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Bringing Out of the Gospel-Treasure What is New and What is Old:
Two Parables from Matthew
Daniel Patte
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Fall 1990

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CHRISTIAN EDUCATOR Maria Harris tells of an unexpected gift she once received from a student, who had been asked to define teaching. He put his definition in the form of a haiku:

We meet awkwardly.
I invite you to walk,
I find you dancing."

Think of the first day of any class you've taken (or taught): the alien classroom, the seat that is not yours, the vague smiles of greeting, the sound of one voice talking. It is all very pedestrian at the beginning, until the crucial moment when questions—the kind that could be rephrased, "how should I think about...?"—are posed. The dance of teaching has begun.

What is the church's stake in the teaching process?

In his article on the teaching office in the United Methodist Church, Langford contends that we do not merely have individual classrooms, individual teachers and learners, and discrete incidents of Christian instruction. Instead, we have a total vision of education that is a part of everything a layperson, deacon, or ordained minister does. The teaching ministry of the church is fundamentally a stance toward life, what Richard Robert Osmer has called "a teachable spirit." Langford's article will appear in a collection of essays titled Teaching Authority in The United Methodist Church, edited by Charles Foster, to be published by Abingdon Press in October, 1991.

A superb example of the harmony between teaching and one's deepest convictions is C. Eric Lincoln, who was Duke University's Teacher of the Year in 1989. Mary Sawyer has

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INTRODUCTION

written a tribute to her teacher that includes samples of his writing, which often verges on poetry. If you are interested in reading more, find a copy of Lincoln's recent novel, The Avenue, Clayton City. Constructed as a series of vignettes tied together by the small town setting of Clayton City in the years between World Wars I and II, it is a powerful work of fiction.

Ted Campbell explores Church of England and Methodist history for a look at the evangelical position on the relationship between baptism and conversion. For him, the evangelical emphasis on repentance and decision for Christ cannot be neglected, even as the church struggles to offer a theological rationale for the practice of infant baptism. Campbell's article underscores the fact that liturgical language not only expresses our beliefs, but teaches them.

In the ancient traditions of Israel, Aaron and Moses were brothers. Aaron was a priest and Moses was a prophet. Aaron, we recall, was a fine public speaker; Moses, seized with stage fright before his people, conversed with God, "as with a friend." John Holbert's close reading of Exodus 32 lets us see these two brothers pitted against one another over the illegitimate worship of the Golden Calf, one of the most infamous episodes in the Hebrew Bible.

I suspect that Cornish Rogers, like many preachers, has shaken his head over lectionary texts from apocalyptic literature. It must have given him some comfort to learn that scholars have also had their problems with it. But Revelation's kaleidoscopic vision has captured his imagination; his article challenges us to work with these texts to see the promise of salvation there, and to celebrate it in our congregations.

Finally, Daniel Patte has turned the lectionary study into a unique teaching tool on the parables. With a slight change of perspective, these simple, familiar stories about a master and his servants, a farmer and his hired hands become part of our contemporary world. Now they are filled with significance about the nature of God's presence, our need for sisters and brothers, and the quest for justice. May these new readings enliven your encounter with the word!
The Teaching Office in the United Methodist Church

Thomas A. Langford

Our concern in this paper is: how can a church which explicitly calls itself "apostolic" bear faithful witness to the Christian gospel? How can the United Methodist Church exercise the apostolic task of ensuring that it presents the received gospel authentically? Or, again, how can the United Methodist Church maintain the truth of the gospel for its own life and for the sake of the world?

The issue is the nature of the teaching office within Methodism. How is the church's proclamation tested? How is its life judged? How are its interpretations assessed? By whom? According to what criteria?

A description of how we have taught is important. Let us begin with some historical observations. Methodism, as the Wesleyan revival movement, held theology to be inextricably joined with practice. To paraphrase Ludwig Wittgenstein: to have a theological language is to possess a form of life. The

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dominant implication of this conviction in Methodist history has been a type of pragmatism—truth is known in its application. Put differently, theology is to be judged by the quality of the life it produces. Theology, in this tradition, has not been abstract, rather it has been understood predominantly as underwriting personal and communal spiritual and moral life. To know God is to love and serve God; truth about God is truth about life.

Such a norm has much to commend it. Nothing is more stultifying than self-certain and self-righteous rational orthodoxy; but this has not been Methodism's problem. Our problem has been the lack of clear authority for determining the interrelation of theology with worship and with moral life; we have been deficient in clarifying the grounding and testing of our praxis; we have been overbalanced toward action in contrast to reflection. As a result, Methodism has been too uncertain in its self-criticism and too prone to conform to non-theological (or not distinctively Christian) influences and cultural values. Hence our actions are often primarily politically or sociologically or economically formed. The lack of clarity about the teaching office in Methodism is reflected in inadequate guidance of the thought and life of the church.

The issue we are considering is: how will the gospel be preserved by the conscious intention of the church? How can doctrine protect the true proclamation of the gospel? The roles of teaching, interpretation and clarification are essential to the preaching and instruction for Christian life and nurture. Our questions are: how does United Methodism do this? How well does it do this?

In John Wesley's time, annual conference meetings served as the magisterium of the Methodist Church. This represented a conciliarist understanding, namely, theological judgments require the consensus of the community through its representatives. The role of Wesley was paramount and even imperious, but he acted within a conference structure. This mode of theological consultation expressed Wesley's conviction that Christian conference (in its several guises—as band, class or conference) can be a means of grace. The supremacy of Conference as the "Living Wesley" was maintained in British
Methodism through conflict and challenge as expressed in the Leeds Organ Case (1820s), the Warrenite Secession (1834-5), and the Fly-Sheet Controversy (1849-53).

Note must be taken of the attitude within Methodism toward the education of ministers. Both in England and in North America there was deep resistance to establishing theological institutes and to formal education of ministers; and, consequently, a failure to recognize a well developed teaching office for preachers. In Great Britain the Warrenite debates in the 1830s revealed strong anti-intellectualism. And in North America typical negative attitudes toward college-trained preachers (see for instance Peter Cartwright's autobiography) resisted any educational program beyond the individualized Course of Study. A lack of trust in explicit theological leadership was evident along with a conservative attitude toward doctrinal formulations (note the restrictive rules in the Discipline). All of these factors reinforced a hesitancy to engage in ongoing and significant exercise of the teaching office. General Conference retained power but little will to exercise the office except where pressed by political necessity (such as the issue of Christian holiness in the 1890s). Creative theological reflection was often focused in moral issues, as found in the Social Creed.

In North American Methodism, General Conference functioned as the interpretive authority for the church. Polity, theology, and engagement with culture were intertwined and in all of these areas General Conference was the authoritative voice of what was authentic, necessary, or allowable. In the breakup of the North American church in the 1840s, new authoritative structures emerged. In the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Council of Bishops became the final court of appeal for all disciplinary matters; in the Methodist Episcopal Church the General Conference retained its supreme position. One of the compromises of the 1939 union was the creation of the Judicial Council as the final arbiter (superceding both General Conference and the Council of Bishops) of what the Discipline means or what the General Conference intends. More and more interpretive authority is exercised to maintain legitimate procedure and to adjudicate counter claims; substan-
tive theological issues are not directly dealt with by the Judicial Council. The General Conference, if it will, can still exercise the power of theological interpretation. As a matter of fact, this is actually done, but usually indirectly and through discussion of particular issues of practice and polity.

In actual practice, a secondary but pervasive set of influences is to be found in some of the boards and agencies, such as the Board of Discipleship and the Board of Global Ministries and the Publishing House with its responsibilities for curriculum resources. These units are given their mandate for teaching activity by the Discipline and are in this sense under the jurisdiction of the General Conference. Ordinarily, however, they function with independence. A thorough study of the teaching office in United Methodism must take these influential bodies into account.

This leaves the bishops of the UMC in an ambiguous position. In most polities bishops play a critical role as "teachers" of the church and a major understanding of a bishop's responsibility is his or her teaching office. This has not historically been the case in Methodism (with the possible exception of the bishops of the MEC, South). Bishops are spiritual leaders and conference managers. In United Methodism, they are viewed as executives in conference affairs; they possess influence of office and person but since they have no vote in General Conference they do not directly participate in judgments about what the church should teach or do. What they in fact do is to execute the policies made by others. Even if functionally one can demonstrate that the bishops exercise greater power than they are explicitly granted, it remains the case that they cannot speak officially and authoritatively in regard to the authenticity of the apostolic message. The bishops have no directly delegated teaching office in the UMC.

There was a period—up until 1908—when the bishops in North American Methodism did possess a direct theological influence as they were empowered to approve all appointments to faculty positions in the church related theological schools. The heresy trials of 1905-1908, however, made the bishops' role difficult and their clear area of responsibility was surrendered. It is not an overstatement to say that currently bishops in the
UMC play an insignificant role in speaking for the church in matters of theology and a somewhat more important role, though still undefined, in guiding moral application. The last reorganization of the Council of Bishops in 1976 created four committees, one of which is "Teaching Concerns," with a subcommittee on "Theological Education." This is evidence of the intention to exercise a greater influence in this area.

A clear exception to this general condition is the recent bishops' pastoral, In Defense of Creation. (It is significant to note that this is a "pastoral" statement--which might be understood to mean that it possesses the same authority and power of a papal "pastoral" but which, in reality, means that it is advice of colleagueship and is, thereby, a contribution to conciliar discussion.) This particular pastoral may prove to be an important initiative. Theological advice was sought, careful formulation was made, wide contribution was achieved, and much discussion has followed. This action may adumbrate an ongoing initiative by the Council of Bishops to lead theological reflection of the church; it may represent a claim for a teaching role. If so it represents a claim initiated by the bishops--rather than granted by General Conference--and this may create a significant place for the bishops in the theological life of the church. Whether this will be remains to be seen.

In regard to General Conference, one particular activity must be noted. The 1988 revision of the theological section of the Discipline is an important expression of the General Conference's exercise of its authority in the teaching office. This is a commendable and potentially important move--especially if it is not limited to one section of the Discipline or to an occasional activity of General Conferences.

One consequence of the lack of clarity about the teaching office beyond or in addition to the official role of General Conference is that functionally the responsibility for exercise of this office devolves on each ordained minister. In the act of ordination, authority "to preach the word" is given, implying a teaching responsibility. Further, in the disciplinary statement of "Duties of a Pastor" (par. 438) two possible references can be taken to refer to a teaching responsibility: "Among the pastor's duties are the following:
"a) To preach the Word, read and teach the Scriptures, and engage the people in study and witness."

"(1) To instruct candidates for membership and receive them into the Church."

The assumption in both cases seems to be that there is a clear and persisting understanding of the gospel which pastors are to convey. The matter of assessing this proclamation is not addressed.

There are basic matters in this delegation of responsibility that need to be noted. First, a full teaching responsibility is not explicitly given, so the role must be interpreted from suggestions. Second, such a function tends toward individual interpretation and underplays the corporate responsibility of the church or of a congregation. Perhaps we should more clearly acknowledge the teaching responsibility of every ordained minister and seek ways both to establish corporate responsibility and to enable more consistent expression of this responsibility.

At the present time there is little explicit understanding of how the teaching office ought to be exercised. General Conference has designated power but little competence, sufficient time, or historically formed character to fulfil this task. (These comments are not meant as personal indictments or ascription of general incompetence; rather they are judgments about the capacity of General Conference to exercise its teaching responsibility.) Further, the Judicial Council does not function in such a manner as to engage theological issues; and the Council of Bishops has no directly delegated authority or history of activity which promise leadership in this area. Pastors do have some designated responsibility, but this function remains vague (perhaps because it assumes a clear understanding of the gospel).

Ambiguity about the teaching office extends to the role of persons who have teaching posts (such as professors in theological schools) which bear directly on the church's life and doctrine. For these persons there is little guidance as to how, in their teaching roles, they relate to the ongoing life of the church or even to their ordination responsibilities. I lift up this matter, for we continue to live with an unstable relation between the general church and its theological schools; between
persons who have explicit teaching roles within the general life of the church and their ordination responsibilities. Other traditions—such as the Reformed tradition—practice ordination to the teaching role. A question is whether United Methodism should consider a similar recognition.

Yet I see possibilities: (1) for the bishops to be assertive and claim a central role, (2) for the General Conference and annual conferences to establish ongoing theological commissions, (3) for there to be theological discussion as a part of General Conference's regular agenda (and derivatively, of annual—and district?—conferences), and for clarification of the "teaching office" for pastors in local congregations, and (5) rethink the role of those whose vocation is teaching. Is it impossible to hope for these changes?

To pursue this possibility I want to consider several issues which are important in understanding the teaching office in United Methodism.

Communal Formation

The nature of teaching itself must be examined. It is not the case that we only teach when we explicitly intend to do so or when we attempt to instruct through stereotyped methods. Of primary importance is the formation provided by a community, its life and rituals, its styles and concerns, its language, its mission and its values.

The church teaches by its common life, its worship, its mission and its discipline. This total ethos is authoritative as it makes possible communal transmission of its distinctive life. Teaching is conveyed by styles and content of worship, by hymnody and prayers, by claims upon all community members to participate in the mission of God and by mutual claims of community members upon one another. Teaching is conveyed by the entire life of being in a community. A part of such teaching is specific reflection upon doctrine and the community’s way of life. Unfortunately, explicit theology has often been left aside in efforts at self-understanding in the church. This issue is: how may theology and the life of the church be held together? Or, can we be conscious of the multi-
ple ways in which we instruct in our community, relate this to theological self-reflection, and reempower the formation of whole persons in mind as well as in heart and service?

For Methodism this inclusive mode of teaching is important, for it is in accordance with the role of theology within the life and faith of this tradition. The Wesleyan tradition is not primarily theological; but to the extent that it is theological, Wesleyanism has stressed the wholeness of experience as thought, affection, will, and action. Wesleyan theology is found within the historical process of concrete Methodist bodies as they have worshipped and lived and taught, as they have developed institutions, assumed missional tasks, found common symbols, rituals, and styles of life. As a part, and only as a part, of this total complex can Wesleyan theology be adequately appreciated.

These matters have implications for the teaching office in Methodism. That is, there is no isolated body of doctrine which is to be taught as finally independent: not only the method of teaching--namely clear recognition of the full range of communication, but also what is taught--namely that theology is a part of a more complete and more adequate response of human beings to God. Theology is important but not singular; the intellectual love of God is one aspect of a more inclusive love of God; teaching has to do not only with thoughts but with the ways in which "we live and move and have our being." The teaching office in Methodism, therefore, has a distinctive character and role. To teach is to contribute to the total formation of Christian life; teaching is done by deed and action as well as by word. And what is taught is not doctrine in an abstracted way but "practical divinity"; that is, doctrine undergirding and enriching Christian existence.

Goals of Teaching

In traditional Methodist language, the goal of our teaching is the sanctification of persons and of congregations. To state the goal in this way is to move from an abstract intellectualism toward practical agency as persons in community with God and neighbors. Hence the goal of teaching in Methodism is not uniquely focussed on rational consensus in doctrinal construc-
tion. The aim is holistic: teaching is in order to provide authentic worship and service; teaching is for the sculpting of life. The means of teaching are totalistic: teaching is a part of every activity and is effective as it conveys ways of living. Methodists were not called people of method for no reason. The ordering of life in comprehensive terms was the shaping Christian response. Yet we have tended to underplay the importance of the methods of Methodists. One does not want to overstate what the methodical character of Methodists produced or portended, but this very means of formation points in the direction of a comprehensive sense of instruction and of the goals of teaching.

The goal of the sanctification of persons and of congregations informs the responsibility of teaching. That is, the teaching office is in the service of the achievement of these goals. So teaching is not singularly for intellectual maturation, rather teaching is for the transformation and enhancement of life as the worship of God and service to the neighbor. The office of teaching is that of a person or a community who attempts to measure the ongoing life of the church by its source (namely God in Christ through the Holy Spirit) and by the ongoing reign of God and its eschatological hope.

Perhaps this raises the question of the residence of authority in United Methodism. Authentic authority is conveyed by community and functions to organize or shape life according to the values of that community. Authority functions in a variety of modes and through numerous channels. Authority is accepted as valid when it nurtures life through means and toward goals which are acknowledged as possessing integrity, sensitivity, and value. The authorities which structure life for United Methodists are those received through the entire encompassing life of the local congregation and the ethos of the larger church. To be aware of what authorizes one's existence is important; covert authorities are pernicious while overt authorities are not only recognized but may be challenged and utilized.

When we speak of authority we are not only asking, who speaks for the church? We are asking, how should the church speak authoritatively to its own life, in critique of its message
and in the ordering of life toward its goals? The problem is not theoretical but intensely practical. Theoretically we have seen that the official authority in the church resides in General Conference; but are not unofficial and less explicit authorities also potent? Do not the regular worship service, the ongoing tasks of mission, the disciplines of Christian formation, and the sensibilities of a church community actually function authoritatively in our denomination's life? Obviously they do. Yet all of these modes of authorization need to be critically assessed, they need to be judged against their normative source and the continuing intention of God.

To look at the goals of teaching in The United Methodist Church is to focus on what our teaching is for, and consequently, to ask about our goals and about our effectiveness in achieving those goals. In a sense every discussion of policy or missional priority in a local church or at General Conference attempts this task. The point I am pressing is: should this not be more regularly, formally, and intentionally done? Is an explicit group required for this task to be done well? Does General Conference need a theological commission?

Ecumenical Context

To ask the preceding questions should not allow us to turn inward and investigate only our own tradition. Rather, it places us within the context of Christian faithfulness in its broadest context. Over the course of history, various church traditions have developed their own practices of authoritative teaching. Different historical presuppositions issue into different forms of transmission and different placements of authority. Also every culture has its own forms of authority and transmission of authority. From within Methodism and from the ecumenical community we have much to learn. There are no stereotypes of a teaching office. Our task as United Methodists is to understand our own life, to be open from others, and to build new means of being affirming, critical, and obedient.

Present Situation

Any contemporary teaching office faces profound difficulties. Individualism, pluralism, and disregard for authority
makes teaching suspect and limited. A Faith and Order state­
ment says baldly, "Today all concepts, ways and modes of teach­
ing are being tested."  

Inherited modes of teaching are now questioned. We are
challenged to be creative in imagining how teaching should be
done in our time. We cannot teach authoritatively today by
simply repeating the past. New times demand new responses.

In United Methodism we are especially in need of claiming
the task of teaching at a variety of levels and by a variety of
groups. The conciliar tradition which is ours can continue as
the context of discussion, argument, agreements, and recogni­
tion of new challenges.

Concluding Suggestions

The teaching office in United Methodism is of critical impor­
tance in order to ensure authentic offering of worship, truthful
proclamation, and extension of service. Nevertheless this
responsibility has not been attended to in a conscious and
thorough way. Consequently, the following suggestions are
made.

1. General Conference and annual conferences should make
discussion of theology a regular and significant part of their
agenda. These are the points at which conciliar decisions be­
come a reality. To serve this purpose conferences should ap­
point a permanent Theological Commission to which matters
might be referred and which will have authority to study issues
on its own. This commission should report regularly to General,
Annual and District Conferences where its reports will be
studied and acted upon.

2. The bishops of the church should continue to initiate study
and make statements so as to provide leadership in the discus­
sions of theological and ethical issues. In order to strengthen
this role, paragraph 501 in the Discipline should be revised to
include teaching as a part of the task of the bishops.

3. Local clergy should be directly encouraged to assume
teaching responsibilities, and congregations should be en­
couraged to support this role.

4. There should be recognition of persons in church seminary
teaching positions who could, along with their task, be specifi­
cally recognized as in their appointment beyond the local church.

These suggestions assume that conciliarism is the form of decision-making about theological issues and that decisions will be made by communities and, finally, by General Conference as the representative leadership group of The United Methodist Church.

The establishment of a teaching office in the United Methodist Church which is consciously set and explicitly acknowledged would significantly serve the church. Such a responsibility would help to maintain the authenticity of the gospel we preach; it would provide more adequate bases for our ethical and missional activity; and it would make us critically aware of the values which underwrite the worship and order in the life of the church. Our church functions so as to teach in the totality of its communal life. It would be strengthened in its practice if what it teaches could be regularly and thoroughly assessed.

Notes

1. This is thoroughly discussed in John C. Bowmer, Pastor and People (London: Epworth Press, 1975) 121-125. (Quoted without footnotes.)

“For Wesley’s early preachers little formal training was necessary, for he supervised their studies, and that was sufficient for their needs; but a very different situation faced their descendants of 1835. To the zeal of the evangelist must now be added a training in theology. The Preacher was now also a Pastor and teacher, ministering to people who were taking advantage of the increasing opportunities for education. Methodism was itself a force for improvement, and congregations did not take kindly to ill-educated preachers. Hence the call, from certain quarters, for some form of ministerial training.

“The need for some kind of training for the Preachers had been acknowledged since the early days. At the first Conference (1744) the question was asked, ‘Can we have a seminary for labourers?’ and the answer was, ‘If God spare us until another Conference.’ In 1745 the matter was raised again and shelved until ‘God gives us a proper tutor.’ Meanwhile Wesley was educating his preachers by personal contact and through his Christian Library; some of them he sent for a short spell to Kingswood School. After his death, the care of the young preachers was frequently before Conference. It became the duty of the District Chairman to see that each probationer in his District produced a Book List and was examined orally at the District Meeting. In 1804 a plan for the intellectual improvement of the junior preachers was proposed by Adam Clarke and other preachers stationed in London, but it did not meet with much encouragement. In 1823 a groowerful group of preachers—John Gaultor, Jabez Bunting, Thomas Jackson and Richard Watson—prepared a report but, again,
nothing came of it. Others, equally influential men in the Connexion, strongly advocated the establishment of an academy, but it was not until 1833 that Conference took the matter seriously, and when they did the objections which were raised against it revealed both the anxieties of the people and the popular image of what a minister is and ought to be. It is instructive to note what those objections were.

"1. In the first place it was said to be ‘at variance with the plans and preceding of the venerable Founder of Methodism.’ In spite of the known attitude of Wesley and the decisions of his early Conferences, this was advanced as a serious argument, even by Dr. Warren. He argued that while there were many brilliant scholars in the ranks of the Methodist ministry, basically the Methodist Preacher should remain untrained and that Providence would always provide sufficient men of the academic type to meet the needs of the Church.

"2. Secondly, there was an ingrained fear of losing what Dr. Warren called, ‘our primitive simplicity’. The pioneer Itinerants were honoured as men who ‘rough it’; rightly or wrongly, there was a fear lest college-trained men, ‘losing their simplicity and zeal…should acquire delicate habits by no means consistent with the toils and privations to which they may afterwards be exposed.’ Or as Dr. Warren, in more picturesque language expressed it, ‘The men thus raised up are indigenous to the soil and climate in which they are reared. Instead of being improved by the salubrious fumes of a hot-house Institution, they would degenerate and become worthless, if not even noxious…’ A more balanced attitude is that of Wesley, the scholar-saint, who never set piety against learning, and while his Itinerants were mostly unlettered men, gave them such education as they had time and ability to assimilate. Jonathan Crowbar (scn.) ably summed up the attitude of reasonable men in Methodism when he said, ‘It is not a pre-requisite for admission as a Preacher among us that a man be what is termed a scholar. Yet the Methodists neither despise nor neglect learning.’

"3. There was a third, and more serious objection; that academic considerations would become more important than the inward call. Wesley, and indeed the Methodists since his time, knew enough of the university-trained clergyman whose moral life was, to say the least, open to question. He had commented severely on such men, for on their shoulders must lie much of the blame for the cleavage between Methodism and the Church of England. So one can understand the fears of those who saw the danger if ever Methodism substituted learning for piety; namely, that the wrong type of candidate should be admitted on the grounds of academic attainments alone.

"4. Finally, there were several minor and largely personal objections to the Institution. Dr. Warren argued, for instance, that the Institution had not the support of the people, and he overstated his case with a personal attack on Bunting and his friends. He denounced ‘the coalition of a few or the ascendency of an individual.’ At the same time, it was widely thought at the time that if he had been given a post on the staff of the Institution he would have forgiven much that he censured in Bunting.

‘So the Theological Institution was founded and Methodists were learning to link piety and learning. Understandably so, for many of them had had their fill of well-meaning but unschooled preachers who did more harm than good;
and they were coming to the conclusion that piety, however sincere, was not enough in the office of a Christian minister.

"On the whole, the Connexion welcomed an educated ministry; so much so that by 1847 circuits were asking for 'Institution men!' The Wesleyan conception of the ministry was undergoing a change. The minister was to be more than an evangelist; he was to be also Pastor and Teacher."


3. In the disciplinary description of the "Nature of the Superintendency" (par. 501) the responsibilities of a bishop are listed as ordering the life of the church, as initiating structures and strategies for equipping Christian people for service, and as administering matters temporal and spiritual. All of these tasks are gathered under the rubric of "leadership." Both here and in listing the "Specific Responsibilities of Bishops" (par. 512) no mention is made of a "teaching office" or any equivalent responsibility. Officially, therefore, bishops are not explicitly given this responsibility.

C. Eric Lincoln, Scholar and Prophet of Black Religious Studies

Mary R. Sawyer

OF THE MANY by-products of the change-oriented 1960s, one of the most significant was the emergence of the academic field of black religious studies. Central to the development of this new area of study was a uniquely prepared scholar, C. Eric Lincoln. Now, twenty years later, Lincoln enjoys the status of master teacher and itinerant sage. Like the field of black religious studies itself, Lincoln is interdisciplinary: an historian, a sociologist of both race relations and religion, and a religious ethicist by training. But his academic training in ethics accounts less for his influence than does his particular approach to religious studies, which in its passion is unabashedly an extension of his personal values.

A white colleague in the field of religious studies was once heard to offer this assessment of Lincoln's work: "He'll be going along being a scholar, and then he suddenly feels compelled to bleed for his people." Intended as a criticism, the remark

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C. ERIC LINCOLN

highlights a fundamental strength of black religious studies: the unequivocal rejection of the notion that scholarship requires one to be indifferent to the reality of his or her experience.

In this respect, Lincoln’s work is in much the same tradition as feminist and Third World scholarship, which honors the experiential, particularly power relationships and the inequities attendant to them. The premise of such scholars is precisely that value judgments are needed in order to excise racism, sexism, and classism. All such scholarship is thus intrinsically concerned with ethics, with Lincoln’s focus on the matter of race. If one theme is constant throughout his writing, it is the theme of "the American dilemma"—the discrepancy between America’s creed of equality and justice and the reality of her conduct.1

Formative Experiences

Because Lincoln’s approach is experientially based, it will be instructive, before turning to an overview of his work, to examine briefly his childhood origins. Lincoln’s vocation as moral commentator on American society had its unlikely beginnings in Athens, Alabama, where he was born in 1924. The circumstances of his childhood were ordinary enough for the time: poverty and racial segregation defined life’s limitations while family, church, and school offered avenues for transcendence. The questions that were to frame his life’s work were conceived at the age of nine when, innocent of racial protocol, he presented himself along with a group of white children at a public immunization clinic and was violently informed by the attending physician: "All niggers have to wait!"2

There were other lessons, including the beating suffered at age 13 at the hands of the manager of the local cotton gin when Lincoln protested being cheated out of a fair price for the cotton he and his grandmother had picked to pay for his school books. No less instructive were the consequences when Lincoln, the sixteen-year-old editor of the school paper, defied the paper’s faculty adviser by editorializing against the segregated seating in the school auditorium on the occasion of a presentation by
the school chorus. The editorial "created a furor" and cost Lincoln his after-school job.

Lessons of a different order were learned at home, which consisted of Lincoln's grandparents, Mattie and Less Charles Lincoln, two cousins who were regarded as sisters, and an assortment of extended family relatives. Between his grandparents, his grandfather was the "gentle and temperate" personality, while his grandmother was "forthright and assertive." The elder Mr. Lincoln was confined to bed near the end of his life, and died while his grandson was still in high school. His grandmother cared for the family, admonishing the boys to avoid any appearance of racial impropriety, and generally negotiating the rules of the caste system in such a way as to protect her household while keeping her dignity intact. It was also his grandmother who read to the children from the Bible, and intoned time and again: "You are all God's children, and you are as good as anybody."

Discipline, moral sensibilities, and affirmation of self-worth came not only from his grandparents, but from the members of Village View Methodist Church where young Charles (the C. Eric came later) participated in dramatic performances and, as a teenager, served the congregation in the capacity of Sunday school teacher. Lincoln literally grew up in the church, and later wrote that "the Village View Methodist Church was for a very long time the symbol of God's love and concern for me." But this only intensified his theological questioning of the world outside the church, which was ruled by contradictions.

While Lincoln's grandmother was a faithful supporter of the family's church, his grandfather never graced the building with his presence. Lincoln eventually learned that this stance symbolized not a rejection of God or religion, but a protest against the human institutional decree that God must be worshipped on a segregated basis. Troubled by the inconsistencies between "the faith as taught and the faith as expressed," the youngster broached his pastor for an explanation. The pastor's reply was that "religion is a sometime thing. It depends on who has it, as to whether it's this or whether it's that. But God knows it when he sees it." This was, Lincoln was to recall, "a bitter revelation,"
and he became "very greatly disturbed" about this "two-level faith."

These theological perplexities followed Lincoln through his academic journey, beginning with Trinity School, a missionary school founded by the American Missionary Association following the Civil War (which provided the sole opportunity for black children in Athens to continue their education beyond the sixth grade), and ending with the Boston University Graduate School, where Lincoln earned his M.Ed. and Ph.D. In between he attended the University of Chicago evening division; Le-Moyne College (A.B.) in Memphis, Tennessee; Fisk University (M.A.) in Nashville; the University of Chicago Law School; and the University of Chicago Divinity School (B.Div.). Whether the curriculum was sociology, law, religion or education, Lincoln's concern with the conflict between Christian doctrine and the reality of race in America was constant--although that was not his sole interest.

Creative writing was Lincoln's original career choice. Discouraged by a college professor from committing himself to a field in which there "was no future for blacks," Lincoln nevertheless has made an avocation of creative writing. During his undergraduate years, and continuing through his service in the Navy, he pursued this first love, producing anecdotes and short stories for Reader's Digest and romance magazines, poetry, social essays, and biographical profiles.

During his graduate years, Lincoln was formally ordained, initially in the Presbyterian Church, and subsequently in the United Methodist Church. His sole appointment was to two small churches in Tennessee, one in Nashville and the other a country church near Columbia. The "one redeeming feature" of the experience, he was later to recall, was that "once a month the country church fed me!" Finding "pastoring" not his forte, Lincoln "ducked into the first classroom I found and never came out." In recent years, Lincoln has accepted occasional preaching invitations. But scholarship has proved in all respects to better suit his temperament and interests.
Academic Journey

A year after completing his dissertation at Boston University, the manuscript was published in revised form as The Black Muslims in America (1961). In the foreword, Yale social psychologist Gordon Allport—then regarded as the foremost expert on intergroup relations in the United States—described the book as "one of the best technical case studies in the whole literature of social science." The book not only established Lincoln as a scholar in the academic world, but brought him and the Black Muslim movement (a phrase he coined) to the public eye. No less than 55 reviews of the book were published. At age 37, Lincoln had become the authority on the Black Muslims for the print and electronic media, and indeed, on the black liberation movement in general. Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, he was a frequent guest on major network news and commentary shows. He was routinely called to testify as an expert witness in court cases involving the Black Muslims, particularly around the issues of conscientious objection to military service and the right to hold religious services in prison.

Throughout the turbulence of the 1960s, while his initial essays were being republished, Lincoln continued to study and to write on the Black Muslims and on the nonviolent civil rights movement as well. As close as the issues of the day were to his heart—or perhaps for that very reason—he elected to express his own social activism through observation, analysis, exposition, and commentary. While he declined to join in the protests and demonstrations, Lincoln's scholarship was filled with passion, and his writings frequently proved prophetic.

Lincoln left Boston in 1960 to return to Clark College in Atlanta, where he had taught before entering the doctoral program. During the four years that followed he completed a second book, a slim volume titled My Face is Black. Two of the five chapters extend his work on the Black Muslims: "Mood Ebony: The Acceptance of Being Black," and "Mood Ebony: The Meaning of Malcolm X," in which Lincoln offers an account of his personal interactions with Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm
Perhaps most significantly, the opening chapter of the book heralds Lincoln's enduring and autobiographical theme of "the American dilemma." The book begins:

My face is black. This is the central fact of my existence, the focal point of all meaning so long as I live in America. I cannot transcend my blackness, but this is only a personal inconvenience. The fact that America cannot transcend it—this is the tragedy of America.

Lincoln's initial work on the Black Muslims and this second book were produced in the context of two larger interests: intergroup relations and black history. Both interests were natural products of the civil rights ferment occurring while Lincoln was in graduate school at Boston University. He could scarcely have ignored the civil rights activity under any circumstances, but Boston University had a special interest, in that the young man leading the movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., had just completed a Ph.D. at that school as Lincoln arrived there.

While working on his doctorate, Lincoln was elected as a fellow at Boston University's Human Relations Center. There he developed a particular interest in black-Jewish relations. His first article on that topic, published in 1966, challenged the concept of black anti-Semitism, arguing that this was a mischaracterization of blacks' rejection of servitude to whites generally. This piece is significant not only for its exploration of black-Jewish relations, but also for its discussion of the idea that the "black masses" had moved from advocating integration to support for "black power." Now the "ex-Negro proletariat" took on a "new conception of role and identity" as "black people." This new position reveals a shift in Lincoln's thought as well.

Lincoln also became active in the National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials (NAIRO), now the National Association of Human Rights Workers (NAHRW). As a result of these involvements, he was commissioned by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith to write an historical chronology of blacks in America. Lincoln wrote The Negro Pilgrimage in America, published in 1967, which became a standard training resource for human relations departments and commissions.
around the country. A revised and abridged version of that book, published in 1969 as *The Blackamericans*, introduced Lincoln's imaginative answer to the prevailing confusion about how to refer to Americans of African descent. His interest and expertise in black history later led to his co-authorship, with Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, of the highly regarded *Pictorial History of Blackamericans*, now in its fifth edition.

Before the first of these books appeared, Lincoln had left Clark College, served a one-year post-doctoral internship in college administration at Brown University from 1964-65, and accepted a position at Portland State University as a professor of sociology. A two-year stay at Portland was followed by an appointment in 1967 to Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he remained for six years as Professor of Sociology and Religion. In 1973, Lincoln returned to Fisk University for a temporary assignment to establish and chair the department of religious and philosophical studies. Three years later, in 1976, he moved on to Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, where he remains as Professor of Religion and Culture in the department of religion.

As the 1960s progressed, Lincoln's childhood perceptions found voice in his proclamations on the state of race relations in America. These essays, written during years when this nation was shaken by events ranging from the march on Washington to urban riots to the bloodletting in Birmingham and Selma, exhibit a remarkable tension. Temperate in tone, they nevertheless vibrate at times with urgency and indignation; at other times they are imploring and almost wistful. Several of the essays were collected and published in 1967 as *Sounds of the Struggle: Persons and Perspectives in Civil Rights*. Many of the selections are still timely, as this excerpt from "Some Theological and Ethical Implications of the Black Ghetto" attests:

The black ghetto is the monstrous symbol of our mutual distrust. The perpetuation of the ghetto, its cultivation and defense, is an extraordinary act of racial conceit and social irresponsibility. Beyond that, it is a contemptuous disregard for Christian ethics and social justice... The promotion of
self-interest leads men to distrust the wisdom of God in his establishment of the beloved community. They substitute their limited judgment for his omniscience, and because their faith in the grand strategy of God is weak and irresolute, they play at little strategies to remedy what God forgot...

A book edited by Lincoln the following year, *Is Anybody Listening to Black America?* exhibits the same qualities—with an unmistakable overlay of heartache. Lincoln notes in the introduction:

> The murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. coincided with the conclusions of my research for this book. With all my heart I regret the occasion to honor him by dedicating this paltry offering to his memory. Our perspectives were not always in agreement, but there was never a time when his courage, his nobility, and his love for humankind did not excite my admiration and support. I can only hope that as he speaks again from these pages, someone will be listening.

It concludes with a poignant epilogue entitled "Weep for the Living Dead," which appeared originally in *The Christian Century* on May 1, 1968.

> Weep, yes weep for America. Weep for our Jerusalem. It is she that killeth the prophets. It is she that consumes her young. It is America that fouls her nest with the feculence and the filth of the racism that is our sickness. Weep for your country...and for mine...

> Do not weep for Martin Luther King. He is dead; yet he lives. Weep for us, the living. Weep for ourselves, the dead.

In 1970, Lincoln edited a volume of essays on King which was revised and reissued in 1984. Regrettably, neither edition includes Lincoln's own eloquent assessments of King: a poem, "Come Back, Martin Luther King," and an essay published in the *AME Zion Quarterly Review*, "Martin Luther King, the Magnificent Intruder."

> Martin Luther King was an intruder. An improbable intruder. He did not belong to the privileged cult of those who presumed themselves the proper shapers of the destiny of a nation. But he was prepared; and he was armed with perhaps
the only philosophy which could have been effective in fore­stalling the American holocaust which was then in the making. He was a man of love and peace, who dared to test his own commitments in a critical confrontation with hatred and hostility. He was a man out of time and out of place, an improbable person for the task laid before him; a stranger in his own house; an alien performer in a tragic drama about himself, his people, and his country.

He was an improbable Intruder. And he was magnificent.\(^\text{10}\)

Although Lincoln's commentary on race continued throughout the 1970s—in chapters of collected essays on minority relations and the sociology of the black community, and in forewards and introductions to other books treating those topics—his central focus shifted in this period to black religion and the black church. It was these years that produced the C. Eric Lincoln Series in Black Religion, The Black Church since Frazier and The Negro Church in America, and The Black Experience in Religion, a volume of readings edited by Lincoln which contained excerpts from the writings of two dozen African and African-American academicians and clergy working in the area of the black church and black religion.\(^\text{11}\)

In The Black Church Since Frazier Lincoln proclaimed a new age in the life of this institution, declaring that

The "Negro Church" that Frazier wrote about no longer exists. It died an agonized death in the harsh turmoil which tried the faith so rigorously in the decade of the "Savage Sixties," for there it had to confront under the most trying circumstances the possibility that "Negro" and "Christian" were irreconcilable categories...With sadness and reluctance, trepidation and confidence, the Negro Church accepted death in order to be reborn. Out of the ashes of its funeral pyre there sprang the bold, strident, self-conscious phoenix that is the contemporary Black Church.\(^\text{12}\)

The publication of his two books on black religion in 1974 was followed by a series of articles exploring the character of black religion and its relation to the society at large, many of which were published in The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center. (ITC is a consortium of six black seminaries
in Atlanta, Georgia.) Among these are "Aspects of American Pluralism," "Contemporary Black Religion: In Search of a Sociology," "The Black Church and the American Society: A New Responsibility," and "The Social Cosmos of Black Ecumenism." While his main interest was explicating the nature and value of black religion in American life, Lincoln has never hesitated to point out the shortcomings of white Christianity. An example was a 1976 article evaluating developments in American religion since the 1957 publication of Liston Pope's *The Kingdom Beyond Caste*.

In his time, Lincoln wrote, Pope "stood head and shoulders above most of his fellow churchmen, who were quite prepared to consign the 'american dilemma' to an American God for solution, in the full expectation that God would require no more of them than public pronouncements and private pursuits of the status quo ante." Two decades later, the situation, in Lincoln's estimation, had changed only marginally:

American religion, like American government, operates on local and national levels. The local church is where the people are; but the local churches (alas, Dr. Pope!) are still segregated and seem likely to remain that way for some time to come, despite the proclamations and the resolutions of national church leaders which appear in the national press from time to time. If God ever cancels his subscription to the *New York Times*, he will be hard pressed to know whose side American religion is on.13

In 1980—in seeming anticipation of what the Reagan years would bring—Lincoln published what is perhaps his most forceful, and certainly most legal-oriented statement on race in America. This essay on affirmative action, called "Beyond Bakke, Weber and Fullilove," took exception to the courts' inclusion of blacks in the broad category of "minorities," arguing that the disabilities of blacks were unique, deriving from a pernicious racial caste system. Correspondingly, the state was obligated to uphold a remedy specific to this class of persons. Lincoln also struck a blow at the notion of "reverse discrimination," contending that
The issue is neither the deprivation of whites nor the preferability of Blacks, but whether a reasonable, belated effort to make less consummate the institutionalized privileges, prerogatives and preferabilities of whites will be tolerated in the breach. The critical implications of the Bakke decision transcend altogether the dubious issue of "reverse discrimination" and address themselves instead to the re-fortification of the prevailing system of racial hegemony brought under siege by Brown vs. Board of Education twenty-five years ago...\textsuperscript{14}

In 1983, Lincoln's work on the Black Muslims was updated with an essay entitled, "The American Muslim Mission in the Context of American Social History." In 1984, excerpts from these essays and others were creatively woven together in Race, Religion and the Continuing American Dilemma, the introduction to which is Lincoln at his best:

Time has a fugitive quality to it and the twentieth century, which was once heralded as a bright new occasion for human ennoblement, is coming to a close. It is no longer bright, and it is no longer new. We still have not found peace from our sins; nor is the evidence that we entertain a serious commitment to the principles of the Golden Rule one of the compelling features of our generation. Prominent among our problems remains the perennial problem Du Bois complained of when the twentieth century was still in its infancy...It is still a problem of the color line, and that problem ramifies in all of our more critical relations, polluting the environment and straining the parameters of credibility in which the democratic ideal is somehow expected to function.\textsuperscript{15}

As for the role of America's churches in addressing this circumstance, Lincoln turns in the conclusion of the book to a retrospect on the 1960s:

The 1960s were a momentous decade in the history of social change. It was the unique occasion for America to free herself from some of the chauvinisms which shackle us all to a past misadventure from which we have yet to recover fully. It was
also the occasion for the modern Black Church to
demonstrate its relevance and maturity. While America fal­
tered, Martin Luther King, Jr. and his followers did more to
embellish the name of Western Christianity than has been
done since the original Martin Luther tacked his challenge
of corruptions on the door of the cathedral at Wittenburg in
the sixteenth century...King was a living example of what the
faith claimed to be about; and King was by ironic necessity a
product of the Black Church...

In a society like ours, the Black Church has no need to
search for a viable future. It has a future thrust upon it....So
long as there is hatred and evil in the world, so long as there
are the poor in spirit and those who need to be comforted,
until there is a voice in every place to speak the truth to the
disinherited of whatever race, the Black Church has a future
because its larger ministry is to the world...(pp. 241, 257-258)

Other Matters of the Heart

Consistent with his experiential orientation, Lincoln's intel­
lectual activity has remained conjoined with the real world of
ordinary people. Not only is his work on the black church
empirically-based; it is relevant for the black church institu­
tion, and in various ways is made accessible to that constitu­
cency. In the 1980s, for example, Lincoln, with Laurence Mamiya,
conducted a national study of the black church which will
provide the most complete and up-to-date information com­
piled since the 1930s. Politics, finances, the role of women,
music, and economic development are among the areas ad­
dressed in the study, which is scheduled for publication in the
fall of 1990. Even as the research was in process, Lincoln was a
frequent speaker at black ministerial gatherings and served as
a consultant to black religious organizations.

In a larger context, the impact of black religious studies as a
whole on black ministers is manifold. Much as the civil rights
and black power movements transformed blacks' self-percep­
tion, scholarship on black religion has fostered greater aware­
ness of the historic black church tradition, and reaffirmed the
importance of ministry in the black church. In that affirmation
are the seeds for a more prophetic ministry, and a more comprehensive program of service to the community at large. These influences are particularly pertinent for ministers who have availed themselves of formal training, for an accredited seminary without black church studies today is a rarity. Perhaps the most comprehensive programs are located at Howard University Divinity School, a predominantly black and non-denominational seminary in Washington, D.C., and the ecumenical Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. But several predominantly white schools, such as Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., also have strong black church studies programs, and most major seminaries or departments of religion offer at least one or two courses on the black religious experience. The fruits of black religious scholarship are thus by no means restricted to black ministers, but are available to many white seminarians as well.

But Lincoln’s constituency extends far beyond either academicians or practicing ministers. Throughout his academic career, Lincoln has continued to write short stories, poetry, country and western songs, and hymns. His youthful aspirations were at least partially fulfilled with the publication of his first novel, *The Avenue, Clayton City*, in 1988, some forty years after his expressed intentions to become a creative writer. Inevitably, however, his avocation converges with his existential preoccupation. His poem, "A Prayer for Love," was published in *Songs of Zion* in 1985; in 1987, he was commissioned to write "Hail to Thee, O Mother Bethel," the official hymn for the 200th anniversary of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. And he was one of thirteen poets in the United States and Britain commissioned to write new hymns for the new *United Methodist Hymnal*. His submission, "How Like a Gentle Spirit," has since been included in other denominational hymnals as well.

A complete volume of Lincoln’s poetry, *This Road Since Freedom*, is scheduled for publication in 1990. He is at work on the libretto for the fifty-voice "Martin Luther King Freedom Oratorio," with composer Howard Roberts, which is scheduled for its premiere performance in 1991. Whatever the medium,
Lincoln challenges his audience to address racial divisions and the array of inequities that issue from those divisions.

If Lincoln's work is notable for the larger questions it poses to and about American society, it is equally revealing of the personal perplexities that have fueled his entire career. Particularly in his work of the last decade, one hears some answers to the theological questioning of his youth.

Although he declines to identify himself as a theologian in any formal, academic sense, it is the case that his personal theology (and Mattie Lincoln's theology?) provides the framework for all of his work. At the heart of that theology is the certainty that blacks are made in the image of God and are therefore persons of dignity. To allow someone to violate that dignity is to "sin," for such complicity is a subversion of God's intention, and an abdication of one's responsibility to God to be what God intended one to be. It follows, then, that one is not only justified, but obligated to take whatever actions are necessary to prevent the violation of dignity. The insistence on dignity and respect for black individuals and black institutions is a refrain sung over and over throughout his writing, whatever else the subject matter at hand may be.

That inequity and injustice should provide the focus of Lincoln's inquiries is scarcely surprising, given that he is so thoroughly a child of the "American dilemma." Like Du Bois and so many other scholars, Lincoln has known the "twoness," the "double-consciousness," that is the legacy of black Americans born and reared in the pre-civil rights years of racial segregation. The spiritual grounding and the tenacity with which Lincoln holds to it may leave him vulnerable to the charge that he is insufficiently critical of black personalities and institutions. Indeed, criticism becomes a difficult task when advocacy and an affirmation of struggling people are the compelling objectives. At the same time, few people have been more effective in bringing the theoretical and the ethical to bear on the pragmatics of race in America, particularly as that issue is refracted through religious institutions. What Lincoln has written of the black church in America might well be said of him personally:
...However nefarious the strategies of men, the faith will not be rendered destitute and the righteousness of God will not be left without a witness. If the established oracles are silent or unreliable, then lo, a voice cries forth from the wilderness.\textsuperscript{17}

Lincoln’s faithfulness in addressing racial matters is matched only by his singleness of purpose. In this, he is less than totally representative of black religious studies. Increasingly, black women, as well as some men, are addressing issues of gender, and a few scholars—e.g., James Cone and Cornell West—have addressed class as well. But for now, Lincoln’s work remains the dominant paradigm. It is important to note that Lincoln’s focus on race to the exclusion of other categories of oppression is characteristic not only of black religious scholarship, but of the major black denominations.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, on matters other than race, black churches manifest a moral conservatism, particularly around issues of sexism, heterosexism, and class. Eloquent as the solo voice may be, some of us still strain to hear the harmony of the full choir. To the extent that those sounds build in volume within the local church, to that extent will the experiential framework of black religious studies be strengthened. That development, however, will detract nothing from the very solid foundation of racial liberation constructed by C. Eric Lincoln.

Notes

1. The phrase was introduced into scholarly discourse with the 1944 publication of Gunnar Myrdal’s study of race in the United States, \textit{An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy}. The dynamics of the 1960s must be credited not only with a change in the method of scholarly analysis, but with a change in its content. That is to say, the increased attention to black religion itself is inextricable from the black consciousness movement. Two publications, in particular, were pivotal. The first was a book entitled \textit{The Black Messiah}, by Albert B. Cleage, Jr., a Detroit clergyman; the second was an article entitled “Christianity and Black Power,” by James H. Cone, a young theology professor at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. (Fortuitously, the same month that Cone wrote this essay, he and C. Eric Lincoln met for the first time. Lincoln read and critiqued the article and the booklength manuscript that followed. The article was subsequently included in one of Lincoln’s books; Lincoln was instrumental in securing a publisher for Cone’s first book, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power}.)}
2. "The Matter of Race," unpublished manuscript, 1959, pp. 6-8. C. Eric Lincoln Collection, The Atlanta University Center Woodruff Library, Atlanta, Georgia. In addition to this manuscript, the information regarding Lincoln's youth and education is drawn from a series of in-person interviews with Lincoln conducted by the author in 1987 and 1988.


7. By 1969, the term "Negro" had fallen into disrepute, but the transition to the label "black" was not yet compete. Lincoln's objective apparently was to devise a term to designate this population that would include equally both aspects of identity, rather than the word "Black" serving as an adjective to qualify the primary identification of "American." Lincoln's nomenclature was never widely accepted and has served primarily as his own stylistic signature. The issue of what label is appropriate and preferred remains subject to debate, as recent discussions regarding the phrase "African American" attest.


17. Lincoln, Race, Religion, p. xxi.

CONTEMPORARY PLAY (and motion picture) depicts a candidate for the Catholic diaconate lamenting the trivialization of worship in his youth:

Maybe things were different when you were growing up, but when I was a teenager, the church was a circus. Everyone sang Top 40 tunes at mass. Didn't matter if they related. I remember once, on Ascension Thursday—the day Jesus ultimately transcends the world, and body and soul enters heaven—the hip hymn committee sang "Leavin' on a Jet Plane."^1

Many Christians—Protestant and Catholic alike—had similar experiences, and consequently value consensus in Christian worship. Worship should reflect the consensus of a specific Christian community, both historically and today, to avoid the

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excesses of individual fancy and to avoid capitulation to non-Christian cultural values. This concern for liturgical consensus emerges at a time when many Evangelicals are struggling to relate their own traditions to the broader currents of Christian history. The informal evangelical response to the Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches, the fascination of many contemporary evangelicals with Orthodox and Catholic spiritualities, and the emergence of an Evangelical Orthodox Church in communion with the Patriarch of Antioch are all signs of a more widespread concern among contemporary evangelicals to understand themselves in the context of the whole Christian tradition.

But the evangelical quest for deeper Christian roots runs into critical problems on the question of liturgical consensus regarding baptism. They are faced with an uneasy tension between the distinctively evangelical conviction (on the one hand) that regeneration, or the new birth, occurs at the point of repentance and faith, and older liturgical traditions (on the other hand) which often imply, if they do not overtly assert, that regeneration is effected by the grace of God given in the sacrament of baptism.

The publication of The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship raises this issue in a critical way for United Methodist Evangelicals, since a liturgy for baptism published in the 1984 Book of Services joins other Methodist baptismal liturgies in the hymnal and will thus come into much more widespread use in the denomination. Reflecting more of the ancient and medieval liturgical consensus than more recent Methodist baptismal liturgies have done, the new liturgy will appear to many Evangelicals to imply a doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

This article reflects on the United Methodist "Baptismal Covenant I" from an evangelical theological perspective. Specifically, it lays out some historic options in the Christian tradition regarding baptism and regeneration, highlighting the historic evangelical option, and then considers the United Methodist baptismal liturgies in the light of these options.
The Historic Options

In the new atmosphere of concern for consensus in liturgy, the historical options (including evangelical options) must be represented more fairly than they have been in the past. Some United Methodists concerned with liturgical renewal have offered two (and only two) options in sacramental theology in general, and in baptismal theology in particular. "There are two sharply contrasting approaches to the sacraments in American Protestantism today," wrote one such author, who went on to distinguish "Enlightenment" and "traditional" doctrines.  

This author found the "Enlightenment" view of baptism to be foreshadowed by Zwingli's sharp distinction between the outward sign and the inward grace which only can effect salvation. In the nineteenth century, this Enlightenment view of baptism was influenced by a humanistic and secularized understanding of individual human freedom and responsibility. Given these options, one would be forced to choose between a humanistic Enlightenment view of baptism or a traditional view, which by many accounts would involve the doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

Granted, regeneration has been frequently associated with baptism since early after the New Testament period. But many "traditional" views of baptism certainly do not imply a doctrine of baptismal regeneration, and it is surely unfair to suggest that these views must be thrown in with the Enlightenment. In particular, evangelical Christians who practice infant baptism, including Anglican and Presbyterian evangelicals, have developed understandings of baptism that have been influential in the churches, but which cannot be identified with an Enlightenment outlook.

The evangelical perspective on baptism can be seen in the controversy over baptismal regeneration within the Church of England in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Anglicans who supported the evangelical cause insisted that regeneration occurs by repentance and faith. Baptism, they maintained, is the appropriate external symbol of regeneration, but is not "invariably connected" to it. That is to say, regenera-
tion can occur apart from baptism (as in the case of an ancient Christian catechumen martyred before her baptism) and baptism does not necessarily effect regeneration (as in the case of infant baptisms). This, they maintained, is the consistent teaching of the Church of England in the Articles and Homilies, and in the Prayer Book catechism.

The controversy over baptismal regeneration was one of the major theological debates in the Church of England in the nineteenth century. Tractarians opposed the evangelical doctrine, insisting on the inseparability of baptism and regeneration, and pressing their own claims that baptismal regeneration was consonant with the teachings of the Church of England. The result was a barrage of homiletical and tract literature, with such works as Capel Molyneux's *Baptismal Regeneration Opposed, Both by the Word of God and the Standards of the Church of England* defending the evangelical position.

The controversy came to a head in the late 1840s, when the Bishop of Exeter refused to institute a priest who would not affirm baptismal regeneration. The priest was then instituted in his parish by direct action of the Archbishop of Canterbury, at which point many Tractarians left the Church of England and became Roman Catholics.

The point I wish to make is that there was a significant alternative view of baptism prevalent among evangelical Christians which stemmed not from an "Enlightenment" stress on human free will and responsibility, but rather from the evangelical association of regeneration with repentance and faith, that is, with conversion. Given this commitment, evangelicals who practiced infant baptism were forced by the logic of their own position to understand baptism in such a way that it was not linked inseparably to the grace of regeneration.

The dichotomy of baptismal doctrines into "Enlightenment" and "traditional" views has a particularly destructive effect for the understanding of Methodist traditions on these issues, placing Methodist inquirers in the position of neglecting that considerable part of their own heritage, which has taken a consistently evangelical understanding of baptism.
Wesley and the Methodist Tradition

Wesley himself stood on the dividing line between classical and evangelical Protestant views of baptism, but the Methodist tradition after him largely held an evangelical perspective on this sacrament.

Wesley has to be placed on this dividing line, I think, because his view of the relationship between baptism and regeneration was complex (some would say confused). It evades categorization into either of the categories of baptismal regeneration or an evangelical understanding of baptism. On the one hand, Wesley did not hold a strict doctrine of baptismal regeneration, since he consistently affirmed that the grace of regeneration does not always accompany the sacrament. His sermon on "The New Birth" (published in 1760) draws these inferences: "And, first, it follows that baptism is not the new birth " and secondly, the new birth "does not always accompany baptism...". At this point, Wesley cited the distinction between the outward rite and the inward grace that would be maintained by later evangelicals.

On the other hand, Wesley maintained that the grace of regeneration does always accompany the baptism of infants. In this respect his perspective differed from later evangelical doctrines of baptism. What emerges then, in Wesley's writings, is the sense that persons are born again when baptized as infants, but that they (frequently) "sin away" their regeneration and cannot as adults cling to baptism as an assurance of the new birth. For these reasons, an exhaustive study of Wesley's doctrine of baptism concludes with the observation, "Here is a treasure of the Church's sacramental devotion which it was not given to Wesley to grasp."

If Wesley's doctrine of baptism evades conventional classification, however, that of subsequent Methodist writers reflects a clearly evangelical perspective. Beginning with Richard Watson, Methodist theologians distinguished their views from the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, generally maintaining that baptism confers a real, efficacious grace, but nevertheless refusing to identify this grace with regeneration.
Watson himself held that baptism is a sign of incorporation into the community of the Church (stressing the analogy with circumcision), and that in infants it effects a grace which may actually grant regeneration to those who die in infancy, but which in others acts as

a seed of life to prepare them for instruction in the word of God, as they are taught it by parental care, to incline their will and affections to good, and to begin and maintain in them the war against inward and outward evil, so that they may be Divinely assisted, as reason strengthens, to make their calling and election sure.  

Although Watson did not use the term "preventing grace" to describe the grace of baptism given to infants, later Methodist writers would.  

Although the Enlightenment and Protestant Liberalism have broadly influenced Christian traditions since the eighteenth century, it is surely misleading to represent the evangelical tradition as maintaining an "Enlightenment" view of baptism. In the first place, the evangelical position on baptism is grounded in a belief in the universal nature of human sinfulness, hardly a pet notion among Enlightenment philosophes.  

In the second place, at least among Methodist writers, evangelicals maintain that a real grace is given in baptism, although they refuse to identify this grace uniformly as the grace of regeneration. This being the case, a historically significant view of baptism has been largely overlooked in contemporary Methodist discussions of the subject.  

The United Methodist Liturgies for Baptism

In 1984 the United Methodist Church approved a group of general services which were published together as The Book of Services. In The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship approved by the General Conference of 1988 and published in 1989, conventional sacramental services are joined by new rites from The Book of Services. Among the rites in the new hymnal, the first and most general baptismal
The liturgy ("The Baptismal Covenant I") is entitled "Holy Baptism, Confirmation, Reaffirmation of Faith, Reception into The United Methodist Church, Reception into a Local Congregation."

On the whole, this service for baptism represents a considerable advance over the conventional service. It calls for a renunciation of evil, an explicit, public repentance of sin, and an affirmation of the racially inclusive nature of the Church.

The service insists on a full confession of faith, following the pattern of the Apostles' Creed. In these respects, the new service recalls the baptismal patterns of the ancient church, and indicates one area in which The United Methodist Church has actually made more explicit its theological commitments. Evangelicals will welcome these changes. The new liturgy will make evangelicals uncomfortable, however, in that it appears to link baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit in forgiveness and regeneration. The "Thanksgiving over the Water" has the minister of the sacrament pray,

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Pour out your Holy Spirit,
to bless this gift of water and those who receive it,
to wash away their sin
    and clothe them in righteousness
throughout their lives,
that, dying and being raised with Christ,
    they may share in his final victory.
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The problem is only apparent in this case, however, since the prayer is cast in a subjunctive mood and the phrase "throughout their lives" indicates that the prayer is for the continuing work of the Spirit beyond the moment of the sacrament. Another passage in the service appears to be much less ambiguous. The introduction to the service has the minister of the sacrament say:

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Through the Sacrament of Baptism
    we are initiated into Christ's holy church.
We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation,
    and given new birth through water and the Spirit.
All this is God's gift, offered to us without price.
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(emphasis added)
Through Confirmation, and through the reaffirmation of our faith, we renew the covenant declared at our baptism, acknowledge what God is doing for us, and affirm our commitment to Christ's holy Church.27

The problematic statement for evangelicals is the present-tense indicative assertion that (in the context of the rite of baptism) "[we are] given new birth through water and the Spirit."

Upon first hearing this read aloud in my home congregation, I was convinced that it was a clear and unambiguous assertion of baptismal regeneration. I was surprised to find, then, that members of the committee responsible for the liturgy had discussed this issue at length, and had not intended at all to convey such an impression. Committee members pointed out to me (a) that the sentence in which this phrase occurs is a separate sentence from the one which begins "Through the sacrament of baptism," (b) that the phrase "through water and the Holy Spirit" is as ambiguous here as it is in John 3:5 (that is, it is not clear that it refers to baptism), (c) that the phrase is to be understood proleptically, that is, as stating in the present tense our hope for the future, and (d) that the sentence "All this is God's gift..." should indicate that the work referred to in the previous sentences is not limited to the work of God in the sacrament.

The expression will continue to generate concerns among evangelical United Methodists, however. Granted that the committee members did not intend to convey an unambiguous assertion of baptismal regeneration, there are reasons why the text itself does convey this impression: (a) the distinction of sentences in oral presentation is not as clear as in written texts (and I take it for granted that a liturgy is first and foremost an oral presentation); (b) if the expression "through water and the Holy Spirit" is supposed to contrast with "Through the sacrament of baptism," it should be placed in a parallel position; (c) the phrase appears in the context of the introduction to the baptismal rite, and is followed by a sentence that distinguishes the work of God in baptism from subsequent acts of confirma-
tion, reaffirmation, and rededication; and (d) "through water and the Holy Spirit" does indeed suggest baptism, (both here and in St. John's Gospel), almost unmistakably in the context of the baptismal liturgy. For those of us who have been taught that sacraments involve both a material form and an invisible grace, the phrase appears to be an unambiguous restatement of the expression "Through the sacrament of baptism."

In short, this particular phrase may represent a serious obstacle for many United Methodists. This is all the more unfortunate, given the very positive changes that have been made elsewhere in the baptismal liturgy. Of course, United Methodists will still have the option of using the older liturgy for baptism, which is included in the new *Hymnal*, but many will feel that the newer liturgy does not reflect a Methodist consensus on baptismal theology.

**Concluding Observations**

I would hope that in the future, theological options will be represented in such a way that the inheritance of Methodist evangelicalism is represented as a serious contemporary theological option. The representation of other views than one's own as "Enlightenment" views amounts to a serious distortion of our theological heritage. Methodist evangelicalism (as well as Anglican and Presbyterian evangelicalism) has generally favored a sacramental approach to the Christian life, acknowledging the gifts of Christ in the eucharist, baptism, and other sacramental acts, even if it does not associate the baptismal grace with the grace of regeneration. This sacramental evangelicalism is, I believe, a gift for the whole Church, and should be fairly represented in contemporary theological dialog.

In the second place, given what has been said above, I would hope that evangelical United Methodists will be able to utilize the new service, perhaps only omitting the offensive phrase in the introduction. They may even be able to use the service intact (as I intend to do) with an explanation of its intent. Future efforts at defining a liturgical consensus should reconsider this particular sentence. After some years of use, it may
be found acceptable, but it may also be found problematic. We should question whether it is strictly necessary.

The struggle on this point within the United Methodist Church perhaps illustrates the predicament that many evangelicals find themselves in at the close of a remarkably ecumenical century. On the one hand, these evangelicals find themselves more and more concerned with the visible unity of the Church, and so are inevitably drawn towards historic liturgical traditions and definitions of orthodoxy. On the other hand, they find that the refusal of previous generations of evangelicals to engage in the ecumenical enterprise has left their own most distinctive claims relatively unspoken in ecumenical arenas. This makes the initiation of dialog even more difficult. Since evangelical Protestants have often defined themselves against other Protestants by their distinctive stress on regeneration as the result of the experience of repentance and faith, the issue of baptism (both its meaning and its celebration) must stand as a point of acute contention for serious ecumenical understanding.\textsuperscript{28}

Notes

2. I shall use the expression "evangelicals" in what follows to describe those persons (including myself) who tend to associate regeneration with conversion rather than the sacrament of baptism. For a more complete definition of "evangelicals," see my article entitled "The Complete Evangelical," \textit{Circuit Rider} 9:5 (May 1985), pp. 3-5.
3. See the comments below in Part 2 of this article.
8. \textit{Sermons}, the first two sermons, pp. 5-56.
10. Edward Bouverie Pusey's tracts on \textit{Scriptural Views of Holy Baptism} (1836) were published as tracts 67-69 of the "Tracts for the Times," and defended baptismal regeneration against the evangelicals.
11. Molyneux's tract was published in London by R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside in 1842.


13. Sermons, IV:1 (in Outler, 2:196-197), where Wesley cites the catechism.


15. On this matter, cf. the preface to Wesley's account of Aldersgate: "I believe, till I was about ten years old, I had not sinned away that 'washing of the Holy Ghost' which was given me in baptism" (Journal for 1738:05:24, par. 1; in W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., Journal and Diaries [Bicentennial edition of the Works of John Wesley; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988ff.], 1:242-243).


20. Even John Miley, who is seen as reflecting some late-nineteenth-century liberal tendencies, maintained that the doctrine of baptism must be grounded in the notion of human depravity (2:408-409).

21. Stookcy does discuss evangelical attitudes towards baptism, but does not deal with the Anglican, Presbyterian, or Methodist evangelical traditions; rather, he focuses on traditions emphasizing believers' baptism, and Pentecostalism (pp. 128-130). Here again a significant range of evangelical opinion is not reflected; on the other hand, Stookcy is certainly right in his observation that early twentieth-century Methodist baptismal liturgies had departed from the classical theological traditions in maintaining that infants are born in a state of regeneration (the position against which Miley had argued, cf. Stookcy, pp. 130-132).


24. The renunciation is given in the Hymnal, p. 34, and in the Book of Services, p. 55. The reference to renouncing "the bondage of sin" in the 1984 version was replaced in the Hymnal with the question, "[do you] repent of your sin?"


27. Hymnal, p. 33; cf. Book of Services, p. 54. The expression "we" in the second line of the 1988 text (above) replaces "believers and their households" of the 1984 text.

28. The World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission statement on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (Faith and Order Paper no. 111; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) goes so far as to claim that "those baptized are pardoned, cleansed and sanctified by Christ" (section on baptism, II:B:4, p. 2), although it does not utilize specific language about baptismal regeneration. It seems to me that such claims would have to face serious challenges for evangelicals to engage in the discussion at this point.
A New Literary Reading of Exodus 32,  
The Story of the Golden Calf

John C. Holbert

THERE IS A FRESH breeze blowing through the halls of biblical scholarship. That breeze has been variously identified as literary criticism, rhetorical criticism, or poetics. By whatever name, the goal is to take very seriously the actual words and form of the biblical texts as they are, rather than to account for how and from where we got them. The following reading of Exodus 32 is an example of this new method.

The infamous story of the golden calf has entered into the folklore of the Western world. Casual Bible readers associate it with the problem of idolatry; and to be sure, that is what is the story is about to a certain extent. Yet a more detailed and careful reading of the entire text may yield some surprises for the preacher who is willing to reexamine the familiar.

*Exod. 32:1-6* (author’s translation)

(1) When the people saw that Moses was shamefully late in coming down from the mountain, they mobbed together

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against Aaron and said to him, "Get up! Make us *elohim* who will go before us! As for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him!" (2) Aaron said to them, "Tear off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring [it] to me." (3) So, all the people tore off the golden earrings which were in their ears and brought [it] to Aaron. (4) He took [it] from their hand, and shaped it into a molten calf. They said, "These are your *elohim*, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." (5) When Aaron saw [this], he built an altar in front of it. Then Aaron cried out and said, "A feast to Yahweh tomorrow!" (6) They rose early in the morning and offered up burnt offerings and presented peace offerings. The people sat down to eat and drink, and then they got up to begin the orgy.

The narrator of chapter 32 picks up the thread of the story that had been dropped in 24:14. In the earlier chapter, Moses had disappeared up the sacred mountain and had charged the elders of the people as follows: "Wait here for us until we [Moses and Joshua] return to you. Here are Aaron and Hur. Whoever has a complaint, come to them." Though Moses speaks to the elders, his command to wait is surely intended for all the people who have just participated in a ceremony of the ratification of the covenant.

At the beginning of chapter 32, the point of view shifts to that of the people. Though Moses has gone up the mountain to receive "the tables of stone, with the law and the commandment" (24:12), the people see his absence as only "shameful delay." By employing the word for "shame" in their description, they imply that Moses has not told them the truth about what he and God are doing on the mysterious mountain; they feel abandoned and alone in the terrifying wilderness. In their fear, they "mob together against Aaron." The sense of the verb can be found in Num. 16:3 and 20:2.

Their demand is blunt, yet strangely ambiguous. "Get up! Make us *elohim* who will go before us!" *Elohim* is a masculine plural noun in Hebrew, but it is often used to designate the one God of Israel. What is it that the people want? Do they want
"gods" in the manner of the two golden bulls of Jeroboam I (I Kings 12:26-30)? Do they want a "god" to replace the God of Israel who has apparently abandoned them, along with that God's messenger? What is certain is that they want these elohim to "go before" them, to lead them. In some undefined way, the desperate people of Israel think that Aaron will fashion something for them that will replace their leader, who did indeed bring them out of Egypt; apparently he did so only to let them die in the wilderness. They call him "this Moses," a sarcastic use of the demonstrative pronoun, a recurring stylistic device in the chapter. By remembering only his past deed of Egyptian deliverance, they silently deny any ongoing activity on their behalf by the absent Moses. The irony of the story is that while the mob is howling for gods at the base of the mountain, God has just handed the sacred "tables of the testimony" to Moses (31:18) in fulfillment of the promise at 24:12.

Why is one "god" made in response to a request for "gods?" The beginning of an answer may be found in the emerging portrait of the people. The first verse tells us a great deal about them. They are anxious, fearful, and desperate. Their call for "gods" is a piece of hyperbole, shouted by a people out of control. They demand something that they can see to replace an absent leader who claims to represent an invisible God. As Frederick Buechner delightfully puts it, they believe that "a God in the hand is worth two in the bush."

And now our attention focuses on Aaron: in the face of the howling mob, Aaron commands them to "tear off" all of their earrings of gold and bring them to him. As this is taking place, Moses has been told by God on the mountaintop that Aaron and his family shall be consecrated as the priests of God (Exod. 28-29). What is the priest-to-be doing with all that gold? This gold, of course, is part of that treasure of the Egyptians, who were "despoiled" by the Israelites as a sign of God's power (see Exod. 3:21-22 and 11:2-3). The gift of God is about to replace God! Yet this first action of Aaron is ambiguous.

"All the people" respond quickly to Aaron's command, using the same two verbs which he used, "tear off" and "bring." Verse 4 presents the reader with several difficult textual problems.
which are important to resolve if we are to understand what Aaron is doing. There is no question that one of the narrator’s interests is to show us that Aaron was fully active in the event about to be described. "He took (it) from their hands," "he shaped it," and "he made it into a molten calf." Aaron is the actor from start to finish; he is responsible for the gleaming idol that now appears. The two words, "shaped" and "graving tool" have been much discussed. The former can mean "cast," as in the casting of metal (see I Kings 7:15) or "to shape." The latter term is more difficult. Isa. 8:1 uses the word as an instrument of engraving. By analogy, it seems best to assume that it is here used as a tool for the engraving of metal. If this reading is sound, Aaron has taken the gold from the hands of the people, cast it carefully in the fire, and shaped it with genuine artistry with a tool specific for the purpose. Aaron made his little calf with careful design, slow workmanship, and clear intent.

Still, Aaron’s reasons for making the calf remain obscure. The reader can only assume at this point that he has made the "god" because the people demanded it. In any case, the people take one look at Aaron’s careful handiwork and cry, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!" This cry makes it clear that they wanted a substitute for Moses, the leader whom they earlier touted as the "man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt" (vs. 1). Whether they believe the calf is itself "gods" or only represents gods makes little practical difference. They regard it as a sufficient substitute for the missing Moses and his equally missing God. In the words of Ps. 106:20, "They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass."

Aaron now sees that the people have accepted the calf he has made as "gods" who have acted in a way formerly ascribed only to Yahweh. So Aaron moves into action. He builds an altar in front of the calf, and proclaims, "A feast to Yahweh tomorrow!" How are we to understand this behavior? It seems certain that Aaron is trying to make the best of a bad situation. Aaron’s problem is reminiscent of Gideon, the judge of ancient Israel (Judg. 8:22-27). The people of Israel ask Gideon to become their king, and he refuses, insisting to them that only Yahweh is king.
Nevertheless Gideon requests that "golden earrings" be given to him. Out of this gold, Gideon makes a "golden ephod," some kind of divine image. As a result, the people of Israel "play the harlot after" the image, and it becomes a "snare" both to Gideon and to his family. Aaron had the same thing in mind. He thought that by building an image that would represent Yahweh, or serve in some way as Yahweh's throne or seat, he would assuage the angry mob and still be in some sense loyal to Yahweh and to Moses. But there is no pious disclaimer from Aaron. Only when he sees the people's reaction to the calf does he build a traditional altar and declare a feast to the glory of Yahweh.

Aaron appears to want to lead the people, seemingly in the name of Yahweh. However, his ready offer to build a calf in response to their angry demands suggests that he is in fact not in control of the people. They have already shown that Yahweh and Yahweh's representatives have little real power in their lives. This shared lack of control is illustrated in verse 6, where the first three verbs pointedly include Aaron and the people. They all rise early in the morning; they all offer burnt offerings; they all present peace offerings. But this traditional worship of Yahweh is a facade, a prelude for the real activity of the day. "The people," excluding Aaron, the reader assumes, "sat down to eat and drink." How far this is from the eating and drinking we find in the presence of God (Exod. 24:9-11)! There the elders "behold God"; here the people behold the calf. "Then they got up to begin the orgy." I have translated the final verb more bluntly (see RSV "to play") to highlight its sexual connotations. In Gen. 26:8, it is used to describe the sexual play between Isaac and Rebekah when they are discovered by Abimelech to be husband and wife after all. But in Gen. 39:14,17, the sexual meaning turns ugly. Potiphar's lusty wife accused Joseph of "insulting" her, with the clear meaning that he has attempted some lewd acts with her. The verb can have a neutral sense (Gen. 19:14), but here the meaning "orgy" seems assured. The people are out of control.

The narrator opens the tale of the golden calf with a set of accusations. First, the people of Israel have broken the first and
second commandments (Exod. 20:3-4); they have worshipped a
golden calf even as Moses is poised to return from God with the
tables of the testimony in his hands. Second, Aaron himself
has transgressed the second commandment; he has created an
image and caused others to sin. Aaron is at best a poor leader,
who compromises his people’s allegiance to Yahweh, and at
worst he is no true follower of Yahweh at all. In either case, the
picture of the people and their temporary leader is very nega­
tive, and it sets the stage for the anger of God and of Moses in
the next scene.

This entire first scene is laden with irony in still another
sense. In Exod. 25:1-9, Yahweh directs Moses to take "an
offering from those who are willing." Among the contents of this
offering is gold, from which they are to construct a portable
sanctuary, the tabernacle. Next God directs them to make the
ark. Both tabernacle and ark are "vehicles of God’s presence."
The people’s demand for a calf to supply themselves with divine
presence mocks the gifts of God’s presence in tabernacle, ark,
and tablet. Their fabrication of a divine representative apart
from Moses and Yahweh and their claim that this image and
not Yahweh has "brought them up from the land of Egypt"
constitutes a challenge to God. As in Egypt, where "God saw
the people of Israel and God knew" their suffering (Exod. 2:25), so
now God "sees" the people again. But this time, God erupts in
fury.

Exodus 32:7-14

(7) Yahweh said to Moses, "Move! Go Down! Surely, your
people whom you brought up from the land of Egypt are
corrupt! (8) They have quickly turned aside from the way
that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a
molten calf; they have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it.
They have said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought
you up from the land of Egypt.” (9) Then Yahweh said to
Moses, "I have seen this people. Yes, a people stiff-necked it
is!" (10) So, now let me alone, in order that my wrath may
burn against them and consume them. But I will make you
a great nation." (11) But Moses sought to appease the face of
Yahweh, his God, and said, "Why, Yahweh, does your wrath
burn against your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? (12) Why should the Egyptians say, "For evil God brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the surface of the soil?" Retrieve your burning anger, and change your mind about evil to your people. (13) Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, "I will increase your descendants like the stars of the sky and all this land which I said I would give to your descendants, they will inherit forever." (14) Thus, Yahweh's mind was changed about the evil which God thought to do to the people.

We leave the orgy at the base of the mountain, and are lifted to the top of Sinai, where Yahweh and Moses are concluding their lengthy discussion of Israel's covenanted responsibilities. Moses has the divine tables of the law in his hands (31:18) when suddenly God explodes in anger. "Move! Go down!" shouts God, using two very brief verbal imperatives. "Your people whom you brought up from the land of Egypt are corrupt!" Yahweh announces two terrible truths in this sentence. First, the people of Israel are no longer Yahweh's; they are Moses' people now. Second, the word "corrupt" has some awesome and frightening connotations: it is used twice in Gen. 6:12 to describe the land and the people just before the onset of the flood. Yahweh is once again angry enough to obliterate creation.

Yahweh says clearly why he is angry: "They have turned aside quickly from the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."" This phrase reminds us of Exod. 20:2, "I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt," which appears at the very beginning of the decalogue. It is interesting to note that the verb yatzah, "brought out," is used in the decalogue, while the verb 'alah, "brought up," is used in chapter 32 (with one exception, verse 11, where Moses purposefully quotes the decalogue's formulation). Yahweh, however, repeats the idolatrous formula in vs. 4, all the better to highlight their foolishness. Whatever Aaron had in mind
when he made the golden calf, and however the people understand their relationship to the calf, Yahweh sees the activity at the foot of the mountain as nothing other than apostasy, the very symbol of a deep corruption in the chosen people.

"I have seen this people," says Yahweh, using the demonstrative pronoun in the same way that the people did when they separated themselves from the missing Moses in vs. 1. Yahweh then pronounces an all-inclusive judgment: "A people stiff-necked it is!" Twice this word, "stiff, hard," was used to describe the stubbornness of pharaoh (see Exod. 7:3 and 13:16). To Yahweh, the people of Israel have become no better than pharaoh; like him, they are stubborn, opposed to the great plan of God. God has saved this people from pharaoh but their inner likeness to pharaoh is a far more insidious threat.

God's anger finally reaches its climax. "Now, let me alone," God says to Moses, "in order that my anger may burn against them and consume them. But I will make you a great nation." Commentators for many centuries have noted the profound paradox in these lines. God is about to destroy the people of Israel. Yet God seems to anticipate Moses' objection by saying to him, "Let me alone!" God addresses Moses directly here, not only inviting his response, but also promises him a fresh beginning, casting Moses as the new Abraham (see Gen. 12:2).

How will Moses respond to God's resolution to destroy the people? The author elevates Moses to a place nearly unparalleled in the Hebrew Bible. "But Moses sought to appease the face of Yahweh, his God." In 1 Kings 13:6, King Jeroboam asks an unnamed man of God to "appease" Yahweh's anger at the king's construction of two golden calves. In Exod. 32:11, Moses, unbidden by any human beings, but subtly invited by Yahweh, seeks to calm God's anger, once again aroused by the building of a golden calf. The difference in the two scenes is, of course, that Moses finds himself toe-to-toe with God on God's home place, the mountain of Sinai!

Moses has listened carefully to God's tirade of the preceding verses, and seeks to answer the points one by one.

1. "Why does your wrath burn against your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt?" In verse 7, God had given
the people over to Moses by the use of the second person pronouns. Using the same tactic, Moses reassigns the people to the God who made them and chose them. Further, Moses uses the form of the commandment of Exod. 20:2, employing the verb *yatzah* rather than ‘*alah*, thus removing the argument from the level of sneering parody and reminding God of the structure of God's own divine command. Moses says, in effect, these are your people, God, to whom you gave the command; you have a continuing responsibility for them. Moses adds the small phrase that God’s action was done with "great power and a mighty hand." This is surely designed to massage even the angriest deity.

2. "Why should the Egyptians say, 'For evil God brought them out to kill them in the mountains and consume them from the surface of the soil?" On the surface, this seems to be a peculiar argument. Why should God be concerned at all with what the Egyptians might think about the divine behavior? The reader is here reminded of one of the major reasons for the exodus in the first place. Pharaoh, when first confronted by Moses' demand to let the people go, says, "I do not know Yahweh" (Exod. 5:2). It is a fateful phrase for him, but it also in part controls the reason for the long and agonizing series of plagues that follows it. Later, God says that Egypt is allowed to live precisely to witness the power of Yahweh, "so that my name may be declared throughout the earth" (Exod. 9:16). And the victory of Yahweh over the Egyptians is crucial in order that "you may tell in the hearing of your son and your son's son how I have made sport of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them; that you (Israel) may know that I am Yahweh" (Exod. 10:2). When Moses warns God about the reaction of the Egyptians to this proposed slaughter of the Israelites, he reminds God of the basic purpose of the exodus, namely, to teach Egypt, Israel, and the whole world who Yahweh is. To "consume" Israel (Moses deftly repeats God’s own word) would be to consume the purpose and result of the exodus itself.

3. "Retrieve your burning anger, and change your mind about the evil to your people." God's use of the word "corrupt" to describe Israel, the word used in Gen. 6:12 to describe the evil
of the pre-flood world, is now matched by Moses who himself uses a famous word from that same story. Moses urges Yahweh, "change your mind," a word from the root, nicham. In Gen. 6:6 and 7, God is said to "be sorry" to have made the human beings; indeed, God is "grieved to his heart." The words "be sorry" there translate the same word here in Exod. 32:12. In effect, Moses asks God to remember the divine sorrow and to withhold the hand of destruction, to change God's mind.

4. The final argument that Moses musters against God was again suggested by God. God promised Moses that he would become a new Abraham, offering him the promise of Gen. 12:2. Moses again turns the tables on God, reminding God of the original promise to the three great patriarchs, a promise sworn by God to them by God's own life, and offered to their countless descendants "forever."

Thus, in four sharply pointed arguments, Moses attempts to change God's resolve to destroy the people of Israel. Note that he never denies the guilt of the people. Instead, God's choice of Israel, God's universality, God's deep feeling for the people, and God's eternal covenant are held up for God's examination. And the result? "Thus, Yahweh's mind was changed about the evil that God thought to do to the people." Moses has successfully convinced God not to destroy the sinful people. Moses has mediated for his people; because of him, they are saved from the anger of God.

There is an interesting relationship between the two scenes we have examined. In scene 1, at the base of the mountain, the anger of the people was assuaged by Aaron, but the result was syncretism and idolatry. In scene 2, at the top of the mountain, the anger of God was assuaged by Moses, and he spares the sinful people. The two scenes draw the readers to a comparison between the would-be leaders of Israel, Moses and Aaron. A second concern arises in the juxtaposition of the two scenes. The relationship between God and the people is broken first from the people's side and then from the divine side. Only Moses heals the breach. Will this be Moses' role as the story continues? Only as we continue the reading can we begin to answer this question.
Exodus 32:15-20

(15) So, Moses turned, and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets written on both sides; on one side and on the other they were written. (16) The tablets, they were the work of God, and the writing, it was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. (17) When Joshua heard the sound of the people shouting, he said to Moses, "A sound of war in the camp!" (18) But Moses said,

No sound of the song of prevailing,
No sound of the song of failing,
Just the sound of song I hear!²

(19) So, it happened that when he drew near to the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and shattered them at the base of the mountain. (20) Then he took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, and scattered it on the surface of the water, which he then made the children of Israel drink.

With the remarkable conversation with God at an end, Moses turns away and heads down the mountain. The narrator pauses, and at some length describes the precious cargo that the deliverer is carrying. He has "the tablets of the testimony in his hands." God's promise of Exod. 24:12 has been fulfilled. In that earlier chapter, God announced that the "tables of stone" were written precisely for "their (Israel's) instruction." But now the tablets do not instruct; they register Israel's fateful crime.

Moses soon meets Joshua, who had gone at least part way up the mountain with his master (Exod. 24:13). As they descend together, a sound wafts up to their ears from the direction of the camp of Israel. The word for "sound," qol, is deliciously ambiguous. It can mean the sound of the war cry, a sound of great distress, the sound of victory after a battle, or even the sound of praise in a service of worship. To Joshua's martial ears, it is a sound of war. Moses knows the source of the sound, and he offers his answer to Joshua in the form of a small punning poem. "No sound of the song of prevailing (geburah), no sound of the song of failing (chalushah), but just a song I hear."
three instances of the word "song" are identical in sound, but the final use doubles one of the letters of the word to distinguish it from the other two usages. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) tries to spell out more specifically the game that Moses is playing by adding the words "of wine" to the last-mentioned "song." But we and Moses know what kind of song fills the air of the sacred mountain; it is the kind of song one finds at orgiastic rites engaged in by idolatrous and/or syncretistic revellers.

Moses now sees the "calf and the dancing," and his immediate reaction is that "his anger burned." In effect, Moses reacts to his "seeing" in the same way that God reacted to the divine "seeing"; both of their angers "burn" (yichar 'af). But there is an important difference. God urged Moses to "let me alone" so that the divine anger could indeed burn. We noted in our reading of verse 10 above that God, in speaking thus to Moses, had in effect invited Moses to discuss the matter, an opening that Moses readily took. But there is no opening here. In a brief outburst of uncontrolled rage, punctuated by seven rapid verbs, Moses reacts to his "seeing." He first throws the tablets of God out of his hands and shatters them "at the base of the mountain." This rather unusual use of the preposition tachath, often translated "under," is also found at Exod. 24:4, where Moses had earlier "built an altar" in response to the people's claim that "all the words which Yahweh has spoken we will do." Now at the "base of the mountain" Moses breaks the symbol of that covenant to show the people what they have done.

He seizes the repulsive idol "which they had made," burns it, grinds it to powder, scatters it on the water, and forces the Israelites to drink it. The actions of burning and then grinding have been difficult to understand; they appear to make little logical sense. However, in an interesting Ugaritic parallel, the goddess Anat destroys Mot, the god of death, using precisely the same verbs in precisely the same order. Thus, the logical order is not significant for our understanding; the goal of Moses is to obliterate the calf.

Moses then forces the Israelites to drink water which has been saturated with the powdery remnants of the calf. To ingest
whatever is left of the evil object is the surest way to remove it from the face of the earth. "An allusion to the ordeal in Numbers 5 may also be in the background, but again should not be pressed. The issue at stake is not to determine the guilt, but to eradicate it."^10

What motivated Moses to take this amazing series of actions?

1. The most obvious possibility is that Moses smashed the tablets out of pure rage. That is what the text says literally (vs. 19). It would not be the first time that Moses reacted to a situation of chaos and confusion with violent anger. In Exod. 2, Moses, the prince of Egypt, kills an Egyptian overseer who was beating a Hebrew, "one of his (Moses') people." After this murder Moses loses the confidence of his fellow Israelites (2:14) and pharaoh, his adopted grandfather (2:15). Later, after Moses' initial attempts to persuade pharaoh to let the people go have resulted once again in Egyptian and Israelite dissatisfaction, Moses turns addresses God heatedly, shouting, "O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all" (Exod. 5:22-23). It would certainly not be inconsistent with Moses' past behavior to assume that his fiery temper caused him to hurl down the tablets.

2. But there may be more than human emotion at work in this passage. The narrator has God "burn in anger" just before Moses is described in the same way. Moses has staunched God's anger with pointed and persuasive arguments. Through this conflict Moses has learned that though God is furious enough to carry out destruction, God is also equally resolved to persist in the divine plan of a "great nation," chosen by God. In the face of these facts, Moses must mediate for his people in such a way that they can remain the people of God, but also be confronted with the seriousness of their sin. All of Moses' actions must now be seen to have something to do with preserving the people whom God has given him to lead.

Given this possible reading of the character of Moses, why then does he destroy the tablets? The act says, "God is furious! The covenant we have been offered has been abrogated; this
astonishing transgression cannot go unpunished. Thus, Moses destroys the tablets deliberately to announce those terrible facts to the people. This reading will help to explain the fifth scene of the story (vss. 25-29), and will help us better understand the next scene (vss. 21-24) with its portrait of Aaron. In fact, the picture of Aaron will become much clearer in the light of this understanding of Moses' motivations.

Exodus 32:21-24

(21) Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you brought upon them a great sin?" (22) Aaron said, "Don't let your anger burn, my lord. You know the people; surely, it is bent on evil. (23) They said to me, 'Make for us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.' (24) So, I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, tear it off and give it to me.' And I threw it in the fire and this calf came out."

This is truly a marvelous scene, and has brought forth the most disparate readings. Much of the disagreement revolves around the question of what to do with Aaron. As Leivy Smolar and Moshe Aberbach have demonstrated, the picture of Aaron in this chapter was very embarrassing for the later traditions of Judaism.

The participation of Aaron in the construction of the golden calf was an additional source of deep concern. This inevitably led to the emergence of an apologetic literature, the basic tendency of which was to minimize the guilt of Israel in general, and of Aaron in particular.

They show how the commentators used all manner of clever linguistic and psychological arguments to demonstrate that Aaron was not really culpable in the terrible deed. This concern to rehabilitate Aaron persists up to the present.

The plain fact is, however, that Aaron is being pilloried here in several obvious ways. We noted above that Moses is fully identified with his people; he has saved them from divine destruction and has just destroyed the product of their wanton and idolatrous behavior. Yet, the reader knows who actually
built the calf. It was Aaron, and now Moses confronts him with the deed. Note, however, that Moses' real concern arose from the way he asks the initial question. "What did this people do to you that you brought upon them a great sin?" Moses' use of the expression "this people" objectifies them distancing them from both himself and Aaron. Moses surely would not deny that the people are stiff-necked; perhaps they did lead Aaron astray. At the same time, Moses makes it very clear that Aaron did in fact bring on the people a great sin. The question is two-edged; it offers the possibility that Aaron is not completely guilty, but it affirms that he is far from completely innocent. His response will tell us just what the narrator thinks of him.

"Don't let your anger burn, my lord," he says. He does not answer Moses' question at all! "Cool off!" he says. It is the same thing that Moses said to God in the face of God's decision to destroy the people. Moses said it to save the people; Aaron now says it to save himself. "You know the people." Who knows this people of Israel better than Moses? He has struggled with them since their initial rejection of his attempts to save them from pharaoh, and has just rescued them from God's anger after their building of the calf. Oh yes, Moses knows the people. "It is bent on evil," says Aaron. So it is, Moses would agree. But Moses has saved them. Aaron now points to their evil and rushes on to separate himself from them and their evil as far as he can.

When Aaron finally gets around to answering Moses' question, he recounts the events that transpired in the beginning of the story. At first his memory is accurate. He says to Moses, "They said to me, 'Make for us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.'" This is indeed a word-for-word recounting of the speech of the people to Aaron as found in verse 1. Then Aaron becomes more creative. "So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, tear it off and give it to me.'" He makes three subtle changes in this part of the speech from the words reported to us in verse 2.

1. He begins his account with the indefinite phrase, "whoever has gold." The implication is perhaps "if any of you happen to
have any gold." That is a far cry from the sharp and detailed
word of command that Aaron uttered earlier to the men: "Tear
off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your
sons, and your daughters..." This change has the effect of
distancing Aaron from the activity and makes the people far
more directly responsible for deciding whether they will com­
ply with the command or not. Aaron portrays himself as far less
imperious, far less commanding, than the speech of verse 2
indicates.

2. He changes the verb of command, "tear off," from the
Hebrew theme piel to the Hebrew hithpael, which is usually the
reflexive theme of the verb. Hence, Aaron tells Moses that he
urged them to "tear off of themselves" the gold, emphasizing
their behavior in action. This change has the effect once again
of transferring the responsibility of the action away from Aaron
and toward the people.

3. He changes the verb from the causative form of the verb
"to bring" to a form of another verb "to give." In verse 2, Aaron
commands them "bring the gold." Here he softens the command
to "give." Again, he implies by this change that they had choice
in the matter. The clear implication is that because they are
"bent on evil," their choices were decided on evil bases. Aaron,
through these subtle linguistic changes, has separated himself
from the people and from the events and decisions surrounding
the building of the calf. But his most outrageous separation is
still to come.

"I threw it in the fire, and this calf came out!" Aaron would
have Moses and us believe that he had no intention of creating
a calf. Indeed, he implies that there may have been some divine
(or demonic?) force at work in the fire, which took all of the gold
and transformed it into a golden calf. But the narrator has
imputed the deed to Aaron, no mistake: "He took it from their
hands, shaped it with a graving tool, and made it into a molten
calf" (vs. 4). Three active verbs belie Aaron's claim of innocence;
Aaron is responsible and this bold-faced lie makes that all the
more certain. One might picture Aaron describing the events
with dramatic gestures and excited voice, while behind him the
people are shaking their heads at the absurdity of his story.
Note also that he uses that device, now familiar to us, of the demonstrative pronoun to distance himself from the calf. He calls it "this calf," suggesting that its miraculous origins in the fire made it an anomaly, an isolated and ultimately irrelevant thing. The fact that it has already been wiped off the face of the earth by the decisive actions of Moses makes Aaron's attempts to distance himself from it all the easier.

What then are we to make of this very negative picture of Aaron? Aaron is clearly a foil for Moses. That is, after we have heard Aaron's ridiculous and shameful explanations for the events at the base of the mountain, Moses' stature in our eyes grows immeasurably. Note the comparisons suggested by the text.

1. Whereas Moses warns God against doing "evil" to the people (vs. 12) so that God does not do "evil" against them (vs.14), Aaron quite directly calls the people "evil" in an attempt to excuse his own behavior.

2. In the face of towering divine wrath, Moses dares to argue with God in order to preserve the people. In the face of Moses' great anger, Aaron will not attempt to rescue the people, but separates himself from them as far as he can through a series of subtle and less than subtle verbal maneuvers.

3. For Aaron, the sin of the people is a result of their evil, an evil in which he claims to take no part. While Moses recognizes the people's evil, he acts to eradicate it and to warn them of the divine fury. In the last scene of the story, he will even offer his own life for the people rather than leave them without the presence of God (vs. 32).

The question of the text is one of leadership. Who is the real leader of Israel and what sort of leader should she/he be? The answer of this text is unequivocal; Moses is leader, not Aaron, and that is so primarily because Moses is one with the people while Aaron demonstrates no identity with them at all.

Exodus 32:25-29

(25) When Moses saw the people, that it had broken loose--Aaron had caused the breaking loose, leading to whispering among their enemies-- (26) Moses stood at the entrance to the camp, and said, "Whoever is for Yahweh, come here!" And
there assembled to him all the children of Levi. (27) And he said to them "Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel: each one put his sword on his side. Pass back and forth through the camp, and let each one kill his brother, his companion, his neighbor." (28) So the children of Levi acted according to the word of Moses, and there fell from the people that day about three thousand individuals. (29) And Moses said, "Fill your hands today for Yahweh! Each one because of your son and your brother has given yourself a blessing today."

Moses now sees that the people have indeed "broken loose" and they have done so at the instigation of Aaron. There is an interesting possible irony in the use of the word translated as "broken loose." The word is used twice in verse 25, once as a passive participle, pharu'a, and once as an active participle, pher'aoh. Earlier in the story of the exodus, in chapter 5, pharaoh, phar'aoh, complains to Moses and Aaron that they have "restrained," tiphr'i'u (the same verbal root), the people from their work. Moses has, of course, asked the pharaoh to let the people go; he (the pharaoh) claims that it is Moses who has restrained them. Now Moses says, in effect, that Aaron has not restrained the people but has "let them go" but for evil activity, not for freedom from slavery. Aaron, in other words, has become a parody of the exodus itself, and has become a pharaoh in reverse, "letting the people go" toward evil. In fact, the active participle, pher'aoh is identical consonantly to the word for pharaoh. One could thus hear the second part of verse 25 as follows: "Surely, Aaron was pharaoh, a whispering among their enemies." Thus does the narrator again denigrate Aaron and indicate the depth of evil to which he allowed the people to fall.

Whatever the historical background of the consecration of the Levites that the text presents, the need for an even more thorough eradication of the evil perpetrated at the base of the mountain is the reason for this section of the story. The result of the transgression has been effectively removed; now the culprits must be dealt with. Two facts should be noted. First, the ones killed are "brothers, companions, and neighbors," members of the people of Israel. The Levites are called to slaughter them without mercy. This grisly command is a clear
indication of the terrible seriousness of the transgression of the
great commandments against idolatry and image making.
Second, not all of the people are killed, merely "about three
thousand." God's anger against the people has been deflected
by Moses but not fully satisfied. There must be a reckoning for
this evil deed, and the price is a bloody one. God's grace, in part
motivated by the intercession of Moses, has allowed the sinful
people to survive as a people. The people's actions threaten the
very order of the "kingdom of priests and holy nation" (Exod.
19:6) that God envisioned when this people was chosen. The
removal of the calf and the killing of the three thousand are
Moses' attempts, as leader of the people, to expunge the rotten-
tenness at the core of the chosen ones of God.

But why not remove Aaron? We saw that he was deeply
implicated in the sin and lied about his involvement when
asked about it by Moses. Aaron is seriously involved all right,
but he remains unpunished. The reason appears to be, once
again, that Aaron must remain as a foil for Moses, and for the
kind of leadership be demonstrated.

There is a similar comparison in leadership styles recorded
in Numbers 25, involving, interestingly enough, a descendant
of Aaron. In this story, Zimri, an Israelite elder, decides to
marry Cozbi, a daughter of an important family of Midian.
Phineas, "son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest," kills the
couple, apparently while they are consummating their mar-
riage, by ramming a spear through both of their bodies. Because
of this bloody deed, Yahweh commends Phineas in the follow-
ing words to Moses: "He has turned back my wrath from the
people of Israel, because he was zealous with my zealousness
among them. So, I will not consume the people of Israel in my
zealousness." Phineas is affirmed as one who acted decisively
and with the same zeal practiced by God, who announced in the
great commandment, "I Yahweh your God am a zealous God"
(Exod. 20:5). Of Phineas it is said that he "was zealous for his
God and made atonement for the people" (Num. 25:13).

One could argue that Phineas combines in his person the two
characteristics of Moses' distinctive form of leadership, namely,
zeal for Yahweh and at the same time compassion for the people
made evident in the willingness to "atone for," כפר, the sins of those people. It is exactly those two characteristics that are lacking in the leadership of Aaron. He is willing to accede to the wild demands of a howling mob, but he has no compassion for them as a people, as his lying attempts to distance himself from them so readily make clear. True leaders demonstrate zealous compassion; Aaron demonstrates neither characteristic.

Exodus 32:30-35

(30) It happened the next day that Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. Now I will go up to Yahweh; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." (31) So Moses returned to Yahweh and said, "Ah! This people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. (32) But if you will carry their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written!" (33) But Yahweh said to Moses, "Whoever sins against me, I will blot them out of my book. (34) But now move! Lead the people where I told you. Look! My messenger will go before you. But on the day that I visit I will visit their sin upon them!" (35) And Yahweh plagued the people, because they made the calf which Aaron made.

The narrator concludes this part of the story still concerned to compare and contrast Moses with Aaron. In the fourth section, Aaron responded to Moses' question to him by attempting to rationalize his behavior behind the recognized fact that the people were evil (vs. 22). "You know how this people are, Moses; evil people beget evil deeds," says Aaron. Moses now in vs. 30 freely admits the great sin of the people, a sin he had earlier blamed at least in part on Aaron (vs. 21). But Moses does not demean them or to cut himself off from them. Quite the contrary: the real leader of Israel resolves immediately to go back up the mountain in an attempt to "atone" for the sins of the people.

It has been said that "Moses desires to make atonement for the sin of his people by offering, if necessary, his own life on behalf of the guilty who are threatened by destruction." The overwhelming meaning of the verb, כפר, "to atone," in the Hebrew Bible is "a material expiation by which injury is made
good and the injured party is reconciled, i.e., by which the hurt is covered (another meaning of the term) and the guilty party is released from obligation." It seems then that Moses is in fact offering himself on behalf of his people; he will become the material offering to "cover the hurt," "make good the injury," and thereby "release the guilty party from obligation." It is Moses' finest hour as leader of his people. In contrast to Aaron, so bent on divorcing himself from the people, Moses identifies with them so closely that he will willingly be wiped from the pages of history if God will agree to spare them. Moses would rather die than see the end of his people.

But God will have none of it. Only the sinners deserve death, says God. God does not want to get in the business of killing the innocent. Abraham's demand that God "not destroy the righteous with the wicked" (Gen. 18:23) is the way that God will operate. Moses' supreme sacrifice is summarily rejected. Earlier in the story, God had invited discussion of the decision to destroy the sinners (Exod. 32:10). But when the question arises of the destruction of the innocent, no discussion is possible; this God will not do it and will not discuss it. Indeed, God rushes on to another subject. God says again to Moses, "Move!" (Exod. 32:7) Back to work, Moses! Lead the people where I told you!

But something very important has changed; God will no longer lead the people. "My messenger will go before you," says God. And God goes on to warn the people, through Moses, that their great sin has in no way yet been fully atoned for. This is further proof that Moses' offer has been completely turned aside, almost as if it had not happened. God still vows to visit their sin upon them; they should not imagine that God's absence from them means that God has forgotten what they have done. Such great evil is not forgotten so easily.

An interesting ambiguity arises from this final section. On the one hand, each person is responsible for her/his own sin before God. Yet, the final threat of God to punish the people for "their" sin indicates that individual sins have a profound and lasting impact on the entire community in which they are done. And to illustrate that ambiguity, the narrator ends the story with a most peculiar sentence: "Yahweh plagued the people,
because they made the calf which Aaron made" (v. 35). Just as Yahweh earlier in the story of the exodus has sent "plagues" on the Egyptians in behalf of the Israelites, so now Yahweh "plagues" the Israelites for their own great sin of creating the calf. That sin in its effects was thus fully equal to the oppressions of the Egyptians and was dealt with in the same way, through a plague from Yahweh.

But the remainder of the sentence sounds on the face of it to be gibberish: "they made the calf which Aaron made." Childs speaks for many when he says, "the last three words appear to be a clumsy, secondary addition." But we must ask what are the effects of the sentence? First, the words summarize the story we have been reading. It is in fact true that both the people and Aaron are culpable in the construction of the calf; he shaped it but at their express instigation. Second, by closing the story with the word "Aaron," the narrator reminds the reader again of his guilt in the affair and once more sharply distinguishes the two would-be leaders. The last we heard from Moses was his offer to sacrifice his life for his people. The last we hear of Aaron from the narrator is the remembrance that he made the calf.

After this wonderful tale there can be no doubt of two facts. Moses is the true leader of Israel; Aaron is at best a provisional one and at worst a rebel against the will of Yahweh. And true leadership consists of total zeal for Yahweh coupled with an unstinting compassion for the people whom one is called to lead. Moses is hero; Aaron is anti-hero. Such are the conclusions of this reading of Exodus 32.

The reader can see much unfinished business in the story. Will God not go with the people? How will Moses be able to lead this stiff-necked people? In what further ways will Moses manifest the remarkable leadership abilities delineated in this story? These questions and others remain to be addressed in Exodus chapters 33-34. Yet the story contained in chapter 32 is a whole story. It begins with the people's demand of Aaron to make gods for them, and ends with the one God plaguing the people for that act. Within that envelope of idol making and its consequences, Moses emerges as the epitome of true leader-
ship for the people. In that sense, the question first asked of Moses by "one of his people" in Exod. 2:14, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us?" has been answered by this story. The answer is: Yahweh, and that choice has been confirmed by the actions of the hero, zealous for Yahweh, compassionate for his people.

Notes

5. I am indebted for the impetus for the following analysis to R. W. L. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God* (University of Sheffield: Sheffield, 1983) 46-48.
7. See, for example, Childs, *Exodus*, p. 567.
8. For the translations of "prevailing" and "falling," see Fox, *Now These*, p. 182.
13. Brichto's claim that Aaron was telling the truth here, that the calf really did hop out of the fire, due to the power of God, is not convincing and is motivated by Brichto's aim to exonerate Aaron's role in the story. See Brichto, "The Worship," p. 13.
Images of Christian Victory: 
Notes for Preaching 
from the Book of Revelation

Cornish Rogers

WHEN I BEGAN teaching a course entitled "Preaching 
Values in the Book of Revelation" I got some funny, 
evasive looks from a few members of the Bible faculty. It wasn't 
until much later, after having taught it twice, that I was in­
formed by the Dean that some questions had been raised about 
my qualifications to teach the course, since I was obviously not 
trained as a biblical scholar. When I replied that the course was 
not intended to be a "Bible" course but a course in preaching, 
he expressed his full support but just wanted me to know that 
some of the Bible faculty were uneasy about it. Their uneasi­
ness stemmed from the unsettled place of Revelation in 
scholarly opinion. One colleague confessed,"I can't figure it out, 
so I just leave it alone." Another said to me sympathetically, "If 
I were an oppressed minority, I would love the Book of Revela­

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Claremont, 1325 North College Avenue, Claremont, CA 91711-3199. This 
article is from a forthcoming book on preaching on Revelation.
tion," implying that, not being a minority person, he had no use for it.

**Scholarly Ambivalence**

Aversion to Revelation among biblical scholars goes back to the early church, and has been especially strong since the historical-critical method of Bible study came into practice. New Testament scholar Amos Wilder reported that when, in 1929, he chose to write his doctoral dissertation on eschatology and ethics, he received a letter from his academic supervisor at Harvard, Walter Lowrie:

> For myself I have serious counsel to give you. If you would have a long life and would see good days, keep mum on the subject of eschatology...a subject which is highly dangerous in these days. Your teachers give you good advice: eschatology is a subject which the good and the great conspire to shun.¹

Nevertheless, Wilder persisted in his project, for which he credited Albert Schweitzer's "grasp of the potent visionary media in their relation to Jesus' mission" as persuasive: "Schweitzer's sense of the power, not of dreams and fictions, but of deeply rooted community symbols and scenarios threw new light on the world drama of the Gospel."

Since that time apocalyptic literature has been reassessed by most New Testament scholars. Recognizing apocalyptic as a central New Testament genre, Ernst Käsemann contended that apocalyptic is "the mother of Christian theology." "Christians," says Jürgen Moltmann, "are joyous revolutionaries." David Tracy considers apocalyptic a corrective built into the New Testament that challenges a privatistic understanding of the Gospels. It is a reminder of the public, political, and historical character of Christian self-understanding, and of the privileged place of the poor, the oppressed, and those who suffer. Not only does it challenge the living to remember the dead, but it also reminds the wise that the ultimate power ordering the cosmos is essentially unfathomable.²

Apocalyptic, whether Jewish or Christian, may be defined with reference to the Greek word *apokalypsis*, the unveiling of
heavenly mysteries. Properly speaking, apocalyptic refers to a mode of discourse, a style of revelation that is richly symbolic, pseudonymous, esoteric; "underground" literature that is also filled with ethical exhortations. A literary example is an apocalypse; apocalyptic eschatology refers to motifs (usually concerning the end of this age, battle between cosmic forces of good and evil, the messianic era of salvation) that may be found in other kinds of literature.³

Theologically, eschatology and apocalyptic must be connected yet carefully distinguished from one another. According to Karl Rahner: "to extrapolate from the present into the future is eschatology, to interpolate from the future into the present is apocalyptic."⁴ Eschatology then is "Futurum," the fulfillment of current conditions in an anticipated climax; apocalyptic is "Adventus," the ideal reality of the future time imposed on, and therefore reordering, present experience. A more direct way of expressing the difference is that eschatology, with its roots in prophetic realism, leads to reform while apocalyptic, drawing on a radical utopian vision, leads to revolution.

Because of its revolutionary character, apocalyptic has a negative cast to it, but one that is distinctly creative in character. "The New Creation is born through the negation of the old, and is not its mere replacement."⁵ In the Book of Revelation, the demonic is used to reveal Christ—just as in the Gospels, it is the demon-possessed who are able to reveal Jesus.

But was Jesus himself an apocalyptic preacher whose revolutionary message was the imminent arrival of the world’s end, and final judgment? Schweitzer himself believed that Jesus’ teaching could not be understood apart from an apocalyptic vision of the world. From then on, scholars have been trying to "save Jesus" from apocalyptic, usually by carefully examining Jesus’ sayings as preserved in the synoptic Gospels. In literature written in other Christian communities (e.g., 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Mark 13, and the Apocalypse of John [Revelation]), the realized victory of the Risen Christ is now connected with an eagerly anticipated sorting out of good and evil on earth. Finally, however, the Church relegated its own apocalyptic
heritage to the fringes; Martin Luther was even tempted to remove Revelation from the Protestant Bible.

In spite of the deprecation of apocalyptic historically, and these days by some mainline biblical scholars, Revelation is enjoying an enormous popularity in the religious imagination of ordinary people in our nation and around the world. As the end of the millennium nears, the book’s dire judgments seem to burn more brightly than before. It is revealing that a Russian physician said at an international conference of physicians in 1988:

In the Apocalypse [8:10-11] there are the following words: “And there fell a great star from Heaven... and the name of the star is called Wormwood...and the waters became wormwood and many died of the waters because they were made bitter.” The Ukrainian word for wormwood is Chernobyl. Where did the Chernobyl wormwood star come from? I am sure it was sent to us from the 21st century as a menacing sign, demanding us to think over the very survival of our civilization before it is too late.6

TV evangelists and fundamentalist preachers everywhere are preaching with great effect their literalistic interpretation of the book. Lay persons are asking more questions about the future of the world as a result of the book’s apparent disturbing message. Meanwhile mainline denominational preachers have shunned the book entirely--their silence imposed by fear that the book is not sufficiently Christian to be intelligible.7

Revelation and Modern Culture

But Revelation is a book whose time has come, and we ignore its preaching message at our own peril. Not only are we nearing the end of a Christian millennium when "end time" interests increase, but we are made more aware of the dangerous possibilities inherent in the sustained conflict in the Middle East between Jew and Arab in the vicinities of Armageddon and other places identified in the book. With the advent of nuclear power, we can actually imagine the possibility of the world coming to an end in our lifetime. Already we have witnessed massive surd evils, like the Jewish Holocaust and the Jones-
town massacre, just to mention two, which serve to prefigure an even more apocalyptic future triggered by evil people. Prominent public officials, like Ronald Reagan and James Watts, have lent their prestige to give legitimacy to a literalistic view of the book.

The contemporary mind, addicted to visual imagery through daily doses of television, cinematic portrayals of interplanetary travel, and far-out science fiction, seizes on the lurid images, grotesque figures, violent conflict, and interstellar action described in Revelation. It is, in a word, great theater! And more than drama, it is musical drama!

Revelation does not only deal with space in a cosmic fashion: it also treats time that way. Apocalyptic literature pioneered the first universal view of history—a view that includes all peoples and all times, even the heavens. It is the preeminent book of the Bible that breaks down the barrier between humans and nature, introducing an ecological consciousness and a cosmic scope of existence. The forces of both good and evil are aided by natural agents.

The need for the gospel to be preached from this book is crucial because the approach of most fundamentalist preachers is to preach not the gospel, but message of fear and dire judgment lacking in the positive dimensions of the gospel. Missing in much of present preaching of the Apocalypse is

the phase of miraculous renovation and that world affirmation which has gone through the experience of world negation...the full apocalyptic scenario should include salvation as well as judgment, the new age as well as the old. 6

Revelation is a call to be faithful to God and to be assured that help from on high is on the way through Jesus Christ, the sacrificial conquering lamb, who has become God's instrument in establishing God's Kingdom on earth. The book does not intend to frighten its readers, but to assure them that God's justice will be done on behalf of the faithful, who suffered because of their faithfulness. As strange as it may appear from a superficial reading, the book is a priestly one designed to give comfort. Even those who suffered unto death are promised
eventual resurrection in the last days when the new city of God is established.

Revelation and Apocalyptic

It is generally agreed that Revelation was written to a group of beleaguered Christians near the end of the First Century C.E. It urges them to hold on their faith in the face of severe oppression by the Roman authorities, who insisted that they include the Roman emperor as one of the gods they must worship. Again and again, it reminds them of the First Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). Even when God's angels come to the aid of the Elect, they warn the Elect not to worship them, but to worship only God. The prohibition of idolatry connects the Old Testament Exodus experience with the Early Church: as God delivered the Jews from Egypt, so God will deliver them, if they refrain from worshipping any "graven images" such as that of the Roman emperor.

Revelation is a typical apocalypse, a report of a vision of the end of the world by a supernatural mediator. Revelation is unusual, however, in two respects. First, it is not pseudonymous; its author, John of Patmos, does not disguise himself (although we cannot identify him with the apostle or the evangelist of the same name). Second, its structure is uncharacteristic in that it alternates visions with digressions. These interludes symbolize the alternation between suffering and joy in the Christian life-style. One reads of the horrible unrelieved suffering of the saints only to come to an interlude of joyful worship and celebration of the coming victory of the forces of good! Then follows more terrible portents and suffering that are almost unbearable when another interlude of worship, reassurance and celebration appears. The point of this rhythm of suffering and joy for the Christian is that his or her life will entail certain suffering, and joy enables one to endure it. Indeed, suffering opens the door for "otherworldly joys" to spill over into this world. As long as one takes the long view, one can always rejoice even in tribulation; for the endtime—that glorious time when the New Jerusalem comes down from God
out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband—is assured. It is a time of vindication.

The structure of Revelation is elaborate and probably patterned after the Book of Ezekiel. It has an upstairs/downstairs quality about it: one has to be aware of what is taking place in heaven and what is taking place on earth. It is difficult to assess the time sequences; time appears to be both vertical and horizontal, swinging on an axis. One must read the book with a wide angle lens, or more aptly, with a split screen lens. But in the order of their reportage, the following chronology occurs

Chapter 1: The Vision of Christ by John of Patmos
2-3: Letters to the Churches
4-22: Visions of the Future
4-5: Preparatory Visions
6-16: Seven Seals, Trumpets, Mystic Signs, Bowls.
(Interludes are usually just before the seventh vision, and introduce the next cycles.)
17-19: Final Destruction of Babylon
20: Thousand Year Reign and Last Judgment
21-22: New Jerusalem

The uniqueness of Revelation is its visions, or images. They appear to have lives of their own outside the context of the book. Christ is exalted—but he is also depicted as conquering and vengeful. Evil is appears in the form of a dragon, as a beast and as a woman astride a beast. Several images of negativity (seals, trumpets, the harvest of God’s vengeance, bowls of wrath, Armageddon) are matched by images of order and integration (worship in the Heavenly Court, the New Jerusalem). Feminine images, both negative and positive, include Jezebel, the Woman Clothed with the Sun, the Woman on the Scarlet Beast and the New Jerusalem as a bride.

A striking parallel of good and evil images emerges from the book. The images project a mirror world of good and evil, images that look suspiciously like each other unless one looks closely. There is the holy trinity of God, the lamb and the bride; and
the unholy trinity of the dragon (Satan), the beast and the whore. There are two beasts (one is later called a false prophet) and two prophets, all of whom have miraculous powers. Both the beasts and the prophets reign for 42 months, 1260 days. There is a seal of the beast and a seal of the Elect, as well as marks of slaughter on both the beast and the Lamb. It is as if evil tries to beguile us into thinking it is the good. It reminds us that the lure of goodness and the lure of evil are almost equal.

Ultimately, the symbolism of Revelation becomes a language that combines disclosure with ecstasy. "The language of the apocalyptist is an acclamation that echoes and continues the event, the miraculum. It is reflexive, not reflective. . . . the language is part of the happening." The language then actually becomes a participant in the enjoyment of the disclosure! But in order for that disclosure to be enjoyed, one must be sensitive and aware of parallels in the present situation. That is why the book invites interpretations that are risky and often faulty, unless one struggles to read the signs of the times from a broad and balanced gospel perspective.

Revelation and the Presentation of the Self

It has been said that the Apocalypse is a representation of the way the world looks after the ego has disappeared. Perhaps its fascination lies in its unveiled truth about ourselves. The images of Revelation are grotesque, perhaps, because we are blinded by our egos. The difference may be only one of perspective: Jacques Maritain reportedly remarked about the art of Picasso that "his distorted faces are perhaps our true likenesses, when we are seen by the angels." Like Picasso, Revelation paints in lurid cartoon images in order to evoke the true likeness of created reality. It is at the gut level that the book communicates truth. It is more than cartoon, more than poetic imagery; it is the stuff of which dreams are made.

"As silently as a mirror is believed, realities plunge in silence by." Those realities, or images, are the subliminal force of the book. Moved by this current, readers take away more than the text actually says. That is entirely preferable to finding less--
that is, reducing imagery into easily recognizable formulas. The gifts of Revelation are reserved for those who take it on its own terms. When Isadora Duncan was once asked what one of her dances meant, she replied, "If I could tell you, I would not have to dance it." In her book, *Dreams, Illusions, and Other Realities*, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty writes that if the Hindu storyteller "sets out to tell a tale of revelation, he may describe events that peel back the physical veil to reveal another, more mystical reality that was always there but not recognized."^{12}

The images created by the wedding of the text with the imagination of the reader/hearer becomes what James Sanders calls "mirrors of identity rather than models of morality." That, he maintains, is the proper hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures.^{13} All Scripture, like Revelation, is an unmasking of appearances, a revealing of ultimate truth behind present reality. Even for Dante, the journey through Hell in *Purgatorio* was a way of seeing his essential self stripped of all pretensions. But his use of terror was for purification, not penalty. In Revelation, too, terror is purgative, not penal, in its intended effect.

Through the power of its images, Revelation has found an enduring place in the imagination of Western history and culture. Artists, musicians, and writers have incorporated its images into the works of their imagination. If all the copies of the book were destroyed tomorrow, its essential message would live on in Western art, music and literature. One needs only to visit Chartres and other European cathedrals to experience an architecture patterned after the description of the New Jerusalem; the triumphant strains of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" exult over the marriage of the lamb. Western literature is replete with allusions to the vivid scenes in Revelation. The book enjoys popularity even among non-Christians, many of whom regard it as their favorite book of the Bible.

Isak Dineson has maintained that any sorrow or suffering can be borne provided it can be put into a story. Revelation is such a story. It is a story of the future about to break into a suffering, sorrowful present. Because of the secularization of our culture, says Harvey Cox, the future "is the only dimension in which the
transcendent can operate; so the future becomes a source of freedom, and imagination becomes the necessary sensibility for hope." Revelation says more. It promises that the future belongs not to the beasts, but to the lambs. And listen to the lambs! We must preach the lambs' song.

Notes

6. From a speech by Dr. Yuri Stscherbak, a physician from Kiev, given on 13 October 1988 during the Congress of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.
7. See also Adela Yarbro Collins, "What the Spirit Says to the Churches": Preaching the Apocalypse," *QR* 4/3 (Fall, 1984): 69-84.
14. Harvey Cox, quoted in a recent speech.
Bringing Out of the Gospel-Treasure
What Is New and What is Old:
Two Parables in Matthew 18-23

Daniel Patte

THE GOSPEL lections from Proper 19 to All Saints' Day are well known to our congregations and to us. In addition to passages such as the Tax Due To Caesar (Matt. 22:15-22), the Great Commandment (22:34-46), You Are Not To Be Called Rabbi, Father, Masters; the Greatest Shall Be Your Servant (23:1-12), these lections include a series of parables: the parables of the Unmerciful Servant (18:21-35), the Workers in the Vineyard (20:1-16), the Two Sons (21:28-32), the Vineyard (21:33-43), the Wedding Feast (22:1-14). These passages are so well known that they are no longer heard; they no longer surprise us by their newness, because, for us, everything in them is "old." But Matthew challenges us preachers ("scribes trained for the kingdom") to bring out of our treasure, the gospel, "what is new and what is old" (13:52). It is not a matter

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of finding something new to say about the text, but rather of acknowledging its richness. It is a treasure! Each passage involves many teachings, as Matthew says about the parables in 13:52 (and throughout this chapter), and as modern scholarship about the parables also emphasizes by underscoring their "polyvalence." Yet, because we are so fascinated by the great value of one of these teachings, we do not hear or see anything else (cf. 13:13); our reading of the text, valuable as it is, hides from us the rest of the treasure. In order to bring out of the treasure the "new" in addition to the "old," we need to be willing to read the text (a parable or any other Gospel text) several times, from different perspectives. Then, other and often very different teachings appear. As preachers or teachers, we should not seek to reconcile these readings. Rather, we should choose which message needs to be brought out of the treasure of the text for a specific audience in a particular situation (although we might need to refer to one or several of the other teachings, because it is well known to our audience).

In a sense, this suggestion should not surprise preachers. They are used to consulting various exegetical studies of the text, and to picking and choosing what is appropriate for their sermon to a given congregation. This is a good example of true practical wisdom which is hidden from "the wise and understanding" (the specialists, the exegetes; 11:25)! Yet this true practical insight must be carried out consistently and coherently, by resisting the temptation to imitate the exegetical studies that, even in the cases of the parables, most often present themselves as a quest for THE single true meaning of the text (whether it is THE original meaning, THE literary meaning, THE theological meaning, etc.). This common exegetical practice denies the richness of the text-treasure, because it denies any validity to the other perspectives that allow readers to perceive other coherent teachings of the text. In the process, we deny any validity to the specific experiences and concerns reflected by these perspectives, including the authentic experiences, concerns, and identities of minority and Third-World Christians, as well as of many groups and individuals in our congregations and in our society. This is why I insist that
preachers should continue doing what they are doing; picking and choosing interpretations that are appropriate for their sermons. But they need to do so consistently. This is to say that they must seek to discern the coherence of each of the teachings that a given text offers, rather than pretending to highlight a few features of THE single teaching of this text.

In this way, one becomes fully aware that any interpretation (for oneself or for an audience) involves choosing one rather than another of the teachings offered by a text. Because these teachings offered by the text are so different, this choice is never without consequences. By seeing clearly the distinct coherence of the various teachings offered by a text, one is in a position to evaluate their implications for a specific audience in a concrete situation, and thus to make an educated decision when deciding which teaching this audience needs to hear.

These opening remarks and the concrete way to proceed are clarified by the "multi-reading" studies of two lections, Matt. 18:21-35, Proper 19; and Matt. 20:1-16, Proper 20. For each lection I propose three readings that should be enough to open up the treasure of the text (of course, other readings are possible). Each of these readings--found in one or several existing exegetical studies--is presented in some detail so as to show that each of their teachings is equally legitimate (equally well based on the text), despite the fact that it perceives a different coherence in the text.4 I also suggest how the perception of these teachings is related to the perspectives of certain groups (by referring to the interpretations of the Hispanic camposinos of Solentiname and of a feminist scholar, Luise Schottroff). This is not saying that these teachings are only for them; they are also for us, but these groups help us see them! Then, we have a choice. When we choose one or another of these teachings as the one to be conveyed in a sermon, we can do so with the full awareness of its implications for our congregations. By using similar exegetical studies (listed in the bibliography), readers should likewise strive to envision the distinct coherent teachings offered by each of the other lections, before making a choice for their sermons.
Proper 19, September 16, 1990
Matthew 18:21-35

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:23-35) underscores the importance of forgiving brothers and sisters, as the dialogue between Peter and Jesus (18:21-22) also does. According to the way the text is read, quite different teachings about forgiveness emerge: an exhortation to forgive as one has been forgiven; a warning concerning the disastrous effects of not forgiving; or a teaching concerning what makes forgiveness "from the heart" possible.

First Reading: Forgiving as We Have Been Forgiven

The lection suggests that 18:21-22 (how many times should we forgive?) is to be read in terms of the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:23-35). Peter's proposal to forgive one's brother or sister seven times (18:21) is quite generous. He envisions a righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees (5:20), who limited forgiveness to three times (Schweizer, 377), and greater than that of the tax collectors and Gentiles (5:46-47; cf. 18:17). Why should there be no limit to forgiving our brothers and sisters (18:22)? The first servant in the parable was unexpectedly (18:26) forgiven by the king a huge debt (ten thousand talents, the highest figure one can think; we could say, billions of dollars), and should in turn have forgiven (18:32-33). Similarly, we have received extraordinary forgiveness from God, and should in turn forgive abundantly (this is, in a nutshell, the interpretation of Jeremias, 210-214).

The Christian "community can live on the basis of God's inconceivably great grace--not only can, but must" (Schweizer, 379; see 375-79). We should forgive our brothers and sisters, as God forgave us; God's forgiveness should lead us to want to forgive--that is, to forgive "from our heart" (18:35), without hypocrisy, and thus also without counting, without limitation (18:22). In sum, unlike the servant who was forgiven and did
not forgive, we should forgive our brothers and sisters in order to avoid being condemned as he was (18:34-35).

For most of us, this is the "old" message that this lection expresses and that we have heard many times (see also, e.g., Meyer, 133-34; Gundry, 370-75; Bonnard, 278-79). It appears as one reads a text in an attempt to discern that to which it refers. In the case of a parable it involves reading it as an allegory. Thus, following Matthew's own suggestion in 18:35, we conclude that the king represents God; the first servant, a false disciple; and the other servants, faithful disciples. This reading is well grounded in the text and should not be neglected. Yet, it must be used with caution, because the very emphasis on God's grace as something that we must imitate tends to transform Jesus' teaching into a legalism. It becomes something that we must do, simply because it is God's way and God's will, but also something that we find difficult to do (who can be as merciful as God?!) It thus generates guilt, instead of offering the good news of God's grace. In order to avoid this pitfall, as Schweizer (379) saw, one needs to emphasize that forgiveness should come "from your heart" (18:35); but, the full significance of this phrase only appears through other readings.

Second Reading: The Disastrous Effects of Not Forgiving

Scholarship has shown that by teaching in parables Jesus deeply challenged, indeed, shocked his audience. Through its allegorical interpretation, the first reading hides this challenge. Our second reading focuses on it by considering how the disciples to whom Jesus addresses this teaching in the story of the Gospel are affected by it. This involves paying closer attention to the unfolding of the story of the disciples. The context of the lection, 18:15-35, must, therefore, be taken into account. In the process, one has to examine more closely the plot of the parable, and especially the role of the fellow servants in this plot.

First, note that Peter would have a hard time understanding the parable as an additional answer to his question; the dialogue, 18:21-22, and the parable, 18:23-35, do not seem to fit together. The parable is far from being an example of unlimited forgiveness! The king does forgive, but then withdraws his
forgiveness. This can be interpreted as a sign that Matthew has brought together two unrelated pieces of the tradition about Jesus' teaching. Then, one might want to study the two passages separately, in an attempt to reconstruct Jesus' original teaching, as Scott (267-80) does regarding the parable. Yet, for the sake of our congregations, it is better to stay with the text as redacted by Matthew; this is the gospel. From this perspective, the lack of continuity suggests that Matthew presents the issue of the limits of forgiveness raised by Peter (18:21) as an interruption of Jesus' teaching to the disciples about forgiveness (begun in 18:15). Jesus' brief answer ("seventy times seven," any number of times, 18:22) dismisses the question of limits as totally irrelevant for the matter at hand, and returns to what he was saying. Thus, the "therefore" (dia touto, 18:23a) which introduces the parable draws the consequence of what Jesus was saying about forgiveness (18:15-20) before being interrupted by Peter.

The phrase, "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to" (18:23a), does not mean that the following story is absolutely identical to the kingdom; in some respects, it is "like" the kingdom, but in other respects it is "unlike" it; indeed, the metaphorical comparison might be primarily negative (Scott, 279).

For first century hearers and the disciples to whom this teaching is addressed, the description of the king, of the size of the debt, and of the punishment (18:23-25) "conjures up the high finances of the empire," the hated practice of "tax farming" (the servant is a tax collector who had bid for collecting taxes over a large region and failed to do so, for unknown reasons; see Scott, 270-71; Jeremias, 210-14), as well as the Gentiles' cruel punishments of selling debtors and their families as slaves (Scott, 274). Thus, for the readers-disciples, such a cruel Gentile king is an unlikely candidate for representing God. This comparison does not become much more likely when the king shows mercy (18:26-27). Indeed, the forgiving of ten thousand talents to the great tax collectors would be viewed with ambivalence, if not in a negative light. Think, for instance, of the public reaction to the current Savings & Loan bailout (we are
speaking of billions of dollars!). If, as is quite possible, the officers responsible for these huge financial failures are merely threatened of prosecution (18:25) without being actually condemned (18:27; being forgiven their huge debt), what will be (is) the reaction of most taxpayers?! Furthermore, at the end, the abhorred Gentile cruelty reappears as a characteristic of this king: "In anger his lord delivered him to the torturers (RSV: "jailers"), till he should pay all his debt" (18:34). In sum, despite 18:35, the disciples would, at the very least, hesitate to identify such a king with God; God is both like and unlike such a king!

The challenge of the parable for the hearers-disciples appears when one notes that they are led to identify themselves with the fellow servants who are greatly distressed by the attitude of the first servant, and report him to the king (18:31; Scott, 275-76), asking for justice. Would not this be the reaction of average taxpayers if they saw a pardoned S & L officer throwing into the street (or sending to jail) someone who cannot keep up with his or her small mortgage payment? But, by reporting the first servant to the king, the fellow servants bear responsibility for unleashing the king's wrath. "By bringing vengeance on the servant, the fellow servants (and the hearer) have left their own situation in jeopardy. The demand for 'like for like,' for apparent justice, has left them exposed. If a king can take back his forgiveness, who is safe? . . . In the end the fellow servants have behaved the same way [the first servant] did; they have failed to forgive and demanded punishment" (Scott, 278). Then it becomes clear that the parable primarily represents what the kingdom is NOT: the refusal to forgive, demanding from God punishment upon the wicked, turns God into a cruel "God" comparable to a Gentile king who, despite generous acts of mercy, remains fundamentally cruel; one cannot count on such a "God's" mercy. God, the God of the Gospel, our "heavenly Father," is NOT like such a king!

This negative parable (a reading well supported by Scott's careful literary analysis) is the conclusion ("Therefore," 18:23) of Jesus' teaching found in 18:15-20. In these verses, the emphasis is on "gaining" back a brother or a sister who has sinned (18:15), spelling out three steps that can be taken toward that
end (18:15-17). In case of failure, it is pointed out that this sinner becomes "as a Gentile and a tax collector" (18:17b)—a direct connection with the parable about the Gentile king and the servant-tax collector. In this context, Peter's question (18:21) shows that he understood that one should not limit oneself to three attempts (18:15-17) to forgive a sinner. Yet, he still presupposes that one should, at a certain point, give up on the sinner, and treat him or her as a Gentile or a tax collector. Is this not what the church's authority to "bind" and to "loose" (18:18) involves? Indeed, it does involve the authority to "report" sinners to God ("to bind"), so much so that they will be condemned in heaven, as the fellow servants reported the first servant (the tax collector!) to the king (18:31). But this has disastrous consequences. By considering this sinner as a tax collector, one irremediably condemns him or her to punishment; one turns God into a cruel Gentile king who withdraws his forgiveness in order to punish (18:34); and one exposes oneself to the same fate as the condemned sinner. Such is the warning that this negative parable of the kingdom expresses: "So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive" (18:35), that is, if you condemn sinners by reporting them to God and demand their punishment.

Ideally, in a positive parable of the kingdom which implements Jesus' teaching of 18:15-20, when the servants were deeply distressed by the sinful attitude of the first servant as they should be (18:31), one of these servants should have gone privately to him to confront him with his fault (18:15); then, if he had not listened, two or three servants could have done it once again together (18:16); and if this had failed, all the servants together should have gone to him (18:17). By repeating this process as long as necessary, there would have been a good chance that the first servant would have seen his error and changed his behavior. Then, instead of losing a fellow servant (lost in the hands of the torturers, 18:34), they would have gained a brother or a sister (18:15). And much more! Indeed, having a brother or a sister is essential to be in good relationship with God, a good God, the heavenly Father who provides the good things you need and ask from him, by con-
contrast with the God of the Gentiles (6:7-8; 7:7-11): "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven" (18:19). Note the condition: one needs to be at least "two"; one needs to have at least one brother or sister, something which soon becomes impossible if one treats all those who sin as tax-collectors or Gentiles! There is still another "gain" in forgiving: the presence of Jesus, which is promised "where two or three (brothers and sisters) are gathered in [his] name" (18:20).

Why should we forgive an unlimited number of times (18:22)? Because, by not forgiving, we irremediably condemn others (18:17b; 18:31-34), and also because we condemn ourselves to a similar punishment (18:35). By not forgiving, we deprive ourselves of brothers and sisters, and in so doing we deprive ourselves of our heavenly Father, who is ready to provide us with what we ask jointly with brothers and sisters. We deprive ourselves of such a Father, by making out of God, despite his mercy, a strict king of justice, a cruel Gentile king. Furthermore, we deprive ourselves of the presence of Christ with us.

This reading has the advantage of taking seriously into account the warning of 18:35. It has also the advantage of avoiding making the admonition to forgive a legalism. Forgiving is no longer something that we must do in imitation of God's forgiveness. The admonition to forgive is rather a grace in itself; it offers us the possibility to avoid condemning ourselves and indeed to receive rich blessings from the heavenly Father. Furthermore, this reading elucidates a message of the text that is truly good news for people who are economically, culturally, or politically oppressed, i.e., the poor, the homeless, African-Americans and other minorities, and women (Rowland and Corner, 9-33). It does not demand that they deny their experience and their legitimate longing for justice; the true God, the God of the Gospel, is NOT like a cruel Gentile king who rules over his servants at his whim, and thus not like the economically, culturally, or politically powerful persons or institutions that oppress people. The true manifestation of the kingdom is forgiving each other, true solidarity among servants.
(the oppressed) who do not report a fellow servant to the king (the powerful), but strive to deal with their conflicts among themselves. Thus the solidarity that is so often found among the poor, among the homeless, among the economically, racially, culturally, or politically oppressed, can be affirmed as manifestations of the kingdom; "theirs is the kingdom."

As with any reading, this one involves a potential pitfall. By focusing on it, one can easily convey that there is no judgment. Of course there is a judgment; we are accountable for not forgiving. Yet condemnation and punishment are not brought about by an "angry" God (18:34); it is rather condemnation and punishment brought upon ourselves by depriving ourselves of the means of blessings: brothers and sisters.

Third Reading: Forgive From Your Heart

Let us change perspective once again by considering the specific role the lection plays in the overall message, or theme, Matthew seeks to convey to his readers in this part of the Gospel. For this, we need to consider the lection in the context of the thematic unit to which it belongs: 17:22-18:35. By clarifying this theme through a close examination of the points that Matthew underscores as particularly significant (through oppositions), we discover a fundamental teaching concerning the basic conditions that need to be met so as to be in a position to forgive others "from the heart."

Our lection, 18:21-35, and the unit to which it belongs, 17:22-18:35, are parts of a larger section of the Gospel that begins in 16:13 and that involves announcements of the Passion. This section begins in 16:13-23, where Jesus first announces to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and be killed. Peter rejects this as impossible; saying that Jesus, "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16) must be killed is utter nonsense (Patte, 230). By the time of the second Passion prediction, 17:22-23, the disciples have progressed; they no longer view Jesus' death as impossible (Patte, 231-41). Yet, it remains that "they were greatly distressed" (17:23) about it. The exact same phrase is found at a key point of the parable: the fellow servants "were greatly distressed" (18:31). The theme of the unit, 17:22-18:35 begins to appear: it concerns how to pass from
false or inappropriate "great distress" to true or appropriate "great distress." The readers should not be distressed by Jesus' death, as the disciples are in 17:23b; but they should be distressed when they see someone refusing to forgive and mistreating a brother or sister, as the fellow servants are in 18:31 (on this and what follows, see Patte, 244-58).

In sum, the lection 18:21-35 is the conclusion of a unit which seeks to transform the perspective of the disciples, and the readers who identify with them, so that they would be distressed about the right thing (people not forgiving and mistreating others) rather than about Jesus' death. What does this transformation require? In brief, it demands a fundamental change of "heart" (cf. 18:35), a total reversal of perception about what is good and bad. Thus, in the conclusion (18:21-35) of the unit (17:22-18:35), we can expect to find an expression of what should be viewed as truly good and of what this perception entails. To recognize it, we need to understand how the text relates "forgiving" to the Passion; in other words, we need to elucidate the common theme, the thread, that connects "forgiving" and Passion. Let us follow the thread which holds together the diverse scenes and teachings of 17:22-18:35.

The disciples' distress is in response to an announcement of the Passion which describes Jesus' passive submission and self-denial: note that in 17:22-23 (by contrast with 16:21) Jesus, the Son of man is totally passive. He does not initiate anything; things happen to him. This theme is carried forward in 17:24-25a, where Jesus submits himself to the half-shekel tax, even though he and the disciples are not obligated to pay it (17:26a). Jesus further explains why it is good to submit to such a tax: to avoid scandalizing (causing to stumble or fall) others (17:27a). The significance of this statement appears when one recognizes that it applies not merely to the specific case of the Temple tax, but to a series of cases presented in 18:1-35, as is made clear by the repetition of the warning against "scandalizing" and "scandals" (variously translated, "causing to sin," "temptations to sin," or "causing to stumble"; 18:6, 7, 8, 9). In each instance, one can avoid "scandalizing" others by adopting a self-denying attitude. Humbling oneself like a child and not
despising one of these little ones (18:1-14) are forms of self
denial for the sake of others; they involve giving up something
that is important for oneself (a hand, an eye, 18:8-9) or at least
risking it (risking the ninety-nine sheep to search for the lost
one, 18:12-14). In this context, it appears that forgiving others
(18:15-35), especially when it is unlimited (18:21-22), is a form
of self-denial and of submission to others—being in a good
relationship with others despite their sins against us, and thus
suffering what they do to us. Self-denial and submission to
others, even if it appears to be costly, even if it means to be
killed (17:22-23), is presented as good, while efforts at self
preservation at the expense of others (18:28-30) are presented
as bad and distressing (18:31-32). Such is the theme of this unit,
i.e., the new perception of what is good and bad that Matthew
aims at conveying to his readers.

The question is then: How can we be convinced to view as
good—as something we will truly want to pursue with all our
heart (18:35)—self-denial and submission to others even when
these others harm us and hurt us? The issue of forgiveness is
a case in point. Why should one truly want (from one's heart)
to forgive a brother or a sister? This is first expressed in
18:15-17 in terms of the church discipline which Matthew
expects his readers to know (cf. 2 Cor. 13:1-2 and 1 Tim. 5:19-
20) and which spells out the steps to reprove sinners in the
community: first, a one-to-one reproof; then, according to Deut.
19:15, a reproof with two or three witnesses; and finally, a
reproof before the entire community, which, if not heeded,
leads to exclusion from the community.

Through his careful presentation of this church discipline,
Matthew makes two points. First, its goal is not the exclusion
of sinners, but on the contrary their reintegration into the
community; it is a matter of "gaining" a brother or a sister
(18:15). Second, Matthew avoids emphasizing that it is a
"rebuke" and that the sinners should repent, and thus humble
themselves (by contrast with Luke 17:3-4); he simply says that
sinners might "listen" or not. This shows that, in their attempt
to gain brothers and sisters, disciples are at the mercy of
sinners; they are dependent on the good will of sinners (as
children are at the mercy of adults, 18:1-6), and thus humble themselves. To make this point perfectly clear, we can say that Matthew presents the disciples as begging sinners to join them back in the community. Why is this so? In brief, as we noted above (second reading), because the disciples absolutely need brothers and sisters; otherwise, God will not answer their prayers (18:19) and Jesus will not be in the midst of them (18:20). Forgiving people who have sinned against you is not a loss (of honor, of property, etc.), but a gain. It is attempting to gain what one urgently and absolutely needs; brothers and sisters are blessings.

Who, then, would not want to forgive "from one's heart" (18:35)? Who would not want to beg those who hurt us to join us back in the community as brothers and sisters? Who would not want to devote oneself totally to forgiving others, as many times as it takes? Only one who, like Peter (18:21-22), has not understood that forgiving is a gain, a blessing, and not a loss! But, because there are many readers who might be like Peter, Matthew continues with the parable. It reinforces this point, whether it is read as a "negative parable (second reading) or as an allegory (a "positive parable") (first reading).

In the former case, the parable reinforces the preceding point by showing the disastrous effects of not forgiving (as the fellow servants did by unleashing the wrath of the king by reporting the first servant; 18:31).

Then, the point of the parable is: by not forgiving, you not only deprive yourself of a blessing, but you also cause the destruction of someone else (causing that person to fall, "scandalizing" that person; 17:27; 18:6); furthermore, you condemn yourself, you "fasten around your neck a great millstone" (18:6), you bring a curse upon yourself (18:7-9); "so also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you" (18:35a).

When the parable is read as an allegory (first reading), it also reinforces the preceding point, although in a quite different way. The description of the king-God wishing to settle accounts with his servants and confronting one with the seriousness of his debt by ordering his punishment (18:23-25) corresponds in many ways to the disciple going and reproving one who has
sinned against him or her. By his attitude and actions as described in 18:23-27, the king-God shows that he attaches greater value to the ongoing relationship with his servant—a relationship which would have been lost if the servant had been sold (18:25)—than to the satisfaction of seeing his servant punished and making reparation for his deed against him. By contrast, through his attitude toward his fellow servant (18:28-30), the unmerciful servant shows that he holds the opposite view, a wrong view. The king-God acts "out of pity" (18:27); he has compassion; he is moved by the plight of his servant. Such compassion, empathy, presupposes an intimate relationship with the other, and thus this relationship is valued more than a huge amount of money that one has lost because of the other. Forgiveness preserves this relationship or attempts to reestablish it. In 18:27 we have, therefore, the image of a king-God in close relationship with his servants-disciples and thus the image of a tightly bound community composed of king-God and servants-disciples. In this reading, we find the same image in the description of the servants who report the unmerciful servant's behavior to the king (18:31). That they are "greatly distressed" shows their compassion for the second servant and their disappointment at the lack of compassion of the unmerciful servant; by reporting their distress to the king, they show their close relationship with him. By contrast, by his entire attitude the first servant demonstrates his lack of compassion (18:29-30), and that he is not really part of this tightly bound community.

The bond that unites the servants among themselves and with the king is broken by the unmerciful servant. Thus, forgiveness has failed (cf. 18:17) with the unmerciful servant; he does not want to participate in the relationship that exists among the servants-disciples (who are therefore called "fellow servants") and the king-God. To them he is like a Gentile or a tax collector (18:17); he is excluded, because he has excluded himself (18:33-34). But, and this is the point of the parable in this case, who would want to exclude oneself from this intimate community composed not only of fellow disciples but also of God (18:19) and Jesus (18:20)?
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In either one of these interpretations, the parable offers positive reasons for forgiving, that should cause the disciples to want to "forgive from the heart" (18:35), that is, because they really and deeply want to do it. This is not a law that stands above the disciples and that they simply must obey. It is perceiving things from the perspective of the kingdom and, as a consequence, having internalized God's will, because it is clear that forgiving is a good thing to do. In either one of these interpretations, forgiving is at the very center of the good news of the kingdom. It affirms that the community (including God and Jesus), with its intimate relationship and its solidarity built upon compassion and empathy, is what is truly good. Those who believe in the kingdom cannot but want to seek to participate in and maintain this community with all their heart; they will then forgive from their heart (18:35). It is only if we can share such a vision of the community and its solidarity (for which the poor and the oppressed long; Rowland and Corner, 7-33; Cardenal vol. 3, 161-66) that we can receive the proclamation of Christ as crucified as good news (17:22-23). Thus, as the message found through the second reading was, the message elucidated by this third reading is truly good news for the oppressed and the poor.

Proper 20, September 23, 1990
Matthew 20:1-16

According to the way it is read, the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16), another parable of the kingdom, offers a positive message, an exhortation, or a warning. It affirms that the good news of the kingdom is the good news of God's grace and goodness. It exhorts us to avoid denying our solidarity with others by viewing ourselves as superior to them, since in the kingdom every one has equal status. It warns us that as long as we are not "last," we will be angry with God, turn against other members of the kingdom, and thus exclude ourselves from the kingdom.

First Reading: The Free Gift of Grace

When one seeks to understand the story by focusing one's attention upon that to which the parable refers, one finds that
its first verses present a concrete social situation. Yet, as this description becomes more and more unrealistic, one is quickly led to conclude that it refers to something else, namely the kingdom (20:1); the concrete situation fades into the background.

The opening verses (20:1-2) paint a realistic picture of the hiring of laborers by the owner of a vineyard. The owner and the laborers agree on the wage, one denarius, which seems to have been a normal wage for a day of work. The next hiring (20:3-4) is still realistic. Since these laborers will begin late, it is appropriate that the owner simply promises to give them "whatever is right"; they are no longer in a position to request a full day's wage (a denarius). But this realism becomes more and more tenuous as other laborers are hired at the sixth, the ninth (20:5), and finally at the eleventh hour (20:6-7); one has to presuppose that there is an urgent need of laborers in the vineyard, for instance, because it is harvest-time. The realism of the last hiring is even more stretched by the dialogue. After wondering, "Why do you stand here idle all day?" (20:6), the owner does not dispute their explanation, "no one has hired us," (20:7). How could this be, since the owner came to the marketplace all day long in search of laborers? One has to imagine that the owner somehow missed them. As they are hired despite the late hour, there is no mention of wages, as is natural; they cannot expect a real wage. Whatever the owner will give them will be generous.

In the second part, when wages are paid, what was left of the realism breaks down. To begin with, the first hired laborers should be paid first, but the owner insists on the reverse order (20:8). This is no longer the description of a common situation; this is a story which aims at showing the negative reaction of the first-hired laborers. It underscores the owner's generosity toward the last laborers who unexpectedly receive a denarius, a full day's wage (20:9). The first laborers naturally expect to receive more from such a generous employer (20:10); but their realistic expectation is shattered when they receive the same thing. They grumble at their employer; for them, the owner is unfair, unjust. For an employer, this is not a realistic way of
dealing with employees. But, the owner replies to one of them that he is just, since he gave him what they had agreed upon and dismisses him (20:13-14a).

The fact that this second part of the story is clearly not the realistic description of a typical interaction between employer and employees (if one does not want labor unrest, one needs to be consistent, and be generous toward all the laborers!) shows that this story refers to something else. It obviously refers to the kingdom (20:1), and thus to God's (or Jesus', as "God with us") interaction with people. Thus, the concluding words of the owner allude to the goodness of God: "Do you begrudge my generosity?" or literally, "is your eye bad because I am good?" (20:15). In sum, the parable is an expression of the generosity of God toward "the last" (20:14b): "So the last will be first, and the first last" (20:16).

From the context one recognizes that "the first" hired laborers represent the Pharisees or, more generally, the Jews, as was also the case in the actual ministry of Jesus according to historical reconstructions (see Dodd, 95; Jeremias, 38, 139; Via, 149). Such is the conclusion we can draw by noting that the preceding verses involve a controversy with the Pharisees (19:3-9), the inconclusive dialogue with the rich young man who has observed all the commandments (19:16-22), and the mention that the disciples will judge the twelve tribes of Israel (19:28). The contractual agreement (20:2) can be viewed as corresponding to the giving of the covenant; the wage settlement as the judgment (20:8 designates the "owner" by the term kritos, a title used by Matthew for God or Jesus as judge), etc. This parable was told by Jesus against the Pharisees and the Jews for grumbling against his ministry as a manifestation of God's goodness toward the outcasts, the poor, the sinners and tax collectors (who remained "idle all day," 20:6, instead of working for God), and other dubious people who had become disciples. Even though these last laborers do not merit any true wage, God's generosity and goodness is such that they will receive a full-wage, the same blessing as the one promised to Israel, the first laborers. In sum, the parable represents the free gift of grace (the gift of a denarius to the last laborers), as is
emphasized in one way or another by the above mentioned commentators; this is the good news of the kingdom.

Such a message concerning the free gift of grace is indeed an important teaching of the parable. Yet, one has to be careful to note that it does not deny the value of "works." It is true that the grace of God (the denarius given to the last laborers) is not a reward for human works. Yet, those who have worked all day long receive the same thing, as a just wage, as a reward for their work. Consequently, we have to avoid making an anti-Jewish message out of this teaching. This would not only be deplorable (latent anti-Judaism and even anti-Semitism are too often conveyed along with the Christian message) but would also go against the text. Note that even if the last laborers are identified as Pharisees or Jews, these do receive the same wage, a denarius, as the last laborers, and it is not taken away from them even after they grumble. Thus, at the very least, the Jews (first laborers) have the same blessing as the disciples (last laborers). According to this reading, by the end of the story, the first laborers are not condemned; they are sent where they and all the other laborers go with their denarius; they are sent home. In addition, we should note that, in the immediate context in Matthew (19:27-30), the first laborers also represent the first disciples (first to follow Jesus by abandoning everything); the last laborers represent newcomers in the church, the "little ones," the Gentiles in Matthew's time (Donahue, 83-85; Jeremias, 37-38; Via, 149; Meier, 141; Schottroff, 144). Thus, if one chooses this first reading, one should avoid conveying anti-Judaism.

Second Reading: Equal Status For All In The Kingdom

When the interpretation is focused upon the unfolding of the story, the message of the parable is quite different. The first reading, by emphasizing the free gift of grace to the last laborers and the goodness of the employer, does not take into account that the plot emphasizes the interaction between the employer and the first laborers (Via, 149-54; Scott, 289-98). Furthermore, by examining the unfolding of the story and the situations which make this unfolding possible (following Schot-
troff, 129-47), it appears that the relationship between first and last laborers also plays an important part in the plot.

The fact that the owner goes in person to look for laborers (20:1)—rather than sending a steward, even though he has one (20:8)—shows that he is not a great landowner, but rather a small owner directly involved in his affairs. The fact that he hires laborers all day long can be viewed as an expression of his concern for the vineyard; he is in urgent need of laborers, for instance, because it is harvest-time (Schottroff, 141; Scott, 296). The hiring procedure in 20:2 makes it clear that this is the hiring of people for a single day of work. An oral contract is passed between the owner and the first laborers for a wage of one denarius, apparently a normal wage. Yet, note that the owner does not impose the amount on the laborers; he "agrees" (συμφωνέσας) with them about the wage. This once again suggests that the owner is not a great landowner who dictates his terms to other people, but rather a small owner who is eager to find laborers for his vineyard. Thus, Scott can say, "the stress is not on master-slave but on patron-client" relationship (Scott, 289); laborers are treated as people with whom one makes a deal. But, simultaneously, the successive hirings paint a dismal economic and social picture of unemployment (people standing idle, because they have not been hired; 20:3-7). This situation is all the more dismal in that these people are without permanent employment and depend for their subsistence on being hired each day for temporary jobs. The situation of these daily laborers is even worse than that of slaves, who could at least depend upon their owners for their subsistence (Schottroff, 130-35). Thus, the laborers hired from the third to the nine hour eagerly accept employment without contractual agreement, on the vague promise, "Whatever is right I will give you" (20:4), or even without any promise in the case of the last laborers (20:7).

The payment of wages in the evening is regarded as a rule for such day laborers (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14-15), because they have immediate need of it; day laborers and their families lived from hand to mouth (Schottroff, 131, 134). Indeed, the one-denarius wage barely allowed them to survive (Schottroff, 134);
"of itself the wage is not generous" (Scott, 290-91). The owner's "generosity" appears when he gives one denarius to the last laborers (20:9). But, the above comments make clear that the action of the owner is more charitable than generous; this is "what is right" (20:4), "just," in a situation in which less than a denarius would condemn laborers and their families to starve. Indeed, for hearers aware of the concrete situation depicted by the parable, the giving of one denarius to the last laborers would NOT have appeared as exceptional generosity, but as justice. This is what Laureano (one of the Solentiname campesinos) recognized right away by commenting: "Everybody has almost the same needs; they have to earn the same" (Cardenal, vol. 3, 181).

The first laborers' expectation to receive more (20:10) is understandable; who would not desire to receive a better wage! But their expectation already shows that they did not understand the owner's action; they do not think in terms of the needs of the last hired laborers; they dissociate themselves from them. They grumble against the owner (20:11). Yet note how they do this: by attacking the last-hired laborers (20:12). As Schottroff (137) says:

They turn their desire for a just wage into a weapon against others. They are envious (20:15); they begrudge the short-shift laborers their denarius; they would be satisfied if the short-shift laborers were to receive significantly less than they themselves received. What is being criticized here is . . . behavior that is uncompassionate and lacking in solidarity.

In this light, the message of the parable does include that God is kind and merciful; indeed, he is not an aloof and arrogant powerful landowner whose only concern is to receive benefits from his properties, but a small owner who is very much involved in the work of his vineyard, who needs laborers, who treats them as persons, and who, with compassion, takes into consideration, and provides for, their basic needs. But the main message is the call to solidarity among laborers (disciples, church members, and Jews). In the kingdom, all the laborers are equal; they have equal status ("you have made them equal to us," 20:12). This means that, positively, they should adopt
The parable is not an attack against the Pharisees but an effort to bring them to the point of joining the disciples of Jesus and accepting solidarity with the poor, the tax collectors, and sinners. The point of entry at which this approach to the Pharisees is made is their conception of God as merciful. (p. 146)

In sum, according to this second reading, the message of the parable is a gentle admonition (a "friendly courting"; Schottroff, 146): since we believe that God is merciful, we should not view
ourselves as superior to others, but acknowledge that all of us have equal status in the kingdom. Solidarity with the other laborers should cause us to rejoice that every one receives the same blessing: the blessing they need.

**Third Reading: The Last Will Be First And The First Last**

Our third reading allows us to address questions ignored by the preceding readings. Is the message that "God is merciful" truly good news? For the first laborers, it was not! Furthermore, the preceding readings fail to take into account the most common reactions of readers and hearers--including our congregations: as they read the parable, they most often share the first laborers' expectation that they will receive more than the last laborers (Scott, 295); and consequently, they have the "feeling that the first-hired laborers have somehow been cheated" (Scott, 289). It is this feeling and the (wrong) view of human relationship that this parable challenges. But, how can we avoid having such reactions? How can we avoid turning into a weapon against others our desire for rewards and status that reflect our faithfulness to the service of God?

Our third reading raises these questions by considering the specific role the lection (20:1-16) plays in the overall message, or theme, Matthew seeks to convey to his readers in this part of the Gospel, and especially in the thematic unit to which it belongs: 19:1--20:16. By clarifying this theme through a close examination of the points that Matthew underscores as particularly significant (by setting up oppositions; see Patte, 261-78), we discover a fundamental teaching concerning the basic conditions that need to be met in order to be in a position to acknowledge God's goodness and the equal status of all the participants in the kingdom.

The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (20:1-16) concludes a thematic unit (19:1--20:16). This unit is closely related to the preceding one (17:21--18:35); after the presentation of the unmerciful servant (who, through his attitude, 18:28-30, shows that he has a "hard heart") and the admonition to "forgive from the heart" (18:35), the new unit opens with a pericope (19:3-9) that underscores "hardness of heart" (19:7). "Hardness of heart" corresponds to having "a bad eye" in the parable ("Is
your eye bad because I am good?" 20:15). The problem posed by having a hard heart or a bad eye is the main theme of 19:1--20:16.

The Pharisees have a hard heart, because they fail to recognize that marriage is a good gift from God (19:3-9; Patte, 263-66); through their words (19:10) and their actions (19:13), the disciples demonstrate that they have hard hearts (Patte, 266-68), as the young rich man does by not wanting to give his wealth to the poor (19:16-22; Patte, 268-72), and as the first laborers also do by grumbling because the other laborers have received as much as they did (20:11-12). Thus, it appears that "hard heart" and "bad eye" are equivalent metaphors for what prevents people from perceiving what is truly good according to God's revelation and thus for what prevents people from making God's will their own will. The parable, the conclusion of this unit, shows the seriousness of this problem, also expressed by the disciples' exclamation: "Who then can be saved?" (19:25).

By contrasting the owner's action of hiring laborers (20:1-7) to the fact, according to the last laborers' statement, that no one hired them (20:7), the text casts the hiring of the first laborers in a peculiar light. Of course, by hiring the laborers the owner makes a contractual agreement with them (20:2). This contract shows that the owner has a need, and that the laborers provide what he needs; the wages are the acknowledgment that they render such a service to the owner. Yet, as the case of the last laborers reveals, the hiring process also meets urgent needs of "idle" people (20:3, 6), i.e., people in need of work; being hired by the owner is a most desirable situation. In sum, the hiring process is beneficial to both the owner and the laborers. The question is: What is the primary motivation of the repeated hirings (calls to serve God)? The first hirings seem to be motivated by the owner's need for laborers in his vineyard. But the last hirings, especially at the eleventh hour, seem to be motivated by the owner's concern for the needs of the laborers. Does this mean that this is also true of the first hirings? 15

The beginning of the second scene (20:8-10) and the contrast it establishes between what the last laborers receive (one
denarius) and what the first laborers expect to receive (more than one denarius), 20:8-10, confirm that the owner did not hire people merely because he needed their work. He hired them mainly because they needed to have work and wages, as the case of the last laborers shows. The owner is generous. Being hired is not merely entering a contractual agreement. It is also receiving a gift from the owner, the twofold gift of work in the vineyard and of wages. If the wages were proportional to the amount of work, as the first laborers thought, then the laborers and their service would merely be viewed as being needed by the owner. But this is the wrong perspective. While laborers are givers of services for which they are compensated, they are simultaneously and primarily receivers of a twofold gift, work and wages.

This point parallels those made by 19:3-9 (the beginning of the thematic unit), where Jesus emphasized that people should view themselves as receivers of the good gift of marriage. This parallelism helps clarify both passages. The Pharisees' eagerness to know what is "lawful" (19:3), which leads them to see commandments even where there is no commandment (they confuse a permission with a commandment, 19:7-9), shows that they conceive of themselves exclusively as laborers in a contractual agreement (20:1-2, 10) with God, or better, as servants of God in the sense of people who provide a service needed by God. In this light, the first part of the owner's rebuke ("Did you not agree with me for a denarius?" 20:13) shows that their expectation of receiving more than a denarius is incorrect, even from their own perspective (Patte, 276; Crossan, 114). Precisely because they view work in the vineyard exclusively as a service for the benefit of the owner, they should view their being hired as a contract for services and appropriate wages; they should expect to receive what was agreed upon in the contract. They cannot accuse him of injustice (20:13a).

Then, the essential question is: Why are the first laborers angry? The answer is provided by the concluding rhetorical question: "Or is your eye bad because I am good?" (20:15b, literal translation). In brief, they cannot accept that the owner is good. Having a "bad eye" (cf. 6:23) is being totally unable to make a
THE GOSPEL-TREASURE

correct distinction between what is good and bad (cf. 6:22-7:12; Patte, 90-98). Because the first laborers have a bad eye, they are unable to conceive that the owner's action vis-à-vis the last laborers was a gift, an act of generosity; consequently, they construe it as an injustice. Furthermore, they are unable to understand that the owner considered them as his "friends" or "companions" ("Friend, I am doing you no wrong," 20:13). Therefore, they cannot imagine that the contract for their services in the vineyard (20:1-2) was also a gift from the owner, as marriage is a good gift from God (19:3-9), as the law (contract) is a good gift from God and demonstrates the goodness of God (cf. 19:3-9; 19:16-22). As long as one does not have a change of "eye" or "heart" through the recognition and acceptance of God's fundamental goodness, the first laborers cannot but be angry with God. They are alienated from God. There is no hope for salvation (19:25).

Usually, one is in a position to resolve a problem by knowing its origin. If we knew the origin of a "bad eye" (or "hard heart"), would we not discover how to avoid the first laborers' attitude and acknowledge the goodness of God? Unfortunately not. It is a "Catch 22" situation! According to 20:15b, the first laborers have a bad eye because the owner is good! It is God's goodness, God's gifts, that cause people to have a bad eye or hard heart. God's goodness toward the last laborers causes the first laborers to deny God's goodness; to grumble against God; to perceive God as unfair, unjust. Why? Because these first laborers have been hired early. Their hiring (their call) was a demonstration of God's goodness, a gift from God. But, unlike the last-hired (20:7), they receive this gift before being in a desperate situation. Indeed, their early hiring is even a greater gift than the hiring of the last laborers; they are spared the anxiety of being confronted with the possibility of not finding a job for the day and of having to go hungry at least until the next day! But, precisely because they are privileged by benefiting from God's goodness early, the first laborers perceived their hiring as a mere contract. From their perspective, by accepting to be hired and by fulfilling their part of the contract, they were doing a favor to the owner who was in urgent need of their service; the
owner was not doing them any favor. But, as long as one strives to serve God without recognizing that being in God's service is a gift, one can only be angry with God and be alienated from God, and one can only be angry against the last laborers. Thus, the greater goodness of God toward them is the cause of their bad eye and hard heart, i.e., the cause of their inability to perceive God's goodness.

How can one truly acknowledge and accept God's goodness (20:15)? How can one be saved (19:25)? Jesus answers: "With God all things are possible" (19:26b). But, what does this mean? According to Matthew (Mark 10:23-31 is more ambiguous; Schottroff, 140-41), Peter provides a correct interpretation by suggesting that this is what happened to the disciples when they "left everything" to follow Jesus (19:27; cf. 19:28-30). This is not their doing; this is what God made possible. Similarly, in its concluding verse, the text provides an answer to the question raised by 20:15: How can one truly acknowledge and accept God's goodness? "The last will be first and the first will be last" (20:16). The formulation of this saying is no longer judgmental by contrast with its earlier formulation in 19:30. It begins, "The last will be first" (instead of "The first will be last"). There is hope for the "last." In order to be saved, in order to acknowledge God's goodness toward oneself, in order to rejoice because of God's goodness toward others, one needs to be "last." Even if one is "first," one has to become "last," and then one "will be first." This means that one has to make oneself "last," by becoming a servant or slave of others, as is expressed in the following passage: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave" (20:26-27). Yet, it also means being like the disciples who, because God made it possible, "left everything" (19:27), that is, who abandoned all that made them "first laborers," namely, all the good gifts that God had formerly given them (such as houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, lands; 19:29) and provided security for them (cf. 8:18-22; 10:9-10; Patte, 118-20; 146-47). It means becoming like children (18:3-4), "for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (19:14). In brief, it means becoming dependent and vulnerable. The last hired
laborers, vulnerable due to their dire situation, cannot but recognize their being hired for what it is: a manifestation of the owner's goodness, for which they are grateful. Similarly, because they are totally dependent on others, children have to count on the goodness of others and of God. Those who are like children have left everything for Jesus' sake (19:29). Without home and family, without possessions, they must count on the goodness of God. Such people can recognize God's gifts for what they are. Consequently they are not alienated from God. Theirs is the kingdom.

Concluding Remarks

For each of these two lections, I provided three of the several possible readings, attempting to show briefly that they are equally well grounded in the text. In order to recognize the coherence of these various readings, it is helpful to have a methodology that clarifies why any text has several coherent dimensions that can be the basis of different consistent interpretations (as I propose elsewhere). But one can simply do as I did in this essay: closely examine a diversity of existing critical exegeses without attempting to reconcile them, but with the awareness that they present different dimensions of the text. Thus, one discovers several (three in the study above) teachings, which are so different that a given sermon must focus on one or the other. Thus, one has the freedom to make a choice. Now that one is aware that the text is a treasure out of which one can bring quite diverse coherent teachings (13:52), one is in a position to consider closely the situation of those to whom one speaks: What do they need to hear?

Notes

1. All the references in this essay are to the Gospel according to Matthew, unless otherwise noted.
2. Our situation as readers-interpreters of a text is similar to our situation when confronted with the black and white picture used in psychological tests, in which one perceives two faces looking at each other when focusing on the black features and a vase when focusing on the white features. When we see one of the two images, it is impossible to see the other as long as we do not switch perspectives, something which is relatively easy to do in the case of this
specific picture, but is more difficult in order such tests, especially when they involve more than two images, as is the case with texts as written down discourses.

3. I allude to a vast and complex issue that I discuss in detail in the Introduction and Chapter 1 of my forthcoming book, Discipleship According to Matthew (to be published by Fortress Press). This book presents four parallel interpretations of the key texts regarding discipleship. The following interpretations of Matt. 18:21-35 and 20:1-16 are samples from this multi-reading study.

4. The understanding of the teaching of the text varies if one begins the reading by focusing one's attention on "what the text refers to" (first reading, a primary concern of historical readings), on "how the argument or story unfolds" (second reading, a primary concern of literary readings), or on the "religious vision of human experience," that is, "the themes and convictions expressed by the figurative organization of the text" (third reading, a primary concern of structural readings).

5. Yet Schweizer admits that he says so on weak ground; he refers to a teaching that emphasizes how many times God forgives. Many scholars (including Bultmann and Braun; see Bonnard, 276-77) have pointed out that forgiveness of brothers and sisters is not unknown in Judaism and not necessarily fundamentally different. To avoid conveying anti-Judaism, it is therefore important to refer to tax collectors and Gentiles as well.

6. Studying the fragments of the teaching of the historical Jesus would involve dropping several verses from the lection, including verses that are especially meaningful for the Christian community (18:21-22, as well as 18:23a and 35). Studying the text as redacted by Matthew does not prevent us from benefiting from Scott's work, which helps us perceive the challenge the parable represents for the disciples and Peter.

7. In 18:21 Peter comes back to the issue raised in 18:15, but makes the sin a personal offense against himself, betraying in this way his misunderstanding. Note that, in this reading, we have to take the short version of 18:15, "brother [or sister] who sinned," as the original text. In 18:15, certain manuscripts have "If your brother [or sister] sinned against you" [so RSV], while other very good manuscripts do not have the last two words. Our second reading suggests that the shorter text ("sinned" in general, rather than specifically "against you") is preferable. But the longer text might be preferable in the other readings.

8. Cardenal, vol. 3, 161-66. The Solentiname campesinos do not perceive the king as a cruel Gentile king, but identify him with the merciful God of the poor, following the allegorical reading suggested by the Cardenal in his opening comments. Yet, they nevertheless see the first servant as an exploiter. Thus, Felipe says:

Jesus gives the example of a rich person because he wants to give the example for an exploiter. Everything the rich have got they've stolen from us, because all their riches have been got with our labor; and now all their injustices are forgiven them, but they don't forgive us; they throw us into jail when we owe them a bit... Who knows if we have that capacity to forgive each other, or if we're like that rich person, like that exploiter."

(Cardenal, vol. 3, 165-66)
9. Yet, let us not idealize the poor. The campesino Alejandro comments:
   Let's not concentrate just on seeing evil exploiters. We need to
   practice these things a lot. Hatred in our community... We the
   poor must forgive each other, too. (Cardenal, vol. 3, 166)

10. This positive view of the fellow servants' distress is not in contradiction
    with the preceding reading; what is wrong according to the second reading is
    the fact that they reported the first servant to the king. Thus, this comment is
    appropriate for both the first and second reading of the parable.

11. Actually, 18:15-17 presupposes that, in the original confrontation, the
    disciple expresses the consequences of the sin: that the sinner will be like a
    Gentile and a tax collector to the disciple, a situation comparable to the servant
    losing his status as servant by being sold.

12. That have certainly been added to the parable by Matthew, as the
    majority of exegetes argue (Scott, 284-87).

13. Pliny the Younger, a landowner of this type, writes: I have just been
    getting in the vintage—a slender one this year, although more plentiful than I
    had expected—provided I may speak of getting in the vintage when I have simply
    picked a grape here and there, glanced into the press, tasted the must of the
    vat, and surprised my town servants who are now supervising the rural workers
    and have left me to my secretaries and readers. (Pliny the Younger, Epistulae
    IX,20,2, quoted in Schottroff, 130)

14. This thematic unit (19:1-20:16) is itself the second part of the "explanation"
    of the second Passion prediction (17:22-23). The link with the Passion is
    marked in 19:1-2, which stipulates that Jesus enters Judea. The third Passion
    prediction, 20:117-19, immediately follows our text and begins a new thematic
    unit.

15. This is comparable to the relationship between customers (who, like the
    owner, seek a service) and a business (or government office). Often, business
    people consider that they do their customers a favor by providing their service;
    thus, customers have to wait patiently to be served. This is the view of the first
    hired laborers. Yet, a business I recently visited expressed the view of the
    parable by posting for the sake of its employees: "We are not doing a favor for
    our customers by serving them; they do us a favor by requesting our services."

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


For the past quarter-century, theology has been nothing if not multiform. Among the available options for theology's immediate future, two seem especially promising: that of Thomas C. Oden, and Schubert M. Ogden's foray into post-liberal theology, seen in *Faith & Freedom*. Oden has of late plumbed the neo-classical vein of the backward glance to church tradition and ecumenical councils. Deliberately—even kenotically—unoriginal, Oden steps out of the way so that the ancient witness will bear post-modern fruit. His is a future with a past.

While liberation theology may seem firmly entrenched, Ogden wishes to move "toward a theology of liberation," because the liberation landscape is today hopelessly mottled and confused. Feminist, Third-World, African and Native American, Latin American—today's liberation theology is divisive and even intramurally nasty.

In good United Methodist fashion (although he quotes Luther often and Wesley never), Ogden's arguments rest on at least five interdependent pillars: Jesus Christ as primal sacrament, faith, freedom, redemption, emancipation. Displaying minimal concern for human fallenness and the tragedy of life, Ogden's call to existence is one both in freedom and for freedom. Negatively, this is "freedom from all things" and positively it is "freedom for all things."

Wherever freedom abounds, there is Jesus Christ. Endorsing Karl Rahner's teaching of the "anonymous Christian," all who travel "the road of self-giving through love" are responding to Jesus Christ's "decisive re-presentation of freedom." Jesus is the primal sacrament and the Church the sacramental expression of Christ's salvation given to the world.

The distinction most likely to be noted and discussed by readers of *Faith & Freedom* is Ogden's telling one between redemption and emancipation. Like faith and freedom, redemption and emancipation are distinguishable but finally
inseparable, two realities converging into one. Utilizing the process metaphysics we have come to expect from Ogden, redemption is God's own self-actualization, which invites each being toward its own fulfillment and culmination. Working toward redemption means accepting the other person as well as acting toward him or her based on such acceptance. Paul Tillich’s renowned "accept your acceptance" definition of God's grace echoes down these pages, although one hopes for Ogden's explicit affirmation of grace, a hope to be disappointed.

Perhaps grace is in abeyance because of Ogden's belief that redemption is finally God's singular work. Emancipation, which completes the entire gestalt of salvation, is also God's work, but it cannot be really undertaken without human co-operation, as Ogden quotes Augustine: "he that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves." It is, however, clearly not a work among equals, for God's duty and enactment are unsurpassable. Being the Christ of God, Jesus both gives God's love and demands that we love God and others.

Unlike the death-of-God theology that marked the beginning of theology's current adversarial profile, liberation theology is not a fad. The appearance ten years later of this new and enlarged edition of Faith & Freedom says as much. Yet the splintered character of much liberation theology, contrapuntal and strident, surely justifies Ogden's writing of theologies of liberation and urging us toward a theology of liberation. The spatial inclination of "toward" means that Ogden's prescription for theology's future includes process metaphysics wedded to the ethical passion of political theology. A theologian who can work in two such seemingly disparate media as process and liberation bodes well for any theological future. And surely Schubert Ogden would own the poet's covenant to "appoint others where I shall fail."

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Review and Comment

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CHRISTIAN EDUCATOR Maria Harris tells of an unexpected gift she once received from a student, who had been asked to define teaching. He put his definition in the form of a haiku:

We meet awkwardly.
I invite you to walk.
I find you dancing."

Think of the first day of any class you've taken (or taught): the alien classroom, the seat that is not yours, the vague smiles of greeting, the sound of one voice talking. It is all very pedestrian at the beginning, until the crucial moment when questions—the kind that could be rephrased, "how should I think about..?"—are posed. The dance of teaching has begun.

What is the church's stake in the teaching process?

In his article on the teaching office in the United Methodist Church, Langford contends that we do not merely have individual classrooms, individual teachers and learners, and discrete incidents of Christian instruction. Instead, we have a total vision of education that is a part of everything a layperson, deacon, or ordained minister does. The teaching ministry of the church is fundamentally a stance toward life, what Richard Robert Osmer has called "a teachable spirit." Langford's article will appear in a collection of essays titled Teaching Authority in The United Methodist Church, edited by Charles Foster, to be published by Abingdon Press in October, 1991.

A superb example of the harmony between teaching and one's deepest convictions is C. Eric Lincoln, who was Duke University's Teacher of the Year in 1989. Mary Sawyer has

\[\text{Maria Harris, Teaching and the Religions Imagination (New York: Harper & Row, 1987) 23.}\]
written a tribute to her teacher that includes samples of his writing, which often verges on poetry. If you are interested in reading more, find a copy of Lincoln's recent novel, *The Avenue, Clayton City*. Constructed as a series of vignettes tied together by the small town setting of Clayton City in the years between World Wars I and II, it is a powerful work of fiction.

Ted Campbell explores Church of England and Methodist history for a look at the evangelical position on the relationship between baptism and conversion. For him, the evangelical emphasis on repentance and decision for Christ cannot be neglected, even as the church struggles to offer a theological rationale for the practice of infant baptism. Campbell's article underscores the fact that liturgical language not only expresses our beliefs, but teaches them.

In the ancient traditions of Israel, Aaron and Moses were brothers. Aaron was a priest and Moses was a prophet. Aaron, we recall, was a fine public speaker; Moses, seized with stage fright before his people, conversed with God, "as with a friend." John Holbert's close reading of Exodus 32 lets us see these two brothers pitted against one another over the illegitimate worship of the Golden Calf, one of the most infamous episodes in the Hebrew Bible.

I suspect that Cornish Rogers, like many preachers, has shaken his head over lectionary texts from apocalyptic literature. It must have given him some comfort to learn that scholars have also had their problems with it. But Revelation's kaleidoscopic vision has captured his imagination; his article challenges us to work with these texts to see the promise of salvation there, and to celebrate it in our congregations.

Finally, Daniel Patte has turned the lectionary study into a unique teaching tool on the parables. With a slight change of perspective, these simple, familiar stories about a master and his servants, a farmer and his hired hands become part of our contemporary world. Now they are filled with significance about the nature of God's presence, our need for sisters and brothers, and the quest for justice. May these new readings enliven your encounter with the word!
The Teaching Office in the United Methodist Church

Thomas A. Langford

Our concern in this paper is: how can a church which explicitly calls itself "apostolic" bear faithful witness to the Christian gospel? How can the United Methodist Church exercise the apostolic task of ensuring that it presents the received gospel authentically? Or, again, how can the United Methodist Church maintain the truth of the gospel for its own life and for the sake of the world?

The issue is the nature of the teaching office within Methodism. How is the church's proclamation tested? How is its life judged? How are its interpretations assessed? By whom? According to what criteria?

A description of how we have taught is important. Let us begin with some historical observations. Methodism, as the Wesleyan revival movement, held theology to be inextricably joined with practice. To paraphrase Ludwig Wittgenstein: to have a theological language is to possess a form of life. The

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dominant implication of this conviction in Methodist history has been a type of pragmatism—truth is known in its application. Put differently, theology is to be judged by the quality of the life it produces. Theology, in this tradition, has not been abstract, rather it has been understood predominantly as underwriting personal and communal spiritual and moral life. To know God is to love and serve God; truth about God is truth about life.

Such a norm has much to commend it. Nothing is more stultifying than self-certain and self-righteous rational orthodoxy; but this has not been Methodism's problem. Our problem has been the lack of clear authority for determining the interrelation of theology with worship and with moral life; we have been deficient in clarifying the grounding and testing of our praxis; we have been overbalanced toward action in contrast to reflection. As a result, Methodism has been too uncertain in its self-criticim and too prone to conform to non-theological (or not distinctively Christian) influences and cultural values. Hence our actions are often primarily politically or sociologically or economically formed. The lack of clarity about the teaching office in Methodism is reflected in inadequate guidance of the thought and life of the church.

The issue we are considering is: how will the gospel be preserved by the conscious intention of the church? How can doctrine protect the true proclamation of the gospel? The roles of teaching, interpretation and clarification are essential to the preaching and instruction for Christian life and nurture. Our questions are: how does United Methodism do this? How well does it do this?

In John Wesley's time, annual conference meetings served as the *magisterium* of the Methodist Church. This represented a conciliarist understanding, namely, theological judgments require the consensus of the community through its representatives. The role of Wesley was paramount and even imperious, but he acted within a conference structure. This mode of theological consultation expressed Wesley's conviction that Christian conference (in its several guises—as band, class or conference) can be a means of grace. The supremacy of Conference as the "Living Wesley" was maintained in British
Methodism through conflict and challenge as expressed in the Leeds Organ Case (1820s), the Warrenite Secession (1834-5), and the Fly-Sheet Controversy (1849-53).

Note must be taken of the attitude within Methodism toward the education of ministers. Both in England and in North America there was deep resistance to establishing theological institutes and to formal education of ministers; and, consequently, a failure to recognize a well developed teaching office for preachers. In Great Britain the Warrenite debates in the 1830s revealed strong anti-intellectualism. And in North America typical negative attitudes toward college-trained preachers (see for instance Peter Cartwright’s autobiography) resisted any educational program beyond the individualized Course of Study. A lack of trust in explicit theological leadership was evident along with a conservative attitude toward doctrinal formulations (note the restrictive rules in the Discipline). All of these factors reinforced a hesitancy to engage in ongoing and significant exercise of the teaching office. General Conference retained power but little will to exercise the office except where pressed by political necessity (such as the issue of Christian holiness in the 1890s). Creative theological reflection was often focused in moral issues, as found in the Social Creed.

In North American Methodism, General Conference functioned as the interpretive authority for the church. Polity, theology, and engagement with culture were intertwined and in all of these areas General Conference was the authoritative voice of what was authentic, necessary, or allowable. In the breakup of the North American church in the 1840s, new authoritative structures emerged. In the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Council of Bishops became the final court of appeal for all disciplinary matters; in the Methodist Episcopal Church the General Conference retained its supreme position. One of the compromises of the 1939 union was the creation of the Judicial Council as the final arbiter (superceding both General Conference and the Council of Bishops) of what the Discipline means or what the General Conference intends. More and more interpretive authority is exercised to maintain legitimate procedure and to adjudicate counter claims; substan-
tive theological issues are not directly dealt with by the Judicial Council. The General Conference, if it will, can still exercise the power of theological interpretation. As a matter of fact, this is actually done, but usually indirectly and through discussion of particular issues of practice and polity.

In actual practice, a secondary but pervasive set of influences is to be found in some of the boards and agencies, such as the Board of Discipleship and the Board of Global Ministries and the Publishing House with its responsibilities for curriculum resources. These units are given their mandate for teaching activity by the *Discipline* and are in this sense under the jurisdiction of the General Conference. Ordinarily, however, they function with independence. A thorough study of the teaching office in United Methodism must take these influential bodies into account.

This leaves the bishops of the UMC in an ambiguous position. In most polities bishops play a critical role as "teachers" of the church and a major understanding of a bishop's responsibility is his or her teaching office. This has not historically been the case in Methodism (with the possible exception of the bishops of the MEC, South). Bishops are spiritual leaders and conference managers. In United Methodism, they are viewed as executives in conference affairs; they possess influence of office and person but since they have no vote in General Conference they do not directly participate in judgments about what the church should teach or do. What they in fact do is to execute the policies made by others. Even if functionally one can demonstrate that the bishops exercise greater power than they are explicitly granted, it remains the case that they cannot speak officially and authoritatively in regard to the authenticity of the apostolic message. The bishops have no directly delegated teaching office in the UMC.

There was a period--up until 1908--when the bishops in North American Methodism did possess a direct theological influence as they were empowered to approve all appointments to faculty positions in the church related theological schools. The heresy trials of 1905-1908, however, made the bishops' role difficult and their clear area of responsibility was surrendered. It is not an overstatement to say that currently bishops in the
UMC play an insignificant role in speaking for the church in matters of theology and a somewhat more important role, though still undefined, in guiding moral application. The last reorganization of the Council of Bishops in 1976 created four committees, one of which is "Teaching Concerns," with a subcommittee on "Theological Education." This is evidence of the intention to exercise a greater influence in this area.

A clear exception to this general condition is the recent bishops' pastoral, *In Defense of Creation*. (It is significant to note that this is a "pastoral" statement—which might be understood to mean that it possesses the same authority and power of a papal "pastoral" but which, in reality, means that it is advice of colleagueship and is, thereby, a contribution to conciliar discussion.) This particular pastoral may prove to be an important initiative. Theological advice was sought, careful formulation was made, wide contribution was achieved, and much discussion has followed. This action may adumbrate an ongoing initiative by the Council of Bishops to lead theological reflection of the church; it may represent a claim for a teaching role. If so it represents a claim initiated by the bishops—rather than granted by General Conference—and this may create a significant place for the bishops in the theological life of the church. Whether this will be remains to be seen.

In regard to General Conference, one particular activity must be noted. The 1988 revision of the theological section of the *Discipline* is an important expression of the General Conference's exercise of its authority in the teaching office. This is a commendable and potentially important move—especially if it is not limited to one section of the *Discipline* or to an occasional activity of General Conferences.

One consequence of the lack of clarity about the teaching office beyond or in addition to the official role of General Conference is that functionally the responsibility for exercise of this office devolves on each ordained minister. In the act of ordination, authority "to preach the word" is given, implying a teaching responsibility. Further, in the disciplinary statement of "Duties of a Pastor" (par. 438) two possible references can be taken to refer to a teaching responsibility: "Among the pastor's duties are the following:
"a) To preach the Word, read and teach the Scriptures, and engage the people in study and witness."

"(1) To instruct candidates for membership and receive them into the Church."

The assumption in both cases seems to be that there is a clear and persisting understanding of the gospel which pastors are to convey. The matter of assessing this proclamation is not addressed.

There are basic matters in this delegation of responsibility that need to be noted. First, a full teaching responsibility is not explicitly given, so the role must be interpreted from suggestions. Second, such a function tends toward individual interpretation and underplays the corporate responsibility of the church or of a congregation. Perhaps we should more clearly acknowledge the teaching responsibility of every ordained minister and seek ways both to establish corporate responsibility and to enable more consistent expression of this responsibility.

At the present time there is little explicit understanding of how the teaching office ought to be exercised. General Conference has designated power but little competence, sufficient time, or historically formed character to fulfil this task. (These comments are not meant as personal indictments or ascription of general incompetence; rather they are judgments about the capacity of General Conference to exercise its teaching responsibility.) Further, the Judicial Council does not function in such a manner as to engage theological issues; and the Council of Bishops has no directly delegated authority or history of activity which promise leadership in this area. Pastors do have some designated responsibility, but this function remains vague (perhaps because it assumes a clear understanding of the gospel).

Ambiguity about the teaching office extends to the role of persons who have teaching posts (such as professors in theological schools) which bear directly on the church's life and doctrine. For these persons there is little guidance as to how, in their teaching roles, they relate to the ongoing life of the church or even to their ordination responsibilities. I lift up this matter, for we continue to live with an unstable relation between the general church and its theological schools; between
persons who have explicit teaching roles within the general life of the church and their ordination responsibilities. Other traditions—such as the Reformed tradition—practice ordination to the teaching role. A question is whether United Methodism should consider a similar recognition.

Yet I see possibilities: (1) for the bishops to be assertive and claim a central role, (2) for the General Conference and annual conferences to establish ongoing theological commissions, (3) for there to be theological discussion as a part of General Conference's regular agenda (and derivatively, of annual-and district?-conferences), and for clarification of the "teaching office" for pastors in local congregations, and (5) rethink the role of those whose vocation is teaching. Is it impossible to hope for these changes?

To pursue this possibility I want to consider several issues which are important in understanding the teaching office in United Methodism.

Communal Formation

The nature of teaching itself must be examined. It is not the case that we only teach when we explicitly intend to do so or when we attempt to instruct through stereotyped methods. Of primary importance is the formation provided by a community, its life and rituals, its styles and concerns, its language, its mission and its values.

The church teaches by its common life, its worship, its mission and its discipline. This total ethos is authoritative as it makes possible communal transmission of its distinctive life. Teaching is conveyed by styles and content of worship, by hymnody and prayers, by claims upon all community members to participate in the mission of God and by mutual claims of community members upon one another. Teaching is conveyed by the entire life of being in a community. A part of such teaching is specific reflection upon doctrine and the community's way of life. Unfortunately, explicit theology has often been left aside in efforts at self-understanding in the church. This issue is: how may theology and the life of the church be held together? Or, can we be conscious of the multi-
ple ways in which we instruct in our community, relate this to theological self-reflection, and reempower the formation of whole persons in mind as well as in heart and service?

For Methodism this inclusive mode of teaching is important, for it is in accordance with the role of theology within the life and faith of this tradition. The Wesleyan tradition is not primarily theological; but to the extent that it is theological, Wesleyanism has stressed the wholeness of experience as thought, affection, will, and action. Wesleyan theology is found within the historical process of concrete Methodist bodies as they have worshipped and lived and taught, as they have developed institutions, assumed missional tasks, found common symbols, rituals, and styles of life. As a part, and only as a part, of this total complex can Wesleyan theology be adequately appreciated.

These matters have implications for the teaching office in Methodism. That is, there is no isolated body of doctrine which is to be taught as finally independent: not only the method of teaching—namely clear recognition of the full range of communication, but also what is taught—namely that theology is a part of a more complete and more adequate response of human beings to God. Theology is important but not singular; the intellectual love of God is one aspect of a more inclusive love of God; teaching has to do not only with thoughts but with the ways in which "we live and move and have our being." The teaching office in Methodism, therefore, has a distinctive character and role. To teach is to contribute to the total formation of Christian life; teaching is done by deed and action as well as by word. And what is taught is not doctrine in an abstracted way but "practical divinity"; that is, doctrine undergirding and enriching Christian existence.

Goals of Teaching

In traditional Methodist language, the goal of our teaching is the sanctification of persons and of congregations. To state the goal in this way is to move from an abstract intellectualism toward practical agency as persons in community with God and neighbors. Hence the goal of teaching in Methodism is not uniquely focussed on rational consensus in doctrinal construc-
tion. The aim is holistic: teaching is in order to provide authen-
tic worship and service; teaching is for the sculpting of life. The
means of teaching are totalistic: teaching is a part of every
activity and is effective as it conveys ways of living. Methodists
were not called people of method for no reason. The ordering
of life in comprehensive terms was the shaping Christian
response. Yet we have tended to underplay the importance of
the methods of Methodists. One does not want to overstate
what the methodical character of Methodists produced or por-
tended, but this very means of formation points in the direction
of a comprehensive sense of instruction and of the goals of
teaching.

The goal of the sanctification of persons and of congregations
informs the responsibility of teaching. That is, the teaching
office is in the service of the achievement of these goals. So
teaching is not singularly for intellectual maturation, rather
teaching is for the transformation and enhancement of life as
the worship of God and service to the neighbor. The office of
teaching is that of a person or a community who attempts to
measure the ongoing life of the church by its source (namely
God in Christ through the Holy Spirit) and by the ongoing reign
of God and its eschatological hope.

Perhaps this raises the question of the residence of authority
in United Methodism. Authentic authority is conveyed by com-
munity and functions to organize or shape life according to the
values of that community. Authority functions in a variety of
modes and through numerous channels. Authority is accepted
as valid when it nurtures life through means and toward goals
which are acknowledged as possessing integrity, sensitivity,
and value. The authorities which structure life for United
Methodists are those received through the entire encompass-
ning life of the local congregation and the ethos of the larger
church. To be aware of what authorizes one's existence is
important; covert authorities are pernicious while overt
authorities are not only recognized but may be challenged and
utilized.

When we speak of authority we are not only asking, who
speaks for the church? We are asking, how should the church
speak authoritatively to its own life, in critique of its message
and in the ordering of life toward its goals? The problem is not theoretical but intensely practical. Theoretically we have seen that the official authority in the church resides in General Conference; but are not unofficial and less explicit authorities also potent? Do not the regular worship service, the ongoing tasks of mission, the disciplines of Christian formation, and the sensibilities of a church community actually function authoritatively in our denomination's life? Obviously they do. Yet all of these modes of authorization need to be critically assessed, they need to be judged against their normative source and the continuing intention of God.

To look at the goals of teaching in The United Methodist Church is to focus on what our teaching is for, and consequently, to ask about our goals and about our effectiveness in achieving those goals. In a sense every discussion of policy or missional priority in a local church or at General Conference attempts this task. The point I am pressing is: should this not be more regularly, formally, and intentionally done? Is an explicit group required for this task to be done well? Does General Conference need a theological commission?

Ecumenical Context

To ask the preceding questions should not allow us to turn inward and investigate only our own tradition. Rather, it places us within the context of Christian faithfulness in its broadest context. Over the course of history, various church traditions have developed their own practices of authoritative teaching. Different historical presuppositions issue into different forms of transmission and different placements of authority. Also every culture has its own forms of authority and transmission of authority. From within Methodism and from the ecumenical community we have much to learn. There are no stereotypes of a teaching office. Our task as United Methodists is to understand our own life, to be open from others, and to build new means of being affirming, critical, and obedient.

Present Situation

Any contemporary teaching office faces profound difficulties. Individualism, pluralism, and disregard for authority
makes teaching suspect and limited. A Faith and Order statement says baldly, "Today all concepts, ways and modes of teaching are being tested."

Inherited modes of teaching are now questioned. We are challenged to be creative in imagining how teaching should be done in our time. We cannot teach authoritatively today by simply repeating the past. New times demand new responses.

In United Methodism we are especially in need of claiming the task of teaching at a variety of levels and by a variety of groups. The conciliar tradition which is ours can continue as the context of discussion, argument, agreements, and recognition of new challenges.

**Concluding Suggestions**

The teaching office in United Methodism is of critical importance in order to ensure authentic offering of worship, truthful proclamation, and extension of service. Nevertheless this responsibility has not been attended to in a conscious and thorough way. Consequently, the following suggestions are made.

1. General Conference and annual conferences should make discussion of theology a regular and significant part of their agenda. These are the points at which conciliar decisions become a reality. To serve this purpose conferences should appoint a permanent Theological Commission to which matters might be referred and which will have authority to study issues on its own. This commission should report regularly to General, Annual and District Conferences where its reports will be studied and acted upon.

2. The bishops of the church should continue to initiate study and make statements so as to provide leadership in the discussions of theological and ethical issues. In order to strengthen this role, paragraph 501 in the Discipline should be revised to include teaching as a part of the task of the bishops.

3. Local clergy should be directly encouraged to assume teaching responsibilities, and congregations should be encouraged to support this role.

4. There should be recognition of persons in church seminary teaching positions who could, along with their task, be specifi-
cally recognized as in their appointment beyond the local church.

These suggestions assume that conciliarism is the form of decision-making about theological issues and that decisions will be made by communities and, finally, by General Conference as the representative leadership group of The United Methodist Church.

The establishment of a teaching office in the United Methodist Church which is consciously set and explicitly acknowledged would significantly serve the church. Such a responsibility would help to maintain the authenticity of the gospel we preach; it would provide more adequate bases for our ethical and missional activity; and it would make us critically aware of the values which underwrite the worship and order in the life of the church. Our church functions so as to teach in the totality of its communal life. It would be strengthened in its practice if what it teaches could be regularly and thoroughly assessed.

Notes

1. This is thoroughly discussed in John C. Bowmer, *Pastor and People* (London: Epworth Press, 1975) 121-125. (Quoted without footnotes.)

   "For Wesley's early preachers little formal training was necessary, for he supervised their studies, and that was sufficient for their needs; but a very different situation faced their descendants of 1835. To the zeal of the evangelist must now be added a training in theology. The Preacher was now also a Pastor and teacher, ministering to people who were taking advantage of the increasing opportunities for education. Methodism was itself a force for improvement, and congregations did not take kindly to ill-educated preachers. Hence the call, from certain quarters, for some kind of ministerial training.

   "The need for some kind of training for the Preachers had been acknowledged since the early days. At the first Conference (1744) the question was asked, 'Can we have a seminary for labourers?' and the answer was, 'If God spare us until another Conference.' In 1745 the matter was raised again and shelved until 'God gives us a proper tutor.' Meanwhile Wesley was educating his preachers by personal contact and through his Christian Library; some of them he sent for a short spell to Kingswood School. After his death, the care of the young preachers was frequently before Conference. It became the duty of the District Chairman to see that each probationer in his District produced a Book List and was examined orally at the District Meeting. In 1804 a plan for the intellectual improvement of the junior preachers was proposed by Adam Clarke and other preachers stationed in London, but it did not meet with much encouragement. In 1823 a powerful group of preachers—John Gaultier, Jabez Bunting, Thomas Jackson and Richard Watson—prepared a report but, again,
nothing came of it. Others, equally influential men in the Connexion, strongly advocated the establishment of an academy, but it was not until 1833 that Conference took the matter seriously, and when they did the objections which were raised against it revealed both the anxieties of the people and the popular image of what a minister is and ought to be. It is instructive to note what those objections were.

"1. In the first place it was said to be ‘at variance with the plans and preceding of the venerable Founder of Methodism.’ In spite of the known attitude of Wesley and the decisions of his early Conferences, this was advanced as a serious argument, even by Dr. Warren. He argued that while there were many brilliant scholars in the ranks of the Methodist ministry, basically the Methodist Preacher should remain untrained and that Providence would always provide sufficient men of the academic type to meet the needs of the Church.

"2. Secondly, there was an ingrained fear of losing what Dr. Warren called, ‘our primitive simplicity’. The pioneer Itinerants were honoured as men who ‘rough it’; rightly or wrongly, there was a fear lest college-trained men, ‘losing their simplicity and zeal...should acquire delicate habits by no means consistent with the toils and privations to which they may afterwards be exposed.’ Or as Dr. Warren, in more picturesque language expressed it, ‘The men thus raised up are indigenous to the soil and climate in which they are reared. Instead of being improved by the salubrious fumes of a hot-house Institution, they would degenerate and become worthless, if not even noxious...’ A more balanced attitude is that of Wesley, the scholar-saint, who never set piety against learning, and while his Itinerants were mostly unlettered men, gave them such education as they had time and ability to assimilate. Jonathan Crowbar (sen.) ably summed up the attitude of reasonable men in Methodism when he said, ‘It is not a pre-requisite for admission as a Preacher among us that a man be what is termed a scholar. Yet the Methodists neither despise nor neglect learning.’

"3. There was a third, and more serious objection; that academic considerations would become more important than the inward call. Wesley, and indeed the Methodists since his time, knew enough of the university-trained clergyman whose moral life was, to say the least, open to question. He had commented severely on such men, for on their shoulders must lie much of the blame for the cleavage between Methodism and the Church of England. So one can understand the fears of those who saw the danger if ever Methodism substituted learning for piety; namely, that the wrong type of candidate should be admitted on the grounds of academic attainments alone.

"4. Finally, there were several minor and largely personal objections to the Institution. Dr. Warren argued, for instance, that the Institution had not the support of the people, and he overstated his case with a personal attack on Bunting and his friends. He denounced ‘the coalition of a few or the ascendancy of an individual.’ At the same time, it was widely thought at the time that if he had been given a post on the staff of the Institution he would have forgiven much that he censured in Bunting.

‘So the Theological Institution was founded and Methodists were learning to link piety and learning. Understandably so, for many of them had had their fill of well-meaning but unschooled preachers who did more harm than good;
and they were coming to the conclusion that piety, however sincere, was not enough in the office of a Christian minister.

"On the whole, the Connexion welcomed an educated ministry; so much so that by 1847 circuits were asking for 'Institution men'? The Wesleyan conception of the ministry was undergoing a change. The minister was to be more than an evangelist; he was to be also Pastor and Teacher."


3. In the disciplinary description of the "Nature of the Superintendency" (par. 501) the responsibilities of a bishop are listed as ordering the life of the church, as initiating structures and strategies for equipping Christian people for service, and as administering matters temporal and spiritual. All of these tasks are gathered under the rubric of "leadership." Both here and in listing the "Specific Responsibilities of Bishops" (par. 512) no mention is made of a "teaching office" or any equivalent responsibility. Officially, therefore, bishops are not explicitly given this responsibility.

C. Eric Lincoln, Scholar and Prophet of Black Religious Studies

Mary R. Sawyer

OF THE MANY by-products of the change-oriented 1960s, one of the most significant was the emergence of the academic field of black religious studies. Central to the development of this new area of study was a uniquely prepared scholar, C. Eric Lincoln. Now, twenty years later, Lincoln enjoys the status of master teacher and itinerant sage. Like the field of black religious studies itself, Lincoln is interdisciplinary: an historian, a sociologist of both race relations and religion, and a religious ethicist by training. But his academic training in ethics accounts less for his influence than does his particular approach to religious studies, which in its passion is unabashedly an extension of his personal values.

A white colleague in the field of religious studies was once heard to offer this assessment of Lincoln's work: "He'll be going along being a scholar, and then he suddenly feels compelled to bleed for his people." Intended as a criticism, the remark

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highlights a fundamental strength of black religious studies: the unequivocal rejection of the notion that scholarship requires one to be indifferent to the reality of his or her experience.

In this respect, Lincoln's work is in much the same tradition as feminist and Third World scholarship, which honors the experiential, particularly power relationships and the inequities attendant to them. The premise of such scholars is precisely that value judgments are needed in order to excise racism, sexism, and classism. All such scholarship is thus intrinsically concerned with ethics, with Lincoln's focus on the matter of race. If one theme is constant throughout his writing, it is the theme of "the American dilemma"—the discrepancy between America's creed of equality and justice and the reality of her conduct.

Formative Experiences

Because Lincoln's approach is experientially based, it will be instructive, before turning to an overview of his work, to examine briefly his childhood origins. Lincoln's vocation as moral commentator on American society had its unlikely beginnings in Athens, Alabama, where he was born in 1924. The circumstances of his childhood were ordinary enough for the time: poverty and racial segregation defined life's limitations while family, church, and school offered avenues for transcendence. The questions that were to frame his life's work were conceived at the age of nine when, innocent of racial protocol, he presented himself along with a group of white children at a public immunization clinic and was violently informed by the attending physician: "All niggers have to wait!"

There were other lessons, including the beating suffered at age 13 at the hands of the manager of the local cotton gin when Lincoln protested being cheated out of a fair price for the cotton he and his grandmother had picked to pay for his school books. No less instructive were the consequences when Lincoln, the sixteen-year-old editor of the school paper, defied the paper's faculty adviser by editorializing against the segregated seating in the school auditorium on the occasion of a presentation by
the school chorus. The editorial "created a furor" and cost Lincoln his after-school job.

Lessons of a different order were learned at home, which consisted of Lincoln's grandparents, Mattie and Less Charles Lincoln, two cousins who were regarded as sisters, and an assortment of extended family relatives. Between his grandparents, his grandfather was the "gentle and temperate" personality, while his grandmother was "forthright and assertive." The elder Mr. Lincoln was confined to bed near the end of his life, and died while his grandson was still in high school. His grandmother cared for the family, admonishing the boys to avoid any appearance of racial impropriety, and generally negotiating the rules of the caste system in such a way as to protect her household while keeping her dignity intact. It was also his grandmother who read to the children from the Bible, and intoned time and again: "You are all God's children, and you are as good as anybody."

Discipline, moral sensibilities, and affirmation of self-worth came not only from his grandparents, but from the members of Village View Methodist Church where young Charles (the C. Eric came later) participated in dramatic performances and, as a teenager, served the congregation in the capacity of Sunday school teacher. Lincoln literally grew up in the church, and later wrote that "the Village View Methodist Church was for a very long time the symbol of God's love and concern for me." But this only intensified his theological questioning of the world outside the church, which was ruled by contradictions.

While Lincoln's grandmother was a faithful supporter of the family's church, his grandfather never graced the building with his presence. Lincoln eventually learned that this stance symbolized not a rejection of God or religion, but a protest against the human institutional decree that God must be worshipped on a segregated basis. Troubled by the inconsistencies between "the faith as taught and the faith as expressed," the youngster broached his pastor for an explanation. The pastor's reply was that "religion is a sometime thing. It depends on who has it, as to whether it's this or whether it's that. But God knows it when he sees it." This was, Lincoln was to recall, "a bitter revelation,"
and he became "very greatly disturbed" about this "two-level faith."

These theological perplexities followed Lincoln through his academic journey, beginning with Trinity School, a missionary school founded by the American Missionary Association following the Civil War (which provided the sole opportunity for black children in Athens to continue their education beyond the sixth grade), and ending with the Boston University Graduate School, where Lincoln earned his M.Ed. and Ph.D. In between he attended the University of Chicago evening division; LeMoyne College (A.B.) in Memphis, Tennessee; Fisk University (M.A.) in Nashville; the University of Chicago Law School; and the University of Chicago Divinity School (B.Div.). Whether the curriculum was sociology, law, religion or education, Lincoln's concern with the conflict between Christian doctrine and the reality of race in America was constant—although that was not his sole interest.

Creative writing was Lincoln's original career choice. Discouraged by a college professor from committing himself to a field in which there "was no future for blacks," Lincoln nevertheless has made an avocation of creative writing. During his undergraduate years, and continuing through his service in the Navy, he pursued this first love, producing anecdotes and short stories for Reader's Digest and romance magazines, poetry, social essays, and biographical profiles.

During his graduate years, Lincoln was formally ordained, initially in the Presbyterian Church, and subsequently in the United Methodist Church. His sole appointment was to two small churches in Tennessee, one in Nashville and the other a country church near Columbia. The "one redeeming feature" of the experience, he was later to recall, was that "once a month the country church fed me!" Finding "pastoring" not his forte, Lincoln "ducked into the first classroom I found and never came out." In recent years, Lincoln has accepted occasional preaching invitations. But scholarship has proved in all respects to better suit his temperament and interests.
Academic Journey

A year after completing his dissertation at Boston University, the manuscript was published in revised form as *The Black Muslims in America* (1961). In the foreword, Yale social psychologist Gordon Allport--then regarded as the foremost expert on intergroup relations in the United States--described the book as "one of the best technical case studies in the whole literature of social science." The book not only established Lincoln as a scholar in the academic world, but brought him and the Black Muslim movement (a phrase he coined) to the public eye. No less than 55 reviews of the book were published. At age 37, Lincoln had become the authority on the Black Muslims for the print and electronic media, and indeed, on the black liberation movement in general. Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, he was a frequent guest on major network news and commentary shows. He was routinely called to testify as an expert witness in court cases involving the Black Muslims, particularly around the issues of conscientious objection to military service and the right to hold religious services in prison.

Throughout the turbulence of the 1960s, while his initial essays were being republished, Lincoln continued to study and write on the Black Muslims and on the nonviolent civil rights movement as well. As close as the issues of the day were to his heart--or perhaps for that very reason--he elected to express his own social activism through observation, analysis, exposition, and commentary. While he declined to join in the protests and demonstrations, Lincoln's scholarship was filled with passion, and his writings frequently proved prophetic.

Lincoln left Boston in 1960 to return to Clark College in Atlanta, where he had taught before entering the doctoral program. During the four years that followed he completed a second book, a slim volume titled *My Face is Black*. Two of the five chapters extend his work on the Black Muslims: "Mood Ebony: The Acceptance of Being Black," and "Mood Ebony: The Meaning of Malcolm X," in which Lincoln offers an account of his personal interactions with Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm
X. Perhaps most significantly, the opening chapter of the book heralds Lincoln's enduring and autobiographical theme of "the American dilemma." The book begins:

My face is black. This is the central fact of my existence, the focal point of all meaning so long as I live in America. I cannot transcend my blackness, but this is only a personal inconvenience. The fact that America cannot transcend it—this is the tragedy of America.  

Lincoln's initial work on the Black Muslims and this second book were produced in the context of two larger interests: intergroup relations and black history. Both interests were natural products of the civil rights ferment occurring while Lincoln was in graduate school at Boston University. He could scarcely have ignored the civil rights activity under any circumstances, but Boston University had a special interest, in that the young man leading the movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., had just completed a Ph.D. at that school as Lincoln arrived there.

While working on his doctorate, Lincoln was elected as a fellow at Boston University's Human Relations Center. There he developed a particular interest in black-Jewish relations. His first article on that topic, published in 1966, challenged the concept of black anti-Semitism, arguing that this was a mischaracterization of blacks' rejection of servitude to whites generally. This piece is significant not only for its exploration of black-Jewish relations, but also for its discussion of the idea that the "black masses" had moved from advocating integration to support for "black power." Now the "ex-Negro proletariat" took on a "new conception of role and identity" as "black people." This new position reveals a shift in Lincoln's thought as well.  

Lincoln also became active in the National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials (NAIRO), now the National Association of Human Rights Workers (NAHRW). As a result of these involvements, he was commissioned by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith to write an historical chronology of blacks in America. Lincoln wrote The Negro Pilgrimage in America, published in 1967, which became a standard training resource for human relations departments and commissions.
around the country. A revised and abridged version of that book, published in 1969 as *The Blackamericans*, introduced Lincoln's imaginative answer to the prevailing confusion about how to refer to Americans of African descent. His interest and expertise in black history later led to his co-authorship, with Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, of the highly regarded *Pictorial History of Blackamericans*, now in its fifth edition.

Before the first of these books appeared, Lincoln had left Clark College, served a one-year post-doctoral internship in college administration at Brown University from 1964-65, and accepted a position at Portland State University as a professor of sociology. A two-year stay at Portland was followed by an appointment in 1967 to Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he remained for six years as Professor of Sociology and Religion. In 1973, Lincoln returned to Fisk University for a temporary assignment to establish and chair the department of religious and philosophical studies. Three years later, in 1976, he moved on to Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, where he remains as Professor of Religion and Culture in the department of religion.

As the 1960s progressed, Lincoln's childhood perceptions found voice in his proclamations on the state of race relations in America. These essays, written during years when this nation was shaken by events ranging from the march on Washington to urban riots to the bloodletting in Birmingham and Selma, exhibit a remarkable tension. Temperate in tone, they nevertheless vibrate at times with urgency and indignation; at other times they are imploring and almost wistful. Several of the essays were collected and published in 1967 as *Sounds of the Struggle: Persons and Perspectives in Civil Rights*. Many of the selections are still timely, as this excerpt from "Some Theological and Ethical Implications of the Black Ghetto" attests:

The black ghetto is the monstrous symbol of our mutual distrust. The perpetuation of the ghetto, its cultivation and defense, is an extraordinary act of racial conceit and social irresponsibility. Beyond that, it is a contemptuous disregard for Christian ethics and social justice... The promotion of
self-interest leads men to distrust the wisdom of God in his establishment of the beloved community. They substitute their limited judgment for his omniscience, and because their faith in the grand strategy of God is weak and irresolute, they play at little strategies to remedy what God forgot...

A book edited by Lincoln the following year, *Is Anybody Listening to Black America?* exhibits the same qualities—with an unmistakable overlay of heartache. Lincoln notes in the introduction:

The murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. coincided with the conclusions of my research for this book. With all my heart I regret the occasion to honor him by dedicating this paltry offering to his memory. Our perspectives were not always in agreement, but there was never a time when his courage, his nobility, and his love for humankind did not excite my admiration and support. I can only hope that as he speaks again from these pages, someone will be listening.

It concludes with a poignant epilogue entitled "Weep for the Living Dead," which appeared originally in *The Christian Century* on May 1, 1968.

Weep, yes weep for America. Weep for our Jerusalem. It is she that killeth the prophets. It is she that consumes her young. It is America that fouls her nest with the feculence and the filth of the racism that is our sickness. Weep for your country...and for mine...

Do not weep for Martin Luther King. He is dead; yet he lives. Weep for us, the living. Weep for ourselves, the dead.

In 1970, Lincoln edited a volume of essays on King which was revised and reissued in 1984. Regrettably, neither edition includes Lincoln's own eloquent assessments of King: a poem, "Come Back, Martin Luther King," and an essay published in the *AME Zion Quarterly Review*, "Martin Luther King, the Magnificent Intruder."

Martin Luther King was an intruder. An improbable intruder. He did not belong to the privileged cult of those who presumed themselves the proper shapers of the destiny of a nation. But he was prepared; and he was armed with perhaps
the only philosophy which could have been effective in fore­stalling the American holocaust which was then in the making. He was a man of love and peace, who dared to test his own commitments in a critical confrontation with hatred and hostility. He was a man out of time and out of place, an improbable person for the task laid before him; a stranger in his own house; an alien performer in a tragic drama about himself, his people, and his country.
He was an improbable Intruder. And he was magnificent. 10

Although Lincoln's commentary on race continued throughout the 1970s—in chapters of collected essays on minority relations and the sociology of the black community, and in forewards and introductions to other books treating those topics—his central focus shifted in this period to black religion and the black church. It was these years that produced the C. Eric Lincoln Series in Black Religion, *The Black Church since Frazier* and *The Negro Church in America,* and *The Black Experience in Religion,* a volume of readings edited by Lincoln which contained excerpts from the writings of two dozen African and African-American academicians and clergy working in the area of the black church and black religion. 11

In *The Black Church Since Frazier* Lincoln proclaimed a new age in the life of this institution, declaring that

The "Negro Church" that Frazier wrote about no longer exists. It died an agonized death in the harsh turmoil which tried the faith so rigorously in the decade of the "Savage Sixties," for there it had to confront under the most trying circumstances the possibility that "Negro" and "Christian" were irreconcilable categories...With sadness and reluctance, trepidation and confidence, the Negro Church accepted death in order to be reborn. Out of the ashes of its funeral pyre there sprang the bold, strident, self-conscious phoenix that is the contemporary Black Church. 12

The publication of his two books on black religion in 1974 was followed by a series of articles exploring the character of black religion and its relation to the society at large, many of which were published in *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center.* (ITC is a consortium of six black seminaries
in Atlanta, Georgia.) Among these are "Aspects of American Pluralism," "Contemporary Black Religion: In Search of a Sociology," "The Black Church and the American Society: A New Responsibility," and "The Social Cosmos of Black Ecumenism." While his main interest was explicating the nature and value of black religion in American life, Lincoln has never hesitated to point out the shortcomings of white Christianity. An example was a 1976 article evaluating developments in American religion since the 1957 publication of Liston Pope's *The Kingdom Beyond Caste*.

In his time, Lincoln wrote, Pope "stood head and shoulders above most of his fellow churchmen, who were quite prepared to consign the 'American dilemma' to an American God for solution, in the full expectation that God would require no more of them than public pronouncements and private pursuits of the status quo ante." Two decades later, the situation, in Lincoln's estimation, had changed only marginally:

American religion, like American government, operates on local and national levels. The local church is where the people are; but the local churches (alas, Dr. Pope!) are still segregated and seem likely to remain that way for some time to come, despite the proclamations and the resolutions of national church leaders which appear in the national press from time to time. If God ever cancels his subscription to the *New York Times*, he will be hard pressed to know whose side American religion is on.  

In 1980—in seeming anticipation of what the Reagan years would bring—Lincoln published what is perhaps his most forceful, and certainly most legal-oriented statement on race in America. This essay on affirmative action, called "Beyond Bakke, Weber and Fullilove," took exception to the courts' inclusion of blacks in the broad category of "minorities," arguing that the disabilities of blacks were unique, deriving from a pernicious racial caste system. Correspondingly, the state was obligated to uphold a remedy specific to this class of persons. Lincoln also struck a blow at the notion of "reverse discrimination," contending that
The issue is neither the deprivation of whites nor the preferability of Blacks, but whether a reasonable, belated effort to make less consummate the institutionalized privileges, prerogatives and preferabilities of whites will be tolerated in the breach. The critical implications of the Bakke decision transcend altogether the dubious issue of "reverse discrimination" and address themselves instead to the re-fortification of the prevailing system of racial hegemony brought under siege by Brown vs. Board of Education twenty-five years ago...

In 1983, Lincoln's work on the Black Muslims was updated with an essay entitled, "The American Muslim Mission in the Context of American Social History." In 1984, excerpts from these essays and others were creatively woven together in Race, Religion and the Continuing American Dilemma, the introduction to which is Lincoln at his best:

Time has a fugitive quality to it and the twentieth century, which was once heralded as a bright new occasion for human ennoblement, is coming to a close. It is no longer bright, and it is no longer new. We still have not found peace from our sins; nor is the evidence that we entertain a serious commitment to the principles of the Golden Rule one of the compelling features of our generation. Prominent among our problems remains the perennial problem Du Bois complained of when the twentieth century was still in its infancy...It is still a problem of the color line, and that problem ramifies in all of our more critical relations, polluting the environment and straining the parameters of credibility in which the democratic ideal is somehow expected to function.

As for the role of America's churches in addressing this circumstance, Lincoln turns in the conclusion of the book to a retrospect on the 1960s:

The 1960s were a momentous decade in the history of social change. It was the unique occasion for America to free herself from some of the chauvinisms which shackle us all to a past misadventure from which we have yet to recover fully. It was
also the occasion for the modern Black Church to demonstrate its relevance and maturity. While America faltered, Martin Luther King, Jr. and his followers did more to embellish the name of Western Christianity than has been done since the original Martin Luther tacked his challenge of corruptions on the door of the cathedral at Wittenburg in the sixteenth century...King was a living example of what the faith claimed to be about; and King was by ironic necessity a product of the Black Church...

In a society like ours, the Black Church has no need to search for a viable future. It has a future thrust upon it....So long as there is hatred and evil in the world, so long as there are the poor in spirit and those who need to be comforted, until there is a voice in every place to speak the truth to the disinherited of whatever race, the Black Church has a future because its larger ministry is to the world...(pp. 241,257-258)

Other Matters of the Heart

Consistent with his experiential orientation, Lincoln’s intellectual activity has remained conjoined with the real world of ordinary people. Not only is his work on the black church empirically-based; it is relevant for the black church institution, and in various ways is made accessible to that constituency. In the 1980s, for example, Lincoln, with Laurence Mamiya, conducted a national study of the black church which will provide the most complete and up-to-date information compiled since the 1930s. Politics, finances, the role of women, music, and economic development are among the areas addressed in the study, which is scheduled for publication in the fall of 1990. Even as the research was in process, Lincoln was a frequent speaker at black ministerial gatherings and served as a consultant to black religious organizations.

In a larger context, the impact of black religious studies as a whole on black ministers is manifold. Much as the civil rights and black power movements transformed blacks’ self-perception, scholarship on black religion has fostered greater awareness of the historic black church tradition, and reaffirmed the importance of ministry in the black church. In that affirmation
are the seeds for a more prophetic ministry, and a more comprehensive program of service to the community at large.

These influences are particularly pertinent for ministers who have availed themselves of formal training, for an accredited seminary without black church studies today is a rarity. Perhaps the most comprehensive programs are located at Howard University Divinity School, a predominantly black and nondenominational seminary in Washington, D.C., and the ecumenical Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. But several predominantly white schools, such as Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., also have strong black church studies programs, and most major seminaries or departments of religion offer at least one or two courses on the black religious experience. The fruits of black religious scholarship are thus by no means restricted to black ministers, but are available to many white seminarians as well.

But Lincoln’s constituency extends far beyond either academicians or practicing ministers. Throughout his academic career, Lincoln has continued to write short stories, poetry, country and western songs, and hymns. His youthful aspirations were at least partially fulfilled with the publication of his first novel, *The Avenue, Clayton City*, in 1988, some forty years after his expressed intentions to become a creative writer. Inevitably, however, his avocation converges with his existential preoccupation. His poem, "A Prayer for Love," was published in *Songs of Zion* in 1985; in 1987, he was commissioned to write "Hail to Thee, O Mother Bethel," the official hymn for the 200th anniversary of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. And he was one of thirteen poets in the United States and Britain commissioned to write new hymns for the new *United Methodist Hymnal*. His submission, "How Like a Gentle Spirit," has since been included in other denominational hymnals as well.

A complete volume of Lincoln’s poetry, *This Road Since Freedom*, is scheduled for publication in 1990. He is at work on the libretto for the fifty-voice "Martin Luther King Freedom Oratorio," with composer Howard Roberts, which is scheduled for its premiere performance in 1991. Whatever the medium,
Lincoln challenges his audience to address racial divisions and the array of inequities that issue from those divisions.

If Lincoln’s work is notable for the larger questions it poses to and about American society, it is equally revealing of the personal perplexities that have fueled his entire career. Particularly in his work of the last decade, one hears some answers to the theological questioning of his youth.

Although he declines to identify himself as a theologian in any formal, academic sense, it is the case that his personal theology (and Mattie Lincoln’s theology?) provides the framework for all of his work. At the heart of that theology is the certainty that blacks are made in the image of God and are therefore persons of dignity. To allow someone to violate that dignity is to "sin," for such complicity is a subversion of God’s intention, and an abdication of one’s responsibility to God to be what God intended one to be. It follows, then, that one is not only justified, but obligated to take whatever actions are necessary to prevent the violation of dignity. The insistence on dignity and respect for black individuals and black institutions is a refrain sung over and over throughout his writing, whatever else the subject matter at hand may be.

That inequity and injustice should provide the focus of Lincoln’s inquiries is scarcely surprising, given that he is so thoroughly a child of the "American dilemma." Like Du Bois and so many other scholars, Lincoln has known the "twoness," the "double-consciousness," that is the legacy of black Americans born and reared in the pre-civil rights years of racial segregation. The spiritual grounding and the tenacity with which Lincoln holds to it may leave him vulnerable to the charge that he is insufficiently critical of black personalities and institutions. Indeed, criticism becomes a difficult task when advocacy and an affirmation of struggling people are the compelling objectives. At the same time, few people have been more effective in bringing the theoretical and the ethical to bear on the pragmatics of race in America, particularly as that issue is refracted through religious institutions. What Lincoln has written of the black church in America might well be said of him personally:
...However nefarious the strategies of men, the faith will not be rendered destitute and the righteousness of God will not be left without a witness. If the established oracles are silent or unreliable, then lo, a voice cries forth from the wilderness.¹⁷

Lincoln’s faithfulness in addressing racial matters is matched only by his singleness of purpose. In this, he is less than totally representative of black religious studies. Increasingly, black women, as well as some men, are addressing issues of gender, and a few scholars—e.g., James Cone and Cornell West—have addressed class as well. But for now, Lincoln’s work remains the dominant paradigm. It is important to note that Lincoln’s focus on race to the exclusion of other categories of oppression is characteristic not only of black religious scholarship, but of the major black denominations.¹⁸ Indeed, on matters other than race, black churches manifest a moral conservatism, particularly around issues of sexism, heterosexism, and class. Eloquent as the solo voice may be, some of us still strain to hear the harmony of the full choir. To the extent that those sounds build in volume within the local church, to that extent will the experiential framework of black religious studies be strengthened. That development, however, will detract nothing from the very solid foundation of racial liberation constructed by C. Eric Lincoln.

Notes

1. The phrase was introduced into scholarly discourse with the 1944 publication of Gunnar Myrdal’s study of race in the United States, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy. The dynamics of the 1960s must be credited not only with a change in the method of scholarly analysis, but with a change in its content. That is to say, the increased attention to black religion itself is inextricable from the black consciousness movement. Two publications, in particular, were pivotal. The first was a book entitled The Black Messiah, by Albert B. Cleage, Jr., a Detroit clergyman; the second was an article entitled “Christianity and Black Power,” by James H. Cone, a young theology professor at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. (Fortuitously, the same month that Cone wrote this essay, he and C. Eric Lincoln met for the first time. Lincoln read and critiqued the article and the book-length manuscript that followed. The article was subsequently included in one of Lincoln’s books; Lincoln was instrumental in securing a publisher for Cone’s first book, Black Theology and Black Power.)
2. "The Matter of Race," unpublished manuscript, 1959, pp. 6-8. C. Eric Lincoln Collection, The Atlanta University Center Woodruff Library, Atlanta, Georgia. In addition to this manuscript, the information regarding Lincoln's youth and education is drawn from a series of in-person interviews with Lincoln conducted by the author in 1987 and 1988.


7. By 1969, the term "Negro" had fallen into disrepute, but the transition to the label "black" was not yet complete. Lincoln's objective apparently was to devise a term to designate this population that would include equally both aspects of identity, rather than the word "Black" serving as an adjective to qualify the primary identification of "American." Lincoln's nomenclature was never widely accepted and has served primarily as his own stylistic signature. The issue of what label is appropriate and preferred remains subject to debate, as recent discussions regarding the phrase "African American" attest.


17. Lincoln, Race, Religion, p. xxi.

Baptism and New Birth: 
Evangelical Theology 
and the United Methodist 
"Baptismal Covenant I"

Ted A. Campbell

A CONTEMPORARY PLAY (and motion picture) depicts 
a candidate for the Catholic diaconate lamenting the 
trivialization of worship in his youth:

Maybe things were different when you were growing up, but 
when I was a teenager, the church was a circus. Everyone 
sang Top 40 tunes at mass. Didn't matter if they related. I 
remember once, on Ascension Thursday--the day Jesus ul­
timately transcends the world, and body and soul enters 
heaven--the hip hymn committee sang "Leavin' on a Jet 
Plane."1

Many Christians--Protestant and Catholic alike--had similar 
experiences, and consequently value consensus in Christian 
worship. Worship should reflect the consensus of a specific 
Christian community, both historically and today, to avoid the

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excesses of individual fancy and to avoid capitulation to non-Christian cultural values. This concern for liturgical consensus emerges at a time when many Evangelicals are struggling to relate their own traditions to the broader currents of Christian history. The informal evangelical response to the Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches, the fascination of many contemporary evangelicals with Orthodox and Catholic spiritualities, and the emergence of an Evangelical Orthodox Church in communion with the Patriarch of Antioch are all signs of a more widespread concern among contemporary evangelicals to understand themselves in the context of the whole Christian tradition.²

But the evangelical quest for deeper Christian roots runs into critical problems on the question of liturgical consensus regarding baptism. They are faced with an uneasy tension between the distinctively evangelical conviction (on the one hand) that regeneration, or the new birth, occurs at the point of repentance and faith, and older liturgical traditions (on the other hand) which often imply, if they do not overtly assert, that regeneration is effected by the grace of God given in the sacrament of baptism.

The publication of The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship raises this issue in a critical way for United Methodist Evangelicals, since a liturgy for baptism published in the 1984 Book of Services joins other Methodist baptismal liturgies in the hymnal and will thus come into much more widespread use in the denomination. Reflecting more of the ancient and medieval liturgical consensus than more recent Methodist baptismal liturgies have done, the new liturgy will appear to many Evangelicals to imply a doctrine of baptismal regeneration.³

This article reflects on the United Methodist "Baptismal Covenant I" from an evangelical theological perspective. Specifically, it lays out some historic options in the Christian tradition regarding baptism and regeneration, highlighting the historic evangelical option, and then considers the United Methodist baptismal liturgies in the light of these options.
The Historic Options

In the new atmosphere of concern for consensus in liturgy, the historical options (including evangelical options) must be represented more fairly than they have been in the past. Some United Methodists concerned with liturgical renewal have offered two (and only two) options in sacramental theology in general, and in baptismal theology in particular. "There are two sharply contrasting approaches to the sacraments in American Protestantism today," wrote one such author, who went on to distinguish "Enlightenment" and "traditional" doctrines.4

This author found the "Enlightenment" view of baptism to be foreshadowed by Zwingli's sharp distinction between the outward sign and the inward grace which only can effect salvation. In the nineteenth century, this Enlightenment view of baptism was influenced by a humanistic and secularized understanding of individual human freedom and responsibility.5 Given these options, one would be forced to choose between a humanistic Enlightenment view of baptism or a traditional view, which by many accounts would involve the doctrine of baptismal regeneration.6

Granted, regeneration has been frequently associated with baptism since early after the New Testament period. But many "traditional" views of baptism certainly do not imply a doctrine of baptismal regeneration, and it is surely unfair to suggest that these views must be thrown in with the Enlightenment. In particular, evangelical Christians who practice infant baptism, including Anglican and Presbyterian evangelicals, have developed understandings of baptism that have been influential in the churches, but which cannot be identified with an Enlightenment outlook.

The evangelical perspective on baptism can be seen in the controversy over baptismal regeneration within the Church of England in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Anglicans who supported the evangelical cause insisted that regeneration occurs by repentance and faith.7 Baptism, they maintained, is the appropriate external symbol of regeneration, but is not "invariably connected" to it. That is to say, regenera-
tion can occur apart from baptism (as in the case of an ancient Christian catechumen martyred before her baptism) and baptism does not necessarily effect regeneration (as in the case of infant baptisms). This, they maintained, is the consistent teaching of the Church of England in the Articles and Homilies, and in the Prayer Book catechism.

The controversy over baptismal regeneration was one of the major theological debates in the Church of England in the nineteenth century. Tractarians opposed the evangelical doctrine, insisting on the inseparability of baptism and regeneration, and pressing their own claims that baptismal regeneration was consonant with the teachings of the Church of England. The result was a barrage of homiletical and tract literature, with such works as Capel Molyneux's *Baptismal Regeneration Opposed, Both by the Word of God and the Standards of the Church of England* defending the evangelical position.

The controversy came to a head in the late 1840s, when the Bishop of Exeter refused to institute a priest who would not affirm baptismal regeneration. The priest was then instituted in his parish by direct action of the Archbishop of Canterbury, at which point many Tractarians left the Church of England and became Roman Catholics.

The point I wish to make is that there was a significant alternative view of baptism prevalent among evangelical Christians which stemmed not from an "Enlightenment" stress on human free will and responsibility, but rather from the evangelical association of regeneration with repentance and faith, that is, with conversion. Given this commitment, evangelicals who practiced infant baptism were forced by the logic of their own position to understand baptism in such a way that it was not linked inseparably to the grace of regeneration.

The dichotomy of baptismal doctrines into "Enlightenment" and "traditional" views has a particularly destructive effect for the understanding of Methodist traditions on these issues, placing Methodist inquirers in the position of neglecting that considerable part of their own heritage, which has taken a consistently evangelical understanding of baptism.
Wesley and the Methodist Tradition

Wesley himself stood on the dividing line between classical and evangelical Protestant views of baptism, but the Methodist tradition after him largely held an evangelical perspective on this sacrament.

Wesley has to be placed on this dividing line, I think, because his view of the relationship between baptism and regeneration was complex (some would say confused). It evades categorization into either of the categories of baptismal regeneration or an evangelical understanding of baptism. On the one hand, Wesley did not hold a strict doctrine of baptismal regeneration, since he consistently affirmed that the grace of regeneration does not always accompany the sacrament. His sermon on "The New Birth" (published in 1760) draws these inferences: "And, first, it follows that baptism is not the new birth " and secondly, the new birth "does not always accompany baptism. . .".%1 At this point, Wesley cited the distinction between the outward rite and the inward grace that would be maintained by later evangelicals.\(^\text{1}\)

On the other hand, Wesley maintained that the grace of regeneration does always accompany the baptism of infants. In this respect his perspective differed from later evangelical doctrines of baptism.\(^\text{1}\) What emerges then, in Wesley's writings, is the sense that persons are born again when baptized as infants, but that they (frequently) "sin away" their regeneration and cannot as adults cling to baptism as an assurance of the new birth.\(^\text{1}\) For these reasons, an exhaustive study of Wesley's doctrine of baptism concludes with the observation, "Here is a treasure of the Church's sacramental devotion which it was not given to Wesley to grasp."\(^\text{1}\)

If Wesley's doctrine of baptism evades conventional classification, however, that of subsequent Methodist writers reflects a clearly evangelical perspective. Beginning with Richard Watson, Methodist theologians distinguished their views from the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, generally maintaining that baptism confers a real, efficacious grace, but nevertheless refusing to identify this grace with regeneration.
Watson himself held that baptism is a sign of incorporation into the community of the Church (stressing the analogy with circumcision), and that in infants it effects a grace which may actually grant regeneration to those who die in infancy, but which in others acts as

a seed of life to prepare them for instruction in the word of
God, as they are taught it by parental care, to incline their
will and affections to good, and to begin and maintain in them
the war against inward and outward evil, so that they may
be Divinely assisted, as reason strengthens, to make their
calling and election sure. 17

Although Watson did not use the term "preventing grace" to
describe the grace of baptism given to infants, later Methodist
writers would. 18 Popular Methodist literature throughout the
nineteenth century consistently opposed the doctrine of bap-
tismal regeneration. 19

Although the Enlightenment and Protestant Liberalism
have broadly influenced Christian traditions since the
eighteenth century, it is surely misleading to represent the
evangelical tradition as maintaining an "Enlightenment" view
of baptism. In the first place, the evangelical position on bap-
tism is grounded in a belief in the universal nature of human
sinfulness, hardly a pet notion among Enlightenment
philosophes. 20 In the second place, at least among Methodist
writers, evangelicals maintain that a real grace is given in
baptism, although they refuse to identify this grace uniformly
as the grace of regeneration. This being the case, a historically
significant view of baptism has been largely overlooked in
contemporary Methodist discussions of the subject. 21

The United Methodist Liturgies for Baptism

In 1984 the United Methodist Church approved a group of
general services which were published together as The Book of
Services. 22 In The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United
Methodist Worship approved by the General Conference of
1988 and published in 1989, conventional sacramental services
are joined by new rites from The Book of Services. Among the
rites in the new hymnal, the first and most general baptismal
liturgy ("The Baptismal Covenant I") is entitled "Holy Baptism, Confirmation, Reaffirmation of Faith, Reception into The United Methodist Church, Reception into a Local Congregation." On the whole, this service for baptism represents a considerable advance over the conventional service. It calls for a renunciation of evil, an explicit, public repentance of sin, and an affirmation of the racially inclusive nature of the Church. The service insists on a full confession of faith, following the pattern of the Apostles’ Creed. In these respects, the new service recalls the baptismal patterns of the ancient church, and indicates one area in which The United Methodist Church has actually made more explicit its theological commitments. Evangelicals will welcome these changes. The new liturgy will make evangelicals uncomfortable, however, in that it appears to link baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit in forgiveness and regeneration. The "Thanksgiving over the Water" has the minister of the sacrament pray,

Pour out your Holy Spirit,
to bless this gift of water and those who receive it,
to wash away their sin
and clothe them in righteousness
throughout their lives,
that, dying and being raised with Christ,
they may share in his final victory.

The problem is only apparent in this case, however, since the prayer is cast in a subjunctive mood and the phrase "throughout their lives" indicates that the prayer is for the continuing work of the Spirit beyond the moment of the sacrament. Another passage in the service appears to be much less ambiguous. The introduction to the service has the minister of the sacrament say:

Through the Sacrament of Baptism
we are initiated into Christ’s holy church.
We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation,
and given new birth through water and the Spirit.
All this is God’s gift, offered to us without price.
(emphasis added)
Through Confirmation, and through the reaffirmation of our faith, we renew the covenant declared at our baptism, acknowledge what God is doing for us, and affirm our commitment to Christ's holy Church.  

The problematic statement for evangelicals is the present-tense indicative assertion that (in the context of the rite of baptism) "[we are] given new birth through water and the Spirit."

Upon first hearing this read aloud in my home congregation, I was convinced that it was a clear and unambiguous assertion of baptismal regeneration. I was surprised to find, then, that members of the committee responsible for the liturgy had discussed this issue at length, and had not intended at all to convey such an impression. Committee members pointed out to me (a) that the sentence in which this phrase occurs is a separate sentence from the one which begins "Through the sacrament of baptism," (b) that the phrase "through water and the Holy Spirit" is as ambiguous here as it is in John 3:5 (that is, it is not clear that it refers to baptism), (c) that the phrase is to be understood proleptically, that is, as stating in the present tense our hope for the future, and (d) that the sentence "All this is God's gift..." should indicate that the work referred to in the previous sentences is not limited to the work of God in the sacrament.

The expression will continue to generate concerns among evangelical United Methodists, however. Granted that the committee members did not intend to convey an unambiguous assertion of baptismal regeneration, there are reasons why the text itself does convey this impression: (a) the distinction of sentences in oral presentation is not as clear as in written texts (and I take it for granted that a liturgy is first and foremost an oral presentation); (b) if the expression "through water and the Holy Spirit" is supposed to contrast with "Through the sacrament of baptism," it should be placed in a parallel position; (c) the phrase appears in the context of the introduction to the baptismal rite, and is followed by a sentence that distinguishes the work of God in baptism from subsequent acts of confirmat-
tion, reaffirmation, and rededication; and (d) "through water and the Holy Spirit" does indeed suggest baptism, (both here and in St. John's Gospel), almost unmistakably in the context of the baptismal liturgy. For those of us who have been taught that sacraments involve both a material form and an invisible grace, the phrase appears to be an unambiguous restatement of the expression "Through the sacrament of baptism."

In short, this particular phrase may represent a serious obstacle for many United Methodists. This is all the more unfortunate, given the very positive changes that have been made elsewhere in the baptismal liturgy. Of course, United Methodists will still have the option of using the older liturgy for baptism, which is included in the new Hymnal, but many will feel that the newer liturgy does not reflect a Methodist consensus on baptismal theology.

**Concluding Observations**

I would hope that in the future, theological options will be represented in such a way that the inheritance of Methodist evangelicalism is represented as a serious contemporary theological option. The representation of other views than one's own as "Enlightenment" views amounts to a serious distortion of our theological heritage. Methodist evangelicalism (as well as Anglican and Presbyterian evangelicalism) has generally favored a sacramental approach to the Christian life, acknowledging the gifts of Christ in the eucharist, baptism, and other sacramental acts, even if it does not associate the baptismal grace with the grace of regeneration. This sacramental evangelicalism is, I believe, a gift for the whole Church, and should be fairly represented in contemporary theological dialog.

In the second place, given what has been said above, I would hope that evangelical United Methodists will be able to utilize the new service, perhaps only omitting the offensive phrase in the introduction. They may even be able to use the service intact (as I intend to do) with an explanation of its intent. Future efforts at defining a liturgical consensus should reconsider this particular sentence. After some years of use, it may
be found acceptable, but it may also be found problematic. We should question whether it is strictly necessary.

The struggle on this point within the United Methodist Church perhaps illustrates the predicament that many evangelicals find themselves in at the close of a remarkably ecumenical century. On the one hand, these evangelicals find themselves more and more concerned with the visible unity of the Church, and so are inevitably drawn towards historic liturgical traditions and definitions of orthodoxy. On the other hand, they find that the refusal of previous generations of evangelicals to engage in the ecumenical enterprise has left their own most distinctive claims relatively unspoken in ecumenical arenas. This makes the initiation of dialog even more difficult. Since evangelical Protestants have often defined themselves against other Protestants by their distinctive stress on regeneration as the result of the experience of repentance and faith, the issue of baptism (both its meaning and its celebration) must stand as a point of acute contention for serious ecumenical understanding.

Notes

2. I shall use the expression "evangelicals" in what follows to describe those persons (including myself) who tend to associate regeneration with conversion rather than the sacrament of baptism. For a more complete definition of "evangelicals," see my article entitled "The Complete Evangelical," *Circuit Rider* 9:5 (May 1985), pp. 3-5.
3. See the comments below in Part 2 of this article.
8. *Sermons*, the first two sermons, pp. 5-56.
10. Edward Bouverie Pusey's tracts on *Scriptural Views of Holy Baptism* (1836) were published as tracts 67-69 of the "Tracts for the Times," and defended baptismal regeneration against the evangelicals.
11. Molyneux's tract was published in London by R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside in 1842.
13. Sermons, IV:1 (in Outler, 2:196-197), where Wesley cites the catechism.
15. On this matter, cf. the preface to Wesley's account of Aldersgate: "I believe, till I was about ten years old, I had not sinned away that 'washing of the Holy Ghost' which was given me in baptism" (Journal for 1738:05:24, par. 1; in W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., Journal and Diaries [Bicentennial edition of the Works of John Wesley; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988ff.], 1:242-243).
20. Even John Miley, who is seen as reflecting some late-nineteenth-century liberal tendencies, maintained that the doctrine of baptism must be grounded in the notion of human depravity (2:408-409).
21. Stookey does discuss evangelical attitudes towards baptism, but does not deal with the Anglican, Presbyterian, or Methodist evangelical traditions; rather, he focuses on traditions emphasizing believers' baptism, and Pentecostalism (pp. 128-130). Here again a significant range of evangelical opinion is not reflected; on the other hand, Stookey is certainly right in his observation that early twentieth-century Methodist baptismal liturgies had departed from the classical theological traditions in maintaining that infants are born in a state of regeneration (the position against which Miley had argued, cf. Stookey, pp. 130-132).


24. The renunciation is given in the Hymnal, p. 34, and in the Book of Services, p. 55. The reference to renouncing "the bondage of sin" in the 1984 version was replaced in the Hymnal with the question, "[do you] repent of your sin?"


27. Hymnal, p. 33; cf. Book of Services., p. 54. The expression "we" in the second line of the 1988 text (above) replaces "believers and their households" of the 1984 text.

28. The World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission statement on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (Faith and Order Paper no. 111; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) goes so far as to claim that "those baptized are pardoned, cleansed and sanctified by Christ" (section on baptism, II:B:4, p. 2), although it does not utilize specific language about baptismal regeneration. It seems to me that such claims would have to face serious challenges for evangelicals to engage in the discussion at this point.
A New Literary Reading of Exodus 32,
The Story of the Golden Calf

John C. Holbert

THERE IS A FRESH breeze blowing through the halls of biblical scholarship. That breeze has been variously identified as literary criticism, rhetorical criticism, or poetics. By whatever name, the goal is to take very seriously the actual words and form of the biblical texts as they are, rather than to account for how and from where we got them. The following reading of Exodus 32 is an example of this new method.

The infamous story of the golden calf has entered into the folklore of the Western world. Casual Bible readers associate it with the problem of idolatry; and to be sure, that is what is the story is about to a certain extent. Yet a more detailed and careful reading of the entire text may yield some surprises for the preacher who is willing to reexamine the familiar.

Exod. 32:1-6 (author's translation)

(1) When the people saw that Moses was shamefully late in coming down from the mountain, they mobbed together
against Aaron and said to him, "Get up! Make us *elohim* who will go before us! As for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him!" (2) Aaron said to them, "Tear off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring [it] to me." (3) So, all the people tore off the golden earrings which were in their ears and brought [it] to Aaron. (4) He took [it] from their hand, and shaped it into a molten calf. They said, "These are your *elohim*, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." (5) When Aaron saw [this], he built an altar in front of it. Then Aaron cried out and said, "A feast to Yahweh tomorrow!" (6) They rose early in the morning and offered up burnt offerings and presented peace offerings. The people sat down to eat and drink, and then they got up to begin the orgy.

The narrator of chapter 32 picks up the thread of the story that had been dropped in 24:14. In the earlier chapter, Moses had disappeared up the sacred mountain and had charged the elders of the people as follows: "Wait here for us until we [Moses and Joshua] return to you. Here are Aaron and Hur. Whoever has a complaint, come to them." Though Moses speaks to the elders, his command to wait is surely intended for all the people who have just participated in a ceremony of the ratification of the covenant.

At the beginning of chapter 32, the point of view shifts to that of the people. Though Moses has gone up the mountain to receive "the tables of stone, with the law and the commandment" (24:12), the people see his absence as only "shameful delay."1 By employing the word for "shame" in their description, they imply that Moses has not told them the truth about what he and God are doing on the mysterious mountain; they feel abandoned and alone in the terrifying wilderness. In their fear, they "mob together against Aaron." The sense of the verb can be found in Num. 16:3 and 20:2.

Their demand is blunt, yet strangely ambiguous. "Get up! Make us *elohim* who will go before us!" *Elohim* is a masculine plural noun in Hebrew, but it is often used to designate the one God of Israel. What is it that the people want? Do they want
"gods" in the manner of the two golden bulls of Jeroboam I (I Kings 12:26-30)? Do they want a "god" to replace the God of Israel who has apparently abandoned them, along with that God's messenger? What is certain is that they want these elohim to "go before" them, to lead them. In some undefined way, the desperate people of Israel think that Aaron will fashion something for them that will replace their leader, who did indeed bring them out of Egypt; apparently he did so only to let them die in the wilderness. They call him "this Moses," a sarcastic use of the demonstrative pronoun, a recurring stylistic device in the chapter. By remembering only his past deed of Egyptian deliverance, they silently deny any ongoing activity on their behalf by the absent Moses. The irony of the story is that while the mob is howling for gods at the base of the mountain, God has just handed the sacred "tables of the testimony" to Moses (31:18) in fulfillment of the promise at 24:12.

Why is one "god" made in response to a request for "gods?" The beginning of an answer may be found in the emerging portrait of the people. The first verse tells us a great deal about them. They are anxious, fearful, and desperate. Their call for "gods" is a piece of hyperbole, shouted by a people out of control. They demand something that they can see to replace an absent leader who claims to represent an invisible God. As Frederick Buechner delightfully puts it, they believe that "a God in the hand is worth two in the bush." And now our attention focuses on Aaron: in the face of the howling mob, Aaron commands them to "tear off" all of their earrings of gold and bring them to him. As this is taking place, Moses has been told by God on the mountaintop that Aaron and his family shall be consecrated as the priests of God (Exod. 28-29). What is the priest-to-be doing with all that gold? This gold, of course, is part of that treasure of the Egyptians, who were "despoiled" by the Israelites as a sign of God's power (see Exod. 3:21-22 and 11:2-3). The gift of God is about to replace God! Yet this first action of Aaron is ambiguous.

"All the people" respond quickly to Aaron's command, using the same two verbs which he used, "tear off" and "bring." Verse 4 presents the reader with several difficult textual problems.
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which are important to resolve if we are to understand what Aaron is doing. There is no question that one of the narrator's interests is to show us that Aaron was fully active in the event about to be described. "He took (it) from their hands," "he shaped it," and "he made it into a molten calf." Aaron is the actor from start to finish; he is responsible for the gleaming idol that now appears. The two words, "shaped" and "graving tool" have been much discussed. The former can mean "cast," as in the casting of metal (see I Kings 7:15) or "to shape." The latter term is more difficult. Isa. 8:1 uses the word as an instrument of engraving. By analogy, it seems best to assume that it is here used as a tool for the engraving of metal. If this reading is sound, Aaron has taken the gold from the hands of the people, cast it carefully in the fire, and shaped it with genuine artistry with a tool specific for the purpose. Aaron made his little calf with careful design, slow workmanship, and clear intent.

Still, Aaron's reasons for making the calf remain obscure. The reader can only assume at this point that he has made the "god" because the people demanded it. In any case, the people take one look at Aaron's careful handiwork and cry, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!" This cry makes it clear that they wanted a substitute for Moses, the leader whom they earlier touted as the "man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt" (vs. 1). Whether they believe the calf is itself "gods" or only represents gods makes little practical difference. They regard it as a sufficient substitute for the missing Moses and his equally missing God. In the words of Ps. 106:20, "They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass."

Aaron now sees that the people have accepted the calf he has made as "gods" who have acted in a way formerly ascribed only to Yahweh. So Aaron moves into action. He builds an altar in front of the calf, and proclaims, "A feast to Yahweh tomorrow!" How are we to understand this behavior? It seems certain that Aaron is trying to make the best of a bad situation. Aaron's problem is reminiscent of Gideon, the judge of ancient Israel (Judg. 8:22-27). The people of Israel ask Gideon to become their king, and he refuses, insisting to them that only Yahweh is king.
Nevertheless Gideon requests that "golden earrings" be given to him. Out of this gold, Gideon makes a "golden ephod," some kind of divine image. As a result, the people of Israel "play the harlot after" the image, and it becomes a "snare" both to Gideon and to his family. Aaron had the same thing in mind. He thought that by building an image that would represent Yahweh, or serve in some way as Yahweh's throne or seat, he would assuage the angry mob and still be in some sense loyal to Yahweh and to Moses. But there is no pious disclaimer from Aaron. Only when he sees the people's reaction to the calf does he build a traditional altar and declare a feast to the glory of Yahweh.

Aaron appears to want to lead the people, seemingly in the name of Yahweh. However, his ready offer to build a calf in response to their angry demands suggests that he is in fact not in control of the people. They have already shown that Yahweh and Yahweh's representatives have little real power in their lives. This shared lack of control is illustrated in verse 6, where the first three verbs pointedly include Aaron and the people. They all rise early in the morning; they all offer burnt offerings; they all present peace offerings. But this traditional worship of Yahweh is a facade, a prelude for the real activity of the day. "The people," excluding Aaron, the reader assumes, "sat down to eat and drink." How far this is from the eating and drinking we find in the presence of God (Exod. 24:9-11)! There the elders "behold God"; here the people behold the calf. "Then they got up to begin the orgy." I have translated the final verb more bluntly (see RSV "to play") to highlight its sexual connotations. In Gen. 26:8, it is used to describe the sexual play between Isaac and Rebekah when they are discovered by Abimelech to be husband and wife after all. But in Gen. 39:14,17, the sexual meaning turns ugly. Potiphar's lusty wife accused Joseph of "insulting" her, with the clear meaning that he has attempted some lewd acts with her. The verb can have a neutral sense (Gen. 19:14), but here the meaning "orgy" seems assured. The people are out of control.

The narrator opens the tale of the golden calf with a set of accusations. First, the people of Israel have broken the first and
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Second commandments (Exod. 20:3-4); they have worshipped a golden calf even as Moses is poised to return from God with the tablets of the testimony in his hands. Second, Aaron himself has transgressed the second commandment; he has created an image and caused others to sin. Aaron is at best a poor leader, who compromises his people's allegiance to Yahweh, and at worst he is no true follower of Yahweh at all. In either case, the picture of the people and their temporary leader is very negative, and it sets the stage for the anger of God and of Moses in the next scene.

This entire first scene is laden with irony in still another sense. In Exod. 25:1-9, Yahweh directs Moses to take "an offering from those who are willing." Among the contents of this offering is gold, from which they are to construct a portable sanctuary, the tabernacle. Next God directs them to make the ark. Both tabernacle and ark are "vehicles of God's presence." The people's demand for a calf to supply themselves with divine presence mocks the gifts of God's presence in tabernacle, ark, and tablet. Their fabrication of a divine representative apart from Moses and Yahweh and their claim that this image and not Yahweh has "brought them up from the land of Egypt" constitutes a challenge to God. As in Egypt, where "God saw the people of Israel and God knew" their suffering (Exod. 2:25), so now God "sees" the people again. But this time, God erupts in fury.

Exodus 32:7-14

(7) Yahweh said to Moses, "Move! Go Down! Surely, your people whom you brought up from the land of Egypt are corrupt! (8) They have quickly turned aside from the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf; they have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it. They have said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." (9) Then Yahweh said to Moses, "I have seen this people. Yes, a people stiff-necked it is!" (10) So, now let me alone, in order that my wrath may burn against them and consume them. But I will make you a great nation." (11) But Moses sought to appease the face of Yahweh, his God, and said, "Why, Yahweh, does your wrath
burn against your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? (12) Why should the Egyptians say, 'For evil God brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the surface of the soil?' Retrieve your burning anger, and change your mind about evil to your people. (13) Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will increase your descendants like the stars of the sky and all this land which I said I would give to your descendants, they will inherit forever.' (14) Thus, Yahweh's mind was changed about the evil which God thought to do to the people.

We leave the orgy at the base of the mountain, and are lifted to the top of Sinai, where Yahweh and Moses are concluding their lengthy discussion of Israel's covenanted responsibilities. Moses has the divine tables of the law in his hands (31:18) when suddenly God explodes in anger. "Move! Go down!" shouts God, using two very brief verbal imperatives. "Your people whom you brought up from the land of Egypt are corrupt!" Yahweh announces two terrible truths in this sentence. First, the people of Israel are no longer Yahweh's; they are Moses' people now. Second, the word "corrupt" has some awesome and frightening connotations: it is used twice in Gen. 6:12 to describe the land and the people just before the onset of the flood. Yahweh is once again angry enough to obliterate creation.

Yahweh says clearly why he is angry: "They have turned aside quickly from the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." This phrase reminds us of Exod. 20:2, "I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt," which appears at the very beginning of the decalogue. It is interesting to note that the verb yatzah, "brought out," is used in the decalogue, while the verb 'alah, "brought up," is used in chapter 32 (with one exception, verse 11, where Moses purposefully quotes the decalogue's formulation). Yahweh, however, repeats the idolatrous formula in vs. 4, all the better to highlight their foolishness. Whatever Aaron had in mind
when he made the golden calf, and however the people understand their relationship to the calf, Yahweh sees the activity at the foot of the mountain as nothing other than apostasy, the very symbol of a deep corruption in the chosen people.

"I have seen this people," says Yahweh, using the demonstrative pronoun in the same way that the people did when they separated themselves from the missing Moses in vs. 1. Yahweh then pronounces an all-inclusive judgment: "A people stiff-necked it is!" Twice this word, "stiff, hard," was used to describe the stubbornness of pharaoh (see Exod. 7:3 and 13:16). To Yahweh, the people of Israel have become no better than pharaoh; like him, they are stubborn, opposed to the great plan of God. God has saved this people from pharaoh but their inner likeness to pharaoh is a far more insidious threat.

God's anger finally reaches its climax. "Now, let me alone," God says to Moses, "in order that my anger may burn against them and consume them. But I will make you a great nation." Commentators for many centuries have noted the profound paradox in these lines. God is about to destroy the people of Israel. Yet God seems to anticipate Moses' objection by saying to him, "Let me alone!" God addresses Moses directly here, not only inviting his response, but also promises him a fresh beginning, casting Moses as the new Abraham (see Gen. 12:2).

How will Moses respond to God's resolution to destroy the people? The author elevates Moses to a place nearly unparalleled in the Hebrew Bible. "But Moses sought to appease the face of Yahweh, his God." In I Kings 13:6, King Jeroboam asks an unnamed man of God to "appease" Yahweh's anger at the king's construction of two golden calves. In Exod. 32:11, Moses, unbidden by any human beings, but subtly invited by Yahweh, seeks to calm God's anger, once again aroused by the building of a golden calf. The difference in the two scenes is, of course, that Moses finds himself toe-to-toe with God on God's home place, the mountain of Sinai!

Moses has listened carefully to God's tirade of the preceding verses, and seeks to answer the points one by one.

1. "Why does your wrath burn against your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt?" In verse 7, God had given
the people over to Moses by the use of the second person
pronouns. Using the same tactic, Moses reassigns the people to
the God who made them and chose them. Further, Moses uses
the form of the commandment of Exod. 20:2, employing the
verb *yatzah* rather than *‘alah*, thus removing the argument
from the level of sneering parody and reminding God of the
structure of God's own divine command. Moses says, in effect,
these are your people, God, to whom you gave the command;
you have a continuing responsibility for them. Moses adds the
small phrase that God's action was done with "great power and
a mighty hand." This is surely designed to massage even the
angriest deity.

2. "Why should the Egyptians say, 'For evil God brought
them out to kill them in the mountains and consume them from
the surface of the soil?'" On the surface, this seems to be a
peculiar argument. Why should God be concerned at all with
what the Egyptians might think about the divine behavior? The
reader is here reminded of one of the major reasons for the
exodus in the first place. Pharaoh, when first confronted by
Moses' demand to let the people go, says, "I do not know
Yahweh" (Exod. 5:2). It is a fateful phrase for him, but it also in
part controls the reason for the long and agonizing series of
plagues that follows it. Later, God says that Egypt is allowed to
live precisely to witness the power of Yahweh, "so that my name
may be declared throughout the earth" (Exod. 9:16). And the
victory of Yahweh over the Egyptians is crucial in order that
"you may tell in the hearing of your son and your son's son how
I have made sport of the Egyptians and what signs I have done
among them; that you (Israel!) may know that I am Yahweh"
(Exod. 10:2). When Moses warns God about the reaction of the
Egyptians to this proposed slaughter of the Israelites, he
reminds God of the basic purpose of the exodus, namely, to
teach Egypt, Israel, and the whole world who Yahweh is. To
"consume" Israel (Moses deftly repeats God's own word) would
be to consume the purpose and result of the exodus itself.

3. "Retrieve your burning anger, and change your mind about
the evil to your people." God's use of the word "corrupt" to
describe Israel, the word used in Gen. 6:12 to describe the evil
of the pre-flood world, is now matched by Moses who himself uses a famous word from that same story. Moses urges Yahweh, "change your mind," a word from the root, *nicham*. In Gen. 6:6 and 7, God is said to "be sorry" to have made the human beings; indeed, God is "grieved to his heart." The words "be sorry" there translate the same word here in Exod. 32:12. In effect, Moses asks God to remember the divine sorrow and to withhold the hand of destruction, to change God's mind.

4. The final argument that Moses musters against God was again suggested by God. God promised Moses that he would become a new Abraham, offering him the promise of Gen. 12:2. Moses again turns the tables on God, reminding God of the original promise to the three great patriarchs, a promise sworn by God to them by God's own life, and offered to their countless descendants "forever."

Thus, in four sharply pointed arguments, Moses attempts to change God's resolve to destroy the people of Israel. Note that he never denies the guilt of the people. Instead, God's choice of Israel, God's universality, God's deep feeling for the people, and God's eternal covenant are held up for God's examination. And the result? "Thus, Yahweh's mind was changed about the evil that God thought to do to the people." Moses has successfully convinced God not to destroy the sinful people. Moses has mediated for his people; because of him, they are saved from the anger of God.

There is an interesting relationship between the two scenes we have examined. In scene 1, at the base of the mountain, the anger of the people was assuaged by Aaron, but the result was syncretism and idolatry. In scene 2, at the top of the mountain, the anger of God was assuaged by Moses, and he spares the sinful people. The two scenes draw the readers to a comparison between the would-be leaders of Israel, Moses and Aaron. A second concern arises in the juxtaposition of the two scenes. The relationship between God and the people is broken first from the people's side and then from the divine side. Only Moses heals the breach. Will this be Moses' role as the story continues? Only as we continue the reading can we begin to answer this question.
Exodus 32:15-20

(15) So, Moses turned, and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets written on both sides; on one side and on the other they were written. (16) The tablets, they were the work of God, and the writing, it was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. (17) When Joshua heard the sound of the people shouting, he said to Moses, "A sound of war in the camp!" (18) But Moses said,

No sound of the song of prevailing,
No sound of the song of failing,
Just the sound of song I hear!\(^5\)

(19) So, it happened that when he drew near to the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and shattered them at the base of the mountain. (20) Then he took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, and scattered it on the surface of the water, which he then made the children of Israel drink.

With the remarkable conversation with God at an end, Moses turns away and heads down the mountain. The narrator pauses, and at some length describes the precious cargo that the deliverer is carrying. He has "the tablets of the testimony in his hands." God's promise of Exod. 24:12 has been fulfilled. In that earlier chapter, God announced that the "tables of stone" were written precisely for "their (Israel's) instruction." But now the tablets do not instruct; they register Israel's fateful crime.

Moses soon meets Joshua, who had gone at least part way up the mountain with his master (Exod. 24:13). As they descend together, a sound wafts up to their ears from the direction of the camp of Israel. The word for "sound," qol, is deliciously ambiguous. It can mean the sound of the war cry, a sound of great distress, the sound of victory after a battle, or even the sound of praise in a service of worship. To Joshua's martial ears, it is a sound of war. Moses knows the source of the sound, and he offers his answer to Joshua in the form of a small punning poem. "No sound of the song of prevailing (gebura), no sound of the song of failing (chalusha), but just a song I hear." The
three instances of the word "song" are identical in sound, but the final use doubles one of the letters of the word to distinguish it from the other two usages. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) tries to spell out more specifically the game that Moses is playing by adding the words "of wine" to the last-mentioned "song." But we and Moses know what kind of song fills the air of the sacred mountain; it is the kind of song one finds at orgiastic rites engaged in by idolatrous and/or syncretistic revellers.

Moses now sees the "calf and the dancing," and his immediate reaction is that "his anger burned." In effect, Moses reacts to his "seeing" in the same way that God reacted to the divine "seeing"; both of their angers "burn" (yichar 'af). But there is an important difference. God urged Moses to "let me alone" so that the divine anger could indeed burn. We noted in our reading of verse 10 above that God, in speaking thus to Moses, had in effect invited Moses to discuss the matter, an opening that Moses readily took. But there is no opening here. In a brief outburst of uncontrolled rage, punctuated by seven rapid verbs, Moses reacts to his "seeing." He first throws the tablets of God out of his hands and shatters them "at the base of the mountain." This rather unusual use of the preposition tachath, often translated "under," is also found at Exod. 24:4, where Moses had earlier "built an altar" in response to the people's claim that "all the words which Yahweh has spoken we will do." Now at the "base of the mountain" Moses breaks the symbol of that covenant to show the people what they have done.

He seizes the repulsive idol "which they had made," burns it, grinds it to powder, scatters it on the water, and forces the Israelites to drink it. The actions of burning and then grinding have been difficult to understand; they appear to make little logical sense. However, in an interesting Ugaritic parallel, the goddess Anat destroys Mot, the god of death, using precisely the same verbs in precisely the same order. Thus, the logical order is not significant for our understanding; the goal of Moses is to obliterate the calf.

Moses then forces the Israelites to drink water which has been saturated with the powdery remnants of the calf. To ingest
whatever is left of the evil object is the surest way to remove it from the face of the earth. "An allusion to the ordeal in Numbers 5 may also be in the background, but again should not be pressed. The issue at stake is not to determine the guilt, but to eradicate it."^10

What motivated Moses to take this amazing series of actions?

1. The most obvious possibility is that Moses smashed the tablets out of pure rage. That is what the text says literally (vs. 19). It would not be the first time that Moses reacted to a situation of chaos and confusion with violent anger. In Exod. 2, Moses, the prince of Egypt, kills an Egyptian overseer who was beating a Hebrew, "one of his (Moses') people." After this murder Moses loses the confidence of his fellow Israelites (2:14) and pharaoh, his adopted grandfather (2:15). Later, after Moses' initial attempts to persuade pharaoh to let the people go have resulted once again in Egyptian and Israelite dissatisfaction, Moses turns addresses God heatedly, shouting, "O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all" (Exod. 5:22-23). It would certainly not be inconsistent with Moses' past behavior to assume that his fiery temper caused him to hurl down the tablets.

2. But there may be more than human emotion at work in this passage. The narrator has God "burn in anger" just before Moses is described in the same way. Moses has staunched God's anger with pointed and persuasive arguments. Through this conflict Moses has learned that though God is furious enough to carry out destruction, God is also equally resolved to persist in the divine plan of a "great nation," chosen by God. In the face of these facts, Moses must mediate for his people in such a way that they can remain the people of God, but also be confronted with the seriousness of their sin. All of Moses' actions must now be seen to have something to do with preserving the people whom God has given him to lead.

Given this possible reading of the character of Moses, why then does he destroy the tablets? The act says, "God is furious! The covenant we have been offered has been abrogated; this
astonishing transgression cannot go unpunished." Thus, Moses destroys the tablets deliberately to announce those terrible facts to the people. This reading will help to explain the fifth scene of the story (vss. 25-29), and will help us better understand the next scene (vss. 21-24) with its portrait of Aaron. In fact, the picture of Aaron will become much clearer in the light of this understanding of Moses' motivations.

Exodus 32:21-24

(21) Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you brought upon them a great sin?" (22) Aaron said, "Don't let your anger burn, my lord. You know the people; surely, it is bent on evil. (23) They said to me, 'Make for us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.' (24) So, I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, tear it off and give it to me.' And I threw it in the fire and this calf came out."

This is truly a marvelous scene, and has brought forth the most disparate readings. Much of the disagreement revolves around the question of what to do with Aaron. As Leivy Smolar and Moshe Aberbach have demonstrated, the picture of Aaron in this chapter was very embarrassing for the later traditions of Judaism.

The participation of Aaron in the construction of the golden calf was an additional source of deep concern. This inevitably led to the emergence of an apologetic literature, the basic tendency of which was to minimize the guilt of Israel in general, and of Aaron in particular.\footnote{11}

They show how the commentators used all manner of clever linguistic and psychological arguments to demonstrate that Aaron was not really culpable in the terrible deed. This concern to rehabilitate Aaron persists up to the present.\footnote{12}

The plain fact is, however, that Aaron is being pilloried here in several obvious ways. We noted above that Moses is fully identified with his people; he has saved them from divine destruction and has just destroyed the product of their wanton and idolatrous behavior. Yet, the reader knows who actually
built the calf. It was Aaron, and now Moses confronts him with the deed. Note, however, that Moses' real concern arose from the way he asks the initial question. "What did this people do to you that you brought upon them a great sin?" Moses' use of the expression "this people" objectifies them distancing them from both himself and Aaron. Moses surely would not deny that the people are stiff-necked; perhaps they did lead Aaron astray. At the same time, Moses makes it very clear that Aaron did in fact bring on the people a great sin. The question is two-edged; it offers the possibility that Aaron is not completely guilty, but it affirms that he is far from completely innocent. His response will tell us just what the narrator thinks of him.

"Don't let your anger burn, my lord," he says. He does not answer Moses' question at all! "Cool off!" he says. It is the same thing that Moses said to God in the face of God's decision to destroy the people. Moses said it to save the people; Aaron now says it to save himself. "You know the people." Who knows this people of Israel better than Moses? He has struggled with them since their initial rejection of his attempts to save them from pharaoh, and has just rescued them from God's anger after their building of the calf. Oh yes, Moses knows the people. "It is bent on evil," says Aaron. So it is, Moses would agree. But Moses has saved them. Aaron now points to their evil and rushes on to separate himself from them and their evil as far as he can.

When Aaron finally gets around to answering Moses' question, he recounts the events that transpired in the beginning of the story. At first his memory is accurate. He says to Moses, "They said to me, 'Make for us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.'" This is indeed a word-for-word recounting of the speech of the people to Aaron as found in verse 1. Then Aaron becomes more creative. "So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, tear it off and give it to me.'" He makes three subtle changes in this part of the speech from the words reported to us in verse 2.

1. He begins his account with the indefinite phrase, "whoever has gold." The implication is perhaps "if any of you happen to
have any gold." That is a far cry from the sharp and detailed word of command that Aaron uttered earlier to the men: "Tear off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters." This change has the effect of distancing Aaron from the activity and makes the people far more directly responsible for deciding whether they will comply with the command or not. Aaron portrays himself as far less imperious, far less commanding, than the speech of verse 2 indicates.

2. He changes the verb of command, "tear off," from the Hebrew theme piel to the Hebrew hithpael, which is usually the reflexive theme of the verb. Hence, Aaron tells Moses that he urged them to "tear off of themselves" the gold, emphasizing their behavior in action. This change has the effect once again of transferring the responsibility of the action away from Aaron and toward the people.

3. He changes the verb from the causative form of the verb "to bring" to a form of another verb "to give." In verse 2, Aaron commands them "bring the gold." Here he softens the command to "give." Again, he implies by this change that they had choice in the matter. The clear implication is that because they are "bent on evil," their choices were decided on evil bases. Aaron, through these subtle linguistic changes, has separated himself from the people and from the events and decisions surrounding the building of the calf. But his most outrageous separation is still to come.

"I threw it in the fire, and this calf came out!" Aaron would have Moses and us believe that he had no intention of creating a calf. Indeed, he implies that there may have been some divine (or demonic?) force at work in the fire, which took all of the gold and transformed it into a golden calf. But the narrator has imputed the deed to Aaron, no mistake: "He took it from their hands, shaped it with a graving tool, and made it into a molten calf" (vs. 4). Three active verbs belie Aaron’s claim of innocence; Aaron is responsible and this bold-faced lie makes that all the more certain. One might picture Aaron describing the events with dramatic gestures and excited voice, while behind him the people are shaking their heads at the absurdity of his story.
Note also that he uses that device, now familiar to us, of the demonstrative pronoun to distance himself from the calf. He calls it "this calf," suggesting that its miraculous origins in the fire made it an anomaly, an isolated and ultimately irrelevant thing. The fact that it has already been wiped off the face of the earth by the decisive actions of Moses makes Aaron's attempts to distance himself from it all the easier.

What then are we to make of this very negative picture of Aaron? Aaron is clearly a foil for Moses. That is, after we have heard Aaron's ridiculous and shameful explanations for the events at the base of the mountain, Moses' stature in our eyes grows immeasurably. Note the comparisons suggested by the text.

1. Whereas Moses warns God against doing "evil" to the people (vs. 12) so that God does not do "evil" against them (vs. 14), Aaron quite directly calls the people "evil" in an attempt to excuse his own behavior.

2. In the face of towering divine wrath, Moses dares to argue with God in order to preserve the people. In the face of Moses' great anger, Aaron will not attempt to rescue the people, but separates himself from them as far as he can through a series of subtle and less than subtle verbal maneuvers.

3. For Aaron, the sin of the people is a result of their evil, an evil in which he claims to take no part. While Moses recognizes the people's evil, he acts to eradicate it and to warn them of the divine fury. In the last scene of the story, he will even offer his own life for the people rather than leave them without the presence of God (vs. 32).

The question of the text is one of leadership. Who is the real leader of Israel and what sort of leader should she/he be? The answer of this text is unequivocal; Moses is leader, not Aaron, and that is so primarily because Moses is one with the people while Aaron demonstrates no identity with them at all.

Exodus 32:25-29

(25) When Moses saw the people, that it had broken loose—Aaron had caused the breaking loose, leading to whispering among their enemies—(26) Moses stood at the entrance to the camp, and said, "Whoever is for Yahweh, come here!" And
there assembled to him all the children of Levi. (27) And he said to them "Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel: each one put his sword on his side. Pass back and forth through the camp, and let each one kill his brother, his companion, his neighbor." (28) So the children of Levi acted according to the word of Moses, and there fell from the people that day about three thousand individuals. (29) And Moses said, "Fill your hands today for Yahweh! Each one because of your son and your brother has given yourself a blessing today."

Moses now sees that the people have indeed "broken loose" and they have done so at the instigation of Aaron. There is an interesting possible irony in the use of the word translated as "broken loose." The word is used twice in verse 25, once as a passive participle, pharu'a, and once as an active participle, pher'aoth. Earlier in the story of the exodus, in chapter 5, pharaoh, phar'aoh, complains to Moses and Aaron that they have "restrained," tiphri'ua (the same verbal root), the people from their work. Moses has, of course, asked the pharaoh to let the people go; he (the pharaoh) claims that it is Moses who has restrained them. Now Moses says, in effect, that Aaron has not restrained the people but has "let them go" but for evil activity, not for freedom from slavery. Aaron, in other words, has become a parody of the exodus itself, and has become a pharaoh in reverse, "letting the people go" toward evil. In fact, the active participle, pher'aoth is identical consonantly to the word for pharaoh. One could thus hear the second part of verse 25 as follows: "Surely, Aaron was pharaoh, a whispering among their enemies." Thus does the narrator again denigrate Aaron and indicate the depth of evil to which he allowed the people to fall.

Whatever the historical background of the consecration of the Levites that the text presents, the need for an even more thorough eradication of the evil perpetrated at the base of the mountain is the reason for this section of the story. The result of the transgression has been effectively removed; now the culprits must be dealt with. Two facts should be noted. First, the ones killed are "brothers, companions, and neighbors," members of the people of Israel. The Levites are called to slaughter them without mercy. This grisly command is a clear
indication of the terrible seriousness of the transgression of the great commandments against idolatry and image making. Second, not all of the people are killed, merely "about three thousand." God's anger against the people has been deflected by Moses but not fully satisfied. There must be a reckoning for this evil deed, and the price is a bloody one. God's grace, in part motivated by the intercession of Moses, has allowed the sinful people to survive as a people. The people's actions threaten the very order of the "kingdom of priests and holy nation" (Exod. 19:6) that God envisioned when this people was chosen. The removal of the calf and the killing of the three thousand are Moses' attempts, as leader of the people, to expunge the rottenness at the core of the chosen ones of God.

But why not remove Aaron? We saw that he was deeply implicated in the sin and lied about his involvement when asked about it by Moses. Aaron is seriously involved all right, but he remains unpunished. The reason appears to be, once again, that Aaron must remain as a foil for Moses, and for the kind of leadership be demonstrated.

There is a similar comparison in leadership styles recorded in Numbers 25, involving, interestingly enough, a descendant of Aaron. In this story, Zimri, an Israelite elder, decides to marry Cozbi, a daughter of an important family of Midian. Phineas, "son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest," kills the couple, apparently while they are consummating their marriage, by ramming a spear through both of their bodies. Because of this bloody deed, Yahweh commends Phineas in the following words to Moses: "He has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, because he was zealous with my zealousness among them. So, I will not consume the people of Israel in my zealousness." Phineas is affirmed as one who acted decisively and with the same zeal practiced by God, who announced in the great commandment, "I Yahweh your God am a zealous God" (Exod. 20:5). Of Phineas it is said that he "was zealous for his God and made atonement for the people" (Num. 25:13).

One could argue that Phineas combines in his person the two characteristics of Moses' distinctive form of leadership, namely, zeal for Yahweh and at the same time compassion for the people.
made evident in the willingness to "atone for," cpr, the sins of those people. It is exactly those two characteristics that are lacking in the leadership of Aaron. He is willing to accede to the wild demands of a howling mob, but he has no compassion for them as a people, as his lying attempts to distance himself from them so readily make clear. True leaders demonstrate zealous compassion; Aaron demonstrates neither characteristic.

Exodus 32:30-35

(30) It happened the next day that Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. Now I will go up to Yahweh; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." (31) So Moses returned to Yahweh and said, "Ah! This people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. (32) But if you will carry their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written!" (33) But Yahweh said to Moses, "Whoever sins against me, I will blot them out of my book. (34) But now move! Lead the people where I told you. Look! My messenger will go before you. But on the day that I visit I will visit their sin upon them!" (35) And Yahweh plagued the people, because they made the calf which Aaron made.

The narrator concludes this part of the story still concerned to compare and contrast Moses with Aaron. In the fourth section, Aaron responded to Moses' question to him by attempting to rationalize his behavior behind the recognized fact that the people were evil (vs. 22). "You know how this people are, Moses; evil people beget evil deeds," says Aaron. Moses now in vs. 30 freely admits the great sin of the people, a sin he had earlier blamed at least in part on Aaron (vs. 21). But Moses does not demean them or to cut himself off from them. Quite the contrary: the real leader of Israel resolves immediately to go back up the mountain in an attempt to "atone" for the sins of the people.

It has been said that "Moses desires to make atonement for the sin of his people by offering, if necessary, his own life on behalf of the guilty who are threatened by destruction." The overwhelming meaning of the verb, cpr, "to atone," in the Hebrew Bible is "a material expiation by which injury is made
good and the injured party is reconciled, i.e., by which the hurt is covered (another meaning of the term) and the guilty party is released from obligation." It seems then that Moses is in fact offering himself on behalf of his people; he will become the material offering to "cover the hurt," "make good the injury," and thereby "release the guilty party from obligation." It is Moses' finest hour as leader of his people. In contrast to Aaron, so bent on divorcing himself from the people, Moses identifies with them so closely that he will willingly be wiped from the pages of history if God will agree to spare them. Moses would rather die than see the end of his people.

But God will have none of it. Only the sinners deserve death, says God. God does not want to get in the business of killing the innocent. Abraham's demand that God "not destroy the righteous with the wicked" (Gen. 18:23) is the way that God will operate. Moses' supreme sacrifice is summarily rejected. Earlier in the story, God had invited discussion of the decision to destroy the sinners (Exod. 32:10). But when the question arises of the destruction of the innocent, no discussion is possible; this God will not do it and will not discuss it. Indeed, God rushes on to another subject. God says again to Moses, "Move!" (Exod. 32:7) Back to work, Moses! Lead the people where I told you!

But something very important has changed; God will no longer lead the people. "My messenger will go before you," says God. And God goes on to warn the people, through Moses, that their great sin has in no way yet been fully atoned for. This is further proof that Moses' offer has been completely turned aside, almost as if it had not happened. God still vows to visit their sin upon them; they should not imagine that God's absence from them means that God has forgotten what they have done. Such great evil is not forgotten so easily.

An interesting ambiguity arises from this final section. On the one hand, each person is responsible for her/his own sin before God. Yet, the final threat of God to punish the people for "their" sin indicates that individual sins have a profound and lasting impact on the entire community in which they are done. And to illustrate that ambiguity, the narrator ends the story with a most peculiar sentence: "Yahweh plagued the people,
because they made the calf which Aaron made" (v. 35). Just as Yahweh earlier in the story of the exodus has sent "plagues" on the Egyptians in behalf of the Israelites, so now Yahweh "plagues" the Israelites for their own great sin of creating the calf. That sin in its effects was thus fully equal to the oppressions of the Egyptians and was dealt with in the same way, through a plague from Yahweh.

But the remainder of the sentence sounds on the face of it to be gibberish: "they made the calf which Aaron made." Childs speaks for many when he says, "the last three words appear to be a clumsy, secondary addition." But we must ask what are the effects of the sentence? First, the words summarize the story we have been reading. It is in fact true that both the people and Aaron are culpable in the construction of the calf; he shaped it but at their express instigation. Second, by closing the story with the word "Aaron," the narrator reminds the reader again of his guilt in the affair and once more sharply distinguishes the two would-be leaders. The last we heard from Moses was his offer to sacrifice his life for his people. The last we hear of Aaron from the narrator is the remembrance that he made the calf.

After this wonderful tale there can be no doubt of two facts. Moses is the true leader of Israel; Aaron is at best a provisional one and at worst a rebel against the will of Yahweh. And true leadership consists of total zeal for Yahweh coupled with an unstinting compassion for the people whom one is called to lead. Moses is hero; Aaron is anti-hero. Such are the conclusions of this reading of Exodus 32.

The reader can see much unfinished business in the story. Will God not go with the people? How will Moses be able to lead this stiff-necked people? In what further ways will Moses manifest the remarkable leadership abilities delineated in this story? These questions and others remain to be addressed in Exodus chapters 33-34. Yet the story contained in chapter 32 is a whole story. It begins with the people's demand of Aaron to make gods for them, and ends with the one God plaguing the people for that act. Within that envelope of idol making and its consequences, Moses emerges as the epitome of true leader-
ship for the people. In that sense, the question first asked of Moses by "one of his people" in Exod. 2:14, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us?" has been answered by this story. The answer is: Yahweh, and that choice has been confirmed by the actions of the hero, zealous for Yahweh, compassionate for his people.

Notes

5. I am indebted for the impetus for the following analysis to R. W. L. Moberly, *At the Mountain of God* (University of Sheffield: Sheffield, 1983) 46-48.
7. See, for example, Childs, *Exodus*, p. 567.
8. For the translations of "prevailing" and "falling," see Fox, *Now These*, p. 182.
13. Brichto's claim that Aaron was telling the truth here, that the calf really did hop out of the fire, due to the power of God, is not convincing and is motivated by Brichto's aim to exonerate Aaron's role in the story. See Brichto, "The Worship," p. 13.
Images of Christian Victory:
Notes for Preaching
from the Book of Revelation

Cornish Rogers

WHEN I BEGAN teaching a course entitled "Preaching Values in the Book of Revelation" I got some funny, evasive looks from a few members of the Bible faculty. It wasn't until much later, after having taught it twice, that I was informed by the Dean that some questions had been raised about my qualifications to teach the course, since I was obviously not trained as a biblical scholar. When I replied that the course was not intended to be a "Bible" course but a course in preaching, he expressed his full support but just wanted me to know that some of the Bible faculty were uneasy about it. Their uneasiness stemmed from the unsettled place of Revelation in scholarly opinion. One colleague confessed, "I can't figure it out, so I just leave it alone." Another said to me sympathetically, "If I were an oppressed minority, I would love the Book of Revela-

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tion," implying that, not being a minority person, he had no use for it.

Scholarly Ambivalence

Aversion to Revelation among biblical scholars goes back to the early church, and has been especially strong since the historical-critical method of Bible study came into practice. New Testament scholar Amos Wilder reported that when, in 1929, he chose to write his doctoral dissertation on eschatology and ethics, he received a letter from his academic supervisor at Harvard, Walter Lowrie:

For myself I have serious counsel to give you. If you would have a long life and would see good days, keep mum on the subject of eschatology...a subject which is highly dangerous in these days. Your teachers give you good advice: eschatology is a subject which the good and the great conspire to shun.¹

Nevertheless, Wilder persisted in his project, for which he credited Albert Schweitzer's "grasp of the potent visionary media in their relation to Jesus' mission" as persuasive: "Schweitzer's sense of the power, not of dreams and fictions, but of deeply rooted community symbols and scenarios threw new light on the world drama of the Gospel."

Since that time apocalyptic literature has been reassessed by most New Testament scholars. Recognizing apocalyptic as a central New Testament genre, Ernst Käsemann contended that apocalyptic is "the mother of Christian theology." "Christians," says Jürgen Moltmann, "are joyous revolutionaries." David Tracy considers apocalyptic a corrective built into the New Testament that challenges a privatistic understanding of the Gospels. It is a reminder of the public, political, and historical character of Christian self-understanding, and of the privileged place of the poor, the oppressed, and those who suffer. Not only does it challenge the living to remember the dead, but it also reminds the wise that the ultimate power ordering the cosmos is essentially unfathomable.²

Apocalyptic, whether Jewish or Christian, may be defined with reference to the Greek word apokalypsis, the unveiling of
IMAGES OF CHRISTIAN VICTORY

heavenly mysteries. Properly speaking, apocalyptic refers to a mode of discourse, a style of revelation that is richly symbolic, pseudonymous, esoteric; "underground" literature that is also filled with ethical exhortations. A literary example is an apocalypse; apocalyptic eschatology refers to motifs (usually concerning the end of this age, battle between cosmic forces of good and evil, the messianic era of salvation) that may be found in other kinds of literature.3

Theologically, eschatology and apocalyptic must be connected yet carefully distinguished from one another. According to Karl Rahner: "to extrapolate from the present into the future is eschatology, to interpolate from the future into the present is apocalyptic."4 Eschatology then is "Futurum," the fulfillment of current conditions in an anticipated climax; apocalyptic is "Adventus," the ideal reality of the future time imposed on, and therefore reordering, present experience. A more direct way of expressing the difference is that eschatology, with its roots in prophetic realism, leads to reform while apocalyptic, drawing on a radical utopian vision, leads to revolution.

Because of its revolutionary character, apocalyptic has a negative cast to it, but one that is distinctly creative in character. "The New Creation is born through the negation of the old, and is not its mere replacement."5 In the Book of Revelation, the demonic is used to reveal Christ—just as in the Gospels, it is the demon-possessed who are able to reveal Jesus.

But was Jesus himself an apocalyptic preacher whose revolutionary message was the imminent arrival of the world's end, and final judgment? Schweitzer himself believed that Jesus' teaching could not be understood apart from an apocalyptic vision of the world. From then on, scholars have been trying to "save Jesus" from apocalyptic, usually by carefully examining Jesus' sayings as preserved in the synoptic Gospels. In literature written in other Christian communities (e.g., 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Mark 13, and the Apocalypse of John [Revelation]), the realized victory of the Risen Christ is now connected with an eagerly anticipated sorting out of good and evil on earth. Finally, however, the Church relegated its own apocalyptic
heritage to the fringes; Martin Luther was even tempted to remove Revelation from the Protestant Bible.

In spite of the deprecation of apocalyptic historically, and these days by some mainline biblical scholars, Revelation is enjoying an enormous popularity in the religious imagination of ordinary people in our nation and around the world. As the end of the millennium nears, the book’s dire judgments seem to burn more brightly than before. It is revealing that a Russian physician said at an international conference of physicians in 1988:

In the Apocalypse [8:10-11] there are the following words: "And there fell a great star from Heaven... and the name of the star is called Wormwood... and the waters became wormwood and many died of the waters because they were made bitter." The Ukrainian word for wormwood is Chernobyl. Where did the Chernobyl wormwood star come from? I am sure it was sent to us from the 21st century as a menacing sign, demanding us to think over the very survival of our civilization before it is too late.

TV evangelists and fundamentalist preachers everywhere are preaching with great effect their literalistic interpretation of the book. Lay persons are asking more questions about the future of the world as a result of the book’s apparent disturbing message. Meanwhile mainline denominational preachers have shunned the book entirely—their silence imposed by fear that the book is not sufficiently Christian to be intelligible.

Revelation and Modern Culture

But Revelation is a book whose time has come, and we ignore its preaching message at our own peril. Not only are we nearing the end of a Christian millennium when "end time" interests increase, but we are made more aware of the dangerous possibilities inherent in the sustained conflict in the Middle East between Jew and Arab in the vicinities of Armageddon and other places identified in the book. With the advent of nuclear power, we can actually imagine the possibility of the world coming to an end in our lifetime. Already we have witnessed massive surd evils, like the Jewish Holocaust and the Jones-
town massacre, just to mention two, which serve to prefigure an even more apocalyptic future triggered by evil people. Prominent public officials, like Ronald Reagan and James Watts, have lent their prestige to give legitimacy to a literalistic view of the book.

The contemporary mind, addicted to visual imagery through daily doses of television, cinematic portrayals of interplanetary travel, and far-out science fiction, seizes on the lurid images, grotesque figures, violent conflict, and interstellar action described in Revelation. It is, in a word, great theater! And more than drama, it is musical drama!

Revelation does not only deal with space in a cosmic fashion: it also treats time that way. Apocalyptic literature pioneered the first universal view of history—a view that includes all peoples and all times, even the heavens. It is the preeminent book of the Bible that breaks down the barrier between humans and nature, introducing an ecological consciousness and a cosmic scope of existence. The forces of both good and evil are aided by natural agents.

The need for the gospel to be preached from this book is crucial because the approach of most fundamentalist preachers is to preach not the gospel, but message of fear and dire judgment lacking in the positive dimensions of the gospel. Missing in much of present preaching of the Apocalypse is

the phase of miraculous renovation and that world affirmation which has gone through the experience of world negation...the full apocalyptic scenario should include salvation as well as judgment, the new age as well as the old.\(^8\)

Revelation is a call to be faithful to God and to be assured that help from on high is on the way through Jesus Christ, the sacrificial conquering lamb, who has become God’s instrument in establishing God’s Kingdom on earth. The book does not intend to frighten its readers, but to assure them that God’s justice will be done on behalf of the faithful, who suffered because of their faithfulness. As strange as it may appear from a superficial reading, the book is a priestly one designed to give comfort. Even those who suffered unto death are promised
eventual resurrection in the last days when the new city of God is established.

Revelation and Apocalyptic

It is generally agreed that Revelation was written to a group of beleaguered Christians near the end of the First Century C.E. It urges them to hold on their faith in the face of severe oppression by the Roman authorities, who insisted that they include the Roman emperor as one of the gods they must worship. Again and again, it reminds them of the First Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). Even when God's angels come to the aid of the Elect, they warn the Elect not to worship them, but to worship only God. The prohibition of idolatry connects the Old Testament Exodus experience with the Early Church: as God delivered the Jews from Egypt, so God will deliver them, if they refrain from worshipping any "graven images" such as that of the Roman emperor.

Revelation is a typical apocalypse, a report of a vision of the end of the world by a supernatural mediator. Revelation is unusual, however, in two respects. First, it is not pseudonymous; its author, John of Patmos, does not disguise himself (although we cannot identify him with the apostle or the evangelist of the same name). Second, its structure is uncharacteristic in that it alternates visions with digressions. These interludes symbolize the alternation between suffering and joy in the Christian life-style. One reads of the horrible unrelieved suffering of the saints only to come to an interlude of joyful worship and celebration of the coming victory of the forces of good! Then follows more terrible portents and suffering that are almost unbearable when another interlude of worship, reassurance and celebration appears. The point of this rhythm of suffering and joy for the Christian is that his or her life will entail certain suffering, and joy enables one to endure it. Indeed, suffering opens the door for "otherworldly joys" to spill over into this world. As long as one takes the long view, one can always rejoice even in tribulation; for the endtime—that glorious time when the New Jerusalem comes down from God
out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband—is assured. It is a time of vindication.

The structure of Revelation is elaborate and probably patterned after the Book of Ezekiel. It has an upstairs/downstairs quality about it: one has to be aware of what is taking place in heaven and what is taking place on earth. It is difficult to assess the time sequences; time appears to be both vertical and horizontal, swinging on an axis. One must read the book with a wide angle lens, or more aptly, with a split screen lens. But in the order of their reportage, the following chronology occurs:

Chapter 1: The Vision of Christ by John of Patmos
2-3: Letters to the Churches
4-22: Visions of the Future
4-5: Preparatory Visions
6-16: Seven Seals, Trumpets, Mystic Signs, Bowls. (Interludes are usually just before the seventh vision, and introduce the next cycles.)
17-19: Final Destruction of Babylon
20: Thousand Year Reign and Last Judgment
21-22: New Jerusalem

The uniqueness of Revelation is its visions, or images. They appear to have lives of their own outside the context of the book. Christ is exalted—but he is also depicted as conquering and vengeful. Evil is appears in the form of a dragon, as a beast and as a woman astride a beast. Several images of negativity (seals, trumpets, the harvest of God's vengeance, bowls of wrath, Armageddon) are matched by images of order and integration (worship in the Heavenly Court, the New Jerusalem). Feminine images, both negative and positive, include Jezebel, the Woman Clothed with the Sun, the Woman on the Scarlet Beast and the New Jerusalem as a bride.

A striking parallel of good and evil images emerges from the book. The images project a mirror world of good and evil, images that look suspiciously like each other unless one looks closely. There is the holy trinity of God, the lamb and the bride; and
the unholy trinity of the dragon (Satan), the beast and the whore. There are two beasts (one is later called a false prophet) and two prophets, all of whom have miraculous powers. Both the beasts and the prophets reign for 42 months, 1260 days. There is a seal of the beast and a seal of the Elect, as well as marks of slaughter on both the beast and the Lamb. It is as if evil tries to beguile us into thinking it is the good. It reminds us that the lure of goodness and the lure of evil are almost equal.

Ultimately, the symbolism of Revelation becomes a language that combines disclosure with ecstasy. "The language of the apocalyptist is an acclamation that echoes and continues the event, the miraculum. It is reflexive, not reflective. . .the language is part of the happening." The language then actually becomes a participant in the enjoyment of the disclosure! But in order for that disclosure to be enjoyed, one must be sensitive and aware of parallels in the present situation. That is why the book invites interpretations that are risky and often faulty, unless one struggles to read the signs of the times from a broad and balanced gospel perspective.

Revelation and the Presentation of the Self

It has been said that the Apocalypse is a representation of the way the world looks after the ego has disappeared. Perhaps its fascination lies in its unveiled truth about ourselves. The images of Revelation are grotesque, perhaps, because we are blinded by our egos. The difference may be only one of perspective: Jacques Maritain reportedly remarked about the art of Picasso that "his distorted faces are perhaps our true likenesses, when we are seen by the angels." Like Picasso, Revelation paints in lurid cartoon images in order to evoke the true likeness of created reality. It is at the gut level that the book communicates truth. It is more than cartoon, more than poetic imagery; it is the stuff of which dreams are made.

"As silently as a mirror is behoved, realities plunge in silence by." Those realities, or images, are the subliminal force of the book. Moved by this current, readers take away more than the text actually says. That is entirely preferable to finding less--
that is, reducing imagery into easily recognizable formulas. The gifts of Revelation are reserved for those who take it on its own terms. When Isadora Duncan was once asked what one of her dances meant, she replied, "If I could tell you, I would not have to dance it." In her book, *Dreams, Illusions, and Other Realities*, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty writes that if the Hindu storyteller "sets out to tell a tale of revelation, he may describe events that peel back the physical veil to reveal another, more mystical reality that was always there but not recognized."^{12}

The images created by the wedding of the text with the imagination of the reader/hearer becomes what James Sanders calls "mirrors of identity rather than models of morality." That, he maintains, is the proper hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures.^{13} All Scripture, like Revelation, is an unmasking of appearances, a revealing of ultimate truth behind present reality. Even for Dante, the journey through Hell in *Purgatorio* was a way of seeing his essential self stripped of all pretensions. But his use of terror was for purification, not penalty. In Revelation, too, terror is purgative, not penal, in its intended effect.

Through the power of its images, Revelation has found an enduring place in the imagination of Western history and culture. Artists, musicians, and writers have incorporated its images into the works of their imagination. If all the copies of the book were destroyed tomorrow, its essential message would live on in Western art, music and literature. One needs only to visit Chartres and other European cathedrals to experience an architecture patterned after the description of the New Jerusalem; the triumphant strains of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" exult over the marriage of the lamb. Western literature is replete with allusions to the vivid scenes in Revelation. The book enjoys popularity even among non-Christians, many of whom regard it as their favorite book of the Bible.

Isak Dineson has maintained that any sorrow or suffering can be borne provided it can be put into a story. Revelation is such a story. It is a *story of the future* about to break into a suffering, sorrowful present. Because of the secularization of our culture, says Harvey Cox, the future "is the only dimension in which the
transcendent can operate; so the future becomes a source of freedom, and imagination becomes the necessary sensibility for hope." Revelation says more. It promises that the future belongs not to the beasts, but to the lambs. And listen to the lambs! We must preach the lambs' song.

Notes

6. From a speech by Dr. Yuri Stscherbak, a physician from Kiev, given on 13 October 1988 during the Congress of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.
7. See also Adela Yarbro Collins, "What the Spirit Says to the Churches": Preaching the Apocalypse," *QR* 4/3 (Fall, 1984): 69-84.
14. Harvey Cox, quoted in a recent speech.
Bringing Out of the Gospel-Treasure
What Is New and What is Old:
Two Parables in Matthew 18-23

Daniel Patte

The Gospel lections from Proper 19 to All Saints' Day are well known to our congregations and to us. In addition to passages such as the Tax Due To Caesar (Matt. 22:15-22), the Great Commandment (22:34-46), You Are Not To Be Called Rabbi, Father, Masters; the Greatest Shall Be Your Servant (23:1-12), these lections include a series of parables: the parables of the Unmerciful Servant (18:21-35), the Workers in the Vineyard (20:1-16), the Two Sons (21:28-32), the Vineyard (21:33-43), the Wedding Feast (22:1-14). These passages are so well known that they are no longer heard; they no longer surprise us by their newness, because, for us, everything in them is "old." But Matthew challenges us preachers ("scribes trained for the kingdom") to bring out of our treasure, the gospel, "what is new and what is old" (13:52). It is not a matter

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of finding something new to say about the text, but rather of
acknowledging its richness. It is a treasure! Each passage in­
volves many teachings, as Matthew says about the parables in
13:52 (and throughout this chapter), and as modern scholarship
about the parables also emphasizes by underscoring their
"polyvalence." Yet, because we are so fascinated by the great
value of one of these teachings, we do not hear or see anything
else (cf. 13:13); our reading of the text, valuable as it is, hides
from us the rest of the treasure. In order to bring out of the
treasure the "new" in addition to the "old," we need to be willing
to read the text (a parable or any other Gospel text) several
times, from different perspectives. Then, other and often very
different teachings appear. As preachers or teachers, we should
not seek to reconcile these readings. Rather, we should choose
which message needs to be brought out of the treasure of the
text for a specific audience in a particular situation (although
we might need to refer to one or several of the other teachings,
because it is well known to our audience).

In a sense, this suggestion should not surprise preachers.
They are used to consulting various exegetical studies of the
text, and to picking and choosing what is appropriate for their
sermon to a given congregation. This is a good example of true
practical wisdom which is hidden from "the wise and under­
standing" (the specialists, the exegetes; 11:25)! Yet this true
practical insight must be carried out consistently and coherently,
by resisting the temptation to imitate the exegetical studies
that, even in the cases of the parables, most often present
themselves as a quest for THE single true meaning of the text
(whether it is THE original meaning, THE literary meaning,
THE theological meaning, etc.). This common exegetical prac­
tice denies the richness of the text-treasure, because it denies
any validity to the other perspectives that allow readers to
perceive other coherent teachings of the text. In the process,
we deny any validity to the specific experiences and concerns
reflected by these perspectives, including the authentic ex­
periences, concerns, and identities of minority and Third-
World Christians, as well as of many groups and individuals in
our congregations and in our society. This is why I insist that
preachers should continue doing what they are doing; picking and choosing interpretations that are appropriate for their sermons. But they need to do so consistently. This is to say that they must seek to discern the coherence of each of the teachings that a given text offers, rather than pretending to highlight a few features of THE single teaching of this text.

In this way, one becomes fully aware that any interpretation (for oneself or for an audience) involves choosing one rather than another of the teachings offered by a text. Because these teachings offered by the text are so different, this choice is never without consequences. By seeing clearly the distinct coherence of the various teachings offered by a text, one is in a position to evaluate their implications for a specific audience in a concrete situation, and thus to make an educated decision when deciding which teaching this audience needs to hear.

These opening remarks and the concrete way to proceed are clarified by the "multi-reading" studies of two lections, Matt. 18:21-35, Proper 19; and Matt. 20:1-16, Proper 20. For each lection I propose three readings that should be enough to open up the treasure of the text (of course, other readings are possible). Each of these readings--found in one or several existing exegetical studies--is presented in some detail so as to show that each of their teachings is equally legitimate (equally well based on the text), despite the fact that it perceives a different coherence in the text. I also suggest how the perception of these teachings is related to the perspectives of certain groups (by referring to the interpretations of the Hispanic camposinos of Solentiname and of a feminist scholar, Luise Schottroff). This is not saying that these teachings are only for them; they are also for us, but these groups help us see them! Then, we have a choice. When we choose one or another of these teachings as the one to be conveyed in a sermon, we can do so with the full awareness of its implications for our congregations. By using similar exegetical studies (listed in the bibliography), readers should likewise strive to envision the distinct coherent teachings offered by each of the other lections, before making a choice for their sermons.
Proper 19, September 16, 1990
Matthew 18:21-35

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:23-35) underscores the importance of forgiving brothers and sisters, as the dialogue between Peter and Jesus (18:21-22) also does. According to the way the text is read, quite different teachings about forgiveness emerge: an exhortation to forgive as one has been forgiven; a warning concerning the disastrous effects of not forgiving; or a teaching concerning what makes forgiveness "from the heart" possible.

First Reading: Forgiving as We Have Been Forgiven

The lection suggests that 18:21-22 (how many times should we forgive?) is to be read in terms of the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:23-35). Peter's proposal to forgive one's brother or sister seven times (18:21) is quite generous. He envisions a righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees (5:20), who limited forgiveness to three times (Schweizer, 377), and greater than that of the tax collectors and Gentiles (5:46-47; cf. 18:17). Why should there be no limit to forgiving our brothers and sisters (18:22)? The first servant in the parable was unexpectedly (18:26) forgiven by the king a huge debt (ten thousand talents, the highest figure one can think; we could say, billions of dollars), and should in turn have forgiven (18:32-33). Similarly, we have received extraordinary forgiveness from God, and should in turn forgive abundantly (this is, in a nutshell, the interpretation of Jeremias, 210-214). The Christian "community can live on the basis of God's inconceivably great grace--not only can, but must" (Schweizer, 379; see 375-79). We should forgive our brothers and sisters, as God forgave us; God's forgiveness should lead us to want to forgive--that is, to forgive "from our heart" (18:35), without hypocrisy, and thus also without counting, without limitation (18:22). In sum, unlike the servant who was forgiven and did
not forgive, we should forgive our brothers and sisters in order to avoid being condemned as he was (18:34-35).

For most of us, this is the "old" message that this lection expresses and that we have heard many times (see also, e.g., Meyer, 133-34; Gundry, 370-75; Bonnard, 278-79). It appears as one reads a text in an attempt to discern that to which it refers. In the case of a parable it involves reading it as an allegory. Thus, following Matthew's own suggestion in 18:35, we conclude that the king represents God; the first servant, a false disciple; and the other servants, faithful disciples. This reading is well grounded in the text and should not be neglected. Yet, it must be used with caution, because the very emphasis on God's grace as something that we must imitate tends to transform Jesus' teaching into a legalism. It becomes something that we must do, simply because it is God's way and God's will, but also something that we find difficult to do (who can be as merciful as God?!). It thus generates guilt, instead of offering the good news of God's grace. In order to avoid this pitfall, as Schweizer (379) saw, one needs to emphasize that forgiveness should come "from your heart" (18:35); but, the full significance of this phrase only appears through other readings.

Second Reading: The Disastrous Effects of Not Forgiving

Scholarship has shown that by teaching in parables Jesus deeply challenged, indeed, shocked his audience. Through its allegorical interpretation, the first reading hides this challenge. Our second reading focuses on it by considering how the disciples to whom Jesus addresses this teaching in the story of the Gospel are affected by it. This involves paying closer attention to the unfolding of the story of the disciples. The context of the lection, 18:15-35, must, therefore, be taken into account. In the process, one has to examine more closely the plot of the parable, and especially the role of the fellow servants in this plot.

First, note that Peter would have a hard time understanding the parable as an additional answer to his question; the dialogue, 18:21-22, and the parable, 18:23-35, do not seem to fit together. The parable is far from being an example of unlimited forgiveness! The king does forgive, but then withdraws his
forgiveness. This can be interpreted as a sign that Matthew has brought together two unrelated pieces of the tradition about Jesus’ teaching. Then, one might want to study the two passages separately, in an attempt to reconstruct Jesus’ original teaching, as Scott (267-80) does regarding the parable. Yet, for the sake of our congregations, it is better to stay with the text as redacted by Matthew; this the gospel. From this perspective, the lack of continuity suggests that Matthew presents the issue of the limits of forgiveness raised by Peter (18:21) as an interruption of Jesus’ teaching to the disciples about forgiveness (begun in 18:15). Jesus’ brief answer (“seventy times seven,” any number of times, 18:22) dismisses the question of limits as totally irrelevant for the matter at hand, and returns to what he was saying. Thus, the “therefore” (dia touto, 18:23a) which introduces the parable draws the consequence of what Jesus was saying about forgiveness (18:15-20) before being interrupted by Peter.

The phrase, "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to" (18:23a), does not mean that the following story is absolutely identical to the kingdom; in some respects, it is "like" the kingdom, but in other respects it is "unlike" it; indeed, the metaphorical comparison might be primarily negative (Scott, 279).

For first century hearers and the disciples to whom this teaching is addressed, the description of the king, of the size of the debt, and of the punishment (18:23-25) "conjures up the high finances of the empire," the hated practice of "tax farming" (the servant is a tax collector who had bid for collecting taxes over a large region and failed to do so, for unknown reasons; see Scott, 270-71; Jeremias, 210-14), as well as the Gentiles’ cruel punishments of selling debtors and their families as slaves (Scott, 274). Thus, for the readers-disciples, such a cruel Gentile king is an unlikely candidate for representing God. This comparison does not become much more likely when the king shows mercy (18:26-27). Indeed, the forgiving of ten thousand talents to the great tax collectors would be viewed with ambivalence, if not in a negative light. Think, for instance, of the public reaction to the current Savings & Loan bailout (we are
speaking of billions of dollars!). If, as is quite possible, the officers responsible for these huge financial failures are merely threatened of prosecution (18:25) without being actually condemned (18:27; being forgiven their huge debt), what will be (is) the reaction of most taxpayers?! Furthermore, at the end, the abhorred Gentile cruelty reappears as a characteristic of this king: "In anger his lord delivered him to the torturers (RSV: "jailers"), till he should pay all his debt" (18:34). In sum, despite 18:35, the disciples would, at the very least, hesitate to identify such a king with God; God is both like and unlike such a king!

The challenge of the parable for the hearers-disciples appears when one notes that they are led to identify themselves with the fellow servants who are greatly distressed by the attitude of the first servant, and report him to the king (18:31; Scott, 275-76), asking for justice. Would not this be the reaction of average taxpayers if they saw a pardoned S & L officer throwing into the street (or sending to jail) someone who cannot keep up with his or her small mortgage payment? But, by reporting the first servant to the king, the fellow servants bear responsibility for unleashing the king's wrath. "By bringing vengeance on the servant, the fellow servants (and the hearer) have left their own situation in jeopardy. The demand for 'like for like,' for apparent justice, has left them exposed. If a king can take back his forgiveness, who is safe? ... In the end the fellow servants have behaved the same way [the first servant] did; they have failed to forgive and demanded punishment" (Scott, 278). Then it becomes clear that the parable primarily represents what the kingdom is NOT: the refusal to forgive, demanding from God punishment upon the wicked, turns God into a cruel "God" comparable to a Gentile king who, despite generous acts of mercy, remains fundamentally cruel; one cannot count on such a "God's" mercy. God, the God of the Gospel, our "heavenly Father," is NOT like such a king!

This negative parable (a reading well supported by Scott's careful literary analysis) is the conclusion ("Therefore," 18:23) of Jesus' teaching found in 18:15-20. In these verses, the emphasis is on "gaining" back a brother or a sister who has sinned (18:15), spelling out three steps that can be taken toward that
end (18:15-17). In case of failure, it is pointed out that this sinner becomes "as a Gentile and a tax collector" (18:17b)–a direct connection with the parable about the Gentile king and the servant-tax collector. In this context, Peter’s question (18:21) shows that he understood that one should not limit oneself to three attempts (18:15-17) to forgive a sinner. Yet, he still presupposes that one should, at a certain point, give up on the sinner, and treat him or her as a Gentile or a tax collector. Is this not what the church’s authority to "bind" and to "loose" (18:18) involves? Indeed, it does involve the authority to "report" sinners to God ("to bind"), so much so that they will be condemned in heaven, as the fellow servants reported the first servant (the tax collector!) to the king (18:31). But this has disastrous consequences. By considering this sinner as a tax collector, one irremediably condemns him or her to punishment; one turns God into a cruel Gentile king who withdraws his forgiveness in order to punish (18:34); and one exposes oneself to the same fate as the condemned sinner. Such is the warning that this negative parable of the kingdom expresses: "So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive" (18:35), that is, if you condemn sinners by reporting them to God and demand their punishment.

Ideally, in a positive parable of the kingdom which implements Jesus’ teaching of 18:15-20, when the servants were deeply distressed by the sinful attitude of the first servant as they should be (18:31), one of these servants should have gone privately to him to confront him with his fault (18:15); then, if he had not listened, two or three servants could have done it once again together (18:16); and if this had failed, all the servants together should have gone to him (18:17). By repeating this process as long as necessary, there would have been a good chance that the first servant would have seen his error and changed his behavior. Then, instead of losing a fellow servant (lost in the hands of the torturers, 18:34), they would have gained a brother or a sister (18:15). And much more! Indeed, having a brother or a sister is essential to be in good relationship with God, a good God, the heavenly Father who provides the good things you need and ask from him, by con-
contrast with the God of the Gentiles (6:7-8; 7:7-11): "If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven" (18:19). Note the condition: one needs to be at least "two"; one needs to have at least one brother or sister, something which soon becomes impossible if one treats all those who sin as tax-collectors or Gentiles! There is still another "gain" in forgiving: the presence of Jesus, which is promised "where two or three (brothers and sisters) are gathered in [his] name" (18:20).

Why should we forgive an unlimited number of times (18:22)? Because, by not forgiving, we irremediably condemn others (18:17b; 18:31-34), and also because we condemn ourselves to a similar punishment (18:35). By not forgiving, we deprive ourselves of brothers and sisters, and in so doing we deprive ourselves of our heavenly Father, who is ready to provide us with what we ask jointly with brothers and sisters. We deprive ourselves of such a Father, by making out of God, despite his mercy, a strict king of justice, a cruel Gentile king. Furthermore, we deprive ourselves of the presence of Christ with us.

This reading has the advantage of taking seriously into account the warning of 18:35. It has also the advantage of avoiding making the admonition to forgive a legalism. Forgiving is no longer something that we must do in imitation of God's forgiveness. The admonition to forgive is rather a grace in itself; it offers us the possibility to avoid condemning ourselves and indeed to receive rich blessings from the heavenly Father. Furthermore, this reading elucidates a message of the text that is truly good news for people who are economically, culturally, or politically oppressed, i.e., the poor, the homeless, African-Americans and other minorities, and women (Rowland and Corner, 9-33). It does not demand that they deny their experience and their legitimate longing for justice; the true God, the God of the Gospel, is NOT like a cruel Gentile king who rules over his servants at his whim, and thus not like the economically, culturally, or politically powerful persons or institutions that oppress people. The true manifestation of the kingdom is forgiving each other, true solidarity among servants
(the oppressed) who do not report a fellow servant to the king (the powerful), but strive to deal with their conflicts among themselves. Thus the solidarity that is so often found among the poor, among the homeless, among the economically, racially, culturally, or politically oppressed, can be affirmed as manifestations of the kingdom; "theirs is the kingdom."

As with any reading, this one involves a potential pitfall. By focusing on it, one can easily convey that there is no judgment. Of course there is a judgment; we are accountable for not forgiving. Yet condemnation and punishment are not brought about by an "angry" God (18:34); it is rather condemnation and punishment brought upon ourselves by depriving ourselves of the means of blessings: brothers and sisters.

Third Reading: Forgiving From Your Heart

Let us change perspective once again by considering the specific role the lection plays in the overall message, or theme, Matthew seeks to convey to his readers in this part of the Gospel. For this, we need to consider the lection in the context of the thematic unit to which it belongs: 17:22-18:35. By clarifying this theme through a close examination of the points that Matthew underscores as particularly significant (through oppositions), we discover a fundamental teaching concerning the basic conditions that need to be met so as to be in a position to forgive others "from the heart."

Our lection, 18:21-35, and the unit to which it belongs, 17:22-18:35, are parts of a larger section of the Gospel that begins in 16:13 and that involves announcements of the Passion. This section begins in 16:13-23, where Jesus first announces to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and be killed. Peter rejects this as impossible; saying that Jesus, "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16) must be killed is utter nonsense (Patte, 230). By the time of the second Passion prediction, 17:22-23, the disciples have progressed; they no longer view Jesus' death as impossible (Patte, 231-41). Yet, it remains that "they were greatly distressed" (17:23) about it. The exact same phrase is found at a key point of the parable: the fellow servants "were greatly distressed" (18:31). The theme of the unit, 17:22-18:35 begins to appear: it concerns how to pass from
false or inappropriate "great distress" to true or appropriate "great distress." The readers should not be distressed by Jesus' death, as the disciples are in 17:23b; but they should be distressed when they see someone refusing to forgive and mistreating a brother or sister, as the fellow servants are in 18:31 (on this and what follows, see Patte, 244-58).

In sum, the lection 18:21-35 is the conclusion of a unit which seeks to transform the perspective of the disciples, and the readers who identify with them, so that they would be distressed about the right thing (people not forgiving and mistreating others) rather than about Jesus' death. What does this transformation require? In brief, it demands a fundamental change of "heart" (cf. 18:35), a total reversal of perception about what is good and bad. Thus, in the conclusion (18:21-35) of the unit (17:22-18:35), we can expect to find an expression of what should be viewed as truly good and of what this perception entails. To recognize it, we need to understand how the text relates "forgiving" to the Passion; in other words, we need to elucidate the common theme, the thread, that connects "forgiving" and Passion. Let us follow the thread which holds together the diverse scenes and teachings of 17:22-18:35.

The disciples' distress is in response to an announcement of the Passion which describes Jesus' passive submission and self-denial: note that in 17:22-23 (by contrast with 16:21) Jesus, the Son of man is totally passive. He does not initiate anything; things happen to him. This theme is carried forward in 17:24-25a, where Jesus submits himself to the half-shekel tax, even though he and the disciples are not obligated to pay it (17:26a). Jesus further explains why it is good to submit to such a tax: to avoid scandalizing (causing to stumble or fall) others (17:27a). The significance of this statement appears when one recognizes that it applies not merely to the specific case of the Temple tax, but to a series of cases presented in 18:1-35, as is made clear by the repetition of the warning against "scandalizing" and "scandals" (variously translated, "causing to sin," "temptations to sin," or "causing to stumble"; 18:6, 7, 8, 9). In each instance, one can avoid "scandalizing" others by adopting a self-denying attitude. Humbling oneself like a child and not
despising one of these little ones (18:1-14) are forms of self-denial for the sake of others; they involve giving up something that is important for oneself (a hand, an eye, 18:8-9) or at least risking it (risking the ninety-nine sheep to search for the lost one, 18:12-14). In this context, it appears that forgiving others (18:15-35), especially when it is unlimited (18:21-22), is a form of self-denial and of submission to others—being in a good relationship with others despite their sins against us, and thus suffering what they do to us. Self-denial and submission to others, even if it appears to be costly, even if it means to be killed (17:22-23), is presented as good, while efforts at self-preservation at the expense of others (18:28-30) are presented as bad and distressing (18:31-32). Such is the theme of this unit, i.e., the new perception of what is good and bad that Matthew aims at conveying to his readers.

The question is then: How can we be convinced to view as good—as something we will truly want to pursue with all our heart (18:35)—self-denial and submission to others even when these others harm us and hurt us? The issue of forgiveness is a case in point. Why should one truly want (from one's heart) to forgive a brother or a sister? This is first expressed in 18:15-17 in terms of the church discipline which Matthew expects his readers to know (cf. 2 Cor. 13:1-2 and 1 Tim. 5:19-20) and which spells out the steps to reprove sinners in the community: first, a one-to-one reproof; then, according to Deut. 19:15, a reproof with two or three witnesses; and finally, a reproof before the entire community, which, if not heeded, leads to exclusion from the community.

Through his careful presentation of this church discipline, Matthew makes two points. First, its goal is not the exclusion of sinners, but on the contrary their reintegration into the community; it is a matter of "gaining" a brother or a sister (18:15). Second, Matthew avoids emphasizing that it is a "rebuke" and that the sinners should repent, and thus humble themselves (by contrast with Luke 17:3-4); he simply says that sinners might "listen" or not. This shows that, in their attempt to gain brothers and sisters, disciples are at the mercy of sinners; they are dependent on the good will of sinners (as

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children are at the mercy of adults, 18:1-6, and thus humble themselves. To make this point perfectly clear, we can say that Matthew presents the disciples as begging sinners to join them back in the community. Why is this so? In brief, as we noted above (second reading), because the disciples absolutely need brothers and sisters; otherwise, God will not answer their prayers (18:19) and Jesus will not be in the midst of them (18:20). Forgiving people who have sinned against you is not a loss (of honor, of property, etc.), but a gain. It is attempting to gain what one urgently and absolutely needs; brothers and sisters are blessings.

Who, then, would not want to forgive "from one's heart" (18:35)? Who would not want to beg those who hurt us to join us back in the community as brothers and sisters? Who would not want to devote oneself totally to forgiving others, as many times as it takes? Only one who, like Peter (18:21-22), has not understood that forgiving is a gain, a blessing, and not a loss! But, because there are many readers who might be like Peter, Matthew continues with the parable. It reinforces this point, whether it is read as a "negative parable (second reading) or as an allegory (a "positive parable") (first reading).

In the former case, the parable reinforces the preceding point by showing the disastrous effects of not forgiving (as the fellow servants did by unleashing the wrath of the king by reporting the first servant; 18:31).

Then, the point of the parable is: by not forgiving, you not only deprive yourself of a blessing, but you also cause the destruction of someone else (causing that person to fall, "scandalizing" that person; 17:27; 18:6); furthermore, you condemn yourself, you "fasten around your neck a great millstone" (18:6), you bring a curse upon yourself (18:7-9); "so also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you" (18:35a).

When the parable is read as an allegory (first reading), it also reinforces the preceding point, although in a quite different way. The description of the king-God wishing to settle accounts with his servants and confronting one with the seriousness of his debt by ordering his punishment (18:23-25) corresponds in many ways to the disciple going and reproving one who has
sinned against him or her. By his attitude and actions as described in 18:23-27, the king-God shows that he attaches greater value to the ongoing relationship with his servant—a relationship which would have been lost if the servant had been sold (18:25)—than to the satisfaction of seeing his servant punished and making reparation for his deed against him. By contrast, through his attitude toward his fellow servant (18:28-30), the unmerciful servant shows that he holds the opposite view, a wrong view. The king-God acts "out of pity" (18:27); he has compassion; he is moved by the plight of his servant. Such compassion, empathy, presupposes an intimate relationship with the other, and thus this relationship is valued more than a huge amount of money that one has lost because of the other. Forgiveness preserves this relationship or attempts to reestablish it. In 18:27 we have, therefore, the image of a king-God in close relationship with his servants-disciples and thus the image of a tightly bound community composed of king-God and servants-disciples. In this reading, we find the same image in the description of the servants who report the unmerciful servant’s behavior to the king (18:31). That they are "greatly distressed" shows their compassion for the second servant and their disappointment at the lack of compassion of the unmerciful servant; by reporting their distress to the king, they show their close relationship with him. By contrast, by his entire attitude the first servant demonstrates his lack of compassion (18:29-30), and that he is not really part of this tightly bound community.

The bond that unites the servants among themselves and with the king is broken by the unmerciful servant. Thus, forgiveness has failed (cf. 18:17) with the unmerciful servant; he does not want to participate in the relationship that exists among the servants-disciples (who are therefore called "fellow servants") and the king-God. To them he is like a Gentile or a tax collector (18:17); he is excluded, because he has excluded himself (18:33-34). But, and this is the point of the parable in this case, who would want to exclude oneself from this intimate community composed not only of fellow disciples but also of God (18:19) and Jesus (18:20)?
In either one of these interpretations, the parable offers positive reasons for forgiving, that should cause the disciples to want to "forgive from the heart" (18:35), that is, because they really and deeply want to do it. This is not a law that stands above the disciples and that they simply must obey. It is perceiving things from the perspective of the kingdom and, as a consequence, having internalized God's will, because it is clear that forgiving is a good thing to do. In either one of these interpretations, forgiving is at the very center of the good news of the kingdom. It affirms that the community (including God and Jesus), with its intimate relationship and its solidarity built upon compassion and empathy, is what is truly good. Those who believe in the kingdom cannot but want to seek to participate in and maintain this community with all their heart; they will then forgive from their heart (18:35). It is only if we can share such a vision of the community and its solidarity (for which the poor and the oppressed long; Rowland and Corner, 7-33; Cardenal vol. 3, 161-66) that we can receive the proclamation of Christ as crucified as good news (17:22-23). Thus, as the message found through the second reading was, the message elucidated by this third reading is truly good news for the oppressed and the poor.

Proper 20, September 23, 1990
Matthew 20:1-16

According to the way it is read, the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16), another parable of the kingdom, offers a positive message, an exhortation, or a warning. It affirms that the good news of the kingdom is the good news of God's grace and goodness. It exhorts us to avoid denying our solidarity with others by viewing ourselves as superior to them, since in the kingdom every one has equal status. It warns us that as long as we are not "last," we will be angry with God, turn against other members of the kingdom, and thus exclude ourselves from the kingdom.

First Reading: The Free Gift of Grace

When one seeks to understand the story by focusing one's attention upon that to which the parable refers, one finds that
its first verses present a concrete social situation. Yet, as this
description becomes more and more unrealistic, one is quickly
led to conclude that it refers to something else, namely the
kingdom (20:1); the concrete situation fades into the back­
ground.

The opening verses (20:1-2) paint a realistic picture of the
hiring of laborers by the owner of a vineyard. The owner and
the laborers agree on the wage, one denarius, which seems to
have been a normal wage for a day of work. The next hiring
(20:3-4) is still realistic. Since these laborers will begin late, it
is appropriate that the owner simply promises to give them
"whatever is right"; they are no longer in a position to request
a full day's wage (a denarius). But this realism becomes more
and more tenuous as other laborers are hired at the sixth, the
ninth (20:5), and finally at the eleventh hour (20:6-7); one has
to presuppose that there is an urgent need of laborers in the
vineyard, for instance, because it is harvest-time. The realism
of the last hiring is even more stretched by the dialogue. After
wondering, "Why do you stand here idle all day?" (20:6), the
owner does not dispute their explanation, "no one has hired us,"
(20:7). How could this be, since the owner came to the
marketplace all day long in search of laborers? One has to
imagine that the owner somehow missed them. As they are
hired despite the late hour, there is no mention of wages, as is
natural; they cannot expect a real wage. Whatever the owner
will give them will be generous.

In the second part, when wages are paid, what was left of the
realism breaks down. To begin with, the first hired laborers
should be paid first, but the owner insists on the reverse order
(20:8). This is no longer the description of a common situation;
this is a story which aims at showing the negative reaction of
the first-hired laborers. It underscores the owner's generosity
toward the last laborers who unexpectedly receive a denarius,
a full day's wage (20:9). The first laborers naturally expect to
receive more from such a generous employer (20:10); but their
realistic expectation is shattered when they receive the same
thing. They grumble at their employer; for them, the owner is
unfair, unjust. For an employer, this is not a realistic way of
dealing with employees. But, the owner replies to one of them that he is just, since he gave him what they had agreed upon and dismisses him (20:13-14a).

The fact that this second part of the story is clearly not the realistic description of a typical interaction between employer and employees (if one does not want labor unrest, one needs to be consistent, and be generous toward all the laborers!) shows that this story refers to something else. It obviously refers to the kingdom (20:1), and thus to God’s (or Jesus’, as "God with us") interaction with people. Thus, the concluding words of the owner allude to the goodness of God: "Do you begrudge my generosity?" or literally, "is your eye bad because I am good?" (20:15). In sum, the parable is an expression of the generosity of God toward "the last" (20:14b): "So the last will be first, and the first last" (20:16).

From the context one recognizes that "the first" hired laborers represent the Pharisees or, more generally, the Jews, as was also the case in the actual ministry of Jesus according to historical reconstructions (see Dodd, 95; Jeremias, 38, 139; Via, 149). Such is the conclusion we can draw by noting that the preceding verses involve a controversy with the Pharisees (19:3-9), the inconclusive dialogue with the rich young man who has observed all the commandments (19:16-22), and the mention that the disciples will judge the twelve tribes of Israel (19:28). The contractual agreement (20:2) can be viewed as corresponding to the giving of the covenant; the wage settlement as the judgment (20:8 designates the "owner" by the term krios, a title used by Matthew for God or Jesus as judge), etc. This parable was told by Jesus against the Pharisees and the Jews for grumbling against his ministry as a manifestation of God’s goodness toward the outcasts, the poor, the sinners and tax collectors (who remained "idle all day," 20:6, instead of working for God), and other dubious people who had become disciples. Even though these last laborers do not merit any true wage, God’s generosity and goodness is such that they will receive a full-wage, the same blessing as the one promised to Israel, the first laborers. In sum, the parable represents the free gift of grace (the gift of a denarius to the last laborers), as is
emphasized in one way or another by the above mentioned commentators; this is the good news of the kingdom.

Such a message concerning the free gift of grace is indeed an important teaching of the parable. Yet, one has to be careful to note that it does not deny the value of "works." It is true that the grace of God (the denarius given to the last laborers) is not a reward for human works. Yet, those who have worked all day long receive the same thing, as a just wage, as a reward for their work. Consequently, we have to avoid making an anti-Jewish message out of this teaching. This would not only be deplorable (latent anti-Judaism and even anti-Semitism are too often conveyed along with the Christian message) but would also go against the text. Note that even if the last laborers are identified as Pharisees or Jews, these do receive the same wage, a denarius, as the last laborers, and it is not taken away from them even after they grumble. Thus, at the very least, the Jews (first laborers) have the same blessing as the disciples (last laborers). According to this reading, by the end of the story, the first laborers are not condemned; they are sent where they and all the other laborers go with their denarius; they are sent home. In addition, we should note that, in the immediate context in Matthew (19:27-30), the first laborers also represent the first disciples (first to follow Jesus by abandoning everything); the last laborers represent newcomers in the church, the "little ones," the Gentiles in Matthew's time (Donahue, 83-85; Jeremias, 37-38; Via, 149; Meier, 141; Schottroff, 144). Thus, if one chooses this first reading, one should avoid conveying anti-Judaism.

Second Reading: Equal Status For All In The Kingdom

When the interpretation is focused upon the unfolding of the story, the message of the parable is quite different. The first reading, by emphasizing the free gift of grace to the last laborers and the goodness of the employer, does not take into account that the plot emphasizes the interaction between the employer and the first laborers (Via, 149-54; Scott, 289-98). Furthermore, by examining the unfolding of the story and the situations which make this unfolding possible (following Schot-
troff, 129-47), it appears that the relationship between first and last laborers also plays an important part in the plot.

The fact that the owner goes in person to look for laborers (20:1)—rather than sending a steward, even though he has one (20:8)—shows that he is not a great landowner, but rather a small owner directly involved in his affairs. The fact that he hires laborers all day long can be viewed as an expression of his concern for the vineyard; he is in urgent need of laborers, for instance, because it is harvest-time (Schottroff, 141; Scott, 296). The hiring procedure in 20:2 makes it clear that this is the hiring of people for a single day of work. An oral contract is passed between the owner and the first laborers for a wage of one denarius, apparently a normal wage. Yet, note that the owner does not impose the amount on the laborers; he "agrees" (symphôneíasas) with them about the wage. This once again suggests that the owner is not a great landowner who dictates his terms to other people, but rather a small owner who is eager to find laborers for his vineyard. Thus, Scott can say, "the stress is not on master-slave but on patron-client" relationship (Scott, 289); laborers are treated as people with whom one makes a deal. But, simultaneously, the successive hirings paint a dismal economic and social picture of unemployment (people standing idle, because they have not been hired; 20:3-7). This situation is all the more dismal in that these people are without permanent employment and depend for their subsistence on being hired each day for temporary jobs. The situation of these daily laborers is even worse than that of slaves, who could at least depend upon their owners for their subsistence (Schottroff, 130-35). Thus, the laborers hired from the third to the nine hour eagerly accept employment without contractual agreement, on the vague promise, "Whatever is right I will give you" (20:4), or even without any promise in the case of the last laborers (20:7).

The payment of wages in the evening is regarded as a rule for such day laborers (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14-15), because they have immediate need of it; day laborers and their families lived from hand to mouth (Schottroff, 131, 134). Indeed, the one-denarius wage barely allowed them to survive (Schottroff, 134);
"of itself the wage is not generous" (Scott, 290-91). The owner's "generosity" appears when he gives one denarius to the last laborers (20:9). But, the above comments make clear that the action of the owner is more charitable than generous; this is "what is right" (20:4), "just," in a situation in which less than a denarius would condemn laborers and their families to starve. Indeed, for hearers aware of the concrete situation depicted by the parable, the giving of one denarius to the last laborers would NOT have appeared as exceptional generosity, but as justice. This is what Laureano (one of the Solentiname campesinos) recognized right away by commenting: "Everybody has almost the same needs; they have to earn the same" (Cardenal, vol. 3, 181).

The first laborers’ expectation to receive more (20:10) is understandable; who would not desire to receive a better wage! But their expectation already shows that they did not understand the owner’s action; they do not think in terms of the needs of the last hired laborers; they dissociate themselves from them. They grumble against the owner (20:11). Yet note how they do this: by attacking the last-hired laborers (20:12). As Schottroff (137) says:

They turn their desire for a just wage into a weapon against others. They are envious (20:15); they begrudge the short-shift laborers their denarius; they would be satisfied if the short-shift laborers were to receive significantly less than they themselves received. What is being criticized here is... behavior that is uncompassionate and lacking in solidarity.

In this light, the message of the parable does include that God is kind and merciful; indeed, he is not an aloof and arrogant powerful landowner whose only concern is to receive benefits from his properties, but a small owner who is very much involved in the work of his vineyard, who needs laborers, who treats them as persons, and who, with compassion, takes into consideration, and provides for, their basic needs. But the main message is the call to solidarity among laborers (disciples, church members, and Jews). In the kingdom, all the laborers are equal; they have equal status ("you have made them equal to us," 20:12). This means that, positively, they should adopt
God's merciful attitude toward their fellow human beings. Negatively, they should not turn their own desire for greater rewards—or greater status in the community—into a weapon against their brothers and sisters, i.e., into an occasion of rejecting them and depriving them of what they need (as the disciples attempted to do by preventing children to come to Jesus, 19:13-14). Indeed, they should not expect greater status than the children, the "little ones" (18:5-6), the newcomers in the church, or people who have not worked much in the church. As such, the parable foreshadows Jesus' rebuke of the sons of Zebedee and their mother for asking to be "first" (20:20-23). But note that in all these cases, the people who are rebuked for refusing solidarity and equal status with their brothers and sisters are not rejected from the community. The issue is: Who should be considered "first" and "last" in the community, in the kingdom? But this is an inappropriate question: all the brothers and sisters in the community have equal status. Thus, even if one is contributing more to the church and its leadership, one should not claim a special status, or ask for more respect: because "you are all brothers and sisters," "you are not to be called rabbi... or father... Neither be called masters... Whoever exalts oneself will be humbled, and whoever humbles oneself will be exalted" (23:8-12). At the level of Jesus' ministry, this rebuke is addressed to the Pharisees and other Jews (as in the preceding reading; cf. 19:3-9; 19:16-23), but then it becomes clear that this does not exclude them from the kingdom. On the contrary, it assumes that they are part of it; it is a "friendly courting" asking the Pharisees to accept other people as full participants in the kingdom. As Schottroff concludes:

The parable is not an attack against the Pharisees but an effort to bring them to the point of joining the disciples of Jesus and accepting solidarity with the poor, the tax collectors, and sinners. The point of entry at which this approach to the Pharisees is made is their conception of God as merciful. (p. 146)

In sum, according to this second reading, the message of the parable is a gentle admonition (a "friendly courting"; Schottroff, 146): since we believe that God is merciful, we should not view
ourselves as superior to others, but acknowledge that all of us have equal status in the kingdom. Solidarity with the other laborers should cause us to rejoice that every one receives the same blessing: the blessing they need.

Third Reading: The Last Will Be First And The First Last

Our third reading allows us to address questions ignored by the preceding readings. Is the message that "God is merciful" truly good news? For the first laborers, it was not! Furthermore, the preceding readings fail to take into account the most common reactions of readers and hearers--including our congregations: as they read the parable, they most often share the first laborers' expectation that they will receive more than the last laborers (Scott, 295); and consequently, they have the "feeling that the first-hired laborers have somehow been cheated" (Scott, 289). It is this feeling and the (wrong) view of human relationship that this parable challenges. But, how can we avoid having such reactions? How can we avoid turning into a weapon against others our desire for rewards and status that reflect our faithfulness to the service of God?

Our third reading raises these questions by considering the specific role the lection (20:1-16) plays in the overall message, or theme, Matthew seeks to convey to his readers in this part of the Gospel, and especially in the thematic unit to which it belongs: 19:1--20:16. By clarifying this theme through a close examination of the points that Matthew underscores as particularly significant (by setting up oppositions; see Patte, 261-78), we discover a fundamental teaching concerning the basic conditions that need to be met in order to be in a position to acknowledge God's goodness and the equal status of all the participants in the kingdom.

The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (20:1-16) concludes a thematic unit (19:1--20:16). This unit is closely related to the preceding one (17:21--18:35); after the presentation of the unmerciful servant (who, through his attitude, 18:28-30, shows that he has a "hard heart") and the admonition to "forgive from the heart" (18:35), the new unit opens with a pericope (19:3-9) that underscores "hardness of heart" (19:7). "Hardness of heart" corresponds to having "a bad eye" in the parable ("Is
your eye bad because I am good?" 20:15). The problem posed by having a hard heart or a bad eye is the main theme of 19:1--20:16.

The Pharisees have a hard heart, because they fail to recognize that marriage is a good gift from God (19:3-9; Patte, 263-66); through their words (19:10) and their actions (19:13), the disciples demonstrate that they have hard hearts (Patte, 266-68), as the young rich man does by not wanting to give his wealth to the poor (19:16-22; Patte, 268-72), and as the first laborers also do by grumbling because the other laborers have received as much as they did (20:11-12). Thus, it appears that "hard heart" and "bad eye" are equivalent metaphors for what prevents people from perceiving what is truly good according to God's revelation and thus for what prevents people from making God's will their own will. The parable, the conclusion of this unit, shows the seriousness of this problem, also expressed by the disciples' exclamation: "Who then can be saved?" (19:25).

By contrasting the owner's action of hiring laborers (20:1-7) to the fact, according to the last laborers' statement, that no one hired them (20:7), the text casts the hiring of the first laborers in a peculiar light. Of course, by hiring the laborers the owner makes a contractual agreement with them (20:2). This contract shows that the owner has a need, and that the laborers provide what he needs; the wages are the acknowledgment that they render such a service to the owner. Yet, as the case of the last laborers reveals, the hiring process also meets urgent needs of "idle" people (20:3, 6), i.e., people in need of work; being hired by the owner is a most desirable situation. In sum, the hiring process is beneficial to both the owner and the laborers. The question is: What is the primary motivation of the repeated hirings (calls to serve God)? The first hirings seem to be motivated by the owner's need for laborers in his vineyard. But the last hirings, especially at the eleventh hour, seem to be motivated by the owner's concern for the needs of the laborers. Does this mean that this is also true of the first hirings?15

The beginning of the second scene (20:8-10) and the contrast it establishes between what the last laborers receive (one
denarius) and what the first laborers expect to receive (more than one denarius), 20:8-10, confirm that the owner did not hire people merely because he needed their work. He hired them mainly because they needed to have work and wages, as the case of the last laborers shows. The owner is generous. Being hired is not merely entering a contractual agreement. It is also receiving a gift from the owner, the twofold gift of work in the vineyard and of wages. If the wages were proportional to the amount of work, as the first laborers thought, then the laborers and their service would merely be viewed as being needed by the owner. But this is the wrong perspective. While laborers are givers of services for which they are compensated, they are simultaneously and primarily receivers of a twofold gift, work and wages.

This point parallels those made by 19:3-9 (the beginning of the thematic unit), where Jesus emphasized that people should view themselves as receivers of the good gift of marriage. This parallelism helps clarify both passages. The Pharisees' eagerness to know what is "lawful" (19:3), which leads them to see commandments even where there is no commandment (they confuse a permission with a commandment, 19:7-9), shows that they conceive of themselves exclusively as laborers in a contractual agreement (20:1-2, 10) with God, or better, as servants of God in the sense of people who provide a service needed by God. In this light, the first part of the owner's rebuke ("Did you not agree with me for a denarius?" 20:13) shows that their expectation of receiving more than a denarius is incorrect, even from their own perspective (Patte, 276; Crossan, 114). Precisely because they view work in the vineyard exclusively as a service for the benefit of the owner, they should view their being hired as a contract for services and appropriate wages; they should expect to receive what was agreed upon in the contract. They cannot accuse him of injustice (20:13a).

Then, the essential question is: Why are the first laborers angry? The answer is provided by the concluding rhetorical question: "Or is your eye bad because I am good?" (20:15b, literal translation). In brief, they cannot accept that the owner is good. Having a "bad eye" (cf. 6:23) is being totally unable to make a
correct distinction between what is good and bad (cf. 6:22-7:12; Patte, 90-98). Because the first laborers have a bad eye, they are unable to conceive that the owner’s action vis-à-vis the last laborers was a gift, an act of generosity; consequently, they construe it as an injustice. Furthermore, they are unable to understand that the owner considered them as his "friends" or "companions" ("Friend, I am doing you no wrong," 20:13). Therefore, they cannot imagine that the contract for their services in the vineyard (20:1-2) was also a gift from the owner, as marriage is a good gift from God (19:3-9), as the law (contract) is a good gift from God and demonstrates the goodness of God (cf. 19:3-9; 19:16-22). As long as one does not have a change of "eye" or "heart" through the recognition and acceptance of God’s fundamental goodness, the first laborers cannot but be angry with God. They are alienated from God. There is no hope for salvation (19:25).

Usually, one is in a position to resolve a problem by knowing its origin. If we knew the origin of a "bad eye" (or "hard heart"), would we not discover how to avoid the first laborers' attitude and acknowledge the goodness of God? Unfortunately not. It is a "Catch 22" situation! According to 20:15b, the first laborers have a bad eye because the owner is good! It is God’s goodness, God’s gifts, that cause people to have a bad eye or hard heart. God’s goodness toward the last laborers causes the first laborers to deny God’s goodness; to grumble against God; to perceive God as unfair, unjust. Why? Because these first laborers have been hired early. Their hiring (their call) was a demonstration of God’s goodness, a gift from God. But, unlike the last-hired (20:7), they receive this gift before being in a desperate situation. Indeed, their early hiring is even a greater gift than the hiring of the last laborers; they are spared the anxiety of being confronted with the possibility of not finding a job for the day and of having to go hungry at least until the next day! But, precisely because they are privileged by benefiting from God’s goodness early, the first laborers perceived their hiring as a mere contract. From their perspective, by accepting to be hired and by fulfilling their part of the contract, they were doing a favor to the owner who was in urgent need of their service; the
owner was not doing them any favor. But, as long as one strives
to serve God without recognizing that being in God's service is
a gift, one can only be angry with God and be alienated from
God, and one can only be angry against the last laborers. Thus,
the greater goodness of God toward them is the cause of their
bad eye and hard heart, i.e., the cause of their inability to
perceive God's goodness.

How can one truly acknowledge and accept God's goodness
(20:15)? How can one be saved (19:25)? Jesus answers: "With
God all things are possible" (19:26b). But, what does this mean?
According to Matthew (Mark 10:23-31 is more ambiguous;
Schottroff, 140-41), Peter provides a correct interpretation by
suggesting that this is what happened to the disciples when they "left everything" to follow Jesus (19:27; cf. 19:28-30). This
is not their doing; this is what God made possible. Similarly, in
its concluding verse, the text provides an answer to the ques­
tion raised by 20:15: How can one truly acknowledge and accept
God's goodness? "The last will be first and the first will be last"
(20:16). The formulation of this saying is no longer judgmental
by contrast with its earlier formulation in 19:30. It begins,"The
last will be first" (instead of "The first will be last"). There is
hope for the "last." In order to be saved, in order to acknowledge
God's goodness toward oneself, in order to rejoice because of
God's goodness toward others, one needs to be "last." Even if
one is "first," one has to become "last," and then one "will be
first." This means that one has to make oneself "last," by becom­
ing a servant or slave of others, as is expressed in the following
passage: "Whoever would be great among you must be your
servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your
slave" (20:26-27). Yet, it also means being like the disciples who,
because God made it possible, "left everything" (19:27), that is,
who abandoned all that made them "first laborers," namely, all
the good gifts that God had formerly given them (such as
houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, lands; 19:29)
and provided security for them (cf. 8:18-22; 10:9-10; Patte,
118-20; 146-47). It means becoming like children (18:3-4), "for
to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (19:14). In brief, it
means becoming dependent and vulnerable. The last hired
laborers, vulnerable due to their dire situation, cannot but recognize their being hired for what it is: a manifestation of the owner's goodness, for which they are grateful. Similarly, because they are totally dependent on others, children have to count on the goodness of others and of God. Those who are like children have left everything for Jesus' sake (19:29). Without home and family, without possessions, they must count on the goodness of God. Such people can recognize God's gifts for what they are. Consequently they are not alienated from God. Theirs is the kingdom.

Concluding Remarks

For each of these two lections, I provided three of the several possible readings, attempting to show briefly that they are equally well grounded in the text. In order to recognize the coherence of these various readings, it is helpful to have a methodology that clarifies why any text has several coherent dimensions that can be the basis of different consistent interpretations (as I propose elsewhere). But one can simply do as I did in this essay: closely examine a diversity of existing critical exegeses without attempting to reconcile them, but with the awareness that they present different dimensions of the text. Thus, one discovers several (three in the study above) teachings, which are so different that a given sermon must focus on one or the other. Thus, one has the freedom to make a choice. Now that one is aware that the text is a treasure out of which one can bring quite diverse coherent teachings (13:52), one is in a position to consider closely the situation of those to whom one speaks: What do they need to hear?

Notes

1. All the references in this essay are to the Gospel according to Matthew, unless otherwise noted.
2. Our situation as readers-interpreters of a text is similar to our situation when confronted with the black and white picture used in psychological tests, in which one perceives two faces looking at each other when focusing on the black features and a vase when focusing on the white features. When we see one of the two images, it is impossible to see the other as long as we do not switch perspectives, something which is relatively easy to do in the case of this
specific picture, but is more difficult in order such tests, especially when they involve more than two images, as is the case with texts as written down discourses.


4. The understanding of the teaching of the text varies if one begins the reading by focusing one's attention on "what the text refers to" (first reading, a primary concern of historical readings), on "how the argument or story unfolds" (second reading, a primary concern of literary readings), or on the "religious vision of human experience," that is, "the themes and convictions expressed by the figurative organization of the text" (third reading, a primary concern of structural readings).

5. Yet Schweizer admits that he says so on weak ground; he refers to a teaching that emphasizes how many times God forgives. Many scholars (including Bultmann and Braun; see Bonnard, 276-77) have pointed out that forgiveness of brothers and sisters is not unknown in Judaism and not necessarily fundamentally different. To avoid conveying anti-Judaism, it is therefore important to refer to tax collectors and Gentiles as well.

6. Studying the fragments of the teaching of the historical Jesus would involve dropping several verses from the lection, including verses that are especially meaningful for the Christian community (18:21-22, as well as 18:23a and 35). Studying the text as redacted by Matthew does not prevent us from benefiting from Scott's work, which helps us perceive the challenge the parable represents for the disciples and Peter.

7. In 18:21 Peter comes back to the issue raised in 18:15, but makes the sin a personal offense against himself, betraying in this way his misunderstanding. Note that, in this reading, we have to take the short version of 18:15, "brother [or sister] who sinned," as the original text. In 18:15, certain manuscripts have "if your brother [or sister] sinned against you" [so RSV], while other very good manuscripts do not have the last two words. Our second reading suggests that the shorter text ("sinned" in general, rather than specifically "against you") is preferable. But the longer text might be preferable in the other readings.

8. Cardenal, vol. 3, 161-66. The Solentiname campesinos do not perceive the king as a cruel Gentile king, but identify him with the merciful God of the poor, following the allegorical reading suggested by the Cardenal in his opening comments. Yet, they nevertheless see the first servant as an exploiter. Thus, Felipe says:

> Jesus gives the example of a rich person because he wants to give the example for an exploiter. Everything the rich have got they've stolen from us, because all their riches have been got with our labor; and now all their injustices are forgiven them, but they don't forgive us; they throw us into jail when we owe them a bit... Who knows if we have that capacity to forgive each other, or if we're like that rich person, like that exploiter."

(Cardenal, vol. 3, 165-66)
9. Yet, let us not idealize the poor. The campesino Alejandro comments:

Let's not concentrate just on seeing evil exploiters. We need to
practise these things a lot. Hatred in our community... We the
poor must forgive each other, too. (Cardenal, vol. 3, 166)

10. This positive view of the fellow servants' distress is not in contradiction
with the preceding reading; what is wrong according to the second reading is
the fact that they reported the first servant to the king. Thus, this comment is
appropriate for both the first and second reading of the parable.

11. Actually, 18:15-17 presupposes that, in the original confrontation, the
disciple expresses the consequences of the sin: that the sinner will be like a
Gentile and a tax collector to the disciple, a situation comparable to the servant
losing his status as servant by being sold.

12. That have certainly been added to the parable by Matthew, as the
majority of exegetes argue (Scott, 284-87).

13. Pliny the Younger, a landowner of this type, writes: I have just been
getting in the vintage—a slender one this year, although more plentiful than I
had expected—provided I may speak of getting in the vintage when I have simply
picked a grape here and there, glanced into the press, tasted the must of the
vat, and surprised my town servants who are now supervising the rural workers
and have left me to my secretaries and readers. (Pliny the Younger, Epistulae
IX,20,2, quoted in Schottroff, 130)

14. This thematic unit (19:1-20:16) is itself the second part of the "explanation"
of the second Passion prediction (17:22-23). The link with the Passion is
marked in 19:1-2, which stipulates that Jesus enters Judea. The third Passion
prediction, 20:117-19, immediately follows our text and begins a new thematic
unit.

15. This is comparable to the relationship between customers (who, like the
owner, seek a service) and a business (or government office). Often, business
people consider that they do their customers a favor by providing their service;
thus, customers have to wait patiently to be served. This is the view of the first
hired laborers. Yet, a business I recently visited expressed the view of the
parable by posting for the sake of its employees: "We are not doing a favor for
our customers by serving them; they do us a favor by requesting our services."

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For the past quarter-century, theology has been nothing if not multiform. Among the available options for theology's immediate future, two seem especially promising: that of Thomas C. Oden, and Schubert M. Ogden's foray into post-liberal theology, seen in *Faith & Freedom*. Oden has of late plumbed the neo-classical vein of the backward glance to church tradition and ecumenical councils. Deliberately—even kenotically—unoriginal, Oden steps out of the way so that the ancient witness will bear post-modern fruit. His is a future with a past.

While liberation theology may seem firmly entrenched, Ogden wishes to move "toward a theology of liberation," because the liberation landscape is today hopelessly mottled and confused. Feminist, Third-World, African and Native American, Latin American—today's liberation theology is divisive and even intramurally nasty.

In good United Methodist fashion (although he quotes Luther often and Wesley never), Ogden's arguments rest on at least five interdependent pillars: Jesus Christ as primal sacrament, faith, freedom, redemption, emancipation. Displaying minimal concern for human fallenness and the tragedy of life, Ogden's call to existence is one both in freedom and for freedom. Negatively, this is "freedom from all things" and positively it is "freedom for all things."

Wherever freedom abounds, there is Jesus Christ. Endorsing Karl Rahner's teaching of the "anonymous Christian," all who travel "the road of self-giving through love" are responding to Jesus Christ's "decisive re-presentation of freedom." Jesus is the primal sacrament and the Church the sacramental expression of Christ's salvation given to the world.

The distinction most likely to be noted and discussed by readers of *Faith & Freedom* is Ogden's telling one between redemption and emancipation. Like faith and freedom, redemption and emancipation are distinguishable but finally
inseparable, two realities converging into one. Utilizing the process metaphysics we have come to expect from Ogden, redemption is God's own self-actualization, which invites each being toward its own fulfillment and culmination. Working toward redemption means accepting the other person as well as acting toward him or her based on such acceptance. Paul Tillich's renowned "accept your acceptance" definition of God's grace echoes down these pages, although one hopes for Ogden's explicit affirmation of grace, a hope to be disappointed.

Perhaps grace is in abeyance because of Ogden's belief that redemption is finally God's singular work. Emancipation, which completes the entire gestalt of salvation, is also God's work, but it cannot be really undertaken without human co-operation, as Ogden quotes Augustine: "he that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves." It is, however, clearly not a work among equals, for God's duty and enactment areunsurpassable. Being the Christ of God, Jesus both gives God's love and demands that we love God and others.

Unlike the death-of-God theology that marked the beginning of theology's current adversarial profile, liberation theology is not a fad. The appearance ten years later of this new and enlarged edition of Faith & Freedom says as much. Yet the splintered character of much liberation theology, contrapuntal and strident, surely justifies Ogden's writing of theologies of liberation and urging us toward a theology of liberation. The spatial inclination of "toward" means that Ogden's prescription for theology's future includes process metaphysics wedded to the ethical passion of political theology. A theologian who can work in two such seemingly disparate media as process and liberation bodes well for any theological future. And surely Schubert Ogden would own the poet's covenant to "appoint others where I shall fail."

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