The Apostolic Character of Ordained Ministry
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The Authority of Our Ambivalence: Mission and Priestly Ministry
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Synergy Toward Life: A Paradigm for Liberative Christian Work with the Bible
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Corporate Spirituality: A New Opportunity for Revitalizing United Methodism
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Worship with the Small Congregation
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Voicing the Cry of the Outsider: The Preacher’s Task in Epiphany
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Introduction

If you want to explain Christian ministry so that anyone, even a child, can understand it, try this: describe the physical details of your work in great detail. Describe your desk and the pictures on the walls; the weight and color of your vestments; how and where you write your sermon or prepare for classes or committee meetings (pen and paper or computer? with early morning sun, or late at night?); imagine for yourself the light and acoustics of the church; describe your visitors, and where you go to visit others. Just note what is there, reserving judgment.

The paradox is that attention to the physical environment of your ministry—simply noticing what is there—can convey the delight and agony of your work as a whole. And the delight and agony of your work opens into the substance and character of Christian ministry. It begins in our contact with what is outside ourselves. In this respect, peace, salvation, hope, love, injustice, evil, and oppression, all have their beginnings in your perception of the warmth of your bed in the early morning, and the phone call that makes you leave it.

The writers in this issue share one essential trait: they have noticed the significant detail in an image, a story, or an idea that leads to a full picture of Christian ministry. Robert Cummings Neville writes powerfully about the seriousness of the call to ordained ministry. This seriousness is our inheritance from the apostles, particularly Paul, whose life was on track until "God knocked him off his horse." Paul then lost possession of his own life's work. Neville defines apostolic ministry as "a series of episodes in God's work...fulfilled in the merciful supplements of grace in creation."

Kathleen Greider noticed her own apprehension about the priestly aspects of Christian ministry. This became the fulcrum for her observations about the presence of women in the church. The consecrated aspect of ministry means a dual
separation: we are set apart by our love for God, and we are set apart from God by what Greider calls "the gap between our dreams and our deeds." In her stories, she illustrates the reality of women as priests, simultaneously set apart and "vaulted into intimacy."

Creative interaction with the Scriptures in churches and other places of Christian ministry is frequently the exception, not the rule these days. When it happens, however, you never forget it. David Carr calls this interaction with the biblical text synergy, and he finds strong examples of it in the work of base communities and in feminist exegesis. To bring synergy with the Bible into mainline American congregations, Carr suggests that we worry far less about biblical history and concentrate on where we need to go theologically in the future.

Paul Jones's article on corporate spirituality shows the unity between detail and purpose beautifully. On one level, it is the record of a series of remarkable retreats whose goal was to foster harmony in the Board of Ordained Ministry at his Annual Conference. As such you will see time being measured out by minutes and hours. But the rhythm of these events, and the use to which this careful reporting is put, is one of faith, and hope, and constant ministry to the world.

We go to a specific setting of Christian ministry in Larry Wagley's article on his own research on worship in the small congregation. True to his statement that smaller congregations are more intimate, Wagley has included the voices of characters who are thriving in these settings. I particularly treasure the picture of Elsie unplugging the coffee pot just before worship begins at one small parish. Here, even the slightest, most familiar act is drawn into the celebration as a whole.

Finally, Richard Ward has offered us a portraits of some of his most memorable characters--both from his life, and current fiction--in connection with the story of Blind Bartimaeus in Epiphany. These images, and the detail it takes to create them, are meant to inspire the preacher to investigate his or her surroundings for characters and stories of outsiders who remind us of our own identity.
The Apostolic Character of Ordained Ministry

Robert Cummings Neville

IN THE RECORDS that survive of the early church, Saint Paul was the first Christian to write about ministry. His comments are sprinkled throughout his letters, and we have third-person reflections on Paul's own ministry from Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, however, is almost wholly devoted to the subject of ministry in all its facets: with Christian leadership of the sort we have come to identify with ordained ministry, with Christian practice of the sort we identify with congregational life, with the several senses of ministry and service required of both ordained clergy and congregational members, with other kinds of leadership and the exercise of talents within the church, and even with Christian followership—that is, with how to respond to different kinds of leadership so as to grow in the Christian life that Paul described in the thirteenth chapter as love.

The description of ministry as apostolic, of course, comes from chapter fifteen, where Paul described the nature of his own ministry. Paul referred to resurrection appearances of Jesus to the apostles and finally to himself, Paul, the least of the apostles because he had persecuted the church, one untimely born. Christ's appearance was not just to confirm God's victory over death, or to set aside people's doubts, points Paul

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did make in other contexts. In this crucial instance Christ's appearance rather was a call to ministry, and it was the ministry of Paul, not any previous comradery with disciples of Jesus, that made him an apostle.

Except in one respect, by "apostolic ministry" I do not mean the laying on of hands, or any of the other trappings of ritual continuity with the students of Jesus, concerns that are peculiar only to certain Christian communions, not to United Methodists. By apostolic ministry I mean the kind of ministry to which Paul was called and that we associate with ordination, a ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order. The one respect in which I do mean to urge a continuity with the first apostles is the seriousness of the calling. We have sometimes succumbed to the temptation to view ordained ministry as a career option, as if it had to do mainly with the life chances of persons. It has rather to do with the need of God to find vehicles to effect the redemption of the world. Ordained ministry is not the only needed vehicle, to be sure. But it is as essential today as in the first century. If we do not find enough apostolic ministers, the gospel will only be repeated, not proclaimed; churches will be Christian by historical designation, not by effective spirit; the saving grace will not be carried to those who hunger for it but will be left with those trained to domesticate it; and God will find the Christian church less and less helpful for the work of redemption. As Kierkegaard so effectively pointed out, the first generation of Christians has no advantage over us in more direct knowledge of God, nor do we have an advantage in resting on their apostolic laurels. Our work is the same as that of the first generation, with more parallels of circumstance than differences.

Call, Not Career

We should be clear about the source of apostolic ministry. It is a call from God, not a job preference. Saul of Tarsus was a clever young rabbinic student, something of a smartass regarding his colleagues (a trait not wholly absent from his subsequent letters). Surely, much of his zeal in persecuting
Christians was aimed to win approval as someone special within his own community. And he probably participated ambitiously in the Geist of his time for reforming Judaism, a movement that did invent the institutions of diaspora rabbinic Judaism falling into place after the destruction of the Temple. Saul probably envisioned for himself a distinguished career as founder of a rabbinic school that embodied Judaism’s uniqueness and purity within the Roman world. Then God knocked him off his horse. As the Lord devastated Isaiah by the vision in the temple, seared his lips for the cleansing of his sins, and sent him forth with the divine word, the risen Christ terrorized Saul with his glory, blinded him to give him sight, humbled him under the care of simple Christians, routed his ambitions in the wilderness, schooled him under his apostolic enemies, and sent him forth, Paul, the apostolic minister to the world. The change from Saul to Paul did not mark a career change. It marked a person change. Saul had a career. Paul was God’s person. We must allow neither our institutional need to recruit ministers nor the fact few people have such singular encounters with God to blind us to the cosmic peculiarity of the call to ordained ministry. Although it might look like a career, and it does have a career’s shape with training, credentialing, institutional roles, public rewards and liabilities, and a pension plan, it is not really a career. An apostolic minister is a series of episodes in God’s work. Only accidentally is that work related to the contours of the minister’s life. The beginnings and endings are in God’s life, not in the minister’s. The meaning of that work is obscure and partial for the individual, immeasurable save in God’s providence. Ministers look for success and so often see failure; but the scale of evidence is God’s, not the apostle’s. The apostle lives in hope for God’s future, and clings with faith to the commitment that discipleship to Christ provides the contours for apostolic work today. The word and work of God was incarnate in the historical man Jesus; but the work of the historical Jesus was not found within the limits of his life, rather in the explosion of that life in the whole of God’s creation. So is the partiality of apostolic ministry fulfilled in the merciful supplements of grace in creation.
That apostolic ministry is not the person's career but a series of episodes of divine grace is not comfortable. If you let yourself think about it, the job is a source of terror. Any minister who is not in abject fear of what is being done with his or her life is a fool. Thank God fools too are useful. Apostolic ministers are called to embrace the terror of God, and in this to find and facilitate God's love. I shall return to the topic of the "call to apostolic ministry" after some less apocalyptic reflections on its content.

Leadership or Service?

Apostolic ministry consists in leadership that is responsible to the whole of the Christian mission. In this, apostolic leadership contrasts with many other kinds of leadership that are responsible to some aspect or part of the Christian mission. These other kinds of Christian leadership are neither less worthy than that of apostolic ordained ministry nor less whole on their own terms. They simply are responsible to their particular sphere of the Christian mission.

Apostolic ministry, of course, does not actually do everything all at once. There are apostolic chaplains with highly particularized ministries. Even the pastoral parish ministry is only partial in its particular locations and cultural tools. Yet the chaplains and the parish ministers, as apostolic, are responsible for how their particular work fits into the whole of the church's mission, and for adjusting their particular ministries to take that into account. An apostolic minister is an agent of the universal church, ancient in history and global in compass, bringing the grace in that church to a local context. The scale of responsibility for ordained ministry extends far beyond what usually appears, and the practical theological education for that responsibility is far deeper than what is usually thought practical.

In emphasizing leadership, I mean to distinguish it from service. Apostolic leadership is a kind of service, one among many, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12. And there are many kinds of service not connected with ordained ministry that also
involve leadership. But leadership and service are not the same. Service is effective responsiveness to a need. Whole congregations can engage in service. One can serve in full cooperation with others. One can rightly expect support and reinforcement in most kinds of Christian service.

Leadership, by contrast, involves a readiness to tell people what they don’t want to hear and to get them to do things they don’t want to do. Leadership works for cooperation but doesn’t assume it. Leadership hopes for a common mind with the group but cannot assume it. Leadership longs for emotional support but must be prepared to press on without it. Precisely because Christian leadership cajoles people into changing—into becoming uncomfortable where before they were at ease, into being dissatisfied where before they thought they had it all, into accepting as neighbors people who are harmful and unvirtuous—leadership evokes resentment. On the one hand, congregations can feel proud of their increasing openness to the Christian life. On the other hand, they harbor resentment toward their leaders for the price they are called upon to pay.

Listen to Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians as he bemoans the rewards of his high-pressure leadership in comparison with other Christian leaders:

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:23-28)

We sometimes expect leadership in ordained ministry to be
surrounded by the church as a support group. As Paul said, often the support group isn't there, and apostolic ministry is required to go on anyway. In fact, the more the churches fail to provide consistent, enthusiastic support for the activities in Christian life, the more leadership is necessary, and the more lonely and isolated.

Here is an easy misconception of Christian leadership. A Christian leader must be out in front, and the more needed the leadership, the farther in front the leader needs to be. Yet leadership is not leadership at all if it loses contact with others. If no one is led, there is no leadership, however strident the call to press forward. We all know the stereotype of the recent seminary graduate in a first appointment. The first Sunday the minister preaches an introductory sermon saying, "Like you I am anxious, confused, and depressed. Like you I was abused as a child, I too neglected my children and then drove them away by making them live my life. Only during my divorce did I accept my vulnerability and decide to enter ministry." The next Sunday this unhealed wounded healer returns to the pulpit with the social gospel, informing the congregation that their racism is exceeded only by their sexism, that they are too mired in the old ways of thought to recognize the evils of ageism, that the well-intentioned barbecue to welcome the new pastor was an egregious display of speciesism, and anyway the fellowship hall is not wheelchair accessible. The third Sunday the district superintendent meets with the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee and one more would-be apostle is shipwrecked. Although this is a stereotype, many have murmured to me that it fits some graduates of my own institution. Let us be clear. Every individual is vulnerable and wounded; Paul too with his "thorn in the flesh." The social gospel is an indispensable call to righteousness; preaching from which it is largely absent is hypocrisy. The gospel for Christian leadership insists on the fact that Christ has bound up our wounds and set us free from bondage to sin. The Christian life is the pursuit of sanctification with that gospel as the premise. Only leadership that establishes contact with those to be led can succeed as leadership.
Two Distortions

In the last several decades, Christian leadership in ordained ministry has been skewed by intrinsically good things, I believe, and the stereotype makes reference to them. The pastoral counseling movement has developed both terms for identifying deep psychological needs of people and tools for addressing those needs. Those needs have been with the church from the beginning, but only in our own time have we the resources to be articulate about them and effective. Pastoral counseling has become a crucial part of theological education, and one of its side effects has been that theological students are now trained to be aware of and sensitive to their own psychological needs and disabilities. Henri Nouwen is doubtless right that wounded healers are often more effective than unwounded technicians in understanding and connecting with the psychological needs of parishioners, so long as the wounded healers are themselves healed.

Responsiveness to psychological needs is a frequent demand made upon ministers and should be part of the pastor’s array of disciplined skills. This demand is laid upon many other professionals as well. There is nothing peculiar to Christianity, or even to religion, in psychotherapy. Yet many ministers have come to define their ministry principally as therapists. Like any major need, psychological needs are infinite. A pastor can never meet them all. It can become an exhaustive definition of ministry. Yet by itself it abandons the gospel. I draw the line too harshly, I suppose; a church setting does make a difference to therapy. But carried too far, the pastoral counseling movement turns the steeple into a special kind of shingle. Pastoral counseling is a true and valuable service for the church, but not by itself the kind of leadership required for an apostolic ordained ministry.

The second good thing that has skewed the sense of ministry in our time has been the social justice movement. From that movement our century has drawn its religious heroes, from Bonhoeffer to Gandhi and King to Tutu. The social justice movement has awakened the North American church from a
comfortable Establishment slumber. Christian leadership has been central in such advances as have been made in civil rights and recognition of the needs of the poor in our country. Furthermore, our Wesleyan heritage has been clear from the outset that personal perfection cannot be separated from a public life to perfect society. The renewal of the covenant, in which Christian salvation consists, includes social and natural elements of creation as well as individual personal ones. Although the social justice movement calls for dedicated and sacrificial service, it also calls for leadership. It responds in service to needs, and it feeds back to create leadership in the churches. Nevertheless, although every Christian is obligated to justice and righteousness, that is not a particularly Christian obligation. Everyone is obligated to justice and righteousness, and Christians have long recognized the appropriateness of alliances and cooperation with non-Christian persons in the social justice movement. Too often Christian leaders have mistaken commitment to the social justice movement, or some part of it, for Christian ministry itself. My first week as dean, a deputation of students visited me with the request to have no requirement for theology in the new M.Div. curriculum because, as they put it, "theology gets in the way of ministry." What they meant was that the complexities and ironies of Christianity inhibit the simple self-righteous enthusiasm typical of "movement" ethics. And they were right. Much as the social justice movement needs cooperation with people who are not Christians, it also needs to incorporate the complexities and ironies of a religion of forgiven sinners obedient to a God who loves bad people.

Theology for the Clergy

The church's concentration in the last decades on pastoral counseling and social justice, important and authentic as that has been as a contemporary Christian witness, has made it possible to conceive of ministry as therapy or social engineering or both. The result is ministry without Christianity. Secular psychotherapists and morally motivated social engineers
probably do better without the bureaucracy and cumbersome gaggles of noncooperative parishioners. And persons responsive to Christianity because of the gospel of Jesus Christ find it hard to identify that kind of psychological and social engineering ministry as religiously interesting. The churches then find themselves abandoned by many, boring to most, transformed into service agencies, and inarticulate about what makes them Christian. Most of all, the salt of ordained ministry has lost its savor. Instead of counseling and promoting social justice in light of the whole demands of the gospel, ministers find themselves shoehorned into social roles others do better, and their esteem as well as real usefulness drops.

The remedy is not to abandon commitments to counseling or to justice, but to recover the Christian context for them, and to reconceive how they fit into apostolic ministry. For this, the practice of ordained ministry must return to theology with passion and rigor.

By theology I don't mean merely seminary studies, but lifelong theological scholarship. Nor do I mean by theology just its systematic expressions. Rather, theology includes knowledge of the Bible, of the history of Christianity and the other religions, of past and current cultures and current events, of philosophy, of theological literature in the narrow sense, of social analysis and ethics, economics and political theory, of counseling, Christian education, liturgy, and the arts of preaching. Other disciplines can be listed as well. The principle of selection, of course, is that ordained ministers need to know, in scholarly depth and with intellectual nuance and flexibility, how the gospel of Christ in its universal scope applies to their particular locus of ministry. Ministry is the work of the whole of the church in a local context, and ordained ministry is responsible for that focus and balance. At few times in history has a theology for the whole been so necessary for a theology of one's local part.
Apostolic Ministry: The Gospel Preached

For apostolic ministry, the gospel is first and foremost to be preached. Preaching is not what the preacher intends but what the congregation hears. Paul was very clear that sometimes one should preach milk, other times solid food, and in certain precious contexts the highest wisdom. Though Paul had only contempt for the “wisdom of the world,” he never suggested a patronizing attitude toward those ready only for the milk gospel, for its elementary expressions. Considering that the Corinthians were such a quarrelsome lot, treacherous, lecherous, debaucherous, and given to playing one person off against another, Paul was remarkably respectful. The ground for his respect, of course, was that he was addressing God’s handiwork in the Corinthians, albeit at a beginner’s level.

The clarity and finesse with which Paul addressed different people in appropriately different ways reflected the thoroughness of his understanding of the gospel and the subtlety with which he could abstract parts of it for special use without distorting the representation of the whole. Paul’s was no mean feat, understanding the gospel that well, for, so far as we know, no one had done it before. It was Paul the evangelist who figured out what the life of Jesus meant for the Jewish culture awaiting the Messiah; he was the one who reckoned the significance of Jesus’ life in the Roman culture of authority and justice, he who thought through the Hellenistic categories of history, the heavens, and the earth to conceive the divine cosmic kenosis. Paul was an evangelical theologian because he thought through the implications of the good news for circumstances through which it had not been thought before.

Our theological work for preaching the gospel is no less demanding. We need to present Jesus as the master to the teenager strung out on crack and introduce the life of discipleship. We need to preach Jesus’ message of the Father’s healing love to the broken victim of child abuse. At the same time we need to preach the renewal of the covenant to secular individualists who know no knowledge but science, no interest but their own. We need to enter the experience of the artists
and writers of our time to pick up their sensitivity, their rebellion, their assertion of truth against authority and inertia, and to connect that with the truth of God’s redemption. We need to witness to those lost in sophistication and secular cynicism whose soul can only learn from a greater sophistication and divine irony. One sermon can hardly do all that. Yet the channeling and direction of our preaching must arise from a subtle grasp of the wholeness of the gospel’s implications.

Word

Apostolic preaching gives rise to three consequences, symbolized in the rubrics of Word, Sacrament, and Order. The Word, of course, is the transformative word of the gospel, and it forms ministry primarily through preaching, through witnessing to its content and power. In addition, ordained ministers have to teach it and superintend the teaching of it. The obligation to teaching comes from doctrines of the responsibility of all Christians for their own faith and the priesthood of all believers. From milk to solid food to the secret wisdom of the Holy Spirit, every Christian is entitled to be taught to capacity. Furthermore, every Christian is obligated to witness to the gospel in the conditions that arise. Perhaps it is too much to say that every Christian should preach; Paul clearly distinguished that from other offices. Yet the education of all Christians, regardless of ordination, is an essential part of the ministry of the Word. Acknowledging different degrees of maturity and sophistication, Christians live by what they know, and are entitled to understand as much as they can.

The teaching responsibilities following upon apostolic ministry have been met by many means during the Christian centuries. Since the Reformation in the Western church, and the widespread capacities for literacy, teaching has often taken the form of catechisms and classes. In the twentieth century the Sunday school movement has adopted many of the ideas of progressive education made popular by Dewey and others, and Christian education has become a kind of subspecialty of ministry and laity alike. Christian education, in the form of the
Sunday school movement, has come under considerable criticism lately for reasons that need to be investigated. What remains clear, however, is that if the Sunday school movement does not work for the widespread teaching of the gospel, then some other means will have to be tried.

Sacrament

The second consequence of apostolic preaching is the institutionalization and administration of the sacraments. In this context we should not limit "sacraments" to baptism and the Eucharist but to the practices of Christians by which they celebrate and ritually fix the saving work of God in their imagination. Sacramental life is both the expression of meaning, signifying our recognition and praise of God's work, and productive activity. The rite of baptism is not merely a sign of something else but the act that itself initiates a person into the church. By gathering sacramentally, Christians act so as to incorporate more of the divine and thereby become more holy. Although sacramental life usually is organized according to congregations, the reality of sacramental living is individual and universal, not limited to congregations. Any Christian ought to be able to wander into any congregation and find a sacramental life with which to identify. Yet the congregation's forms of sacramental life belong to the universal church and are not "owned" by the congregation as most of its other institutions are. It is the obligation of a congregation to offer sacramental life, and of ordained ministers to see to its administration.

The sacramental life of Christianity constitutes its true community. Whereas this is most often expressed or embodied in congregations, the Christian community cannot be reduced to the collection of congregations. Part of the genius of the Methodist connectional system is that it underscores the sacramental unity of the church by establishing that its sacramental administrators, the ordained clergy, are connected universally, not by means of congregations. There are other polities for relating the "priesthood" to universal sacramental
unity, of course; but the Methodist one is particularly appropriate. Ordained ministers are in connection with one another not because of any superiority of clergy to laity, or because of a higher position in the church for clergy, or because ministers are supposed to support one another over against fractious congregations, but because clergy directly administer the sacraments and thus have a special obligation to administer sacramental living locally so as to reflect the place of the locale in the whole sacramental life of the history and spread of the gospel.

Sacramental consciousness in the Methodist movement has undergone significant changes, from Wesley's high Anglicanism to American frontier "low church" life to the current revival of historical sensibility and liturgical richness. Most of us come from a "lower church" background than is in the Methodist mainstream today, especially as this is focused in seminary education. We are clearer now about the difference between the Word preached and taught, on the one hand, and the worship life of Christian people. We also understand better the difference between worship and the institutions we build in, around, and through our congregations. At the same time that Methodists are coming to concentrate on liturgy, the use of the lectionary, and other explicit forms of public spiritual cultivation, we are appreciating to a greater degree the importance of personal practices of spiritual development. The reappearance of the ecclesiola or Wesleyan "classes," cell groups for spiritual encouragement within larger liturgical congregations, marks a new seriousness about spirituality. It also constitutes a bridge between the personalistic piety of those on the Christian right with the social justice commitments of those on the left; both require the communal cultivation of personal spirituality. Ordained, apostolic ministry leads the way through the sacraments of Christian development.

Order

The third consequence of preaching the Word is what we bureaucratically call "order." At one level this means running
the congregation according to the Discipline, and the Discipline is filled with important theological ramifications. Other denominations have parallels. At a deeper level "order" as an apostolic activity of ordained ministry refers to leadership in the establishment of Christian institutions. These are of three sorts. One is the organization of the congregation, or chaplaincy service, or whatever is the position of the minister. The second is the organization of the congregation's activities to serve the wider community. Often these two overlap, but sometimes they do not. A congregation has an obligation, for instance, to visit and support its needy members, surrounding them with the love of Christ; it has an obligation to serve those who are not its members, but not in the ways of caring for those within the community. A third sort of institution to which apostolic ministry has an obligation of order is those groups and institutions in society not otherwise touched by a Christian congregation. This is mission in the old-fashioned sense, bringing the benefits of the gospel to those out of touch with Christian communities, although it need not involve the sense of cultural and religious superiority characteristic of the missions of a century ago.

Let me stress the obligation to institutionalize the gospel outside established Christian communities. Even if there were no congregations, an apostle still has a gospel to preach, a wisdom to teach, means of grace to offer in sacramental life, and an order of life to put forward so as to renew the covenant. Most often, this simply means establishing a new congregation. Yet in our own time, that might not be effective. Perhaps people now gather in cultural communities for which congregational life based on geographic location is not meaningful and communities of common interest such as labor unions or of transient meeting such as airport chapels are effective places of ministry. The connection of ordained ministry rather than diaconal service with chaplaincies in hospitals and the military recognizes the diversity of institutions within which apostolic preaching with Word, Sacrament, and Order are required.

Recall the situation in Corinth. It was a city of splendid Hellenistic secularity. An international port, a military camp, even its great collection of religious sects created a social
ambiance of worldliness. Paul's covey of Christians, established a few years before the writing of the first letter, also was worldly. His letter advised them on very practical things concerning how to be holy in the midst of worldliness. Eat before coming to Eucharist or you'll gorge yourself, get drunk, and embarrass the poor. It's okay to eat meat sacrificed at the pagan temples because they really are secular businesses anyway, and food is not a matter of holiness unless someone thinks it is, whereupon you should take that sensibility seriously. Christian identity comes from Christ, not from whoever founded or nourished the group. Pay attention to different talents in the religious community, respect them all and don't jumble them. Attend to theology when you are ready for it, but remember the bottom line is a character that loves as God does in creating and redeeming us. Don't get hung up on imagining what resurrection might be like, but have confidence that what's good enough for the Son of God is good enough for us. All this was advice to a group trying to establish a congregation. By establishing that congregation Paul was not just giving order to the congregation itself but to the city. Paul's apostolic ministry was secondarily to the church at Corinth; primarily it was to Corinth.

Ministry to the World

Such is the call for our own time. Though we may exhaust ourselves in the secondary work of ministering to the church, the primary need is to minister to the world. Without neglecting the spiritual cultivation of Christians, we must recall the theological basis for ministry. By God's act in Christ we live in a covenant that, although broken, now has the means for renewal and restoration. By accepting that act as our salvation, we Christians are launched on a path of sanctification or holiness that consists in working to renew and restore the covenant in ourselves and in all things. The scale of the covenant is cosmic. The covenant is not just the church. The church is a special community called out to work for the covenant. The covenant is the peculiar normative relation of nature and people involved in the very creation of human life: we are
created and defined by a covenant binding ourselves with all people and with nature before God. No human being can escape or deny the covenant, only live in it badly in a broken way. By the grace of Jesus Christ we are not bound to fail the covenant but can restore it. In all the moral poverty, impiety before nature, flight from historical actuality, and despair characteristic of human history, there remains the possibility of so living toward God, and toward the people and natural things with which we are covenanted, that God can perfect the creation. Though we are bound to Christians in the church by virtue of sharing a faith, a knowledge, and a project, we are bound more deeply to all people and to the entire natural cosmos by the covenant of creation. The bottom-line love in Christian piety is directed identically to the God of all creation and to our neighbors who constitute that creation.

The call to apostolic ministry thus is from the God of all creation to serve the whole of that creation by proclaiming, teaching, sacramentally embodying, and institutionalizing the powers of grace in Christ.

Who is called? Few people have such a clear calling as Paul experienced on the road to Damascus, or that he reconstructed in his imagination when talking with Luke. Most people now get mixed signals, and then spend years trying to interpret them; our spiritual weaknesses becloud the interpretation. But it should be remembered that the call does come from God and is relative to God’s need for apostles to the world. Our job, as clergy and laity concerned with ministry, is to help identify and interpret that call and then see to its acceptance and formation.

Remember the calling of Saul. He was smart: we need to look for the call in smart people who can give intelligent leadership. He was well-educated: we need to find the call among those who are on the road to disciplined self-improvement. He was brash and aggressive: we need to identify the call in those whose energy will carry the gospel over the obstacles that channel the inertia of the church. He was not a Christian, in fact an anti-Christian: we need to find the call in those people who take the matters of religion so seriously that they can stand against the church. Apostolic ministry calls for leadership, and we should
search out the call in those people whose capacity for leadership is sufficient to bear the grace it must convey.

How do we identify the call? I suppose that is not our job. We should only look to find those in whom we would like to find a call and leave the calling itself to God. Yet God works through us to help people identify and respond to the call, and that working sometimes takes strange forms. For myself, it came early, when I was about thirteen. The minister advising our youth group one day asked me what I wanted to be, and I told him either a famous physicist or a rich lawyer. He concluded I was close enough to Paul in chutzpah and sassiness to be worth a try and informed me that, on the contrary, I was going to be a minister. My mother laughed, my father suggested other youth groups, and I worried. Then the minister gave me Friedrich Nietzsche to read on the death of God, a strange choice for a thirteen-year-old. He introduced me personally to A. J. Muste, founder of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, whom he believed to be a saint. And he taught me to use the mimeograph machine, the first and most practical of the arts of ministry. The signs of my calling were Nietzsche, Muste, and A. B. Dick. By the age of fourteen I was as confused as my peers about my own identity, but figured it was God's problem. By fifteen I was a local preacher, by twenty-four a deacon and by twenty-seven an elder. For many years, no one could figure out what my ministry was all about, since I made my living as an academic, and this particularly worried successive bishops. To save them anxiety I stayed away from annual conference as much as possible until my present bishop, W. T. Handy, Jr., informed me in clear terms that this worry is what he is paid for and that I had better shape up my conference connections. When it came time to determine whether deaning in the seminary is really what my ministry had been preparing for, it was to him that I went for discernment. Would that all potential candidates for ordination were served as well by the church as I have been, from Death of God in the MYF to episcopal oversight.
Conclusion

Over half the United Methodist ministers now serving will be retired by the year 2000. Whether they will be replaced, by whom, and with what training are the central questions for Boards of Ordained Ministry, for seminaries, and for the whole church. Wrong answers will be disastrous. Knowledge that God can use others if the Christian church self-destructs is small comfort. The gospel of Jesus Christ offers salvation to individuals who are lost in the world and who are spiritually dead. The gospel of Jesus Christ orders the work of sanctification by which the covenant of creation can be renewed in us, around the world, across the galaxies. The gospel of Jesus Christ can transform souls more deeply than psychoanalysis, can achieve justice more humanely than social engineering, can rouse the sleeping, focus the frenetic, liberate the enslaved, comfort the blasted, give hope, feed faith, and build love. But it cannot do that without apostles. Who will speak for God? We must find them, nurture them, and give them our heart for the mission.
Nearly a year had stretched between the day I agreed to give an address on "women's experience of priestly ministry" and the day of the presentation, and I was surprised by the amount of nervousness that built up in me. It was clearly more than just stage fright. But what did it mean? Even after three decades of consciousness-raising it is hard to remember that the personal is political: that my nervousness might be telling me something about the topic; that my nervousness might be a clue to a collective nervousness toward the subject; indeed, that nervousness might be a place from which to begin these reflections about women's priestly vocation.

Rather than trying to privatize or in some other way jump over this nervousness, then, I want to begin by exploring our wariness toward the priestly aspect of ministry. As we track the trail of our jitters, we will see how tension builds up between complicated and apparently oppositional aspects of priesthood. This tension, I believe, tells a profound truth about the nature not only of women's experience of the priesthood but of the priestly vocation itself: priestly ministry is marked with ambivalence. It is ambivalent; that is, it has two-sided values, double meanings. This essay argues that ambivalence signals...
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the presence of creative, liberating energy. Moreover, I will suggest that exploration of the emotional tension we call our ambivalence will yield an honorable and resilient source of authority for priestly vocation.

A Nervous Priesthood?

Why so much nervousness about the priesthood? First, it is a vast subject, passionately charged with our diverse faith commitments. We must be keenly aware from the start that the concept of priesthood covers a vast spectrum of meaning according to personal faith, denominational affiliation, religious culture and social location. Difficult as it is to set and honor parameters for our reflection, I will be basing my remarks on the assumption that priestly ministry takes at least two shapes in the vocation of most women in the Christian tradition. In the most foundational theological sense, priesthood is defined by the "diverse and complementary gifts" of the whole people of God. Membership in the community of faith authorizes each woman and man to confess their faith and to give account of their hope. By God's grace, all faithful individuals are invested with the potentiality of priestly ministry, which offers to a broken world "a foretaste of the joy and glory" of God's realm.

Clergy women are charged by virtue of our ordination with a second, more specific priestly responsibility: "to assemble and build up the body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating the sacraments, and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry." These functions are not an exclusive right of the ordained ministry. The ordained person exercises these roles as a "representative," "providing the focus for the unity of the life and witness of the community." Discernment of the differences between pastoral, prophetic and priestly activity, the task undertaken here, suggests an even more specific focus: priestly ministry is sacramental ministry.

These definitions delineate tensions enough to permeate the exercise of priestly vocation with nervous energy. Priesthood is as vast as all that we do and as specific as the sacraments.
Priestly ministry is inclusive of all believers and selective of a few. Priestly authority must not be autocratic, but the search for community consensus should not prevent priests from speaking what they prayerfully discern to be the will of God. While priests are instrumental in moving the faith community toward ever-new manifestations of God's realm, the priesthood is also an office which takes its authority from old orders and whose holders are charged with the preservation of an ancient tradition.

Certainly, though, the nervousness evoked by this topic goes much deeper than definitions. This topic raises two thorny questions that lie very near our hearts. First, should we be priestly? Second, what difference does it make if the priest is a woman?

Should we be priestly? There isn't much debate about whether Christians are called to be pastoral or prophetic. But we're still not sure if we're called to be priestly or, among the "high-church," just how priestly we are called to be. Church and seminary communities are frequently engaged in the revitalization of the traditional functions of pastor and prophet and in liberating them from constraints such as patriarchalism and nationalism. But our images of the priest often convey an impression of priesthood's most traditional functions: representation of the divine; mediation within hierarchies and dualisms, amongst symbols and substance, between people and God. Such tremendous sacred and ecclesiastical power is best handled gingerly. Those too invested in priestly power appear suspect; priestly lay people can be just as suspect as priestly clergy. The second question—what difference does it make if the priest is a woman?—is even more difficult to approach. It raises the sticky issue of whether women's ministry can be characterized in general as distinctive from that of men. The uniqueness of women clergy's contributions to the pastoral and prophetic functions of ministry are beginning to be explored, but there is almost nothing published by women about their experiences of priestly ministry. Though writing and research abounds on ordaining women to the priestly ministry, it seems
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that, once ordained, we fall silent about what difference it makes that the priest is a woman.

These questions are not easily separated. I suspect most women would agree that whether women should be priestly depends in part upon how distinctively women use the authority inherent in the role. Many women testify to being on the receiving end of priestly authority used oppressively. Will women shape a priestly ministry that shares power, or will we fall prey to the same temptations of power-over that have corrupted the ministries of some priests before us? No wonder we are skittish and yet subdued about this subject—it leads us to a place of sighs and groans too deep for words!

Ambivalence and New Authorities

I decided to take my research to women themselves, to conversations and autobiographical writings. I read and talked to lay women and clergy, low-church and high. I got an unsettling range of response as, for example, from the woman who said in a faltering voice, "I'm embarrassed to admit it, but when you said 'priest,' I thought 'man.'" An Episcopal woman writes of contemplating her call to ministry:

Thinking of it as "ordained ministry" was fine; that meant study and work. Thinking of it as "priesthood" was another matter. That had connotations of identity and authority that scared me to death. I was, after all, a suburban housewife with three children, a ranch-style house, and a station wagon with wood sides. Who was I to think of being a priest? I could hardly imagine it, but the idea persisted and I could not ignore it. I considered the possibility that it was a neurotic symptom, or a call from God, or both.10

As I read and talked with women colleagues about their experience of priestly ministry, a common thread has emerged that begins to unravel the tight ball of silence. Underneath the silence and nourishing the nervousness is a deep-running stream of ambivalence about priestly authority and, to a lesser degree perhaps, ambivalence about the symbols themselves. On the one hand, liturgy and sacrament have been one of the
many battlegrounds where Christians have fought to preserve hierarchy and discrimination. Ritual and sacraments are sometimes used in theological, ecclesiastical skirmishes to defend exclusive rights and privileges. On the other hand, the sacred power of liturgy, its capacity to move and change celebrant and congregant, is also rightly relished and enjoyed. The line between these ambivalent aspects of ritual’s power is difficult to negotiate. As we have already noted, gender provides no guarantees that women will not use this power naively and destructively, no easy avenues to an equitable sharing among the whole people of God of the sacred power in ritual’s concretization of holiness.

In regard to the symbols themselves, women report striking experiences of being drawn closer to God through ritual and sacrament, both as lay and ordained participants. These symbolic aspects of faith are felt to carve out much-needed, meditative sanctuary, to consecrate the everyday stuff of women’s lives, to help us find direction for our actions in the world. Frequently women bring zestful creativity to ritual, receiving and serving spiritual food with the special, artful touches honed from years of making homes out of houses and family rituals and holy-days out of holidays. But such proximity to the presence of God also brings discomfort and can be very disturbing to our settled patterns of life.

Here, liturgy and sacrament symbolize the ambivalent separation which is woven inextricably into the fabric of our spiritual lives. We are a people and creation set apart by virtue of our love for God, and liturgy and sacrament can be embraced as a symbolic expression of the holiness with which we and all aspects of the creation are endowed. We are also a people separated from God by a gap between our dreams and our deeds, and ritual serves as a symbolic expression of our repentance and yearning for that which is "not-yet" in our lives of faith.

The power of liturgy and sacrament is neutral. But throughout human history, our conceptualization and use of that power has honed a sharp, double-edged sword. Liberation lies alongside bondage. Ambivalence toward the symbols is the result. Yet we have hope that we can redeem those symbols
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from misuse through theology and ritual action that are grounded in liberation principles. Our hopes for the contribution of the priestly function are high, at least in this regard. But ambivalence is confronted again in the paradoxical and ambiguous nature of the priestly function itself. The exercise of the function brings both pleasure and privilege. Ritual leadership tempts us toward false pride yet deepens us spiritually. Priests are charged to keep order in the church but, as Carol Gilligan has pointed out, women are willing to break the rules when relationships are at stake.\textsuperscript{11} The priest is at once set apart and "vaulted into intimacy."\textsuperscript{12} Communicants avert their eyes and grasp us into sudden hugs.

In light of the ambivalence that surrounds priestly authority and sacred symbols, and in order to save our priestly function from either misuse or abandonment, we must reach out widely for fresh soil into which we can extend the roots of our ministries. Not ignoring the wealth of authority bestowed on us through ordination and ecclesiastical tradition, neither can we be satisfied with it. Like the woman with ten coins who searched diligently for one lost, our search for new sources of authority seeks out abundance. This search may lead us to the discovery of new sources beyond us or to the recovery of more personal wisdom within. Wherever it might lead, I believe that we must be open in all circumstances to the inbreaking of holy anointment.

This is not a new suggestion, this call to be engaged continually in a search for fresh authorities for women's priestly ministries. In 1970, Peggy Way wrote that for her essential validation as a minister she was relying upon the "authority of possibility." Making room in our institutions for the God we describe as "doing a new thing," we recognize that sometimes authority is not so much a power to be conveyed and claimed as it is a conviction to be cultivated in the process of living out possibilities and "futures."\textsuperscript{13} The authority of possibility is rooted in the very newness of women's ministerial leadership (and in other "futures") and is cultivated in the prayerful discernment of sacred sanction and guidance in which any of us might engage as we undertake something unprecedented.
Elaine Huber's work guides us to another source for our priestly authority—the authority of our inspiration. Identifying how the authority of inspiration empowered women's leadership in historic Christian reform movements, Huber describes this inspiration as a 'practical impulse to live, speak and write with a vision to searching out the mystery of revelation.' For women in history the authority of inspiration, she says, was 'a sense of empowerment experienced by those who understood themselves to be in direct communication with the Spirit of God.' Throughout history, the authority of inspiration has emboldened women to assert that insofar as any of us, lay or ordained, are inspired to search out the mystery of revelation, any of us might be called to be priestly. This would be a boldly assertive claim in our day.

The Authority of Ambivalence

Possibility and inspiration are optimistic sources of authority for priestly ministry and seem to offer a way around the ambivalence we are tempted to disparage and dismiss. This uneasiness with ambivalence is common, I think, and largely attributable to the popular notion that ambivalence is a mark of indecisiveness and weakness. As compared to the creative promise of inspiration and possibility, ambivalence risks mediocrity. Inspiration and possibility invite movement; ambivalence smacks of inertia. Inspiration and possibility seem contributions from a clear conscience, ambivalence the confusion of mixed feelings. Inspiration and possibility burn hot with enthusiasm; ambivalence feels lukewarm.

But having explored the ambivalence that surfaces in the reactions of many women to priestly ministry, I have come to believe that our ambivalence has its own authority and its own way of building up. Ambivalence meets the human desire for clarity and closure with an insistence upon intricacy and openness. It nags at us with what seems at first glance to be uncertainty but turns out, upon inspection, to be a conglomeration of several strong, pure streams of conviction. In this way, ambivalence speaks the truth. Answers to critical questions are
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occasionally found in yes or no. But more frequently we must measure multiple calibrations on delicate inner sensors, steadily figuring and refiguring our response to a shifting reality. The constructive psychological aspects of ambivalence are explored in object-relations theory. This theory suggests that ambivalence is a positive achievement signaling our ability to see both "good" and "bad" aspects in ourselves, in others and in the world. Melanie Klein's pioneering work in child analysis shows that feelings of ambivalence are a major step beyond our tendency in infancy psychically to split the world, and ourselves, into good and bad. An ability to feel ambivalence depends upon the courage to acknowledge more complex emotion, both love and hate felt toward or received from the same person or situation.

Ambivalence is not, of course, sufficient in itself. Ambivalence becomes a liability when it does not prepare us for a more trusting and responsible relationship with others. The mature capacity for acknowledging ambivalence enables the fusion of extremes of emotion; rage can be tempered by consideration, idealization seasoned with sagacity. Fusion engenders a growing confidence that aggression will not defeat affection.

Based on fusion's mixing of our feelings, ambivalence develops hand-in-hand, Klein says, with the desire to "make reparation." Acknowledging actual or potential destructiveness engenders a desire to repair and set things right; recognition of human goodness makes available the resources and instills the confidence to do so. In this way, the whole spectrum of human emotion becomes the raw material from which we can construct something honest and positive in contribution to the welfare of self, others and the world. Thus, ambivalence has ramifications upon social life. The British analyst Donald Winnicott says that the feeling of ambivalence is essential for the capacity to feel concern, "the fact that the individual cares, or minds, and both feels and accepts responsibility."

We are accustomed to meeting our ambivalence with disregard and impatience, but in so doing, we slight our own inner acuity and risk immobilization between unacknowledged
Mixed feelings are a reflection of confusing realities. If we respect our ambivalence as an astute guard against oversimplification and allow its wisdom to inform our actions, the feeling of ineffectualness that is our negative association to ambivalence and mixed feelings will be avoided. Emotional paralysis results not from the ambivalence but from our lack of respect for the authority of our ambivalence. Notice, I have not suggested that we work out our ambivalence and get past it. Rather, I am suggesting that we get to know our ambivalence as one of our abiding voices of authority, a voice that tells us when the signals are crossed and the stakes are high.

The remainder of this essay is devoted to narrative theology, to the telling of and reflection upon faith stories that I hope will illustrate the authority of ambivalence. The rehearsing of these experiences is not simple nostalgia or for the sake of complaint. Rather, by this theological method, I will try to show that ambivalence tells a truth, a truth about complexity and ambiguity.

The first woman minister I ever saw was a woman priest. It was March, 1975. The priest was Carter Heyward. The Eucharist was irregular. The service actually took place at high noon, but according to my memory of it, it was nighttime in the chapel at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and the lights were low except for a spotlight shining on the table and on her outstretched arms. In addition to bread and wine, there were milk and honey, cheese and olives—food for an exodus people. We sang Leonard Cohen's song: "Like a bird on the wire, I have tried in my way to be free."

I was a college junior contemplating graduate school, oblivious to the drama going on in the Episcopal church at that time. But I was stunned by the drama going on in me that "night." It was the first time I had ever wanted a priest. It was the first time that I began to think there might be a priest in me. Neither were happy thoughts. I grew up in Lancaster.
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County, PA—eighteen years of Amish-country culture and lower-than-low church theology. At the church of my childhood, the Evangelical United Brethren, we went to the altar nearly as often for conversion as for Communion. I approached this priestly ministry reluctantly, suspiciously.

But that day the room had a smoky feel to it, and I realized, somehow for the first time, that the spiritual terrain is full of ambiguity. I had been steeped in God’s revelations; that day we affirmed God as unknowable. I had been taught that personal faith was the mark of discipleship; that day I felt our common lifeblood course between us making faith. I was frightened and yet strangely warmed by ritual I did not understand. And that woman priest was nothing like me, yet she awakened something priestly in me.

I remember sitting outside the empty chapel the next day, feeling scared. That event initiated in me an ambivalence that remains a tension in my heart. A standoffish God sends me invitations I cannot seem to refuse. A community of faith gives me words to say that none of us can really bear to hear. My vocation for priestly ministry is urgent and alienating.

II.

Nine years after that event, I walked into the sanctuary where I was to celebrate Holy Communion for the first time. My commitment to feminism had turned my view of relationship—actually, of the whole world—upside down. My seminary education had taught me to be a pastor, encouraged me to be a prophet, and coached me to be a preacher, but had skipped over the priest part: What to say, when to lift, what to do if it spills? I remember feeling embarrassed that I wanted to do this; it was so hierarchical. The United States flag fluttered to my right. The altar was firmly nailed to the back wall of the chancel.

But that Sunday morning, when their first woman pastor moved behind the table she had carried up the stairs from the Sunday school room and turned to face those people for the first time as priest, their first woman priest, we were confronted with the reality that few of us wanted me to be there and yet
all of were dying to know what was going to happen. I remember thinking, This is so right and so wrong.

As I ministered in that community, it became clear to me that the people wanted a priest. For a very few, it was apathy—having a priest meant they wouldn’t have to attend to God themselves. In contrast, the majority of that congregation wanted to overcome distance between themselves and God but were frightened of sacred things. They wanted to know the holy and yet they were afraid to get too close; they needed me, and yet they could have done it themselves. We never did resolve it.

III.

A woman was on her way to church one summer Sunday morning when her car broke down. The man who stopped to help her was cordial until he saw her robe and stole stretched out across the back seat. When he inquired as to their meaning and she told him she was going to preach, he flew into a sudden rage, banging on her car and screaming verses from the Epistles. Fearing for her safety, she got in the car, locked the door, and sat through an eternity of his raving and striking out. As abruptly as his violence had entered her life, he got in his car and drove off, leaving her to sit there unaided and, temporarily, silenced by fear. Some of our ambivalence is caused by the danger that lies all around us. Most of the danger is not so easily identified as in this example, so our ambivalence serves as a warning beacon. However reasonable we or our neighbors may appear on the outside, our ambivalence warns us that inner wounds, vestiges of physical, psychological or spiritual violence, may at any time break open again. Even more threatening is the danger that, because of those wounds, a person might lash out, taking their revenge on the innocent. It is reckless to ignore the warning our ambivalence broadcasts. Rather than fleeing into denial or cynicism, the authority of our ambivalence can put us on alert and help us mark off these areas of danger and in other ways deal with the risks proactively. A wisdom culled from the deep resource of our own mixed feelings can meet
A lesbian woman tells what it is like to choose her life and lose her vocation.

I had always been open about my sexuality. The priest in my parish was very supportive of my candidacy for ordination, but he reminded me that I would have to be quiet about my lifestyle. "Quiet?" I laughed. "I'm the chair of the lesbian and gay caucus at seminary!" I got turned down for ordination. I will never forget what it was like when I heard the final word. It was like a knife was inserted deep within me and I was cut apart.

While the current politic in many of our churches would have us discern whether lesbians and gay men are born or made, the authority of our ambivalence tells us that all people are both born and made. Similarly, the authority of our ambivalence tells us that we cannot simply choose between our call to be priest and our call to choose life. The personal is political, and both are spiritual. This woman could not bear the thought of living in secret. But she could not fully escape it, for now everyone knows she is a lesbian, but very few people know that she is a priest.

A woman in despair is seeking solace with a friend. She tells of her fading hope and weakened faith. She wants a word, a suggestion, some guidance from her friend. But the friend, not wishing to presume too much, tries to turn the desire for counsel back. "You know that you have a deep faith. Just remember that." The woman's reply is quick and sharp: "I can't remember that right now. I need you to remember for me. I
Here ambivalence is felt as a fear of the misuse of power alongside the persistent, insistent requirement of the community that we be priests for one another. The power isn't a matter of sacraments or ordination. The power is raw and spontaneous. People who have cultivated a relationship with the spiritual dimension in their own lives, priestly people, are called not to grasp power but to let power grasp them. Jesus is our model. When a woman touches the hem of his garment, he acknowledges the power that, of its own accord, flowed out of him (Mk. 5:24-34). When Jesus tries to distance a woman from the source of grace, she challenges and changes him: "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (Matt. 15:21-28). Jesus himself puts it this way: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from God I have made known to you" (Jn. 15:14). The authority of our ambivalence here is in the acknowledgement that it is harder to be a friend than to be a servant. This model of the priestly function is based not on our singular spiritual depth but on our shared communal call. This is co-creating, a co-operative, a true household of faith. The priestly function that teaches others about the holy secrets is teaching that seeks to overcome separation and to bridge the gaps.  

VI.

One Communion Sunday morning, the woman priest got her menstrual period just before worship began. She says, "I felt ill all during worship. When I was saying the words of institution, I felt like I was going through the motions. But as I lifted the chalice I was startled by my own thought: Am I unclean? I could hardly believe the thought had crossed my mind. Then I spoke the words: "This is my blood,...poured out for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins." No, I thought, I am not unclean. I, too, know that blood is the essence of life."
Women have been told that our bodies make us unfit for ministry. Our experience tells us that our bodies help us understand our ministry and fill it with passion. The authority of our ambivalence here is experienced as the ongoing struggle to bring our ministries, given to us through the Holy Spirit, closer to home, more firmly wedded to our loved ones, more tangibly expressed by the limits and liveliness of our physical beings.

VII.

Eleven years after seeing my first woman priest in the chapel at Union Theological Seminary, I was asked to celebrate communion there. Oh, was I nervous about "doing" Communion in that citadel of Christian liberalism! I fretted over whether or not to robe. I pored over the order of worship to rout any exclusive word or concept. I had a veritable army of people participating, so as to avoid clericalism.

Several weeks later a woman from the community approached me. "We've been talking about you at the Roman Catholic women's potluck suppers." "Me?" I asked warily. "Well, you and the Eucharist where you presided. I've been feeling angry at you, seeing you up there, robed, doing what we cannot. Even here at Union, we don't usually see women preside at the Eucharist. But as we talked about it over supper I realized that I wasn't angry at you. It's just that it was a wonderful liturgy. You acted like you belonged there. You stood there at the table, not apologizing for yourself. I want to give up this struggle in my church, but seeing you there re-awakened my hope."

Women have struggled long and hard for equity in the community of the church, and we have come a long way. But it is not so far as we are tempted to think. Until all of us are free, whether from exclusion or tokenism, none of us are free. Here, our ambivalence is refracted, and it reminds us that oppression is not yet defeated. We are bound to speak of our ambivalence, to give voice to injustice, until priestly ministry no longer divides and separates.
This is the authority of ambivalence, that it speaks a complicated truth and points toward an alternative path when neither "yes" nor "no" will suffice. These stories illustrate the ambivalence that characterizes our attitude toward priestly ministries. They also show that the ambivalence women feel toward being priestly is reflective of the ambivalence inherent in the priestly function of ministry. Priestly ministers help and hurt; priestly ministry is profound and perilous. Sometimes the call to be a priest seems like "a neurotic symptom, or a call from God or both."

Notes

1. This essay is an adaptation of a paper presented on January 21, 1988, to The Network of United Church of Christ Clergywomen at their New England biennial retreat. The theme of the gathering was "The Wisdom of the Spirit: Called and Sent as Pastor, Priest, and Prophet." Other presenters addressed the pastoral and prophetic aspects of ministry.

2. I use this phrase advisedly, wary of its overuse. My experience here can serve to remind us that casual use of precious slogans may dribble away their power. Historically stirring watchwords like this one deserve discriminating application in order to increase their meaning.

3. Indeed, these reflections are informed and bound by my identity as an ordained United Methodist, white North American, liberal (and liberally) seminary-educated woman, whose spiritual formation commenced amidst the evangelistic verve of revivals and campmeetings.


5. BEM, p. 20.

6. BEM, p. 22.

7. "...every charism serves to assemble and build up the body of Christ. Any member of the body may share in proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, may contribute to the sacramental life of that body." Ibid.


9. The extensive literature on women and preaching may be an exception here, though even that literature seems to me to explore preaching's pastoral
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and prophetic potentialities without much explicit attention to its priestly potentialities.


11. See, for example, the reflections of Claire on the morality of abortion in Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 57-8.

12. Glenn Winters first used this image to describe the experience of beginning a relationship of spiritual direction.


15. Huber, Women and Authority, p. 3.


18. Except where noted, all of the following stories are taken from my personal experience or from conversations with women regarding priestly ministry. I am grateful to all of the women who talked with me so frankly and gave permission for their stories to be told.

19. This story was shared by Judith Smith with Boston Area United Methodist Clergy at their retreat in August 1986.


For Additional Reading


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We begin with a paradox: the Bible is functioning most vitally in those parts of the world where its status is most questioned. On the one hand, in the industrialized Western cultures where the Protestant emphasis on sola Scriptura is most dominant, the Bible and Bible study must be energetically defended. On the other hand, small groups throughout the rest of the world are finding the Bible to be an essential resource in their struggle for liberation. Many of us first encountered this dynamic, liberative Bible reading in Latin American liberation theology, particularly in the base community movement. Such reading, however, has been present for much longer in the Black church and other groups who have read their struggle into and through the lines of Scripture. As they join to confront their pain and the systems which cause it, their use of the Bible shines the brightest.

A Contrast between Traditional and Liberation Interpretation

Much of the white middle-class church is still dominated by the long standing hermeneutical opposition between biblical
literalists on the one hand and liberal historical critics on the other. Roughly sketched, both groups are Bible-centered in so far as both define themselves by their attitude toward the Bible. Following Hans Frei's definitions:

1) Literalists understand biblical narratives to be "literally intended accounts which are reliable factual reports." They tend to focus on the establishment of the historical accuracy of the Bible's account of ancient history.

2) To the extent that they focus on the Bible, liberals can take biblical narratives as "historically understood mythical accounts which have no essential connection with fact reporting." They tend to focus on the identification and extension of the original intentions of the ancient authors of these biblical texts.4

Though there have been many attempts to mediate between these positions—from the eighteenth-century neologians to the twentieth-century biblical theology movement—most groups have finally ended up at one end or the other of this Bible-centered continuum. In either case, the Bible is seen first of all as being about the past, whether a past event or a past perspective. Both approaches require us to preserve the Bible's distance from us before building some kind of bridge from the Bible's history or theology to us. According to both, the primary interpretive problem is the following: the Biblical must first of all be defended from our tendency to deny its integrity over against us.

The Bible is seen quite differently by many of those struggling for liberation. As Carlos Mesters puts it:

The common people are putting the Bible in its proper place, the place where God intended it to be. They are putting it in second place. Life takes first place.6

Caught in the fire of various kinds of oppression, these people are turning to the Bible in need. They are looking to see how it can help them. They need not defend its historicity. They do not emphasize its meaning "back then." First and foremost, they want to see if it can assist them in their present struggle. And the powerful truth is that the Bible has proven equal to this task. Take, for example, the following discussion
of the angel's announcement of the virgin birth:

[Luke 1:31] Now you are going to be pregnant, and you will bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

I [Ernesto Cardinal] told them that "Jesus" was a name that was usually translated as "Savior" or "Salvation," but that now it was better translated as "Liberator" or "Liberation." The Hebrew name is Jeshua, which means "Yahweh liberates" or "Yahweh is liberation."

Someone said: "That angel was being subversive just by announcing that. It's as though someone here in Somoza's Nicaragua was announcing a liberator..."

And another added: "And Mary joins the ranks of the subversives, too, just by receiving that message. I suppose that by doing that she probably felt herself entering into a kind of underground. The birth of the Liberator had to be kept secret. It would be known only by the most trusted friends and a few of the poor people around there, villagers. We have to keep in mind that they were under an oppression. And even the name 'Jesus' was a dangerous name..."

Another said: "And it's still a dangerous name. And we who are saying that name 'Liberation' or 'Liberator,' we're being subversive too..." [Ellipses in the original]

Here a group of Nicaraguan peasants allow their world to fuse intimately with the world of Scripture. Through reading Scripture in terms of their situation, they can reinterpret their own situation in terms of Scripture. In the process, the Bible becomes a powerful resource for seeing the liberative aspects of their present Christian identity. Whereas the Bible is often distant and dead in Western literal or liberal interpretation, here it is close and powerful. This Bible of the Latin American base communities is a Bible which can change people, even nations.

Meanwhile, many of us in the rich "first" world find ourselves uneasy with interpretation which is not well measured by our Bible-centered categories. For example, most historical critics like myself have been trained to focus on original intention.
Many of us wonder how liberation theologians can be so selective in their focus on biblical texts (Exodus, Prophets and Jesus) and so often inconsiderate of the original context of the Scriptures. Thus, the Exodus story of God’s special care for Israel is often taken as an example of how God works with oppressed groups in general. What was originally a story of God’s “option for Israel” is read in liberative contexts as “God’s option for the poor.” All such critiques, however, miss the point. In the liberative contexts where the Bible is most alive right now, the issue is not primarily focus on the Bible in itself but the Bible’s potential as a life-giving resource for liberation.

"Synergy" as an Image for Liberation Interpretation

How might we describe what liberation interpreters are doing right, so that we might do it too? Some of us might be tempted to say that these liberation theologies do a good job of "application," relating scriptural truths to their contemporary referents. But a term like application suggests that first you discover a truth in Scripture which only later you "apply," discovering what the text "meant" before moving to what it "means. 8 This image does not convey the dynamic process of mutual illumination, indeed (as we will see later) mutual transformation of both text and situation which can occur when Scripture is read in the heart of liberative struggle. I propose that "synergy" is an image which can convey the dynamism and power of liberative encounter with Scripture. Definition: as opposed to one source of energy working alone, synergy is the interaction of different sources of energy to produce a force greater than mere addition would produce. One type of energy feeds off the energy of the other and vice versa. For example, each member of a good Bible study brings a limited amount of insight and interest into the discussion, but when the discussion starts and the insights are pulled together, a whole new perspective on the text is reached. Insights feed on one another. The message of the text comes alive, and the members of the Bible study begin seeing new ways their situation is illuminated.
by the text. Now they are excited and activated. Their common contributions have fed off each other to feed the flame of the Spirit moving among them.

Synergy with a biblical text would be the kind of interaction which happens when elements of the situation illumine—even transform—the text, while the text in turn brings new perspectives on the situation, even changing it. This has been true for a long time in Black Christians' special reading of the Exodus texts. Take the following excerpt from a sermon on "How a People Make History":

Once Harriet understood this reality—that she could not be both slave and free—all indecision ceased; all confusion in her mind ceased. Harriet Tubman became unified within herself. And then her God, the God of her fathers, was able to counsel Harriet Tubman and guide her successfully in her commitment.

Once Harriet made the journey North by herself, she qualified to become a conductor on the Underground Railroad. She knew the road, she knew the dangers. She knew that you couldn't be overconfident about your friends' willingness to help you. You had to be careful not to push your friendship too far.

The slaves built legends around Harriet Tubman. They legitimated her as their hero. Before she stood up to her overseer as a slave girl, the family called her Minti. After she took her bold stand, they called her Harriet. After she began leading her people to the North on the Underground Train, the people called her Moses.

She notified the people of her presence by whistling like a whippoorwill, or hooting like an owl, or singing "The Chariot's Coming . . ." When the slaves would say, "Moses been here," the slave masters wanted to know, "Who is this man, Moses?" The slaves smiled to themselves: our Moses is a woman.

With the emergence of liberation theology, this understanding of the Exodus has become more widespread. Today,
many liberation theologians have taken the Exodus as the paradigm for God's action in history, of the socio-political character of salvation.  

This integration of Exodus scripture and liberative struggle has produced both a new reading of the Exodus texts and a new understanding of the religious (and not merely political) significance of liberative struggle. Moreover, this synergy with the Exodus image has empowered many working within North and South American contexts to work with greater energy and insight toward liberation. One of the virtues of the "synergy" image is its ability to describe both 1) the process of mutual illumination of Scripture and situation and 2) also the human empowerment which arises from this process. In contexts permeated by conscious and unconscious Christian presuppositions, synergy with Scripture is power. The Bible continues to exercise a deep and abiding influence within the church and many (now largely unconsciously) Christian societies.

Synergy with Scripture need not just undergird and affirm liberative or other programs in which we are already engaged. For example, reading onward in the Exodus story to Exodus 32, the people are wondering what happened to Moses, the one who led them out of Egypt (note the lack of recognition of God's role here). Left without their human leader, they commission Aaron and his sons to build a golden idol. And upon casting this golden calf, Aaron and his sons proclaim: "This is your God, O Israel, who led you out of Egypt." The people then celebrate a pilgrimage holiday, feasting and offering burnt and communion offerings. Their Exodus God has been made into a simple golden bull, a material image of an animal to be tamed and harnessed to human ends.

This story mirrors the human tendency to see either a charismatic leader (say even a Martin Luther King, Jr.) or a tamed God—even an Exodus God—as the primary force behind human life and/or liberation. The rest of the Exodus 32 story shows how this cult of the tamed God turns out to be the opposite of the worship of the God of Israel. It is an abomination to attempt to represent Yahweh, the true God of Israel, with images. This God of Israel ever stands over against human attempts to
harness God to our own concerns and political projects. Yet no one is immune from the tendency to do just that, not even Aaron and his sons, otherwise the ideal figures (along with Moses) of so much of the Pentateuch. Synergy with the Bible is a sword which can cut two ways, to affirm and to critique.

Synergy and a Rewritten Bible

One might argue that both the preceding two examples can be taken as extensions of the original intentions of biblical texts. Indeed, many liberation theologians would claim that the Bible was originally intended to preach liberation and that it continues to be a testimony to God's decision to side with the poor. Others would maintain that the Bible does have some oppressive traditions in it but that the majority supports the liberative project. One aspect of liberative interpretation is the selection of those biblical texts with the most potential to fuel liberative struggle.

Whereas those involved in third-world revolutionary struggle often find their situation transformed liberatively by the Bible as it stands, many feminists find that very same Bible to be an important part of the problem. There are a variety of ways to cope with this reality: many traditionally anti-women texts in the Bible are being creatively reread, showing that the Bible is not uniformly patriarchal. The negative biblical perspective on women is part of its ancient Near Eastern background, and finally, there are ways the Bible's unique prophetic and monotheistic emphases can be used to critique the Bible's own patriarchy. Nevertheless, the biblical texts are not preoccupied with overcoming patriarchy in the same way many of us today are. For this reason, the best an honest feminist historical-critical investigation of the Bible's own thought world can often achieve is a three-by-three-foot plot in an acre of that world, not the broad and deep base of liberating memory needed to cultivate a feminist church.

Building instead on the truths they have met in their struggle against patriarchy, feminists have realized that not only can Scripture be creatively used to transform a situation but the
truth met in liberative struggle can also be used to transform Scripture through rewriting/counterwriting it. This process of rewriting bears strong resemblance to the process of retelling involved in the formation of our Bible. Our Bible (the Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic history, for example) was formed through a process of appropriating ancient authoritative traditions. Nevertheless, the ancient editors/authors often radically altered the significance of these authoritative traditions through retelling the stories, giving the traditions a new context, and/or making alterations in the traditions at key points.  

Similarly, some feminist poets and liturgists have appropriated the early authoritative tradition in order to draw on its power, but they altered the biblical material at strategic points in light of their own powerful experience. Take, for example, Carter Heyward's rewritten creation account:

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In the beginning was God
in the beginning
the source of all that is
In the beginning
God yearning

God moaning
God laboring
God giving birth
God rejoicing
And God loved what she had made.
And God said,
"It is good."
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Here insights arising from the embracing of the body and experience of mothering have enriched the creation text, overcoming some of its cold hierarchies. The female imagery elegantly elucidates the connection between God's creation/birthing of the world and God's approval of it: "It is good."

Sometimes the associative power of Scripture can be drawn on so that a biblical text is not just elucidated but turned upside
down. An example of this is the final part of Arlene Saidman’s counterwriting of the story of Lot’s wife (Gen. 19:26). Here Saidman has given Lot’s wife a name: Tova. Tova is thinking about her neighbors in Sodom, having heard that they would be destroyed:

Tova couldn’t understand why she and Lot were chosen to be saved. She knew they did their best to do what was right, but they weren’t perfect. Who was? And what about the babies and the innocent children? Why couldn’t God just destroy the people who were really evil? Why destroy everyone?

Tova heard Lot and the men sent by God calling to her. She took a last look around, tightened her arms around her bundles, called to her daughters and ran out to meet them. As they fled down the street, Tova heard one of the men say, “Flee for your life, do not look back.” She felt something in her eye and as she brushed her hand across her face, she felt the salty residue that had been left by her tears. At that moment, Tova’s heart was so heavy with sadness and pity for those who were left behind, that she could go no further. She turned back to look for one last time.

God saw Tova and felt her anguish and compassion. God knew that Tova could never be happy knowing she had survived while everyone else had been killed. God knew what to do. As Tova turned to look back, God changed her into a pillar of salt. For just as Tova’s tears evaporated leaving their salty residue, Tova’s spirit evaporated, leaving forever a monument to her deep feelings of love and caring—a monument made from the condensation of Tova’s compassion.  

The original narrative portrays the transformation of Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt as just punishment for her disobedience of the messenger’s commands. Saidman, however, focalizes the story through Lot’s wife’s eyes and draws on the potential of the salt-pillar imagery to invert the biblical narrative’s negative portrayal of Tova’s behavior and its consequences. In some important respects, this particular counterwriting is an extension of a process already begun in the formation of the
text on which it is based. At some point an editor/author recontextualized the terrifying story of Sodom and Gomorrah through insertion of a transitional bridge (Gen. 18:17-33) between the parallel accounts of Abraham at Mamre (Gen. 18:1-16) and Lot at Sodom (Gen. 19:1-29). In this transitional bridge, Abraham asks the same question of God that Tova is asking in Saidman's rewrite: "Will you indeed destroy the innocent with the guilty?" (Gen. 18:23) Part of the power of Saidman's rewrite is the way it resonates with the themes of Abraham's confrontation with God.

Of course, there are crucial differences between the options available to the editor/author of Gen. 18:17-33 and the options available to counterwriters of Biblical narratives like Saidman. Whereas the ancient editor/author was able to insert her/his transition into a still permeable biblical text, Saidman's and others' rewrites will always (in the foreseeable future) be separate from the text upon which they are based and from which they draw their power. These rewrites will not be found in the Bible but in commentaries and other reflections on it.

Even standing separate from the text on which it draws, such rewritten Bible has and can empower human transformation. This feminist rewriting of the Bible is an example of synergistic mutual transformation (as opposed to mere mutual illumination) of Scripture and situation. Synergy is an image for biblical interpretation focused on the liberative potential of biblical texts. The image expresses the potential of the Bible to both transform and be transformed by a situation of struggle for life, often in ways unrelated to—or even contradictory to—the original intention of the biblical texts. Indeed, this feminist development of liberation interpretation helps make clear that the validity of such interpretation does not depend on its correspondence with the original intention of the texts, however that may be discerned.

Synergy toward Life

Nevertheless, for all its flexibility, such a synergy criterion is not enough. Though not every agenda can synergize with the
biblical witness, some extremely wrong things can interact powerfully with it. For example, just as Scripture empowered the American civil rights movement, it has been used effectively to prop up apartheid in South Africa. Within our context, synergy is power, and we must take full responsibility for how we exercise it. No formal criterion for Scripture interpretation (like Synergy) will absolve us of this responsibility to evaluate the religio-political results of our interpretations.

I suggest that an interpretation must not only dig deep into the tradition and our situation; it must do so in a way which takes us where we "need" to go. We might decide that interpretation must "bring us closer to God," "manifest the Reign of God," "empower us toward work for justice and peace," or any number of other ends which describe what we think should happen through our encounter with Scripture. This focus on the goal or teleological norm of any interpretation can help us to recognize the ultimate worth of any interpretation of Scripture. Interpretations are to be judged according to how closely they represent and remain open to the Spirit of God at work in the world.

Latin American liberation theologians and their communities witness that the God they have met through interpretation is a God with a special preference for the poor, a God who sides with the poor's struggle for liberation from oppression by the rich. This belief in God's "option for the poor" then becomes their hermeneutical key for interpreting the Scriptures. An interpretation is not selected just insofar as it synergizes with the Biblical text but also insofar as it empowers the poor to liberate themselves. In other words, they don't seek just synergy with the Biblical text but synergy for the poor, synergy for liberation.

But this is not all most liberation theologians would claim for their belief in "God's option for the poor." Many would also argue that all of the Bible, or at least some kind of "core" of the Bible, itself witnesses to God's "option for the poor." They would hold that this is not just their experience, but that the text in itself, when read correctly, testifies to God's special commitment to the poor. This then allows them to condemn previous
traditional readings of their oppressors and present their own liberative interpretation of Scripture as normative for others.

It is at this point, more than any other, that I think first-world Christians may want to pursue an alternative path for interpretation. Scripture repeatedly testifies to a variety of things (including an occasional divine option for the rich) which can be construed in an infinite variety of ways. It would be an illusion for us to isolate only one theme and propose it as at the center of Scripture. I suggest that we first-world readers must take responsibility for the interpretive aims we choose. For example, a criterion which measured the "promotion of liberation" could encourage readings which draw on the manifest liberative potential of many biblical texts. But in the final analysis, our choice of one of those criteria is a distillate of theological reflection on our own communal experience, which is unique to ourselves. 19

I maintain that those of us in the first world who are rich (at least by global standards) will need to pursue some norm other than that of "God's option for the poor," for if we focus exclusively on our role in liberating the poor, we risk perpetuating the paternalism and dependence which are essential parts of the problem of oppression. All of us are inevitably and unconsciously formed by our own socio-economic class interests. Though we may follow the poor's lead in dismantling the structures which bind them in an oppressive relationship with us (such as third world loans and military aid), the time has come to 'just say no' to our constant, often good-intentioned efforts to do the poor's work of liberation for them. The best ones to direct and execute liberation are the poor themselves. 20 Yet any close look at our lives shows that poverty is not the world's only type of brokenness. Most of us have been damaged in various ways: women being denied autonomy or men being denied vulnerability, sufferers from sexual and physical abuse along with those who suffered unintentional emotional damage from their parents, the alcoholic, workaholic, those of us whose busy righteous (i.e., politically correct) lives are but a thin veneer over a desperate sense of unworthiness... the list could go on. And I have not even begun to mention ways in which our nation
as a whole suffers in its bondage to a high standard of living, dominance of other nations, and an awesomely destructive military power.

So much of this pain is hidden, but it is real and deep.

One colleague of mine mentioned that when he came to pastor his first church, all the people he met seemed like "normal," happy people, but as he went into their homes and got to know them, he began to wonder if there were any "normal," happy people anywhere. Deep down under the "normal" front we present to the world, beyond the pastor's cheerful jokes and talk about other people's suffering, there is an ocean of unspoken suffering right here in us. Some of it is damage caused by our own formation in oppressive, patriarchal structures, and some of it is not.

But the key for a first-world parallel to third-world liberation theology will not be just reiterating the third-world poor's discovery that God can empower them toward liberation. The key for us will be finding the courage to face our own suffering. As Rita Brock in her book *Journeys by Heart* puts it:

> We are called to remember our own brokenheartedness, the extent of our vulnerability, and the depth of our need for relationships. Hence we are called not to dependence on a power outside ourselves, but to an exploration of the depths of our most inner personal selves as the root of our connections to all others.

The witness of Latin American base communities, American Blacks, feminists and many others is that a synergistic encounter with God through Scripture has empowered them to "take heart" in liberating themselves. In affirming their struggle we have our own journey to make, both as individuals and as communities, a journey toward discovery of our own brokenheartedness. Indeed, this brokenheartedness is a special gift, enabling us to reach out to others suffering similarly with an understanding of their suffering from the inside. Only this process of individual and communal self-confrontation can enable us to act from the heart, both in our own ministry to those who have suffered similarly and in our affirmation of and
solidarity with the liberation struggle of those who have problems different from ours. Without such self-confrontation, without such recovery of "heart," our efforts to help will all too often be "heartless."

In this process my community might represent its experience of the fruits of the Spirit in the following way: as interpretation which promotes life in all its fullness (both individual and communal). Here "promotion of a just peace" would be understood as an integral part of this overall "promotion of the fullness of life." Then my community could test the life-giving power of each interpretation, case by case. Indeed, this criterion can provide the basis for re-envisioning the role of any expert in religious interpretation, whether professional biblical scholar, pastor, or Bible-study teacher. According to this criterion, we are only helpful for (Christian) religious interpretation to the extent that we empower the community to enter into a life-giving synergistic encounter with Scripture.

Community members know the contours of their suffering (at least those aspects of their suffering which they are ready to confront); we cannot tell them. Therefore, to the extent that we experts try to dominate the synergy process or limit its validity, we are only getting in the way. Nevertheless, we may still be able to play a role: inviting others to the kind of life-giving encounter with the text that we ourselves have experienced. Insofar as we have already used a certain text to delve deeply into our lives, we will be equipped to lead other community members toward a powerful encounter with that part of the Bible and themselves.

This life-giving encounter can take a variety of forms. Rather than talking through the entire sermon, the preacher might initiate the kind of conversation over Scripture engaged in by the peasants at Solentiname. Or perhaps the Sunday school teacher might lead the class to step inside a biblical narrative, identifying with one of its characters and moving through it scene by scene. And like the feminists discussed above, the community may be moved to rewrite Scripture contemporizing a prophecy, redescribing their suffering following a certain Psalm lament, or writing a fifth gospel about a female Christ.
Whatever is done, the key issue will be "To what extent does this approach promote a life-giving encounter with Scripture?"

Synergy and Authority

I conclude with the recognition that this approach to Scripture does not provide the means to decide between one community's interpretations and another's. Though we can use the synergy image-ideal and our teleological norm to evaluate interpretations for our purposes, we cannot reliably distinguish between our good interpretations and everybody else's bad ones. Therefore, a combination of the synergy formal norm and teleological norm(s) cannot support using the Bible to coercively alter other people's perspectives.

For this reason such a norm system for biblical interpretation would involve rethinking our images of biblical "authority." Not only would "authority as raw domination" be inadequate but also any image of "authority" which continues to imply the existence of a truth in Scripture which is automatically privileged over other sources of truth. Indeed, "authority" itself may be a poor, hierarchically oriented term. The Bible as our Christian "heritage" or some similar term may better express the synergistic norm, with openness toward different ways to cherish and work from that "heritage." Synergistic interaction with Scripture is part of who we are, but it is in what happens in and through that interaction, not the Scripture itself, that Truth can occur.

Though this approach to Biblical interpretation risks splitting us into a variety of little interpretive communities, it recognizes that true integration of our communities does not and will not occur on the level of a shared biblical text and united norms for its interpretation. Rather, what is required is the dissolution of the socio-political and mystifying ideological structures which divide us.

For a long time Bible-centered norms for biblical interpretation have been among these mystifying and divisive ideological structures. As long as many of us have maintained that truth was in Scripture and that our readings were somehow an exten-
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sion of that truth, we have been able to disavow a modicum of responsibility for our views. Rather than owning our responsibility for discernment of truth in the interaction between our lives and Scripture, many of us have been able to maintain that our views are somehow uniquely sanctioned by the Bible. Moreover, this power has not been evenly distributed. For too long, certain people have had special power—whether clerical authority or expert status—to interpret the Scriptures for others. Not only was Truth portrayed as in the Scriptures but only some people had the keys to it. With regard to peasant revolts, slavery, patriarchy, and even liberative struggle, we people with such interpretive power have often supported or changed the status quo by using the Bible as a weapon: finding a truth in it to wield against our opponents. As harbingers of God’s peaceable realm we must hammer that biblical sword into a plowshare. This paper has been built around the idea that not only do we need to look for justice and peace in the Bible but we must seek images for reading the Bible justly and peacefully. Perhaps “Synergy toward Life” can be such an image.

NOTES

1. This essay has benefited immensely from the input of various people who have seen previous drafts of it, including my students and colleagues at Methodist Theological School in Ohio: Kempton Hewitt, Linda Mercadante, Sharon Kingo, Simeon DeVries, Fred Tiffany, Jeff Hopper and Bob Tannehill. I thank them for their help and bear full responsibility for this final product.


5. See Frei’s The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative as a whole for a nuanced description of this process.


8. It is here that David Lockhead's otherwise helpful book still preserves remnants of 'first' world interpretation. See his The Liberation of the Bible (Student Christian Movement of Canada, 1977, and the World Student Christian Federation of North America, 1979), especially pp. 51-59 and 47-62. Though he qualifies his distinction between explicatio and applicatio (p. 48), the primacy of these categories in his introduction of method indicate a continuing first-world sort of effort to defend the Bible before defending ourselves.


14. In looking to canon for models for reading it, I am here building in particular on the work of James Sanders. See Torah and Canon (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972); idem. Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). I am using the Bible's tradition history only to establish our contemporary interpretive freedom. Though we might want to follow the example of liberating biblical texts, surely we would not want to follow the Bible's example when it uses ancient traditions to oppress people. Moreover, once we have identified biblical texts which were once used to oppress people, we need not be limited by their original purpose. Just like the biblical authors, we can exercise freedom; we can turn these texts on their heads, subverting their original purpose. Here I...
diverge from those like Boff who would follow the lead of tradition history or
those like Mosala who would claim that only originally liberative biblical texts
were truly liberative now: Clodovius Boff, Theology and Praxis: Epistemologi-
cal Foundations (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987); Dumeleng Mosala, Biblical 
Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
1989), particularly pp. 20 and 31-38. See also the endorsement of Boff's
approach in the recent book by Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner:
Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies

15. Carter Heyward, "Blessing the Bread: A Litany," in Our Passion for
Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation (New York: Pilgrim Press,
1984). Jewish feminists have been particularly creative in rewriting tradi-
tion. See in particular: Judith Plaskow, The Coming of Lilith: Toward a
Feminist Theology," in Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion,
ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979),
188-200; idem. "Jewish Memory from a Feminist Perspective," Tikkun
1 (1987), 28-34 and reprinted in Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist
Spirituality, Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, eds. (San Francisco:
Harper & Row, 1980), 33-50; and Jane Sprague Zenes, ed. Taking the Fruit:
Modern Women's Tales of the Bible, 2nd edition (San Diego: Woman's Institute

Taking the Fruit: Modern Women's Tales of the Bible, 2nd edition (San Diego:

17. The 18:17-33 transition probably underwent more than one stage of
tradition history. The parallel speech introductions in 18:17 and 20 are the
most prominent indicator of this. As is often the case, the first speech is the
later one (otherwise the previous speech introduction could govern a speech
inserted after it). Thus the first stage, 18:20-21, is preoccupied with God's
destructive and investigative intentions, while the latter stage, 18:17-19 and
22-33, is preoccupied with Abraham's privileged relationship with Yahweh and
confrontation with Yahweh out of that privileged relationship. In our discus-
sion in the body of the text I am dealing primarily with the innovations
introduced by the latter of these two stages.

18. See the survey in Liberating Exegesis, pp. 46-50, and sources cited in
note 21, p. 81.

19. To be sure, our communal experience probably has itself been shaped
through our encounter with the Scriptures.

20. Here I take issue with the assumption of the "option for the poor"
criterion by Rowland and Corner in Liberating Exegesis, particularly in their
chapter on "Liberation Theology in the First World," pp. 138-140. Here they
focus almost exclusively on the role of first-world interpreters in a global system
of oppression. They see this participation in a global system of oppression as
giving us a stake in doing a first-world version of liberation theology. Never-
theless, unlike those in third world-base communities, we are on the other side
of the fence of class struggle. We are bound by our own class interest to
disempower the poor and perpetuate their dependency on us, even in our best-
targeted efforts to help. Moreover, in focusing on our efforts to alleviate the
poverty of others, Rowland and Cross collude in our own tendency to avoid
allowing God (through Scripture) to touch our own brokenness and suffering.
SPIRITUALITY IS A TERM that has gained wide usage during the past ten years. It usually hints of something prodigal having its long overdue homecoming. Yet the lack of clarity about the meaning of spirituality tends to hide deeper resources in Christian tradition as well as obscure the spiritual tasks awaiting the church. The result is a mixture of confusion and opportunity.

A working definition of spirituality emerges from an analogy: spirituality is to theology as practice is to theory. Spirituality is the living out of one's theology, and theologizing is the conscious articulation of one's lived spirituality. The two relate much as "action" does to "reflection." The spiritual revitalization of the church entails two dimensions: a deepening recognition and rehearsal of faith as an orienting trust from which action and life style flow; and increasing clarity about the church's traditions as spiritual resources for its present praxis.

Individual Spirituality. Stage one of this spiritual renewal has focused almost exclusively on individual spirituality. From a sensed need for deeper and more intimate relationships with God, what has emerged is a rediscovery of personal spiritual disciplines. Thus the publishing market has blossomed with
guides for journaling, contemplation, spiritual direction, meditation, sacramentals, and personal liturgies.

**Communal Spirituality.** This important revitalization, however, can encourage an unfortunate conflict between individual spirituality and the reality of the church as communal. Thus a second stage is emerging, building upon the first. What is being rediscovered is not only the neglected spiritual figures and practices within the church's long tradition, but examples and models of communal spirituality. This accounts for the growing fascination of Protestants with monasticism, intentional Christian communities, and retreat centers. Recognition of the intimate nature of faith, then, is leading to awareness of the unconditionally communal nature of Christianity as well. Many denominations are beginning to understand that deep individual spirituality requires that one be enfolded within the mutual support and accountability of intentional Christian community. Life as pilgrimage is intersecting with a new sensitivity for the priesthood of all believers, issuing in groups whereby support and accountability intertwine. The church is beginning to reappropriate her own traditions, which have provided models for secular groups in the past. For example, United Methodists are rediscovering with creative appreciation the covenant discipleship of the Wesleyan tradition, layered with increasing intensity in societies, classes, and bands.

**Corporate Spirituality.** Thus far, spirituality has tended to be a code word for two stages of renewal. The first focuses on the individual's lived faith style. The second is taking shape around experimentations in the church as communal commitment. Important through these individual and social dimensions of spirituality are, a third stage is needed. The church, by nature, is systemic. It is a corporate institution, sharing with other institutions the need for structured patterns of leadership, decision-making, resourcing, professionalism, and discal solvency. We are beginning to sense that the church is a self-contradiction if individual spirituality has no transforming significance for the corporate structuring and functioning of the church. There is reason for deep suspicion if the church as corporate institution simply parallels the secular marketing
structures and methodology of corporate America—rooted as it is in self-interest, measurable efficiency, profit-margins, and a management-by-objective operating style.

This article is concerned to take several first steps on the edge of this third stage—the search for corporate spirituality. If the church can recognize this unexplored dimension as a serious task for the next decade, then spirituality will finally come into the mainstream of Protestantism.

The Board of Ordained Ministry as a Spiritual Agency

Personal research, questionnaires, and visitations over the past several years have convinced me how little precedent and how few resources exist for exploring the relation of spirituality and functional ecclesiology. As a result, some of us have been pushed into a period of experimentation, one which I find very satisfying. On the one hand, exploring these questions has permitted the interplay of the various dimensions of my own calling—as a seminary professor of theology, an ordained United Methodist clergyperson, a family brother of the Trappist Order. On the other hand, as secretary of the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Missouri West Conference, I have found dedicated colleagues with whom to experiment. Together we are working toward a corporate spiritual vision.

The goal of this experimentation was not to resurrect some neglected portion of our past, although we did indirectly rediscover some of our own traditions. Rather, it began as a spiritual hunger leading to individual disciplines. These began to be discussed informally at our meetings as a board. Gradually some of us were drawn to recognize and confess the poverty of our communal spirituality as a board. We were convinced that our corporate functioning contradicted the faithfulness we were called to model, examine, monitor, and nurture.

While the scope of corporate spirituality is broad, our introduction to it as a board has been through three distinct ecclesiastical functions, often but wrongly held to be exclusive: 1. discernment as a spiritual method for determining the call
of ministerial candidates; 2. clergy covenant as an instrument for spiritual renewal of the annual conference; and 3. corporate decision-making as a spiritual act. Judging by requests from other conferences, there is reason to believe that there is an especially widespread interest in the spiritual exercise of corporate decision-making.

Discernment of Callings

I remember without fondness my experience as a probationary member of an annual conference. Yearly, during exam week, I drove over 400 miles from seminary for a one-half hour meeting with several members of my Board of Ordained Ministry. These sessions featured anecdote-swapping about spouses, children, and mutual friends. While most boards of ordained ministry today take their responsibility for ministerial candidates more seriously, similar tales could be told by many who have gone through this process more recently than I.

Our board sensed the need for a spiritual dimension in the "screening process." While candidate interviews were usually conducted in a context called a "retreat," in truth there was little to distinguish them from interviews for secular service jobs. Assuming the problem was ours, we made inquiries into how other boards were conducting their candidate interviews. These inquiries elicited many confessions of failure, few solutions, and consistent pleas that we share any insights we gained along the way. Left to our own creativity, it soon became clear that no simple format change could solve our dilemma. If our responsibility to screen candidates was to become a spiritual event, we would need to begin with ourselves—to reconstitute ourselves as a spiritual agency.

With this clarity came an even harsher realization. Our board, as a microcosm of a widely diversified annual conference, was functioning primarily on a political model, and decisions were often made on a competing, faction-serving basis. We had to move beyond the rivalry of conservative and liberal, piety and social justice, rural and urban. Our hope rested on one point of
agreement: unless we could learn to relate communally with respect and love, there was no way in which we could function corporately as a spiritual agency, let alone model spiritual revitalization for the annual conference.

Our first step in search of a solution began with deep uneasiness. It was an overnight fall retreat—for the 35 board members alone. We gave it a title: "Ministerial Covenant as Unity in Diversity." The expenses were paid not from our administrative budget but from continuing education funds. Roommates were good-naturedly teamed together according to "those least likely to choose each other." We began at 11 AM with input on the "ministerial covenant" as found in the Discipline, stressing that our ordination entailed a vow of commitment to one another, despite all differences. The noon meal was a context for seeking this unity in diversity, reflecting together on "Where I Find God in My Ministry."

Afternoon sessions began with the Eucharist, intentionally using one loaf and a common cup. The sermon was shared exegesis by board members on the text describing Jesus' calling of the disciples. After the service, we distilled four primary groups to address each of the major responsibilities of the board: Enlistment and Candidacy, Ministerial Formation and Ordination, Ministerial Education and Pastoral Care, and Conference Relations and Support. Members of each group were chosen to represent a microcosm of the full board. After a break, a plenary session discerned the particular responsibilities which belong to each group. This was followed by a free-wheeling session of visioning, and newsprint containing hopes for the board and conference soon covered the walls. The day ended with worship, which used various scriptural texts on servanthood, followed by an optional liturgy of footwashing. All chose to participate.

After morning prayers, the four functional groups met to translate the vision into preliminary plans for the year. The board retreat ended after lunch with the Wesleyan Covenant Service. The benediction was an assignment of "board partners"; these "unlikely" two-somes were asked to offer daily
prayer for each other and occasional tokens of caring until the next Board meeting.

Our plan called for a second retreat for board members to be held the following fall on the theme of "Personal Spirituality." That retreat eventually took place, but the positive evaluations from the first retreat encouraged us to move more quickly to the next stage—experimentation in corporate spirituality. We then focused on creating a spiritual models for relating as a board to ministerial candidates. What emerged was a two-day spring retreat for all candidates and the full board together. The theme was to be "Discernment and the Wesleyan Means of Grace."

This event was held at a Franciscan Prayer Center near a central urban area. The Board, involved in the planning throughout, received retreat materials in advance and then gathered at 4:30 on a Sunday afternoon for final instructions. Deacon and Elder Candidates arrived an hour later. Each was greeted by the particular B.O.M. member assigned to be that person’s "pastoral friend" throughout the experience. There were 29 candidates and 33 board members in this experiment. Each pastoral friend helped his or her candidate to get settled in the room they would be sharing, after which hot cider provided aroma and informality for meeting other duos. The whole group then focused on practical details such as location of eating facilities and hiking trails. Then each elder candidate was teamed with a deacon candidate. These two, together with their respective pastoral friends, ate the first meal together.

The evening began with explaining the theological rhythm of the retreat, emphasizing that the purpose was no longer that of voting to accept or reject candidates. Rather, all of us would be responsible together to discern the particular nature of the ministry to which the Spirit was calling each person—whether or not that turned out to point toward ordination. Such discernment began with a half-hour panel discussion on the subject "The Meaning of Ordination." Participants—three candidates and three board members—were chosen on the spot. This created an atmosphere of informality and common vulnerability which flowed into the eight discussion groups
which followed. A series of numbers had been written on each name tag so that throughout the retreat each discussion group had a different membership. Thus every B.O.M. member had personal interaction with each candidate.

At 8:15 P.M., there was a presentation on "The Wesleyan Means of Grace." In the small groups that followed, individuals shared spiritual journeys, focusing on how the means of grace had been involved in discerning one's call to ministry. Evening prayers were held at 10:15, following which candidates were given concrete questions for over-night discernment. These were concerned with commitment, authority, gifts, and lifestyle. Returning to their rooms, candidates found gifts of care from board members, the bishop, the cabinet, local church members, and family. Meanwhile, B.O.M. members took turns in the chapel, praying for each candidate by name.

Rising was at 6:45 A.M., with coffee and orange juice brought to the candidates in bed. After morning prayers, there was an explanation of the nature and purpose of the eight Discernment Teams. Composed of 3-4 B.O.M. members, each team met that morning with a deacon candidate, with his or her elder candidate-friend serving as silent observer. These sessions had a different flavor than interviews of the past. Beginning with prayer, the candidate shared her/his discernment from the previous night. The task was not to say "yes" or "no. "The working assumption was that each Christian has a special calling, with the team responsible for discerning the particular direction that call is taking in each person. This could be ordained, consecrated, or lay ministry. A second assumption was that every Christian needs spiritual direction. The discernment teams were to model this spiritual function for each person, providing concrete insights for the journey. Two rounds of such discernments completed the morning.

At 1:00 there was a panel on "Preaching the Word," followed by discussion groups sharing one's personal theology as foundation for the homiletical task. Throughout, B.O.M. members were expected to share of themselves just as deeply as candidates, and to receive discernment in turn.
Discernment teams for elder candidates, with their deacon friend as silent observers, occurred in the afternoon and evening. At 6:00, everyone attended the Roman Catholic Mass at the Center, without taking communion. Afterwards, discussion groups focused on this question: "What, if anything, needs to be said or done with our elements (which were on the table beside the altar at Mass) in order for us to be able to complete Holy Communion?" Reassembling at 6:15 P.M., one of the groups was chosen to serve communion to everyone, providing any "missing" liturgy which reflected their theological answer to the question posed. Evening prayers centered on concrete intercessions in behalf of the world.

Morning prayer consisted of participation in one of the regular monastic offices (lauds) of the Franciscan sisters. From 8:00-10:30 A.M., the full Board met for corporate discernment about each candidate. The special effort to provide personal interaction between each board member and each candidate had a marked effect on this conversation. Meanwhile, the candidates met for their own session of mutual discernment, followed by input on conference resourcing. During this whole time, candidates took turns praying in the chapel for the Board—that their discernment would be wise, faithful, and spirit-led. The Eucharist began at 10:45 A.M. After a sermon focusing on the meaning of the ministerial covenant, each candidate and pastoral friend went for a walk outdoors. In such friendship duos, the Board's discernment was shared, providing support and suggestions for that person's ongoing pilgrimage, whether toward ordination or otherwise. The pairs reassembled for communion, and the elements were reserved for latecomers.

The closing luncheon permitted the original groups of four to bring personal closure to the event. The peace was passed among the whole group, and the benediction given. The candidates left, and the Board reconvened for thanksgiving and for regular matters requiring official action.

When the written evaluations were read, several things had become clear. The event had been so well received (by uneasy candidates and wary board members alike) that a new model for approaching candidacy had emerged, centering in spiritual
"discernment." The priority had shifted to where it belonged: God does the calling, and ours is the task of faithful discernment of the Spirit's leadings. For this, spiritual preparation for each Board member was necessary. Discernment of "specks" requires a prior wrestling with the "log" in one's own eye.

We parted, but no longer as individual interviewing teams who had dealt with isolated individuals. Having functioned organically as the body of Christ, no candidate would enter the Conference as a stranger. Beyond our expectations, sixty-two persons had become spiritual partners in ministry.

The Clergy Covenant

Having had some success in bringing candidates and Board into the corporate spirituality of ministerial partnership, the next step seemed to involve comparable beginnings in spiritual revitalization within the Annual Conference itself. Unless there could be a renewal of the ministerial covenant among other clergy, we had the uneasy sense of having set these new candidates up for inevitable disillusionment. Our focus turned to one of the most spiritually drained parts of most Annual Conferences—the event called "Executive Session". Ironically this is the very occasion where clergy meet in closed session for precisely the purpose of exercising and renewing the ministerial covenant. In a recent national consultation on that subject, John Harnish of the Detroit Conference characterized the executive session as "so boring" that "people go only because it's business and they have to, rather than thanking God for allowing them to be a part of it."1

This led us to reconceive the executive session in terms of its Wesleyan spiritual purpose. As we explained in an introduction to the experiment that resulted, our intent was to regain a sense of "Christian Conference." One of John Wesley's most remarkable contributions, Wesley considered it so crucial that he forbade his ministers from preaching where no Christian conference was available.
The word "conference" itself is revealing. To confer means to bring persons together in order to "compare" and to "bestow." Convinced that no one could be a Christian alone, Wesley's Societies were divided into classes of twelve persons, meeting weekly for "Christian Conference." The function was two-fold. First, they compared their weekly performance with the Wesleyan rules for Christian living. And second, they bestowed supportive fellowship of kindred souls and minds. In short, a Christian Conference is a covenantal group for the sake of growth in grace, where there is a sharing of one another's joys and sorrows, and the truth is spoken and heard in love. One could not be a Methodist without belonging to such a group. Today, that function is thought to be provided by the local congregation.

The obvious benefits of Christian conference for fostering an authentic Christian life poses a crucial question for United Methodist clergy. If one cannot be a Christian without the supportive accountability of a Christian conference (as now exercised by the local congregation), what happens to clergy who are not permitted to belong to one? The answer is that the annual conference is to provide the Christian conference for clergy, focused in the executive session—for clergy only.

This spiritual purpose becomes clear when one considers the questions asked of ministerial candidates during the executive session. Two in particular are agonizingly direct: "Are you going on to perfection?" The one that follows drives to the heart: "Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?" Not only are the only acceptable answers "Yes," but Wesley was clear that clergy have no right to ask such questions of candidates unless they have themselves been rendered accountable by these same questions. Such accountability is the first function which renders the executive session essential as Christian Conference for each clergy-person.

The second function centers in the tri-partite covenant involved in ordination. A clergy-person has a special covenant with Christ, rooted in the call to ordination. Second, one has a covenant with the church, which has recognized of one's call as valid, and one's self as fit, effective, and ready to exercise that
CORPORATE SPIRITUALITY

The third covenant, however, is often unrecognized, overlooked, or discounted. We have a covenant with each other. Analogous to marriage, in ordination we have made a profound commitment, saying in effect:

I take you to be my colleagues in ministry, To have and to hold, from this day forward, For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, In sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, Till death us do part.

Such a covenant is foundational for the executive session. We gather to hear of those who are hurting, those who have been chosen, those who have left us for awhile—by choice or by death. As clergy are to provide Christian conference for the laity, so in executive session clergy are held accountable to the bishop, as their pastor, for the state of their individual and collective souls.

Thus the tradition to begin with the hymn "And Are We Yet Alive?" makes sense. Our early brothers and sisters had been apart, in hostile environments—battling everything from diphtheria to outlaws to Baptists! Some would not be returning. And so it is in 1990. During the past year, some have enjoyed large salaries—and are we yet alive? Some have been workaholics in the drive to gain prestigious appointments—and are we yet alive? And some feel left behind, neglected and unrecognized—and are we yet alive?

This growing understanding of the Wesleyan background for corporate spirituality is what pushed our Board of Ordained Ministry to refashion the executive session. The loss of such corporate spirituality resulted in the symptoms of isolation, distrust, and competition. The task we set ourselves was to restore, at least symbolically, the corporate nature of the ministerial covenant. We kept before us as motto these incredible words from the Discipline: accountability without love is cruel; love without accountability is irresponsible.

Our experiment entailed turning the previous 1 1/2 hour business meeting into a worship event, with hymns reinforcing the distinguishable actions. The first part centered in the historic questions, to be asked later of the candidates, as a basis for silent self-examination by each clergy person, followed by
sharing one’s discernment with a colleague seated nearby. This accountability ended with corporate confession and absolution, issuing in prayers of intercession for one another.

A ten-minute sermon was a reflection on the "State of the Clergy Soul," distilling conversations on that subject by Board members at a prior Retreat. The required Disciplinary report-questions were placed in meaningful groupings—such as "Transitions in the Covenant," "Termination of the Covenant," and "Affirmation of the Eternal Covenant." Instead of being read aloud, the questions and names were printed in a bulletin, and lifted in prayer (after vote, when required), such as:

Wise and Gentle God, guide our colleagues who have been placed on leave of absence since last we met. Hear their needs and sustain their hopes, as we promise our availability to them. In the name of Christ we pray. AMEN

After questioning the candidates as we had questioned each other, we elected them into full connection. The service ended with a "resssealing of our covenant." Small dishes of olive oil were passed, each person touching the forehead of the next person, saying: "Remember your ordination and be thankful."

The response was overwhelmingly positive, centering in a renewed sense of corporate spirituality as ministerial covenant. The several negative comments we did receive centered in resisting the depth of ministerial covenant conveyed by the liturgy, and discomfort with the sacramental use of oil. I found a letter from a pastor of a large congregation, with whom I have little in common: "I want you to know that I felt better about who I was and what I belonged to after the session. I needed the reminder!"

Corporate Decision Making

Such experimentation with corporate spirituality leads toward one further arena in need of spiritual discernment: corporate decision-making (from committees, to congregations, to annual conference sessions, to clergy appointments). Innovations here may be difficult, for modern individualism resists even acknowledging Christian decision-making. It is
quite different from the secular method of projecting personal opinion into group decision-making through majority vote.

Richard Foster recognizes this when he insists that the church is not a democratic institution. It is called to be a theocracy of the Spirit. As a result, the church must regain the method of discernment as its defining process. The Jerusalem Conference, meeting to decide the future of Christianity's world mission, reached its conclusion by discerning what "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28).

My first such experience occurred over twenty years ago. A black family visited our morning worship. By evening, an emergency meeting had been demanded. After hours of passionate, negative personal feelings, an elderly woman rose, and with difficulty said, "I guess we're pretty clear about what we want; I happen to agree. But that's not the issue. We're here to discover what God wants. I think that's equally clear. I move we declare ourselves an open congregation." And we did--once the difference was clear between voting one's personal opinion, and discerning the will of God.

There are helpful precedents for learning to substitute the lurings of the Spirit for the politics of competitive self-interest. On the personal level, there is the "Clearness Session," developed in the Quaker tradition. When a person needs guidance in making a decision, a group of 4-6 persons is chosen, whose spiritual sensitivity is trusted. In advance, they are given in writing the question to be discerned, and relevant background information. In the group session, they listen carefully as the person shares anything further that might be germane. Group members may ask clarifying questions, make observations, and suggest assignments, but they are not to tell the person what decision to make. There can be one session, or a series. The sole task is a birthing of Spirit. Parker Palmer finds such sessions "startling," for almost always an inner answer is present, needing only to be drawn forth by spirits listening to Spirit.

The Sisters of Loretto expand this process in their group decisions. When discussion becomes intense, heated, or unduly political, anyone can call for a period of quiet reflection--a
"discerning silence"—usually 3-5 minutes. It is remarkable what clarity can occur in this way. Quakers often use such spiritual silence to gain "a sense of the meeting."

The Jesuits are helpful in exploring large group structuring for such spiritual discernment. One possible application could be when a problem of consequence is to come before an Annual Conference. In that case, 1. delegates would be informed in advance how to prepare spiritually. Finding a quiet place, one prays that one's ego not get in the way of the discernment process. Then one studies the material given, providing data and various perspectives on the issue. The task of such preparation is to refrain from making any decision, coming to the session instead with an informed, open, and spiritually receptive mind. 2. The first group activity is for the working of imagination—a free-wheeling time for suggesting possibilities that "pop" into the mind, without regard for practicality. 3. This period is followed by prayer for illumination regarding the multiple options uncovered. 4. The group, as a whole or in smaller groups, distills the ideas into a more manageable and practical handful of options. 5. Next, the group discerns the pros, then the cons, for each option, writing these on newsprint as offered. No point already made can be repeated, nor can one express one's own opinion. 6. When finished, each person goes off alone, reviewing the options prayerfully, asking the Spirit for discernment. 7. Upon returning, persons are numbered off into small groups, sharing what happened. 8. After these experiences are reported to the whole group, a straw vote is taken on this question: "Toward which option do you discern yourself being lured by the Spirit?"

In this manner, the group often finds that it is moving toward a consensus. If not, the process repeats, beginning with step 6. It continues as long as there are those who feel strongly that their discernment has not been heard, or that the group has not yet considered the options sufficiently.

Such spiritual revitalizing of decision-making throughout the church's life is not likely to occur, however, unless it becomes modeled in the appointive process. Discussions of the current itinerate crisis in the United Methodist church tend to
identify the central disrupting factors as clergy couples, women clergy, and separate spouse vocations. The truth, however, is that the primary disruption of the appointive process is economic stratification. The profound value of itineracy rests on the spiritual process of discernment—by which the needs and gifts of each congregation are permitted yearly to interplay creatively with the gifts and needs of each pastor, intersecting in mutual pilgrimages. The appointment process was intended to be a deeply spiritual event—in method and in goal.

What has rendered this process increasingly difficult, however, is the establishment of a quantitative ladder (of salary and membership), functioning as an instrument of reward and punishment. What hope does the process of spiritual discernment have if parishes and pastors must be matched by economic proximity? By narrowing the options in this way, any additional contingencies within the pastor’s personal pilgrimage appear greatly magnified in the eyes of the cabinet. The renewal of corporate spirituality will not return to the appointive “system” until these economic barriers are sufficiently modified. Where a revitalization of the appointive system is beginning, it tends to be in annual conferences where the bishops are keenly interested in spirituality—as in Iowa, Wisconsin, and West Virginia. There the matching of needs and gifts, limits and opportunities, is being done by a process we have identified as spiritual discernment.

Conclusion

Our intent in this article has been to offer concrete ways in which the present resurgence of interest in personal spirituality can begin to revitalize the church—through the emergence of a corporate spirituality that is functional. We conclude by acknowledging two barriers to this revitalization. On the one hand, those who are deeply immersed in personal spirituality may operate as if “church” is simply a name for gathered Christians. On the other hand, those for whom “church” is an organism whose reality far exceeds the sum of its
parts may not recognize their faith as rooted in Spirit. For the revitalization of the church, we deeply need each other.

NOTES

Parker Palmer, To Know as We Are Known (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 92ff.
HOW DOES THE environment of the small-membership church modify its Sunday morning worship? Does the situation of the small congregation dictate a different practice of worship than in larger churches?

Most of us who have attended or served small membership churches feel the community is so different that worship must be strongly impacted. Small congregations feel like an extended family where everyone knows your name and your history. Small churches are more...intimate. If one word could characterize the small membership church it would be “connection.” Such close relationships should have a major impact on worship. Knowing one another personally affects how we raise prayer concerns or witness our faith. However, the research in this area has been directed toward concerns other than worship, and so we are left with feelings and suppositions rather than hard data.

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Those of us who have sampled the literature can support the impression that the world is different when viewed from the perspective of the small congregation. The research speaks of the high priority placed on relationships of the number of shared experiences, of the existence of an informal communications system, and of the importance of family relationships. All of these combine to produce what I have called the "communication situation" of the small membership church. Recently I have explored how the communication situation in the small membership church affects preaching.\(^1\) Community, sharing and participation all define the small churches communication situation. Community is characterized by closeness, by shared concerns, and by knowledge and understanding of one another. Sharing is intimate and includes individual and group stories.

Participation extends to everyone and is often more highly valued than whatever is the intended product of the action. Another recent book reaches similar conclusions and describes the small church as (1) a folk society where roles are more important than offices, and as (2) a society with a priority of social connections.\(^2\)

The communication situation of the small congregation also applies to worship. The churches I have studied have an average attendance at Sunday morning worship of sixty or less. Two groups are centered in Illinois and Kansas. A third group is widely distributed geographically in this country and is a good sample of small congregations in this United Methodist Church. The research is incomplete, but some preliminary conclusions may be drawn.

Music and Congregational Singing

Describing their church music, one committee began with negatives. "Our choir," they said, "does not practice very often. We have no regular director. They only sing a special once in a while." I was prepared for a disastrous evaluation. However, the committee concluded: "The choir makes a valuable contribution because they lead the song service and everyone sings with more feeling and the service moves better when the choir
leads.” This church had learned to value what their choir could
give. They were an exceptional case.

Small-membership churches feel ambivalent about music
and congregational singing in their worship. In surveying com-
mitees constituted by pastors to evaluate worship and in
reviewing questionnaires filled out by congregations following
worship, I learned that four-fifths of the churches in the study
expressed enough concern about music and congregational
singing to institute a program for its improvement. No other
area of worship approached this level of concern.

Part of the difficulty is that these congregations have con-
flicting values concerning music in church. They value music
like larger churches and know they have serious handicaps in
providing able accompaniment, skilled choirs, and competent
leadership. On the other hand, they judge music differently
than does the larger congregation. Relationship with musicians
is more important than skill. They rely almost exclusively on
volunteer leadership and utilize it differently than larger mem-
bership churches. Accompaniment is usually provided by a
piano. A song leader often directs congregational hymn singing.
When there is a choir, it represents a large percentage of
church attendance. The Rural Church, published in 1988,
reports on studies done in 1952, 1967, and 1982. During that
period, the use of choirs in mainline small churches increased
significantly. In 1982, 20.5 percent of mainline churches with
fewer than 50 members had a choir. A choir was present in 38.6
percent of churches with between 50 and 99 members.3 The
United Methodist churches I studied had a much higher
presence of choirs. Including children’s youth, and part-time
adult choirs, 60 percent of these small churches had choir
groups. Several had two!

Though many small congregations have choirs, they differ
from those in larger-membership churches. These choirs have
limited numbers and skill and seldom spend much time
rehearsing. Anthems are often repeated. Arrangements of
hymns are popular as anthems. Sometimes simple two-or-three
part popular gospel music is used, depending on the character
of the congregation. The existence of a song leader often ex-
cuses the choir from taking responsibility for leading congrega-
tional singing. Hymns are seldom rehearsed by the choir. De-
spite the differences between these choirs and choirs in
larger congregations, still they tend to measure themselves by
the same norms as do choirs in larger-membership churches.
Primary emphasis is placed on the singing of an anthem, but
this is the most difficult thing for a small-congregation choir to
do. The things that they could do more easily and which would
make a more positive congregation to worship, such as leading
congregational singing and leading congregational service
music, are often ignored. Small congregations value and expect
participation by a high percentage of the people. Choirs in those
congregations, however, often monopolize singing that would
better be given to all the people. The result is both poor
anthems and poor congregational singing.

Several churches with which I am working are testing
another approach. They place primary emphasis on congre-
gational singing and ask the choir to take responsibility for that
singing. Familiar but not trite hymns ("Don't include the dozen
hymns that are sung over and over") are highlighted. This
approach includes introduction of a hymn by the choir or a
soloist and the singing of it each Sunday for a month. A portion
of the hymn may continue to be used in succeeding months as
service music: introit, call to prayer, response, etc. The con-
gregation comes to sing these hymns with meaning and en-
thusiasm, and these hymns add the functional dimension of
service music to worship.

The hymns introduced in this program are not new. Small
congregations resist learning new hymns. Often good leader-
ship to help in the learning of new hymns is lacking. However,
the number of hymns available to a congregation can be ex-

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panded by using all hymns known and adding other texts to
familiar tunes. New hymns can be learned after the general
quality of hymn singing is improved. Congregational singing of
lines or portions of hymns as service music can also improve
singing ability and appreciation. In churches where there is no
choir, the song leader and/or accompanist take a similar role in
leading congregational singing of hymns and service music.
Music is central to worship and of particular importance in the small-membership church. Speaking of Roman Catholic worship in small rural communities, Michael Kwatera says, "The biggest strength in rural liturgical music may be the sense of community. Rural people's lives are interconnected with one another as a result of their great sense of rootedness and stability." The small congregations I have surveyed find hymn singing very meaningful; therefore, when congregational singing is not a strength it is a painful deficiency.

Corporate Prayer

I am convinced there is an emergency in the prayer life of most churches. Questionnaires circulated among members of worship committees and members of congregations report a widespread feeling that there is little effective praying in their worship. Committees were unsure about the function of prayer in worship. Some bulletins revealed an absence of prayer. I think this feeling of disease would be even more marked if many people had not learned to expect little from prayer in worship.

Prayer has become isolated from the real world in which people live. There is a tendency to live in one (secular) world and pray in another (sacred) world. However, the small-membership church is a wholistic world where people and concerns are both secular and sacred. New liturgies move toward prayer which is grounded in the "conviction that life itself, as creative empowerment and as fellowship in a community of praise, offers the incessantly repeated initiative of God inviting us into intimacy." Such intimate relationship with God may be reestablished in the community of the small congregation.

This is another area where practice in the small congregation should, and often does, differ markedly from practice in larger congregations. The distinctive characteristics of the small congregation strongly impact prayer.

The raising of joys and concerns, widely introduced in the last decade, is an example of an act that takes a very different expression depending on the size of the congregation. In a
service of over a hundred worshippers, eliciting joys and concerns is most often delegated to the clergy if it is attempted at all. In the small congregation, the raising of joys and concerns is often a very active part of the service in which a high percentage of the congregation participates. Occasionally clergy report that raising of joys and concerns has "gotten out of hand." There is concern that this part of worship has too much input and takes too long. One pastor said, "We have tried several ways of raising prayer concerns, but most didn't get a very good response. We didn't feel comfortable and committed to be a part. We tried a congregational response: 'Hear Our Prayer O Lord.' It wasn't heart felt. When we invited concerns, they went on and on. Now we just mention the names of people in need."

The nature of the concerns of the people is also different depending on the size of the congregation. In the small-membership church the joys and concerns are very personal and immediate—people mention the names. Birthdays, anniversaries, events in people's lives are named. The recalling of sickness and death often has an existential quality, and there is a pressing sense of the need for prayer. Sometimes this need is so great the congregation turns to prayer even if that is not the next item in the bulletin. Joys and concerns are so immediate and personal that larger or more-distant issues named in larger churches may be neglected.

The pastoral prayer in the small congregation is likely to be a "prayer of the people" in which the minister has a real sense of lifting the concerns of the people to God. Laity may also pray these prayers. Churches of all sizes may use written prayers, but in the small congregation written prayers are preliminary to real praying. Members of the congregation may add their prayers aloud, and it is not unusual for small congregations to gather at a kneeling rail for communal prayer.

Creating a setting for prayer needs attention in any size congregation. Larger congregations often modify lighting and have special musical settings for prayer. The small congregation may not have a rheostat on the lights, but it has other advantages. I recommend that attention be given to the setting for prayer. The person gathering joys and concerns of the
people may walk into their midst and speak conversationally. Everyone may join in the choral call to prayer. Churches often have a sense of a holy place for prayer. The minister, lay leaders, sometimes the whole congregation may move to this holy space to raise prayers in behalf of the people of God.

Transitions are important. People need notice and time for preparation to make the transition to prayer. Signals in congregations of any size help people move toward prayer. Calls to prayer may be spoken, or be indicated by movement or by choral and instrumental music. In the small congregation it is easier for prayer to belong to all the people and not be delegated to clergy. There are many times for prayer in worship. These various times of prayer should contribute to a time of sustained and intense prayer and not be substituted for it.

Prayer is so central to the definition of worship that churches should rethink their practices to reflect the needs of the people and the situation of their worship. Intimacy and caring communication are the *sine qua non* of prayer.

**Gathering**

Gathering is receiving increasing attention in worship books. *The Companion to the Book of Services* says this part of the service should be "uncluttered," and then it lists six different patterns found in United Methodist congregations: (1) informal greetings, conversation, and fellowship; (2) announcements and welcoming; (3) rehearsal of congregational music and other acts of worship that are familiar to the people; (4) informal prayer, singing, and/or testimony; (5) quiet meditation and private prayer; and (6) organ or other instrumental or vocal music. Worshiping congregations of every size have experienced a recent proliferation of acts of gathering.

Strangely, gathering is more often named as a problem of worship when a few people are gathering than when the congregation is large. I think it is because a strength of the small congregation is often experienced by some members as competing with worship. The small congregation almost always gathers for friendly visitation. Members know each other and
long to share the intimate happenings of their lives when they gather. This is so important it is often difficult to call them away from it. Friendly conversations may continue on through the time of preparation for worship, and the talking may be louder than the musical prelude. In some congregations there is a kind of competition between those who want to encourage friendliness and those who want to encourage prayer.

My recommendation when this is reported as a problem is to find ways to defuse the competition and to affirm both friendly visitation and prayerful preparation for worship. Gathering is a complex time when many things happen. Gathering is also a central and focusing activity. "Here as people greet one another, share what has happened to them during the past week, welcome visitors, prepare to worship, the body of Christ is literally being 'remembered,' the members of that body are once again taking visible form."

The key is for the congregation to find and agree upon signals that help people know when they have moved from one time (friendly visitation) to the other (prayer). There are many signals, but some have lost their meaning and need to be reinvested with significance: Instrumental and/or choral music, movement of the clergy to the altar, ringing of the bell, lighting of the candles, carrying in of the Bible. In one church I asked, "What is the signal for moving from friendly visitation to preparation for worship?" The response was sure and immediate: "When Elsie unplugs the coffeepot."

Scripture

The reading of scripture is being impacted in churches of the United States; however, the change is not size differentiated. In congregations of every size there has been a recent movement toward multiple readings, use of various translations, and reading by laity. The three-year common lectionary has had a profound influence on American churches.

A distinctive use of scripture in small congregations has not been developed largely because the need has not been felt. The prevailing pattern in small parishes is modeled after larger
congregations and after traditional clergy-dominated reading of scripture. In many small-membership churches the reading of scripture is closely related to preaching. This has many positive effects, but it has also often limited the reading to biblical material that is to be used in the sermon and caused it to be read by the person who preaches. "The modern use of lay lectors highlights the fact that the Scripture belongs to all baptized Christians. The practice gives laypersons a sense of ownership over that which is central to the life and witness of the church: God’s word."  

Although questionnaires seldom surface deep dissatisfaction with the reading of the scripture, it is often rated as "average." I invited congregations to evaluate several areas of worship as "very meaningful," "somewhat meaningful," or as "lacking meaning." In many responses the reading of scripture failed to be given a very meaningful evaluation. I found that, in small congregations, the introduction of some alternate patterns for the reading of scripture is appreciated. I have sought patterns for the reading of the scripture that better fit the communication situation of the small-membership church.  

The Bible should ground the worship life of the church. When the lectionary is introduced as a way of implementing this goal, it is almost always received with enthusiasm. Moving through the canon and getting a representative hearing for the whole Bible is appreciated. Members of the congregation are often willing to read and study passages during the week prior to the worship service. Bible study groups can be formed. Members who have read and studied the lesson in advance of the service may be willing to read the passage in the worship service. I encourage that one or two lessons be read by lay members of the congregation standing in the midst of the people. A few people who are able to read well and who will make preparation can serve the congregation in this ministry. A final lesson will be read by the preacher from the pulpit just before and in preparation for the sermon. Intimacy and face-to-face communication as it is experienced in the small congregation makes a marked contribution to these readings. Readers
can prepare the people for the lesson with a brief introduction of the passage. Often these introductions are more than listing of themes and characters. They relate passages to local needs and interests.

Even when there is not an initial feeling of need for new practices, the introduction of scripture as outlined above can impact the whole worship life of a congregation.

Sacraments

In small churches, baptisms are big events. They occur rarely but happen to people who are members of the extended family. The danger is they will be given social significance but not theological significance. Everyone will celebrate the new baby or the faith of the adolescent as something important in the life of someone known and loved. The congregation is likely to be less sure about the theological significance or the liturgical expression.

An ancient ritual being introduced to most churches fits the small congregation well. The renewal of baptism is personal and communal and doesn't have to wait until someone is to be baptized. Remembrance in the sense of re-living may help people reclaim the theological meaning of baptism and use it as a motif for worship. Baptism reminds us of God's initiative. People in small or large congregations need to realize that worship depends first on God and second on our faithful response. The continuing significance of baptism for the whole church may be emphasized with teaching, preaching and occasional renewal of baptismal vows by all the people. One congregation used the occasion of baptism of one of the family for a congregational study of baptism. When the infant was baptized, it occupied the entire service and was a matter of celebration for the whole community.

In churches of all sizes we are seeing a new emphasis on the Lord's Supper. Again the small congregation has advantages over the large church in introducing changes. I think the single largest impediment to more frequent communion, for instance, is the time it takes to serve a large congregation. In the small-
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membership church, various means of serving may be utilized, including gathering the whole congregation around or even seating them at the table without concern for how long it will take. Willimon and Wilson note that the small church is a "believable family" and likes family-type activities such as a meal with real bread and wine. 9

In the United Methodist Church there has been a dramatic increase in the frequency of celebration of the Lord's Supper. My research indicates that the denomination has moved from quarterly communion to monthly communion as the norm. Tentative results also indicate that communion at the primary worship service is more frequent among smaller congregations than among large congregations. Large-membership churches now often have weekly communion, but it is celebrated at one service in a multiple-service Sunday-morning schedule.

The churches in my study divided, with one-half serving the Lord's Supper monthly plus other special services. The other half served Holy Communion bi-monthly or quarterly plus other special services. The thirty-five churches on which I have information concerning frequency of serving the Lord's Supper served 10.8 times per year.

My recommendation when this is a concern of the congregation is to deepen the meaning of the Lord's Supper for the people before increasing its frequency. When people experience the real presence of Jesus Christ, they welcome frequent celebration of Holy Communion. Introduction of special services can often provide both deeper meaning and occasion for teaching. Christmas Eve communion and Maundy Thursday communion have been introduced widely in Protestant denominations. These services take a different form than regular Sunday morning communion. They introduce practices that may be replicated on Sunday morning. Classes, often existing Church-school classes, may study the content of the liturgy. Celebration of the Lord's Supper in people's homes, for shut-ins, at retreats, for the first meetings of the year, with youth-men-women organizations, all give new perspectives. Serving the Lord's Supper may be connected with other valued acts of worship. Congregational singing during serving of the
bread and wine is recommended in all services in the new United Methodist Hymnal. In some churches prayers of the altar call are combined with receiving the elements of Holy Communion. Sometimes the Sending Forth is accompanied by receiving the bread and the wine as people depart. The church pot-luck supper could begin with celebration of the Lord's supper.

The small congregation experiences itself as an extended family. The Lord's Supper may become a family meal that expresses the solidarity of this family. At this meal we are gathered as God's children and learn a style of being together that resembles the community of the early Christian house church.

Small congregations bring special needs and special opportunities to worship. The small-membership churches included in my study were helped by taking the unique situation of the small congregation into consideration as they planned worship. This often involved setting aside previous norms borrowed from larger congregations. As the special characteristics of congregations with fewer than sixty people in Sunday morning worship are recognized and taken into account, I am sure that better programs for their worship can be developed. Since Sunday morning worship tends to be the primary focus of these congregations, implications growing out of like studies are of major importance.

Notes

8. Craig Douglas Erickson, *Participating in Worship* (Louisville:
Voicing the Cry of the Outsider: The Preacher's Task in Epiphany

Richard F. Ward

The Problem with Being an "Insider"

HE LOOKED UP at me across the table in the hospital cafeteria. His dark brown eyes seemed tired and his black beard a little grayer than the last time I saw him. "I don't know, I'm feeling alienated from the church right now. It must be because I'm having a hard time learning the difference between being a professional Christian and a Christian disciple." I knew exactly what he meant. In that moment, we admitted to each other that our lives were so crowded with church "busy-ness" that we were losing our vision of Jesus' Way. Such is the predicament of the "insiders" in the Jesus Movement according to Mark. Those closest to Jesus in Mark's Gospel, his disciples, the eyewitnesses of his miraculous acts, even his family members, do not know who he is or where he is taking them. Discipleship is a means for personal advancement to James and John (Mk. 10:36). We hear echoes of James and John's request in popular American Christianity today. If you follow Jesus, they say, you will gain success and security in the eyes of the world.

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Those of you who are reading this article have probably spent a great deal of time and energy becoming an "insider" in ecclesiastical circles. You have attended the right schools, taken the right courses, read the right journals and books on preaching and have been paying your professional dues. Now you are expected to speak with some authority each Sunday on what authentic Christian discipleship means. Yet you may be having difficulty imagining what an appropriate response to the call to Christian discipleship might be in our time. Is it a nod of assent? The signing of a pledge card? The hope that someone will speak to you after the service about becoming a member of a committee? Will Christian discipleship be equated with institutional maintenance and personal advancement or does the call take us somewhere else? Epiphany is the season for "insiders" to seek a fresh encounter with Jesus. Without a sense of who Jesus is, we will lose our way as disciples.

What was unclear to the disciples was clear to Jesus. The pathway to saving knowledge of God led him to Jerusalem, into conflict with the authorities, and then to a cross. On the way he is interrupted by the persistent cry of someone on the edge of the crowd who knows who Jesus is. Bartimaeus, a blind beggar sitting in disgrace in the dust by the road, calls Jesus the Son of David and begs for mercy. The "outsider" is immediately silenced by the "insiders" who are startled by the blind beggar's entry into the story.

Meet 'Hawkeye Pierce'

When I was a freshman ministerial student in college, I tried desperately to get into a prestigious mens' group. Since the college was a conservative, church-affiliated institution, fraternities and sororities were not allowed. So we created "social clubs" that functioned exactly like the Greek system at "secular" schools. In order to be "in," we had to devise some process for keeping others "out." One guy that I thought should be kept out was a young man named Mike Pierce.

Pierce’s nickname was "Hawkeye," but not because he had the handsome demeanor of an Alan Alda or the rugged machis-
mo of James Fenimore Cooper's character in *The Last of the Mohicans*. A Hollywood Hawkeye he was not. He got the nickname because he was virtually blind in one eye. He'd look up at you through his thick glasses, speak to you, and then walk off to the science building. At 18 his hair was already thinning out and he carried a briefcase in the Age of the Knapsack. Though he was a brilliant student, he kept coming to the rush parties for our club. He did not seem to fit the image of the ideal member. Still, owing to his persistence and earnest desire to be a part of the group, he was offered an invitation to join. So was I. Now we were both "inside" the same club. Slowly, steadily, as we walked through those first years of college, "Hawkeye" moved from the periphery of that circle of young friends to its very center.

One day in the deep freeze of the Oklahoma winter, Hawkeye caught a bad case of the flu. It was about the time of year when you just could not afford to get sick because you have too much to do. Some of us were trying to look after him—bringing him soup and beverages from the cafeteria, running errands for him, and helping him keep up with his work. One evening he looked at us through his one good eye and announced that what he really wanted was a good old-fashioned healing service, complete with hymn singing, the laying on of hands, the reading of scripture, and the anointing of oil—right there in his dorm room! That was quite a surprise. Was he serious? It was a tall order for a group of snickering practical jokers who had lampooned everything from the tapping services into the Sacred Order of the Bison to the John Barleycorn Revival Hour. It wasn't that we were unfamiliar with healing services—as young children we had listened to the radio preacher ask us to put our hands on the radio as he prayed. (And we did when no one was looking!) So he wanted a healing service, did he? Well, a first-class, no-holds-barred healing service is exactly what he would get!

Late one Friday night, we came to Hawkeye's room in the dorm, clothed in black robes, with our fingers in our Bibles at James 5:14-15. Some had brought candles and others had sneaked a small vial of vegetable oil out of the cafeteria for
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"anointing." With our tongues placed firmly in our cheeks, we began. We laid him out in the center of the group and began singing some of the songs he had requested. But when we got to the last line of the first verse of "Amazing Grace," the whole spirit of the occasion was transformed. Instead of cynical students poking fun at the religion of our ancestors, we had become participants in a sacred ritual. We were in the presence of someone who was pulling us together and binding us in love. Gradually our playful action took on new levels of meaning. What I remember most was the moment when each one of us knelt down there beside him and told him how much we appreciated him.

I am not sure what this service did for Hawkeye's case of the flu but I do know what it did for me. In my moment with him, I remembered how hard I had worked to form a "fraternity" without Hawkeye. Now I realized that the very one I had sought to exclude had become the instrument for bonding us together. Once I had used words to hurt this man and to keep him out of a particular circle of friends—now there he was, lying in the very center of that circle. Once we had been a clique that could not imagine him being included; now we were a community of friends that could not imagine what we would do without him.

An "outsider" had taken us more deeply into what we valued most—the joy of friendship. Likewise, insiders who are looking for a fresh encounter with Jesus may do well to listen to the cry of those who are marginalized in our society.

The Cry of the "Outsider"

The cry for mercy that persistently comes from those sitting in shame at fraying edges of the social order shakes "insiders" to the core, for it is a cry that reminds us of who Jesus is. "JESUS, SON OF DAVID, HAVE MERCY...!" stops Jesus in his tracks and stills the frantic posturing of his disciples. A beggar crying for Jesus' attention from the dust of the road silences the glib "Christianspeak" of insiders whose vision of faithful response becomes narrower and their conduct more exclusive. His cry for mercy leads us into a fresh encounter with
Jesus for it is the language of God’s coming Reign. God’s Divine Presence can break in anywhere someone asks for Jesus to stop and listen. It can happen by the road leading out of Jericho or in the middle of a dorm room in Oklahoma. We need only to listen.

*Sound* in the story of Bartimaeus leads to sight. Bartimaeus receives his sight because he is not afraid to persistently call out to the Son of David even against the din of those trying to silence him. This beggar is the model for faithful preaching. Preaching that does not know what to ask for and does not emanate from the depths of our own needs and those of our community cannot open the pathway to true discipleship. It is preaching “for members only” and it may even silence the cries for mercy coming from the outside. Preaching during the season of Epiphany is about asking for sight . . . again, for ourselves as preachers of the gospel and for those we speak to.

When Bartimaeus calls Jesus the Son of David, he enlarges the listeners’ understanding of him. Eduard Schweizer reminds us that this is only place in the Gospel of Mark where we hear the phrase “Son of David.” Suddenly, in one turn of phrase, this one on his way to Jerusalem is associated with the memory of the mighty king David, whose story nourishes hopes and expectations with images of God’s new age. It raises questions about the way we talk about Jesus in our sermons during this season. What is the image of the Christ that emerges in the hearts and minds of the listeners when we speak about him? Does what we say expand or narrow the hearers’ perception of Jesus? Do our words enable or hinder the listener’s healing encounter with Christ? Do we even expect him to stop and listen to us?

**Word, Sound, and Image**

Flannery O’Connor creates a wonderful title character in her short story “Parker’s Back.” Parker has a penchant for tattoos. Except for a large empty space on his back, they literally cover his body. Parker is married to Sara Ruth Cates, the daughter of a Straight Gospel preacher, and she disapproves of every-
thing Parker does. To win her approval, Parker seizes upon an idea. He will fill that space on his back with a picture of God because "She cain't say that she don't like the looks of God!" This cannot be any tattoo, any picture of God; it must be the right one. He looks frantically through the tattooists' book of symbols, driven by the fanatical search for the right picture of Christ.

Parker's heart began to beat faster and faster until it appeared to be roaring inside him like a generator. He flipped the pages quickly, feeling that when he reached the one ordained, a sign would come... On one of the pages a pair of eyes glanced at him swiftly. Parker sped on, then stopped. His heart too appeared to cut off; there was absolute silence. It said as plainly as if silence were a language itself. GO BACK. Parker returned to the picture—the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all demanding eyes. He sat there trembling, his heart began slowly to beat again as if it were being brought to life by a subtle power.

Parker has the tattooist put the image of the stern Byzantine Christ on his back and returns home to show his wife. When she sees it, she screams "God don't look like that!" and beats him severely about the back, causing welts to appear on the face of the Christ. Parker leaves the house and in the final image of the story, as seen through Sara Ruth's piercing eyes, Parker is leaning against a tree, crying like a baby.

Unfortunately, this has been a description of many spiritual journeys in our faith communities. In a frantic search for the "right" Christ, some end up with this stern figure on their backs, a figure whose eyes pierce and condemn, who hurts instead of heals. Some find themselves outside the house, under the tree alone, weeping like a child, still waiting for the Word of Grace. Some find themselves under the cruel eyes of a religious system suffering abuse because they still have not found the "right" way to think about Christ.

Word and image are closely connected; the way we speak makes an impact on the way our listeners will envision Christ. Some images of Jesus that are being held in the community's memory are related to bad words uttered about God through...
their lifetime. These images may prevent us and our listener from hearing the healing word of grace.

The cries of a beggar by the road or the sobs of the misunderstood by the tree widen our perception of who Jesus is. If Jesus is the Son of David, then he is the Promised One who identifies with the outcast and the misunderstood. When he arrives, they recognize him as the one who has come to proclaim the good news that God's Reign will come and that hurts will finally be healed. Jesus calls out to those who are persistent in calling out to him and who long for vital contact with him, whether they be "inside" or "outside" the circle of intimates. When he speaks, he speaks simply, clearly and with authority. In fact, it is a word that facilitates healing and wholeness.

The Wounding Of The Word

There was a time in our cultural memory when the word had such a power. When a Greek warrior fell wounded on the battlefield, it was the duty of one of his comrades to come to his side and utter a "cheering speech," that is, words cast into poetical or musical form to comfort and soothe the fallen one until medical help arrived. These beautifully rendered speeches would assist or even effect the healing process. It is amazing for us to think of a time when language had this kind of power.

But what a contrast to the situation in our culture! We have a hard time even saying what we mean to each other. We live in a culture where it is the word that has been wounded. The integrity of the spoken word is a casualty in the war for attention and influence waged daily by propagandists, media consultants, advertisers, politicos, and bureaucrats who use words to manipulate, not to communicate, and who disguise truth rather than reveal it. Even religionists have made Word into an opaque monolith of doctrinal systems—it is not for them the living, breathing, authentic, cheering interaction rooted in experience and love of the truth.
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What is it about our Christian community that sets it apart from the kind of world where 'word' is divested of meaning? Our language about God has become so sophisticated. We have become experts at reading between the lines but have lost our ability to recognize the Word when it is uttered. Do our words keep some people out of our fellowship? Do they make Jesus out to be some stern, doctrinal Superhero or the realized Presence of God?

If Bartimaeus' speech enlarges our perception of who Jesus is, then his actions provide a model for true Christian discipleship. He does not eagerly arise to accept a set of doctrinal propositions or to enlist in a program for perpetuating an institution. Bartimaeus springs up out of the dust because he knows the thing he desires most in the world and anticipates Jesus' desire to grant it to him. He does not long for a favored position among the disciples or for some form of privilege and security. Instead, he asks for sight from the One he believes can restore it. Unlike his previous encounter with a blind man in Bethsaida (8:22ff), Jesus does not even touch Bartimaeus. He tells him that his faithful response, his recognition of who Jesus is, his persistence in calling out for mercy, his joyful response to the call, and his understanding of what he needs has opened his eyes. Jesus' Way is now open to him.

This is, as Schweizer says, a story about Jesus' determination to attend to the needs of the helpless and the handicapped and that those who would follow Jesus cannot help but share that concern. But it is also a story about admitting one's own "blindness" and knowing who to ask for enlightenment. The problem for many of us is that we feel we are so involved in Jesus' movement that we have lost Jesus.

A Word for the Wordsmiths at Epiphany

On the wall of the vestibule in the church where I grow up, there was a portrait of Jesus that was donated to our church by some Korean army officers. At first glance, you could recognize the familiar figure of Jesus the Good Shepherd, tending to his flock. Upon closer examination, however, the viewer could see
that the beautiful lines of the portrait were created out of words—the words of the entire New Testament. An anonymous Korean artist had used the medium of words to create this portrait of Christ. The viewer could not fully appreciate the full impact of this artistry unless he or she stood very close to the picture, but to do so mean that the picture of Christ disappeared.

As a young boy, I became disoriented when I stood before that picture. But when I stood back from them, I became aware of their subject again—the figure of the caring, healing Christ. Perhaps that is what we need to get ready to speak during this season of Epiphany. If we can stand back from our words about the Word and listen to the cries of the "outsider," we may gain a fresh perspective on Jesus' ministry. "Outsiders" can teach us to listen to the deepest desires of our own hearts and to bring them to the Son of David. It is the Promised One himself who grants us insight on the purpose, direction, and fulfillment of discipleship. Epiphany is a time to let a renewed vision of Christ hold our attention, to shape our words about the Word; it is a time to listen to and speak the Word which heals.

Notes


Given the secular character of Western, cosmopolitan society, it is hardly surprising that the theological problem of our age is the problem of pluralism. How do we proclaim an ancient gospel in "one Name" to a technological society where religious belief is marginalized; where the individual will is sovereign over values? What is the unique claim of the gospel in a consumer society with its supermarket of ideas? That is the question. It is a missionary call.

Answers abound. John Hick and other pluralists say that there is nothing unique in the Christian gospel. In the marketplace of religions, the claim of Christ is attractive, but it is only one among many claims from a variety of religions. God, says Hick, has many faces. Most theologians are uncomfortable with that. Some grasp both horns of the dilemma to maintain the uniqueness of Christ, on the one hand, but to include all religions, on the other hand, as hidden expressions of the truth of Christ. Paul Tillich's "latent church" and Karl Rahner's "anonymous christian" are notable examples. Karl Barth is still the best example of an uncompromising assertion of the uniqueness of Christ on the authority of special revelation. Even so, his claim has a propositional character of rational truth. Most evangelicals make the claim for uniqueness on the same rational basis.

David Tracy in *The Analogical Imagination*, has recently argued, on the basis of the primacy of language in shaping human life, that the Christian story in scripture is a "classic" which has traditional authority for its unique claim. The classic for Tracy has had, over the generations, a surplus of meaning, an abundance of beauty, harmony and coherence. The truth of Christ, he says, is well attested in the classic of the Christian story. Part of Tracy's problem is that he is a theologian talking to theologians, engaging in a frankly academic exercise on a mostly stylistic concept. The larger part of the problem, however,
ever, is that Tracy provides no criterion for evaluating the claim that the Christian classic is unique.

Lesslie Newbigin does not claim to be a theologian. He is, as he says, a missionary and pastor. Nevertheless, he deals with the problem of pluralism in a thorough and substantive manner which deserves the full attention of academia. His nearly forty years as a missionary to India and his long association with the World Council has given him a first hand, personal association with the pluralist society. On the other hand, his analysis of current epistemological, biblical and theological studies is broad and well integrated. The material in this volume he presented first at Glasgow University as the Robertson Lecturer for 1988.

His practical, missionary perspective is evident in the description Newbigin gives to his own position. It is not exclusivist, he says, in the sense of denying the possibility of salvation to non-Christians. It is inclusivist in admitting that grace operates outside the church; but, contra Tillich and Rahner, he refuses to regard non-Christian religions as vehicles subrasa of Christian salvation. He is a pluralist in acknowledging the gracious work of God everywhere, but thoroughly exclusive in affirming the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ (p. 182). The case made by Newbigin for the uniqueness of the gospel is frankly particular while recognizing the limits of every particular claim. It is a profound argument and apology for Christian faith. It puts the missionary movement on firm intellectual ground for the first time since World War I.

Newbigin argues, as does Tracy, on the simple recognition that language is primary in shaping human experience; that the Christian story has a normative claim in human society. Using the epistemological analyses of Michael Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn, he accepts a sociological definition of knowledge where thinking subjects are integral parts of the world observed; where facts are expressions of shared commitment. Using the work of Alisdair MacIntyre, he places reason also within the language system of a particular culture. Reason is not necessarily universal. Facts do not necessarily have objec-
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tive validity. Rationalism and empiricism are thus belief structures which are necessarily contained in and subject to the language systems of particular societies. There is no justification, concludes Newbigin, for marginalizing religious beliefs because they cannot be "proven" empirically or rationally. The proof of any belief is functional: its adequacy in organizing, in making sense and meaning out of human experience. Religious beliefs, particularly the Christian story, are to be considered as true on the same basis as scientific beliefs.

The Christian story of the election of Israel and of the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Christ is normative in the Church; and, Newbigin argues, makes an inclusive, normative claim in the world. Because language is essentially narrative, history rather than nature is the field of analysis. The fact of Christ is the central, organizing truth of history. That is Newbigin's thesis.

The fact of Christ is neither an empirical observation nor a rational proposition. It is more compelling as truth, however, he argues, because it puts both the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the empiricism of Science into a historical perspective of meaning. It is truth because it is the most successful, hypothetical 'lens' through which the world can be seen whole and organized significantly.

Even though the truth of the Christian story comes to us through the tradition, Newbigin's basis of authority is charismatic. Its truth is God's self-disclosure in history. The story is about grace, but it is the gift (charis) of grace which shapes and gives salvation within the lived experience of history. His theology of disclosure is not dependent on the events of history as Biblical theology, so called, would have it. It is more analogous to the way in which natural theology understands God's self-disclosure in nature.

The language of the story, however, is important because God's self-disclosure can only be recognized in the rational dialogue of the community of faith. Newbigin is very clear that although God's self-disclosure is personal, it is not individual but located always in the community, i.e., the church. The language of the story is also the written scripture, obviously.
But Newbigin avoids the literalist controversy by placing rationalism, even rationalist theology—as nearly all evangelical theology is—within the context of narrative. Narrative itself is normative only as a "lens" through which grace makes sense of human experience.

The charismatic nature of truth is apparent in Newbigin's theory of missions. We should, he says, pattern our missionary activity after the example of St. Paul, who preached Christ, baptized believers, grounded them well in the gospel and then went on to another place. Paul did not stay a lifetime to organize churches thoroughly after the pattern of the mother church. Neither should we. The story of Christ should be told and trusted to work its own power to change lives and societies in the context of differing cultures. He points to liberation theologies of Latin America and Asia and the theologies of Africa as examples of how that happens anyway.

The most important implication of Newbigin's charismatic definition of authority and its truth is his treatment of hope. Hope has no corresponding word and no meaning in the Tamil language (p. 101). Its lack reflects a paradigm of fatalism which characterizes Eastern religions generally. Narrative theology of the gospel, on the other hand, is an open-ended promise from an empty tomb. The guiding, normative promise of the kingdom of God is the expected fulfillment of the Christian story. The fact of Israel's election and the fact of Christ point to the fulfillment of God's kingdom universally.

The problem with charismatic authority, as Max Weber recognized, is that it is asserted by the charismatic leader but must be recognized as true and legitimated within a group of followers. In Newbigin's thesis, it is not a charismatic person but a charismatic community, the church, which tells the authoritative story. It is the church that lives out the hope of God's kingdom. But to assert the truth of Christ and to have it recognized and legitimated in the pluralist society is quite another matter.

Newbigin's argument gains some strength in that it is not an individual but a community of rational discourse with a strong, venerable narrative tradition which asserts the truth of Christ.
His argument gains additional strength in the universalism of the gospel itself. The church is to become more and more inclusive as its mission is lived out in both proclamation by word and also example of love and service. His argument is strengthened by his recognition that though the church is the community of narrative disclosure, grace does operate generally in society. Salvation is possible outside the church.

Nevertheless, the truth of Christ is a matter finally not of reason, not of observation, but of hope. Finally, we have to trust that the gift (charis) of grace will bring the kingdom of God to saving fulfillment universally. How that is to be legitimated now, before its fulfillment, is problematic.

Newbigin refuses, however, to admit the premise of pluralism: that every claim of truth has an equal claim for legitimacy. Jesus, he says, cannot be co-opted as one of the deities in a Hindu pantheon. Neither can Christ be only one truth among many in Newbigin's own pluralist England. The individualistic, secular pluralism of England is as much a mission field, says Newbigin, as is Hindu India. The truth of the Christian story and hope is, to be sure, yet to be legitimated. In the meantime, however, it offers a more productive "plausibility structure" than either scientific rationalism or any of the other world religions. The Christian story may well be, Newbigin speculates, a long-sought-for "unified field theory" of salvation!

Not that other "plausibility structures" are without merit. Every insight and theory of human experience is useful, Newbigin says, in detecting and interpreting God's self-disclosure in history. They simply do not have the universal, normative possibilities found in the Christian story told by the church. Actually, by making a strong, normative claim for the truth of Christ, Newbigin shows high respect for people of other religions and beliefs. He takes them seriously; more so than Tillich and Rahner, e.g., who try to co-opt them; more so than Barth and the evangelicals, who have no discourse with them; more so than liberals such as Hick, who level all opinions to equal non-importance.
The gospel must, nevertheless, be faithfully proclaimed in a world of many religions and beliefs. The world missionary movement foundered on the First World War. If the Christian nations of Europe could perpetrate such a devastation, how could people in other nations be persuaded of the superiority of Europe’s faith? It took a long time for the missionary movement to recognize how much classical Protestant theology had been contextualized into rationalist Western culture; how much liberal Protestant theology had been contextualized into cultural progress. Both were called into radical question by the war. It has taken even longer for the church to restructure its intellectual foundations in the context of its own culture.

Newbigin’s argument for the gospel is a strong bid for the re-establishment of the mission of the church. The gospel, he says, is always in the language and context of a particular culture. But, the truth of the gospel always critiques its cultural context. Not only that, but the narrative Christian story has run through many contexts of history with meaning and continues to provide meaning in new contexts where it is told faithfully.

Newbigin will doubtless offend liberals in this country as well as in England who have accommodated their theology to a pluralist society and eschewed the triumphalism of the missionary movement. There is indeed offense in the Christian story, Newbigin says, but it is the offense of creative fulfillment. He will doubtless offend conservatives in this country and perhaps also in England by his refusal to espouse the literal truth or even the primacy of scripture in propositional revelation.

Instead of dealing with those usual topics, he calls upon the church—the local community parish—to be the place where the truth of Christ is lived out in praise, discipleship, mission and service. Newbigin is a strong ecumenist, but it is not in the organizational structures that he sees the hope of God’s kingdom. It is rather in the community of the parish where the story is heard and learned and prayed with thanksgiving that its authority is to be found. It is in the parish which gives nurture and strength to its members to live out the commission.
of their baptism in the world that the mission of the church will be located. It is in the local parish which reaches out to its surrounding community in proclamation and service that the base will be found for world mission.

The implication of Newbigin's theology of the church, of course, is that the church has a public responsibility to its society. He affirms that clearly. The individualistic, pluralistic society of Western culture is incapable of reaching its promise by rational and scientific means. Moral values, for example, have no authority beyond individual preference. The age of Enlightenment is drawing to a close, and Western culture is in a crisis of immense proportion. The Church has a public responsibility to offer Christ.

Newbigin's book is neither the final nor the complete blueprint. The issues of community, of public life and of language need more exploration than our psychological and sociological disciplines have been able to achieve with their quasi-scientific methodologies. The theology of the church and its public responsibility must move far beyond a concern for individual salvation and other worldly fulfillment. But Newbigin's argument is hopeful. Perhaps we can trust the Lord of history after all.

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They are at it again. The prophets Hauerwas and Willimon have issued yet another indictment of contemporary Christian life and have sounded yet another call for church renewal and faithfulness. Hauerwas and Willimon declare that the old world of a shared Christian piety "has ended and a new world is being born" (p. 146). In this new secular world "paganism is the air we breathe, the water we drink. It captures us, it converts our young, it subverts the church" (p. 151).

Because the new world is so obviously at odds with the Christian witness, churches have a new opportunity for faithfulness. Where churches in the past have been too accommodating to the wider society, they should now uplift a distinctive Christian life. As citizens of a Christian colony, church members are "resident aliens" in the secular world. They help the world by witnessing to and exemplifying another way of life which is formed through loyalty to the Gospel, not conformity to the secular culture.

This Christian "outpost" or "beachhead" is "God's means of a major offensive against the world, for the world" (p. 51). Its first political task is not legislative lobbying but forming itself as a "community of the cross" (p. 47). Its ethics center not on abstract reasoning or case decision making but on training its members to live out the Gospel on their "journey" in an unfriendly world. Hauerwas and Willimon insist that Christians are trained for this journey as they are formed in a Christian community. By watching and imitating the "saints" of the church, Christians learn the "virtues" necessary to faithfulness. The journey requires a goal, "constancy," and "honesty" (pp. 61-64). The goal, defined as "true and complete friendship with God," is the basis for all Christian ethics. Hauerwas and Willimon do not work out the details of this goal but focus instead on the virtue of honesty. In their emphasis on truthful confrontation they reject "such bourgeois virtues as tolerance, open-mindedness, and inclusiveness" (p. 63). Indeed, the church has failed, they claim, because it has fostered a "conspiracy of
Ministers and lay people want so much to be nice to each other and the world that they fail to speak the hard truth about the cost of loyalty to the Gospel. Only through honest confrontation is real faithfulness possible. Only through faithful witness may the church offer some hope to a seemingly hopeless world. Finally, Hauerwas and Willimon have "confidence in the boldness of pastors and the potential truthfulness of their congregations because we do not believe God has abandoned the world... Thank God, we are not so unfaithful as to be utterly unable to locate the saints" (pp. 171-172). Through the example of the ordinary saints within their congregations, Christians learn how to live truthfully as resident aliens in a hostile world. Hauerwas and Willimon have written a clear, lively and troubling work. Their descriptions of thinkers with whom they disagree (Tillich, the Niebuhrs and Marty) seem, at times, unfair. The stark contrast they paint between Christians and the wider society is odd, given that so many of our lawmakers, teachers, and voters are Christians. But on most counts their claims are hard to dispute. Surely Hauerwas and Willimon are right that Christians must put faithfulness to the Gospels above accommodation to the culture. Clearly they are just in their charge that many churches (including the United Methodist Church) have often placed niceness and sentimentality above the costly truth of the Gospel. And assuredly they are correct to remind us that a life lived according to the Gospel stands in sharp contrast to the values of our capitalist culture. But do Hauerwas and Willimon point us to the right source for discovering what that Christian life should look like? Hauerwas and Willimon direct us to imitate the saints of our congregations. Their virtue should become our model. But Hauerwas and Willimon also call for confrontation with the hard truth. And one of the hard truths of our tradition is that those virtuous saints of our congregations are sinners just like the rest of us. Our hope is not in the virtue of the saints but in the grace of God. Our model is not their witness but the witness of Christ. Indeed it is because those saints may be dead wrong that we need the very characteristics which Hauerwas and Willimon reject and label as the "bourgeois virtues of tolerance,
open-mindedness, and inclusiveness" (p. 63). Surely both steadfast commitment and humble and gracious openness should live in the Christian heart. *Resident Aliens* is an excellent book for discussion in church classes. It relates directly to and draws examples from church life. It is thought provoking and easy to read. Martin Marty's *The Public Church* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981) and Richard John Neuhaus' *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984) offer two alternatives to Hauerwas' and Willimon's understanding of the church as a colony. Studied and discussed together, the three books would present sharply divergent recommendations for Christian social witness.

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BOOK REVIEW


A timely book! Current, historical, insightful, and stimulating describe the 234 pages including endnotes on each chapter and an excellent index. Geyer pulls together a brilliant understanding of Russian history and the Orthodox Church with a concern to make the Russian/US connections. What we have is a fresh analysis of the events that have unfolded with the coming of Mikhail Gorbachev. Geyer accomplishes this by walking us through Russia's history.

Geyer points out that almost every major American foreign relations policy prior to 1917 had a Russian connection. Russia supported the American Revolution! Russian diplomacy touched the War of 1812, the Monroe Doctrine, the American Civil War, the acquisition of Alaska, the Spanish-American War, the Open Door Policy in China, the settlement of the Russo-Japanese War and the Great War of 1914-1918. He gives credit to the Nixon/Kissinger years in moving towards detente, critiques the Carter/Brzezineki period for deterioration in relations. Though Reagan's start was to attack the "evil empire", the appearance of Mikhail Gorbachev turned the whole issue around. President Bush's initiatives and responses to the changes in Russia are hopeful though at this time not conclusive.

"Atheistic communism," the lens through which Russia is viewed is shattered when Geyer's analysis leads him to affirm Russia as the largest Christian country in the world. That is why he supports the thesis that Russia cannot be understood apart from the Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church cannot be understood apart from Russia and its politics. For all practical purposes the church was shut down by 1939. In spite of the genocide instigated by Stalin, he was responsible for reopening 18,000 churches by 1950. Today the church is a vital segment in the drama of glasnost and perestroika. With these hopeful signs Geyer lays the ground for an identification with a Russia that recognizes honorable and humane goals that are in the benefit of our search for world peace.
In 1988, the Orthodox Church celebrated its millennium. Three academic conferences addressed the historical significance of the millennium. Glasnost and perestroika were being extended to the churches with the recognition that the future of Russia must include the churches. Two million Jews and as many as 50 million Muslim and variegated Protestants are Geyer does not forget the situation of the Soviet Jews and the resurgent anti-Semitism that is being experienced.

Geyer's chapter The Russian Story is a primer on Russian history. It is so well written and packed with facts that one can hardly put it down. Understanding the 6 o'clock news will be greatly enhanced by those who understand the Russian story. His ecumenically oriented theological perspective, historical analysis, political acumen, and commitment to peace produce a book that should be widely read and studied now! Those who do will find an affirmation of what God is doing in God's world, and at the same time know what to say to those who continue to see a "communist behind every bush."

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