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Introduction

After a grueling rehearsal for the annual college Christmas concert, a tenor complained to the conductor that he was tired of practicing a particular hymn. "We keep singing the same theme over and over," he said. "I can't stand this endless repetition!" The conductor's response surprised the young man. "What you have to understand," he said, "is that the angels in heaven sing this song of praise to God throughout all eternity. You only have to sing six verses."

Given our need to sing six verses of praise during Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, when it is so easy to lose perspective on the whole, we open this winter issue of QR with a topic of magnificent scope: human freedom and moral evil, especially the freedom to accept or reject the presence of God in our lives. The grace and clarity of this little essay moved to the top of our list, where it can, we hope, cut through some of the doldrums of preparation and fits of distraction in the holiday season.

Abraham Smith titled his article simply "Homosexuality and the New Testament." But there is nothing simple about this subject. Smith contends that the New Testament evidence on homosexuality is elusive, lying behind the sexual mores of Paul's day, and Paul's own concerns for the communities for which he wrote. Like his colleague, Simon Parker, who wrote about homosexuality and the Hebrew Bible in the fall, 1991 issue, Smith will not let us off the hook of responsible biblical scholarship before we debate these issues theologically.

What hath biblical scholarship to do with meditation on scripture? Both are exercises, and for those in ministry, private spiritual exercises prepare the way for public ministry. Ralph Underwood sees all this through the lens of pastoral care. Care of parishioners by pastors, yes, but better yet care of the pastors who give such care. We try to be biblical preachers, but Underwood would have us look at the ways that the Word permeates our presence and even our silences with others. To develop this
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presence, he counsels us to take up *lectio divina*, the medieval pattern of meditation on scripture.

In our last installment of the manuscripts from the Yahara Consultation on globalization, ecumenism, and interreligious dialogue in theological education, we have three overviews. Each summarizes what took place at that consultation, but each bears the unique stamp of the writer’s position on these issues.

For those of us who savor the history of Methodism, and who understand theology best when it is rooted in a concrete time and place, Russell Richey’s evocation of the Methodist camp meetings will capture the imagination. He focuses on the meals at these gatherings—the family, the society, and the eucharistic meals—to explore the role of dialogue and community in nourishing an authentic religious life.

For those who love a central metaphor that can illuminate various situations and shape ideals for the future, M. Douglas Meek’s discussion of the *oikoumene* (household or home) will be particularly stimulating. The household renewed by a global mentality, and marked by compassion for one another’s weakness and pain can do much to show the limitations of the market mentality, in which everything has its place and its price.

And finally, for those of us who want a list of far-reaching but practical goals to work toward, Norman Dewire and Ridgway Shinn show us how the Yahara papers can move us toward the renewal of theological education in the twenty-first century. It is based on recapturing the passion and clear thinking of ecumenism, globalization, and interreligious dialogue—as redefined by this important set of papers.

Paul Franklyn’s lectionary study on the Hebrew prophets offers preachers something different to inform sermon preparation in Epiphany. A deft combination of storytelling, biblical scholarship, and social concern, Franklyn’s work shows both depth and versatility.

I wish you grace and peace during this holiday season!
IN AN ANCIENT MIDRASH included in readings for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, Rabbi Berechya declares:

The Holy One, just before the creation of Adam, saw that both saints and sinners would be numbered among his descendants. The Holy One considered: If I create Adam, I create sinners as well; but if I do not create Adam, how will the righteous come into existence? Therefore the Holy One ignored the sinners who were destined to be born, took hold of mercy, and created Adam.¹

These words offer in story form one answer to the perennial question of why God permits evil. Indeed, probably the line of thought pursued most frequently by religious thinkers in their efforts to understand moral evil is that which attributes it mainly to human freedom. It is argued that the responsible exercise of real freedom of choice is indispensable if men and women are to become true persons rather than puppets. The attainment of authentic personal life requires the option of choosing lower as well as higher values. Freedom can be misused, whether deliberately, thoughtlessly, or ignorantly; and when this occurs it can bring misery to all concerned. But removal of choice would block the way to genuine personhood and destroy the possibility of a community of daughters and sons of God striving for the ends God seeks. This possibility

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outweighs the risk God takes in creating beings who can oppose and thwart the divine will.

Freedom and Its Critics

Neither as myth nor as rational argument has the rabbi's interpretation won universal acceptance. C. S. Lewis maintains, for example, that "even if all suffering were man-made, we should still like to know the reason for the enormous permission to torture their fellows which God gives to the worst of men." Many theologians, Jewish and Christian alike, ask if the values made possible by human freedom are worth the price of the brutal extermination of six million Jews and an equal number of other opponents of the Nazi regime during World War II. Similar questions are raised by the reports documented by Amnesty International of the cruel torture of political dissenters in many supposedly civilized lands today. Concerns like these dare not be brushed aside.

Among philosophical theologians much attention has been focused on the "free will defense," so called because it aims to answer an atheist attack. Why did not an omnipotent God create a world in which people always do right? Obviously they sometimes do right; hence, it is logically possible that they should always choose the better course. Omnipotence could actualize any possibility; therefore, God could have prevented evil by creating human beings who would freely and invariably do the right. Why didn't God do this? This question has elicited much acute discussion.

C. J. Ducasse suggests that God could have given all men and women "at the start" the health, wisdom, and virtue needed for right choices, so that they could have gained moral stature without temptation, struggle, and difficult choice. Anthony Flew and J. L. Mackie consider the possibility that God, acting like a Great Hypnotist, by advance action might have created people who would unknowingly and irresistibly carry out divine commands. Edward H. Madden and Peter H. Hare maintain that God could at least have created finite persons with the
disposition to act rightly, even though they might occasionally choose evil.⁶

All the arguments of this kind that I have encountered seem to me to lack validity at crucial points. Three considerations are particularly important.

1. A life pre-programmed like a computer might conceivably make all the correct motions, but it could not be a truly good or responsible life. An automaton might be geared to perform certain functions, but it could not act purposefully, formulate new ideas, propose goals, create works of art, or develop and test theories or hypotheses. Nor could it cooperate with others in advancing shared values.

2. True goodness cannot be implanted in persons as a kidney or a lens can be transplanted or implanted by a skilled surgeon in a human body, or installed in a human mind as an automatic gearshift can be installed in an automobile by the manufacturer. Character cannot be bestowed or built in ready-made; it can only be acquired through many choices in widely varying circumstances. A world without at least limited free choice might escape moral evil, but it would also be emptied of all moral worth.

3. As John Hick has pointed out, the creation by God of persons who are unavoidably related to their Creator in love and obedience would destroy the free relation to God that is implicit in faith and worship. God could not value as a free and genuine response a devotion which was actually the inevitable result of God's own manipulation of their minds.⁷

Such reflections justify the conclusion that it is self-contradictory to conceive of free human beings created so that they would always choose the good. If they were really free, there could be no assurance that they would invariably choose right­ly, while if they were constituted in a way that excluded wrong choices they could not be truly free. The growth of persons capable of becoming children of God requires that they be able to exercise choice, even when this involves freedom to oppose the divine will. This opportunity for the abuse of freedom offers
a valid though partial explanation of the existence of evil and the suffering it causes.

The "Withdrawal" of God

Leaving aside the "free will defense," we can put the matter positively by looking at the basic relation between Creator and creatures. The very act of the creation of conscious beings seems to entail the granting of a certain independence to the creatures. To be brought into existence as an other of the Creator implies the possession of at least a measure of autonomy. Charles Bartholomew quotes with approval Charles Kingsley's formulation of God's procedure in creation: "I make things make themselves." Such a characterization is apt if we think of God's relation to us somewhat after the analogy of human parenthood. A wise and good mother or father does not do all the "making" but increasingly grants responsibility to the child on the way to maturity. If human beings are to become fully human, God must, as it were, withdraw, allowing them space to be themselves.

"The very act of creation," writes Frances Young, "implies allowing the creation autonomy; it implies God abandoning his creation to be itself." This observation seems especially true if we think of creation as an act of love aimed at producing a community of love. Only as God in love withdraws from creation to a degree and allows the creatures to live their own lives can the beloved community, which is marked by mutual concern and support in fulfillment of divine purpose, become real.

This grant of a measure of self-direction to the creatures is risky. Since love requires that the beloved be freed from dictation for its own response, the shape of creation as a work of love cannot be predetermined. In a perceptive book entitled Love's Endeavor, Love's Expense, W. H. Vanstone emphasizes that God's grant of freedom to the beloved, renunciation of absolute control of the other, and willingness to wait for a response make God vulnerable. Authentic love, which gives to its objects power over itself, is precarious, limiting itself, and
exposing itself to disappointment, pain, and failure. "A love which so controlled the other that it could not fail, or which limited its activity to those projects in which it could not fail, would be bereft of all poignancy, and would be exposed as falsity."  

The distinguishing marks of creative love also characterize the work of God as Redeemer. Vanstone quotes three famous lines of the Dies Irae which end respectively with the words lassus, passus, and cassus. Lassus, "weary" or "spent," connotes the limitlessness of love’s self-giving; passus, "passion" or "suffering," expresses its vulnerability; and cassus, "in vain," suggests the precariousness of love, the possibility that its work may be futile and its end tragedy. The words of the poem are addressed to the Redeemer of humanity, and the "so great labor" to which they refer is the labor of love in the work of redemption. The writer is well aware that his salvation comes at the cost of a labor that reveals the limitlessness, vulnerability, and precariousness of authentic love.  

The human creature is thus as free to resist the wooing of forgiving love as the urging of creative love. There is in either case no guarantee of a positive response. Yet love by its very nature takes the risk of rejection and bears the pain of positive defeat for the sake of the unsurpassable values which come with a free and affirmative response. Further, the power embodied in the weakness of suffering love offers hope of healing and renewal.

Are Human Beings Really Free?

At this point a philosophical determinist or a Calvinist in theology might with some impatience interrupt with the question, "Isn’t all this discussion premature, putting the cart before the horse?" Instead of inquiring whether God could create a free being who could not sin, should we not first ask whether there are any free beings, created by God or not? To recognize the weight in this argument we have only to look at the universality of sin. "There is no distinction," writes the
apostle Paul, “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23, NRSV). Though Paul’s emphasis here is on the grace of God, the passage makes plain his conviction that humans are without exception sinners. Is it then not naive to talk about their freedom? If we answer no, we have to deal with the claims of both philosophical determinists, whether mechanistic or psychological, and the theologians who assert the absolute sovereignty of God and the bondage of the human will.

The history of religious thought exhibits great variety in the positions upheld and the arguments offered. In the present context it must suffice to state what I understand freedom to mean and why I affirm its reality. True freedom is not equivalent to indeterminism—absence of any antecedent causation. It includes self-determination or self-direction, but goes beyond it to involve the power of choice among possible alternatives. The area of genuinely free choice is often severely limited by our physical environment and its causal processes; historical and social circumstances; our own physiological, biological, and psychological constitution; and the cumulative effect of our past choices. No one can say with any precision how much freedom we actually have, but there are good grounds for affirming that to a modest and crucial degree we do have—in theological terms—the God-given power to accept or reject the grace of God. Concretely, this means in specific cases the capacity to say yes or no to the divine will, and to exercise judgment in deciding between alternative attitudes or courses of action. Four considerations are briefly mentioned.

1. Virtually all Christians, whatever their formal theology, act as though the gospel invites them freely to accept the creative, forgiving, reconciling love of God that can transform their lives. (This recognition, it will be noted, is very close to the insight of John Hick mentioned above—that divine pre-programming of people to live rightly would destroy the very essence of a loving relationship.) Fortunately, our evangelical practice has been more consistent with the character of God as disclosed in Jesus Christ than has much of our theology.
2. The experience of choice is real and cannot be ignored. We do make decisions; paradoxically, one evidence that freedom is limited is the fact that we cannot avoid decisions. Daily we express and carry out preferences regarding lifestyles, ethical questions, and religious faith no less than jobs, clothes, and recreation. However, we perceive many of our choices and those of others as decisions that could have been made differently; hence, our experiences of regret for unwise acts and remorse for wrong ones.

3. We cannot make sense of the moral life without presupposing a measure of free will. Our ethical decisions assume that some attitudes and forms of conduct are better than others and therefore should be preferred. Terms like *ought* and *obligation* would be meaningless if only one course were open. If we *must* act as we do, what we do cannot soundly be called right or wrong, good or bad, but simply necessary, unavoidable. On this basis there could be no such thing as a truly good life.

4. The same applies to the intellectual activity that seeks truth. It too presupposes freedom. Scientific investigation at every stage assumes the ability of the researcher to formulate problems; gather data thought to be relevant; advance hypotheses; test hypotheses by carefully contrived experiments; reject, accept, or modify hypotheses; and finally to formulate laws that account best for all the facts. All this presupposes the capacity of the scientist to think freely. The same implication is present in less precise forms of rational inquiry. Indeed, without such freedom neither truth nor error would have meaning. If we *must* think as we do, our conclusions cannot properly be called true or false, but only necessary. To discover the truth or falsity of a proposition we need to test it according to a norm. If each step is necessitated, we should have no way to apply the norm and therefore no way of determining whether the judgment reached is true or false.
The Universality of Sin

Considerations like these, I believe, warrant the judgment that, within the limits suggested and in varying measures, human beings are gifted with the capacity to decide the beliefs they will hold and the actions they will undertake in relation to both God and other human beings. But no sooner have we said this than we are painfully reminded of the ease and frequency with which we fall short of our best intentions. Sensitive Christians who are honest with themselves know from experience what Paul is talking about when he writes, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Rom. 7:18-20, NRSV). There are many times when we feel not free but bound, lacking the strength to act as we really want to act. In such circumstances we can understand how Paul could describe sin as a kind of objective power which had taken possession of him and speak of himself as "sold into slavery under sin" (Rom. 7:14, NRSV). Our insistence on God's gift of freedom must always be accompanied by the acknowledgment that repeatedly we misuse our freedom by opposing the divine will, and often we feel as though we are under some kind of duress which prevents us from carrying out our true intentions.

We sin when we trust ourselves rather than God, placing ourselves in the center instead of the One who alone is our true Center and substituting our own limited ends for the inclusive purposes of God. This I take to be the central meaning of the act of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. They trusted the serpent instead of God ("You will not die") and succumbed to the temptation to eat the fruit which would give them knowledge equal to God's: "Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Already here there is, in the prominent role assigned to the serpent, not only an accurate portrayal of our tendency to evade responsibility ("The serpent tricked me, and I ate") but also a true description of our disposition to refer to forces outside of or other than ourselves.
the temptations and sins that wreak such havoc in our lives. In much traditional Christian theology this more-than-individual influence has been personified as Satan.

Though belief in a literal, personal devil would be at best difficult to defend today, its experiential basis is as strong as ever. We may reject belief in demons as an antiquated remnant from a credulous past, but men and women today are often too vividly aware of the demonic. Though we consider ourselves responsible agents, in particular situations we find the temptation to sin so overpowering that it is easy to ascribe it to some objective supernatural cause.

All human beings are from an early age inescapably influenced by the families and societies to which they belong through no choice of their own. Before the child is able to make ethical distinctions, he or she unconsciously adopts the ways of thinking and acting observed in the parents. By the time moral accountability is attained, ideas of what is right and wrong are already deeply ingrained, and the deeds that embody them have become habitual. As we grow older, we are potently influenced by the mores of the various communities to which we belong, and the achievement of independent judgment always has to contend with the pressure, indeed often with the authority, of the practices accepted as normative by our peers. Complex economic, social, and political forces are constantly at work, and individuals often find it impossible to extricate themselves from their power. These influences are, of course, constructive as well as destructive and some are mixed, but our efforts to fulfill our highest aims are often compelled to confront the downward pull of long-established practices that we cannot rationally comprehend.

Here we need to go beyond our own childhood and relations with our parents to recognize the hidden, cumulative, corrupting effect of past choices of even our distant ancestors. Walter Wink, influenced by Carl Jung's theory of the collective, or racial, unconscious, finds in this the most illuminating way of understanding the activities called satanic. We are all moved
by "a primordial elemental force" which has been "darkened by millennia of wrong decisions."13 Satan is real as

the collective symbolization of evil, ... the symbolic repository of the entire complex of evil existing in the present order, ... the sum total of all the individual darkness, evil, unredeemed anger and fear of the whole race, and all the echoes and reverberations still vibrating down through time from those who have chosen evil before us.14

To understand Satan, Wink uses the same key that he applies to interpreting the meaning of angels, who are the "interiority" or withinness in created things. In real life we encounter Satan "as a profound experience of numinous, uncanny power." He is "the real interiority of a society that pursues its own enhancement as the highest good."15 We are free to believe or disbelieve in Satan as a "being," but in everyday life the experience that was given his name is "a brute and terrifying fact."16

Obviously the power of the tendency toward evil is not the same in all persons. Some, because of the structures of their individual personalities or the circumstances of their physical or social environments, are more vulnerable than others. Perhaps this helps to account for some of the acts of extreme horror sometimes reported in the daily press: brutal maltreatment of poor and helpless old people, indiscriminate killings, and fiendish tortures. Yet in all of us the pressure to place and keep ourselves in the center is constant, needing to be countered and overcome by a greater power able to free us for life in our true center.

We have noted various restrictions on our freedom because of our past and present connections in an imperfect society. Moral evil makes its power felt both vertically and horizontally. The sins of the fathers do bring evil not only on the third and fourth generations (Exod. 20:5; 34:7) but on all future generations; and we all live in a society so closely knit and interlocked that none can escape the pressures that constantly impinge on us. The moral life is never atomistic.
Genesis 3 is the story of all humanity. As is now well known, Adam in Hebrew is not the proper name of one individual but a common noun meaning simply human being. Original sin is not guilt inherited from the first man and woman but alienation from God through the mistrust and self-centeredness which all humans share. Sin originates in the human will that is estranged from God; essentially, therefore, "original" sin means that every person is his or her own Adam.

Richard G. Jones has captured this fundamental truth in his hymn "God who created this garden of earth," a graphic statement of Adam’s predicament which is also ours. Moved by the proudly ambitious desire for wisdom equal to God’s, Adam grasps the "sweet fruit" and boasts, "As God I shall be," only to find that his act casts him out of the divine presence. The second and third stanzas close with this prayer,

Lord, forgive Adam,
for Adam is me.17

Conclusions and Further Questions

The preceding discussion brings us to these conclusions:

1. Freedom is real, and it is necessary if human beings are to grow as persons in relation to God and one another.

2. Human freedom of choice is severely limited, probably more so than many of its defenders have been willing to acknowledge. In some individuals and circumstances it is virtually nonexistent.

3. Evil and the suffering it occasions result from both our abuse of freedom and our lack of it, from avoidable wrong choices and from our possession of power to harm without sufficient power of self-restraint.

4. An understanding of human freedom therefore advances our understanding of evil, but it is not in itself an adequate answer. It leaves largely untouched the whole area of natural evil, while in view of the terrible havoc wrought by human wickedness it leads many to ask whether the price of freedom
is not too high for the values it yields. We still face the question raised by Ivan in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*—whether creation is worth such a cost. Could not God have created a world that would not have allowed humans to perpetuate massacres and genocidal holocausts?

This query finds direct expression in a hymn by Fred Pratt Green. After referring to the creation which God called good, the author continues:

Now, shocked by what we are,  
we cry, in our dismay,  
had God no better way  
to foster life:  

than give us freedom to destroy  
what he intended for our joy  
in senseless strife?  

The answer most frequently given is that God had no better way, but chose to take the risk of creation, in spite of the suffering it might involve for both Creator and creatures, in preference to not creating at all. God regards the value of the beloved community which only freedom can make possible as so great that it justifies the risks entailed.

In this response there are implications for both the goodness and the power of God. Both spring from the fact that it is God who bears the ultimate responsibility for the evil that results from creation. Though humans are, as Thomas Aquinas puts it, "secondary causes" and though the wrong choices made are theirs rather than God’s, it is God who gives them the power of choice and places them in situations where they must use it. Since God performs these actions knowing that they will almost certainly involve agony among the creatures, can we speak of God as unequivocally good? Though we may affirm in faith that God knows or will find ways to redeem such suffering and accomplish the ultimate victory of the good, we still confront during the interim the reality of much unrelieved and long-lasting pain. However, the closing stanza of Green's hymn
stresses the good news that God, acting out of the "divine necessity" of redeeming love, reaches out and dies "to break our fall."

The Creator's ultimate responsibility for the evil actualized in creation also raises questions regarding traditional notions of divine omnipotence. Is God's inability to create free beings who invariably choose the right equivalent to the inability to make a square circle or a stick with only one end—by definition a logical impossibility, hence not really a restriction of divine power? Or does the necessity to create self-directing and possibly disobedient centers of decision and action in order to achieve divine goals indicate a limitation structural in the eternal nature of God—something unchosen and inexplicable in the ultimate character of reality?

Pursuit of these questions lies outside the scope of this article, as does the whole area of natural evil in which no human choice is involved. However, it is clear that a God who needs to take risks and engage in arduous endeavor if there is to be a value-fulfilling created order is hardly the serene, almighty Absolute of much traditional theology. The price exacted from God and God's creatures by the grant of limited freedom includes suffering for both God and those God loves. The biologist L. Charles Birch bears witness to both his religious faith and the results of his evolutionary studies when he finds "a cross pattern deeply woven into the very fabric of creation."19 Yet this recognition underscores an enduring truth of the Christian gospel: that God's purposes are ultimately fulfilled through costly struggle willingly undertaken.

Notes


15. Wink, Unmasking, 25.

16. Wink, Unmasking, 25; see also p. 31.


THREE BRIEF NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS, 1 Cor. 6:9; Rom. 1:26-27; and 1 Tim. 1:10, are often cited in support of the view that Scripture prohibits homosexuality. If we want to use these passages responsibly, there are two factors that we must confront. First is the Greco-Roman cultural situation, which forms the background against which Paul and the early Church wrote. The social setting of early Christianity included views on homoerotic behavior that are often quite different from modern attitudes. But it also reveals the conflict in Greco-Roman society over these same sexual practices and their effect on the growth and stability of social institutions. Paul and others in the early Church reacted to these practices in similar ways, seeing the potential for harm to the community inherent in certain sexual behaviors.

The second crucial factor is the literary design of each of these passages. Paul’s quarrel with the Corinthian Christians, for example, is intricately argued, and the allusions to homoerotic acts are momentary references in his larger pastoral effort. Paying attention to the literary design of the letter itself allows us to see why certain forms of sexual behavior—behavior that was already being challenged in Greco-Roman society—were condemned as a threat to the spiritual health of the ecclesia. The Greco-Roman cultural background of these texts is therefore linked with their authors’ arguments. The

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precise nature of this linkage is the focus of our examination of these passages.

The Character of Homoerotic Activity in Greco-Roman Antiquity

ON ALL LEVELS OF SOCIETY, HOMOEROTIC ACTIVITY PERVADED the Greco-Roman period. How then do we explain the preponderance of same-sex love among males in the Greco-Roman period? According to Robin Scroggs, homoeroticism flourished during this time because of the confluence of male-oriented subcultures in education and political life. In the Greek educational system (later adopted with some modifications by the Romans), secondary schools, or gymnasias, promoted the education of young boys by elder tutors. The educational system was connected to the young boy's initiation into adulthood. Tutors both educated and socialized the free young boy from a subordinate to a superordinate status. In Greek public life, only males voted or held public office. The female's role was largely, though certainly not exclusively, confined to procreation and "household" maintenance. Hence, in a world where males had little social contact with females except within the household and where males conducted the business of governing in the presence of other males, the chosen "intellectual and, indeed, affective partner to a male was another one."

Another major factor was Greek male society's preoccupation with the beauty, or kalos, of youths, especially of boys. This is attested in literary and epigraphical material, where adult males associated the word kalos itself with a young male. While by the fourth century BCE, Greeks idealized a male youth with softer, more "feminine" contours, originally they idealized "masculine bodily features."

The Greek understanding of human sexuality also played an important role. In general, their view toward sexuality had two components. Sexuality is a human appetite, for which the moral
problem was excessive desire, i.e., enslavement to desire, and the moral aim was mastery over one's desires, not total abstinence. Plutarch remarks that "to rule pleasure by reason marks the wise man, but not every man can master his passion." Second, human sexuality was not characterized by mutuality but by a hierarchy that was both individual and social. The sexual act was done "by one person over another" and was a symbol of the dominance of the "active" male over the "passive" female, boy or slave. In both Greek and later Roman societies, a male's primary sexual responsibility was "to propagate and raise a family and to safeguard the future of the state." If this responsibility was fulfilled, no impropriety was attached to homoerotic acts as such.

This brief sketch of Greco-Roman social influences shows that this culture was open to the possibilities of strong affections and sexual relations between two males, usually an older male and a younger one. Such openness, of course, does not necessarily mean that an individual male in that society would have thought of himself as a homosexual. Since sexual partners were not distinguished by gender but by role (that is, not as male or female, but as dominant or submissive), these categories are artificial. Sexual orientation in the contemporary sense, therefore, is not a phenomenon in Greek and Roman society. When moral distinctions were made with regard to sexual practice in the Greco-Roman world, however, various types of homoerotic relationships were judged quite harshly.

Homoeroticism, Dominating Passion, and Familial Values

GRECO-ROMAN SOCIETY CAUSTICALLY CONDEMNED malakoi; the pleasure-seeking, receptive agents of free youth prostitution, and reluctantly passed legislation against the often violent kidnapping, castration, and prostitution of slaves. But Greek and Latin writers eventually condemned even "respectable" homoerotic dominance between an "active" adult tutor and a
"passive" noble boy (pederastia), because they perceived such behavior as contrary to nature (para physin), dehumanizing, and rife with excessive passion. Homosexual activity per se was never outlawed; however, the Roman imperial government passed laws intended to promote family life as opposed to the "carefree, self-indulgent pleasure" of many of its citizens. Within Judaism (e.g., Josephus and Philo), the male homosexual act was often castigated as a Gentile practice. Ancient Jewish writers joined the ranks of the wider culture in condemning excessive or dominating passion of any sort.

So great then and transcendent an evil is desire, or rather it may be truly said, the fountain of all evils. For plunderings and robberies and repudiations of debts and false accusations and outrages, also seductions, adulteries, murders and all wrongful actions, whether private or public, whether things sacred or things profane, from what other source do they flow?

Jewish thought of the time considered passion as the root of other evils, and homosexual passion (based on the model of homosexual dominance) as the most consuming. It was unnatural and unlawful, blurring the distinctions between the sexes and blinding the adult male to his family and civic responsibilities. Thus while homosexuality underlined the freedom and superordinate status of the adult male, both Greeks and Jews decried it as a manifestation of excessive, irrational passion.

Exegesis of New Testament Passages

While several exegetical studies have been offered for 1 Cor. 6:9; Rom. 1:26-27; and 1 Tim. 1:10, they have not always carefully considered the way in which these passages relate to the key arguments made by their author. The rhetorical situation, therefore, will be an important focus of these interpretations.
1 Cor. 6:9-10

(9) Do you not know that wrong-doers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes (malakoi), sodomites (arsenokoitai), (10) thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

First Corinthians contains many disparate and seemingly incoherent themes, all of which Paul weaves together into a rich tapestry about Christian unity. Some members of the community are arrogant and presumptuous, resulting in a growing factionalism. Paul implores the Corinthians to return to his initial teachings, particularly his words about the self-sacrificial role of Christ. Jesus was the foundation upon which Paul and Apollos worked (1:10-4:21), a foundation some now tried to abandon. The community must be reminded that limits are placed on its behavior—it may not engage in immorality (porneia, 5:1-7:40). The criterion of Christian behavior, its basic principle, is self-sacrifice, as he illustrates in a discussion about meat offered to idols. Before his conclusion (16:1-24), Paul needs only to exposit a few of his other foundational teachings (11:2-15:58) to show their connection with the problem of factionalism and the solution of self-sacrifice.

While the theme of immorality forms the basis for Paul's view of community boundaries, this section (5:1-7:40) also contains references to Leviticus and Deuteronomy concerning the expulsion of evil from the community (Deut. 7:17) and the prohibition against “incest” (Lev. 18:7, 8). The argument also echoes the classic struggle between reason and irrational passions. By depicting ancient Israel as a model for the church's sanctified role in the world, Paul cites an additional constraint on its behavior. By listing certain forbidden practices (a “vice list”), he offers another way to judge community limits. In each of the three topics in chapters five and six (a man with his father's wife, lawsuits, and visits to prostitutes) Paul carefully accents the principle of self-sacrifice. The community's life in
Christ depends upon its members' ability to forfeit rights and freedoms for one another.

Significance of Specific Terms

In 1 Cor. 6:9, Paul uses two terms which are difficult to translate: malakoi and arsenokoitai. As we have noted, the term malakoi in a sexual context is often used to indicate young boys who gained pleasure or money (or both) from being dominated homoerotically. The term certainly never refers to the person taking the "active" role. Arsenokoitai is always used in a sexual context and echoes the levitical ban against "lying with a male." Since Jewish writers of the time condemned homoeroticism based on the model of dominance, Paul is likely to be referring to the passive "receptive" malakoi and the active arsenokoitai, partners in the free male prostitute form of homoeroticism. But even if malakos does not, in this case, indicate one who receives pay for sex, the condemnation remains because these behaviors indicate excessive passion. The malakoi-arsenokoitai act, if it takes place within the Corinthian community, assails the distinctiveness of the Christian community, making it no different from the larger world, in which such activities also take place and must be condemned.

Remarks

Two remarks are in order about our interpretation of 1 Cor. 6:9. First, the modern attempt to isolate one item from the list of vices runs counter to Paul's attempt to show a range of censured activities by outsiders. All of the vices and indeed all of the themes in 1 Cor. 5-6 concern the dangers of irrational, excessive passion. Thus, if one singles out the malakoi-arsenokoitai act as the only one in this list to be avoided, on what basis do the others become acceptable? Second, Paul's use of the malakoi-arsenokoitai act in the vice list shows his perception that the Christian community is to be distinguished from the world. The crucial issue is, how much weight should be given today to Paul's own methods of maintaining community
boundaries? How far should modern believers distance themselves from "the world" in order to reinforce their sense of Christian unity?

Romans 1:26-27

(26) For this reason, God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, (27) and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their person the due penalty for their own error.

Like 1 Corinthians, the letter to the Romans was also written as a letter of exhortation. Unlike 1 Corinthians, however, this letter was written to congregations which Paul had not yet visited and which he himself had not established (1:10, 15; 15:20). Thus, one of Paul's goals in the letter is to exhort this community "on some points," because he wants the offering of the gentiles to be sanctified by the Holy Spirit (15:15, 16), and because he considers himself to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

The whole letter resounds with the terminology of slavery. From the introduction in 1:1-15, we learn that Paul thinks of himself as a slave and that he considers the Romans to be part of the nations which have been called to be saints and to be obedient to the faith. Paul wants to convince the believers in Rome to transfer their allegiance from one master to another, from the domination of sin to the power of God.

Rom. 1:26-27 belongs to a larger section of Paul's exhortations, which includes 1:18-32, a section concerning God's wrath toward the gentiles who had rejected God. The basic indictment made against the gentiles is their rebellion against God, or the suppression of the truth about God (1:18). The manifestations—not provocations—of this wrath are made in three parts (1:24-25; 1:26-27; 1:28-32), each of which contains the expression, "God gave them up." Our passage is the second of these
three segments. The entire three-part section is related to at least two polemical arguments current in Greco-Roman society. One of them is an anti-passion argument, which is seen in the equation of truth-suppressors and lustful persons, those with degrading passions. Since the verb “to give over” (paradidomai) is often used technically to indicate the handing over of a slave to his master or master’s representative, all three clauses are meant to show the Roman believers that the gentiles are slaves to their passions.

In Rom. 1:26-27, Paul uses the terminology of homoeroticism, for both males and females, based on an allusion to the prohibitions against it between males in the Hebrew Bible. The statement that such acts are “against nature” refers to the created order in Genesis and suggests that these acts show a disruption of the natural subordinate/superordinate relations between male and female ordained by God in creation. Paul’s purpose in Rom. 1:26-27 was to show the Romans that the basic problem for the gentiles was bondage to sin, a manifestation of which was their slavery to excessive passion.

The phrase “males with males” is the same phrase mentioned in Philo to condemn Greek homoerotic dominance. Scroggs contends that Paul is likely to be talking about the same thing. Nevertheless, Paul’s cultural interpretation of the Genesis traditions would indeed have left him with only one option for sexual relationships—that between a male and a female. Romans 1:26-27 is part of a section in which Paul attacks gentile behavior using the standard of the Jewish belief in the cosmic order of creation. Because they fail to acknowledge God as Creator, God judges them. It is this divine judgment that causes the specific manifestations of God’s wrath.

For Paul, nothing is more fundamental than the full acknowledgement of God, for only with this acknowledgement can gentiles be freed from slavery under passion or any other manifestation of sin’s bondage.

Thus, in Romans, as in 1 Corinthians, Paul does not present a treatise on homoerotic behavior; instead, this argument is
about the various manifestations of sin's domination over the gentiles. Nor does Paul call homoeroticism a sin. Instead, it is a manifestation of sin precisely because it departs from his understanding of the distinctiveness of the sexes in the cosmic order of creation. The critical question to be asked is, Should modern believers accept the same world view of the separation and hierarchy of the sexes as part of the core of their Christian belief? In what aspect of sexual relations does sin typically inhere?

1 Timothy 1:9-10

(9) This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, (10) fornicators (pornois), sodomites (arsenokotais), slave traders (andrapodistais), liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching (11) that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

There is consensus among scholars that all of the pastorals (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) are pseudonymous works written in a post-Pauline era (ca. 125 CE) when the church needed to guard itself against appearing subversive to the patriarchal order of its imperial rulers.20 As with his Jewish counterparts (e.g., Philo and Josephus), the author takes an apologetic stance toward his implied critics.

1 Timothy is a letter of exhortation intended to remind the writer’s congregation how to act as the household of God, in accord with Hellenistic household management (oikonomia). If the community acts modestly, within the embrace of a “sober” piety, others in the larger world will believe and be saved, as indeed the author was. Since his former life of vanity and persecution was caused chiefly by his ignorance and unbelief, he is particularly concerned that this church believe and come to know the truth. That truth is one in which the church,
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for the sake of its witness, must conduct every aspect of its existence within the framework of the Greco-Roman patriarchal ideology.

1 Tim. 1:10 is part of a vice list given in the letter's introduction (1:1-20), which forecasts some of the issues to be treated more fully in other parts of the letter. One of these interests is related to correct teaching. The contrast between sound (or healthy) teaching and the instruction of "other" teaching anticipates the contrast between those who have sound inner qualities (a pure heart, good conscience, and sincere faith) and those who do not.

There are a number of contrasts in the letter. In 4:6, the author asserts that "Timothy" has been nourished on "sound teaching," but others are credited with the "teaching of demons." Timothy is admonished to teach "these duties" (the preceding instructions), in contrast to anyone who "teaches otherwise." As the writer's true or unwavering child in the faith, Timothy is later exhorted to continue in the faith and help others to do so rather than being shipwrecked in it, denying it, wandering away from it, or missing the mark with regard to it.

The introduction is clearly marked by a hierarchically structured system of order. This order appears in chapter 1 in at least three ways. First, by speaking of the "command" (1:1, literally, "the order placed upon him") placed upon the author by God, the writer prepares his listeners for the time when he will command them. He will command the submission of women by alluding to the androcentric account of Adam and Eve (2:11-15) and the submission of the bishop's children. Second, the writer's language about "appointed roles" in chapter 1 shows a reliance on a hierarchical order. In 1:12, the writer speaks of himself as having been "appointed" to God's service and notes that he is giving Timothy instructions. Later in the book he alludes to Timothy's service of putting the instructions on household hierarchy before the community. In this way the writer creates a chain of authority that runs from God to the apostle to Timothy to the church. Third, as we have
noted, the word for "training" also means household management, a subject that pervades chapters 2-6. In 1 Timothy 3:15, the author equates the church with a household explicitly.

The introduction prepares the listeners for the violent tone that the writer will use later to describe spiritual deviants. In his autobiographical section (1:12-17), the author speaks of his former life of blasphemy, persecution, and "outrage" (hybris-ten). Later, in 1:19-20, he links the deviants to his past life of vanity and violence by describing them as those who have "suffered shipwreck," and by associating Hymenaeus and Alexander, two of the spiritual deviants, with blasphemy.

Spiritual deviants are described further as "liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron" (4:2), men with a morbid or diseased craving (6:4), people whose senseless and harmful desires plunge or drown them in ruin and destruction (6:9), persons who have an intense eagerness or "orgiastic" grasping for wealth (6:10), and who, as a result, have "pierced themselves with pains."

As the two previous passages have made clear, the presence of a vice list is a typical way of showing the intemperate passions of a person or group. Indeed, the list given here includes some of the worst imaginable examples of vice (murder of fathers and mothers). The writer's emphasis on "sound" or "healthy" teaching, pure conscience, versus deviating spiritual dispositions, are clear signals of the contrast between rational thinking and irrational passions. Even the the writer's assessment of the spiritual deviant's lack of understanding suggests that he was relying on the familiar Greco-Roman argument against excessive passion.

Given the writer's concerns, we are now prepared to see how the vice list (1:10) functions as a part of the introduction. This list speaks of vanity toward God and violence toward others, a recurring theme in the letter. This list sets up the writer's continuing preoccupation with the two paths available to humanity: the cultivation of inner qualities that allow Christians to remain faithful to the gospel and the vain and violent tendencies that allow Christians to stray from it. The writer
shapes the gospel in terms of instruction that promotes godli-ness through a hierarchical sense of "order." This orderly gospel protects the congregation from subversive criticism and makes mission efforts in the world more feasible.

Thus the combined use of the terms pornoi, arsenokoitais and andrapodistais (slavetraders), like the other terms in the vice list, are considered by the writer to work against the hierarchical order. The reality that stands behind this list is likely to be the practice of slave prostitution, which was specifically banned by the Roman empire. Given that slave traders were often associated with violence and male slave prostitution, this practice would wreak havoc against the empire's goals to encourage marriage and stable families. The Christian writer, who wishes to model the structure of the church on the structure of the empire, first points out with the vice list that certain acts clearly work against the ideals of the empire.

As we have seen with 1 Cor. 6:9 and Rom. 1:26-27, the writer of 1 Timothy does not set out to write about homoeroticism as such. Instead, his concern is to intimate early on that such acts violate the social framework in which Christians are expected to live and carry out their mission. His main interest is to exhort his readers to conduct themselves well within the limits of Greco-Roman patriarchal ideology.

The "sound teaching" in 1 Timothy that seems to rule out homoerotic behavior also presumes to accept slavery and the submission of women in society. The question to raise in connection with this passage is not, What kinds of sexual activity are ruled out for authentic Christians? but What sources of authority will the church employ when it makes policy (instruction) for itself on issues of sexual conduct? Will it accept the social ethos that follows from the national political process, or will it seek other sources to shape its instruction?

Conclusion

Our examination of the text suggests three comments. First, the bulk of the evidence supports Scrogg's theory that
the New Testament writers would have understood homoerotic
dominance as the model for all kinds of homoerotic behavior.
Not one of the passages we have considered deals with
homoerotic acts between two adult males. But it is necessary
to consider the cultural reaction to these activities by the
Roman empire and prominent Jewish writers in order to un­
derstand these texts fully, because they outlined the potential
for abuse in these relationships. The New Testament writer
simply absorbed this criticism from social mores of the time,
rather than originating it.

Second, each biblical writer’s condemnation of homoerotic
acts entails a culturally specific understanding about sex roles
that influences but need not be accepted wholesale in modern
times. Early Christians accepted religious and cultural norms
about the distinctions between the sexes and their functions in
society that modern Christians would find both alien and op­
pressive. The situation is more clearly marked in the case of
slavery, which the New Testament world accepted and even
theologized.

Finally, we do not have any clear instruction from the early
Church about how to treat homoeroticism as a whole.
Homoeroticism is simply used as part of a list of behaviors
meant to illustrate larger concepts, such as wisdom, the power
of sin, or anti-imperial values. Both ancient Jews and Greeks
considered excessive, abusive passion to be the point of serious
concern in sexual relations. Whatever else we may learn from
the ancients, they were, like us, very well aware that any
relationship can be dysfunctional.

Notes

1. In discussing same-sex love among the ancients, I prefer the more neutral
term “homoeroticism,” a word covering the entire gamut of same-sex love
regardless of time-specific categories.

2. See K. J. Dover, Greek Homosexuality (Cambridge: Harvard University,
1978); John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay
People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the
Fourteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Christine
Downing, Myths and Mysteries of Same-Sex Love (New York: Continuum,
1989). See also Plutarch, Aristides, 2, and Pericles, 8. Unless otherwise noted, all classical references and translations are taken from the Loeb Classical Library and all Septuagint references of Hebrew Scripture are taken from Septuaginta Id Est Vetus Testamentum Graece In Iuxta LXX Interpretis, ed. Alfred Rahlfis (Stuttgart: Privilegierte Wurttembergische Bischöfliche Bischöfliche, 1952). In some instances, I have supplied (and indicated) my own translations of the Septuagint and of the New Testament material. All other New Testament translations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

3. See Sarah B. Pomeroy, Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 88. Some evidence for homoerotic activity among women does, of course, exist (e.g., Plato's Symposium), and on a few vase paintings from this era. With a tremendous amount of speculation, one could make some arguments about the homoerotic activity of the Lesbos island community presided over by Sappho.


7. Downing, Myths and Mysteries, p. 137.


10. See Scroggs, The New Testament and Homosexuality, p. 40. Such youths were sometimes called pornoi. Note, for example, in Xenophon's Memorabilia, "For to offer one's beauty for money to all comers is called prostitution (pornon)." At other times, they were characterized as soft or effeminate because they found sexual gratification in the role. Halperin's study of the term malakoi shows that the "receptive" desire of such a male does not represent a fixed orientation, but rather indicates the extent to which some would go to receive sexual gratification.

11. In late antiquity, pederastia (pederasty) meant the love of an adult male (usually in his twenties) for a young boy. See Downing, Myths and Mysteries, p. 137. I am not suggesting that homocristicism always occurred as sexual dominance, but apart from a few exceptions, Greek writers understood homocristicism according the model of homoerotic dominance. See Scroggs, 132-138.


15. The Greek text's reading of Lev. 18:22 and Lev. 20:13, respectively, says: "And with a male (arsenos) you shall not lie the bed (koiten) of a woman." "And whoever lies (koi meth) with a male (arsenos), both have done an abomination; they shall be put to death, they are guilty." (v. 13).


More and more pastors are discovering the value of meditating on scripture and are exploring ways to combine this approach with the exegetical skills first acquired in seminary. Roman Catholic clergy, on the other hand, long nurtured in meditative practices, are now benefiting from a more vigorous emphasis on exegetical analysis of scripture. These developments make for an informal convergence of the exposure these two groups have had to the Bible.

A Pastor’s Testimony

Here is the way one Protestant pastor describes his own experience:

Three years ago I had been depressed and angry about my pastoral situation. I felt burned out, empty, and at the end of my rope. I seriously considered leaving the ministry. During that time I went through the motions of being a minister but without much spirit. I held onto one thing: I saw myself as a

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good and responsible preacher. My pastor-parish relations committee let me know otherwise, and I was shocked to say the least.

Expecting that I might be pushed into some uncomfortable decisions, I started up again what I had not done in years: take time for daily prayer and devotional reading of scripture. What a great help that was for me. By God's word through devotional use of scripture and hymns I was blessed and in a sense born again, this time of the Spirit. I felt assured by God about my life, my personhood, and my call to ministry. I discovered ways to grow again as a husband and father. My old hunger for knowledge and ideas and facts has been overtaken by a deep-rooted hunger for God's word in my life.

This and similar experiences of pastors bring to mind an important question from a pastoral care perspective: What is the place of studying the scriptures and praying the scriptures in the context of pastoral ministry?

If prayer is the soul of pastoral care, then scripture is its substance. Listening to scripture is multifaceted: it is corporate in the context of worship; personal in daily prayer and devotions; exegetical, a critical and systematic mode of listening; dialogical in the context of Christian ministry (what early Christians and Calvin termed "fraternal correction").

The sense of this multifaceted listening is hinted at by Peter Gomes, who maintains that we have lost our capacity for biblical preaching because we trust neither the text nor ourselves. What will it take to restore this trust? First, we must challenge the view that biblical preaching is simply the act of preaching a sermon on the text. Proclamation has many forms both in the ministry of pastors and the ministry of all God's people. Many forms of listening may help to shape a sermon, but not all listening is to be corralled into the sermonic moment.

**Lectio Divina**

How shall we describe the role of exegeting and praying the Word of God in the ministry of pastoral care? The concept of
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combining exegesis and prayer is hardly new. Commenting on Exod. 12:4, for example, Origen wrote, "From this it is clear that we must not only bring study to bear on the learning of scripture, but we must also pray and beseech the Lord day and night, that the Lamb from the tribe of Judah may come, and deign to take up the book that has been sealed and open it." The process by which this takes place has traditionally been called lectio divina, or divine reading. In the strict sense, lectio divina was envisioned as having four dimensions: (1) lectio, or reading and listening to the text; (2) meditatio, reflecting on the Word; (3) oratio, praying for the Word to touch the heart; and (4) contemplatio, encountering the silence too deep for words. The traditional scheme of lectio divina reminds us that what God does to us through the scriptures is as important as what the scriptures say. Broadly speaking, lectio divina entails prayerful study and a studied prayerfulness. Prayer precedes and follows exegesis, and prayerfulness sits close by throughout the exegetical process. Since the term lectio divina points to a spiritual task but is not a technique as such, I shall use the term broadly to refer to prayerful study of scripture.

The Word in Psychological Perspective

THE DIVINE PROCESS OF SELF-REVELATION IS ANALOGOUS to the natural process of self- and other formation. God's self-giving is like a mother's self-giving. As the mother mirrors the child, occasioning the child's self-discovery, so God mirrors to us our true nature in Jesus Christ. In Christ we are coming to understand the nature of God and our own identity. Accordingly, praying the scriptures is listening to Christ as the One who interprets the scriptures (Matt 9:7; Luke 9:35; 24:27).

Dynamic Canons

Psychologically the image of Christ is a fascinating representation in the mind, for Christ represents both humanity and God. The Christ alive and present "inside" the soul is in-
definable except by reference to the "outside" (the historical Jesus, however elusive) and the unfathomable, transcendent reality of God. To trust Christ is precisely to trust the Other and oneself. Is the initiative for this trust found in the soul itself or outside of it? The locus precedes, permeates and transcends inner and outer realities. Consequently, these inner and outer realms dynamically inhere. Knowing Christ, then, is more than a conscious representation in the mind of an historical story and character; it is a reshaping, a being conformed to, and becoming like that which one knows (Eph. 4:13). This knowing is the core of personal development or formation and is the seedbed of action, personal and corporate. The inherent relation of knowing, being and action (such that true knowing forecasts destiny in terms of identity and action) will be developed at a later point.

But if from an experiential standpoint, Christ transcends internal and external boundaries of self and other, so does scripture. Existentially, all people have personal "canons," texts that tell them who they are, texts to which they listen in a particular way because they strike the heart. The Bible is the canon set before Christians, who are called to listen to its texts in order to uncover their false self and discover their true self. This false self occupies the center of its own world; it is egocentric; it deploys battalions of assumptions, programmed emotional reactions, and mental and behavioral habits, which occupy much of the territory of daily life.

Dynamically, everyone's personal canon is mixed, and that is the problem. The psychological "canon" is a conglomeration of inner "texts," which are primary sources for self-understanding and together set the boundaries or limits for this self-understanding. Where there are no boundaries, there is no knowledge, only chaotic mental process; however, misplaced boundaries distort true knowledge. Pride and other forms of sinfulness misdirect the imagination (Luke 1:51), which is in need of continual redirection.

The scripture is what Christ, our Tutor, sets before us to train the imagination (Luke 24:27). The Bible itself, therefore,
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comes to occupy a place in the psyche and represents the voice and spirit of Christ. The Bible's status and authority as canon introduces a dynamic that enters into a reading and analyzing of any part thereof. Think, for a moment, of how corporate worship begins—typically with sentences of scripture. Whether the initial sentences are prayers or not, whether or not they refer to prayer, the sentences are calling the people to prayer. When we hear scriptures read, we not only hear what is said but have the mental image of a primary Other who is speaking among us and within us."

For Christians the Bible is both canonical text and primordial object. Emotionally as well as spiritually, the Bible occupies such a special place that it is readily idolized. We worship the Bible and forget its Author. How can we tell when this is happening? When the Bible is no longer saying anything new to us; it is sealed. Then we automatically and unconsciously project our needs onto it, and what we receive back is nothing but our old, untransformed selves.

So exegeting and praying the scriptures is a means of grace and like all such means is to be used as a way of actively waiting on God. But our trust is in God, and our confidence in the means of grace is relative to the Giver of this hope and confidence. Our trust is in Christ, and so in God's Spirit of truth (John 16:13). In the scriptures we learn more about this Christ, and it is He who gives us understanding of them (Luke 24:27), so that they become a means of grace for us. As Howard Stone writes, "Faith involves the assurance that God's word will come, but not the knowledge of when or how."1

Scripture in Community

IN GIFTING US WITH FAITH GOD TRUSTS US both as individuals and as a community. In this community we share beliefs and enter into dialogue around the texts of our canon. When Christians listen to the Word together, they can stand and speak a representative word, a word that represents what has been heard. Consequently, in corporate worship preaching may allow
the truth of Christ already present to resound. This means
simply that every congregation does well to have some definite
means, such as small groups, for studying and praying the
scriptures.

We come to trust the texts, in part because God has given us
each other. We are called to care enough to listen and to speak
the truth to one another. As we do so, the Bible becomes an
open book, speaking to us in our daily lives: Christ is present
among us. This is the way truth lives, in the midst. There is no
immaculate perception, no perfect or complete possession of
truth. If the tools of exegesis correct our false doctrinal read­
ings of the text, then loving but honest dialogue about scripture
corrects our false isolation from the text and from each other.

Such a reading of the text involves a process of reorientation
for the individual. This process decenters the old self, disclos­
ing its fragmentation, and recenters life on God in Christ,
present now in the Spirit. This dethroning of the self usually
occurs through the media of crises and tragedies on the one
hand and peak experiences on the other. It also occurs through
the daily learning of the art of attending to scripture, a develop­
ing capacity for mindfulness and fresh awareness. In any of
these very different avenues, the person becomes aware of his
or her vulnerability. Indeed, one is so struck down in affliction
or in honesty that he or she is hardly recognizable as a person
or self and can only trust God as a child trusts the caring
strength of a parent.

The dynamics of personal and cultural canons, primary texts
which sustain selves and communities, disclose the emotional
significance and spiritual centrality of the Bible as the sub­
stance of pastoral care. Can we sustain true care for people and
for ourselves if we do not pray and exegete the Bible? If we
neglect past and present theological interpretations of its
meanings? If we avoid dialogue between the primary sources of
Christian faith and our contemporary experiences?
The Pastor's Role

In providing pastoral care, then, does the pastor, by virtue of educational background and the personal discipline of listening for the Word, tutor the parishioner's imagination? In a conventional way the answer is yes, yet fundamentally the answer is no. Christ, of course, is the Teacher or Tutor—Christ within the person or in the midst of persons, acknowledged or not. In crises and transitional periods, the persons to whom pastors would minister are often more open psychologically than is the pastor. This is why Anton Boisen, the founder of Clinical Pastoral Education, focused on human crises. A crisis is like a spotlight that draws attention to a previously unlit part of a person's soul. The pastor often participates in a drama as a peripheral character and witnesses the wonder of the divine presence and speaking. Although there is an element of tutoring in our care of persons, the parishioner is the principal actor.

Or let us compare the pastoral role to that of a psychiatrist doing psychotherapy. A patient relays the story of an illness. The physician hears this narrative, makes a variety of observations, and offers a diagnosis. The language of this professional diagnosis is not that of the patient, so typically the sufferer's interpretation differs from that of the professional practitioner. The healing process in part becomes one of negotiating or of dialogue between these persons. The pastor's language may not be as technical as that of the psychiatrist, but that vocabulary, some of it religious, is a way of interpreting what he or she hears. The person who seeks pastoral guidance may also have a religious vocabulary but may apply it in a different manner and direction than the pastor. The interpretative negotiation and dialogue between these perspectives, not all of it verbal by any means, take place in the context of caring with the hope of healing. The psychiatrist ought constantly to relate his or her language and interpretation to the patient's language and to observations of the patient's experience and behavior, helping the patient to discover in the illness itself a source of wisdom. In this sense the physician is "an emphatic witness,"

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to use Kleinman’s phrase. Likewise, the pastor listens and, out of preparatory acquaintance with Christian sources, may discern Christ in the person or may be in a position to empathically witness to Christ in relation to the person’s suffering and self-understanding.

The psychiatrist’s empathy is a moral act, and the pastor’s attending to another is a spiritual offering. At this non-verbal level, the Word of God’s loving and merciful care is being communicated already. This being so, there is no need to arbitrarily or compulsively impose verbal interpretations or scriptural passages where these interfere with the dynamics of personal caring. On the other hand, verbal communication, not only of one’s own care but also of God’s, is at times a natural part of such caring.

Scripture and Pastoral Conversations

Consider, then, what may take place in a pastoral conversation. Two or more persons discover meaning as their relationship is transformed from polite introduction, or tentative trials at real communication, into a bonding together. A pastor’s process of understanding scripture shapes his or her interpretation of this encounter. Other “texts” in his or her life which operate dynamically like a canon (e.g., messages from childhood) also influence this interpretation. The other, too, has his or her personal “canons,” and these guide what is heard and understood. But in these conversations, the pastor pledges intentional loyalty to the canon of scripture. This does not mean that the pastor throws the Bible at people or quotes a proof text for every issue or opinion. This would manipulate the canon. Rather, understanding of the Bible sensitizes us, teaches us what to look for in others and ourselves, and prepares us to attend to God’s presence, even in the least likely nooks and crannies of our lives.

Yes, the Bible can and often should be read in the course of pastoral conversations. Howard Stone comments that the purpose of communicating the word of God verbally in pastoral care
"is not to manipulate or pressure the other person but to share something of personal importance to ourselves with this other person for whom we care so deeply."  

Guidance for Lectio Divina

If parishioners in crises or in the ordinary course of Christian community are asking for guidance on lectio divina or something like it, the pastor can teach straightforward methods such as the approach of Francis de Sales. An outline of this approach is included at the end of this article. Usually persons try a method and go beyond it, readily adapting their own style of listening to scriptures. All church libraries should have good commentaries for consultation, and the same is true for hospital chaplaincy departments, which ought also to consider a lending library for patients and staff.

One person I know describes her discipline of reading scripture as follows: "The first task is to empty my mind of surrounding concerns (in a sense, to dislocate oneself). Then I replace my 'mind' and its ego-centered concerns with the text. The next step is to add the world so that it is the text and the world. Finally, I reintroduce my own reality and reflect on the text in relation to it." The strategy of this detour is to let the text speak and not simply use the text as a pretext for self-talk.

What happens when persons study and pray the scriptures and talk over their responses with others, perhaps the pastor? They are using texts of scripture to compose their own "text," to spell out their own understanding of their relation to God and what God is saying now to them. Something in a text, for example, triggers a deeply held way of understanding or an emotional issue, perhaps cavernous and subliminal. The scriptures, then, are relevant when they thus quicken the soul or address the spirit of a community.

When a scriptural passage truly speaks and is genuinely heard, the encounter produces actual change. Psychologically, we may suggest that the primitive image of God and of self from early childhood are no longer merely buried in the unconscious
mind but enter a dialogical "space" where the internal and the external (objective text) become alive to one another, are in transition in relation to one another, and suggest potential meanings to one another. Theologically, we may suggest that the immanent work of the divine Spirit recreates ancient texts in the heart and mind of the individual and community, whereby these ancient texts become holy texts, aflame here and now, quickening, infusing and transforming self-understanding and communal faith.

We pastors do well to be attuned to these dynamics. We must realize that, in undertaking lectio divina, persons are venturing on new discoveries of the reality of God, their relation to God, to others, and to their own selves. It is a special moment in ministry when a pastor has the kind of relationship with a parishioner that permits them to join together in silent meditation on a text, after which they mutually share insights and questions with each other.

But note the difference between the pastor as witness to a process and the pastor as tutor, the one who shares insights from the Christian Bible. The latter slyly invites pastors to step back into the pulpit while doing pastoral care, or to re-envision the pastoral conversation as a classroom. In pastoral conversations a little didacticism goes a long way, and too much of it derails pastoral care. We teach best by listening and learning ourselves. This is because, as St. Augustine knew, Christ is the Teacher within. We simply help one another to remember and attend to Christ's illumination in our souls.

Pastor as Symbolic Object

The one who "presides" or leads a congregation is one who ushers us into the sacred realm. This person inaugurates corporate worship, often with a sentence from scripture. The saying has authority, and the speaker's authority to call the community to prayer derives in part from this fact. Psychologically, this person serves as a transitional object for the others. His or her bodily presence and role, associated with the
authority of the Christian canon, stimulate internal associations concerning God and the sacred. As the psychotherapist lets himself or herself be used as a symbolic object in a therapeutic relationship with reconstructs and reworks primary relationship, so the ritual leader becomes a representing “object.” Members of the community then begin to strengthen, correct, reconstruct and refashion their understanding of God and themselves.

The ritual leader in the life of the faith community is also the leader in the community's care of individuals. This is a complex, multidimensional symbolism that adheres to the person and office of the pastor. This theme has been analyzed psychologically, but seldom adequately in terms of transference and countertransference. As the psychotherapist allows himself or herself to be used as an object, so the faith community's ritual and pastoral leader becomes a symbolic object, a phenomenon many pastors experience as being abused or adored by a minority of parishioners at either extreme of a continuum.

I have claimed that, from a psychological viewpoint, persons have a personal “canon” which is essential to their self-definition. Such a canon holds outward forms and inner representations together in dynamic tension. It therefore may be called “transitional.” Likewise, the pastor in relation to the parishioner may serve as a transitional object, especially at a time of crisis or change. In fact, the pastor may be more symbol than person in this relationship, though there is usually some awareness of the difference between the pastor as person (external) and the pastor as symbol in the parishioner's internal life. This dialectic of the external and the internal is where the potential for new life and transformation is explored.

Pastoral availability is not just “being there,” pace Peter Sellers; it is being present and willing to be such an “object.” Because we pastors are symbols, we often feel that we have done nothing for persons, even though they credit us with miracles! For the same reason, we often feel maligned and misrepresented and do not recognize ourselves in others’
portrayals of us. We may be seen as angelic or perfect. We may be seen as the anti-Christ. Not only do our lives embody their own scripture; we are also clothed with their own image of faith.

Our task is not to interpret the dynamics of transference or countertransference but to be willing to be the symbol. In this way we help carry forward the conflict centered in the symbol. This means being subject to misrepresentation and declining to defend oneself, offering oneself anew to God and to the other as consistently as possible. It means not seeing others as they see themselves when they are “misrepresenting” us as symbols. Every mental image of the pastor as a parental figure, an authority figure, or a representative of the divine has a correlative self-image. If we can detect how we are interpreted by our parishioners, we also have received indirectly the message of how they see themselves. Of course, it may be that people discern in us features that we refuse to recognize in ourselves. But in the event of distorted apperception of who we are, we can respond by being ourselves, by refusing to conform to the image projected onto us, and by countering others’ self-images by relating to them out of a fresh vision of their possibilities. To be ourselves in such situations certainly does not mean to retaliate because we feel abused. For pastors, being a true symbol means owning and being faithful to the pastoral office and its duties, which point to the truth of Christ. Thus we behave like the text, which is stable and refuses to change into anything other than what it is. Such behavior expects persons to arrive at a recognition, in us, of some of Christ’s inexpressible love for them.

This simultaneous offering of oneself as real object and as actual person, as bigger-than-life symbol and as concrete personality, is the ordinary saintliness of pastoral care and counseling. What is required for all this except the grace of attentiveness to scriptures and to people, including one’s own self? So it is that to be a pastor requires prayerful study and a studied prayerfulness. As Hebrews 2:1 suggests, either we attend to the word of salvation or we drift.
THE SUBSTANCE OF PASTORAL CARE

Conclusion

CLASSICAL TEXTS CONSTITUTE A CULTURE. Primordial texts constitute the self, giving self an identity. Between the person’s deepest self-image and one’s most profound image of God lies a cluster of texts or a personal canon. Such texts fill the space of the human spirit, the potential space bounded by self, other, and the symbols which recapitulate self-other relations. Scripture presents Christ to the liturgical life of the community and to the imaginative life of the person, enabling persons to listen more attentively to the Christ within. This Christ tutors the imagination so that persons can negotiate their way through the diverse promises and demands which would claim the spirit’s allegiance. Because of its critical role in the faithful presentation of Christ, scripture may be said to be the substance of pastoral care as truthful and enlightening care. When we attend to scripture, scripture renders a present Agent (God), a new self, and a promising world.

Appendix

Guidelines for Brief Meditation
(Francis de Sales, 1567-1622)

1. Preparation
   a. Become aware of the presence of God.
   b. Invoke divine assistance.
   c. Compose the place.

   (This involves reading a chosen text and envisioning the scene by the imaginative use of the five bodily senses. Francis emphasizes scenes from Jesus’ life.)

2. Considerations
   Reflect on the scene and the images that affect you in order to enhance understanding.

3. Affections and Resolutions
Enlarge the affections (e.g., love of God) and make specific resolutions. (Affections are not passing feelings but enduring attitudes which come to characterize personality and personal values. Resolutions do not always add items to one's agenda of commitments, but may call for a rearrangement of priorities.)

4. Conclusion
   a. Give thanks and praise to God.
   b. Offer results of the meditation to God.
   c. Pray for grace to fulfill insights by action.

5. Spiritual Bouquet

For Francis this is a way to summarize the meditation in a key word, phrase, or image, which one "wears" mentally and spiritually through the day as a reminder of the beauty of the divine grace manifested through the meditation and in life.

Notes
2. There is a definite analogy between texts and primary mental representations. Like texts that do not change, these primordial images are relatively stable or "fixed" in the psyche, but their contexts and meanings can and do change over time, just as texts have a capacity for new meaning. This "primitive canon" establishes the original rules for self and other understanding in an individual's development. Over time, however, new meaning can be discovered even in this infantile kingdom.
5. It is also the case, naturally, that we pastors project our conflicts onto parishioners. We see ghosts and angels in them. Our task is to attend to them as real persons, knowing them as if for the first time, and then what their lives symbolize will have new meaning.
Three Ecumenical Agendas: A Methodist Perspective

Russell E. Richey

In a Christmas-Season Sunday School class, a couple confesses how difficult the season has become now that their daughter has married a Muslim. Customs, seasonal observances and family beliefs must be individually negotiated. They ask for the prayers and support of the class. The larger human family impinges on, indeed divides, their immediate family. Members of a council on ministries meet to struggle over the priority to be given to witness, evangelism, and church growth over against new preschool ventures. Despite or without the oversight of the work area of education, Sunday school teachers proceed to order a wide variety of church school materials, including some from the Bristol Bible Curriculum. The work area chairperson of church and society raises a serious question at a council on ministries meeting. Should all of the church's efforts in urban ministries be mediated through an inter-denominational agency (which the church had itself brought into being)? Would it not be preferable for the church to undertake some missional efforts on its own? The agonies of ecumenism take local expression.

United Methodism is divided by the very ideals which aspire to unite it. Justice, evangelism and ecumenism—to name but the obvious—would each pull Methodism together around itself. But the ideal and the endeavor to press for it produce not

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unity but division. The competition on behalf of the three creates cacophony. How might the discord be lessened?

To think about these ideals and their relation, we propose a metaphor—three meals eaten at early American camp meetings: the family meal, the love feast, and the eucharist. Each had, we will propose, its own table, its own community, its own covenant, its own function, and if license be permitted, its own “grace.” Methodists could not do without any. The camp meeting offered sustenance for each and all. Before exploring the three meals and the sustenance we might today draw from them or their counterparts, we need to essay the problem more fully.

The Search for Unity

UNITED METHODISM DOES FIND ITSELF DIVIDED by the very ideals which aspire to unite it. Justice, evangelism and ecumenism offer themselves as the sole priority in terms of which Methodism should conceive its mission. Each has its champions. And at every level of church life, the champions contest for position and priority on the denominational agenda. The contest is inescapable; it is built into the organizational fabric. The church itself is structured top to bottom with boards, agencies, committees and caucuses committed to these ideals. Church and Society, Religion and Race, COSROW, and, to some extent, Global Ministries pursue the various justice issues. Discipleship, Global Ministries and Good News raise the banner of missions, witness and evangelism. Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns labors for its ideals with some encouragement from the Council of Bishops. Each agency and its counterparts on every level can be counted upon to press its agenda. But within each, the other ideals emerge, spontaneously, reflexively, to vie for preeminence. The struggle for missional priorities in church, as in the nation, has long since gone beyond the spirited give-and-take that warranted building these distinct ideals into the Methodist machinery.
In its most ferocious expression—the caucuses—the struggle leads to anathemas. So Good News pledged itself in 1990 to the “DuPage Declaration,” which delineated the lines of division and ideological rectitude sharply through affirmations and denials. Two of the latter bear citation:

We deny that other religions are pathways to salvation, or that one can be in a right relationship with God apart from repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

We deny that the mission of the church is the self-development of exploited peoples or the political liberation of oppressed peoples.2

On behalf of one ideal, evangelism, the “DuPage Declaration” speaks to the other two ideals. It also speaks for evangelicals of other denominations, who conjointly drafted and subscribed to it, indicating that the divisions within Methodism are replicated in other “mainline” denominations. It is worth underscoring this point, for both the evangelical/liberal division and the search for a balm to heal it characterizes many of the so-called mainline denominations. Indeed, one recent observer has insisted that this division has displaced denominational and confessional differences as the significant fault line in American religious life.3 Evangelicals from the several denominations feel themselves pulled together, as the “DuPage Declaration” certainly indicates. Liberals enjoy comity through ecumenical activities and working relationships between and among the professionals in the boards and agencies. Essentially the same fissures run through American politics and society. Not a denominationally fragmented Christianity but ideologically rent denominations constitute the present scandal of a divided Christianity.

It may seem naive to hope that the re-imaging offered here would cure these divisions. A Methodist metaphor for thinking about the ideals? Surely a few words and a concept or two can do very little to heal divisions that run so deep. And yet, (1) because it was Christ’s wish for his disciples “That ye love one another, as I have loved you,” and “That they all may be one;
as thou Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou has sent me"; and (2) because unity in mission was a central and motivating concern for John Wesley and early Methodism; (3) and because unity and unity in mission are constitutional and constitutive marks of United Methodists who in the “Preamble” and initial articles to their constitution affirm:

The Church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world.

As part of the Church Universal, The United Methodist Church believes that the Lord of the Church is calling Christians everywhere to strive toward unity; and therefore it will seek, and work for, unity at all levels of church life . . . ;

and (4) because therefore we live in Christ and in his church under an imperative to search for unity, a few words that evoke important Methodist commitments should not be inappropriate.

The Threefold Problem

EACH OF THE THREE IDEALS—justice, evangelism, ecumenism—would present itself as the unitive solution. And even within the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns (GCCUIC) all three ideals have standing as possible routes to the unity sought.

Justice here will be construed as standing for the unity of the whole creation sought through struggles for “justice, peace and the integrity of creation” and also through the dialogue among and between representatives of the living religions.

Evangelism will stand for the unity sought through missions and witness, bringing unity by the winning of souls to Christ; but it will also stand for the unity within the denomination between those who put such a premium on evangelism and those whose priorities lie elsewhere. This unity concerns the
fissures between evangelicals and liberals, with particular attention to the divisions those identities create within Methodism but with obvious import for the lines drawn between those two parties in the larger arenas.

Ecumenism will stand for the unity of Christians, the healing and renewing of Christ's body through the mutual recognition of ministers and members, inclusive eucharistic fellowship and other forms of unity.

The three "ideals" may serve to heal as well as to divide and diagnose. As competing ideals they divide the church; as a complex of assumptions and theory about reality they diagnose the church's situation in the world; as a program, they offer the church a set of solutions. At every level in the connection, the three ideals divide, diagnose and attempt to heal. What relief can be found for a troubled Zion?

Unifying the Schemes for Unity

THE RELATION AND PRIORITY AMONG COMPETING IDEALS of unity is an old and ongoing concern. The Discipline in the article cited above proceeds to specify several types of unity in which United Methodism should engage, specifically "world relationships with other Methodist churches," "councils of churches," and "plans of union." It does not indicate precisely how the church might hold those together or put them into priority order. Those tasks have been left to GCCUIC and the Council of Bishops, where discussion does proceed on both the types of unity just mentioned and those delineated by our three ideals. In such discussions, some hold out for a particular type of unity, for energetic participation in World Methodism, bilateral relations or COCU, for instance, to the relative neglect of the others. Other persons insist, as apparently do many within the World Council of Churches and the larger ecumenical arenas, on the interrelated character of the various kinds of unity.

In my own very limited observance of GCCUIC affairs, I have been troubled by such insistence on the seamless quality of
ecumenism. I found myself especially perturbed by the enthusiasm lavished on interreligious dialogue, by the interjection of concern for other religions when items of Christian unity were on the table, and by the commission's efforts to hold together the agendas represented in its name. How, I wondered, would this body really lead the denomination in reception of COCU, due for attention at the next General Conference, if its attention remains so fragmented? With what theological rationale does the commission insist on equating the unity of the Body of Christ to dialogue with other religions? (Why should Methodists, who know that if others' Christian hearts are as our hearts to give them our hands, extend ourselves in the same way for the Muslim or Hindu?) I remained unconvinced that the justice or interreligious agenda, important though it might be, really belonged to Christian unity.

Something of a conversion occurred during a recent conference for United Methodist seminaries under the sponsorship of GCCUIC, the Division of Ordained Ministry and the Association of United Methodist Theological Schools. What really brought a change of heart was Bishop Roy Sano's insistence that global, interreligious and ecumenical issues were preeminently local, that rural communities monitor the international economy on which their books balance, and that the opportunities and divisions represented abstractly by terms like "interreligious" manifest themselves immediately and concretely in neighbor and family. During his talk, I made my own inventory and discovered, as I indicated through my opening remarks, that the various kinds of unity do impinge as problem and opportunity in the congregations. With that recognition came the realization that the several types of unity must be held together if the congregation itself is to be held together.

The Three Meals of Methodism

CONVERSIONS IN BOTH SCRIPTURE and the history of the church have often been portrayed as eye-opening experiences. While
holding that grace undergirds the entire process, Arminians nevertheless believe that some eye-opening precedes the conversion—even as the conversion opens the eyes to the full realities of the human condition. My conversion proceeded in this fashion, impelled by the discovery (from my own research) of a Methodist way of seeing the problem, and also pulled by the realization that some such resolution needed to be found. From Methodist life came a metaphor that made it possible for me to see the several ideals as related and to understand the several kinds of unity as inseparable (though not indistinguishable or necessarily of the same importance). The metaphor derives from that staple of 19th-century Methodist life, the camp meeting.

Three meals sustained the camp meeting: the eucharist, or communion, the love feast, and the family meal. Camp meetings required all three. Communion could be said to have brought the camp meeting into being. The meetings had their spiritual origins in the large-scale sacramental meetings and quarterly conferences that characterized pietism, and particularly Methodism, in the late 18th century. When the stylized camp meeting eventually emerged, it continued to feature the communion service. Also carried over into the camp meeting from the quarterly meeting were the love feasts, that Methodist borrowing from the Moravians, which featured religious testimony sustained through a simple meal of bread and water. Camp meetings were camp meetings because families settled into rustic living on the grounds and therefore made provision for an extended stay. One such provision was eating, and the accounts of camp meetings recall the flickering camp fires as well as the love feasts and eucharists. Camp meetings, at least those under Methodist sponsorship, required all three. They could not exist without the family meal, would have been unthinkable without the love feast, and would have been incomplete without the eucharist.

The family meals, though they divided the camp by kin and by race, were the most inclusive. The unregenerate spouse or child who came grumbling to the occasion (and whose conver-
sion highlights the camp meeting accounts) would have been welcome, indeed, expected at this meal. Here, as it were, the world partook. Slave families at such events rather especially suggest the worldly, even interreligious character of the camp meeting, for their Christianity reverberated with African pulses, and their meals might well have included members whose religiosity remained essentially African. In the family meal, Methodism made table fellowship with the world. It did so uneasily, perhaps testily—one can imagine a wife coaxing her unconverted husband or son over dinner with a firmness that made conviviality impossible and civility the only hope or a teenager lampooning an exhorter who had tripped over his tongue—but there was genuine fellowship nonetheless.

Love feasts would have been the most exclusive, reserved theoretically for Methodist members of society in good standing. Disciplinary rules expressly limited the times that a non-member might observe. These were witnessing occasions. Here a society or circuit divided by some issue—not into today's liberal and conservative but perhaps over the equally explosive matter of slavery—might find renewal and unity. For evangelicals, the love feast returned to the basics—the recounting of conversion experiences and the simple meal, one uniting through the ear and memory, the other through taste, both employing the senses to renew and unite hearts. Love feasts dealt intradenominationally. Only Methodists need appear. The Presbyterian or Baptist at the camp meeting could simply sleep in. Methodists would be up at the crack of dawn for this simple meal, a fellowship well designed to hold the movement together.

Communion could be either inclusive or exclusive depending on who celebrated. Baptists and Presbyterians, who often cooperated with Methodists in staging camp meetings, would reserve communion to their own kind, a behavior paralleling Methodist policy on the love feast. Methodists, on the other hand, offered a more open eucharist. Then, as today, Methodist communion would have welcomed the larger Christian family. “Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins,
and are in love and charity with your neighbors...” Though non-Methodists did not always find this invitation compelling, Methodists nevertheless made eucharistic fellowship possible.

In the three camp meeting meals, then, early Methodists stylized the three ideals and the unity possible around each. At the common family table, all members justly received their fare, even though at other tables the family would divide. Justice, equity, decency demanded that the whole family, even the worldly, be fed. In the love feast, Methodists found unity through witness, a table designed for the household of faith. That spiritual intensity fed intradenominational unity and harmony. In communion, Methodists offered a table open to the larger Christian family. The camp meeting required all three meals; it set three tables. Each and all provided sustenance for the camp meeting through which Methodism offered itself to and for the world.14

Three Covenants

ALTHOUGH WE CANNOT AND SHOULD NOT SEEK renewal by some repetition of the camp meeting and its meals, we might do well to reflect further on what those meals say about Methodist belief. The three tables call to mind three covenants.15 Methodists do not typically formalize these covenants theologically in the manner of the Calvinists or always give them the ritual expression they deserve. And yet, Methodists have a clear sense of each, and more importantly, an appreciation of the social bonds and realities which each entails, and at least some realization that they are brought into being and sustained by Christ.

Each table and meal depends upon its particular covenant. The family meal rests on the marriage covenant. The love feast, the missing rite in much of contemporary Methodism, belonged preeminently to the quarterly meeting and to the covenant that Methodists struck with one another. Its constitutional derivative today would be the charge or church conference, an organizational and business affair wanting the
joy and intensity of the love feast and rendering the mutuality of that earlier covenant in fiscal and political terms. Communion, of course, derives from the church covenant, Christ's promise to be with us savingly in that meal.

Though the grace available differs, Christ is not missing from the other meals. The family meal points to the creation, to God's sustaining of the natural order, to the divine ordering of the social and political realms, to the possibility that the common things of life--our meat and drink--might orient us to God's will. This prevenient grace works on and binds together those who do and those who do not call upon Christ's name. So we would understand the marriage covenant as holding together spouses who marry across religious boundaries (as well as families who share the same denomination) and pointing to the grace working throughout the human family. Marriage is a gift to the human family. The grace that sustains it makes possible the good order of the world. It also makes possible a nurturing family life that redounds directly to the church. Hence our preference for a religious rather than civil marriage and for the church's blessing of the bonds that the couple accepts. But we do not typically limit the ceremony to believers, and therefore we do implicitly accept that this covenant belongs to God's larger family. The marriage covenant points especially to God the Father, the Lord of creation.

The love feast points particularly to the Spirit, the Spirit at work in the Methodist faithful, that makes witness possible, that unites and renews, that gives life to the church. In early Methodism, the love feast was routinely celebrated at quarterly conferences and quarterly conferences held in connection with camp meetings. Then the circuit gathered in witness to the commitment that held it together, to a peculiar covenant struck between a preacher and the people who gathered to hear him at preaching stops for four weeks and to the connection that these people had made with one another. The people who attended these powerful gatherings and experiences gave their testimony to the work of the Spirit with bodily expressions and
sobbing and shouting. For such self-disclosures, love feasts needed a prior sense of intimacy and confidentiality; they also established it further. The love feast functioned only when it was limited to those who had chosen to travel the Methodist road. Their sanctifying grace was limited to those justified. It is this grace that seems so missing in Methodism, a grace that is wanted to heal the chasm that divides evangelical and liberal, to call Methodists so united to that higher road of Christian perfection that has been our peculiar testimony, and to give vibrance and spirit to our cause.

Communion, on the other hand, Methodists understood and understand as a saving ordinance. In it, Christ is available to those who would orient their lives to receive him. It points to him and joins in covenant all those who call upon his name. Of the meals celebrated at camp meetings, it has been the most fully and faithfully sustained in modern Methodism. Indeed, through the ecumenical liturgical renewal that has shaped our new rites, we have added eucharistic riches to the treasures that we, through Wesley, had derived from the Anglican tradition. Both old and new rites, because they belong really to the wider Christian heritage, point unmistakably to the wider covenant of Christ with his church. And the text and actions make that referent unmistakable.

Feast and Famine

THREE MEALS SUSTAINED THE CAMP MEETING. Many drew sustenance from all three meals; some partook of two; others would have been permitted only at one. Within United Methodism today we need the grace of all three.

Our family meals should always remind us of those who eat and those who do not eat across the globe, of those who by the common meal are made one even though we do not share a common witness, and of our responsibility to make sure that the bread is broken so that all may eat. We cannot do without our daily bread. In giving thanks for it, we accept in covenant all who share God's created order. The ideal of justice and
the unity of creation through justice belongs to us as Methodists.

Nor can we do without communion. By our more frequent celebration, Methodists now recognize how vital this is to our life together. In remaining true to their understanding of communion, Methodists need to proclaim their open table but also to work zealously to make tables genuinely open. Real unity among Christians is our prayer. We must be willing to accept the sacrifices that bring answers to that prayer. As Methodists we should be about the healing and renewing of Christ's body through the mutual recognition of ministers and members, inclusive eucharistic fellowship and other forms of unity.

We have, unhappily, done without the love feast. The meal that comes closest is the dinner on the grounds or the church potluck. Something of the conviviality of the camp meeting affair survives in such meals, which in a sense links them historically with the camp meeting. But gone are its intimacy and grace. Methodism needs to reclaim this meal and its covenant, for the unitive ideal of evangelism belongs very much to Methodism. But it cannot be the posture of one party. Real evangelical missions by Methodism require the commitment of the whole church. Such unity can come on the terms of neither party, and the posturing by Good News cited above does little to achieve real commitment on the part of the denomination to the ideals for which Good News stands. Unity around the ideal of evangelism, no less than that around the other ideals, is costly, but it is worth the cost so that evangelicals and liberals can eat love feast together.

The meals, families and covenants need to be held together. And yet the several kinds of unity, though inseparable, are not indistinguishable. And Methodists need to know when and where to eat, how their eating binds them to others and which dinner invitations take priority. We employ various strategems for dealing with the invitations. Some would accept only one invitation, hold up the banner of only one of the ideals and reject the other two. So, for instance, some believe that justice
or evangelism is the United Methodist priority. Others would give priority to one and subsume the other two. A few, particularly in the ecumenical camp, would insist on holding all three together. The latter has been argued here, but with the realization that there will be occasions in which priority does have to be established.

To my own tastes, when invitations force some prioritizing, the ascending order would be family, communion, love feast (justice, ecumenism, evangelism). We obviously cannot do without any. We cannot do without our daily bread. But for eternal well-being, the food of heaven, communion takes priority. When commitments to the two families come into conflict, when the two covenants divide our loyalties, when choice has to be made between interreligious dialogue or Christian unity, the latter has precedence. Similarly, the unity in the Spirit takes highest priority. It does so because it depends upon, presumes and evokes communion, because of what we must attest, because our system does work, because ecumenism is not irrelevant, and because we need to be united so as to share our testimony. I have no misgivings about our zealous pursuit of the next stage in COCU and other such ecumenical ventures. I favor ecumenical explorations by Methodism, as a community confident of its own heritage, of what it brings to the table, of its peculiar grace, of the covenant it enjoys. So also renewal of the Methodist covenant in the Spirit makes genuine dialogue with persons of other faiths and accountability to the needs of the whole creation both possible and imperative. The three meals do belong together; all are, in fact, necessary. Communion really is the basic meal, the one that makes it possible for us to enjoy the other two; the love feast provides a peculiarly Methodist accent to its own life and its involvement in the lives of others.

Notes

1. Here we make the assumption that advocates of any one ideal are unlikely to triumph, thereby producing that model of unity. Unity by victory would
probably result in a major division or significant membership losses, depending on whether the losing party or parties exited collectively or individually.

2. Good News, 23 (May/June 1990), 41. These points, III and VII, included affirmations of justification by grace and the imperative of Christian witness and discipleship.


22. The glory which thou has given me I have given them, that they may be one, even as we are one.

23. I in them, and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou has loved me” (RSV).


6. The rationale for this threefold schematization of the United Methodist problematic and of its resolution will be found below. There are other and more conventional ways of outlining the vying priorities and conceptions of the unity to be sought. For instance, the Center for Ecumenical Dialogue in Longwood, Florida, orders its work into three dialogues—with the Christian Community, with the Religious Community and with the Human Community—thus distinguishing in its first two dialogues what we have combined in our first. The Center subsumes our second under its first. Our threefold delineation indicates an explicit concern with the disunity within denominations and not incidentally sets up the Methodist metaphor which is the burden of the paper. The proof is, we hope, in the pudding; we beg the reader’s patience in its preparation here.

7. This is the title of one of the World Council of Churches processes, a World Convocation for which met in Seoul, Korea, in March 1990. Efforts to tie this concern to faith and order are being carried on through a formal study project entitled “The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community.”

8. Observers of GCCUIC and of United Methodist ecumenical endeavor will recognize the first and third as not only appropriately assigned to, indeed mandated of, GCCUIC, but as embodied in its very name. The middle conception will seem less clearly GCCUIC’s. The recognition by that agency of the unity within the denomination can be seen in its recent efforts to work more effectively with the World Methodist Council, in attention within its meetings to the larger agenda of conversations with the church’s evangelical wing and in an effectively sounded call by Bishop Roy Sano to work toward that end. For the latter, see Roy I. Sano, “Ecumenical and Interreligious Agenda of the United Methodist Church,” Quarterly Review 11/1 (Spring, 1991): 82-97.
9. The acronym will be probably more familiar than the phrase for which it now stands, "The Church of Christ Uniting." Its older referent was for "Consultation on Church Union," the structure and process which has recently produced a new covenanting proposal now before the denominations for action. For particulars, see the two descriptive documents, The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting, ed. Gerald F. Moad (Princeton: COCU, 1985) and Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting (Princeton: COCU, 1989).


12. The first Discipline queried: "How often shall we permit strangers to be present at our love feasts?" and stipulated "Abs. Let them be admitted with the utmost caution; and the same person on no account above twice, unless he becomes a member." The first Discipline and Large Minutes are conveniently compared in History of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church by Robert Emory, rev. W.F. Strickland (New York: Carlton & Porter, [1857?]). See p. 29.

13. The first Discipline specified a controlled invitation: "Let no person who is not a member of the society be admitted to the communion, without a sacrament ticket, which ticket must be changed every quarter. And we empower the elder or assistant, and no others, to deliver those tickets." Emory, History of the Discipline, 45.

14. We have not attempted here to treat the camp meeting as a whole and so therefore slight the other offices, particularly preaching, that played such an important role in Methodism's spreading scriptural holiness over the land and reforming the continent. The point of this essay is not to propose the modality of Methodism's engagement with the world or even the means by which unity might be achieved. Were we to do so certainly other means of grace would take more prominence and preaching would receive its due. The point rather is to discover how, as Methodism went about its work, it managed to hold itself together.

15. I use the present rather than the past tense here to indicate that, in subjecting this metaphor to theological attention, we are proceeding beyond what early Methodism verbalized about the camp meetings. It is my conviction, elaborated in other essays, that early Methodist theology was a theology of action, structure, and ritual. It needs to be exhibited in its fullness and respected for its texture. But then the action, structure or ritual needs also to be analyzed if we would understand what Methodists believed. For their "thought" or theology was embedded in the forms by which Methodism lived. Of no event is this more true than the camp meeting. Methodists then and thereafter knew that it said something very important about themselves. But they found no good way of elaborating what it said, except by performing it.
Their orthopraxy requires theological analysis from us if we would do them justice. Hence here we will speak of the meals and covenants as 20th-century Methodist possibilities. This presumes, of course, that that earlier practice might be instructive to us today. I do not intend to suggest that we ought to reinstitute the camp meeting. I am suggesting that we reclaim the three meals.

16. By limiting marriage within the faith community, some traditions and most sectarian movements place the marriage or family covenant within the church covenant. The more expansive notion outlined here would seem more in keeping with Methodist thought.

17. Even our meals around the TV, though they rob the nourishment that we give each other, mediate the world to us and thus point to this larger covenant. Obviously, the TV dinner would need some creative attention and interpretation before it could function in this way.

18. It is important to underscore the point that love feast can have priority only insofar as it always depends upon and points to communion. We do not here intend to undo the Reformation and establish another sacrament or in any way diminish the Eucharist. Rather, we would reclaim the distinctive Methodist commitment to perfection, wholeness, and sanctification. We understand that this higher life is always fueled by the grace of baptism and communion but nevertheless aspires to the fullness of Christ-like existence that baptism and communion make possible. The love feast symbolizes that fullness. It is worth recovering.
Globalization and the Oikoumene in Theological Education

M. Douglas Meeks

Here hang in my office two pictures I found in East Berlin in the late sixties, when I was doing research on European political theology. They have helped me come to grips with the difficulties of relating Christian faith and the world's claims to truth and power. Both pictures depict a fool. In the first the fool is walking beside the king. We see them from behind, their heads bowed in deep conversation, their hands folded behind them, a scepter in the hands of the king, a fool's cap in his companion's. The fool, one could assume, is speaking the truth to power. But they are walking in a secluded garden where no one else can hear their conversation. The other picture is of the fool zwischen den Stuhlen, "between the chairs," a German colloquialism for the state of being perplexed and ambivalent. The dazed smile on the face of the fool befits the confusion of falling between conflicting claims.

These two states of the fool may have some application to theological education and the church of our time. This is certainly not the first time in history that a transition period has produced uncertainty about how to speak the claims of Jesus Christ truthfully in a world content with its own claims and how to live with the ambivalence created in the household of the seminary and church by conflicting claims of the household's own members. Even if, as it is, the uncertainty is accom-

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panied by excitement and the anticipation of new shapes of theological education, it is nevertheless proper to remember that many who have gone before us in such times thought discipleship something like being a “fool for Christ.”

Seminary faculties learned in the eighties that the customary way of putting together the theological curriculum has been debilitating for the ministry and mission of the church. The integrity of theological education, it was argued, should not be based on the methodologies of the academic fields or the professionalization of clergy. The present debate suggests that the unity and integrity of theological education should rather lie somewhere in the oikoumene, globalization, and interreligious dialogue. But we have fallen “between the chairs.” We have discovered that there is a conflict of interpretations among us. We have sensed that the ecumenical movement, globalization, and interreligious dialogue, as they are being commonly understood, do compete with each other in theological education and in the church. We understand ecumenicity, globalization, interreligious dialogue differently depending on our position on the foundational questions of particularity and universality, relativity and constancy, plurality and unity, inclusivity and exclusivity, evangelism and dialogue, identity and justice.

Those who love the ecumenical movement worry that the movement seems to be floundering and wonder why we are not better able to engender its future. What we have loved is either forgotten or scorned as passe. Our perplexity is deepened by the widely shared conviction that the United Methodist Church is essentially and necessarily ecumenical. It belongs constitutionally to the church uniting movement. The United Methodist Church’s peculiar heritage is constitutive of the church universal. What is distinctive to us are trusts to be shared with the whole church. If this is the case, as I believe it is, the fate of the ecumenical movement is of more than passing concern for United Methodists.

But we are “between the chairs.” On one side is the generation of great visionaries of the one visibly united church of
Jesus Christ. Their vivid depictions of the yet open promises of the ecumenical movement still grip and stir us. Theological educators often feel at fault for the failure to inform our students about the ecumenical mandate of the church and to help them to become practical ecumenists. We yearn for a new commitment. But on the other side are our students and children and people all over the world struggling for freedom from political, economic, and cultural oppression, a generation for whom these ecumenical visions and language have become suspect.

What has become problematic for so many people about ecumenical language? The language of ecumenicity stresses unity. Unity is a political term, which is to say it is a term of power. The suspicions about the ecumenical movement center around the false unification of the church culturally, racially, ethnically, or nationally. Aristotle articulated in his *Nicomachean Ethics* the oldest and most successful theory of sociality: “Birds of the feather flock together.” Many Christians throughout the world do not want unity in terms defined from the perspectives of northern, white, male, industrial dominance. Many are committed to work against such unity. No unity without justice. The World Council of Churches meeting in Canberra, Australia, was perhaps a watershed revealing that we cannot go further without radical changes in the ecumenical movement. And yet we cannot go further in globalization without what has been gained in the ecumenical movement. Indeed, the irony is that the ecumenical movement has itself wakened in us the consciousness of cultural and religious diversity that is now claimed by some to be underrepresented in the ecumenical movement.

Within North American theological education “globalization” is the current rallying cry. But how are we to understand globalization? Is “globalization” meant to supercede the ecumenical movement? Is “globalization” a new word for ecumenicity and mission? Does globalization mean that social and economic justice in the global community is the irreducible core of theological education? Is “interreligious and intercul-
tural dialogue" the central meaning of "globalization" so that it should supercede both ecumenicity and globalization as the key to theological education?  

I do not believe that globalization should jettison the ecumenical movement. In fact we are far enough along in the debate to say that globalization and interreligious dialogue are not panaceas for theological education; they do not in themselves solve the major questions facing us. The future of the church requires all of these realities (ecumenicity, globalization, interfaith dialogue). Indeed, it seems to me that they mutually coinhere in such a way that to lose one would mean to lose all. But to hold these crucial realities together will require that our understanding and practice of all three will have to change.

Oikos as Key for Relating Oikoumene, Globalization, and Interreligious Dialogue

I submit that OIKOUMENE should remain the key term, even as we appropriate the new perceptions and experiences generated by globalization and interfaith dialogue. But the meaning of oikoumene has to be expanded. If the ecumenical movement is going to have a future, it will look different from what we have known and will have to be related inherently to globalization and the community of the world religions as well as more intentionally to the life of the congregation.

The word oikoumene, connected with oikos (household, homo), belongs to our oldest memories and richest language systems. Oikos provides the root meaning not only for oikoumene but also for economy and ecology. It is in these three spheres that the survival of the globe will be determined. All of these terms are about home. Home is where people know your name, where they can tell your story and therefore join with you in anticipating your future. All things in nature also need a name and a history if they are to survive. Having a home means being confronted, forgiven, loved, and hoped for. It means having a place at the table and a claim on sharing what
is on the table. Fundamentally, home means access to what it takes to live and live abundantly. To be homeless is to be subjected to death.

The life and death questions of oikos have been largely repressed under our modern fascination with progress. So caught up are we in our implicit faith in mechanistic theories of economy that the questions of oikos, in their ancient sense, no longer seem sophisticated enough. And yet they are starkly real and irreducible. The question of economy is, will everyone in the household have access to what it takes to live and live abundantly? The question of ecology is, will nature have a home, its own living space? The question of the oikoumene is, will the peoples of the earth be able to inhabit the earth in peace? Taken together they constitute oikoumene as the most comprehensive horizon for the church's service of God's redemption of the world. These are questions of creative justice, that is, God's power of life against death.

Oikoumene, then, comprises not just the unity of the church but God's oikic work to make the world into a home. As all narrations of its history make clear, the modern ecumenical movement came out of the practice of mission. The theme is still the same: How can the church be prepared to serve God's oikic work?

Why, then, has globalization come on the scene? Globalization and interreligious dialogue stress the difficulty of creating home across cultural, social, political, and religious differences. They question the particularistic and sometimes dominating thrust of Christian mission. In some forms they eschew mission altogether and downplay the tradition in order to find an unmediated universal truth, a world theology. They want to proceed directly to a universal community without taking the difficult path of conversion. What is missing in many of these current understandings of globalization and interreligious dialogue is our own conversion. For fear of a narrow absolutist approach in ecumenical circles, there is a tendency to opt for yet another absolutist approach. The approach we should follow, it seems to me, is to take seriously the new ground
plowed by globalization and interreligious dialogue in order to bring these experiences into a transformed practice of the oikoumene.

The Necessity of Globalization

GLOBALIZATION IS A TERM THAT HAS RISEN from the economic universe of discourse, which is ruled by multinational corporations in the United States, the European Common Market, and Japan. It is based on the recognition that local and national economies are increasingly tenuous, that is, that governments are less and less capable of holding economic actors accountable to the humanity and dignity of the people in their sphere of influence.

Despite the cry for democracy now heard round the world, the great global enterprises that make the key decisions -- about what people eat and drink, what they read and hear, what sort or air they breathe and water they drink, and, ultimately, which societies will flourish and which city blocks will decay -- are becoming less and less accountable to the people whose lives they change. Global corporations, whatever flag they fly, have outgrown national laws and national cultures, and the whole world has not begun to address the problem.8

From this perspective, globalization, then, means that there is one global economy and that those who can comprehend or control the household rules of the global economy, its language and logic, its resource allocation, and its markets will survive and be secure. Those who do not globalize will increasingly become victims of an irreversible historical process. And thus we have the recent self-congratulatory claim of a major multinational corporation, "We globalized forty years ago!"

But a full two-thirds of people in the global household the majority of people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and an increasing proportion of marginalized persons in the first
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world, are being left out of the global household and hence are increasingly threatened with hopeless conditions of death. Those who are systemically excluded from the North American public household are also subject to death. Shall we consider it an irony that within North American theological education "globalization" has become the current rallying cry?

The absolutist approach in globalization and interreligious relationships can make it impossible for us to see what, in my opinion, is the greatest threat to the church's freedom for the gospel and its power for mission to the oikoumene (which includes freedom for interreligious community in our time), namely, the universal and totalitarian reality of the market society. To be sure, the market is in itself a good human instrument. But when market logic spreads into all dimensions of the world's societies, freedom is denied. If we really want to speak of globalization in relation to God's oikic mission, then we must face the fact that market logic determines all spheres of social goods, and thereby excludes many people from what it takes to live and live abundantly. When unity is defined by the market logic, the interpretation of scripture and formulation of doctrine become ideological, that is, a means of promoting one's own interests at the expense of another. These interpretations can cloak or condone an unconscious desire to maintain superiority or to dominate, control, or devalue other traditions. Ideologized doctrines and practices used to justify the subordination and exploitation of other cultures and religions have to be detected and revised before God's word can be heard. Such an ecclesial task is nothing less than global in scope.

Globalization therefore entails a disciplined awareness of the new world context in which theology and church must live. It also encompasses the search for new modalities of theology, church life, and mission in the world. Globalization as such does not provide new criteria for theology. It does not present an occasion in which the Christian tradition should or can be suddenly discarded. Globalization, in contradistinction from the spreading of the universal logics of the market, of progress,
of deterrence, and of the exploitation of nature, should mean living coram Deo in the modality of the gospel at this time in history in this place in the world household.

The Gospel as the Focus and Criterion of Globalization

THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL WORK OF GLOBALIZATION AND MISSION to the oikoumene is grounded in the power of God's word, which has the shape of the gospel. I believe that theological education as oikoumene renewed through globalization and interreligious dialogue can find its integrity and empowerment only in the gospel. If globalization requires radically new analyses of the world context of theological education, it also requires a steady focus on the gospel, without which it has no theological content and direction and can easily serve, if unsuspectingly, the globalization of the market society. Simply to say the word gospel does not end the debate about globalization, but it clarifies, I believe, what the argument is about.

Gospel (euaggelion) has at least two basic meanings or dimensions: the good news proclaimed by Jesus and the good news which is Jesus.

1) The good news proclaimed by Jesus he received from the traditions of our older Scriptures: God's righteousness reigns. Jesus added the timing: Today God's righteousness is at hand, in your midst. “Righteousness,” God's power for life against death, is the means by which God creates home for God's creation.

The shape of the gospel, which Jesus as a member of the household of Israel received and proclaimed, is promise and command. The promise is that the conditions for life against death are being created by the righteousness and power of God in the midst of history. If the promise of the gospel is the presence of God's righteousness/justice (Immanuel), then the command of the gospel is mission to the oikoumene which God will redeem. The promise of God's righteousness and God's sending (mission) to serve the life of the oikoumene are con-
stitutive of a household which trusts and lives from the good news.

Concretely this means that globalized theological education should find its practical integrating focus in the congregation's mission to the oikoumene.\textsuperscript{11}

2) The second sense of good news is Jesus himself as grounded in the resurrection of the crucified one. The good news is that the character of God has the shape of Jesus and his future. This is good news in at least three senses:

(a) The power by which righteousness can be done is radically different from all other kinds of power, all of which tend to destroy themselves and various aspects of God's creation. This power is called love and its logic is grace. The power and logic for life are enfleshed in the past, present, and future of Jesus (which embrace Israel, God's creation, and God's universal redemption).

Concretely this means that theological education must engage in the conflict created by the public announcement of the gospel. If the power and logic to which the gospel witnesses are true, then the seminary is responsible for helping the church engage in the strife of conflicting powers and logics in the world. Globalization is a way of saying that these conflicts over the truth of powers and logics are at once local and worldwide.

(b) The power by which justice can be done comes first to the those threatened with evil and death (the \textit{am ha-aretz, ptochoi, ochlos}) for no other reason except the character of God who gives it. This character is grace: good news to the poor, justice to the oppressed, name to the nameless, forgiveness to the sinner, sight to the blind, daily bread to the hungry, reconciliation to the enemy. The gospel always appears in relation to those who are excluded from what it takes to live and live abundantly. That is, its oikic shape makes possible the oikos of Jesus Christ.

Concretely this means that globalized theological education shaped by the gospel cannot happen apart from people of color, the poor, women, the handicapped, the nameless, prisoners, the unorganized, the uninformed. The poetics, aesthetics, and
rhetoric of globalized theological education will arise from the discourses of these people as they struggle for inclusion in the household and radical transformation of the relations and structures of the household.\textsuperscript{12}

(c) The third sense in which Jesus is the good news is that God is constituted by the community of relationships that appears in the history of Jesus (past, present, and future). Jesus' relationships to Abba and to the Holy Spirit are not only the means of knowing God; they comprise God. There is no God behind or under this community of righteousness. God as a community of righteousness is good news, for this reality is the undermining of all theories and practices of domination, especially the modern ideologies of individualism and privatism.\textsuperscript{13} Concretely this means that globalized theological education is a constant practical and theoretical struggle before God for a life that conforms to the character of God's life. Among other things this entails the seminary's attempt to resource the church, and itself as a part of the church, to become a community of diversity and unity that conforms, under the conditions of history, to the Triune Community's own life. A globalized seminary will work for the formation of a household whose household rules are shaped by the gospel, a household which practices hospitality to the homeless in a global setting.

In my judgment, the transformation of the ecumenical movement through globalization is most at risk in the attempt to revive Enlightenment standards of relativism, pluralism, and secularism as the criteria for interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

The Search for Interreligious Community

THE ABSOLUTISM OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH came to an end through the wars of religion and was replaced by the relativism of the Enlightenment and by humanism. But the Enlightenment tradition has its own weaknesses. And those problems have to do with the resulting history of the great Enlighten-
ment clarion calls of tolerance, plurality, relativity, and secularity. Tolerance has become indifference, plurality empty pluralism, relativity relativism, and secularity secularism. Relativism is always married to a hidden absolutism. In most instances a religious relativism seems simply a cloak for a new absolutism. Absolutism and relativism are twins because both view everything from a higher, non-historical watchtower, a privileged position. In short, the Enlightenment has its own problems of absolutism and triumphalism that lead to a new absolutism.  

An affirmation of religious pluralism can all too easily lead us to tolerate what is intolerable. As Paul Knitter has put it:

The First World theologians are well aware that their dialogues have often taken place on mountain tops overlooking barrios and death squads. Theologians engaged in dialogue are realizing that religion that does not address, as a primary concern, the poverty and oppression and ecological degradation that infest our world is not authentic religion. Dialogues between inauthentic religions easily become a purely mystical pursuit or an interesting pastime affordable only by First World mystics or scholars. Something essential is missing in such otherworldly or ultra academic dialogue.

Interreligious conversation can easily degenerate into relativistic pap in which “many” means “any” and no one can make any valuative judgments.

How are we to deal with relativism? One way is to move to a universal position, one that penetrates beneath all the accidental and historical differences among human beings and their religions to some supposed essential oneness which we share. Then on the basis of this unity underlying everything human, we can understand and negotiate the differences with which the several great religious traditions confront us.

But there is really no such universally human position available to us; every religious or secular understanding and way of
life we might uncover is a particular one. Does there have to be a positing of some common ground shared by all religions? A common essence within all traditions or a universal faith? Or a common yet indefinite mystical center? We should be warned against positing a common anything within religions as a basis for dialogue. We should resist the search for a foundation or common ground above or outside the plurality of views. There may be no way outside a tradition to assess the meaning and truth of claims made within it.

If we really want to take plurality seriously, then we should cease our search for a universal theory or a common source of religion—or even for one God within all religions. "The problem is the quest for what is common. Truly to accept pluralism is to abandon the quest. If liberal theists really wish to be open, they should simply be open. The openness is inhibited by the need to state in advance what we have in common." There is no one ultimate within or behind all the world religions. In our desire to establish or distill a common essence or center, we all too often miss what is genuinely different, and therefore what is genuinely challenging or frightening in the other. By proposing a universal deity instead of beginning with the particularity of Jesus Christ and Israel as our starting point for dialogue, we are implicitly, unconsciously, but still imperially imposing our notions of deity or the ultimate on other believers who, like many Buddhists, may not even wish to speak of God or who experience the ultimate as Sunyata, which has nothing or little to do with what Christians experience and call God.

The commitment to enter into dialogue with the other religions must be found within the particularity of each religion. Only in this way can the domination of one religion over others or the domination of a new umbrella religion be prevented. But this requires that we be true and loyal to the particularity of the other as well as our own particularity. Genuine community requires real diversity. Dialogue cannot be determined by arbitrary and predetermined attitudes. This means that dialogue should begin with a hermeneutic of suspicion, not about the dialogue partner but about one's own
religious presuppositions. The search for a genuine freedom for dialogue begins with my struggle for freedom from my own personal, class, national, racial, and gender interests. Are my assumptions simply girding up my ideology by which I express and protect my own interests? The leading question is the ancient question, Cui bono? For whose good does the inter-religious dialogue exist? Whose interests is it serving? We do not enter into community without a sense of our own incompleteness, without the realization that we are coming to receive something as well as give something.

But if there is no common essence or ground or ultimate that can be predefined, what is common that brings us together? We also should not fall into skepticism and relativism that lock each religion into its own language game. What is the bridge, the table, the common ground, the forum? On what basis can dialogue take place so that the freedom proper to every religion can be safeguarded?

I think the answer is human suffering. Human suffering is a central problem in all world religions. Each confronts the sufferings of humanity and the need to put an end to godless and inhuman relations of the world. The primary components of the religions' community of suffering are compassion, justice, and peace. Compassion or suffering love is the divinely given power to turn to the world. The first sense of suffering is being acted upon, being the object of pain. The second sense of suffering is the power of life, the strength of living. It is the power to go outside of oneself and be with the other. But human suffering remains an open question. No religion has been able to give a definitive answer. Is the problem of suffering "solved when the Buddhist tries to extinguish the 'desire' of life as the ground of suffering? Is it solved if the animist sees it as a disturbance in the cosmic balance and tries to put the disturbance right through sacrifice? Is it solved when the Moslem accepts his or her destiny in total self-surrender to God? Is it solved if the Christian accepts suffering in the love of God and transforms it by virtue of his [or her] hope?"19 No one of these answers is completely satisfactory.
Compassion turns us to the world where the other is suffering. And there all religions find in common tasks of justice. We go out to encounter other religions, not primarily to enjoy diversity but first of all to work for justice. Justice takes precedence over relativism and pluralism. Life with the poor and the marginalized constitutes the necessary and primary purpose of dialogue. Religions must speak and act together because only when they do so can they make their crucially important contribution to removing the oppression that contaminates the earth.

Returning to the Oikoumenic Task

GLOBALIZATION AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE will, I believe, take theological education back to renewed work for the oikoumenic church. The ecumenical movement has been right in its argument that community must precede justice, that without community there can be no mutually shared conception of justice or means of establishing justice. Oneness is a gift to be received; being comes before action. But there can be no genuine unity in Christ without transformation. And therefore we must decry the false ecumenicity which replaces unity through transformation of the churches with unity as interchurch cooperation. Ecumenical work that elevates Enlightenment tolerance instead of mutual transformation and growth in Christ toward deeper koinonia fails the unity to which the church is called.

The ecumenical movement has also reminded us that the root of oppression is not just unjust structures but sin, which can only be healed in the koinonia created by God's grace. Therefore, that oneness of community is the means to mission. Nothing changes for the good in history without living relationship in dialogue, continuing conversation, face-to-face reciprocity, community of shared suffering working for justice. Life in fellowship, life in dialogue changes the atmosphere. Each religion should show its truth and vocation in relationship, in dialogue. Dialogue is not merely a way of discussing
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suffering; it is also a way of practicing our attitudes to suffering with one another.

But this means, above all, our own transformation: spiritually, socially, and economically. Mutual participation and cross-fertilization become possible only when we understand that such a community will change us. All genuine encounter is transformation. That doesn't mean that we will substitute our most basic beliefs or our traditions, but the way we appropriate our beliefs and traditions will be changed in community. Such a relationship is what our culture and (as far as I know) every culture calls friendship. Interreligious dialogue is a sign of hope for the future of the world if it is carried on in the interests of life and liberation.

This freedom for community among the religions brings about a feast of unending joy. Reconciled human beings of the many religions can find inestimable joy in their reconciliation and in their common compassion for the suffering of the world, for this new community will already be a sign of religious freedom and joy in anticipation of what all the religions know will come one day: a human community of peace with God, with each other, and with nature. To know this freedom already, under the conditions of evil in the world, is a joy for which we should be ready to sacrifice and work with our whole beings.

Despite our having fallen between the chairs, there is abroad in theological education today an extraordinary good will and an energizing hope that we can become generative, that we can occasion the generation of the generations in the oikoumene, globalization, and interreligious dialogue. It is time that United Methodist seminaries begin practicing an intentional and disciplined conciliarity for the sake of God's oikoumene. Whether this work looks like that of a fool, of course, depends not only on one's vantage point in the oikoumene but more importantly on the timing of God's gracious righteousness.

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Notes


2. The case has been made definitively, among others, by two of our chief ecumenical theologians, Albert Outler and John Deschner. If these claims are true, one avenue for our entering the Church of Christ Uniting (an inclusive, visible, eucharistic community through mutual recognition of ministries and members) lies at hand, for example, in COCU, were we able to abandon our stubborn Methodist claims to self-sufficiency. One sense of malaise arises from the fact that, having given such decisive leadership to the COCU process, the United Methodist Church seems now to be expressing reluctance.


4. See S. Mark Heim, "Mapping Globalization for Theological Education," Theological Education 26/Supplement 1 (Spring 1990), 7-34. Heim argues that globalization will be understood according to the perspective one occupies regarding evangelization, mission/oikoumene, social justice, and dialogue with the other religions and that one's perspective will be further refined by one's predilection to a specific type(s) of social analysis.


7. Mark Kline Taylor and Gary J. Bekker offer a sobering caveat to simplified views of "globalization," in "Engaging the Other in a Global Village" Theological Education 26/Supplement 1 (Spring 1990), 22-33.


11. The recent proposals for the congregation as the integrating focus of theological education go in the right direction, but in general they do not stress...


13. This means that exigency for the unity of the church and the justice of the *oikoumene* is found in the fundamental logic of the Christian faith, the life of the Triune Community. For an extended argument see M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist*.


16. "By 'objectivism' I mean the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature or rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness (and religious experience)...Objectivism is closely related to foundationalism and the search for an Archimedean point. The objectivist maintains that unless we can ground philosophy, knowledge, or language in a rigorous manner, we cannot avoid radical skepticism." Jeremy Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983). See also Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

17. According to Raimundo Pannikar, "Pluralism does not allow for a universal system. A pluralist system would be a contradiction in terms. The incommensurability of ultimate systems is unbridgeable."


Some Implications of the Yahara Papers for Seminaries and for Theological Education

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Previous issues of Quarterly Review carried several of the papers presented at the Yahara Consultation of March 1990. In view of the numerous ideas and concerns raised in those papers, it seems reasonable at this juncture to ask, What may one make of them? Can one find substantive matters to be learned and applied to seminaries specifically, and to theological education more broadly?

Perhaps the major insight from the collected papers is that they come at a strategic time in theological education. The Association of Theological Schools' work on globalization has influenced faculty and administrators in all seminaries, including those related to the United Methodist Church. They call for theological reflection, especially in light of the official responses from the churches to Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry, the document which sets out what some believe to be the most significant ecumenical convergence of this century. Moreover, seminaries must respond to the increasing reality of
other living faiths emerging in significant ways on the U.S. religious scene. The increasing interest in spiritual formation also calls for a response from seminaries.

The Yahara papers cumulatively and collectively lead to a *gestalt*, that is, a persuasive and powerful insight ineluctably rooted in the totality. They proclaim a vision of an ecumenically renewed and reconstructed theological education, radically transformed in faithfulness to the ongoing search to understand the nature of God and to comprehend God's action in Christ. Theological educators should not merely "tinker" with components, to add a course here and there or to arrange a short-term visit, but rather they are called to reconceive, re-envision, and redirect the whole enterprise!

The Yahara Consultation was also the setting for some vital but unpublished scholarly work. The members of the consultation were divided into six working groups, each of which focused on a specific issue: Ecclesial Agreements: Reception in Church and Seminary; Denominational Formation and Ecumenical Formation; Developing the Next Generation of Ecumenical Leadership; Ministerial Formation in an Increasingly Interreligious Context; The Terminology of Unity: Meanings, Relationships, Conflicts, and Priorities; Theological Import and Adequacy of "Globalization." By the end of the consultation, each working group drafted a substantive and suggestive paper which included reflection on the formal papers presented as well as the shared knowledge, experience, and wisdom of the participants. This essay draws upon both the papers as published and the writers' access to other work accomplished at Yahara.

From all those materials, numerous clues and strands intertwine to suggest possible directions for transformation. From those we have isolated five themes that may well indicate the direction of theological education in the future:

- theological education is broader than seminary education;
• United Methodist identity is constitutively defined to include ecumenism;
• both confession and passion are needed in relation to ecumenism;
• tension points require explicit attention, not avoidance;
• interreligious dialogue is critical and essential, especially to address justice issues among the human family.

Seminary Education as Part of Theological Education

While seminaries are a critical locus for theological education, theological education is broader than seminary degrees. The concept of theological education must include the entire spectrum of laos, that is, all baptized Christians, the overwhelming number of whom will never seek seminary degrees. From that number, certain vitally important persons will respond to God's call and seek preparation for representative ministries through seminaries. Theological education also includes those persons already within representative ministry, who have insights and learnings to share. Roy Sano's plea for addressing the intradenominational tension between liberals and evangelicals of the United Methodist Church requires a vision of theological education that goes beyond seminary bounds. 1 The task of reordering the life, ethos, and offerings of the seminary is sufficiently staggering but even that is not enough. For example, Loren Mead of the Alban Institute foresees every local congregation functioning as a kind of seminary: "Not the ones we've known, but a reinvented seminary. The ones we have train a professional cadre in three years. The ones we need are life-long centers of training, retraining, and nurture." 2

For the vision of households, the oikos, which Douglas Meeks sketched 3 and for the understanding of the "three tables" which Russell Richey described 4 to become incarnate in the
conscious life and witness of baptized persons in congregations, we need the most comprehensive view of theological education.

Yet, within that comprehensive view there remains a critical, central place for the seminary. The Church must look there, primarily, for theologians to name the fundamental questions about God, Jesus Christ, and the world. The church must expect and support scholarship in all the areas that presently exist within seminaries. But seminaries also need to engage in the world, even at risk. Seminaries are called to be prophetic. The seminary curriculum, therefore, has accountability to the faith, to specific institutional missions, to the academy, and to the wider world. The Church needs all the expertise it can assemble to prepare persons for ordained and consecrated ministries. This must be done from the intertwined perspectives of globalization, ecumenism, and interreligious dialogue.6

Ecumenism and the Denomination

For United Methodists both denominationalism and ecumenism are important. Several authors7 call attention to the ecumenical stance of the United Methodist Church, which embeds these words in the Preamble to its Constitution:

The Church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world.

John Deschner argued that ecumenism “is not an extra, but is essential and constitutive for United Methodism as a church.” If, as he continues, ecumenism goes beyond its concern for the dividedness of the Church (important as that is) and attempts to heal the brokenness of the human community, then Methodism and ecumenism become inextricably linked. “No ‘distinctives,’ no United Methodists...no ecumenical commitment, no United Methodists either...”7 Deschner concludes that United Methodists should recast theological education, in light of Wesley’s understanding of grace.8 Such recasting must maintain a concern for Methodist distinctive-
ness and particularity, but only within the broader context of ecumenical commitment. Both must be done simultaneously. Certainly, this implication requires careful and thoughtful attention.

A Passion for Ecumenism

At present, United Methodists seem unwilling, or unable to confess their part in perpetuating the dividedness of the Church and evidence little passion for ecumenism. Perhaps the most telling comment is that of Michael Kinnamon:

I speak as a person who loves the United Methodist Church when I say that the biggest objection I hear from your—our ecumenical partners is that the Methodists are too self-sufficient.

Have United Methodists outgrown ecumenism? Do United Methodists worry more about denominational survival and declining membership than they do about the dividedness of the Church? Are United Methodists unwilling to envision the coming great Church if it is not precisely like the present, or even any, institutional church? It appears that United Methodists are turning their collective backs, and minds, on John Deschner's point: the centrality of ecumenism as constitutive for United Methodists' self-understanding.

Inclusive church unity is constitutive for United Methodism—as constitutive as personal sanctification is for Wesleyan salvation. United Methodism has its being, its integrity, only in relation to the whole church of Christ. We cannot be ourselves without being ecumenical. That is what Wesley saw in his construal of the relation of the Methodists to the Church of England. And it remains utterly clear in principle in the Constitution and Discipline of our denomination.

United Methodist-related seminaries can lead United Methodists to understand the centrality of ecumenism and commit themselves passionately to it. Other denominations' seminaries have recently experienced pressure from persons...
seeking to enforce "doctrinal conformity"; this may well be coming to United Methodist-related seminaries. James V. Heidinger, II, in Good News identifies this issue for attention at the 1992 General Conference:

3. Call seminaries to theological accountability. Many of us wonder if our seminaries have become such handmaidens to America's secular universities that they've lost all sense of accountability to the church. Who oversees the doctrinal integrity of our UM theological seminaries?...Whose job is it to guarantee that our denominational seminaries are teaching theology which faithfully reflects United Methodist doctrine as outlined in the Book of Discipline? Isn't it time the church called our seminaries to doctrinal accountability?  

This appears to be a call, not to ecumenism and denominationalism together, but to United Methodist particularism. Roy Sano notes the need for "a much sharper focus on the tension between evangelicals and liberals within The United Methodist Church." And that will most certainly include tension around the foci of theological education.

The lack of confession and passion are of serious concern. Theological education, as all education, is committed to the ongoing search for truth. But this includes the potential of new truth breaking in and being found, and especially truth about the nature of God, and for this both confession and passion are needed. If theological education is to reflect the gestalt of interweaving ecumenism, globalization, and interreligious dialogue, it seems essential that we lament the brokenness of the Church and feel the pains of division. There can be no "mutually vulnerable pursuit of truth" without that foundation.

Difficult Areas for Future Debate

VITAL ISSUES ARE AT STAKE HERE not only for theological education but also for the faith itself. Simply to avoid tangling with
the issues and to choose an “opting-out” stance will do a profound disservice to theological education.

What is the stance for addressing such issues? Again the phrase was introduced by Michael Kinnamon: the “mutually vulnerable pursuit of truth.” That is a taut phrase with profound meaning. Participants need to begin their study with questions rather than declarations, with hypotheses rather than conclusions, with open minds rather than closed minds, with a deep commitment to searching for truth whether old or new rather than simply restating given positions. Should participants enter such study with the assumption that truth is finite and fully known, the opportunity for substantive theological reflection will be lost. The question of stance with its methodological implications is the first area needing debate and resolution.

What are some of the critical areas of tension raised in these papers? They are numerous, to be sure. We are making no attempt to develop a comprehensive listing but rather to identify some of the areas that seem worthy of careful study.

Defining the Terms

First, there is a clear need to develop a working understanding of the three terms that played such a large part in the Yahara papers: globalization, ecumenism, and interreligious dialogue. It is possible that this may be best done by assuming that all three are essential to theological education. The practical work toward implementing them may be far preferable to the abstract exercise of defining them. Whatever the approach, there is a substantial body of work to be done around these three key terms.

Indeed, the term ecumenism moves in two related directions. There is the three-level meaning many would recognize. The term ecumenism refers: “1) to unity and renewal of the whole Christian community...2) to the world-wide mission of the church, and 3) to the unity of the whole human family.” On the other hand, Douglas Meeks goes to the root word, ὀίκος, household or home, and suggests a different set of meanings:
the relationship between economy, ecology, and oikoumene. He writes:

The question of economy is, will everyone in the household have access to what it takes to live and live abundantly? The question of ecology is, will nature have a home, its own living space? The question of oikoumene is, will the peoples of the earth be able to inhabit the world in peace? Taken together they constitute oikoumene as the most comprehensive horizon for the church’s service of God’s redemption of the world.  

It is worth recalling Diedra Kriewald’s point that many church leaders “operate from a denominational perspective that rarely includes the language or root metaphors of ecumenism.” Certainly, once these sets of meanings are studied and understood, more will be necessary to move them into the conscious and subconscious thought patterns of church folk.

Mission and Witness

Another area that calls for attention is the ongoing relationship between Christian mission and witness (which also have multiple meanings) and global mutuality and solidarity. That means more than simply a “sending” side to the equation; it calls for theological reflection and human interaction among diverse peoples and cultures. It calls for further work on the relationships between particularity and wholeness, to say nothing of the entire issue of contextualization.

An observation made by Lamin Sanneh needs substantial review: “We need to be aware of the fact that all religious claims are intended for human custody even where they direct us to transcendent ends.” While his comment was directed to Muslim-Christian relationships, it is an important point upon which to reflect. It moves beyond a merely “comparative religions” view and presses to a differing understanding of the reality of God’s creation.
Another interesting concern raised has to do with the location of the magisterium, or teaching office. One thinks of the ways in which the Council of Bishops has exercised its teaching office through two important initiatives: *In Defense of Creation* and *Vital Congregations: Faithful Disciples*. But in United Methodist polity, General Conference is ultimate. John Deschner has raised the possibility that United Methodism may be responding to a growing conciliar magisterium and asked whether that is a direction that should be encouraged and supported. In a fascinating analysis, he described the process by which The United Methodist Church fashioned its response to that critical document from the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. There, General Conference delegated the task of response to the Council of Bishops. While that is significant in itself, his principal point was that, in asking vital questions and in receiving responses from 189 churches, the World Council of Churches, in effect, was itself exercising the teaching office. Certainly the whole question of teaching office, and the role of seminaries in that, requires exploration.

**A New Pedagogy**

Pedagogy, that is, the selection and focus of content, the rationale, perspectives, and assumptions for curriculum and courses, and the actual mode of instruction, is integral to any educational process. Closely related, of course, is what experience, perspectives, scholarship, and preparation seminary faculty and other teachers need. For example, Thomas Thanigaraj is explicit in his recommendation:

> We need to adopt an entirely different theological and educational methodology in all the courses that are taught in our schools. Each subject that is offered in the seminary or school should be taught in such a way that the global-contextual matrix of that particular discipline is highlighted and explicated.
Jane Cary Peck described, in considerable detail, the ways in which she, as a seminary professor, used ecumenical resources and perspectives. In each class, she used a searching, questioning mode of instruction so that "In this environment, we can intentionally work on developing and practicing the values of an ecumenical community." The seminary class itself, therefore, became not only an academic experience but also an ecumenical one. Diedra Kriewald calls on the United Methodist Church to tap the research and writing resources assembled in the seminaries for the issues of ecumenism and to recognize that: "the seminary communities can become centers of information and interpretation to help restore balance and discourage litmus testing...."

These, then, are some of the issues which will create tension and conflict but which require study and addressing so that theological education can change as it needs to.

**Dialogue and Global Justice**

*The More Encompassing Meaning of Ecumenism* or the threefold meaning rooted in *oikos*, is in many ways, the most complex of the strands. It reflects a theological cutting edge; even to state it challenges some traditional Western notions about Christian mission.

This theme has a special urgency for Americans. U.S. society, in the last generation, has undergone radical changes, a trend that will almost certainly continue. By the turn of the century, for example, there will be more Muslims in this country than Jews. Every major city in this country encompasses a wide mix of persons from every part of the world, reflecting differing cultures, languages, and religions. As a society, we seem ill-equipped to comprehend such drastic change. The consciousness of being one world, sharing in "spaceship earth," and the interdependence of ecological systems are beginning to dominate our awareness. In religious circles the dialogue among Jews and Christians since the end of World War II has had a special common focus in trying to comprehend the
Holocaust. Models for Muslim-Christian or Buddhist-Christian or Taoist-Christian or Shinto-Christian or Hindu-Christian relationships and dialogues lack the commonalities that seem to be found readily in Jewish-Christian dialogue.

What about the traditional understanding of missions from Christian churches in the Western world to non-Christians, which was stated succinctly in the words of the "Great Commandment?" As many persons in the two-thirds world testify, it was not only Christ but Western culture that accompanied missionaries. Differing forms of witness and mission are now required. Authentic dialogue emerges as a new alternative that rests on a significant theological premise:

If dialogue is defined as a mutually vulnerable pursuit of truth..., then Christians can presumably learn something new about the nature and purpose of God from such encounters. The clear implication is that God is at work redemptively in and through these other communities (whose members we regard more as partners in God's work of shalom than as objects of conversion)... 27

That premise, to be sure, is unacceptable to many Christians. If God is at work in all of the creation and among all the peoples of the world, how can we understand that reality in relation to the billions of people who are neither Jews nor Christians? Herein lies the need for dialogue and search.

Throughout the Yahara papers, there is high concurrence that the matter of interreligious dialogue must be addressed, that it is essential to globalization and to ecumenism, and that it is not optional. Jane Smith wrote out of her scholarly study and her direct experience with Muslim-Christian dialogue; Lamin Sanneh wrote out of his experience of conversion from Islam to Christianity; Thomas Thangaraj wrote out of his experiences in India and the West; Douglas Meeks, in the concluding paper at Yahara, lifted the broadest meanings out of the household of the human family. 28

It is important that Christians engaged in dialogue commit themselves to the mutual search for truth and for knowledge
about God. Second, Christians need a clear understanding of who they are, of what they believe, and of how they have experienced God's action through Jesus Christ, and reflected upon that. The particularity, "the specificity and concreteness of the human situation," of those in dialogue is vital to its success. 29 Third, it is essential to realize that all Christianity is contextual. Christianity has not only adapted as an institution, it has also borrowed from institutions. Fourth, persons in dialogue need to struggle with nuances of language. Finally, it may well be that human suffering is the common ground which authenticates dialogue, the reality that negates relativism, and the focus that requires human beings to join together to seek justice, as Douglas Meeks has argued.

Human suffering is a central problem in all religions. Each confronts the sufferings of humanity and the need to put an end to godless and inhuman relations of the world. The primary components of the religions' community of suffering are compassion, justice, and peace. 30

Since there seems an endless amount of injustice and suffering around the world, there is some urgency in moving toward developing models for interreligious dialogue and incorporating them into theological education.

A Challenge for Leadership

TRANSFORMING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION WILL REQUIRE leadership from a wide spectrum of persons in seminaries—deans, presidents, trustees, faculty, and students—as well as from agencies in The United Methodist Church, such as the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry with its divisions, and the General Board of Discipleship with its publication programs and its work with laity. Clearly, there is a place for the Council of Bishops to continue with their initiatives and join in addressing some of these transformations in theological education. And, it must be pointed out, funding will be neces-
sary to support some persons in research, study, conferencing, writing, and the like.

The tasks are formidable, especially since numerous pressing questions were not dealt with in the Yahara papers or any of the essays in this collection. Consider, for example, two clusters of questions:

The first: How would a local church or local congregation look after the transformation of theological education suggested in these papers comes into effect? This is the arena, perhaps, where denominational particularism might be expected to be strongest. Yet, in community after community, local congregations join together in informal and formal structures across wide denominational and interreligious boundaries to engage in collective acts of mercy, witness, and justice. Could it be that some congregations and local religious communities are already engaged in re-envisioning and re-designing? That is a possibility. But, it is also possible that denominational particularism may be the more stubborn reality when profound change is called for, especially in view of the enormous investment which local congregations have in plant and facilities. The local congregations will be different, but what will it be like?

The second: How will we carry out the theological task of seeking to understand all living faiths in relation to God’s creation? That question, for some persons, cannot be raised because of their understanding of God’s specific actions in Judeo-Christian history. Yet, if God is greater than a tribal deity, the question requires examination and study. At one level, this question might suggest the relativizing all religious views. Christians, by their name and understanding, see God’s action most clearly in Christ. Yet, such claims become a barrier to any common search for God’s actions.

The challenge of all this was well stated by Douglas Meeks in the concluding portion of his essay:

The ecumenical movement has also reminded us that the root of oppression is not just unjust structures but sin, which can only be healed in the koinonia created by God’s grace.
Therefore, that oneness of community is the means to mission. Nothing changes for the good in history without living relationship in dialogue, continuing conversation, face-to-face reciprocity, community of shared suffering working for justice. Life in fellowship, life in dialogue changes the atmosphere. ...But this means, above all, our own transformation: spiritually, socially, and economically.

It is hoped that all those engaged in theological education will be prepared to take the risks of transforming the enterprise. Such transformation must be undertaken in faithfulness to beliefs and claims about the nature of God and with a clear understanding of God's action in Christ which, in all ways, seems the vital reality with which to enter the next steps.

Notes

5. This is the point which Meeks stressed so strongly in the essay “Globalization and the Oikumene in Theological Education.”


22. Deschner, "Basic Ecumenical Policy," pp. 53-55; see also Kriewald, "Theological Education in Light of COCU," pp. 66-68; and note her observation: "The teaching office to which we all attend is located somewhere in the structures of ecumenical dialogues," (p. 67).


25. Kriewald, "Theological Education in Light of COCU," p. 64.

26. Kinnamon, "Naming the Issues," pp. 78-9; see also Sano, "United Methodist Agenda," p. 90: "At the same time, to say the obvious, there are persons best explained by Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shintoism, to mention the more conspicuous Asian traditions where more than half of humankind lives."

27. For each of the authors see throughout their essays as cited: Smith, pp. 61ff; Thangaraj, pp. 76ff; Meeks, pp. 71ff.


Preaching on the Call to Prophecy in Epiphany

Paul N. Franklyn

IN THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF BETHEL, religious authorities challenge the preaching credentials of Amos after he announces that the religious establishment and national government together are poised at the brink of exile. Since Amos has not been appointed (or anointed) as a minister by Amaziah, Bethel’s chief-executive priest, Amaziah suggests that Amos go “earn his bread” with the prophetic guild down south.

Amos retorts that he is *la' nabi*, “no prophet.” Since he is not a guild member himself, institutional sanctions have little deterrent effect on him. For he has been compelled directly by God to expose the apostasy of his nation. According to God, there is no hope—well, maybe just a little (5:4, 6, 14)—for the salvation of Israel.

Though not in the lectionary readings for this season, the call of Amos (Amos 7:10-17) introduces the parallel lectionary texts by exposing why ministers, lay or anointed, have doubts about their personal identity, their authority to speak on behalf of God’s people, and the social location in which they will pursue their vocation. Furthermore, the differences between the appointed preacher and the layperson called by God are germane to those of us who would read and interpret the Old Testament lessons during Epiphany in Year C. Each of the lessons in Isaiah and Jeremiah have been studied repeatedly to understand how persons are set apart to become passionate oracles for God’s love and judgment. Nehemiah 8 (which is to be replaced by one of the Servant Songs in Isaiah 43 in the forthcoming Revised Common Lectionary) might be considered an exception, but this narrative also gives evidence of the primary compulsion experienced by those who stand before God’s people to proclaim Torah.

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Epiphany and the Call to Ministry

THE CALL TO MINISTRY IS APPROPRIATE TO THIS SEASON of the church year because the call to ministry is one way that we clarify our identity and, therefore, our authority to speak for God. During Epiphany all members of God’s body make Jesus manifest to the world in ways that recall his human acts. This is what it means to be identified as a Christian.

Epiphany, which was first celebrated in the fourth century among Egyptian Christians, is an obscure season within the church year. Over the centuries it was eclipsed by the newer and more spectacular festival of Christ’s birth at Christmas. Instead of the Christmas image of the helpless infant in the manger, Epiphany emphasizes Jesus’ works in manifesting God. It begins with Jesus’ baptism, which requires our baptism, so that we are sent forth in ministry. We emerge from the revelry of Christmas to make God’s presence known in the congregation of worshipers at work and at home. During Epiphany we help one another experience “the signs and teachings of God’s work” (White: 1991, pp. 65-67).

The Lessons during Epiphany C provide a superb opportunity to deviate for a few weeks from the relentless task of preaching strictly from the Gospel. The lectionary is driven by a christological focus. The temptation to remain in the New Testament during Epiphany is strong because there is a natural tendency to use the Gospel lections to explain how Jesus’ miracles and teaching “fulfill” his baptism. Preachers strongly resist the Hebrew Bible because these called servants, the prophets, did not have pleasant things to say about the future of the nations. The preacher who repeats and interprets their words about apostasy may find himself or herself engulfed in a feeling of gloom and doom.

The following pages offer hints for developing a month of sermons on the call to ministry during Epiphany. (The assigned text from Isaiah 62:1-5 is overlooked here because it apparently has less to do with the call to ministry during Epiphany.) This consistent theme will hold the readings together, even when subthemes are developed in a sermon.

Initiation or Politics?

BIBLICAL SCHOLARS DISAGREE ABOUT THE NATURE of Isaiah 6, 61, and Jeremiah 1. Should each be understood as the prophet’s own account of his call despite the formal structure? Or are they biographical
memoirs composed by later editors to explain why the prophet was unable to prevent the exile of the nation?

Though this dispute seems unimportant to modern congregations that do not strive to replicate life in Israel or have the memory of political exile, it has implications for the vocational tasks of the minister. In Isaiah 6, 61, and Jeremiah 1 we hear the account of a priest-turned-prophet who identifies with his community through a spiritual autobiography. This launches a new phase of personal appointment to ministry. The call narrative thus becomes a kind of narrative theology.

A political reading of these texts produces quite a different perspective on them. A political reading of Isaiah 6 emphasizes the prophet's empowerment (retroactively through editorial creativity) just before he verbally challenges King Ahaz (Isaiah 7) during the Syro-Ephraimite War in 735 B.C.E. For Jeremiah it would come as he challenges complacency and shallow optimism in the wake of Assyria's retrenchment (627 B.C.E.)

The preacher of these Old Testament lessons during Epiphany is poised to help the members of the congregation articulate both an individual narrative of the call to ministry and a communal narrative about the call to God's justice. There are several paths that lead to this end. Sometimes we initiate a process of "visioning" among ministry groups about what God wants us to do for a particular group of persons. Sometimes we use a strategic-planning approach to articulate the objectives, goals, and primary tasks of our mission. But in the sermon, at least, we form the community responsibly by passing on traditional canonical stories about ordinary, sinful persons who were called out to serve God.

The call narratives have a similar form throughout the Hebrew Bible. The following stages appear in each story of a call to ministry, though not in the same order for each biblical personality (Habel: 1965, pp. 306-10):

1. **Divine Confrontation.** The person encounters God metaphysically and metaphorically.
2. **Introductory Word.** The potential leader becomes more aware of human fallibility.
3. **Commission.** The leader is set apart to minister.
4. **Objection.** The leader protests about lack of ability.
5. **Reassurance.** God is with the leader.
6. **Sign.** A symbolic action seals the call.

The lectionary makes a choice for the preacher. Our first instinct is to get past the bad news brought on by the call of Isaiah 6 and then leap...
THE CALL TO PROPHECY IN EPIPHANY

into the good news of Isaiah 61. We will pursue this linear route in the following pages, but the preacher may find it more effective to begin with good news on Epiphany 1, followed by a reminder that we Christians are all strangers or aliens in exile. Consider the narrative structure of these callings during Epiphany C.

Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13)

Isaiah confronts the “heavenly council,” which is presided over by Yahweh, sitting on a big throne and wearing a long robe that fills the whole room. Two angelic attendants, known as seraphs, introduce Yahweh and call (Heb.: qara’) the room to orderly behavior, as they always have, with great shouts and the announcement that Yahweh is exceedingly holy. Like other attendants in the room, they use two wings to fly, two wings to cover their faces in the light of Yahweh’s glory, and two wings to modestly cover their private parts. (Ancient storytellers say that the wings covered the seraph’s “feet,” but that is a euphemism in the Bible for genitalia.) With the pillars shaking and with the smoke filling the council chambers, we can reliably imagine that Isaiah also has his face and feet covered when he objects in shame to this interview because he is a defiled man among a people with loose lips. So one attendant flies over to the altar and plucks a red hot coal with a pair of tongs. Unable to touch it, the seraph touches Isaiah’s mouth with a burning coal to absolve the potential leader of guilt and to signify symbolically that sin is forgiven.

Presumably with his face still covered, Isaiah hears the voice (qol) of Yahweh who asks rhetorically, “Whom shall I send, and who will go on behalf of the council?” Isaiah accepts the commission, which is to “go and say.” Yahweh tells him to go and preach bad news. Isaiah dares to interrupt the speaker of the council and wonders aloud, “How long” must he preach this negative sermon. His audience is not likely to feel good, self-fulfilled, about this message. Yahweh insists that Isaiah’s defiled community is so hopelessly evil that even a tiny 10 percent remnant who escape death will be sent into exile.

Some readers would object mildly to the preceding retelling by insisting that the narrative in Isaiah 6 is a “memoir” that is politically motivated and concerned with the prophet’s opposition to the Syro-Ephraimitic War. According to this version, Ahaz refuses to listen, so Isaiah tries to invoke his authority as one directly connected to Yahweh. Isaiah is temporarily transported to the divine council, in a manner similar to the story about Micaiah ben Imlah (1 Kings 22:19-29). In retrospect, according to this view, hearers of the story acknowledge that
Isaiah arrogates the authority to confront Ahaz in chapter 7 (Clements: 1980; Klaus Koch: 1984).

Such a revised reading acknowledges that stories have political consequences. Obviously, the call narrative does not stand alone within the book but immediately invokes the purpose of the prophet’s commission: to indict apostasy at an institutional level. The prophet, therefore, indict the misguided royal leaders who are willing to wage a war to protect their comfortable way of life.

The implications of this story are obvious. A minister, lay or ordained, does not remain appointed or alive for long within the security of a religious institution by indicting it and its ruling partners as ethically and religiously unclean, and, more ominously, by reiterating literally and poetically how God sent one personally to say so. Exile is the obvious next step, one way or the other.

Isaiah 61:1-4

Jesus had been recently baptised in the Jordan River by his cousin John. After experiencing some forms of satanic temptation that tested the limits of his humanity, Jesus returned to Nazareth to attend his home congregation, where he worshipped on most Sabbaths. On one memorable Sabbath day he volunteered to read the lesson. The synagogue librarian brought him the scroll of Isaiah, which the newly anointed minister opened to what we now call Isaiah 61. Just like one of Isaiah’s disciples during the exile, Jesus announced that he too was called and anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to bandage the broken-hearted (lebasser = “good news” and l’nisb’re = “brokenhearted”); to open doors for oppressed prisoners; to give mourners a crown (p’er) instead of carbon (‘eper = “ashes”) a mantle (matheh) of praise instead of a faint spirit and to make them a planting (matta*) of the Lord.

As the people heard this, they were amazed that their hometown carpenter could speak with skillful word play, and they could not help but remember the promises that the exilic Isaiah made about the people of God who would boast (hitpa’er) about God’s glory in a restored Israel. If Jesus had not initiated and authorized his call to ministry by interpreting Isaiah 61 at least 500 years later, we probably would not have realized that an exiled disciple of Isaiah was recalling a commission to ministry among a people who were looking for new hope in a restored Zion. And even if we doubt that Isaiah 61:1-5 is a mixed genre of poetry and formulaic narrative from an exilic prophet, we are forever indebted to Jesus’ reinterpretation and application of the call to himself as he narrates his own commission for ministry.
THE CALL TO PROPHECY IN EPIPHANY

The abbreviated guidance above for retelling this text is designed to help the preacher emphasize the Hebrew word plays and convey the rhetorical artistry in the text of Isaiah 61. This poet is telling a story that contains metaphor, parallelism, and hyperbole. For a contemporary analogy in preaching one is reminded of clever rhythmic phrases in African-American proclamation. A sermon on this text suggests a passionate and rhythmic delivery, no less so because of the content that builds with climax. One preaches the day of revenge, the year of favor. One proclaims that we will

A build up ruins
B raise up devastation
A* renovate wasted cities
B* raise up generations of devastation.

Other rhetorical clues include the extensive vocabulary for describing those who are in need of ministry: the oppressed, brokenhearted, captives, prisoners, and mourners.

The preacher might also make use of other examples of legitimate hyperbolic interpretation of this text in much late-twentieth-century theological rhetoric about the inclusive and universal core for Christian mission. Isaiah 61 is often invoked by theologians who deem it quite apparent that the Gospel has not been offered to nonpersons as often and as eagerly as it has been offered to those in visible places of power and prestige. For instance, the church often overlooks or ignores persons with handicapping or retarded conditions, and those imprisoned, impoverished, or otherwise marginalized. (Mezer: 1992)

Once again the costly political implications of this call narrative are too painfully obvious. As one writer remarked to me while we were driving past a downtown church, Did Jesus really go to the cross so that we could build Christie health spas for yuppie consumers? At the time I defended this trend on the grounds that such “full-service” churches may be meeting legitimate human needs for physical health and well-being. At Abingdon Press, we often argue with care that pastors and church leaders must compete in a secularized and rapidly changing society. We identify legitimate needs for specific groups of people and then look for Christian resources that will meet those needs—with appropriate “return on investment” so that we may continue to meet other needs.

Too often, however, we become so skilled at bending the advertising hook that we ignore the life of Christian discipline and self-denial. Then,
instead of authentic spiritual food for souls, we offer what David Watson calls “spiritual amphetamines” to Christians in our culture who can afford to pay for the candy that makes them feel good about themselves (Watson: 1990, pp. 30-32).

Isaiah 61 is indeed a difficult text, and I am judged by applying it to my work as much as anyone who would dare to preach it truthfully in our congregations. The call of Third Isaiah in the text is generally dated in a postexilic Israel. The phrase “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me” suggests that this disciple is thinking of the divine council, where his mentor, Isaiah of Jerusalem, appeared before the fall of Ahaz’s northern regime. This time the prophet is called to deliver good news to a remnant that is thoroughly devastated and wasted. The identity of the prophet is defined by the identity of the people in exile (Bueken: 1989, p. 420). Thus, while someone may find it costly to preach an honest reading of Isaiah 61 in an upper middle class, suburban, full-service church, we do know that it is good news for those persons who are broken and oppressed by global economic and political forces. Our calling is to make certain, through evangelism and mission, that our congregations hear this message during Epiphany and beyond.

This called prophet (whom Jesus emulated) preached bloody apocalyptic disaster (Isaiah 63:2-6) for those who perpetuated oppression against God’s people. The prophet graphically describes how God will trample defiled bodies in the same way that feet crush grapes in a wine vat. Our first impulse is to pass over such violence as apocalyptic excess. However:

There is truth in the dread visions of the apocalyptic seers among us, as there was in the time of Third Isaiah. Our world is sorely threatened by human cruelty, prejudice, greed, distrust and idolatry. But there is an inestimably greater truth in the apocalyptic event that arises above all others—the event on the cross, in which both the tragedy that lies at the center of human existence and the hope that lies beyond the tragedy were embraced and offered to all peoples (Hanson: 1988, p. 103).

The response to the Old Testament Lesson for Epiphany 1, Psalm 29, is chosen appropriately because the heavenly council is again in session and dominated by the transcendent glory of Yahweh. This ancient Canaanite hymn, previously dedicated to Ba’al the storm God, has been rewritten by psalmists who, like Isaiah of Jerusalem, are called to strip away apostasy among the defiled nations (Cross: 1973, pp. 151-56).
If the congregation has any doubts about the power of God to effect the bad news that Isaiah of Jerusalem proclaims, then let them imagine the divine council of gods, from which the voice (qel) of Yahweh, Lord of the storm, hovers over waters, makes trees skip and whirl from thunderbolts, cracks giant cedar trees, strips forests of oak trees, and levels all plants into a wilderness.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Jeremiah always expected that he would be an appointed minister in the sanctuary. Jeremiah's father, Hilkiah, was a member of the clergy class at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, so he and his associates established apprenticed training in religious matters for their children (Clements: 1988, p. 70; on education see Crenshaw: 1985) These priests, however, were not very dependent on or impressed by the national headquarters, Solomon's temple at Jerusalem. These priests, were instead descendants of Abiathar, King David's advisor and priest, who was banished from Jerusalem to Anathoth by King Solomon (1 Kings 2:26 350 years before). No wonder Hosea's proclamation up north throughout the last century was their main influence, for the cultural hegemony that occurs when the rulers of the south are one with the Temple in Jerusalem had not changed since Hoseas's day.

Just when Jeremiah was about to be married and take on his appointment to the congregation, he was transported by a vision to confront Yahweh in the heavenly council (as he reminds us again in 23:18 when defending his words). He was introduced by Yahweh to a holy life that had been shaped and prepared for many generations, long before he was even born. God formed him (creation), knew him (redemption—in the technical, legal sense of the verb yada'; see Wolff, 1979, p. 100) and consecrated him (sanctification).

As head of the council, Yahweh appoints Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations. He is to have a global perspective, and he is no longer to be constrained by the maintenance of religious shrines at the outpost in Anathoth. But Jeremiah objects because he is only a boy with insufficient political skills to manipulate the religious bureaucracy in Jerusalem. Yahweh heard the same objection from Moses concerning Egypt, and similar reassurance is tendered: Speak only God's words and do not be afraid of religious or political leaders in power. God will save.

Then Yahweh reaches out from the heavenly council to touch Jeremiah's mouth with God's hand as a sign that seals particular words which are about to follow from his mouth. Isaiah's mouth was touched too, and, with similar intent for Isaiah's community, Jeremiah is ap-
pointed against the nations to pluck up and pull down. Unlike Isaiah though, Jeremiah is to rebuild and to plant.

As he or she did with Isaiah's call, the preacher may elect to redescribe this narrative as Jeremiah’s personal initiation, either through a liturgical ordination ritual or as a private religious experience. Or the preacher may choose, with Robert Carroll, Brevard Childs, and Walter Brueggemann, to preach about literary texts and conventions only, deliberately “depersonalizing” the text. In that case, the call narrative serves to legitimize the two visions that follow it in v. 11-19 (the almond tree and the boiling pot).

Canonical critics are inclined to help preachers sort out the political implications of the text for their own communities. They are less likely to suggest that preachers attempt retellings about the individuals who encouraged disciples in ministry or those who labored to collect and preserve oracular sayings.

Neither alternative for preachers is devoid of eisegesis or potential for abuse. One preacher can infuse the latest politically correct thinking into a text as easily as another preacher can retell misleading imaginative “lives” of religious saints such as Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or even Jesus. It is important to remember, however, that when we distance ourselves from the power of the personal, memorable calling that comes through these texts, we risk losing the prophet’s most compelling message for us: that the divine message of judgment applies not to others, but to ourselves.

Nehemiah 8:1-12

The people are returning, planting, and rebuilding after release from over two centuries of Babylonian exile. Ezra, competent scribe and biblical scholar, arrives on the scene with a letter from the Persian King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:11-27). The letter authorizes a method of compensation for those who are called to proclaim God’s commandments to the new community.

Town walls have finally been built despite some local terrorist plots. Now Ezra, apparently by invitation from Governor Nehemiah, appears before the people who have gathered as a mega-congregation on the town square at Water Gate. The people ask Ezra to got the Torah and read to all the men and women who are present, plus anyone else who can understand.

Ezra mounts a wooden pulpit, made for proclaiming Torah, and ceremoniously opens the book so that everyone can see. As soon as he opens the book, everyone stands and says, Amen, while lifting their
hands in praise to God. Then they bow deeply to the ground and worship God face down.

He reads orally and proclaims (qara’) for several hours before stopping at noon. As he reads he is apparently assisted by more than a dozen fellow scripture scribes, called by name and identified as Levites, who proclaim the sense of the Torah so that people understand the reading, even while they are standing and listening to Ezra.

The people begin to weep when they hear what was meant by the commandments and statutes of Torah. So the Governor, Nehemiah; the chief priest, Ezra; and the levitical Torah teachers comfort the people and urge that their remorse over personal failure be turned to joy, for this is a holy day. They send the people home to an afternoon meal to eat with merriment but then to return offerings of this food in thanks for this teaching—perhaps that the priests might also eat from the portions which are returned.

The similarities between this text and the practice of liturgy in the Judeo-Christian tradition is remarkable. The narrative should be preached if only to help startled church members understand some of the postexilic traditions that shape the proclamation of Torah and the worship of God by the people of our time.

The preacher is also reminded of his or her identity or calling. The leader, then and now, of the postexilic congregation is one who “reads” (so NRSV, but the verb is qara’ for orally calling out) the Torah, and as one of the scripture scribes who explain (m’paras) God’s commandments to the people that are biblically illiterate. Thus one is able to read or even preach about the names of these forgotten scribes (omitted in the lectionary selection) to emphasize the identity and function of those who teach the people of God.

The preacher also has an opportunity to reflect honestly and openly upon the possibilities and liabilities in this text for the upkeep and support of the clergy class. This narrative explains with subtlety how the Levites were set apart from the laity (the people of God) and aligned with the governing authorities in a postexilic, though hostile, environment. The narrative thus fulfills a political function in the canonical context. The Levites are able to do the special work of God—proclamation and interpretation of a Torah that they are concurrently codifying—and thereby earn their bread. This motivation among the Levites has been much maligned as the essence of Old Testament legalism or “priestly elitism” in European and American biblical scholarship of the past two centuries. The heirs to Protestant reformers generally prefer (for a while) the anti-institutional ethics of zealous prophets like Isaiah.
or Jeremiah over the priestly, institutional structures maintained by Catholic traditions on the basis of the Ezra administration.

Exiles and Aliens

Each of these narratives selected for proclamation during Epiphany, is interpreted through an understanding of exile (for more on exile see Greenhaw: 1988). Isaiah is sent to preach hardening words that will further the inevitable spin of the nation into exile. Jeremiah is appointed during the exile, when there is renewed optimism about the end of the Assyrian domination. Third Isaiah is anointed to proclaim liberty for oppressed people who are losing all hope in exile. Ezra and the Levitical associates are called by the people to explain the Torah, so that they might resettle and build community in the midst of a terrifying and openly hostile land.

The preacher may choose to skip over these Old Testament lessons, supposing that his congregation is growing and satisfied within well-protected national borders, that her congregation is optimistically evangelizing the North American culture with reasonable Christian values so that this culture might someday become more enlightened and humanistic.

But if the preacher re-examines with the congregation a call to ministry that is found in these narrative lessons for Epiphany and is focused through exile, then the whole people of God can begin to take seriously their location in a colony, as aliens or strangers passing through a hostile world. This perspective of a colony is advocated persuasively by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, in Resident Aliens (1989). The political consequences for Christians in exile are spelled out further in After Christendom? by Hauerwas (1991).

Some Christians who want to share rulership of the world, or at least to restore the religious power of Christendom, would dismiss the image of aliens in exile as "sectarian," in the same way that some of us would dismiss the prophets who were called to warn and minister to a remnant of the righteous ones that escaped God's judgment upon apostate nations.

Others, however, will find a positive message here. They will preach during this Epiphany that God's salvation is universally promised through Jesus on the cross (Watson: 1990) and proclaim that a disciplined community of resident aliens are living faithfully in exile by deeply nurturing and carefully training others who are called into the covenants of ministry (Hauerwas: 1991, chapters 4-6).
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