. In Jesus, there is a power loose and at work in our congregations and consequently in our communities. The power is not in the preacher per se; the power is in the message of Jesus' cross and resurrection. In short, the power is the gospel (Rom 1:16–17).

The truth about preaching is obvious, but so easy to forget in the church. The mail that crosses my desk lures me to believe that the new next best thing is coming down the pike. It will save my ministry and make my congregations successful. What gets the culture's attention? Preachers who seem to have it all based on exploiting the power of their personal charisma. And there is no small temptation in our parishes to use the power of the office and of our person to get things done. The gods of technology beckon us to employ the newest computers and the newest software, projection and images; these will be the secret to relevancy. Who doesn't want to be relevant?

In the Acts reading, we are called to remember the basics—that salvation comes as the call and power of the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of the day of Pentecost (Acts 1), the gift of the Spirit is given to the eleven who are gathered to wait and pray; by the end of the day, the gift of the Spirit is given to those who hear the eleven speaking in their own languages. The Spirit is clearly gift: ". . . but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith, even as he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth" (Luther's *Small Catechism*). The act of preaching, too, is full of gift! When our sermons end, there is no doubt that God is loose and at work in the world.

Jesus does some preaching of his own in the Gospel reading, albeit preaching to only a few as they walk the road away from Jerusalem. (The proclamatory task is not limited to the pulpit!) In his preaching, Jesus is careful not to call attention to himself as the one walking with them but to himself as the crucified and risen one, the one in whom all the prophets were fulfilled.

The reading from 1 Peter delivers for us the beautiful truth that our very birth into the kingdom has come through the proclamation of the Word, a word that is not stiff and static but living and ongoing.

Even the psalm could be called to support this sermon to help us think about sermons. In the images of the psalm, the writer is one who has been pulled from the clutches of death. How helpful it would be to remind our people that the preaching of the gospel week in and week out also pulls us from the clutches of death.

In my experience, most who listen to sermons regularly do not see the sermon as any different than other acts of speech giving. This Sunday's readings give ample opportunity to help both preacher and hearer remember the place of preaching in the economy of salvation. JKH

Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 13, 2008

Acts 2:42–47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19–25
John 10:1–10

On what traditionally has been labeled Good Shepherd Sunday, we get an odd pairing of the first ten verses of John 10 with the well-known passage from Acts that considers all that has happened in the first two chapters, and thrusts the fledgling community into its ongoing dailiness, where the faithful devoted themselves "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (v. 42). This section focuses on one of the main themes of the entire book of Acts: community.

Perhaps it's not surprising that those early believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. What lay at the center of their faith was still relatively novel; they were still trying to understand all of the

implications. To hear those who had walked and talked with Jesus now unfold this new reality would have been stimulating indeed. But it's not just that. Teaching and learning are part of the ongoing work of the church. When we are called and experience the baptismal gift of the Spirit, the work has only just begun.

Fellowship (κοινονια) is an overused and under-understood word. Too often, the church uses the word *fellowship* to describe the chumminess that we enjoy with our friends at church. Part of the miracle of the church is that God could create community from so diverse an assemblage of people. That miracle goes on. In the church we are formed into community with people whom we would probably not choose as our friends. That in itself is not unusual; in many settings we have to work and play closely with people whom we would not choose as our friends. We live next door to them, work with them, are part of parent groups with them. What makes the church unique, however, is not just the friendliness but that we are knit together with the commonality of that most intimate and crucial of relationships, our relationship with God. With bonds that are strong, invisible, and mysterious, the Spirit binds us together with Jesus' body and blood and makes us into the body of Christ for the sake of mission.

Holding all things in common sounds strange to Western, North American, capitalistic ears. Such sharing of all things in common is testimony to the dramatic impact that the gospel had on these people. The power of the gospel set loose in their lives overturned their conventional social and material relationships. Everything they once held dear had been set free for the sake of the gospel; *koinonia* meant something to them.

In both volumes of Luke's Gospel, table fellowship is a major theme. The Jewish culture into which the church was born placed a great deal of emphasis on the proper rules of table fellowship. Social and economic boundaries were made tangible and were enforced at the table. Those rules were blown apart in Jesus. People of different social strata and different economic means not only shared in common what they had but also sat and ate together. To sit at table became a tangible, visible expression of the Holy Spirit and a mark of unity, solidarity, and deep friendship. Do we find here a reference to the Lord's Supper? Undoubtedly, although Luke's first readers likely would have been puzzled by the distinctions we make today between the Lord's Supper and any other kind of community fellowship at table.

Finally, they prayed. This community who thrived on the teachings of the new kingdom ushered in by Jesus and expounded by the apostles still kept coming to the temple. With one hand reaching for the future hope that was given in Jesus, they remained anchored in the tradition that had been given them.

One of the strong, preachable themes of this Acts reading is community—in particular the radical effect that receiving the gospel had not only on individual lives but in creating a community. This was a community in which the Spirit was being set free, a community who demonstrated in the way they lived each day that the Messiah had come.

This could be a chance for probing reflection on the state of community in my congregation. To what extent and how have we substituted socialization for community? Have we determined to be a busy people rather than a people-building community? To build community is at heart a gift of the Spirit. But it is also our response to the gospel to work at building the community that we have been given. In general, the members of North American churches give

up too easily! We get upset at something, and rather than working through the conflict we transfer to another congregation where everything is wonderful—until the next thing to get mad at comes down the pike. We ought to consider ourselves lashed to the mast with these people and determine to get through the storm without abandoning ship. While there is virtue in practicing hospitality to the stranger and in being friendly and chummy with folks we already know, friendliness is not the same as community. To build community requires the work and risk of relationships. How will we find the time for relationships? How will we commit to the work of relationships?

The reading from 1 Peter was written to a dispersed community that was experiencing suffering. For most North American congregations, that is already a disconnect with the first recipients of this letter. But regardless of the where, when, and what in which we live, the reading reminds us that we are a community formed by Christ bearing our sins in his body on the cross (v. 24) so that we might be a community of the righteous. And whether or not we are suffering for the faith, we are a community that follows the example of the suffering Christ, looking first not to our own needs but to the needs of others and the world.

The connection of the first reading to the Gospel is not immediately apparent, and certainly not its connection to the community theme. However, I can imagine letting down our pretensions and maybe even injecting a moment of humor and self-deprecation, talking about ourselves also as a community of sheep. That's not a very glamorous or complimentary thing to say; in current parlance it carries the connotation of dumb people blindly following a leader to ruin. However, in this case, reflecting on how we are a community of sheep could add another dimension to the rich material in the Acts passage. Jesus is the one who seeks the community out, and by grace it's a community that knows and hears the voice of the shepherd. And how about using the Acts passage to define what Jesus means in his enigmatic words, "I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (v. 10)? JKH

Fifth Sunday of Easter
April 20, 2008

Acts 7:55–60
Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16
1 Peter 2:1–10
John 14:1–14

First Reading

The Acts reading is the final few verses of the long story of Stephen's encounter with the religious establishment; it chronicles the violent end to Stephen's life and to this chapter in early church history. Earlier in Acts 7, Stephen speaks pointedly and directly to the religious leaders who had arrested him, asserting that their handing Jesus over to the Romans for crucifixion was yet one more example in a long line of killing and persecuting the prophets. After reading Stephen's speech, it's no stretch of the imagination to believe the depth of their outrage.

What exactly did Stephen see when he looked to heaven? Whatever it was, those religious leaders did not want to hear anything about it, even covering their ears to escape the words. Was their loud shouting a way to drown out what they didn't want to hear? Then the mob mentality took over; they rushed Stephen and stoned him. No semblance of proper judicial proceedings here; the mob became judge, jury, and executioner.

Psalm 31 is a prayer for deliverance from enemies, a prayer that at least on a

purely superficial level was not answered for Stephen. The psalmist cries out to God that God be a rock of refuge and listen to his cries for help. The reading (or singing) ends with the confident cry of faith: "my times are in your hand; let your face shine upon your servant." The prayer echoes not only Stephen's last words before his martyrdom but also Jesus' last words from the cross.

The author of 1 Peter urges his readers to crave the pure spiritual milk and to come to Christ the living stone (another of those scriptural oxymorons) and let yourselves be built (οικοδομεισθε, imperative passive verb form) into a spiritual house (v. 5). In words of great comfort and encouragement, the reading exalted cultic language to lift the hearers' sights to see what God has made them to be, "a chosen nation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (v. 9). Their being built into a spiritual home is not for the sake of comfort and coziness but for the sake of mission, "that you may proclaim the virtues/glories/wonders (αρετας) of the one who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (v. 9).

The Gospel reading brings another of those familiar texts that we hear often and that preachers end up having to preach on fairly often, especially if they serve in a parish with frequent deaths and funerals. In one of those odd but frequent lectionary occasions in the Easter season, we go back to the time before the crucifixion and resurrection. We rehearse the intense, focused time when Jesus was preparing his disciples for what they could never imagine. In doing so, Jesus gave them the promise of a future, a future made wondrous and marvelous in the Easter event. Thomas, ever the realist and frighteningly like us, pushes Jesus. "Make it clear; don't speak in these infernal riddles; tell us what you mean; give us the evidence."

One can imagine Jesus' frustration, even on this solemn evening. "You have been with me all this time and you still don't get it? You still don't understand that you have seen the Father? It's clear that you understand so little of what I've been trying to teach you and show you."

Pastoral Reflection

How about beginning a sermon by posing a question: What did Stephen see that was worth dying for? On the direct level of the text, he saw a vision—the glory of God, and Jesus standing at God's right hand (v. 55). But that still doesn't answer the question. What did Stephen see that was worth dying for? He has just spent a lot of words unfolding a drama of a people's infidelity to the purposes of God. What Stephen asserts is nothing less than blasphemy. And then when the fire gets really hot, Stephen reports seeing a vision. In Acts, visions are used to make clear to earthly disciples the reality of heavenly facts.[1] Again, what did Stephen see that was worth dying for?

It is a particularly interesting question in these days when we can hardly go a day without hearing of another religious person somewhere in the world who has been willing to die for his or her faith. In that context, we tend to see martyrdom as the act of a fanatic rather than the action of a faithful follower. Luke portrays Stephen as a hero; we might be more likely to portray him as a lunatic.

What would it mean for us to die for our faith? Perhaps a more fruitful way to frame the question is to ask, What's worth living for and worth dying for? It might be easier for us to grasp the issue in the terms that Paul used in Philippians, "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain." We may not often think about whether we will be required to die for our

1. William Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 64.

faith, but we do experience the tension between living now and the eternal life of the future. Most pastors who have spent any time with people who approach the statistical end of their lives know the heartfelt pleas of those who are tired of the struggles of living and are ready to go home.

What Stephen saw was a revelation. The revelation brings the answer to both sides of the question of what is worth living for and what's worth dying for. The answer is the same: to know the One who has come among us to give us real life, the One who in his own dying has given us life and helped us to see beyond the *incurvatus se* of the Old Adam and Eve. This One is Jesus, who has come to make us a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. Consequently, what's worth living for and dying for is to proclaim the deeds of this One who has called us out of darkness and into the marvelous light of freedom. He is the same One who keeps on calling the world out of the darkness and into the light.

In the Gospel reading, Philip seeks a revelation. Philip wants to see the Father. He wants to discover what's worth living for and what's worth dying for. Philip knows he is looking for something but is unable to see that what he has been looking for has been right under his nose all along.

I can imagine that the people to whom we preach are far more like Philip than they are like Stephen, people whose faith endures more questions than it has answers. Jesus has shown us what we need, what fulfills our deepest yearnings. Jesus has shown us the glory of the Father and in that revelation has shown us meaning and purpose. Jesus shows us who God is and who we are. Jesus shows us what's worth living for and what's worth dying for. JKH

Sixth Sunday of Easter April 27, 2008

Acts 17:22–31
Psalm 66:8–20
1 Peter 3:13–22
John 14:15–21

First Reading
In the Acts story, Paul, Silas, and Timothy had not had a good run. They kept getting kicked out of places. On the other hand, not all was lost; some were believing their message. When Paul left Beroea and went on to Athens, Silas and Timothy stayed behind. While waiting for them, Paul observed and became deeply disturbed at all the idols in Athens. So he argued with those in the marketplace who were groping for God—Jews along with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Paul engaged them on their own territory by employing their own rhetoric, taking a conciliatory rather than a condemning position. As Paul spoke to Greeks, recounting salvation history, he left Israel out, the Israel that was usually at the center of his preaching! The movement of the speech is formally magnificent, from the religiosity of the Athenians to a sympathetic critique of idolatry to a call to repentance. Paul engages the marketplace seekers on the basis of natural theology and commends them for what they have discovered. But as Paul goes on, natural theology can only take you so far; what's needed is revelation, the revelation that comes through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which Jesus promises in the Gospel reading and will be recounted in the reading from 1 Peter.

The psalmist blesses God, even though the community of which he is a part has been through the fire of trouble. Now on the other side of trouble, the singer acknowledges that God has brought this community of

faith to a spacious place again, and so the sacrifices of worship are offered once more. The psalmist invites anyone who will listen to come so that he can tell of the things that God has done.

The second reading contains a series of short aphorisms, wisdom sayings addressed to a church that is clearly undergoing persecution. One of those sayings is an encouragement to always be ready with an account (λογον) of the hope that is in Christ. The sense here is not of a defense or an apology. The writer is not calling for the kind of formal presentation one might make in a trial or in trying to meet the demands of an official magistrate. Rather, what is called for is a simple, conversational, heartfelt explanation of the hope that empowers one's living, namely, the hope that is in Christ. The writer also presents another of the gospel-in-a-nutshell sayings: "For Christ suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God" (v. 18).

The Gospel reading continues Jesus' words of preparation for his leaving. Jesus leaves the gathered disciples with the promise of the Spirit. In words that echo what Jesus has already said in conjunction with the footwashing, Jesus reinforces that his disciples will be a community characterized by love, love that has its source in the Father and will be demonstrated by having the commandments and keeping them (v. 21).

Pastoral Reflection

There is a sharp contrast between the Acts and the Gospel readings. Paul engages "the world," and he engages them on friendly, accommodating terms; Jesus seems to be drawing his followers back from the world. The world cannot receive him because it neither sees him nor knows him. In this reading, Jesus engages only the insiders, even drawing a sharp distinction between who's inside and who's outside, the world versus the followers.

Rather than giving in to the voices clamoring for withdrawal from the world, those who would build walls of separation between the world and the church, Paul suggests rolling up one's sleeves and engaging the world where one is. Where are signs of God's engagement with people? What are the signs that people are seeking for spiritual meaning, seeking to know God? Paul engages the outsiders.

So, which is it? What is the work of the church—to comfort and strengthen the insiders or to engage the outsiders in hope of converting them? Yes! Both are the work of the church, and one dare not set up the false alternatives of nurture versus mission. For most congregations, nurture is a given. That is why we join a church, because we have a yearning to know God and to grow in our faith and we think the church is a good place for that to happen.

But nurture is only one side of the equation. Nurture finds expression in mission. There is inhaling and exhaling, nurture and mission. Americans in particular continue to demonstrate a yearning for religious meaning. In surveys taken by The Gallup Organization in 2003, 60 percent of Americans said that religion is very important in their lives.[2] However, the same survey suggested that these same Americans are just as apt to self-design their religion as become a part of an organized church. Need we say more about following the example of Paul and introducing these seekers to the living God?!

As we reflect on these readings, we can challenge ourselves to guard against mak-

2. Cited in Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 37.

ing this false distinction. Few of us would state such a blatantly one-sided practice of our faith. The greater challenge is to ensure that we are both inhaling and exhaling. We can take this opportunity to remind ourselves of the hope that is in us, that we have life with God through the righteous One whose suffering and death have brought us back to God (1 Pet 3:18). We remember that we are nurtured continually by Word and Sacrament, by the gospel message itself, so that the hope in us might remain strong. This is the truth that the Spirit will bring.

We remember, too, that as the baptized we are called to engage the world in its seeking for God, ready to introduce others to the One who has given us life and to invite them into the community of Jesus' followers. JKH

The Ascension of Our Lord
May 1, 2008

Acts 1:1–11
Psalm 47
Ephesians 1:15–23
Luke 24:44–53

The Acts reading brings the beginning of volume 2 of Luke's account of the ministry of Jesus, while the Gospel reading delivers the end of volume 1. As with volume 1, volume 2 begins with a personal message to Theophilus. Although not stated explicitly, the implication is that the line of demarcation is Jesus' ascension; what is already written is about all that happened before Jesus was taken up into heaven; what is written now is about the things Jesus did after he was taken into heaven. The story is still, however, about Jesus.

I wonder what the impact might be were we to let loose of the liturgical order of the readings for one occasion and read these two texts in canonical order, beginning with the end of volume 1 and following immediately with the beginning of volume 2!

After his resurrection, Jesus did not stop teaching but continued speaking to the disciples about the kingdom of God. For forty days, Luke says, Jesus instructed his disciples in what must have been an intense and intensely joy-filled time. In a strongly worded charge, Jesus instructed them to stay in Jerusalem. Jesus' instructions were not merely to bide their time but to wait for what had been promised, namely, the Spirit.

One of the striking things about this story (and the juxtaposition with the end of Luke) is the emphasis here on how the disciples still didn't get it. ("Will you now restore the kingdom to Israel?") What they simply could not understand—and when you think about it, how could they have?—was how things were continuing to be turned upside down in Jesus. Previously existing relationships would not be the same; they were being transformed. Whether or not the world was to end soon was, in Christ, irrelevant. The disciples' lives had already changed in ways that they could never have imagined, and what they will go through in the story recounted in Acts and in church history was a reality they could never have imagined. The measure of what was important in their lives had changed; how they saw themselves had changed; how they related to the world and to people around them had changed. What they had previously thought worthwhile, significant, and important had been superseded by a new reality in Christ.

For Luke, what was new was Christ. This One was being raised to God's right hand, the Pantokrator. This is the central message of the reading from Ephesians. The teaching about Christ, which is the reason this lection is appointed for Ascension Day, is embedded in a section of profound doxology and generous encouragement to the

congregations who were to receive this encyclical letter. The doxology overflows into profound teaching about Christ and his place after his death and resurrection. Christ is now ruler over all forever.

An aside: As I read Ephesians, I am stuck by how consistently Paul included generous encouragements to the congregations to which he wrote, even profoundly troubled congregations like the one in Corinth. Perhaps this reading might plant the seed for planning a sermon imbued with this kind of deep gratitude for the people we serve, to tell them that we never stop giving thanks for them (assuming that's true!) and that we are praying for them. Well-placed and generous thank-yous can do wonders for the gospel ministry of a congregation. Ascension Day is not for any apparent reason the right time to do that, but the text certainly calls it to mind.

What is apparent is the connection of this reading to Ascension Day: that God has placed Jesus at God's right hand, the place of power, and that the crucified One, now risen and ascended, has been given the place of rule over all creation.

What that looks like is not clear; exactly how that happens is not clear; what we will perceive of that rule is not described. The point is not so that we might paint a picture of the heavenly throne room where Jesus has a bejeweled chair just to the right of the Big Throne. Rather, the point is to know that, despite appearances to the contrary, God in human flesh—in our flesh—has been given the rule, and we live in the world under that gracious rule.

Ascension Day makes a demarcation of sorts. For Christians there was the time when Jesus was walking the earth, and now the time when he is not, the time of the church. There was a time when the proclamation of the kingdom was coming from his mouth; now is the time when it comes secondhand, if you will. There was a time when miracles came through Jesus' physical touch; now is the time when, if there are any such things as miracles at all, they come through mediated means. There was a time when Christ's followers could touch the nail scars on his hands; now we cannot touch him at all. There is certainly a long enough list of reasons why those sitting in our pews will sense a discontinuity between the time before Jesus' ascension and now.

But the discontinuity is only skin deep. What is important is the profound continuity—the ascension doesn't mark a different time, only a different way that Jesus' ministry operates. In his life, death, and resurrection, a new age came. The new age continues. The new age and the ultimate end that was foreshadowed in Jesus' resurrection meant a new reality for the disciples, and it continues to mean a new reality for us. Even death—maybe especially death—is not the final arbiter.

So, if the ascension of Jesus made clear for the disciples that the new age was going to continue through them, Ascension Day is a good reminder that the work of the new age goes on; it is not yet completed. The dying and rising goes on; the proclamation that in Christ all things are new goes on. What had happened in the resurrection was not entirely clear to the disciples, and it is still not entirely clear to us. But the work of the new age would go on through them, and it goes on through us. The rule of Christ in the universe for the sake of the church goes on.

The voice of Christ, the touch of Christ, and the presence of Christ have not disappeared with Jesus' disappearance into the clouds. They go on in the church through the word and sacraments, and from there the voice of Christ, the touch of Christ, and the presence of Christ go out into the world in the daily living of every baptized child of God. JKH

Seventh Sunday of Easter May 4, 2008

Acts 1:6–14
Psalm 68:1–10, 32–35
1 Peter 4:12–14, 5:6–11
John 17:1–11

First Reading

The Acts reading presents a continuation/overlap from the reading for Ascension Day. The disciples have gone a Sabbath day's journey, a short distance of less than a mile, from Mount Olivet back to the place where they had been staying. While waiting, they also go to the temple, blessing God (Luke 24) and constantly devoting themselves to prayer. Luke's concern for the wider band of followers of Jesus comes through again in this passage. Luke is careful to include the women and Jesus' brothers who had by now become followers.

Psalm 68 is a song of praise to a powerful and mighty God who causes the wicked to perish but cares for the orphans and widows, calling to mind the care God gave when God went out in front of the pilgrims from Egypt. The psalm ends with an ascription of praise to God for God's power and majesty not only over Israel but over all creation.

The reading from 1 Peter contains the theme we have seen nearly every week, of encouragement and exhortation to a church suffering persecution. The first section is directed very explicitly at those who are undergoing persecution. The second is a string of exhortations using the image of the Evil One as a prowling lion, ready to pounce on the unsuspecting follower of Jesus. Beware and be constantly on guard! the writer warns. Contained in this paragraph are the familiar and beloved words of comfort and strength, especially for those being persecuted, that all anxieties and cares can be cast on the God who has cared for God's people all the way to the cross.

John 17 is commonly called Jesus' High Priestly prayer, a deeply personal prayer to the Father before his arrest. Every year in the RCL, a section from this chapter is read. This year in series A, logically, we read the first section. Portrayed is the last scene of Jesus' farewell meal with his disciples. While Jesus speaks to his disciples before his crucifixion, he speaks as if the ascension has already taken place. "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world" (v. 11). One sees further connection to the ascension; John describes Jesus as looking up into heaven as he speaks to his disciples, just as he did at the ascension. Only here, Jesus is addressing not his disciples but the Father. The disciples will see what we have already seen, that the Father's glorification of the Son took the cruel form of a cross. In Christ's own emptying of himself, he accomplished salvation for all. On the cross God's true character was revealed, for there we could see the depth of God's love. Another key aspect of this glorification will be the unity of those who follow Jesus. Jesus' prayer for unity is mentioned not only here in verse 11 but also in verses 21, 22, and 23.

Pastoral Reflection

As I think about the Acts reading and preaching for this Sunday, I am particularly intrigued by the disciples' response to Jesus' instruction, reproof, and promise. They gather to pray. Jesus also, in the few moments before the most critical events of his ministry, pauses during his farewell dinner to pray.

This church is different from the one I live in. In the church that I live in and lead, the response to these kinds of challenges from Jesus would be to do something, even if the doing only involved putting together a

task force to study the issue. We will eventually get down to action, but before the action we've got to plan. It's all about getting something done.

What is demanded of the disciples here involves no busyness, no programs, no strenuous, stress-inducing effort. They are told simply to pray. In the end, the true work of the kingdom would not require their planning or effort. It would come by the Spirit's working through the church.

How do we view the delicate dance between our own effort and the work of the Spirit? What would it look like for the church of our day to gather to wait and pray? What an onerous burden that would be for a church that lives in an instant society where nothing happens without action and where successful people are required to worship at the altar of action. We pay homage to waiting once a year, in Advent; by the Easter season we have left waiting behind and are pedal to the metal with programs, trying to get everything in before the summer lull begins and people hurry off on vacations and to their summer cabins so they can cram in a few weekends of relaxation between the frenzied weeks of work.

What would it look like for congregations to wait and pray? What would it look like for individual Christians in congregations to practice waiting and praying in their own lives of faith? What would happen, for instance, if for every decision that the church council is required to make, they delayed that decision for a month so that they could wait and pray? What would happen if we had two congregational meetings a year, one three months prior to the "real one" where the decisions are made, and the time between the two was designated as a time to wait and pray?

Would anything change? Maybe no decision would change, but I have a hunch that we would change. Why wait? Waiting forces us to realize that there are things that we are called to do that are beyond our ability to accomplish. Waiting and praying may also be the way to actualize the prescription from the second reading; in the waiting and praying, we are on guard against the lures of the Evil One. The waiting and praying may be the way to actualize the prescription to cast cares upon the God who cares for us. JKH

Pentecost
May 15, 2008

Acts 2:1–21
Psalm 104:24–34, 35b
1 Corinthians 12:3b–13
John 7:37–37

The hard part about preaching on Pentecost is not trying to squeeze a theme or sermon out of the texts but deciding which of the abundant images and themes the preacher needs to preach in this place on this day.

We've already seen in the Acts reading for Easter 7 how Jesus instructed the disciples for forty days prior to his being taken into heaven. His further instructions urged them to wait and pray for the gift of the Spirit. As Luke tells the story from crucifixion to resurrection to ascension to Pentecost and beyond, there is no break in the action. Rather than a series of chapters, this is the continuation of the story of salvation. Pentecost is not a different story from Easter or ascension but the continuation of the same. The power of God that we see unleashed at Pentecost is the power that raised Christ from the dead and is now let loose, first on the eleven and then on the whole fledgling church.

Elements of this Pentecost story are supernatural; they don't give in very well to explanations and formulations. On a purely

analytical level, what is described is something strange, even bizarre, that we could never have dreamed up; something miraculous, ambiguous, and mysterious.

I think it would be helpful with the gathered assembly to paint the picture so that together preacher and people imagine what this must have looked like or sounded like. Such an imagined scene is not for the purposes of speculating about what the disciples were thinking or feeling but to capture the astonishing nature of the event and the varied reactions of the crowd. The crowd likely had no knowledge that Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit, and even if they had, would they have made the connection? All they knew was what they were seeing. No wonder they were amazed and perplexed. No wonder some of them came up with easy and, I suppose, natural explanations for such bizarre goings-on: "They are drunk."

The sound, the wind, and the fire give the impression of an almost violent unleashing. Fire needs oxygen to burn, but wind and fire are not always a good combination. Not if you're a camper trying to get the evening campfire lit and the wind keeps blowing out the little kindling flame. Not if you were a homeowner in southern California last October. The combination of wind and fire is potentially lethal. But here—Is it yet another sign of how things are new in Christ?—the wind and the fire set loose a mighty demonstration of God's power and love.

The wind plays prominently in the story. One can hardly read the Pentecost account without the creation account dancing merrily in the back of the mind, when the spirit/breath/wind of God "swept over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2 NRSV), and God said, "Let there be . . ." and there was. And alongside it is the story of Nicodemus in John 3 when Jesus told this religious man that one must be born again of water and the spirit/breath/wind.

What was heard as wind was seen as fire. And then the tongues of fire became the tongues of the diverse peoples in Jerusalem from all over the world. There to celebrate a feast, they become eyewitnesses of the unleashing of the Spirit of God for a new day and a new way. Here is the first charism of the Spirit: speech. Proclamation. The first recipients of the Spirit in the first public ministry of the church became a proclaiming community!

Quoting the prophet Joel, it is clear that Peter believes that he is standing as an eyewitness to the fulfilling of Joel's prophecy and watching as the last days unfold. Could he have grasped how true this really was, that forthtelling would no longer be the exclusive bailiwick of the professionals but would become the duty and delight of all God's people?

The psalm supports this exuberant unleashing of the Spirit. In its entirely, Psalm 104 is a psalm in praise of creation. In the section included in the lections for Pentecost, it comes to some climax when the psalmist declares that all the creatures belong to God and that God cares for all of them. Even the work of creation—its beginning and its sustenance—comes by the sending forth of the Spirit.

The second reading comes from the spiritual gifts section of Paul's letter to the troubled and dysfunctional congregation at Corinth. The many varieties of gifts—and Paul lists several of them—are all activated (participle of ενεργεω) by the same Spirit. I find this an interesting word. Generally it's intransitive, indicating that it *gets done to* rather than *does*. In short, whatever gifts are employed in proclamation, and even in the wider ministry of the servant church, those gifts are energized by the Spirit. And to each to whom gifts have been given, the manifestation (φανερωσις) of the Spirit is also given. No longer is the presence of the Spirit

by stealth; the Spirit is revealed, up front and visible, made known in and through each member of the body active in the ministry of Christ.

One aspect of the Pentecost story that is striking to me is the high drama. What both the disciples and the crowds heard was not commonplace and ordinary but supernatural. Although some accused the disciples of drinking before noon, the disciples themselves knew that they had witnessed divine power set loose in the world. The rest of Acts will tell about how what began at Pentecost in Jerusalem with a few followers of Jesus became a movement of thousands that spread throughout the known world.

The drama of the church today is not full of such visible signs and wonders. Or is it? What are the signs of the Pentecost Spirit in your congregation? What stories continue the dramatic unleashing of God's power in the world, and specifically in your community? If we believe that Pentecost was not a one-hit wonder, we will look for and find the stories of the continuing work of the Spirit. And what inspiring stories they will be to the people listening to our preaching on Pentecost!

Additionally, in both the 1 Corinthians passage and in the Acts Pentecost account, unity and commonality are highlighted in the midst of diversity. In spite of the languages that separated the Jerusalem pilgrims, in spite of the many practical and theological issues that may have separated the individual members of the Corinthian congregation, in spite of the plethora of concerns, questions, backgrounds, social and economic factors that may separate the members of or our own congregations, the Spirit is the common power of God among us that unites them and us and binds all together. JKH

The Holy Trinity
May 22, 2008

Genesis 1:1–2:4a
Psalm 8
2 Corinthians 13:11–13
Matthew 28:16–20

It is odd to have a Sunday devoted to a doctrine—and a doctrine that takes its name from a word that isn't even in the Bible. From that standpoint, preaching on Trinity Sunday, in my opinion, is very little about trying to explicate the doctrine of the Trinity and much more about helping unfold for the gathered assembly the good news that God is revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God is first revealed as Creator. In the grand language of Genesis 1, God is where we begin. The creation account can hardly be heard in North American churches without hearers calling to mind the cantankerous battles between science and religion about creation. What role does Genesis 1 play?

Science has brought us far more knowledge and understanding of the created order than the ancients could ever have imagined. And yet, Genesis 1 is astonishingly relevant, even for science-steeped North Americans. For it reveals the wonder of God. Genesis 1 is not explicitly a trinitarian text; rather, it speaks to us of one way in which God reveals God's self: marvelous, wondrous, mysterious, loving Creator.

Creation, God said, was good. So good is creation, in fact, that when it later fell, God esteemed it and us so highly that God sent the Son to redeem it and us. The cross becomes a continuation of the loving work begun in creation. This loving work is referenced indirectly in the second reading. The work of redemption brings to humanity the grace of God in Christ. The second reading seems to have been appointed for Trinity

Sunday because of its explicit trinitarian blessing, a blessing that serves in the liturgy as the apostolic greeting. Grace, love, and communion/fellowship (κοινονια) as blessings of the Trinity could be a fine structure for a sermon on Trinity Sunday.

Psalm 8 is another of the great creation poems. In the big picture of the entire created order, the psalmist asks, what are people that God should care at all about them? We are part of the created order, the song answers, and an important part. The world answers the question with a variety of responses: we are products of a purely scientific, evolutionary process; we are pawns in the hands of the world's powerful; we are biological machines that function for a time and then we die and cease to exist. The psalm lifts our eyes above mechanics to see that we are "crowned with glory and honor" (v. 5).

The Gospel reading, too, likely finds employment on Trinity Sunday because of its explicit trinitarian formula for baptism. While it might seem a little strange to hear an evangelism text used on Trinity Sunday, the oddity is only skin deep. The God who reveals God's very self as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a missionary God. The God revealed as Trinity is not content with the status quo. After the crucifixion, resurrection, and now ascension, God was not content to allow those who followed Jesus to go back to the way things were, to their homes and former occupations. They would carry on the mission that Jesus began, and would do it by going, and as they went they would teach and baptize.

The phrase "all authority has been given to me" may be an interesting one to unpack homiletically on Trinity Sunday. Authority (εξουσια) is a significant one for Matthew in describing Jesus. He is now the CEO of the universe and in complete control of the world. We received this good news in the texts for Ascension Day. Any who would claim power—spiritual, metaphysical, philosophical, material, religious—are now subject to Jesus. The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our God and of our Christ. What the kingdoms of this world thought they had—power—has been taken from them and given to Christ. As followers of Christ, we need fear no human powers, for we are cohorts with the king.

Frederick Dale Bruner, in his commentary on Matthew, writes that this verse is at the heart of the church's trinitarian formulations. If Matthew's claim is to hold any water, it must be true that Jesus is God. If Jesus has been given universal authority and yet is not God, where does that leave God? What the church has come to know, understand, and practice through the centuries is to worship Jesus as the Son of God the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. "Baptism is the last great 'handing over' of the passion-resurrection of Jesus. For in baptism, discipled people become the beneficiaries and children of a new Father, new siblings in the Son, and fresh companions of the Spirit."[3]

This new kingdom in Jesus means that we have come into possession of a new God —or, more accurately, that God has come into possession of us. We are under new management, are transferred to a new company.

In the increasingly multicultural world in which many of us preach, Christians are increasingly in contact with American Muslims. We share with our Muslim brothers and sisters a common heritage as people of the Book. Yet this very doctrine, for which we name a Sunday and which the appointed lections encourage us to say something about,

3. Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28*, revised and expanded edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 821.

is the stumbling block between Christians and Muslims, as it is between Christians and Jews. I recently had a long conversation with an American Muslim who had been studying the Bible for thirty years and knew it better than I did and better than anyone I had ever met. He brought his well-worn Bible with him and took me trekking through all the passages that claim Jesus' divinity. He had his own refutation for each of them. He was not militant at all but gentle and genuinely seeking truth. With some sadness in his voice, he said, "This is the one thing that keeps Christians and Muslims apart," suggesting that we need only give up the claim that Jesus is divine for these two great religions to become one.

What do we say? The readings today suggest that God's revelation as Father, Son, and Spirit is at the very heart and core of our faith; take that away, and we are no longer left with Christianity.

The final promise and assurance of Matthew's Gospel is aimed not at the future but at the present. Jesus does not say "I will be with you" but "I am with you." The Crucified One, the God-with-us One, the God-in-human-flesh One, this One is with us now and will be to the end. This is a promise of great comfort, a promise of protection and defense, and also a promise of empowerment and encouragement. The charge that Jesus gives in the great commission is now empowered. Disciples are given courage, wisdom, power, and the promise that what we are sent for will be accomplished. JKH

Proper 3 – Lectionary 8
Time after Pentecost
May 29, 2008

Isaiah 49:8–16a
Psalm 131
1 Corinthians 4:1–5
Matthew 6:24–34

Isaiah 49 is a back-and-forth dialogue between the Servant Israel, Darius, and Yahweh, with a choral interlude at verse 13. The exiled people yearn for return from exile, and it becomes clear in these verses that Darius, unlikely successor to Cyrus, will be the "savior" who returns the people from exile to their own land. Ezra records the role that Darius played; he is the one who ordered that the work on the temple in Jerusalem be resumed and completed. Verse 13 provides a doxological choral interlude, a song of praise at the news that Yahweh will, in fact, bring his people back to their land. Verse 14 provides a contrasting lament, as if to say, "it cannot be true; we will not return; we have been forgotten." The lection ends with well-known words that deliver powerful images of love and care and comfort.

The final image, of Yahweh declaring that his people have been inscribed on the palm of his hands, delivers the promise that God's people have been cut into God's flesh and therefore constantly, continually, unrelentingly on God's mind. The image becomes even more powerful when the cross moves from the background to the foreground and we see pierced hands of Jesus on the cross, the scars as the sign of the atonement and our salvation. The deep love and care with which the reading ends finds its greatest expression in the Father's sending of the Son and the Son's giving of himself.

Psalm 131 is an unusually brief song that expresses a humble and quiet trust in Yahweh. The exemplary simplicity of the

faith of the psalmist is apparent: "I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me." Instead, he has chosen simply to put his trust and hope in Yahweh, eschewing the need to understand everything completely. There is an explicit connection with Isaiah, as this psalm also uses the image of the love of a mother for her child, although the nursing child of Isaiah has become the weaned child in the psalm.

The second reading opens with a powerful introductory phrase describing the relationship that Paul and his coworkers want with their wayward congregation. They want to be regarded above all as "servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries." The rest of the lection provides an "on the one hand" and "on the other hand" treatment of human versus divine judgment.

As a pastor reading the words of a pastor, I choke on Paul's words "I am not aware of anything against myself." I am more than well aware of my own weaknesses, failures, and limitations and could not imagine saying such a thing to the people I serve. But for Paul, it all seems to be pointed to placing ourselves under God's judgment, a judgment that inevitably falls in our favor for the sake of the One who has inscribed us in the palms of his nail-scarred hands. God will bring things to light; God not only will disclose the purposes of the heart but will transform those purposes through the sanctifying work of the Spirit in us. We need not wait to understand these things that are too great and marvelous for us, but instead, "hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore" (Ps 131:3).

Matthew 6 is the center chapter of the Sermon on the Mount. In the first part of the chapter, Jesus comments on and gives instructions on a variety of pieties, indicating how the practice has been distorted and giving his own correctives. Today's reading follows that discussion. It opens with the warning that one cannot serve two masters, God and Mammon. In a culture in which success and material goods are such driving forces, unpacking these two verses and their implications for the life of the Christian would be a relevant and timely sermon.

The larger part of the reading deals with the anxieties of having enough. We are inundated with cultural counsel to make a variety of investments here on earth in order to have security. We are encouraged to make financial investments so that we might have security for the proverbial rainy day, for the children's education, and for retirement. We are encouraged to make investments of education for the sake of our career, which will make it easier to find financial security. We are encouraged to make investments in our family, in our health, and in our overall well-being. While none of these things is bad, Jesus teaches us to cast a wary eye at their ability to provide real security. How odd it is that the more we pursue security, the more anxiety we experience.

In the face of physical needs, it is easy for us to believe that a supernatural God is irrelevant. But Jesus teaches us that God is apparently not too busy or too distant or too far beyond us to care about such basic things as clothing and food.

If the world's religion is acquisition, here, as in the entire Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' disciples are called to be different. If the world is concerned about the security of possessions, we are called to be countercultural and be concerned about the kingdom of God. We are concerned with a quiet, steady, daily seeking of God's kingdom, what Eugene Peterson calls "a long obedience in the same direction."[4]

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4. Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in and Instant Society*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2000).

At a recent breakfast, a friend, who is also a clergy colleague, and I were discussing the extraordinary popularity of *The Secret*.[5] According this book, the secret to a life of meaning and purpose is to determine what you want and put it out to the universe. In the midst of a conversation that revolved around trying to understand the popularity of such a message came this blunt indictment: The church has failed. While perhaps overly harsh, the kernel of truth is that through the centuries we have made Christianity and the church about church attendance and confession and morality and . . . well, you complete the list. We have made it about anything but the deep, profound love of God for God's people that is communicated in all the readings for this day. A sermon that celebrates the elements of this deep and profound divine love by pulling together the thematic strands from each of the lessons could be one step of corrective, at least for the people in the congregations we serve. JKH

5. Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret* (New York: Atria Books, 2006).

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