John D. Vogelsang
Doing the Right Thing in a Postmodern Society

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Economy, Ecology, and Ethics

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Christian Marriage Today: Fantasy and Hope
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Introduction

Earlier this year, in the sleepy research village of Cambridge, England, controversy erupted. The university had decided to grant M. Jacques Derrida an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters in recognition of his contributions to contemporary scholarship. But before it could do so, three literature professors registered their disapproval of the motion, declaring a traditional (but seldom invoked) protest, *non placet* or it doesn't please. Debate ensued. Derrida, the dark lord of deconstructionism, the academic world's best-known literary critic, was known for his theory that the meaning of any literary text—its truth—dissolved under the weight of the interests and contradictions of the society that produced it. The Non Placets called Professor Derrida's ideas "absurd and disabling." The Placets countercharged that their opponents were narrowminded and suffered from "intellectual insecurity." The good people of Cambridge were divided on the question of whether truth existed or was an illusion.

Derrida eventually received the honorary degree. The fun part was that for all the sophistication of his theories, he still had to deck out in medieval looking gear to get it. But God and the Bible were not voted down in Cambridge, as some of us might suspect. It's just that Cambridge was waking up to the importance of our current intellectual climate: postmodernism. This environment is having a marked impact on theological writing these days, and John Vogelsang's article can help us begin to make sense of it. Whether we are pleased or not by these new theories, we have a stake in all conversations about truth and how we tell it in our communities.

Sabine O'Hara is an environmental economist, which is an interesting hybrid and a hopeful sign, particularly in the United States, where politicians routinely pit environmental concerns against short-term economic growth. O'Hara wants us to be clear and realistic about our environmental and economic goals, and to search for ways
to live our Christian commitment as stewards of God's creation. This is the sort of carefully written piece you can count on to help fend off distortions coming from both ends of the political spectrum.

Our two core articles this issue are about the church in its relationship with married couples and singles. The church has a strong and legitimate interest in family relationships, but we all know how often that gets simplified into a few rules and vast unspoken realms of social norms. If we are going to be effective here, it would certainly help to have a clear and realistic picture of how the church defines the marital relationship. It would help us to know what vision it offers to people who worry that their lives are more on the boundaries than in the center of the traditional pious icon of the family. Nowhere is this more of concern than in issues of sexuality. Writing with realism and sensitivity, Leroy Howe struggles with dilemmas of sexuality and commitment to tell us that the church can bring God's presence to the core of human intimacy.

But the story is not complete if we do not take seriously the church's love and care for the singles in its midst. Sheron Patterson's article reminds us that God loves us by ourselves and in ourselves, with or without a partner. When I asked Sheron to consider writing this article, she warned me. "I'm not a theologian," she said. "And I'm real conservative about sex outside marriage." This was a good reminder of the split that we see and live with about sexual ethics these days. But there was something about her passion for the topic that convinced me that she would write well on this topic. She has done so. You will hear a call to action in her article, to talk, respond, argue, question, probe — something. Sheron knows that conversation and not silence is the first, vital step if the church is going to accept the witness of the single woman or man.

I want to record a special word of thanks for two unsung contributors to the fall issue. The fine lectionary study by Rosanna Panizo was conveyed to us in the writer's first language, Spanish. Then began the process of translating it. This proved to be a daunting task. This never quite means that. Thanks are due to Robert Colvin, who provided us with a working translation of the manuscript, and to Professor Sharon Ringe, who perfected it for publication.

The rest of our articles continue the theme of, let us say, new wine in fresh wineskins. From new theoretical constructs to the parabolic message of the Christmas season, I hope this collection of Christian thought and reflection catches you in celebration of God's grace — for the Paschal mystery of Christ, and for the goodness of our lives together.
Doing the Right Thing in a Postmodern Society

During this recent election year we have heard many speeches about family values, responsibility, ethics, and doing the right thing in an age of amorality. There is, however, an historical shift occurring which is affecting how we discuss and choose what is the right thing to do.

The historical shift is from what is called Modernism to Postmodernism. With its roots in the Enlightenment and its rise to prominence as part of the Industrial Revolution, Modernism is marked by belief in the autonomous nature of the self or individual, faith in technology and reason as the tools for progressively improving the human condition, and trust in management and planning as the means to a good society.

Within Modernism tension exists between what is considered subjective experience and objective inquiry. There are different languages and, therefore, different realms of inquiry for religion and the secular world, art and science: whereas one makes provisional assertions, the other attempts to convey objective fact. All that is objective becomes identified with the institution; all that is subjective becomes the individual struggling to assert his/her identity in the impersonal system. The authority of personal experience can be counterbalanced only by the authority of objective science. The field of modern psychology becomes divided between the behavioral

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sciences, which find their home in the academy and the subjective relativism of the encounter group movement, which lives on the edges of the institution. Within the field of modern scripture study there is the scientific analysis of the historical-critical method that reveals objective truth. This is balanced by the subjective experience of individuals who engage the text in order to reveal the religious truth that can be applied provisionally to their life.

In many cases ethical discourse has become private and subjective interpretations of Judeo-Christian principles on the one hand, countered by public adherence to the view that if each person pursues his/her self-interest in a rational way (according to the objective demands of the real world), it will be to the benefit of everyone's self-interest. Following the Ten Commandments in a way that contributes to everyone's self-interest provides the machinery for the progressive improvement of the human condition. As we have seen far too often, however, it provides dominant groups with a rationale, authorizing their actions at the expense of subordinate groups.

Unlike Modernism, Postmodernism does not offer a particular set of doctrines. At this juncture, its proponents are less intent upon fostering a Postmodern school of thought than they are upon challenging Modernism's basic premises. Many use systems of analysis to arrive at the precipice between Modernism and the unknown. Some, such as Robert Bellah, Stanley Hauerwas and others, offer us visions of a pre-modern "good society"; others invite fellow travelers to leap and discover the new in the mutual fall from the old. The theorists dealt with in this article are more those who invite us to leap than those who offer us pre-modern societies.

The variety of the voices comprising the Postmodern critique can be daunting. Feminist theoreticians and Liberation theologians analyze the systems of oppression operating within our standard forms of knowing the world and structuring society. The French deconstructionists challenge all attempts to impose authority as they describe the world as a decentered language game. Architects and artists explore eclectic collections of forms and installation art where all the forms and shapes relate to other objects or concepts without there being one center of focus. The Social Constructionist movement in psychology explores the processes by which people make meaning of the world in which they live. Among theologians, David Tracy offers a theology of pluralism that allows us to enter conversation with other belief systems by risking all our present understandings and facing the claims to attention of the other. Gordon Kaufman calls us to realize that God and the world are imaginative constructs,
and that we must take control of them and reconstruct them in order to bring about a more humane situation in the world.\(^5\)

For Postmodernism there is no longer an absolute authority upon which to base ethical choices, or a "meta-narrative" of universal principles and rules that can explain and govern actions. All attempts at absolute authority are exposed as efforts to impose the viewpoint of a particular group upon another and displayed as one alternative among a plurality of possible interpretations. Reality is a construct within a particular sociocultural and historical situation. Just as installation art and eclectic architecture depend for their meaning upon referring to other objects around them and to other art works, individuals are intersubjective phenomena of relations with others and the stories they tell about those relationships. We can no longer focus on self-interest, reason, moral codes, public or private discourse, or objective truth. We recognize these as constructs of a particular socio-historical situation that have gained prominence because they have served the needs of dominant social groups. We become concerned, instead, with the act of relating to others and how we make meaning in the midst of that relationship.

Given this shift, how do we do the right thing? From a Postmodernist perspective answers, knowledge and questions are not something to be possessed but something people do together, a discourse. The question becomes, then, how do we construct an ethical discourse in which we can decide what to do and propose guidelines for future actions? What follows are possible elements for that discourse that I have identified within the texts of various writers who are part of the shift from Modernism to Postmodernism.

**The Context.** The codes and categories that we take for "objective observation" and "reasoned understandings" are particular constructs of a cultural, historical, and social context. As we grow up and continue to move from one social context to another, we are taught patterns of basic assumptions as to the correct way to perceive, think, and feel. Even the methods we use for analyzing what we experience are contextual constructs based upon what we have been taught to look for and how we have been encouraged to interpret what we see. These assumptions and methods prevail not because they are empirically valid but because they are supported by tradition and they are useful for maintaining the social structure.

Within the Modernist tradition there has existed a dispute between universal principles and what is called "relativism." The person most identified with "relativism," Benjamin Whorf, shows in his famous example of the Hopi concepts of time and space that how

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we conceive of the world is very much controlled by the structures of our language:

*every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.*

What we take for categories and universals are the pattern-system of our own specific language family. Many people attempt to refute Whorf and prove the existence of universals by showing that he is able to translate the Hopi concepts into English, that we are able to understand the Hopi concepts, and that to totally accept Whorf's thesis leads to the view that any society may ethically justify any action no matter how alien to another society.

Once Whorf's ideas are put into their sociohistorical context, another perspective emerges. When Whorf did most of his work, 1925-1941,

*Nazism was on the rise in Europe and jingoism was prevalent in America. . . . Western civilization was assumed to be the pinnacle of intellectual achievement; other civilizations were considered inferior. . . . The very idea that "uneducated" Indians, who were still considered savages by many, could reason as well as educated Americans and Europeans was extraordinary and radical. The notion that their conceptual system better fit scientific reality—that we could learn from them—bordered on the unthinkable.*

Whorf demonstrated that the Hopi concept of the universe, while being a product of their language structure, has integrity and validity. This is a direct challenge to the universal application of Western civilization that has continually led to the oppression of Indian societies and cultures throughout the world. From this perspective, Whorf's theories are not about justifying actions within a particular context as much as they are about attempting to provide a voice for systems of thought that have been excluded. When Postmodernists analyze the context, they are concerned with raising a voice for that which has been excluded.

Whenever we analyze a statement of fact, then, we need to look at three levels of conceptualization: empirical, paradigmatic, and ideological. Empirical: what data do we choose to observe, how do we test hypotheses, how do we draw generalizations, and what do we not observe? Paradigmatic: how does the field of study in which we
are working (sociology, theology, ethics, psychology) affect what we assume about the data, what data we look for, and how we generalize about that data? Ideological: what are the sociopolitical and philosophical influences on us as individuals operating within a specialized field of study that has also been shaped by sociopolitical and philosophical forces?

Each time we gather for an ethical discourse we need to ask what is influencing how we see, think, and feel. How does being part of a dominant group or subordinate group shape what we call right and wrong and exclude alternative considerations? When we think “white” or “male” do we have more choices than when we think “black” or “female”?

The Person. Modernism deals with the dichotomy between the person as an autonomous individual or as a member of a collective. The individual seeks deeper self-awareness, clearer integration of inner values and outward actions, and greater opportunities for self-expression. The member of the collective seeks awareness of role within the larger social scheme, clearer integration of desires with the goals of the social system, and greater opportunities to fulfill one's duty. This dichotomy even shapes developmental theory, which positions the collective as an earlier stage and the autonomous individual as the more mature or later stage of moral and psychological development.9

Postmodernism offers the concept of person in community. Who we are is not what we decide to be on our own or what others tell us to be. It is a combination of what we come to express as our needs, wants, abilities, responsibilities, and calling—our boundaries—within a community where certain ways of perceiving, thinking and feeling have come to be real, and where other people express their needs, wants, capabilities, responsibilities, and calling—their boundaries. The boundaries that we form in relationship with one another provide a way for us to differentiate each other. The boundaries that we form become part of the unfolding story of our life that is interlocked with the unfolding stories of those around us and the ongoing narrative of our community, nation, and world. Our personhood and identity is a construct of the story we are told by the sociocultural situation, our understanding of one another’s boundaries, and the response we get to our experiments with expressing our own boundaries.

Our ethical discourse then would talk about boundaries that are conducive or destructive to the intended relationship; about abusing one's power to violate or discount people's boundaries; and the

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boundaries that are constructed in order for a relationship to fulfill its stated purpose.

**The Other.** Modernists believe that the constructs we use to explain life have limited meaning in themselves but derive their meaning from their correlation to things in the world and universal categories or principles. The world can be objectively observed, understood, and managed if we find the right language to correlate with what we experience and the right universal principles to explain what occurs. In scientific enquiry and philosophical arguments, when words fail, mathematics carries the day. Where words may be limited to a particular language, mathematics is a universal set of functions and principles that can better explain reality and provide the basis through symbolic logic to make truthful assertions.

Postmodernists recognize that how we know ourselves and the world is through negotiated understandings that are mediated by contextually bound language and constructs. Instead of being meaningless in themselves, our constructs are what produce meaning. George Lakoff has shown that even on a preconceptual level – the instantaneous physiological encounter with the world – there are mediating structures that make meaning of what we encounter according to biological and learned dispositions.\(^ {10} \) Mathematical formulas and symbolic logic are patterns of meaning that we use to construct what we call truth rather than a way to access the truth in the world. The world claims our attention yet exists for us as a mediated experience. We understand it, yet it is different than the structures of our understanding. We respond to the elusiveness and challenge of the world by modifying our conceptual structures and expanding our preconceptual structures (e.g., microscopes, x-rays, geiger counters), yet it remains different from us; it remains what is other.

The other claims our attention. We make meaning out of it by constructing images of it as God, as the world in which we live, and that which is beyond our world. We experience that which is different from us and conceptualize it within the codes, categories, and language available to us. What we call God and the world, then, are constructs that are useful for helping us to give meaning to what we experience. Recognizing this, we need to risk reconstructing God and the world each time we gather for an ethical discourse.

**A Sacred and Classic Text.** A text becomes sacred when it is given a key role in shaping and sustaining a community.\(^ {11} \) Upon a sacred text
can be founded all of the principles for relationships in the community, or at least a point of reference for laws, rituals, traditions, legitimations, and sanctions. A sacred text can give form to the unfolding story of the community. The community forms its understanding of current events based upon what is in the sacred text: the Exodus event, for example, has given oppressed people in the United States and Latin America metaphors and a vision for their struggle. A sacred text is held in a place of honor; it carries a great deal of symbolic importance and, as a result, claims our attention and demands a response.

A sacred text is also a classic text. It persists as important to a culture or a group because it also calls forth multilayered and persistent meanings. It defies any one interpretation and continues to be part of forming and reforming our perception of the world. The text does not contain (possess) meaning—the revealed word; meaning comes from the interplay of the text and the interpreter. The interplay is a disclosure and concealment; we come to one sense of what is meaningful only to become aware that more possibilities remain. The text has the capacity to continually set meanings at play in our conversation with it. A classic, therefore, outlives the attempts of one generation after another to control it, interpret it, use it as an answer manual, and claim it as their own story.

For a Postmodern ethical discourse sacred texts are not only the writings, stories, and scripture that are passed on. The contemporary experience of each participant and the larger community also constitutes a text. A discourse would juxtapose an analysis of the written text and the text of contemporary experience, both of which claim our attention and call us into meaning making. Just as the written text may provide symbolic constructs for understanding current events, one person's story or a community's struggle can give form to another's unfolding story.

Process for Making Meaning. Modernism tends to focus on managing data. How can we categorize what is happening? One way to manage data is to look at the present and categorize it based upon what we learned in the past. The present is meaningful because it fits the past, which taught us certain lessons. An action is wrong or right because it is similar to what we have experienced, been told, or come to believe.

Another way is to look at the present and see it as a particular and distinct manifestation of known principles. The present is meaningful because it captures our attention as an event in its own right and because particular situations exist in tension with principles. There are respected and agreed-upon principles that are held as ideals,
while experience presents situations which are judged as efforts to approximate those principles. This argument is commonly used to justify divorce, same-sex relations, pre- and post-marital sexual relations. We hold the principle that marriage is sacred and is the arena within which there can be sexual expression. We live, however, in a fallen world where we can only approximate the ideal, and we need to have compassion for each other.

A third way is to look at the present and see it as different from the past in a way that changes our constructs, reveals an aspect of reality we have not seen or have ignored, and opens up alternative choices into the near future. The present does not fit our pre-understandings of how the world should work, and in analyzing it and experimenting with it we modify how we conceive of the world. This is a variation of what Piaget refers to as accommodation—the modification of conceptual frameworks that assist cognitive development. It is also a variation of the hermeneutics of recovery offered by Gadamer. Gadamer believes that it is impossible to separate the subjective interpreter from an objective text. We may encounter the text through our pre-understandings of it, but through the act of interpretation, particularly of biblical texts, we can transcend our pre-understandings to reveal the truth of the past concealed in the text. The role of the interpreter is to be in a conversation with the biblical text in order to reveal the truth hidden there that will help reshape the interpreter’s understanding of present reality and lead to the interpreter applying the truth in his/her life. People rediscover and reveal the Christ event in order to make it meaningful in their present lives. Bridging both Modernism and Postmodernism, Gadamer does not say there is one truth which is ahistorical, restricted, and particular. Rather, he speaks of a mysterious wealth of truth, an originating event that is passed on through history through the act of rediscovering and revealing it.

Rather than manage data, Postmodernism calls us to play with our constructs and understandings and to suffer with fellow human beings. We choose to attend to that which is present to us and form it with our pre-understandings—our assumptions about God, about how the world operates, about language and its meaning, about what is valuable and what is right. In our initial experience, the physical event, conversation, or text discloses similar assumptions. We know what it is about; it fits our past experiences and confirms our values and what we hold as right. Someone in our group may have decided to join an anti-abortion demonstration at a local clinic. People begin to argue, stating their positions on abortion and their understandings
about what is happening at the clinic. Factions form and people align
themselves with those they assume are expressing a similar
perspective.

We recognize, however, that these pre-understandings are formed
by our sociohistorical context. We question and challenge any
pre-understandings that are asserted as the “true” and authoritative
way to make meaning of the event. We attempt to release our
pre-understandings, have faith to no longer let them rule how we
experience the event, in order to experience the event as different
from us. The paradox is that although we need to release our
pre-understandings to encounter the difference and otherness of the
event, we can only understand the event through our
pre-understandings. We move as close to the event as we can,
recognizing that each moment we believe we have revealed what is
there, it is concealed in our pre-understandings of the world. We
encounter alternative meanings and disclose images, words, and
stories which reveal our pre-understandings and challenge us to
analyze them anew and form different understandings of ourselves,
the world, and the text. If we remain attentive, we experience
another concealment, since even our new understanding is limited to
this time and this place. We stop the heated interchange to ask each
other about our positions and understandings. Where does the belief
that abortion is murder or that pro-choice is correct come from? Who
is fostering those stances and how do they benefit from fostering
those stances? Who seeks out abortions at the local clinic? What do
we know or speculate about what influences their decision to have an
abortion? What is our personal experience of struggling with this
topic? How does our socioeconomic status, our racial-ethnic
background, and our religious training influence how we interpret
this situation?

What is also revealed is the anxiety of being amidst uncertainty
and the suffering of those who have been damaged and excluded by
economic, social, and political forms of oppression. Without a clear
voice of authority and with all authoritative voices open for analysis
and challenge, we look around and see a fellow community of
unknowners, each suffering in his or her own way either with the
anxiety of uncertainty or the oppression of authoritative systems. We
see how we all struggle with doubt, we hear the cries of the poor, we
touch the wounds of those mangled by war, we experience the cage of
racial and class oppression, we feel the pain of victims of power
abuse, and we listen to the “voice” of a dying environment. At that
moment we choose to suffer with them, share our experience,
understandings, and knowledge, but not try to fix their suffering with
an imposed authoritative answer. Through our choice to suffer with one another, alternative meanings are released which can be used to reconstruct our understanding of the world, of God, and ourselves. We share the pain and doubt we have experienced struggling with the abortion issue. We try to hear the pain of those who seek abortion and the pain of the unborn.

In the midst of the discourse, and the release of alternatives, we form a convicting image. We hold in our attention one phrase, one image, one story from the discourse. With our imagination we give it form as a conviction — we are convinced of its importance and we are convicted to respond and act upon it. Having entered the conversation, we now construct a meaning, an image, that will project and carry us into action. The person may still join the demonstration, but now determined to care for those who seek abortions. Some of those who spoke out for choice may choose to accompany women to the clinic, in order to be a witness for their pain and in order to begin a dialogue with those among the demonstrators who are open to doing so. Or alternative actions may emerge, such as: lobby against legislation that would establish barriers to information about and access to abortion; form dialogue and support groups for people who are considering or have had an abortion; organize with local and state groups to advocate and develop ways for providing better access to good health care for poor women and children.

Communities of Discourse. To engage in ethical discourse we gather with others who are willing to play with their understandings and suffer with one another. These communities of discourse could exist within a particular denomination, a professional group, a neighborhood Bible study, a school, or a declared community. They are not attempts to form a particular community of faith as George Lindbeck advocates, to recapture the virtues of the classical world in small subcultures as Alasdair MacIntyre advises, or to foster Stanley Hauerwas's story-formed communities of character. They are gatherings of people within larger institutions who open themselves to alternative ways to make meaning and act upon those alternatives to reconstruct the institutions and the social situation.

Within the community of discourse people find the authority to act on their interpretations. Instead of absolute authority that is universally applied, authority for individual or group action is conveyed by the group as a product of the ethical discourse. The External Witness. As a community of discourse we reach out and welcome other communities, particularly those most unlike us, in order
to witness to each other the constructs we have made of the world, of what is right, and of God. We invite one another to play with our constructs and understandings yet to suffer with each other so that more alternatives may be revealed, and we have the opportunity to construct images that will project us into action.

How do we do the right thing in a postmodern society? We gather in discourse to put authority and truth at play, to hear the voice of those who have been oppressed, to experience our own anxiety, to be in the presence of the other, to release alternatives, and to go forth convicted and committed to action.

Notes


11. See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* for a fuller discussion of sacred and classic text.


16. *After Virtue*.

17. *A Community of Character*. 
Economy, Ecology, and Ethics
—Mind, Body, and Spirit

Economy, ecology and ethics represent important dimensions of our lives, both as individuals and as a community. One might say that these three areas stand for three parts of a whole. Mind, body, and spirit are also three parts of a whole. If any one part is isolated, neglected, or overly indulged, we are out of balance, fractured, incomplete, diseased, un-whole; we miss important aspects of our living and living together.

If we apply this analogy to our society, economy might stand for the mind, ecology for the body, and ethics for the spirit. No one part is whole or complete without the others. None of them taken alone, whether ignored or overemphasized, can move us closer to a society of humanness, ethical values, and wholeness; that is, toward a society which embodies that for which we all pray in our Christian churches worldwide: that the kingdom of God may come, here on earth as it is in heaven.

As an environmental economist and active layperson in the church, the approach I bring to this analysis is an interdisciplinary one, and a personal one. It is one which describes my own wrestling with the ethical questions raised by our market society and by the state of our natural environment and which seeks to explore how God's spirit moving among us can inform our wrestling with these questions.

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Economy—The Mind

Economy, from the Greek words *oikos*, household, and *nomos*, law or management, means "the law of the household." The task of describing, analyzing, and theorizing about this household is the focus of economists. However, a shift has occurred. Economics, a relatively young science, has undergone a rapid process of "scientification" in which the discipline has increasingly moved from a social science to a hard, an "objective," and quantitative science. The emphasis is on quantifying the household and on compartmentalizing it rather than looking at it in its entirety.

Economics as a science originally focused more on describing the laws and effects of scarcity, with its resulting necessity to make choices, since not all things are available in the quantity we want them, where we want them, and when we want them. The introductory phrases of an economics textbook states this clearly: "Economics is the study of how people and society end up choosing . . . to employ scarce productive resources . . . to produce various commodities and distribute them for consumption, now or in the future, among various persons or groups in society." In other words: How do we maximize our profits or our benefits under the conditions of scarcity with limited resources, goods or production factors? How can we reach a predetermined goal with the least possible input? These are the questions of economics.

The Market Systems. The tasks suggested here raise the question of how we are to manage this entire household, our society. In the United States the market system is the answer. The market is the mechanism which manages our "household." It regulates supply and demand of goods and services, allocates resources and production factors, and regulates distribution, and it does all this via the price system.

Undoubtedly, this market system of management is a most efficient way to supply goods and services and to allocate resources. No one would argue with that. The unavailability of consumer goods, inefficient methods of production and distribution, and general disillusionment with the planned economies of the former Eastern Bloc countries bear testimony to that.

At the same time, however, the market economy is merely a mechanism to regulate our household. It is a means and not an end in itself. How strong is this mechanism, this market? Can it do everything? Can the market achieve a clean environment, access to
health care, or a dignified life after retirement? These are questions that need to be raised, questions that are evident in the free market society of the United States with its increasing social, economic, and environmental problems; questions that need to be confronted despite capitalism’s “victory” over communism, despite the undeniable efficiency of the market system.

The market system, after all, is not an abstract, isolated system but rather one in which human beings relate and act. These human beings change their behavior; they live and act within their social and cultural contexts; they can be influenced, no doubt, yet they do not act predictably and according to preplanned and programmed behavior.

Has the “mind,” the thinking and analyzing process of economics, room for all this? Can economics deal with all the uncertainties of events and human behavior? To some extent, yes. Economics attempts to account for human behaviors in the form of assumptions. Such assumptions for which the proper functioning of the market is defined are: equal access to markets, full and equal information, the homo economicus behavior, a rationally functioning human being, to mention just a few. More often than not, however, the conclusions drawn from an economic theory are not stated in the context of such assumptions. Economists contend, for example, that a change in income has an effect on the demand for durable goods ceteris paribus, all other things being equal. Yet when we make prognoses about falling interest rates and their effect on consumer behavior, we act as if we knew not just the direction but the extent to which changes occur. We simply assume a uniform (equal) situation. Theories are generalized rather than being put in the context of the assumptions within which they are made. This phenomenon of stating a picture or ideal of reality as if it were reality itself is called “misplaced concreteness” by Daly and Cobb. In other words, there are limits to our economic theories; and, it seems to me, they point to the limits of the economic system itself.

**Limits to the Market System.** Some of these limits of our market system are clearly acknowledged and described in our economic theories in terms like external effects, free goods, and public goods, to name a few relating particularly to ecology.

External effects are generally defined as “...the influence of our economic actions on another economic activity.” Such external effects were not the intention of an economic activity, but were indeed caused by it. Producer as well as consumer activities can be their cause. Examples are the paper factory whose wastewater affects...
the fish hatchery downstream, or the consumer who uses his car to go shopping and thereby contributes to the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and to the greenhouse effect. These side effects were unintended and are not accounted for in our economic system, but their results have real economic implications for us as a society. In fact, we pay very dearly for them.

Free goods escape the market mechanism because their price is zero. One example of a free good is air; another is solar energy. Both are available for free, even though some technological investment might be necessary to use them or to improve their quality. The goods as such are available for free. The environment as a medium for the absorption of pollution we generate or as a good providing room for recreational activities is another example.

The limits of this concept of the free good character of the environment have become increasingly self-evident with decreasing environmental quality and increasing waste and pollution problems. We are forced to recognize the cost we create to our society by our treating the environment as free-good.

Public goods present yet another example of market failure. The “principle of exclusion,” one of the premises for the functioning of the market system, does not work for public goods. It states that all those who demand to participate in the market have to pay a price appropriate for the extent of their participation. Yet no one can be excluded from the use of a public good, whether they are willing to pay a price for the use or improvement of this good or not. Such goods are air quality, water quality, the quality of open space, and so on.

In spite of these market failures the necessity of setting standards for environmental quality are not readily accepted. Few environmental regulations are implemented and even fewer are enforced. Discussions about assigning pollution costs to the polluter quickly end by pointing out that the resulting effects on the market and on the competitiveness of American businesses prohibit it.

And ecological problems are not the only ones which result from limits to the market system or so-called market failure. Thirty-seven million people in the United States are without health insurance. Thirty-two million pay for their plans out of their own pockets. Millions more are underinsured, having no or insufficient coverage for pre-existing illness, preventive or long-term medical care. Hunger is a reality for millions of Americans. Over 31 million Americans lived below the poverty level in 1989, an estimate which has steadily increased since then. Every fifth child in the U.S. faces hunger, the highest percentage being children of color living in female-headed
households. Sixty-five percent of them live in poverty. Unemployment figures, though currently on a downward trend, are distorted with many remaining unregistered because they have given up hope for public help and support. Our education crisis, which shows the U.S. placing 49th among nations in literacy rates, exacerbates the problem. Those displaced workers who are among the 30 percent of U.S. adults who are functionally illiterate, have little or no chance for retraining and job placement.

Yes, the market has its limits. It is but a means to an end which we as a society have to define. Clearly, it goes without saying that the planned economy of the former communist countries has caused environmental problems of enormous dimensions. No one would argue that. Environmental quality, however, was never an explicitly stated goal of the planned economy.

The market system, on the other hand, does not have an automatic mechanism by which either environmental quality or social justice is achieved and which automatically internalizes the social costs of our economic activities into its price system and market structure. It cannot be given responsibility for regulating virtually every facet of our individual and communal lives; it cannot be given responsibility for stating our values as a society. If we neglect that truth the resulting problems are manifold and severe.

In summary three conclusions can be drawn:

1. Standards of environmental quality, distributive justice, and the guarantees of the basic human needs, those things which affect our well-being, need to be stated explicitly as public policy goals. Within this ethical framework then, the market economy can be an effective management means. Such goals, stated, for example, in the regulations of the European Community and virtually every one of the market economies of Western Europe, should easily be recognized as having their basis in the Constitution of the United States, holding in common the goal of “justice, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all,” not just for a privileged few.

2. The market is not a “neutral” system. The management model, which interestingly enough both market and planned economy follow, leads to a distancing from reality. Managers are not owners and therefore claim to be value-free, scientific, and “objective.” Yet in abdicating everything to the management process, the market system in the United States is no longer just a market economy; it has become a market society, where everything is determined, ruled, and influenced by the market. Economics rules our world. It is not just a system of distribution and allocation any more. That which was conceived to serve the people now requires appropriate action from
them in order to sustain the system itself. The system has lost its ethical framework. It has taken on its own momentum.

3. The same claim to objectivity and scientific approach has led to the logical “mind” of economics, which avows that it can describe, quantify and monetarily evaluate virtually everything. In order for progress to be tangible and noticeable, it has to be measurable, such as increase in GNP or GNP per capita. Yet such measurement has to fall short. It is impossible to quantify all the many indirect and interrelated effects of economic activities. And even if they could be determined, what price is to be given to a life shortened by the effects of work-related illness, or to an extinct species. We may not have technical limitations, but we certainly do have moral and ethical ones. It seems imperative for us to recover a more historical understanding of economics, monitored by an ethical understanding and considerate of its social, cultural, and historical context.

John Locke is one of the fathers of individual freedom and the unlimited rights of individuals to maximize self-interest, whether material wealth or well-being as defined in economic terms of profits or benefits. Yet he linked such goals to his own faith and his Calvinistic understanding of responsibility for the common good which deeply influenced him. For us as Christians a “rethinking” of such connections seems imperative.

Ecology – the Body

Ecology, the *logos* or word of the *oikos*, the household, describes the system, or the workings of the household. What does ecology teach us about our “household,” the world in which we live?

Our natural environment calls us back from economic theories to the basic realities of life, literally back to the earth. It confronts us with the limits of our household management. Our environmental problems have taken on worldwide dimensions with the greenhouse effect and holes in the ozone layer, with air and water pollution, with energy and waste-management problems. They point us to undeniable truths:

1. Our environment shows us that our actions have consequences — real physical, bodily consequences. For too long we have exhibited an “out of sight, out of mind” attitude, pretending that we live in an open system which can endlessly absorb our waste and abuse. We assume that, should problems occur somewhere, we will certainly be able to fix them. This attitude has resulted in numerous pollution problems and pollution-related health problems, not to mention the
effect on the nonhuman parts of creation. We can no longer pretend that economic growth automatically means growth in the well-being of our society and its members. The negative ecological effects of our activities create costs to our society as a whole and to its individual members.

Even though these social costs cannot and for ethical reasons should not be quantified, they need to be internalized in our economic system, that is, acknowledged and given explicit validity. The reality is that all the effects of our actions internalize themselves whether we like it or not, whether we acknowledge it in our economic price structure or not. In the environmental deterioration we have caused we experience the embodiment of our external effects. To acknowledge these effects, therefore, we need to start where they are caused, despite the difficulty of identifying and quantifying the cause and effect. We must give political consideration to and provide economic incentives for clean-up costs as well as for serious efforts to prevent environmental damage and to sustain our planet for future generations.

2. Another lesson our environment teaches us is that we are all interconnected by a network of relationships, causes and effects. The questions as to whether emission or immission standards are relevant illustrates this connectedness. Emission describes the concentration of pollutants as they enter into the environment, that is, as they leave smokestacks, wastewater treatment plants or car exhausts. Immission describes the concentration in the environmental medium itself, for example, in a groundwater layer, a lake, or the air over a metropolitan area. Yet pollutants travel. If air pollution standards (emission standards) are exceeded in the Midwest, the acidity of lake water in the Adirondack mountains of New York is affected. Thus to reach or maintain quality standards of air, water or soil (immission standards) is not an easy task. It is often difficult enough to identify the specific cause-and-effect relationship of a pollution problem. It is even more difficult to quantify them.

In addition, we are connected not only over space but also over time. The pollutants we emit into the environment today may only become visible as immissions many years from now. The ability of the environmental media to clean themselves, as well as numerous buffer effects, where elements present in soil or water absorb or bind pollutants, contribute to this time-lag phenomenon. However, the self-cleaning ability of the environment is not indefinite, especially if additional pollutants are continuously being added. Emission and immission, therefore, become more and more equal over time. Hence the environmental problems we face today may in many cases
constitute but the tip of the iceberg. Such relationships need to be considered in our ongoing debate over pollution control.

3. Our natural environment is diverse. No two leaves on a tree are the same. No two snowflakes are identical. For us humans, who are part of this creation, this diversity has implications we may not always appreciate. Interests and opinions differ, and our individual interests may not be in the best interests of the whole—all of creation.

One question we need to wrestle with in this context is “how much is ‘enough’?” How much more do we need to have enough? This cannot be determined solely by quantities of consumer goods or profit margins, or even our human well-being, but it must consider the well-being of others as well as the quality and diversity of the environment itself. We live in and are part of all of creation.

The Debate on Energy Needs. One of the examples which illustrates these questions is the James Bay II project in Southeast Canada. In the James Bay area a proposed 15,600 square kilometers of land are to be flooded, destroying one of the largest remaining areas of pristine wilderness in the northeastern region of the American continent. The prestigious $9.3 billion project is to be financed through contracts for the sale of energy to New York and New England. The consequences to flora and fauna, as well as to the hydrological balance of an area the size of France, are dramatic. At least equally as dramatic are the human consequences to the Cree and the Inuit, two native tribes in the James Bay II area whose lifestyles will be severely impacted.

We plead with Brazil and its neighbors to halt the destruction of the rain forests despite possible economic disadvantages, while we attempt one of the largest engineering projects on the Northern Hemisphere of our globe—citing economic considerations, of course.

What is even more disturbing is that the debate about our own energy needs is conducted with little or no attention to energy reduction measures and increased energy efficiency. The recent Climate Negotiations at the UN, which took place in preparation for the so-called “Earth Summit” in June, 1992, in Rio de Janeiro, prove this point. Short-term economic interests dominated the debate. The United States acknowledged the threat of global warming and U.S. as well as European study documents show that reductions of greenhouse gases, notably carbon dioxide need not pose a burden on our economies but may rather lead to increased efficiency and decreased energy dependency. However, the U.S. did not agree to any specific target amounts for the reduction of carbon dioxide.
emissions or a timetable to reach such targets, citing the crisis state of our economy. Above and beyond self-centered reasons of long-term benefits, the setting of carbon dioxide reduction targets would demonstrate an ethical commitment. Recognizing the urgency of the problem of global warming and its threat especially to countries of the Southern Hemisphere but also to future generations, and indeed to all of creation, is clearly not part of the U.S. agenda.

Numerous other examples, both local and global, could be mentioned. Energy generation or waste treatment projects continue to be planned with little or no serious consideration for implementing measures to increase efficiency or to reduce wasteful consumption patterns. All these point to this “not-enough” syndrome.

Our egocentrism and anthropocentrism with its lack of consideration for others (much less other parts of creation) needs to be rectified. As much as we might like to believe it, we humans are not the center of the universe.

The role of the church in this alteration process is a very important one. Part of our heritage is the church’s support of the notion of the supreme role of humanity in creation and its right to subdue the earth and to use it for its own benefit. Our culture has willingly subverted such concepts, quoting scriptural tradition for its own selfish goals.

Yet biblical concepts also point us to relationships of love and justice, including our ecological responsibility, affirming that everything we do has consequences. In his book Loving Nature, James Nash sums it up as follows: “...the bottom line remains: what does Christian love demand of us in defining our responsibilities to and ordering our relationships with our neighbors in nature?” Each action we take affects the whole. Both our actions and our attitudes have far reaching consequences. As Paul writes in First Corinthians, if one part suffers in the Body of Christ, in the community, in the common household, then all suffer. This community, this common household reaches beyond our human community. We are part of creation and connected with it. This may well be the most important message ecology holds for us.

Ethics – the Spirit

The following understanding of ethics outlined here is based on and influenced by my own faith, which arises out of my German
Lutheran and United Methodist background, and in the tradition of the Old and New Testaments.

In the "Lexicon of Religion and Theology"\(^9\) ethics is defined as "the theory of human conduct" or as the "explicit accountability of people's manner of living." This means we are called to take a stance, to affirm what we stand for and who we are. We are to confess by virtue of how we live. Three points seem important to me in this context:

1. **Our God-concepts—the names and images we have of God—influence our behavior.** According to Douglas Meeks,\(^10\) our God concepts are primarily political ones. We speak of God the king, God the mighty one, the ruler, the Lord. Our God concept seems dangerously limited. Sometimes we expand this concept to include ecological images of God such as God the creator, God as the one who made us from dirt, like a potter, an artist perhaps. Missing, however, are economic images of God: God the householder, who asks of those living in the household to act but in the biblical understanding of a faithful and prudent manager (Luke 12:42; parallel Matt. 24:45), identifying with all members of the household as those created in the image of God. This God is the housewife or the househusband, God the homemaker who offers us not just a house but a home, God who calls us home again and again. Such images of God speak of caring, of nurturing, of warmth and love. Such images must have consequences for our own household management, our attitudes and our actions.

Is it coincidence, ignorance, or something more that has led to the neglect of these nurturing images of God? Apart from these images being both male and female (the exclusion of female images of God from our churches, the condoned oppression of women, the present struggles of feminist theologians and laity to recover such female images of God in our churches is no secret, but cannot be expanded upon here), this neglect also speaks of a clear division between God and economics, between God and our housekeeping. Our economic behavior is conveniently split off from God, who is over here while our economic activities are over there. And never the two shall meet. Has the church, the institution which is to hold up to us the power of God, fallen prey to the "powers and principalities" of an all-powerful economic system instead of confronting this system? Should not the church confront this system with the limitations of its reign and point to the reign of the one true God?

2. **Christian ethics challenges us to rethink one of the most basic assumption of economics: the law of scarcity.** Undoubtedly scarcity is a reality. Consider the illusion that every human being on this globe can reach the level of affluence and standard of living which we enjoy
in the industrialized nations in the Northern Hemisphere and furthermore, that they can reach it in the same way and by the same means we have achieved it. Under such circumstances there is little doubt that our planet simply could not survive.

But what does our Christian faith have to say about scarcity? Jesus’ feeding of the multitude, where at least 5,000 people were fed and satisfied with two fish and five loaves of bread speaks of a scarcity that is negated. Scarcity is overcome by faith, by trust in God, by thankfulness for God’s blessings, and by the sharing of these gifts in community.

At the center of our Christian faith is another reminder of these unlimited blessings: the Lord’s Supper. “All are invited to the table of our Lord. . . .” our pastors say in the invitation to the service of Holy Communion. All are invited to eat and to be satisfied—not just the ones who look like me or think like us. Here scarcity is overcome by overcoming boundaries, by being open to others, by being inclusive, by being willing, yes eager, to share God’s gifts. What consequences such an understanding of our faith would have if we ever really began to live it! For example, the rapid population growth in the so-called Third World with all its disastrous economic and ecological consequences is primarily due to despair and hopelessness with existing living conditions. Having more children means more help and more security in one’s old age. What would happen if we alleviated some of these fears by really sharing what we have in order to provide for conditions of independent, self-determined development of equals? This means not merely sharing what we have left over in our affluent First World but sharing out of the fullness and thankfulness of our lives.

3. Christian ethics challenge us to rethink the economic concept of interest maximization. We all strive to maximize our own interests. But what is our real interest as individuals? After all, this interest is also influenced, even inseparably connected to, the interest of the community. Justice, caring, mutuality, respect, and solidarity are all concepts that are unthinkable without consideration for others within the community. However, they must go beyond what we consider to be our own community. Our reaching out has to overcome our known and internalized limits. God’s justice, God’s caring, and God’s love are for all of creation.

In 1 Cor. 12:13, 26 Paul writes: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. . . .If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored all rejoice with it.” How do we formulate this in terms of benefit or profit? We can’t. There are
things we can neither quantify nor measure monetarily. There are things that are priceless, just as the full, the fulfilled time—the *kairos* Jesus speaks of—cannot be measured in chronological time, or *chronos*. What is truly priceless we need to state explicitly.

**Conclusions**

What conclusions can be drawn from these reflections on economy, ecology and ethics? Let us return to our analogy between the human being and society.

The mind without body and spirit becomes inhumane and distanced from human concerns, fears, and joys. It is turned in on itself, absorbed and intrigued with its own thought and theory. It is without consideration for the deep needs of life, which may often be only sensed or felt but not rationally defined. Likewise, economics, with its presumption to be able to analyze, quantify, and monetarily evaluate everything has lost sight of these deep human needs. The system, the mechanism which was conceived as a means has become a goal in itself.

The body without mind and spirit, however, is equally dangerous. This becomes clear in looking at parts of the environmental movement where only narrowly defined goals are pursued without consideration for their context and the complexities of life. The result can be a dangerous emotionalism and sentimentality which rejects the diversities and conflicting needs of human concerns and struggles.

The spirit is what unites everything. The spirit helps us deal with the complexities of life. It forces us to wrestle with all three areas discussed here and to ask for the deeper intrinsic values of our humanness, which we are so often tempted to ignore. A spirit, however, which has no consideration for the mind or the body and is content with a theoretical, detached kind of theology, cannot be the Spirit of God. After all, God gave us Jesus, God's Son. A more concrete embodiment of what we are called to be and do in our lives is hardly conceivable.

We are called then, with our whole being, with all of who we are embedded in and part of the community, to wrestle with God's call to us. This is a call toward wholeness, toward becoming what we were created to be and are ever becoming. Ethics, therefore, has to be lived; it has to be translated into action. This includes both our individual response and our responsibility for the societal and policy level, all of our lives in all their connectedness. Nash writes: "... my intention is to remind us that Christians are called to embody

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personal life-styles and advocate cultural patterns that are relevant to present ecological needs and that serve as signs of the Reign of love.”

We are the Body of Christ. Without this embodying—without this acting on our call and struggling to live it—all our prayers are just meaningless and empty. Somehow deep within us we really know that. Do we mean it, too? God’s kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven!

Notes


6. On Friday March 27, 1992, New York Governor Mario Cuomo announced the cancellation of the New York Power Authority’s 1000 megawatt contract with Hydro-Quebec. Despite this positive step, Hydro-Quebec has not yet determined the future of this project. Political considerations with respect to Quebec’s independence from Canada seem to be a determining factor.

7. Not only were other industrialized countries willing to agree to such standards, several of the European countries have already taken steps to implement voluntary carbon dioxide emission reductions in their own countries.


Christian Marriage Today: Fantasy and Hope

Until recently, "traditional" marriages seemed headed almost for extinction. The loneliness for which a permanent union once seemed the best cure was assuaged by swinging experimentalism which threw precautions to the winds. Stability was thrown over for freedom to explore, the more wildly the better. Today, however, exploration and experimentation have proved both exhausting and dangerous. Rather than feeling more intimate and generative, people feel lonelier and less creative than ever. To many, even marriage seems the better course.

What kind of a marriage, however? For all of the changes in marriage and family life so widely talked about these days, well-intended women and men continue to bring to one another ideas of what marriage can be which border on fantasy.

For instance, many continue to believe that marriage will be an adequate compensation for other hardships in life, such as money shortages, job insecurity, frequent moves, illness, and so forth. It is true that couples can strengthen their bonds with one another in confronting hardships, but in an achievement-oriented society, most couples find that hardships detract from the marriage relationship.

Others continue to hold onto the fantasy that children will enhance and not complicate the marriage relationship. Must this not be so if the chief end of marriage is indeed "to be fruitful and

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multiply”? In a former time, children were an economic asset. Today, however, they are liabilities, both economically and emotionally. Children place great demands on the emotional capital of their parents, straining beyond endurance many who already have difficulties sharing themselves and tolerating frustration of their own immediate concerns.

A pervasive fantasy today is that in marriage both spouses can stay in love forever, and that in this love alone all their emotional needs will be met. Prior to the Middle Ages, marriages were entered into for either companionship, or property transfer and stabilization or both. With the Age of Chivalry, a new ideal for the male/female relationship emerged: intimacy of overwhelming intensity, within which lovers are beside themselves with feeling for the other, and that other alone. But the chivalrous did not deceive themselves into believing that the marriage relationship is suitable for such experience; rather, “falling in love” required a partner not available for marriage. Today, however, perduring ecstasy is the marriage ideal, and the inevitable failure to achieve it floods lovers with disappointment, anger, and sadness.

Is it any wonder that marriage relationships have become so unstable in recent generations? Impossible expectations yield inconsolable rage and despair. And yet, the yearning for something of meaning with which to overcome the loneliness of life in an affluent, competitive, consumption-oriented society remains epidemic.

Might the understanding of marriage mediated in the Christian tradition have something to say to women and men striving to fulfill their own fondest hopes for marriage in the present situation? This essay attempts a characterization of what that understanding has been through the centuries and an application of that tradition’s understanding to living out faith within the bonds of marriage.

A Christian Perspective on Marriage

From the standpoint of the Christian tradition, the marriage relationship is a permanent union, bound by mutual commitments to loyalty and fidelity, built upon consent, which is sealed initially by the act of sexual intercourse and which in its fullness is intended to symbolize God’s love for all humanity. In the paragraphs to follow, I will elaborate further the terms of this definition.

Through the centuries, both Judaism and Christianity have shared a common perspective on the marital union as, ideally, a permanent union. Husband and wife shall “cleave” to one another for
life: “until death parts us.” Today’s relationships, by contrast, tend to exhibit some version of a commitment to abide “for as long as love lasts.” Though some in both traditions have construed marital bonding to extend even beyond time and history, for instance, Mormonism’s emphasis upon the “sealing” for eternity, the tradition as a whole views marriage as including the vow to live together for all of the time remaining to the couple in their present existence. It is not intended to extend beyond this life. Thus, the death of a spouse frees the surviving spouse both from the marital obligations themselves and to consider marrying again.

The essential “bonding” in the marriage relationship is the couple’s mutual commitment to remain both loyal and faithful to one another. “Loyalty” here is understood in the sense of a pledge of self, a personal investment, from the heart, to support what is of greatest importance to the other. The moral dimension of marriage has to do especially with whether what each partner is called upon to support in the other is truly worthy of such support. “Faithfulness” certainly refers to sexual exclusiveness, but the sexualizing of the meaning of fidelity seriously narrows the scope of the marital bond. The vow traditionally expressed as “I pledge you my faith” represents a promise more encompassing than for sexual restraint. The pledge has more to do with “entrusting” one’s well-being to the other, with rendering oneself truly vulnerable to the other. Trusting that one will be cared for, precisely when vulnerability is disclosed, “binds” a couple far more deeply than merely confining sexual relations to one another.

Modern Christian thinking about marriage uniformly affirms that the foundation of any marriage relationship is the consent of the couple. Without consent, a marriage simply does not exist; a “forced” or “coerced” marriage is a contradiction in terms. In pre-modern times, and in many other cultures today, consent is that which is given typically by the parents or by sponsors who have arranged the marriage. But in today’s Christian community, it is the couple’s own consent which is essential. In the marriage ceremony, the couple is asked to declare publicly their intention, previously shared in private, to be bonded in marriage. What this means is that couples in fact marry themselves; external ceremony celebrates and legalizes a commitment already entered into. The wedding “service” provides the occasion for families and friends to witness their own affirmation of the marriage and to pledge their support to the union already created. A civil or a religious authority may confirm on behalf of a community the couple’s commitment, but “pronouncing” the couple husband and wife does not itself create the marriage state. From this
vantage point, the essential starting point for all effective premarital
guidance is the ascertaining and/or the facilitating of informed
consent.

The Role of Sexuality in Marriage

Whether prior to or following the customary public ceremony and
celebration, it is typical for a consenting couple to express their union
definitively by presenting their bodies to one another. As the man
enters hers, and the woman receives his, they "seal" their intent.
What they feel and say from their hearts they enact physically, in the
dramatic act of sexual intercourse, completing a process of bonding
beginning with consent and usually including a public ceremony.
Traditionally, this is what is meant by referring to intercourse as
"consummating" the marriage: it "finishes" the process of beginning
that marriage. An "unconsummated" marriage could be subject to
annulment, because without this seal, the marriage is not truly a
marriage. While the tradition viewed sexual intercourse as properly
occurring subsequent to public acknowledgement of a couple's
consent to marry, the fact that the practice of most couples no longer
follows, this sequence in no way undermines the significance
Christianity has rightly seen of such activity to the marriage relation
itself. As such, more extended discussion is called for.

Can sexual intercourse continue to be understood as an
indispensable seal of the marriage relationship? Why, for instance,
might not publicly declared consent be sufficient in itself? Or, if not
consent, why not some other seal besides intercourse, such as
distribution of property to one another? One answer, from
anthropology, is that intercourse has been the means of procreation,
of insuring continuity between past, present, and future generations,
and, as such, insisting on intercourse as the seal of the marriage
relationship has effectively linked marriage with producing offspring,
with its purpose frequently articulated almost wholly from this
standpoint. Presupposed in this point of view, however, is a perceived
population scarcity. The power of this ancient perception has
diminished radically because population scarcities have given way to
population inundations, and because modern science has given
couples the technical means to separate altogether their sexual
behavior from procreation.

A more relevant answer to the question is theological and comes
initially from the Pauline tradition. In St. Paul's views, sexual
intercourse both expresses and arouses lust, binding human beings
to the flesh when their more fundamental task is to transcend their corruptible and corrupt physical nature. As the means of procreation, sexual intercourse further binds humanity to an illusory hopefulness for the future precisely when God is now seeking to bring all of human history to its appropriate end. But, Paul recognizes, even in the “last days” sexual intercourse holds such allure for most people that they cannot control their urges to give in to it. Marriage is the way of controlling such urges; it delimits sexual practices to one person and thereby prevents licentiousness. Upon this view, marriage becomes a necessary compromise with the claims of the flesh. Though it would be better not to need the arrangement at all, Paul seems to believe, when people do marry they can give more of their attention to preparing themselves for the next life.

Contemporary Christian theologians have broadened considerably Paul’s orientation toward the sexual relationship in marriage. On the one hand, most have affirmed the so-called “discoveries” about sexuality from the wider, secular-humanistic culture of which the church also now is a part. A major criticism of Christian piety, articulated trenchantly by many schools of modern psychology, is that Christianity has imposed upon peoples’ sexual experience dysfunctional quantities of guilt and shame. Expressed somewhat along the lines of caricature, piety insists that it is better not to want sex at all; but when people both want sex and have sex, they at least should feel bad about it. Psychology has helped people, within and beyond the churches, to re-experience sex without guilt and without shame, and to rediscover its naturalness for both women and men. Sexual activity has become, even for the pious, a thoroughly acceptable way of expressing sensual satisfaction. Further, sexual pleasure is now experienced through many kinds of activities and not merely by means of intercourse. The fullness of sexual expression is the mutual pleasuring which contributes to deeper communication and greater intimacy within a stable and committed relationship.

Though Christian theologians incorporate a great deal of contemporary secular thinking about sexuality into their theological reflections, they also typically add considerations not always affirmed by the more strictly humanistic outlooks. One addition, in particular, is that the purpose of sexual pleasuring is principally to strengthen the bonds of permanent union. Outside the context of a faithful relationship, sexual pleasuring reinforces self-centeredness, pulling couples away from committed love, whereas within the bonds of a permanent union, the mutual pleasuring in sex contributes to binding a couple’s loyalty to and trust of one another. Secondly, the context of sexual pleasuring remains a context of generativity. It
properly looks beyond itself to the enhancement of another, both the lover and the possible offspring of the sexual union. Within this framework, it should now be easier to see the sense in which sexual intercourse and not merely sexual pleasuring functions as this “seal” of a love commitment.

The point here is not St. Paul’s disparaging confinement of sexual intercourse to marriage as a way of bringing lust under temporary control; such a view finally reduces the act of intercourse to an act of relieving oneself of tensions. The point rather is that sexual intercourse, unlike any other pleasing act, can become a means of expressing the “consummate” commitment of one’s whole sexual self to the well-being of another, because it includes not only the other with whom I engage in intercourse (in contrast with “have” intercourse), but the children who may come as a result. For all of the variations in the “when” of the act in today’s sexually liberated age, there remains considerable wisdom in the Christian tradition’s viewing of sexual intercourse as the principal “seal” of mutual commitment to loyalty, fidelity, and permanency. What more appropriate seal could there be than a couple’s pledge to engage with one another in mutual pleasuring precisely through the means of procreation, and to engage thusly only with one another? I want to test the adequacy of this thesis by applying it to nine contemporary issues of sexuality and marriage.

**Virginity before Marriage.** Every major study on sexual behavior in Western society continues to confirm that this is no longer an operative norm, if indeed it ever was. It is safe to say that well over half of the female population and 70 to 80 percent of the male population in Western society marries already having had sexual intercourse. However, less data is available about the partners in the intercourse. For instance, of those who have sexual intercourse before marriage, how many have confined their intercourse to the person they do in fact marry? The fact of the frequency of sexual intercourse before marriage does not rule out the possibility that couples who have intercourse do so in the context of a permanent relationship to which they already have committed themselves.

Though intercourse before marriage is widely accepted, it would be premature to conclude that sex without commitment has become the operative norm. For one thing, whatever trend there may have been in this latter direction seems rapidly to be diminishing in the face of the current AIDS crisis. More important, for a very large portion of the population, the practice of sexual intercourse still functions as a sign of a yearning for intimacy at an emotional and not
merely physical level, for intimacy with commitment. If “virginity before marriage” has become both irrelevant and banal, “virginity before commitment” by both partners continues to hold powerful normative sway in our time, and rightly. “Purity” has to do with singleness of intent and commitment rather than with lack of genital contact. And it is unspeakably gross and oppressive to reduce the meaning of sexual purity still further to the state of the hymen.

Contraception. Frequently, the biblical invitation to “be fruitful and multiply” has been confused with a demand. In the priestly tradition of Gen. 1:28, the blessing of man and woman occurs before the invitation is offered; it is not conditioned upon their fulfilling that invitation. Absolute prohibitions on contraception finally root in affirming one dimension of marital love to the exclusion of the other: they are offspring-centered and not communion-centered. And they misconstrue their Biblical foundations. Most adherents of the traditions which promulgate the prohibitions themselves reject the prohibitions, even at the expense of painful guilt. But quality-of-life for all family members, including a child desired but not yet conceived, makes some practice of contraception in today’s world not only desirable but necessary. Both partners have equal responsibility in the matter; contraception is not something which properly one partner “takes care of.”

Pleasurable versus Procreative Sex. From what has been said thus far, it may seem that the Christian tradition has rendered sex such a serious matter that pure “enjoyment” would assume a morally reprehensible cast. But the point of view being developed in these pages is one which soundly emphasizes the mutuality of sexual pleasuring within the context of behavior which includes but is not confined to sexual intercourse itself. In essence, God intends for sex to be pleasurable, to both parties, in addition to its being procreative. And when it is not pleasurable, something has usually gone wrong in the marriage relationship. However, if sex is merely for the sake of pleasuring, it is not likely to facilitate deepening the bonds of and growth in the relationship. One principal value of sexual lovemaking in marriage is that couples learn from one another how to give more of themselves. Sex which begins as personal enjoyment gradually becomes a means of expressing an intentional searching out of the well-being of another. In this sense, love learned in marriage can eventually become love available for others in the form of agape love. Nothing in this argument entails that sex must always be in the direction of biological offspring. What is suggested, however, is that
when sexual pleasuring becomes a way of learning genuine self-giving, there need no longer be any kind of contradiction between the notions of pleasurable and procreative sex.

Extramarital Sex. Evidence abounds that the incidence of extramarital sex is on the increase, for both women and men (40 percent and 60 percent respectively). Evidence also abounds that extramarital relations constitute a devastating abuse of marital bonding, from which most marriages do not recover. As most experienced marital counselors will attest, the work required of a couple to recover from such an abuse is at least the equivalent of work needed to overcome a massive heart attack, and most couples simply do not have enough heart left to undertake it successfully. The destructiveness of extramarital relations on actual marriage relationships seems to confirm the wisdom of the Christian position, that sexual infidelity corrupts the quality of marital love.

Infertility. It could be argued, from what has been said, that a couple’s infertility expresses some kind of derangement in the marriage relationship, insofar as their means of sexual pleasuring are inextricably tied with the means of procreation. Such an objection must be taken seriously. Currently, estimates are that 10 percent of married couples may have one or more difficulties in conceiving children. Medical science alleges that it is on the verge of overcoming the consequences of these difficulties for many couples through such means as artificial insemination (with the husband’s sperm or an anonymous donor’s); in vitro fertilization; artificial wombs; and, much less satisfactorily, surrogate mothers. But even if a couple has offspring through any of these means, many psychological accompaniments to the prior diagnosis of infertility or fertility problems are likely to remain, particularly the overwhelming sense of inadequacy and invalidation as a human being, which for many couples renders questionable the foundations of their marriage. Consciousness of oneself as a member of a species brings with it a felt obligation to contribute to the survival of that species. Only a long and patient process of putting such a feeling into proper perspective is likely to help. Medical practitioners as a group have remained remarkably insensitive to this dimension of “fertility problems”; they tend to see such problems in excessively technological terms. What “infertile” people must discover is that fertility includes but is not defined by their child-producing capabilities. Many couples, for example, have many children, but their family unit is lifeless. And many who cannot “produce” children still contribute creatively to
our common life. Having said this, however, the phylogenetic still
makes its claims upon us, especially in the inextinguishable yearning
of adopted children to find their "real," that is, their biological
parents. The reality of infertile couples must make us aware of the
dangers of linking too narrowly the meanings of sexual pleasuring
and procreation.

**Sexual "Dysfunctions."** This term is interesting especially for its
barbarity, and yet it predominates in current medical discussions
about human sexuality. The term "dysfunction" suggests that some
people do not "function" sexually as they are "supposed" to function.
Current discussion of sexual dysfunctions suggest further that there
are therapies available which can get people functioning again,
sometimes as if their sexual problem is in the plumbing more than in
their relationships. Fortunately, however, most sex therapists do see
human sexuality as intrinsically relational and sexual activity as
relationship building. When a relationship is itself building
"naturally," nature usually takes its own course, and couples
"perform" sexually as their relationship requires, not in terms of
how they are "supposed" to function. (It is also interesting to note
the fateful association between sex and "performance." ) From this
vantage point, the so-called sexual dysfunctions - inhibited desire,
inadequate arousal, premature ejaculation, impotence, vaginismus,
frigidity, and so forth are most typically signs of difficulties in a
particular relationship or with relationships in general. So
frequently, when alienation is healed in a formerly intimate
relationship, sex becomes more pleasurable. With exceptions to be
sure, most sexual dysfunctions are treated by turning sex into either
a performance or an obligation. The cure is usually not a new
technique but more genuine giving and receiving in the relationship,
of which "good" sex is a reliable sign.

**Celibacy within Marriage.** Many couples, and not only those who
have been married for long periods of time, cease having sexual
intercourse. Their behavior raises the question of whether when
intercourse stops, the marriage is over as a valid marriage. "Joy of
Sex" manuals tend to suggest that active and improving sex is the
sine qua non of an intimate relationship. But one does not have to
revert to the parochialism of the Pauline tradition in order to
reaffirm that sex is a great deal more than "the sex act." For some
couples, affection and tenderness without intercourse is an even
more loving way to celebrate the intimacy of the relationship. It is
easy to draw the conclusion that since human beings can engage
sexually into their nineties, and since some do, everyone should. But
for many couples, it is a better choice not to. For some couples, to be
sure, there may be no meaningful option. For there are indeed
“dysfunctions” which have an organic base, for instance, impotence
following prostate surgery, vaginal dryness not alleviated by
hormones. But there need be no loss of the sexual per se, unless
couples themselves choose not to explore other ways of pleasuring
one another.

Homosexual Sex and Marriage. If marriage is properly
understood as an emotional bonding, with commitment to
permanence, loyalty, and fidelity, sealed by a physical uniting, then
there are large numbers of valid homosexual marriages in existence
at present. It is likely that such marriages will increase: AIDS fears
are effecting wholesale transformations in sexual practice away from
the casual and toward the committed, and not only among
homosexuals. For ministers, what this means is that counseling
requests from homosexual couples certainly will increase.

It is not clear that Christianity has ever been of one mind on
homosexual relationships. Old Testament prohibitions seem to have
to do more with the Hebrews establishing a separate identity in a
Canaanite world than they do the elaboration of a normative sexual
ethic for any and all cultures. In the New Testament, St. Paul seems
more concerned about male prostitution than about homosexual sex
in itself. Medieval prohibitions against homosexuality, when studied
more closely, seem more to be concerned with sodomy than with the
homosexual relationship. Indeed, when the Christian tradition is
surveyed as a whole, what seems to emerge is more what is taken for
granted than what is affirmed explicitly.

In specific, Christianity has taken for granted the “seal” quality of
sexual intercourse as signifying a commitment to offspring and,
therefore, the “naturalness” of male-female intercourse. Since we no
longer link so explicitly intercourse with offspring though, what has
been taken for granted can no longer function as a guideline for
thinking in this area. In essence, given the symbolic understanding of
sexual intercourse presently under discussion, there seems no good
reason *prima facie* not to affirm the legitimacy of homosexual
bonding. Negativity on the subject of homosexual marriage seems
principally to have to do with an over-literalizing of the sign value of
genital intercourse in an intimate relationship. When intercourse is
rightly understood as a symbol of a commitment to mutual self-giving
which is permanent and exclusive, homosexual unions, whether
between males or females, do not in any obvious way call for judgment and condemnation.

However, if homosexuality cannot be said to be an “abomination to the Lord,” it is difficult for the Christian church to regard it as a cause for public celebration and rejoicing. Most Christian communities do not give public sanction to homosexual relationships any more than other communities would sanction marriages between persons “not ready” for them in other ways (e.g., between the profoundly retarded, prepubescent children, or even earning incapacitated). Insofar as a marriage relationship is founded upon mutual consent, the existence of homosexual marriages is beyond the purview of any community, religious or otherwise. But insofar as a marriage relationship drives toward public affirmation and celebration, the lack of such public celebration is now functioning for at least some homosexual couples as an invalidating of the relationship. Is there likely to be change in the church’s thinking on this matter? In the light of the significant and substantial changes which have occurred already in Christian thinking about human sexuality, perhaps it is not unduly optimistic to expect change in this area also.

Commitment to Childless Marriages. Prior to the eighteenth century, childlessness rendered a marriage suspect, and a commitment to childlessness invalidated the marital covenant itself. Today, increasing numbers are both considering and making such a commitment, for a number of reasons. For some, children would have a disproportionate negative impact on their own personal development, particularly the childbearer. Secondly, many people seem simply “not called” to be parents, either because of their genes, gifts, or graces. Thirdly, many people are capable of inspiring self-giving, but in other ways than producing offspring. The willingness to give of self to persons other than children, for instance, to one another, or to wider social units, surely is sufficient for a valid marital union. Fourthly, global overpopulation makes morally valid both reductions in the numbers of children and the commitment to have none; in a seriously overpopulated world, obeying an injunction to “be fruitful and multiply” can border on the obscene. Finally, as metaphysically dubious as it may seem to advance the claim, many choose not to have children on the basis of the rights of the unborn and the not yet conceived to have a minimal quality of life.

Precisely because the Christian community has linked, in a number of ways, sex and marriage, it is impossible to avoid discussing that tradition in its import for contemporary social issues.
arising as human beings seek to express their sexuality. But for most people in our society, what marriage is continues to center around what sex is, at least at the beginning, and thus the extensive elaboration of this one part of the definition of marriage has seemed appropriate. Now I want to move to the final consideration, Christian marriage as symbolizing God's love for all.

The Symbolic Capacity of Marriage

In the language of the traditional marriage rites, there has been consistent reference to marriage as "signifying unto us the mystical union which exists between Christ and his Church." Here is surely the deepest symbolic dimension of marriage: marriage is intended to point out and toward something beyond itself in a way which can make present that very reality not only to the couple but to all whose lives the couple touches.

What this means, most importantly, is that more is involved in the marriage relation than the fulfillment of the couple. Intimacy and mutual happiness are not ends in themselves only. Their value includes their opening to others the reality of love's transforming power in all of life. As all symbols enable a sharing in what is symbolized, a happy and intimate marriage is one which points toward and makes present such love by drawing it close to others and others close to it. The marriage relationship is intended to embody a wider reality of love, even as it in itself is in process of being transformed by and into that wider reality.

Traditionally, marriage has borne society's hopes for the continuity of the generations and the stability of the social order. In our time, marriage has come to revolve around the happiness of the individuals comprising the marriage relationship. But marriage both includes and transcends all these meanings in order to re-present something about the human future in God. Until the late Middle Ages, Pauline theology expressed this latter emphasis in a particular way: marriage represented the possibility of containing lustful preoccupations with this world in order that persons could properly prepare themselves for the next life undistracted. While Roman Catholicism even today remains largely governed by this notion, the Protestant tradition began in the sixteenth century a reshaping of the symbolic dimension of marriage in light of an overarching preoccupation with the theme of grace. The Reformer's affirmation, sola gratia, is that God invades and pervades human beings with redemptive love, in whatever sinful condition they are, including lust.
Divine grace is itself the sufficient “containing” power over sin, relieving human beings of the responsibility all by themselves to master it. From this orientation, marriage can be seen as one appropriate vehicle, not so much for containing the consequences of sin as for expressing grace. A couple’s deep and abiding love for each other is a means for showing all who know them God’s gracious love. As others are affected by the couple’s love, they may glimpse afresh the nearness, constancy, and supportiveness of God. God’s love in Christ makes its appearance powerfully as a couple’s love flows out from each other and toward others, as their love for one another enables each to love more and more of God’s creatures.

What this suggests is that the overarching task of marriage across a lifetime is to cultivate the fruits of gracious love in ways which lead to greater lovingkindness toward and in all. The “fruits” of marriage are not so much children, therefore, but a quality of character by which a couple share themselves for others’ welfare. So sharing, they make present God’s ever reaching out lovingly to all creatures.

It is easy to become confused about the symbolic meaning of marriage today, particularly when so much stress is laid upon the quality of a couple’s interactions with one another. Intimacy has become the all-important quest, and it threatens to degenerate into a fantasy of fusing two individuals into one. It is not difficult to see why preoccupation with “entering” and “being entered” borders on the hysterical. Symbolically, of course, these foci do suggest something profoundly true about the union and communion possible between human beings and God: “I in God” and “God in me.” However, focusing upon communion in this sense can distract us from the more important reality, the wider community of which every human being is a member. It is an illusion that lovers need only one another. God intends for all human beings to have their authentic being in community with all other creatures. Thus, it is as a couple reaches out to others, sustained by their own love, that their love can re-present God’s love for all, and in so doing, come to its own fulfillment.

From a Christian standpoint, marriage is “dead” only when its symbolic capability is no longer present. The alienation between spouses becomes, in its own way, another kind of symbol, making present all over again the awesome reality of the alienation and estrangement which pervades the human community as such. But for many couples struggling with marital problems, it is also the case that by means of patience, understanding, and especially forgiveness, they can overcome most threats to the relationship. When
responsiveness to grace is gone, however, there is little left that is recognizably Christian about the marriage, or even about life.

**Christian Marriage Today:**
**Toward a Hopeful Realism**

To this point in the essay, I have presented a paradigm for Christian marriage against a backdrop of fantasies about marriage and family life. In this concluding section, I want to translate that Christian perspective into realistic hopes for marriage in today's world.

Is it realistic to maintain high hopes for the marriage relationship today? From a Christian standpoint, it is indeed. One hope which Christian faith encourages us to sustain is that each partner in a marriage will experience an enhanced sense of being accepted and supported as an individual with needs, wants, and hopes which are worthy of respect. To be sure, given the level of maturity it requires truly to accept another human being with relatively few conditions (unconditional love is for God alone), it may appear decidedly unrealistic at the outset to hold out such a hope for a marriage relationship. The marital covenant is frequently entered into for what the other can do for “me,” and reflection goes only as far as conjuring how to change the other so that I will get what I want. Once we learn, however, that we can get far more from those we love than just what we think we want, and that it is impossible for us to remake our lovers to our own specifications, we are freed up to discover that most realistic course of action in marriage, mutual give-and-take, from which grows a fondness for the other precisely as other, even as the unchangeable other.

A second realistic hope is for warmth, kindness, and companionship in an increasingly lonely social world. The values of individualism, freedom, and self-assertiveness so pervade modern society that alienation has become one of the most profound distresses of our time, in spite of the evident fact that “it is not good for a human being to be alone.” While it is unrealistic to expect from marriage perpetual enrichment, excitement, and adventure, with increasing frequency pursued under the guise of simultaneous and multiple orgasms, it is realistically hopeful to expect in marriage a pervasive kindliness of two companions along life's way, committed to assuaging each other's loneliness. While we are used to celebrating such a virtue in couples considerably further along in marriage than we like to think we are, kindliness is worth striving for from the
beginning. Only prejudice allocates mellowness to the aging and ecstasy to the young.

It is also reasonable for couples to expect in their marriages a lively sense of participating in, as well as planning for, the future. Generally, the way most couples fulfill this expectation is through a common commitment to bear and to nurture offspring. Their own future typically looks different when there are children to be raised. It becomes especially laden with significance when couples contemplate that their children might in fact make a difference to the world's future. But there are other ways to participate in the future than by raising children, as we have seen, because there are many ways to become involved in bettering the human race as a whole. When couples extend their personal interests beyond themselves and their own well-being, their own relationship can deepen and become more fulfilling.

It is reasonable to expect a marriage to provide a support structure for children's development which is more adequate and encompassing than any support structure either partner could build on her or his own. The experience of today's single parents confirm that parenting is done best when it is done by both parents, mutually committed to expending the energy necessary to accomplish the tasks, at times at the expense of personal fulfillment. Single parents raising children on their own discover, often painfully, that one person simply cannot generate sufficient energy and does not bring to the task sufficient competencies for meeting all parental responsibilities. The happiest single parents accept this and set about to build a support structure which will substitute for the absent other parent. They also possess an inner peace which comes from knowing that their inability to compensate for the lack of the other parent is neither a personal nor moral failure.

Finally, it is realistic to hope that marriage partners will contribute to each other's own growing union of their sexual and their spiritual natures, and in a way which turns both partners increasingly beyond themselves to become advocates for the well-being of all. As I have argued, erotic love itself contains within it the possibility for learning that kind of self-giving through which every human being can become more fully human. For all of its vaunted liberation in matters sexual, modern culture continues to dichotomize the sexual and the spiritual, now on the side of a pan-sexuality which sacrifices the spiritual. This is as aberrant a life-style as was that of the generation against which it protests, which desexualized the spiritual in the direction of a moralism whose vitality was consumed in false righteousness. The human spirit
suffers whenever the sexual and the spiritual become antagonistic to one another. In an intimate union, bounded by a commitment to permanence, by loyalty, and by faithfulness, the sexual and the spiritual can flourish. It is still possible for marriage to be a school for faith.

For Further Reading

Bernard, Jessie. *The Future of Marriage*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982. Jessie Bernard introduces one of the most enduring distinctions in all marriage literature, the concept of “his” and “her” marriage. This book is in the fullest sense of the term a classic, indispensable to all serious reflection about marriage today.


Singles and the Church

Imagine sitting in the pews this Sunday at church all by yourself. There is no spouse at your side to nudge you and keep you awake. There's no one to laugh with at the pastor's jokes. Unconsciously your head is lowered during the sermon when references to the family are made. You wonder, is the pastor talking about me, or just people with spouses? This is one single adult's experience in church.

Imagine sitting in the pews this Sunday at church surrounded by members of your singles Sunday school class. You have other people to share the worship service with. You experience warmth and security within your group because everybody knows and accepts others as they are. You have a high comfort level in the crowded sanctuary because you know that the sermon is for everyone. This is another single adult's experience in church.

The experiences of being single in the church are as varied as grains of sand. They run the gamut from the deeply depressed to those filled with unspeakable joy. Many factors determine how single persons react to singleness, such as their relationship with God, how they become single, their level of self-esteem, and their pastor's sensitivity to single adult issues. During my decade of work in the area of single adult ministry, I have seen the best and the worst. The common denominator for them is their love for God and their love for the church.

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Who Are Singles?

Single adults come in all colors, shapes, and sizes. The Sunday school superintendent, the usher, or even the pastor may be single. There are five categories of single adults that I recognize and work with: the always single, the divorced, the separated, the widowed and single parents. Each of the five groups possesses unique traits. Each group—and every member of it—need to be accepted and appreciated as they are. Most of all, their relationship with the church is crucial, for it can determine whether or not they are healthy single adults.

Never married single adults bear an initial stigma simply by their categorical name. To be called "never married" is to be labelled by what they are missing rather than what they are. I prefer to call them the always single adults because to this point in their lives they have always been single. Unlike the other five types of singles, the always singles have never tasted matrimony, therefore marriage may appear as life’s ultimate goal. Marriage can become an obsession fueled in large part by the church. The Bible can put the always single person between a theological rock and a hard place. The Old Testament records God placing Adam and Eve together because “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). This has been interpreted by some literalists to mean that a single person is violating God’s will by his or her non-married status. Yet the New Testament records the words of an apostle who urged early Christians to “...be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord...” (1 Cor. 7:32).

Kevin is a 33-year-old always single man who has endured at least 15 years’ worth of verbal haranguing due to his singleness. His mom wants a daughter-in-law and grandchildren. Kevin’s dad wants his son married as a validation to his friends that Kevin is not gay. What Kevin wants is somebody to understand that someday he will marry, but only when he is good and ready. He sees no rush and really there is not one.

Parental pressure is the most intense for this segment of single adults. This pressure can have the negative effect of driving a single person into the arms of marriage just to please the family. Self-esteem can also suffer when the always single person feels incomplete in the eyes of loved ones.

Because of his parental situation, Kevin risks the danger of accepting others’ negative definition of his singlehood. This could shrink his self-concept and ultimately affect his interaction possibilities with others, perhaps even compromising his ability to
marry some day. His interests can be best served by involvement in a singles group that emphasizes the worth of its members as single adults.

The divorced single adult is the least understood of the group. Church folk are confused on this issue. Should divorcees be congratulated or condemned? Jesus spoke of the divorced, particularly divorced women, as adulterers. In Matt. 5:31 he said, “...everyone that divorces his wife except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery.” Looking at the words of Christ from a 1990’s vantage point I can say that his purpose is still relevant. Jesus needed to affirm the sanctity and holiness of marriage. If he had pointed out a list of loopholes and quickie exits from marriage, our parents might have bailed out at the first argument and some of us would not be here today. Jesus’s words are stern to reinforce the conviction that marriage is not like a toy that’s played with and then tossed aside.

Adultery is a scorching word that can send many people running back to a troubled marriage just to avoid the heat of damnation. “‘Til death do us part’ certainly does not mean until your husband beats you into a coma,” I said to Sherry, a 33-year-old woman. I met her in a battered woman’s shelter. She’d come there in the middle of the night across three state lines on the run from her husband. Dan was a high-powered investment banker with a mean streak. She knew when they met that he was controlling and jealous, but she hoped that by marrying him she could prove her loyalty to him and he would change. Dan never changed. The beatings were daily and severe. The mental abuse was equally intense. Dan convinced Sherry that if she ever thought of leaving the marriage she would become an adulterer and God would strike her dead.

The church did not prove helpful to Sherry. Before she fled, she approached her pastor with the marital problems. He suggested that she was exaggerating the beating accounts. He also sided with Dan that a divorce was unwise.

In most instances the widowed elicit automatic support and sympathy from the church. While the food, prayers, and visits are tangible signs of concern, widows also need help from the church in getting on with their lives.

Sarah’s husband died of asbestos poisoning three years ago. She describes his death as a gradual and painful one. At age 55, she became an integral part of maintaining his life and offering what comfort she could. “I learned how to give him his injection every two hours, change his bed pan and feed him,” she recalled. “His coma in
the end was a blessing. No one could have survived that much pain. If it weren't for God I know that I would not have made it through."

Sudden singleness was difficult for Sarah. "I had a hard time accepting the title "widow." I had so much shame," she said. "I felt afloat at sea. My husband had been my anchor, now he is gone."

Sarah's main source of support came from her church's singles group. "They helped me through the transition from being married to widowed because they were just there for me. On a Saturday night the phone would ring and it would be them saying, 'let's go out to a movie or out for pizza'. The church really came through for me."

Separated single adults are a curious group. As they straddle the fence overlooking marriage and divorce, they make some church folk nervous. There are some singles groups that will not admit them. I've always advocated including the separated in singles groups because if ever the church was needed in a life to help make a decision, it is during these times.

I counseled with Andrew for several months as he contemplated his future in a 15-year marriage that had gone bad. Andrew discovered that his wife Michelle was involved in an extramarital affair. He confronted her with his knowledge of the affair, and she promised to end it, but had not done so. Andrew felt trapped, thinking that the only way out was a divorce. The pain of betrayal made him bolt from the ranks of the married to the singles ministry at my church.

During the first few months of his separation we looked at the options available to him. He could go back to the marriage, hoping that his wife would agree to marital counseling and eventually all would be well or he could end the marriage with divorce and begin again as a single man. Quite honestly, I believe the idea of starting over frightened him. Also the idea of a potentially messy divorce and maybe losing the kids in a court fight seemed overwhelming.

He counted the costs before he made a move. Andrew attended our singles Bible study and talked with others who knew what he was going through. After much prayer and thought, he decided to return to his wife and try marriage again.

I dare say that the separated can receive such personalized treatment elsewhere. But here the church made the difference. It gave Andrew a place to comfortably make one of the most important decisions of his life.

Single parents are a rapidly growing sector of the singles population due to the high rate of divorce. Such persons often find themselves confronted with the tremendous task of being both mother and father. They suffer guilt because they may blame
themselves for the disintegrated marriage and the displacement of their family. The idea of starting out again, alone with kids, is awesome.

Women are most commonly expected to be the single parents. They are the primary child care givers and judges usually rule in their favor when a child custody fight ends in court. However, more single men are becoming single parents. Take my small church, for example: of the 15 single parents within the congregation, two of those parents are men.

They are both admirable men, too. One is divorced and caring for his three preschool age children; the other is a widower who has the responsibility of raising his six children ranging in age from preschool to high school. The latter is the one who most impressed me.

His name is John, he is 40 years old and a fireman. Even though he is required to spend a number of days per week at the fire station, he is one of my top church leaders. His family attends church regularly and seems to be happy. John has learned how to plug into the unofficial child care network at the church. When he has a need for help with his family, one of the other single parents will pitch in. And when the situation is reversed, he will pitch in to help another single parent. Obviously he has not allowed his maleness or his non-traditional role to keep him from making sure that his family receives care.

I've admired his parenting ability from afar for a while, but I did not want to praise his child-rearing skills for fear that it would seem condescending, as though as a man he should not have any. Finally one day I asked him how he was able to do so much so well and with such finesse. John explained to me that as his wife was dying with cancer, she asked him to promise to keep the kids and raise them himself. She told him that he had the ability to be a good parent if he would trust himself. “Rev., I just took her at her word” he said.

The Invisible Singles

Even though singles are easily categorized, they can still be invisible because the church does not want to see them or because they choose not to be seen.

The church with no understanding can ignore singles because the singleness of others is a reminder that the same dreaded fate may come their way. It is more convenient to overlook the pain that the divorced have suffered, the anguish of the widowed and the unconnectedness of the always single.
I've met pastors who seem to enjoy their role in the conspiracy of silence. They adamantly defend their decision not to sponsor singles ministries in their churches. Their primary reason is, "I don't have any singles in my church." What happens in reality is that the singles are hidden, not recognized for what they are.

It's easier to see widower Jones as the aged man who always opens and closes the church on Sunday morning, rather than the man who recently lost his wife of 50 years to a car accident with a drunk driver. He is just widower Jones. The truth is that he is suddenly single, thrust into a new way of living, a new status. The change is too much for the church to deal with so they don't see him as a single.

Some singles like it this way. They want their status to remain a non-issue. It is simpler to conform to the established weave of the congregation by trying to be like everyone else. Who wants to stick out like a sore thumb?

Kate has been divorced for seven years, yet she still wears her wedding ring. She is a communion steward and her hands are looked at by all when she changes the cups at the altar rail. The wedding band on her hand lets people know that everything is "normal." She is married. She is able to keep her man. She is not alone at night.

Kate's facade is vital to her position at the church. She does not want to be seen as a single. The very word "single" conjures up images of the pitiful, the rejected, the shamed. She does not want those words connected with her. Therefore she chooses the cloak of deception to make her singleness invisible.

The False Need For Sex

In addition to loneliness, misunderstanding, and low self-esteem, another vicious trap that awaits singles is the false need for sex. We are all pawns of the media, which uses sex to sell everything from fresh fruit to automobiles. The media hype has produced a society that erroneously believes that a sexual relationship is a requirement for a productive life. This sex-crazed attitude knows no bounds. It can be found in our local churches as easily as it can be found in the town tavern. The only difference is that we overlook it and hope that it will go away. In the singles community it does not go away. It is intensified. It is up to the church to save us from ourselves.

My position on sexual relations among singles is a negative one. I discourage it and promote celibacy. There are other singles leaders of national stature who see things differently. They say that we are all sexual beings and that our sexual urges must be satisfied whether we
are single or married. Others say that sexual relations are permitted between singles who are in a loving and committed relationship. I've tried to see things their way but I can't.

I can only see sexual relationships as God's gift designed to function within the marriage covenant where there is security, commitment, and demonstrated love. The Bible speaks clearly to the reality that fornicators, those who have sex outside of marriage, are sinners.

While still a novice in singles ministry I was on fire to get people out of the fire—of passion, that is. I'd take my Bible and slam it against pulpits and tables all the while declaring that "the wages of sin is death." I thought that I could browbeat people into celibacy, but I was mistaken.

I also learned early on that celibacy is not a popular topic. Singles would rather talk about anything else but this. That's why I now reserve that topic until the end of my workshops and presentations. Once in Nashville I conducted a workshop on the single life. The group was friendly, open, and talkative. Everything was going great until I raised the issue of celibacy. Then my workshop went downhill fast. To my amazement a glaze seemed to cover the eyes of most of the people in the room. I sensed disinterest and boredom within the formerly lively group. Eventually I began to catch side-long glances and hear the sucking of teeth. I knew that I had lost them for good.

During the summer of 1989 I took a survey at a city-wide singles gathering of 100 singles. Of that group seventy-eight were female and twenty-two were male. Seventy-nine were always single. Twenty were divorced and one was widowed. I asked them the question "Is celibacy a reality in your life today?" The results surprised me and also helped me to reformulate my approach to this issue. Seventy-two of the singles stated that celibacy was a possible way of life for them. Seventeen stated that it was not. And eleven singles did not answer the question.

I've learned much, even if I have to learn the hard way. Celibacy is still my position but now I present it in a different way: celibacy is "an option" for the Christian single life. I softened my pitch because I came to understand that single adults are just that—adults who are single. They will do what they want to do anyhow. It is my job to present a new way to live. The choice is theirs to make. Now, in a humorous kind of backdoor way, I challenge singles with three reasons not to be celibate. This always wakes up the ones snoozing on the back row.
I tell them, “don’t become celibate because you are without someone to have sex with anyway. And don’t become celibate because you are angry with your boyfriend or girlfriend. Thirdly, don’t choose it because you want to appear alluring and exclusive.” Celibacy should spring from the heart. It is God’s gift to you to control and redirect your sexual urges.

I feel much more comfortable with this approach. The ultra-conservatives accuse me of condoning free sex, while the liberals say it is too restrictive for the modern generation. But it feels right to me because that is how Jesus handled things. He did not condemn people for what they were doing wrong; he told them what was right and pointed them in that direction.

Do They Add Anything?

With all the controversy that can surround singles ministries in our churches, one logical question that can be raised is “what does the church profit by highlighting the single status of its members?” Single adults represent the inevitability of life. At some point in all of our lives we have been single and we will be single. Some of us will never marry, others of us will divorce, still others of us will become widowed. Singleness is the first state we know as humans. We are born alone and we shall die alone. The single state is such a common one that it does not deserve its badge of shame. Singles make the body of Christ even more varied. Wouldn’t it be boring if everyone was married?

Healthy single adults demonstrate to the church that a productive life with oneself is possible. They show us that it is good to like, love and know yourself all by yourself. The love from another human being while good, is not necessary for survival.

Singles make our faith stretch to understand how God can bless a wedding union and also bless a single, non-wedded person. The church has been challenged to embrace the concept of family far beyond the once standard dad, mom and two kids model. Family now includes single adults, all by themselves. They teach our young that they have a choice in life. Marriage as well as singleness can be an aspiration of their choosing.

Singles have always been contributors to our faith, whether we choose to admit it or not. Some of the most stirring biblical accounts come from the lives of single people. The widow with the copper coin showed us how to give from the heart and not for show. A single man named Paul pointed the way to sexual restraint. A woman engaged in
the sinful act of cohabitation met her savior at the well and went on to testify to the world about the waters of living life that changed her life forever.

Then there was one guy, around thirty years of age, who never married. He was too busy doing God's work. As you know, his name was Jesus and he was the premiere single adult. We have no way of knowing whether or not his family tried to pressure him into marriage, but he seemed pretty confident in himself. Many people are too uncomfortable to zero in on his single status. As a single savior, he symbolizes to us that God can use us in any form. Speaking of God, has anyone determined if our heavenly parent has a spouse? Or did single parenting get its origins from the heavens?

What's Ahead

The future for singles in the church is rocky, as it has been for all new groups out to forge new ground. Singles must continue to educate the church on issues of acceptance and understanding.

Single parenting is taking a new unexpected twist among churchgoing singles. Many singles, especially single women, are deciding to adopt children. They are tired of dates that lead nowhere and commitments that never materialize while their biological clocks tick away.

I attended a baby shower for a woman from church who just adopted a two-year-old girl. At first the whole scene grabbed me with a “what's wrong with this picture?” feeling. There was the baby, presents, the proud mom. Finally I figured it out—there was no proud dad.

Adoption is meeting needs that refuse to be ignored. There are children in need of homes and there are women who want to end their wait for marriage and want to become mothers now. I applaud them and their bravery. This is not just some hot trend; considering the declining quality of male/female relationships, it looks as if adoption is here to stay.

There are other single women fed up with squalid relationships who bypass adoption and give birth to their own. The television character Murphy Brown brought this issue to a national focus. Some of us church folk consoled ourselves with the view that such behavior was found only outside the church. Let's think again. I've got two “Murphy Browns” in my congregation. These are college-educated, well-employed and salaried women who are active in church. They are not the godless heathens one would imagine.
They see nothing wrong with conceiving and bearing a child out of wedlock because they are able to take care of the child and this appears to be their only road to a family.

As a woman, a pastor and an advocate of singles I can understand their motivations clearly. But I cannot advocate their road to motherhood. It trashes our Christian tradition and leaves little to hold on to. Clearly, we need to do more thinking about this issue.

Another issue in singles ministries is the emergence of such programming in ethnic churches. One Korean diaconal minister informed me that his interest in singles groups was future oriented. He explained that “the Korean mass immigration came in the 70s and there has not been an assimilation into American culture yet. As the church moves along its generation ladder it will soon face these issues.”

In the African American community, singles ministries, I predict, will become a staple due to a tragic societal reality: there are currently more African American men in prison than there are in colleges. This unfortunate statistic means that there will be large numbers of women in this racial group who will be without partners. Marriage may not be a possibility for them. Such a large scale catastrophe will send droves of women to the church. Hopefully they will find sane, Christ-centered advice there that equips them to make it as they are.

A Theology of Singleness

My theology of singleness embraces all of the singles presented above. It informs them that God loves them just as they are. Too many single people feel that God’s love for them is contingent on the presence of a boyfriend or girlfriend, a husband or a wife. Too many singles feel that if God really cared for them they would still have a spouse. Too many singles wallow in the loneliness that can accompany singleness and assume that God is not with them.

Singleness is not a curse. This is a point that I hammer in all of my interactions with singles. Helping singles accept and love themselves is what I do best. I open my remarks at all singles gatherings with this same message: “Marriage will not cure you; singleness will not kill you.” I want them to find satisfaction, peace, and even happiness as single adults first. Then, after they believe that they are whole people, they are in a stronger position to meet others, form relationships, and marry if they choose.
What is to be avoided is a condition that I term “marriage elitism.” Those who have it assume that married people are better than single people. I’ve seen married people turned completely off by any form of singles advocacy. They feel threatened, as though an empowered, happy single adult will come along and break up their marriage. They feel as though a singles ministry is in direct opposition to the family. They envy what they erroneously believe is the swinging, partying single life.

I’ve even had the unfortunate opportunity to address groups that were so anti-singles ministry that I had to defend my faith as well as my association with singles ministries. It’s sad, but programs that accept single people as they are can be misinterpreted as organizations that reject Christian relationships and do not respect the institution of marriage.

How wrong can they be? I love marriage, I think it is great, but I am realistic enough to admit that marriage is not a perfect institution that everyone should stay in or that everyone should enter into. This conviction came to me when I was younger and had the perspective of the pews rather than the pulpit.

Ten years ago I was a single adult and I sat in the pews of a St. Luke “Community” UMC alone. I enjoyed church immensely, but I was certain that the church should offer something special to people like me. After all, children had their own programming and senior citizens had a ministry built around them. Even the married folk had their own special Sunday school. So why couldn’t we?

The senior pastor enthusiastically approved of the idea, even though he confessed he had no idea what such a ministry would look like. He simply had enough vision and common sense to look out from the pulpit on Sunday and see a burgeoning singles population. After a few months of research and planning, a singles ministry was launched.

That was 1982 and I was one who benefited from such a ministry. Now it is 1992—I’ve been married eight years, I have one son and I am pregnant with another child. So what am I still doing in singles ministry? I am asked that question more than I would like to remember. It seems odd, I suppose, for a married, pregnant woman to minister to singles. For some people it does not compute.

However, my relationship with single adult ministry is not based on my own marital status. This relationship was welded together ten years ago when God placed in my heart a determination to help singles live happily just as they are. That determination has not changed and I pray that it will not. Many people assumed that once I
married, my interest would move on to marriage ministry, or once I became a parent I would move on to children’s ministry. But I am here to stay. Like the prophet Jeremiah, this singles thing is hard to shake. Whenever I try to keep it to myself it does not feel good. It’s like a fire shut up in my bones and I will not keep it in.
Practical Divinity: Ministry in the Wesleyan Tradition

Issues of form, function, and authority dominate current discussions about ministry in the United Methodist Church. This ongoing concern about the nature and quality of ministry has generated renewed interest in the history of ministry in the Wesleyan tradition. We are prompted to ask if an examination of John Wesley's theology and practice of ministry can help us in our deliberations.

In order to answer this question, we must examine John Wesley's own religious formation, especially the significant influences of his early childhood, as well as his ongoing relationship with his parents, Samuel and Susanna Wesley. It is my belief that Wesley's view of ministry was profoundly shaped prior to the Oxford days.

Childhood Environment

The Wesley children grew up in a context of strife. Life was filled with hardship and marked by poverty. John was the thirteenth or fourteenth child to be born to Samuel and Susanna Wesley, but he was only the seventh child to survive the first year of life.

When John was born in Epworth on June 17, 1703, the family was already heavily in debt. Samuel Wesley was an Anglican priest who
was actively involved in religious and political issues. He had come to Epworth at the direction of Queen Mary in reward for his loyalty.

The people of Epworth already resented anyone in authority, especially those connected with royalty, since Charles I had seized their land and deprived them of their livelihood. Samuel was very dogmatic in his religious views but came to be known as a conscientious pastor who visited and provided pastoral care for his parishioners.

In this way he won their respect by his attention, but made himself unpopular by his strictness. In addition, his political opinions were completely opposed to theirs: he was conservative, and they were fundamentally liberal. His militant temperament made it impossible for him to conceal his views. On the contrary, he openly canvassed for his party and its ideas.

In May, 1705, when John was two years old, political activity took Samuel away from the parish to the town of Lincoln for a heavily contested election. While Samuel was away, a mob protesting his militant views gathered in the street late at night to shout, beat drums, and shoot at the Wesley home. Susanna had been in bed for three weeks after the birth of a child, and a nurse was caring for another infant. After the mob left, the sleeping nurse rolled on the child in her sleep, causing its death. With the news of the baby's death and a threat on his life in Lincoln, Samuel returned home. His arrival brought back the mob, who embarrassed the Wesleys until after midnight. The next day a passerby called the children “devils” as they played in the yard and threatened: “We will come and turn ye all out of doors a begging shortly.”

John was just three years old when his father was thrown into debtor's prison at Lincoln Castle (June, 1705) for failing to meet obligations incurred from rebuilding the parish rectory after a fire in 1702. In one letter from prison, Samuel worried that the parishioners would turn his family out of the rectory as they had so often threatened to do.

Another letter in September expressed concern for the Wesley family after three separate incidents of harassment. The family lost its supply of milk when the cows were stabbed and dried up. The same night the iron latch was torn off the door so the disgruntled townspeople could shoot the lock. They also chopped off one leg of the family dog. In an attempt to secure Samuel's release, Susanna sent her rings to her husband for payment of his debts, but he returned them to her. Samuel was released from prison some time before Christmas, 1705, and returned home.
Probably the most widely known event in John Wesley’s young life was the second rectory fire at Epworth on February 9, 1709. An act of arson, the flames trapped John, age six, in a second-floor bedroom. Samuel attempted to reach his son, but could not because the stairs were on fire. John was pulled out of the window by neighbors just as the roof fell in.

With this background, we might wonder why John Wesley would ever consider entering the ministry. His childhood experiences reflected the consequences of his father’s frequent absences on church business, the poverty of a rector’s family, and the harassment of hostile parishioners. He did enter the ministry, but he never forgot the misery of those early years. Later, when Samuel asked his son, then ordained and preaching at Oxford, to follow him in ministry at Epworth, John asked, “If it be said that the love of the people at Epworth balances all these advantages here [Oxford], I ask, How long will it last? . . . Alas, sir, do I not know what love they had for you at first? And how they have used you since?”

And yet, the foundation laid in childhood contributed to John Wesley’s understanding of the nature of ministry. Theological grounding, parental models of ministry, and identification with the poor and hungry are all part of John Wesley’s heritage.

Three themes of the senior Wesleys’ theology were formative in John’s thought. Letters from both parents reflect their ongoing dependence on the providence of God. Samuel would often repeat this theme: “I’ve done what I could; do you the same, and rest the whole with Providence” (10/19/1725). Trust in the providence of God resulted in a life of faithful discipleship for the Wesleys inspite of hardship.

A second theme heard by John from early childhood was “saving all the souls you can.” Susanna Wesley’s primary concern as a parent had been saving the souls of her children. Later she encouraged John in his own ministry with young persons to “speak boldly without fear; these truths ought to be frequently inculcated, and pressed home upon the consciences of men” (2/14/1734).

A third theme frequently repeated by Susanna and affirmed by Samuel placed an indelible mark on John’s ministry: love to God and love to neighbor, “the principle and rule of all our thoughts, words, and actions, with respect to either” (11/10/1725). This principle provided a means for discerning God’s will and direction. It was the measure of a holy life.

In addition to a theological foundation, Samuel and Susanna Wesley modeled ministry in different ways during John’s formative years. As a child, John had seen his father’s dedication to parish ministry in
spite of the parishioners' hostility. While John was studying at Lincoln College, he had an opportunity to draw on his father's experience during a controversy over the Holy Club's involvement in prison ministry. Samuel shared advice from his own prison ministry and encouraged his son's continued involvement.\(^8\)

Susanna was also a model for ministry. She designated one evening a week for each child's spiritual guidance. Later, she would advise John as he guided the spiritual growth of others (11/10/1725). Susanna advocated the practice of spiritual disciplines as a means of focusing on the providence of God, of resisting the sinfulness of earthly pleasures, and of practicing faith as necessary for salvation. During one of Samuel's absences, Susanna began to hold services for members of her husband's parish. She wrote that she prayed for them and conversed with them with "warmth of affection."\(^9\)

Susanna's work with the parishioners later led John Wesley to observe that his mother "had been, in her measure and degree, a preacher of righteousness."\(^10\)

Finally, Wesley's identification with the poor and hungry combined with his conviction that God's assurance is available to every person led him to an innovative ministry in relation to human need. While the Wesleys were certainly not among the most impoverished of their time, John Wesley's childhood experiences gave him insight into a life of deprivation. In a letter to Susanna, John wondered why he was "little and weak" (3/19/1727). Susanna replied: "I believe the true cause of your being so is want of sufficiency of food for ten or twelve years when you were growing, and required more nourishment" (4/22/1727). This awareness of what it meant to be poor and hungry influenced John Wesley's developing ministry and its emphasis on response to the need of his neighbor.

These formative experiences in theological grounding, models of ministry, and a life of poverty nurtured the beginnings of John Wesley's concept of ministry. The Wesleys' lives were witness to ministry based on the providence of God and the command to love God and one's neighbor. A second formative period came as John Wesley declared his intention to seek Holy Orders.

**Preparation for Holy Orders**

John Wesley was the son of two strong-minded individuals who seldom agreed and who appeared to have had very different ideas about the nature of ministry. Once John decided to seek Holy Orders, a major conflict developed about the best way to prepare him for minis-
try. It began innocently enough in 1724 when Susanna voiced the hope that John would be his father's curate. Four months later, Samuel discussed reasons why his son should enter Holy Orders but advised him to wait.

*By all this you see I'm not for your going over hastily into Orders. When I'm for your taking 'em, you shall know it, and 'tis not impossible but I may then be with you, if God so long spare the life and health of your affectionate father.*

(1/26/1725)

Samuel proposed extensive preparation for ministry through a course of critical learning to provide a strong foundation in classical learning, especially in biblical languages and scholarship.

Within a month, Susanna directly contradicted Samuel and encouraged her son to prepare for Holy Orders immediately and recommended a study of practical divinity as the best preparation.

*I approve the disposition of your mind, I think this season of Lent the most proper for your preparation for Orders, and think the sooner you are a deacon the better, because it may be an inducement to greater application in the study of practical divinity, which of all other I humbly conceive is the best study for candidates for Orders. Mr. Wesley differs from me, and would engage you, I believe, in critical learning (though I'm not sure), which, though of use accidentally, yet is in nowise preferable to the other. Therefore I earnestly pray God to avert that great evil from you of engaging in trifling studies to the neglect of such as are absolutely necessary.*

(2/23/1725)

What Susanna Wesley meant by practical divinity is clearly stated much earlier in a letter to daughter Sukey: learning things by heart or saying prayers is not enough, "you must understand what you say, and you must practice what you know."11

Susanna believed that the primary educational task in preparation for ministry was instruction in knowledge requisite to the practice of faith. The goal was to follow the foundation and rule for practical divinity: love to God, and love to neighbor.

The battle lines were drawn over the best preparation for ministry. Samuel's plan for a course of critical learning came into direct conflict with Susanna's recommendation for practical divinity. The parental models of Samuel as biblical scholar and Susanna as practical theologian were at odds. The father wanted his son to focus on the knowledge of faith; the mother on the practice of faith.
The debate over preparation for ministry was only partially resolved when John received Holy Orders in 1725 and indicated that he agreed with his mother's view regarding learning: "I am perfectly come over to your opinion, that there are many truths it is not worth while to know" (1/24/1727). Yet, the issue was a difficult one and John continued to confront the tension between critical learning and practical divinity at Oxford: "Shall I break off my pursuit of all learning but what immediately tends to practice? I once desired to make a fair show in languages and philosophy. But 'tis past" (2/28/1732). John's life at Oxford kept this issue constantly before him. His intention had been to combine the two parental models of biblical scholar and practical theologian in his ministry:

The strongest impression I had till I was three or four and twenty was, Inter sylvas Academiae quaerere verum [to seek for truth in the groves of Academia], and afterwards (while I was my father's curate), to save my own soul and those that heard me. 12

An apparent change in Samuel Wesley's point of view appeared during a conflict over who was to succeed him at Epworth. John refused to leave the academy for the Epworth parish. Samuel wrote: "God made us for a social life; we are not to bury our talent. . . . And to this academical studies are only preparatory" (11/20/1734). Samuel did not want his son to remain at Oxford, and his letter rings of earlier admonitions by Susanna to avoid trifling studies. The disagreement between the parents about the kind of education needed to prepare their son for ministry had disappeared. The correspondence reveals that both parents were intensely interested in practical divinity. Samuel died at the age of 72 years on April 25, 1735, shortly after the controversy over the Epworth living. John was still at Oxford, so Samuel died not knowing the ultimate direction of John's ministry.

The Nature of Practical Divinity

John Wesley's guiding vision for ministry was a product of his early childhood environment and his relationship with Samuel and Susanna Wesley. While other relationships and experiences were formative, these family experiences were crucial. The inheritance from Samuel Wesley is dominated by biblical scholarship and critical learning. From Susanna Wesley, John acquired the commitment to saving souls through practical divinity. From both parents, John inherited courage rooted in trust in the providence of God when faced with hardship.
Biblical scholarship and practical divinity are the inherited parental models, but practical divinity is the primary vision underlying John Wesley's understanding of ministry. The central elements of practical divinity are summarized here as the basis of a Wesleyan understanding of ministry.

Practical divinity is based on trust in the providence of God. John Wesley's belief in grace available for all persons combined his father's emphasis on the providence of God with his mother's view that persons must work out their own salvation. According to Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace, God's Spirit is at work in us, giving each of us the choice of accepting the assurance of God's grace and living a faithful life in response.

Practical divinity is obedience to God out of love for God. Obedience to God means doing good because we have chosen to do God's will in response to God's grace at work in us. John Wesley asked himself, "Can you do the good God would have you do?" (6/13/1733). Samuel had repeatedly instructed John: "God gives us our work," and "God will direct you" (1/26/1725, 9/7/1725, 7/18/1727). For John Wesley, obedience to God meant "doing all the good you can" for the love of God and neighbor.

Practical divinity is a life of holiness, inward piety balanced with social holiness. The primary question for Wesley, "What must I do to be saved?" extended to his ministry with others. The answer was a life of holiness: "that course of life tends most to the glory of God wherein we can most promote holiness in ourselves and others, . . . If it be best for others, then it is so for us; if for us, then for them" (12/10/1734). And there was much to be done. Wesley wrote of the reasons why he was needed in Oxford and should not leave for Epsworth:

here are poor families to be relieved; here are children to be educated; here are workhouses wherein both young and old want and gladly receive the word of exhortation; here are prisons to be visited, wherein alone is a complication of all human wants; and lastly, here are the schools of the prophets, here are tender minds to be formed and strengthened, and babes in Christ to be instructed and perfected in all useful learning. (12/10/1734)

A life of holiness addressed both the physical and spiritual needs of the neighbor, as well as one's own inward piety.

Practical divinity is accountability in community. For Wesley, there was no holiness but social holiness. From his own experience, John Wesley knew persons could not live a Christian life alone.
Susanna Wesley’s educational method was foundational for much of John’s work. Her instruction to “enter upon serious examination of yourself, that you may know whether you have a reasonable hope of salvation by Jesus Christ; that is, whether you are in a state of faith and repentance or not” (2/23/1725) was formalized into a series of questions for members of Methodist class meetings. Answering these questions weekly provided an avenue of accountability for class members in a community setting.

**Practical divinity is plain truth for plain people.** John Wesley grew up believing that truth should be stated plainly in ways persons could understand. His family environment was one where honesty was expected in all circumstances. To love and care for one’s family meant honesty to the point of discomfort and conflict. As a result, Wesley did not mince words in his ministry, and response to his words often came in the form of dispute or harassment. But Wesley’s sense of mission was clear. Love to God and love to neighbor was his directive on the path to saving souls.

Practical divinity affected John Wesley’s understanding of the forms of ministry. On the one hand, it is clear that Wesley supported the authority of the Anglican Church in the ordination of persons to Holy Orders. On the other hand, it is equally clear that the power of the Spirit working within persons’ lives could not be denied. John Wesley recognized and supported a variety of ministries as legitimate responses to God’s call. Gunter described this dialectic as a move from “formal ecclesiology to a practical ecclesiology that met the need of a specific situation.”

John Wesley’s commitment to practical divinity inevitably led him to practical ecclesiology. A notable example of this was the emergence of lay preaching. Thomas Maxfield, a supervisor of the classes and bands at the Foundry in London, moved from reading and expounding the Scriptures to preaching while Wesley was away. On his return, Wesley was quite angry, but was confronted by his mother:

> John, you know what my sentiments have been. You cannot suspect me of readily favouring anything of this kind. But take care what you do with respect to that young man: for he is as surely called of God to preach as you are. Examine what have been the fruits of his preaching and hear him yourself.

Practical divinity meant an increasing role for women in Methodist leadership. With the model of his mother as a “preacher of righteousness,” Wesley appointed women as leaders of classes in Bristol as early as 1739. Sarah Crosby had such success that Wesley gave
her and others permission to preach two years later. It was clear that Wesley did not consider class or gender to be appropriate criteria for leadership. In 1787, Wesley wrote to the Manchester Conference: “We give the right hand of fellowship to Sarah Mallet, and have no objection to her being a preacher in our connexion, so long as she preaches the Methodist doctrines and attends to our discipline” and evangelists. While Wesley did not approve of the formal ordination of women, he did name them to serve as class leaders, lay preachers, and evangelists.

Because of his conviction that God’s grace and justification by faith are available to all, John Wesley accepted, although sometimes reluctantly, these responses by laypersons to the movement of the Spirit within their lives. The primary measure for Wesley was evidence of fruits of the Spirit in a person’s living witness. A second criteria for Wesley was formed by his vision of “primitive Christianity.” He used the authority of the New Testament to validate the role of women in ministry. Wesley addressed women in one of his sermons:

Let all you that have [it] in your power assert the right which the God of nature has given you. Yield not to [that] vile bondage any longer! You, as well as men, are rational creatures. You, like them, were made in the image of God; you are equally candidates for immortality; you too are called of God, as you have time, to “do good unto all men [sic]” . . . . It is well known, that, in the primitive Church, there were women particularly appointed for this work [visiting the sick]. Indeed there was one or more such in every Christian congregation under heaven. They were then termed Deaconesses, that is, servants; servants of the church and of its great Master.

Responding to the inner workings of God’s Spirit through practical divinity, “understanding what you say and practicing what you know,” became the measure for ministry in early Methodism.

Conclusion

John Wesley’s vision of ministry was formed from early childhood experience, parental influence, and his desire to recreate the New Testament faith community. He believed that all persons are ministers in the place they are given by the Spirit regardless of the dictates of formal ecclesiology. As Gunter observed, “from the very beginning [Wesley] exhibited a tendency to minister to the needs of his converts even at the expense of ecclesiastical protocol.”
If we are true to Wesley's vision of ministry, we must be inclusive of all those who seek to live a life of obedience to God's will, those whose living reveals evidence of God at work within. Just as Wesley made room for Thomas Maxfield, Sarah Crosby, and Sarah Mallet, we are called as a faith community to find ways to acknowledge the gifts God has given to those we may be most reluctant to accept.

For John Wesley, ministry must be in tune with the physical and spiritual needs of the downtrodden. Practical divinity is based on responding to God's saving grace and inward call with a social passion to care for one's neighbor. The forms of ministry accepted by Wesley were shaped by the gifts that persons were given and the needs of the neighbor. What resulted was a variety of ministries to the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, the young, the ill, the uneducated, the aged, and more. Through the witness of these early Methodists, we are challenged to develop and to support ministries that meet the needs of our neighbors.

John Wesley's vision confronts the church's discussion about the nature of ministry as we head into the twenty-first century. What is currently missing from our ministry discussions is a churchwide revisioning about the meaning and mission of ministry. As I have listened to the ongoing discussions, one issue has become abundantly clear. As long as we think about ministry out of a hierarchical mindset, we will be unable to shape forms of ministry in relation to a vision for the renewal of ministry and the church. Rather, we will continue to address these issues in relation to institutional advancement and power.

Guided by our Wesleyan heritage, a re-created vision for ministry based on the egalitarian, counterculture faith community of the New Testament would offer us a multiplicity of forms for ministry that interconnect and support each other. Our focus could be on stewardship and deployment of resources to work for peace and justice. And we would be freed to do all the good we can in love of God and neighbor. Ordering ministry would not stand in the way of doing ministry.

Practical divinity calls us to examine the context within which we live and to look for models of ministry which provide grounding in knowledge of faith, as well as practice in living faith. The Wesleys challenge us to commit ourselves to the vocation of saving souls, to provide foundational knowledge of faith in creative ways, to model the practice of ministry in love of God and neighbor, and to be open to the grace of God in the intertwining of critical learning and practical divinity. If Wesley's theology of ministry includes an "evangelical insistence that gospel ministry is not restricted to any ecclesiastical
structure,“ are we not called to be innovative in structuring ministry for our time?20

Notes

1. Dennis Campbell has made a significant contribution to this discussion in The Yoke of Obedience (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988). And yet, Campbell uses only one paragraph to name John Wesley’s religious heritage from his parents before moving on to the importance of the Oxford years (p. 48).


3. Adam Clarke, Memoirs of the Wesley Family (New York: Lane and Tippett, 1976), 175.

4. 6/25/1705 in Clarke, 177.

5. 9/12/1705 in Clarke, 179-80.

6. 9/17/1705 in Clarke, 181.

7. All dates in parentheses throughout the remainder of this article refer to letters found in Frank Baker, ed. The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley, vol. 25 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980):

1/26/1725, 157-169.
2/23/1725, 159-160.
9/07/1725, 182.
10/19/1725, 182-183.
11/10/1725, 183-185.
1/24/1727, 208-209.
3/19/1727, 212-215.
7/18/1727, 227.
2/28/1732, 327-330.
6/13/1733, 350-351.
2/14/1734, 377-378.
11/20/1734, 395-397.
12/10/1734, 397-409.

8. 9/18/1730 in Clarke, Memoirs, 249-50.


Christmas Should Be Softly Spoken

Didn't know you'd come to save us, Lawd,
To take our sins away.
Our eyes was blind, we couldn't see.
We didn't know who you was.

– Robert MacGimsey,
“Sweet Little Jesus Boy”

We'll call him Ray—a young minister fighting Christmas crowds, looking for a special gift at one shop, a toy another place, a card at still another. Eventually he finds something he likes, or more importantly, that he thinks someone else will like.

The saleswoman wishes him a happy holiday as she hands back his purchase and change. Ray responds with a smile and a cheerful, “Have a materialistic Christmas.” Apparently the woman misses the sarcasm, for she returns the smile before moving on to her next customer. Pleased with his protest, Ray moves on, too. Not only is he determined to avoid the frantic holiday trap that grabs these other people in December, he will make a statement as well.

What about the saleswoman? Had she understood his sarcasm, she would only have felt hassled. Converted? Not by Ray’s arrogance!

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As for himself, Ray has simply found another way of being
distracted during the holidays. He still does not understand the
subtlety of Christmas.

Christians often decry what has happened to their holiday. What
should be a profound but simple celebration has become occasion for
extravagant spending, with so many trying so hard to make
themselves and others happy. The business world is willing to
encourage our overindulgence and materialism. And we go along,
overspending, overeating, overdrinking, hoping there really is a Santa
Claus at the end of it all.

We have a problem with Christmas, but I would suggest that
commercialization is not to blame. Nor are we helped by simply
trying to “put Christ back into Christmas.” Far more is involved.

Merchants and advertisers do seduce us into overspending in
November and December, but it is just as true that we, the spending
public, encourage such an economic cycle. Surely merchants do not
enjoy that kind of seasonal vulnerability. If anything, we, with our
need to spend and indulge, have done to them as much as they have
done to us. We participate in the escalation.

I do not know that our celebration of Christmas can be different,
given human nature and the subtlety of the gospel. While the
commercialization of Christmas is a modern wrinkle, the basic
dynamic is the same as it has been for centuries. People have trouble
seeing God’s redemptive activity, even when it is taking place before
their eyes.

Martin Luther said it well in one of his Christmas sermons:

Shame on the wretched Bethlehem—no one even came to help
in the manger. Here God was working in their midst and they
did not even care. Isn’t this always true, though. . .the work
of God goes on regardless of what man is doing and the work
of man goes on regardless of what God is doing. Many of you
here are thinking, “Ah, but if I had been there it would have
been different. I would have gone to the babe.” Yes, because
you would have known who it was, the Christ of glory. If you
had lived there you would have acted no differently. (from
Martin Luther’s Christmas Book, edited by Roland Bainton)

People missed the birth of Christ in the first and sixteenth
centuries as well as in the twentieth. Christmas has been hidden, for
most people, most of the time—even before it was commercialized.
The Gospel and the Use of Parables

Jesus said he used parables because his listeners had difficulty seeing, hearing, and understanding (Matt. 13:10-17). He may not have intended to keep the gospel veiled, but his words acknowledge the effect.

The gospel is subtle, so subtle that we often do not hear or understand. Perhaps we are too concrete in our thinking and miss the fine points. Or perhaps we are too busy, preoccupied with daily routines and planning for tomorrow.

The dynamic is similar to the difficulty we have seeing rainbows and smelling roses. Rarely do we experience beauty in depth. Instead we move on to something else, distracted just enough to miss that which is most important and immediate.

As I understand the teachings of Jesus, we are to expect that God works in secret and that men and women keep missing what is important. That's the way it is, even when we strain to see God's activity. That's the way we are, unseeing, hard of hearing, and heavy of heart, even when trying not to be.

James Thurber has written a wonderful story about his difficulties as a freshman in the biology lab at Ohio State University. Early in the quarter the students are learning to focus their microscopes, but Thurber cannot get his to work. A few weeks later they are doing simple research, but Thurber continues to work on focusing; he sees nothing but blurs of light. At quarter's end the class is involved in various experiments, except for Thurber. He is still fighting his microscope, still demanding his vision.

Sometimes the harder we try, the more we keep missing. When that happens, we need to learn a new way of seeing, or at least we need to stop trying so hard.

Perhaps this is what Jesus meant. If we have difficulty seeing and hearing, the only means of communication that stands a chance is one that requires us to see and hear differently. So his parables depict common, everyday occurrences, but with sudden twists that surprise the listeners by turning reality upside down. Fairness and love are not defined by human standards. God's world is not as we thought. And neither are we, as we stand confronted with new realizations about ourselves.

Today's irony is that the parables are so familiar that even the twists have come to be expected. We know exactly what the Samaritan and the Prodigal will do, and why. We are two steps ahead of the action.
But simply knowing the plot does not mean we understand. In fact, the opposite may be true, for the parable is intended to lead to an experience of surprise and self-recognition. Until we are surprised, those stories will remain as veiled as rainbows and roses. Familiarity is a hindrance.

Christmas as a Parable

_How silently, how silently_  
_The wondrous gift is given!_

—Phillips Brooks,  
_“O Little Town of Bethlehem”_

Christmas is a parable. Originally it was a story in which everyday occurrences took completely unexpected turns. A common girl gave birth to a savior. A manger became a royal nursery. A star guided those who were faithful and receptive.

People who later heard the story were initiated into the delights of God’s unpredictable activities and wonders. They were surprised by what the story suggested, both about God’s world and about themselves. And their surprise lets them grow and see other happenings just as delightful and unexpected as Christmas itself.

Today Christmas is as familiar as Rudolph or last season’s TV specials. The Church and the business world both tell us to celebrate, but their messages are rehashed and blatant. There can be no surprise, for there is no subtlety. Somehow we have gotten the idea that we know all about Christmas. How sad, for we really know so little.

What are we to do? We would have an easier time saying what not to do. We will not understand Christmas by simply trying harder. This is what Ray did not know, for he tried to force recognition rather than allowing surprise. Actually, trying harder means that we will not understand, for we have not paused to hear what Christmas says about us. We only deny its message about human nature. And in spite of what we would like to believe, our difficulty with surprise has nothing to do with commercialization. We are the problem.

Like the parables, Christmas reflects our inability to see and hear. We stand confronted, as though a mirror were held before us; we are the innkeeper, too busy to recognize the unexpected happening in our backyards. We are the king, too sure of our power to make things happen. We are the shepherds, self-conscious about offering a gift that might be considered unworthy.
The message about God becomes a message about us; Christmas is a judgment on our limited vision. If we do not hear this, we are likely to miss all of Christmas.

The good news is that we do not have to pretend we are different. God is with us, whether we sense the divine presence or not. Being slow, unseeing, and hard of hearing is acceptable. God has come, whether we were ready or not, whether we have heard or not. The real issue is whether we can let ourselves stand in wonder and surprise.

If we understand this, we may be able to look at Christmas, with its subtleties, in a manner that is also subtle. We need a less direct way of seeing, much like other activities that call for right brain reflection rather than analysis. For example, a dream takes on more meaning as it is “befriended” by the dreamer, i.e., as it is allowed a life of its own, then followed. Too direct and analytical a focus can keep the imagination from doing the gentle, playful work that is needed.

Prayer is an activity that calls for a centering of self, followed by a letting go as we anticipate communion. While God’s presence may be found, it can never be forced. “The wind blows where it chooses” (John 3:8), surprising us, even in anticipation. Poetry is similar, as it speaks the soft, veiled language of imagination and metaphor. When T. S. Eliot was asked how to read his poetry, he replied simply, “Between the lines.”

By the same token, Christmas is best seen as we are open and receptive to its simple mystery, letting ourselves settle for occasional glimpses of God’s activity in our midst. If we listen quietly instead of trying so hard, God may surprise us. As the Kingston Trio suggested years ago, “Christmas should be softly spoken...,” and perhaps softly heard as well. In this regard, the commercialization of Christmas can help, for it provides the backdrop against which the real event is sensed more clearly. Perhaps we should be thankful, instead of seeing the secular influence as an evil to be overcome.

No, commercialization is not the enemy. Our modern celebration is but a replication of the first Christmas, with all the opportunity and concealment that were present then. Today’s concealment simply takes a different form—not better or worse, just different. What an irony! But then, that is the nature of parables. If we hear, they turn out entirely different than expected. And so does God.

It may be enough to see, hear, and stand touched by Love Incarnate every now and then, catching glimpses, as it were. Perhaps we will even pass on something of the mystery and wonder that we
find, though probably in ways that will also be softly spoken or
hidden. Can it be any different?

*Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy,
"Do you hear what I hear?"

–Noel Regney and Gloria Shayne,
"Do You Hear What I Hear?"
No season in the Christian Year is more hazy in the mind of the modern Western church than Epiphany. Though older than Christmas, Epiphany pales in comparison with Christmas and Lent, which receive far more attention. The Eastern church celebrated Epiphany as the time when Jesus' birth and baptism revealed him as "the manifestation of God in the world." Our lectionary suggests that in Epiphany we can construct a homiletical bridge between the cradle of Christmas and the cross of Good Friday, one that centers on the church's mission in the world. Although the Sundays after the Epiphany are designated as "ordinary time," they hold the promise of being anything but ordinary.

The Emphasis on Mission in Epiphany

My own experience of Epiphany bears out the theme of mission. During this season, missionaries often make their church appearances, following their return home from foreign service to celebrate the Christmas holidays. After a break for Christmas, missionaries tour churches for support. While this timing is not inspired by the liturgical calendar, it is appropriate. The story of the Magi's visit from...
Matthew's Gospel reinforces the idea of the church in the world, and Jesus' baptism sounds the theme of mission and ministry.

Epiphany can, therefore, focus the church's reflection on its ministry. But we must beware of confining our theological reflection on mission to the Sundays in Epiphany, which are, after all, only several weeks each winter. For Christians, "God's manifestation in the world" is an everyday event, not bound by the parameters of the liturgical calendar. Lectionary preachers will find some built-in dangers in Epiphany as well, especially if they are contending with churches with a limited understanding of mission. The main danger for preachers, however, is the habit of overrelying on the Gospel texts.

Preaching from the Lessons in Epiphany

The Gospel lections for Sundays between Epiphany and Lent, according to the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), Year A, offer preachers several elemental Christian images: salt and light, baptismal water, and the Lamb of God. Because these texts are so foundational, it is easy to let them dominate preaching during Epiphany. Many will argue, and correctly so, that the Epiphany theme of baptism cannot be overemphasized. At this time in the church's life, it can be difficult to explain to confirmands why they should go through a confirmation curriculum rather than simply scheduling a date to walk down the aisle and join the church. Any opportunity to increase a congregation's understanding of baptism is important and should not be passed by. In fact, confirmation is chiefly concerned with helping people understand their baptism.

The Gospel does provide a convenient place for preacher and congregation to meet. But there is always a strong temptation to rest content with the familiar. Unfortunately, this practice does not necessarily lead to greater depth of insight—and it may even reinforce the problem of biblical illiteracy. Congregations who hear sermons based only the Gospels and certain high-profile Hebrew Scriptures will have a truncated canon. As Dick Murray, Professor of Christian Education at Perkins School of Theology, has often said, most Christians don't really want to know the Bible; they want to want to know the Bible. If we as preachers stay in a rut, limiting ourselves only to what we know, we will hardly inspire our congregation to venture into new areas of biblical literature.

Pastors are responsible for teaching the church the whole of scripture, not just a part of it. In Epiphany, the lectionary offers us an option of preaching from the Book of Isaiah. To use these texts
effectively, however, we do not have to abandon the Gospels and steep ourselves in the world of Hebrew prophecy. Instead, the familiar themes of Epiphany can be our theological guide to these more ancient biblical texts. The mission of the church in the world can be illuminated by the prophet’s view of God’s activity in the world. The Isaianic themes of God’s majesty, the ethics of the covenant, divine authority for leadership, and the command to be still and trust God—all these take on special meaning when seen through the lens of the dominant Epiphany Gospel lessons. The New Revised Common Lectionary gives those wanting to explore exciting biblical possibilities a solid motive to do so.

A Paradigm for Sermon Preparation

The word paradigm is a catchword these days. But paradigms, or models, are important because they allow us not only to visualize complex ideas but to discuss them. Educational theorist William H. Schubert has defined paradigm as “a loosely connected set of ideas, values, and rules that governs the conduct of inquiry, the ways in which data are interpreted, and the way the world may be viewed.”

Paradigms are supported by philosophical assumptions that must be carefully assessed. In every paradigm these assumptions, or basic ideas, control the questions asked and the content of the answers. Schubert, for example, defines a curriculum as an educational paradigm. As such, the philosophical assumptions about education determine what kinds of questions are valid and worthwhile and how the inquiry is to proceed in each curriculum.

Paradigms in theology and preaching work in the same way as paradigms. Paradigms for preaching are essential models by which preachers can speak with one another about the preaching task. But these paradigms do more than that; they allow preachers to think about the task of preaching in new and perhaps more creative ways. Professors of homiletics and contemporary students of preaching have offered a number of new models for preaching. For example, Eugene Lowry has described an unusually functional paradigm for preaching that he calls the “Lowry Loop.” This paradigm involves a fivefold approach to investigating narratives in scripture. This approach allows the preacher to use the Bible to address a congregation’s life experience, as opposed to the formal, linear, and propositional form of preaching which is often so dull and ineffective. Other noteworthy paradigms include those by Fred Craddock, Michael Williams and John Holbert, and James Hopewell.
These paradigms must be scrutinized from two directions, however. First, it is important to challenge philosophical assumptions in each paradigm; in other words to ask, What questions are useful to explore the issues of faith and the life committed to faith? Also, How are we to ask such questions and in what context? These questions help us maintain a fruitful conversation involving the nature and practice of preaching. Second, each paradigm must be adaptable to a particular preacher's style and temperament. Preaching paradigms are not intended to convey a step-by-step procedure. They are simply different ways of clarifying the preaching task so that it may be discussed and evaluated by those engaged in it. In fact, some of the models conceive preaching as closer to an art form than anything else. Preaching paradigms, in this sense, are like styles of painting where form, technique, and intuition all converge in a meaningful sequence of brushstrokes.

How would we construct a working paradigm for sermon preparation that is philosophically responsible? Again, turning to recent studies in educational theory, which has been heavily influenced by the writings of philosopher Jurgen Habermas, we can adapt a paradigm that is comprehensive and allows us to ask relevant questions for sermon preparation. The groundwork for this approach is given by home economist Francine Hultgren, who has systematized Habermas's paradigm of “science” (inquiry as a whole) which distinguishes between three different kinds of knowledge. These broad categories differ primarily in terms of “interests served”: the technical, the practical, and the emancipatory. The technical mode is the one that we would call “scientific” in the narrow sense. This kind of rationality relates to the principles of control and certainty. The technical element is the paradigm's most unbiased component, using laws of science and inquiry to develop propositions that can be tested empirically. The technical interest in any inquiry defines knowledge as verifiable and value-free; the process of inquiry is geared to efficiency.

The second category is the practical, hermeneutic element. This kind of knowledge is communicative and perceptive. The interpretive mode of rationality, says Hultgren, “sees human beings as active creators of knowledge... [who are] looking for assumptions and meanings beneath the texture of everyday life.” Practical rationality views phenomena as completely interconnected in all aspects, including history, economics, and politics. Language plays a crucial role in defining and interpreting these interconnections.
The final category in Habermas’s paradigm of knowledge is the emancipatory mode. This category is interested in power—where it resides, how it is used, how it is retained, and so on. This mode of rationality exposes injustice and proposes action to rectify such unjust situations. In Hultgren’s word, emancipatory thinking “examines and explicates value system and concepts of justice upon which inquiry is based.”

Preparing to preach makes use of similar distinctions in collecting, organizing and evaluating of information about the text, the congregation, and the sermon itself. Seen against Habermas’s paradigm of knowledge, the traditional questions used in preaching can be seen more clearly.

The first preaching question, corresponding to the technical mode of inquiry, is a simple exposition of what the text does, in fact, actually say. The technical element has to do with getting as close as possible to the meaning of the text at various stages of its preliterary and literary forms. This is where biblical criticism and preaching are most directly linked. In this early stage of preparation, exegetical work consists of narrowly reading out of the text, discovering the meaning of obscure terms, relating the text to its context in history. To the extent that he or she is able, the technical facet of sermon preparation encompasses textual-critical matters of the text.

The second area of the Habermas paradigm, the practical, is where two questions are best asked of a biblical text under consideration: 1) what did this text mean then, and 2) what does this text mean now? Although understanding what a text actually says can be arduous, determining what a biblical text meant and means is the stuff of adventure. As we have seen, this mode of rationality is not to be understood as objective knowledge. Rather, it is an arena where there is great interaction between the life experiences of the preacher and the congregation. Since this mode of rationality asserts that human beings create their own knowledge and meaning, its application to sermon preparation means that the gate of creativity is opened. In view of the results of the first, technical mode, this creativity will not be freewheeling or irresponsible. If the technical mode musters the academic and scholarly qualities of the preacher, the practical mode unleashes the preacher’s poetic and visionary qualities.

The final and third mode of Habermas’s paradigm is the emancipatory. In this mode, the corresponding homiletical question is, What happens to this text after it is preached? If the technical question is answered by the preacher, and the practical question is
answered both by the preacher and congregation, then this last question is primarily addressed by the congregation, remembering that the preacher is “called out” of the congregation. What do we do with this preached text as we go from the sanctuary back into the “real” world? Can the hearers translate this sermon into faithful action? Can the preacher convey a sense of the Word in the faith community, and will they, in turn, reveal this Word in service to the world? These are questions living in the hearts of all waiting on the Lord.

Preaching Isaiah After the Epiphany

The Four Sundays after Epiphany, Year A, contain lectionary texts from Isaiah. The Baptism of the Lord Sunday and the Second Sunday after Epiphany offer as the first lesson texts from Second Isaiah. The Third Sunday after Epiphany offers a text from First Isaiah, or Isaiah of Jerusalem as he is often called, while the fifth Sunday after Epiphany gives the first lesson from Third Isaiah. Thus within a span of four Sundays, a preacher can preach texts from each major prophetic section of prophecies we call the book of Isaiah. I begin by exploring Second Isaiah, with First and Third Isaian introductions to follow.

Who is Second Isaiah?

In Isaiah, chapters 40-55 are considered to be written or spoken by an unnamed prophet of the Babylonian exile simply denoted as Second Isaiah. The exiles from Judah were primarily upper and middle class “officials and the elite of the land” who were deported to Babylon (2 Kings 24:12-16). In reality, the deportation involved probably no more than ten percent of the population, but those deported comprised Judean society’s key leaders, whose influence greatly outweighed their numbers.

Who is this prophet, Second Isaiah? The question of the prophet’s identity has long plagued biblical scholars. We do not know much about him (or is he even a he?), but from the context of his prophecy we can assume some matters with confidence. Evidence from the prophecy itself points to an exile from Palestine prophesying in Babylon.

First, we know that if Isaiah prophesied during the exilic period, then he spoke during the darkest days Israel had experienced in her long history. The prophet Jeremiah, speaking of the demise of the
both the Northern and Southern kingdoms of Israel, said that “Israel is a hunted sheep driven away by lions. First the king of Assyria devoured it, and now at the end King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon has gnawed its bones” (60:17). Conventional wisdom suggests that a spokesperson for Israel might reflect the air of cynicism and despair no doubt running rampant through a people who had seen every promised dream shattered. Yet, Second Isaiah begins with these surprising words: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (Isa. 40:1-2). James Mullenburg writes that “his is the only prophetic voice which could meet the disaster and the resulting dejection of 586 BCE with a faith undimmed and a vitality undaunted. In many ways he stands closest to the writer of Israel’s most glorious epic, the Yahwist, and he grasps the distances and guises of the epic with fidelity and certitude equaled only by the Apostle Paul.”

A second aspect of Second Isaiah’s identity is that the prophet shows a remarkable familiarity with daily life in Babylon. For instance, Isa. 47:12-13 speaks first-hand of aspects of divination and astrology: “Stand fast in your enchantments and your many sorceries, with which you have labored from your youth; perhaps you may be able to succeed, perhaps you may inspire terror. You are wearied with your many consultations; let those who study the heavens stand up and save you, those who gaze at the stars, and at each new moon predict what shall befall you.” Jeremiah speaks also of the exiles’ experience of prophets, diviners, dreamers, soothsayers, or sorcerers (27:9). Second Isaiah appears thoroughly familiar with the quasi-religious practices of Babylon.

Second Isaiah’s Babylonian exile also reveals an accurate awareness and depiction of Cyrus, a conquering Persian ruler. Cyrus merits regard in the ancient near East as an historic rarity: a benevolent ruler. Some scholars go so far as to say that the Servant of Second Isaiah is modeled on the life of Cyrus, although it would be safer to simply point to the passage in which the prophet recognizes Cyrus as a “messiah” (45:1). At any rate, under Cyrus’ government the exiled Israelites were permitted to return to Palestine, if they chose to do so. Isa. 45:1-5 bears a strong resemblance to the so-called Cyrus Cylinder, the sovereign’s governmental edict written on a clay tablet in 538 BCE (compare 2 Chronicles 22-23).

A third reference to the exiles in Second-Isaiah stems from the similarities between his message and other Hebrew Scriptures which speak to the exilic experience. The much-loved Psalm 137 sings in
lament, "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormenters asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion! How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?'" Much of Second Isaiah's prophecy is an answer to this liturgical question. The servant songs give hope and reassurance to people who have been broken by covenant unfaithfulness. Second Isaiah speaks eloquently of a reversal of faith. The God sending the judgment of exile upon Israel will be the God who redeems them.

The Servant Songs

This reversal of faith takes another twist in Second Isaiah's prophecy. Those who have been sitting in darkness are now called to be the light (Isa. 49:6). Another similarity we see between this idea and other biblical texts of the exile is in the four Servant Songs in Isaiah (Isa. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13—53:12). The Servant Songs proclaim that through the vicarious suffering of the Servant, non-Hebrews (that is the Gentiles or the nations) will be brought to salvation which comes from Yahweh. Many suggestions have been offered as to who exactly is the Servant: Israel, the prophet, a king of the Davidic line, the promised Messiah or even Cyrus. Though there is no consensus, the majority of scholars see Israel as the most likely referent.

Another aspect of interpretive controversy surrounding the Servant Songs is that scholars are deeply divided about the source of the songs. Some believe the songs are from Second Isaiah, but written at a different time relative to the balance of the prophecy, Isaiah 40-55. This is, they say, because there is a perceived contextual discontinuity in the flow of the prophecy. Still others suggest the songs were independently written, inserted into the prophetic corpus during its latest redaction at the most appropriate places. There are many other opinions regarding the interpretive issues around the Servant Songs, but these options summarize the main contours of existing scholarship.

The songs, I suggest, are answers to the psalmist's question: How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Rather than give a theological explanation of the cause of their plight, these servant songs and other passages give people a task. This task is to become a servant people and "a light to the nations" (Isa. 49:6). Many passages could be cited in this regard, but one is particularly illustrative.
Although it is not strictly speaking one of the Servant Songs, Isa. 41:8-10 spells out in detail the charge or call to servant ministry by Yahweh.

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corner, saying to you, “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”; do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.

Those of the faithful remnant of Israel who have experienced the “former things” are called to bear witness to the “new things.” Two passages in Second Isaiah help make this contrast clear. “Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble. Who among them declared this, and who foretold to us the former things?” (Isa. 43:9). “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (Isa. 43:19). The Servant Songs move between the remembered pain of covenant infidelity toward the possibility of a new covenant with Yahweh. It is in these songs that Israel is given the new music of faithfulness as the servant people of Yahweh. In the place of despair is a new promise; in the place of destruction is given a new task.

Epiphany is the season when the Word of God becomes manifest to the world. Therefore, Epiphany is an opportunity for the church to again hear its call to ministry as the new servant people of God. As we read and reflection on the story of salvation for the Hebrew people, we can claim it also as our story. Like the exiles, we too have the task of letting God’s light shine in us so that we might become a light to the nations.

Baptism of the Lord Sunday: Isaiah 42:1-9

In the technical mode we ask simply, What does this text say? The first thing we notice is that this text comes to us in two distinct units. The first unit, Isa. 42:1-4, is one of four Servant Songs in Isaiah (see also Isa. 9:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13–53:12), though “songs” is something of a misnomer, since the songs are actually poems. The second unit begins at verse 5 with the prophetic formula, “Thus says God, the Lord.”

The Servant Song portion of our text portrays Yahweh speaking to an unidentified audience. Through the prophecy of Second-Isaiah, who lived during Israel’s exile in Babylon, Yahweh proclaims that the
Servant will have an important role in the reconstitution of Israel out of its remnant remains. The exiles are either gathering to return to the land of promise or have just recently returned, but in any event they are without hope. Every dream and expectation has been crushed. Yahweh’s Servant, who will have a special role or task, is introduced to Israel. The Servant will bring justice (Hebrew: mishpat), an assertion that is repeated in verses one, three, and four. This justice and the accompanying teaching or torah (v. 4) will not be done in a display of raw power like that which, for instance, brought about the exile. Nor will it be trumpeted loudly for all to hear. Rather justice will be accomplished quietly and steadily: “He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice” (Isa. 42:2-3).

The practical mode asks, What does the text mean? Since verses one through four speak of the Servant, it is easy to see why Christians made a jump in interpretation and considered this text to be a foreshadowing of the Messiah. While the first unit of this pericope speaks of the servant, the second unit speaks solely of Yahweh and the persons to whom this prophecy was directed, which is in all likelihood Israel. Both parts of this text are directed to Israel, despite the fact that the “you” in verse 6 is singular, versus a plural “you” in verse 9. In the history of interpretation, the Servant of the Lord will indeed lead the people of Israel to be “a light to the nations.” We do not need to resolve the scholarly issue of the exact identity of the Servant to comprehend that as the Servant leads and establishes justice, this people will follow suit, bringing forth justice for those who have been deprived of their sight and their freedom.

Any interpretation of this text for preaching will do well to note the two distinct units within the pericope. Fortunately for us, the line of demarcation is clear. The first section, vv. 1-4, show us what God’s Servant-leader will look like as an individual personality. The point is not to isolate a definite person in whom we see these qualities, rather that when we see these qualities we will recognize this Servant-leader. In the face of a hopeless situation, the Servant-leader will rekindle hope in quiet, unassuming ways. These unassuming ways will be wondrously strong, however, for they are the just ways of Yahweh. The second unit, 5-9, calls forth a response from the people. The Servant-leader is called by Yahweh, but so too are the people of Israel. They are to bring forth the justice established by the Servant-leader, but in ways that, “to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (42:7).
The emancipatory mode leads us to ask, *What do we do with this text?* One thing we can do with this text is to celebrate it during worship. This Sunday, when we celebrate the The Baptism of the Lord, we remember Jesus’ baptism by John in the river Jordan. Christian theologians have wondered through the centuries why Jesus would need to be baptized by John, whose baptism was oriented to repentance for sins. John asks it himself: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented” (Matt. 3:14-15). What is the fulfillment of all righteousness? Jesus chooses to identify with people, so that they will identify with him as the Christ. He eats and teaches and is baptized and dies, just as they will also. The Servant-leader of Second-Isaiah is also a servant who identifies with the people. In this sense the servant is one of the people. This is why Jesus submits to John’s baptism.

As my friend and colleague Robert Walker pointed out recently in his church newsletter, “to be Christian is to be fully human. Our humanity is realized in a loving relationship with God and with our fellow humans.” The Servant of Isaiah and the Christ of Matthew’s Gospel each inspire hope by acting out the justice and teachings of Yahweh. This hope separates human beings from all other creatures.

After the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, the exiles lacked hope in God’s promise. Yahweh’s promises to deliver them from their enemies had been broken. The remnant even questioned whether their election by God could ever mean anything again. The Servant of the Lord comes bringing the hope these people needed to begin anew. Perhaps it is not too farfetched to say this pericope is another creation story. A people of Israel is being recreated. This is also the message of baptism for the church – the New Israel of God. Each time a person is baptized, either infant or adult, the people of God are given another chance to nurture the love and justice called forth by the Lord.

This text has plenty of work to do among modern people. Many live in a hopeless land. Whether crushed economically or by illness, bad marital relationships or wayward children, people today need hope to live. Despair, of course, has always been with us. But these days, despair takes on frightening forms that were hardly imaginable a few generations ago. The work of this text and the baptismal story of Jesus is to give hope that Servant-leaders and a Messiah are still possibilities in God’s world. And we will be made worthy of hope to
The extent that we follow these Servant-Leaders' guidance toward love and justice.

The Second Sunday after Epiphany: Isaiah 49:1-7

The technical mode: What does this text say? The text for this Sunday is another of the four Servant Songs in Second-Isaiah. The general consensus of scholarship is that the song ends at first verse 6, with another unit beginning with the prophetic formula, "Thus says the Lord." This form is similar to last week's text from Isaiah 42. A major difference, however, is the emergence of the prophetic speaker, who appears to be the Servant of Yahweh. The Servant as prophet describes Yahweh's call upon his life, saying "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me." Another more specific account of Isaiah's call and commissioning is found in Isaiah 6.

The middle section of today's pericope, consisting of verses 3-6, summarizes Yahweh's word to this Servant. While the Servant fears that his labor is in vain, he accepts the assurance that his cause is indeed Yahweh's. In fact, the Lord has become the prophet's source of strength, in spite of his feelings of failure. The prophet has been called to be "a light to the nations." Verse 7 is a concluding oracle to the nations which follows naturally from the prophet's call to be a servant of Yahweh. This text gives credence to the theology which extends God's call beyond Israel to all the nations, or the Gentiles. The hope which is concentrated in the person of the prophet is also granted to the faithful in the remnant who have sat in darkness, and now must be gathered together as community. The light is the promise of the Lord, the foundation of their hope.

The practical mode: What does this text mean? The Lord has made this prophet's mouth the vehicle for Yahweh's promise to make the prophet and the nation of Israel a light to the Gentiles. Through the prophet and the reclaimed people of Israel, this hope will now extend to all people. Thus the prophet, and perhaps these new people of Israel, will have two primary tasks. Their first task is to restore themselves as the chosen people; those who have been exiled are now to return to the land of promise. Note the prophecy's play on the names "Jacob" and "Israel."

The second task is to universalize the promise of God which had been exclusively Israel's. Since the theme of baptism is one which will be sustained throughout Epiphany, last week's lesson from Acts illustrates this theme of God's grace being extended beyond the
Israelite nation. In Acts 10:34-35 Peter says to the Council in Jerusalem, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

A great reversal takes place in this Servant Song: those who have been captives of other nations will now be the bearers of the good news of salvation to their former tormentors. Jesus' teaching about loving one's enemies and a universal call forgiving persecutors is most appropriate. The call and commissioning of God through this Servant-leader and the remnant people of Israel begins the breaking down of divisions that fuel religious and national hatreds, which the writer of Ephesians will later call “the dividing walls of hostility.”

The emancipatory mode: “What do we do with this text? Isa. 49:1-7 suggests many themes. One is certainly that a person never knows where faith in God will lead him or her. Israel is called not only to forgive those who have captured and destroyed their nation, but also to provide spiritual leadership — to bear the message of salvation — to those who have been their sworn enemies. The church, too, finds challenge in these words. Those individuals and forces who scorn the church’s ideals are to be forgiven and indeed given words of good news. This is a difficult mission and one which can not be carried out without divine grace and purpose. Fred Pratt Green’s hymn, “When the Church of Jesus,” states the matter clearly: “When the church of Jesus shuts its outer door, lest the roar of traffic drown the voice of prayer, may our prayers, Lord, make us ten times more aware that the world we banish is our Christian care.”

Another theme suggested by this text is the question of how to define success in mission. What minister of the gospel (together with a good many of the laity), has never voiced along with Isaiah, “I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” This text reminds us that our labor is in the Lord, yet its final fruit we may or may not see. Though all our ministries are time-bound, there is a timeless quality to the ministry of God in our midst and in the midst of all peoples. As Charles Haddon Spurgeon said in Lessons to My Students, “The lesson of wisdom is, be not dismayed by soul-trouble. Count it no strange thing, but a part of ordinary ministerial experience. . . . Trust in God alone, and lean not on the reed of human help.”
The Third Sunday after Epiphany: Isaiah 9:1-4

The technical mode: What does this text say? This text is chosen for this day in Epiphany because it is quoted in the gospel lesson from Matthew. In fact, the pericope—from Isaiah of Jerusalem, who lived in the eighth century—is only part of a larger unit which ends at verse 7. Scholars describe this text as either a lyrical poem or a hymn of thanksgiving. The darkness and gloom refer to the Northern Kingdom's occupation and destruction by Assyria in 722/1 BCE. Since Zebulun and Naphtali were regions of Galilee, the reference to Galilee is forward looking. Chapters 7 and 8 of Isaiah's prophecy spell out the cost of divided allegiances between political alliances of convenience, perhaps understood by Ahaz as an alliance of survival, and total dependence on the God of Israel. In these verses, the previous chapters' prophecy of destruction is set alongside the glimmer of hope in our pericope, Isa. 9:1-4. Otter Kaiser remarks:

The anger of God is not the end of all he has to do, but a transition to a new act of grace. For the sake of his glorification in the sight of the nations he will not abandon his people of the twelve tribes in the future. He himself will bring a new prosperity and freedom to the land which is oppressed at his command.\textsuperscript{11}

Though the setting is not described as such, some scholars have put forth the idea that this is an oracle which celebrates either a coronation of a righteous monarch or at least the birth of such a person. What is at stake is not the continuation of the Davidic line as such, but a new, ethically transformed office of the monarch. The divine right given to this new monarch contrasts with the simple maintenance of the royal line that the people have come to expect. The people will rejoice, for now the monarch will have been enthroned by Yahweh.

These verses reflect a major biblical theme, one contained in both Testaments. This theme is the reversal of fortune. The often-used phrase in the Gospels is Jesus' saying: "the last shall be first and the first be last." The reversal of fortune can be seen in many Hebrew narratives, for instance, in stories such as Joseph and his brothers, and Job. In Third Isaiah this idea is carried farthest where we read, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners (Isa. 61:1). It is little wonder that Luke quotes this passage announcing the inauguration of Jesus' ministry (Luke 4:16). In Luke's Gospel, the prodigal returns and the
Samaritan is good, these being only a few of Luke’s many pictures of the reversals in the Kingdom of God. In the text from Isaiah, the coming devastation will eventually be reversed by Yahweh, who rules and overrules creation.

The practical mode: What does this text mean? The role of new monarch has messianic overtones. Verses 5-7 bear out the positive consequences for the nation:

For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

The first four verses would be difficult to interpret without reference to the wondrous consequences of the messianic rule. This is a noble hope held out to a people suffering long in despair’s darkness.

The previous context of Isaiah’s prophecy is also brought to bear on this text. In chapter 7, Ahaz has put his trust, not in Yahweh, but in false military alliances which he hopes will protect his nation against conquest. “The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the King of Assyria” (Isa. 7:17). The point of this text is clear: trust in God alone. Yahweh alone is to be trusted over against all other human options which may be immediately useful, but which over time will always fail.

We in the church today deal with the idea expressed in Soren Kierkegaard’s collected essays titled Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing. Prominant in Kierkegaard’s theology is the idea of double-mindedness. He suggests that those persons of faith make up their minds as to which god they will follow. The holy God of Israel and of Christ will allow no other competing gods, reflecting the radical monotheism of the Isaianic prophecies. The issue of false and competing gods is one that tempts every generation of believers.

Emancipatory mode: What do we do with this text? This text proclaims that today, as always, trust in God must be radical. In this part of Isaiah’s prophecy we see several chapters where misplaced trust has speeded doom toward God’s people. Whether this trust is on the part of national leaders or ordinary citizens matters little. To
have faith in the promises of God is to have faith that this trust is sufficient.

The church today is to proclaim this kind of radical trust in the midst of the cacophony of voices which claim to be trustworthy. As Israel was a faithful remnant proclaiming salvation to the nations, so too is the church called to stand firm in its faith that God’s word is both first and last for our world. No other voice is credible compared to the everlasting word of God. This is the task to which all of us in the church are called. Today the church’s voice may be heard as one of loyal opposition, but the church knows too well that the world always follows those voices promising quick solutions to problems going to people’s souls. Only God speaks the word which is both eternal and unchanging.

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany: Isaiah 58:1-12

The technical mode: What does this text say? This lesson is from the so-called Third Isaiah or Trito-Isaiah, the third major section of Isaiah (Isaiah 50-66). R. E. Clements has suggested that modern historical-critical scholarship has mistakenly divided its interpretation of the whole of Isaiah’s prophecy into three distinct units. This attention to the differences between the first, second, and third Isaiahs has deemphasized the essential unity that holds the book together—that is, “concern with the fate of Jerusalem and with the Davidic dynasty.” The distinct parts of the prophecy, Clements believes, have been reworked and shaped by later traditions, since the historical events to which the prophecy often refers are within a time frame of over two hundred years.

To simplify Clements’s argument, the first Isaiah (chapters 1-39) reports the prophetic word of pre-exilic doom to the people and the impending destruction of the nation and its cultic center, Jerusalem. Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) reveals prophecies of hope to people in exile, with promises of deliverance to those who remain faithful to Yahweh. Thus, as this text from Isaiah from the fifth Sunday after the Epiphany will show, one of the prominent features of Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66) is the post-exilic concern for rebuilding and restoring Jerusalem. The context implies that our text comes from the years following the Babylonian captivity, concluding with hope-filled words: “Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” (Isa. 58:12).
I choose to expand the text that is suggested by the 1983 New Common Lectionary and offered as an alternative by the Revised Common Lectionary. This decision seems to me to sustain the text’s overriding theme of fasting as an example of artificial worship.

Verses 1-3 appears to be a prophetic word given to those who have recently returned to Israel. Prior to the exile from Jerusalem, the temple had been a place of beauty and pride. The perspective of the people is captured by a set of rhetorical questions from another of the prophets: “Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? (Hag. 2:3). Isaiah is instructed to shout the prophetic word to the people—”Do not hold back!” (68:1). Perhaps the contemporary generation can learn from the mistakes of their elders.

The identity of the speaker in this text is unclear. Some commentators believe these words are spoken by the worshipers. I believe the text makes better sense when the prophet is understood to be the speaker, denouncing the people’s rebellion. Verse 3b is the people’s rhetorical lament: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

The prophet’s response, verses 3b-5, indicates that the people are indeed fasting, but with little or no enthusiasm or devotion. The spirit of God is not within those who fast. Fasting for purposes other than reverence for Yahweh, is addressed by Jesus when he cautioned, “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward” (Matt. 6:16). During the exile, fasting became an institutional form of worship. In other words, the fast was divorced from the concomitant life of faith it was intended to produce. The prophet points out clearly that the fasting ritual had become vanity because the people did not respond sincerely. In verse 5, Isaiah indicts the people, using a question Yahweh would put to them: “Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?”

Instructed by Yahweh, Zechariah’s word stings in similar fashion, “Say to all the people of the land and the priests: When you fasted and lamented in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted? And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink only for yourselves? (Zech. 7:5-6).

Micah’s prophecy, a lectionary reading for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, offers a similar prophetic word, although he emphasizes
sacrifices and offerings rather than fasting: "With what shall I come before the Lord, and how myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" The answer to Micah's questions are found in verse 8, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

The consequence is the same, however: true worship practices will lead to true piety, which will, in turn, guide proper ethical conduct. The point of the Isaiah 58 prophecy is direct. For fasting to be religiously efficacious, it must be earnestly and faithfully undertaken. Verse 7 lists features indicating the religious fruits of faithful fasting: sharing bread, bringing the homeless into your house, covering the naked, and providing for kin. These are marks of a pious fast and signify faithful worship.

The following verses, 8-10, are Yahweh's conditional promises to those showing a suitably faithful response to the needy. Also the phrase, "your light shall" is used twice, indicating another Isaian theme: being "a light to the nations." The prophet's idea is true worship does not only speak of justice, but reflects justice in the lives of those practicing unfailing ritual worship. Proper worship, thus, makes persons just. This new condition leads to righteous actions toward those who on the margins of society.

The pericope's conclusion is two-fold. First is the promise of continuing providence, "The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places". For those having crossed the desert wastes between Babylon and Jerusalem, this is a splendid promise. Second, appears the promise of restoration in the rebuilding of the "ancient ruins," a major theme of the post-exilic Third Isaiah. For returning exiles, Jerusalem's rejuvenation is a powerful promise for those who have known only devastation and disappointment.

The practical mode: What does this text mean? The prophet and the people are in dialogue here—theological dialogue—though it may be contentious enough to be called a disputation. The prophet poses and anticipates the people's implicit and explicit questions. "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" the people ask. Again the answer is clear. The spirit of faith is not contained in the worshipers' practices. The prophet proclaims Yahweh does see and does notice, but that something is amiss. The people's hearts are not in their worship.
Proper worship is more than mere ritual. Proper worship is authentic ritual joined to people’s “glad and generous hearts.” Amos reminded the people of Israel a similar lack of earnestness several centuries earlier when he said, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps” (Amos 5:21-23). When the ritual joins ethical conduct, then fruits of worship and faith will be manifested. Then and only then, the truly pious will show compassion and concern for the community’s poor and indigent.

Perhaps, it is worth reflecting on the truth that every generation of believers, Jewish or Christian, are seduced by the practice of worship ritual. Each of us knows the ritual of worship can evolve into nothing more than an outward exhibition of sincere worship. Only worship which involves the totality of a person—mind, heart, and will—is worship worthy of the creator God.

Emancipatory mode: What do we do with this text? For contemporary congregations, a response to the “call to discipleship” might be a good indication of the depth of modern worship rituals. As people prepare to leave a Sunday worship, do they hear the call to discipleship as children hearing the last school bell of the day? Do worshipers sing with glee, “free at last?” Or, do worshipers hear in the call to discipleship opportunities to be the servant church in the midst of a broken world? A question worthy of consideration might be: “what might our light rising out of darkness” (v. 10) look like today? How would modern Christians “raise up the foundations of many generations?” (v. 12).

What people bring to worship and what they take from worship mark whether or not the worship ritual prepares people to carry the divine presence with them into the world. As a result of our worship ritual, is the commitment to discipleship present—to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit the prisoners? Is what occurs in our churches on Sunday morning separated from the rest of the week?

The revitalization of the church is a spiritual matter. Currently there blows a new spirit among many churches. Notions of suffering and service for the world are beginning to take root. These churches demonstrate the direct correspondance between acts of worship and the willingness of believers to devote themselves to the world as the people of God. The pious, in the best sense of the word, understand worship as a call from God to be truly human and to show

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compassion toward those who need it desperately. Epiphany most assuredly is a time of call and response, making God’s presence manifest in the world.

The Gospel text for this Sunday, Matt. 5:13-14, “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” In the Isaiah text there are explicit relationships between the ways people worship and the kind of faithfulness they display toward other people. When Jesus tells the crowds following him that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, he tells them they are witnesses to the truth of God he represents.

In Epiphany the symbol of light is dominant. Could it be that as people become light through true worship of the true God, they also draw others to the word? Since the word is a light to people’s paths (Ps. 119:105), is not our deportment in this life of faith a means to teach others about the truth of the gospel? Our worship itself will attract others to the light of faith in an otherwise darkened world. To those persons addressed by Third Isaiah, the lines of demarcation between light and dark are stark indeed. “If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday” (Isa. 58:10). Epiphany people come to God on God’s terms, not their own.

A Final Benediction

My use of Habermas’s philosophy to construct a paradigm is only a pattern in progress. Certainly no one would claim that the texts from Isaiah offered in this essay have been given their due, just as no candid preacher would claim her or his sermon had given any text its due in definitive preaching. The point is to keep the conversation alive and on several fronts.

One aspect of this conversation about preaching remains the need for Christian congregations to hear more texts from the Hebrew Bible. Another aspect of the conversation is making full use of the Christian liturgical calendar to enliven and interpret these texts from Hebrew scripture. This is especially true for Epiphany and the following Sundays.

The three modes I have suggested in the paradigm are primarily for sermon preparation. What I am not suggesting is that these three modes be carried into the pulpit as a homiletical blueprint. This paradigm is not another variation of the old “three points and a
poem" ploy. At the same time, I am suggesting that if these three modes—the technical, practical, and emancipatory—are not addressed prior to the preaching event, then we will have failed in attempts making the text powerfully available to the congregation. Obviously, other homiletical paradigms will address these modes, too, though with a different set of descriptive terms.

Last, the question is legitimately raised, why Habermas? My answer comes from our own religious tradition. From the time the Hebrews plundered the Egyptians (Exod. 12:35-36) and the Wesleys borrowed “tavern tunes” with which to sing religious hymns, Christians have used secular vehicles to carry the freight of faith. Using Habermas’ philosophic system, I propose, is simply another example of faith larceny in divine service.

Notes

7. Schubert, Curriculum, 180.
9. The United Methodist Hymnal, 692. This hymn was brought to my attention by The Rev. Bobby Baggett, Pastor, First United Methodist Church, Gatesville, TX.


For Further Reading


As recently as the mid-1980s, there were virtually no books or other resources addressing issues of violence against women and children from a religious perspective. That circumstance has changed so dramatically that it is now necessary for interested clergy and laity to wade through copious titles in search of useful theoretical and practical resources.

Listed below, with brief descriptions, are some of the best of the new crop of books, videos, and resource packets. They are divided into the four categories in which clergy are most likely to be asked for assistance. Two of these categories, family violence/battering and child sexual abuse, have been recognized by churches as critical issues for several years, yet few church libraries or pastors' studies contain related volumes. The other two, adult survivors of child sexual abuse and clergy sexual misconduct, are even newer issues for most churches and leaders, and related resources are less likely to be at hand when needed.

It would be wise for clergy to have one or two items from each category in both personal and church libraries. Most are widely available and can be obtained from, or through, most religious bookstores.

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Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse


Domestic Violence/battering

women. Challenges a theology of suffering and calls the church to a pastoral and prophetic response. Available from Fortress Church Supply, 1-800-638-3522.


Fortune, Marie M. *Violence in the Family: A Workshop Curriculum for Clergy and Other Helpers.* Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991. For use by any group wanting to provide continuing education for clergy and assisting secular helpers in better responding to religious questions. Extensive appendix and resource sections offer useful materials which can be duplicated. Worship materials included.


**Child Sexual Abuse**

Byerly, Carolyn. *The Mother's Book: How to Survive the Incest of Your Child.* Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1985 (available for order through CPSDV, 1914 North 34th St., Suite 105, Seattle, WA 98103). A resource for mothers, who are often blamed or forgotten when incest is disclosed. Includes a partial listing of rape crisis services by state.


**Clergy Sexual Misconduct**

*Clergy Misconduct: Sexual Abuse in the Ministerial Relationship,* a training packet from the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence. Essential prevention and intervention training for lay and clergy leaders. The Center offers a training “Workshop for Trainers” to prepare for use of the curriculum, or curriculum may be purchased separately. Includes: trainer's manual; workshop participant manual; “Not in My Church” video with study guide; “Once You Cross the Line,” a 50-minute training video; and 25 copies of an awareness brochure. For more information, write or call CPSDV, 1014 North 34th St., Suite 105, Seattle, WA 98103. (206) 634-1903.


*The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* is a powerful examination of the nature of power, the dynamics of sexual violence, and the social, political, and theological factors that create abuse. Poling has created a resource for readers that dares to relate the perpetrator and the survivor, the reality of abuse and the theology of a God that can encompass that abuse.

Based on the assumption that power, not sexuality, is at the root of sexual violence, Poling begins his book with an analysis of power and the dynamics of power in relationships. He asserts that “power in its ideal form is virtually synonymous with life itself. To live is to desire power to relate to others” (p. 24). But when human beings experience fear and arrogance and are in positions of dominance over others they may choose to use that power in destructive ways. Poling includes patriarchy, racism, social injustice, as well as sexual violence, as examples of these power imbalances.

In the next section of the book, the reader hears the voices of those involved in the dynamics of sexual violence. First the reader hears the story of Karen, a survivor of sexual violence. In the following chapter, the reader hears the stories of recovering perpetrators. Poling very skillfully helps the audience hear the pain of both the survivor and the perpetrator, while maintaining the responsibility and accountability for sexual violence with the perpetrator. In a following chapter, Poling presents a classic case from the history of psychotherapy. The discussion of this case sheds light on the lifelong effects of child abuse.

The following chapters of the book examine in both psychological and theological terms the searches for self, community, and God. In each of these discussions, Poling presents the dynamics of sexual violence and abuse of power and how each of these venues can be redeemed by hope and healing. The chapter on self presents the aspects of the survivor and the perpetrator. Poling explains the dynamics of the development of self in psychological terms and then presents the aspects of the healing of self that a wounded person must face in order to reach wholeness. Poling says, “A core issue in healing from sexual abuse is the ability to live in the midst of ambiguity. Ambiguity is a necessary component in forming a self that can flourish during the healing process. The ability to sustain the self in the midst of contradictions is crucial in order to sustain the higher values” (pp. 110-111).
The chapters on community and on the search for God continue this theme of the ability to live in ambiguity. Poling describes a loving community, able to minister to both the survivor and the perpetrator. This loving community is “inclusive” and “just.” Loving communities are able to withstand the pressure of ambiguity which is embodied in the wounded survivor and the perpetrator in need of both compassion and accountability.

The search for God in our tradition brings us stories of a God who seems ambiguous—exhibiting the qualities of both a loving and a punishing parent. Poling develops the concept of an “ambivalent God” which is explored in the scriptures 2 Samuel 13 (the rape of Tamar) and Genesis 12-22 (the story of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac). Poling probes what would be a “revised image of God” and asks the questions “Where is the love of God?” and “Where is the power of God?” He concludes that there is a God which can be worshipped by people of all experiences: “I do not need a perfect God to rescue me from the mess of this concrete life. Rather I need a God whose power is sufficient to sustain resilient hope for justice in the midst of ambiguity” (p. 182).

The final chapter in the book, “Ministry Practice and Practical Theology,” presents learnings from Poling’s research and experience implied for ministry with victims and perpetrators of sexual violence. In addition, he redefines his definition of practical theology (the methodology for his book) in light of his learnings.

Early in the book, Poling confesses his limitations in writing the book. In the subsection, “The Question of My Accountability,” Poling acknowledges the limitations of his white, male, heterosexual, Southern, upper-middle class background. He then outlines the ways that he maintains accountability within the process of writing the book. He reports his steps to receive criticism and feedback from persons representing a diversity of gender, culture, race, and class. This intentionality is one of the strengths of the book as it attempts to look at the social/cultural ways that sexual violence is nurtured and created. Poling takes care to present feminist and womanist critiques in various places in the book, thus broadening the reader’s understanding of the issues which add to the problem of sexual violence.

Poling unapologetically confronts the institutions of church and society for their role in the perpetuation of sexual abuse. “Abuse does not occur in a vacuum. The testimony of our witnesses has disclosed how institutions and ideologies explicitly and implicitly sanction abuse of power” (p. 121). Poling’s ability to hear the individual voices
of survivors as well as to step back to see the bigger pictures of community and theology— their potential and their blind spots—is a gift to the reader. His is not one perspective. It is a wholistic approach to truly hearing the pain, standing with the broken, and challenging the blocks to the ones who need the ministry of the church.

Poling’s message is strong and challenging. And yet, it is not overwhelming. Poling does not leave the reader in desperation, despite the difficult content of the topic. Throughout the book, he helps the reader listen for the sounds of hope. His discussions move the reader through the pain of ambiguity to the possibilities for wholeness. Poling often brings the reader back to the question “Where is the hope?” Referring to the story of Karen, a survivor of sexual abuse, Poling says, “If hope is possible in her life of terror, then it is possible for others who seek new life” (p. 48).

In the conclusion of this important book, Poling leaves the reader with the ultimate hope in a world besieged with evil and unilateral power:

Whatever is evil is as much a part of God as whatever is good. Yet in the midst of this radical ambiguity there is resilient hope, a restlessness toward beauty that cannot be suppressed. This is why the witness of slaves, holocaust survivors, and victims of child abuse is so important. They know the truth about good and evil. They know there is a hope at the center of reality that cannot be destroyed by evil (p. 191).

May it be so.

Beth A. Richardson
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