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Evangelism as an Ecumenical Task

Walter Harrelson
The Qumran Community's Life, Faith, and Hopes

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Biblical Resources for the Easter Season
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Quarterly Review (ISSN 0270-9287) provides continuing education resources for scholars, Christian educators, and lay and professional ministers in The United Methodist Church and other churches. QR intends to be a forum in which theological issues of significance to Christian ministry can be raised and debated.

Editorial Offices: 1001 19th Avenue, South, Box 871, Nashville, TN 37202. Manuscripts should be in English and typed double-spaced, including notes.

QR is published four times a year, in March, June, September, and December, by the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry and The United Methodist Publishing House. Second-class postage paid at Nashville, Tennessee.

Subscription rate: $16 for one year; $28 for two years; and $36 for three years. All subscription orders, single-copy orders, and change-of-address information must be sent in writing to the Quarterly Review Business Manager, Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202. Orders for single copies must be accompanied with prepayment of $5.00.

Postmaster: Address changes should be sent to The United Methodist Publishing House, Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202.

QR is printed on acid-free paper.

Lections are taken from Common Lectionary: The Lections Proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1983).

Scripture quotations unless otherwise noted are from the New Revised Standard Version Common Bible, copyrighted © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the US, and are used by permission.

Quarterly Review:
Spring, 1994

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Introduction

A few years ago, when my husband and I had the opportunity to visit England, a friend of mine suggested a stop at Tintern Abbey, a place she remembered fondly from her own travels. We did manage to find it, and I now have a photograph of the place that I cherish. It is a view of one wall of the ruined cathedral. In the wall are two large holes where there were once stained glass windows; in one the tracery still exists. What remains of Tintern, its church and its monastery, is the bare outline of the religious life that once flourished there. If it is haunted, then the ghosts sing plainsong.

The ruins of Tintern remind me of another ruin, this one in the desert in Israel. What remains of Qumran is the outline of rooms, some obviously used to hold a vast quantity of water with stairs descending into it. Mikvah baths in the desert! And the caves off in the distance, some perhaps still hiding a treasure trove of ancient texts. There was life there once. I imagine sombre, white-clad figures who left the noise and commerce of the city behind and who prayed and studied—and immersed themselves daily in these quiet pools to purify themselves. If their ruins speak for them, then the long dead inhabitants of this place were a daring group of people.

The core essays in this issue are all associated with alternative religious communities, both in history and today. The desert spirituality we talk about today has its ancient roots in groups such as the Essenes, who inherited their views from the Israelites before them. Walter Harrelson, who has translated and analyzed the Qumran scrolls for years, has written a fine account of the beliefs and values of these desert dwellers so as to make these ruins speak more clearly to us.

Next we move to an alternative religious community with even closer spiritual ties: the early Christian groups. I say groups because the word church has architectural overtones. Bob Jewett’s point is
precisely that we need to scale back our ideas of the grandeur of house churches in order to catch a glimpse of the earliest followers of Jesus Christ. As members of tenement churches, they were poor and in need of each other's direct support. His essay on the phrase, "Those who do not work shall not eat" offers us new insight into an expression that has frequently been used as an excuse to keep outsiders out rather than as a principle of fairness that serves to keep insiders in.

Finally we have a moving, first-person account of a sojourn in an alternate community. Doug Wingeier has studied leadership patterns in various cultures for some time (see his article on leadership patterns in Korea in the Summer 1990 issue), and this is how he shapes his insights into the Base Christian communities. But his involvement with these groups, and individuals within them, goes far deeper than scholarly observation. Wingeier's article completes our movement from the historically remote to the contemporary. It also helps pose the question: In the end, after all the differences between alternative groups and ourselves are weighed, are there not some challenging similarities between us? Is it possible for one to have significant contact with alternative religious community and not find oneself urged toward a greater clarity of purpose or even transformed somehow?

These core articles are surrounded by a host of fine essays. Ruediger Minor, the United Methodist bishop of the newly created Eurasia area (the former Soviet Union), shares his theological reflections on evangelism in the opening piece. The former rector of the United Methodist Theological Seminary in East Germany, his thoughts have been shaped by the tumult of war and state oppression in his own country and the dedication of many persons there to keep the gospel alive. In this essay, we have an indication of the spiritual and intellectual leadership in this new episcopal area. It is a time of great hope for all Christians in Russia.

Jim Clemons is often asked how he got interested in the topic of suicide, on which he has written and lectured extensively. I asked him myself, not wanting to hear of a family tragedy but preparing myself to do so in order to learn about his motivation. What he said surprised me. Class members at Wesley Seminary, where he teaches, asked him to make a focused presentation on some biblical topic of pastoral interest. He chose the topic of suicide and found the resources on this topic scanty. So he decided to contribute some himself. Fifteen years after that original request, Clemons has written two books, edited
another, and given endless lectures and presentations about suicide across the country.

I would also like to commend to you the two remaining essays, one by Wallace Gray and the other by Clifton Black. Professor Gray’s essay tells of cultural exchange in a Christian spirit that links together the island of Japan with landlocked Kansas.

And finally, Black’s lectionary study takes us back to the beginning again, for in the Easter words of our Shepherd’s voice, we all have the chance to respond to original mystery. Whether that call leads us into the desert or the country or the city, in Christ we are all faithful servants.

Sharon Hels
This theme is not a new one, but it has quite an urgency today. Everybody is speaking about evangelism nowadays, the Roman Pope and the Primates of the Orthodox Churches as well as Protestant leaders and more or less popular televangelists. It should be assumed, however, that in using the same word they do not necessarily mean the same thing.

John Paul II speaks of a "re-evangelization" of Europe, suggesting that there is a need to reclaim this continent for Christianity. There is an underlying concept of Christianity, as of nations, in countries that were once Christian but have abandoned the Christian faith. Evangelism would in this understanding be a way that these nations would reclaim the faith of their parents, but also a way that the Christian church would reclaim these nations. Such an understanding has the scent of conquering; it is a crusade conception. The question has been raised whether the real issue is not "recatholicizing," a new phase of counterreformation. I would also challenge the underlying concept of faith. Faith is always original. It cannot be bought secondhand from our forefathers; "God has no grandchildren." Evangelism is much more radical than
the rebuilding of the medieval *Corpus Christianum*, the Christian World with a church-led unified concept of human life.

The Pope at least acknowledges that the concept of a Christian world has somehow deteriorated. The Primates of the Orthodox churches, on the other hand, believe in an unbroken Christian character of the Orthodox countries which needs revitalization but whose existence and value should not be questioned. They do not hesitate to speak of the Eastern European countries as "Orthodox countries" where mission is not required. Their definition of *mission* is very narrow and traditional: to take the Christian message to non-Christian countries with a pagan population. Any missionary work in Christian, or even "Orthodox countries," they defame as "proselytism." Orthodox leaders speak of an "Orthodox population" that includes even the nonbaptized parts of the nation. Although there is a need to "evangelize" them, it is clear from the very beginning that this can happen only by giving them Orthodox teaching, and the result is determined by this process.

**Mission in Methodism**

I would like to contrast these two positions with the Methodist concept of "mission-evangelism." Methodism has understood from its very beginning that evangelism is mission in the full sense of the word. Although a great admirer of his native Anglican church, John Wesley never saw faith as a component of a national or cultural tradition. He was openly critical of the concept of a Christian nation and the subjugation of the faith by the state that was traditional from the time of the late Roman empire. Personal faith, according to him, is "experimental," a genuine experience made by human beings and not made by tuning into a national or cultural tradition, which Wesley called "formal religion." It is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ that happens through the proclamation of the gospel according to Holy Scripture.

Let me therefore attempt a working definition of evangelism. It is important to see the biblical roots of the word and the matter. Evangelism is the proclamation of good news. Zion is called a "herald of good tidings" (Isa. 40:9) who proclaims hope to an exiled people. God is at work; he cares for his people. God's action determines what could be called the "job description" of the prophet, which is "to bring good news to the oppressed" (Isa. 61:1). This is further explained as,
“to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.” God’s help is concrete. The New Testament continues in the same direction. In the words of Jesus, evangelism becomes a central expression of his work. John the Baptist in his tribulations in prison sends messengers to Jesus asking, “Are you he who is to come?” And Jesus answers, “The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt. 11:5). The message and its content become identical. Jesus’ coming is the good news. He not only brings a message, he is the very message of a God who turns to humankind. The word *euangelion*, good news, becomes the description of his life story. The early Christianity “evangelizes the *euangelion*, the gospel.” This is more than tautological speech. The apostles and evangelists do not bring mere information, as correct and objective as possible. The people who listen to them are not only an audience. The proclamation itself becomes the glad event where again and again good things happen. People become involved; they understand that this news affects them directly. Evangelism is intended to change persons.

**A Question of Unity**

Let me in a similar way look to the Bible for a working definition of unity and variety. There are basically two passages of scripture that are continually thought provoking: “Make[e] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph. 4:3-7). Traditionally we evade the challenge of this text. We declare it either a description of an original unity of the church that is long gone or the final, eschatological goal of the churches. We should not overlook the fact that St. Paul is speaking in the present tense. There is a basic unity that goes before all diversity—not only in terms of time but as its very foundation. To express this unity is a continuous challenge for all parts of the church and its witness.

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities,
but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor. 12:4-7). These are the classical texts about unity in variety. They do not contradict each other. Even more, it is biblical to expect that variety will lead to unity and not to separation. But is this the reality that we are experiencing? Many of us feel that we are again in a time when denominational and confessional interests are replacing the quest for unity.

What is the unity of which we speak? It is a unity in plurality. It is not pluralism. Pluralism is the mere sanction of division and therefore the opposite of unity. Unity in plurality means that this unity is "pluriform." It has many different expressions, and those are kept together by a common center. The opposite of a pluriform unity would be uniformity. Uniformity has a longstanding tradition in the church. It has been enforced over the centuries. And from its very beginning this uniformity has been used to keep together disparate societies. Constantine the Great, instrumentalizing the church to keep the weakening Roman Empire together, introduced a state policy that enforced church unity to serve the cause of the state. This led to the regulations of the later emperors that made membership in the church (usually the catholic) compulsory for all citizens. Not to belong to the catholic, the general church, or even to lead other people out of its community, was no longer a question of schism or heresy, division in organization or teaching. It was a crime that would be punishable by the authorities. That the time of such thinking is not yet over can be seen by some recent events in Eastern Europe, where the attempt has been made to continue ideological uniformity by using the traditional forms of national religious life.7

Unity and Ecumenism

People who support such an idea have an interesting view of the religious situation and the ecumenical task. Let us take Russia as an example: Since church unity is assumed in the existence of the Russian Orthodox Church, the argument sometimes used is: "Why break up the unity only to build it up again later?" Religious plurality is seen as a typically Western element and the unbroken unity of the Orthodox church, interrupted only by the Communist regime, is emphasized. Beside the fact that such an argument presents a rather
romanticized view of Russian church history, it should be noted that there is variety, even pluralism gaining ground in Russia today, as it is on its way to a modern democratic society. The Christian identity is pluriform, and people have and use choice in matters of belief. But at the same time we must ask whether those varieties reveal or darken the unity of Christianity. Could the different “variations” of Christianity in Russia practice mutual acceptance and cooperation that would enhance the effectiveness of evangelization and be a witness for the unity of Christ’s church?

It is, however, possible to ask whether such acceptance and cooperation, such unity in evangelism would be required at all. There are basically two opposite theses about the relationship between evangelism and the unity of the church:

1) Unity is a prerequisite for mission and evangelism.
2) There is a fruitful tension between evangelism and unity.

1) The first position has been the basis for the international movement in the missionary work that led to the foundation of the modern ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches. The divisions in the Christian church (most obvious in the field of mission where churches were competing) were felt to be a scandal for the world and a sin of the church. It was mainly the representatives of the mission churches who felt that the division of the church was counterproductive for the Christian mission in their nations. Positively speaking, this meant that churches needed to seek unity to be better equipped for mission. Mission and unity were seen as two sides of the same matter. It should, however, be mentioned that even from within the ecumenical movement this position was criticized with the provocative thesis that “Ecumenism . . . is [a] hindrance” for evangelism, since it “distracts” churches from the missionary task and leads to the “delusion that unity guarantees evangelism.” The churches “stay together to do nothing. Evangelism is sacrificed on the altar of ecumenism.” There is indeed the danger of an ecumenical complacency that forgets about the major task of the church, not to serve itself but the world by witnessing that the world may believe.

2) That ecumenism is a hindrance for evangelism would be affirmed (yet not always openly) by probably most of the traditional evangelists. Many of them believe in the positive role of competition (which makes them susceptible to market thinking and strategies). More substantial, their hearts are burning, and so they move out to the
wide open fields, open to forward movement. It is not surprising that such thinking was developed in the U.S., with its special social and religious history. The U.S. was indeed a wide-open field for an evangelistic mission, and the Methodist circuit rider is probably one of its most genuine expressions. Evangelism can be understood as forward movement. But what happens if it hits immovable things or collides with another forward movement?

The Methodist movement outside this country has a lot of experiences of the first kind, of conflicts with immovable forms and structures of the church. Early Methodism in England quite soon collided with an Anglican Church that was not ready for a spiritual renewal and therefore struck to its rules, rituals, and structures and turned them against the Methodist movement. This paradigm was repeated again and again in Europe in the beginnings of Methodism there in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Methodism, though sometimes and at some places first welcomed as a help to intensify traditional church life, was rebuked as enthusiasm and curbed in its activities by the established church. To preserve unity in such cases would have meant to retract from evangelism. Therefore, those Methodists chose separation (sometimes too easily).

It is very interesting to take a look at John Wesley's writings about this matter. They reflect both the high appreciation of the unity of the church and the tension between a vivid proclamation of the gospel and the petrified structures and forms of church life. Wesley deals with this at length in his sermons "Of the Church" and "On Schism." He very much stresses the importance of unity and the evil of separation. He declares schism as "evil in itself, and productive of evil consequences." It does not only lower the standards of Christian living but it is also a scandal before the world. This corresponds with a spiritual concept of unity: "The true members of the Church of Christ 'endeavour,' with all possible diligence, with all care and pains, with unwearied patience (and all will be little enough), to 'keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace;' to preserve inviolate the same spirit of lowness and meekness, of longsuffering, mutual forbearance, and love; and all these cemented and knit together by that sacred tie,—the peace of God filling their heart." But there is one single reason that would not only allow but even mandate separation from a church body: if it would be impossible to preach the gospel unrestricted. Wesley is quite explicit here: "I will make the case of my own: I am now, and have been from my youth, a member and a
Minister of the Church of England: And I have no desire nor design to separate from it, till my soul separates from my body. Yet if I was not permitted to remain therein without omitting what God requires me to do, it would then become meet and right, and my bounden duty, to separate from it without delay. To be more particular: I know God has committed to me a dispensation of the gospel; yea, and my own salvation depends upon preaching it: ‘Woe is me if I preach not the gospel.’ If then I could not remain in the Church without omitting this, without desisting from preaching the gospel I should be under a necessity of separating from it, or losing my own soul. The same Wesley who strongly speaks against those who “leave a Christian society with as much unconcern as they go out of one room into another” speaks here of the duty to separate from a church. This is not a contradiction but a deep conflict, personal as well as theological. It becomes obvious if we look at the language John Wesley is using here. It is the same language that he uses in the mission statement in his letter to James Hervey, where he declares the world as his parish. Finally mission gets the precedence over unity. But it is only mission that would be valued so high; common criticism provides no sufficient reason to leave. Wesley could be very critical of the Church of England, its priests and prelates. But the love for “what God has wrought” was much higher. So he is not judging his church.

The Value of Mutual Acceptance

It is one of the achievements of the modern ecumenical movement that churches have learned not to judge each other. This was not only a process of common learning; for us from the East it was also a process of common suffering. The situation brought us close together. In this common suffering Christians found a communion that went beyond the usual boundaries of their faith: Christians and Communists in the concentration camps of Nazi-Germany, Christians and representatives of other religions in the forced labor camps in China. How deep are such feelings? Could we lose again what we once learned? Present experience tells us that the judging is not at all over. Today in Russia fundamentalist Protestants are coming in an attitude that treats the Russian Orthodox Church as pagan. They behave as if they were the first ones to name the name of Christ. On the other hand Russian Orthodox priests spread tracts (“Beware of Protestants!”) that
tell incredible stories and declare that all Protestants are heretics. Is unity in Russia today only a dream that could hinder effective evangelism?

The following text is a Russian Orthodox tract as well, a pastoral letter of an archbishop to his people. “The word of God gives manifold reason for a mutual acceptance as Christians of those who might be of different opinions in particular questions of beliefs, but are on common ground in the essential parts... If a human being... is living and speaking under the influence of the Holy Spirit... if God is in him and he abides in God, then, indeed, to deny that such a person is belonging to the saved ones, belonging to the Church, the body of Christ, is a total disrespect of the authority of the Word of God. It is replaced by denominational self-aggrandizement, by that arrogance that has, as any arrogance has, nothing in common with the love of Christ.”18

In this very warm document the spiritual basis for mutual acceptance is set forth. This is still the opinion of a minority in Russia, but it is the way to learn to accept each other and to appreciate each other in our different identities. To accept each other in this spirit would include that we challenge each other to become what we are really. It is not an “I’m okay, you’re okay” attitude. Ecumenical complacency would mute the witness. For Methodism such acceptance would include that we would also challenge ourselves to become what we ought to be: “A company of men and women having the form and seeing the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.”19 This was the spirit of the Methodists when they set out “to reform the nation, and especially the church, and to spread scriptural holiness throughout these lands.”20 In this spirit we have learned to accept others, and we have learned to cooperate. We are doing this already in the fields of humanitarian assistance, of speaking up for human rights.

Why is it so difficult to do the same at the place where the very heart of our faith is, in sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ? Let me try an answer: This touches our identity as Christians, and there is the fear that we could lose or be forced to give up some of this in the encounter with an identity that is different from ours. Therefore, we fall back to the old pattern of self-defense. The churches’ lack of ability to witness together shows a lack of creative power of our faith to find new pattern for its expression, to be open for a new encounter with Jesus Christ as he is speaking to us through the witness of sisters
Discerning the Work of Christ

In looking for a way out of this situation let me ask the question What does an evangelist bring to the people? Is he bringing God, or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit? He is a witness who brings a witness. He does nothing but tell the good news. And sooner or later he will become aware that Jesus was already there before he arrived. He is always prior to us; we cannot pass him. Where do we find him? We see the great things that he has done and is doing with others. Jesus' work did not start only recently; the faith has a history. There is some truth when people insist that we cannot deal with countries that have a longstanding Christian tradition in the same way as with the pagan world. Such tradition is not a value that stands for itself, but it shows the vestiges of Christ's work there. Those vestiges might not be very clear. It is like walking on the beach, where the waves are washing over the footprints. After some time they might be barely recognizable, but they are still there.

Let's again look upon Russia as an example. In this century there have been a lot of waves over Europe and particularly over Russia which have distorted Christ's vestiges. They were distorted through a tradition in the church that for a long time has not been understood by the people, through persecution and the deformation forced upon the church. Such distortion has created a vulnerability. Do we come to heal it or to use it for our own purposes? We need to examine our intentions about that and to listen carefully to our partners.

What are the vestiges of Christ's work in Russia? Let me try to identify some of them. The spirituality of the ancient Greek church that was of great influence on John Wesley. His concept of holiness and Christian perfection was shaped after the model of the ancient Eastern fathers. In discovering such vestiges we could discover common roots. The power of the candle is another of those vestiges. There is a spiritual beauty in an Eastern night service with the congregation standing for hours, following the liturgy, hearing the choir, responding "Christ is risen, He is risen indeed!"—and holding
candles. Their light is a sign of caring for each other. The candle is a gentle means to show gentleness. And it is no wonder that it became the symbol of the peaceful and gentle revolution in Eastern Europe in 1989. The icons as windows to eternity are likewise such vestiges. They help to make the invisible understandable and vivid. When the Bible calls Christ the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), the Greek text uses the word icon. It is God who made himself visible in Christ, and the icons are testifying to this.

We all know that these symbols can be abused. As Protestants we are always aware of the danger that spirituality can be perverted into a set of superstitious behaviors. Lighting a candle can be a substitute for genuine prayer. The icons can become objects of idolatrous worship. However, it would be cheap to criticize the other side for their weaknesses (it would need no great innovative gifts for them to do the same with us). Why would we not try to find our sisters and brothers at those signs of Jesus’ work and presence among them?

I would claim that Methodism has a historic sense for this. From its very beginnings it did not reject rites and forms of worship (this used to be the classical anti-ritualistic Protestant attitude, especially in the Reformed tradition and in Anglo-Saxon Protestantism). Methodism used traditional forms of worship, and it has filled them with a new meaning, a meaning for mission.21 It has developed its own rites and worship forms by rediscovering old traditions (the Watch Night from the ancient vigil, the Love Feast from the agape) and again turning them into means of mission.

Could this be the way to find new paradigms for a united evangelistic thrust together with people from the Orthodox tradition that are open for a creative new approach? I cannot yet offer those new paradigms; I am looking for partners who would seek them with me. The way would be that we help each other to become truly what we are according to God’s will. That means for the United Methodist Church, among other things, to continue to support the Russian Orthodox Church spiritually and materially in its enormous task to rebuild that church. This is an important way to “advance the kingdom of God” in Russia. (We need to say this time and again to our more conservative evangelical friends.) And it means that we are and become even more what God has called us to be, to contribute what God has bestowed upon us. In the two years that I had the privilege to work with the Methodists in Russia I would highlight the Bible’s role
in their work and their personal touch and commitment and honesty of mind in dealing with the Bible.\(^2\)

If we begin to map the vestiges of Christ's work together, we will truly find his footprints on the land before us and the direction for a way together. It is my hope that the result may be a renewed indigenous church in Russia, with a variety of ministries and forms of organization and a common thrust to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all humankind.

Notes

1. Evangelism was one of the major issues that led to the formation of the modern ecumenical movement, and it was widely discussed there. A first review and assessment of this discussion was written in the 1950s by Hans Jochen Margull entitled “Thologie der missionarischen Verkündigung.” (An English version of this work appeared in 1962: Hope in Action: The Church's Task in the World. Translated by Eugene Peters. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press).


3. Cf. their statement about the European situation, issued at the meeting in Phanoerou (near Istanbul) in March 1992.

4. Section on “mission” in the Phanoerou statement.

5. It is interesting in this view to read Wesley's remarks about Constantine, for example, "the grand blow . . . was struck in the fourth century by Constantine the Great, when he called himself a Christian" (Works VI, p. 261/)

6. I largely follow the definition that was given by my German episcopal colleague, Walter Kläber, in his book Ruf und Antwort (Proclamation and answer) pp. 25–29.

7. The recent events around the law on freedom of consciousness and religious belief in Russia are an obvious example. There is no question that some of the self-proclaimed helpers who are coming to Russia, including Eastern cultists and Western "missionaries," have acted like intruders in the country and have become a public nuisance. This is at the same time a very welcome chance for the Russian Orthodox Church to claim the whole population as belonging to it. The most interesting part is the support of conservative (still) communist circles for this attempt. It seems as if they hope to replace the lost ideological party line with a uniform religious ideology. Two times in the last few months the Supreme Soviet, the Russian parliament, passed a law that favored the Russian Orthodox Church and restricted other religions and especially Western missionaries. The law was drafted by a Russian Orthodox priest and was strongly supported by the hierarchy. Although this law is probably now history after the fatal end of the institution that had produced it, the problem will not be over, and pressure will probably continue.

8. Cf. "... the mission and unity of the Church ... are two aspects of one single entity, like the two sides of a coin," D. G. Moses, Mission and Unity, p. 9. These ideas led to the merger of the International Mission Council with the World Council of Churches.

10. To give but one example: In the 1890s in a suburb of the Lithuanian city of Kaunas a spiritual lay movement began among the inhabitants, all of them members of the Lutheran church. They built a prayer house and enjoyed themselves in the favor of the Lutheran pastor in Kaunas. Later other people in the area complained about the leaders of the group. In taking Christianity earnestly they had begun to admonish their neighbors. The pastor told them therefore they should not exaggerate their spiritual endeavors, but later openly supported their opponents. The result was the foundation of a Methodist Church there.


13. "And what a grievous stumbling block must these things be to those who are without, to those who are strangers to religion, who have neither the form nor the power of godliness." "On Schism," #16.


17. In this letter of March 20, 1739, he wrote: "A dispensation of the gospel is committed to me; and woe is me if I preach not the gospel. . . . I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that in whatever part of it I am I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare, unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation." The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, ed. Telford, Vol. I, p. 286.

18. Archbishop Michail (Mudjugin) of Yologda and Veliki Ustjug, pastoral letter. (Translation of the German translation, published in *Ökumenische Rundschau* 2/1993: 226)—There are interesting parallels to Wesleyan thinking; cf. the sermon "Catholic Spirit."


20. This is the original wording in the "Large Minutes," the legislative form of the results of Wesley's Annual Conferences with his preachers.

21. This could be seen in a most striking way in the Methodist understanding of the Holy Communion as a converting means, cf. John Wesley's *Journal*, Vol. I, ed. Curnock, Vol. I, 361: "... many have affirmed that the Lord's Supper is not a converting, but a confirming ordinance. . . . But experience shows the great falsehood of that assertion . . . Ye are the witnesses. For many now present know, the very beginning of your conversion to God (perhaps, in some, the first deep conviction) was wrought at the Lord's Supper" (June 27, 1740).

22. An attempt at such a new cooperation was made at the seminar for lay pastors and leaders in the Russian United Methodist Church, held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, Sept. 20-30, 1993. There a faculty was brought together with a former professor of atheism, a United Methodist professor of Old Testament, and a Russian Orthodox monk and professor of New Testament studies. The underlying common theme of lectures and discussions was how to read, to study, and to understand the Bible in a post-Communist situation in Russia.
The relationship of the Bible to suicide is apparent on several levels. For individuals, it is frequently a major ethical source to which they turn in making their own decision about suicide or for understanding and comfort when a friend or loved one is considering, has attempted, or has committed suicide.

For religious communities, it is a source for official doctrine, teaching, nurture, and guidelines for members in relating to one another when matters of suicide arise.

For society at large, what the Bible says or supposedly says is a factor in shaping community attitudes, which in turn affects legislation, psychological and psychiatric therapy, and the administration of health care delivery systems.

Merely to list these several dimensions of suicide underscores its broad impact upon those within religious communities and those who stand outside them. The relationship between the interpretation of the Bible and suicide is an influential one not only for this country but in many others as well. In Britain, for example, male spouse and lover abuse is a major cause of suicide among women. Studies show that such abuse is widely accepted, even among many women who suffer from it, because of "what the Bible says" to affirm male superiority.

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The Need for Correction: Two Examples

Because biblical interpretation directly and indirectly affects a broad range of decision-making groups within our society, it is appropriate that those concerned with biblical exegesis, ethics, pastoral care, and social justice give attention to one of the most tragic and troubling issues of our day. This article is offered as a contribution to clearer thinking and more informed action, especially on the part of religious leadership.

Two recent statements illustrate how misinformation about the Bible and history still persists in academic and more popular arenas.


> Jewish and Christian tradition, on the other hand, has always been against any form of suicide.

(p. 400, emphasis added.)

It should be common knowledge by now that the Bible does not at any point condemn suicide, either in narrative reporting of self-chosen deaths or in any of the comments about those deaths. Nor does it condemn suicide in any of its specific teachings of right and wrong. This I have demonstrated in my book What Does the Bible Say about Suicide? (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). What we do find in the Bible, however, are a large number of texts that have been used both to condemn and to condone the act of self-chosen death.

Varga goes on to say:

> In the United States, the law forbids any person to help an incurably ill patient commit suicide. Any accomplice in such a suicide is charged with manslaughter. However, if he is found guilty, he usually receives a light sentence.

This statement is incorrect on two counts. In the first place, each state makes its own laws regarding the legality of assisted suicide and these laws vary from one state to another. That is why Dr. Jack Kevorkian has not been brought to trial for his latest episodes involving the so-called "suicide machine" in Michigan.

Then too, not all states that do have strict laws on the books follow...
through with prosecution. Television reporter Betty Rollin wrote Last Wish (Warner, 1987), detailing how she helped her mother, dying of an incurable cancer and in great pain, bring about her own death. Rollin was even interviewed on television about her book but was never charged with the felony which assisted suicide is in her home state of New York. In 1992, Last Wish was dramatized by prominent actresses in a made-for-television movie.

A second example of misinformation, this one in the popular press, was noted by Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor in their recently published A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992). The June 17, 1990, edition of the Chicago Tribune carried an article about Dr. Kevorkian in which the reporter said,

*Much to the dismay of religious leaders, an increasing number of people now consider suicide a personal right, not the shameful, sinful act against God that it has been regarded since biblical times.*

(p. xi, emphasis added)

Droge and Tabor have made a most excellent contribution to the ethical discussion of suicide by showing that some of the strongest notions among Jews and Christians, from the time of the Second Temple through Augustine, included a wide variety of views on self-chosen death, usually very favorable ones. Most challenging to common belief is their agreement with the statement that the traditional claim about Jewish "sanctity of life," which precludes all forms of suicide, has no foundation in the writings of this period! (p. 106).

Interpreting the Biblical Texts on Suicide: An Overview

Within this broader concern for the relationship of biblical interpretation and ethics, a close look at some of the specific texts and their interpretation of suicide can inform ethical discussion of the topic today among all interested parties and on all levels of interest.

Any adequate discussion of suicide in the Bible must begin with a definition. Unless we know precisely what we are looking for, we are likely to overlook texts that can be useful for the discussion. That may account for the fact that lists of the suicides in the Bible sometimes differ. Suicidologists recognize the necessity for a working definition,
and there are several, depending in part on the needs of the users. The most detailed attention to this need is found in Edwin Shneidman's *Definition of Suicide* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1985). My own definition is broad enough to include every clear biblical example, without going beyond necessary limits:

*Suicide is the choice and the successful completion of the act to end one's life regardless of motive, circumstance, or method.*

By this definition, there are six self-chosen deaths in the Hebrew Bible and one in the New Testament:

1. Abimelech—who had a subordinate slay him with the sword (Judg. 9:52-54);
2. Samson—who, after praying for God’s help in doing so, caused a building to fall on him (Judg. 16:28-31);
3. Ahithophel—who, having set his house in order, hung himself (2 Sam. 17:23);
4. Saul—who in one account (1 Sam. 31:1-13) fell on his own sword after his armor-bearer refused to slay him, and in another account (2 Sam. 1:1-16) was slain at his own request by an Amalekite;
5. Saul’s armor-bearer—who fell on his own sword (1 Sam. 31:5);
6. Zimri—who shut himself up in his house and set fire to it (1 Kings 16:18-19);
7. Judas—who, for motives that are not clearly stated and which lead to interesting speculation, also hung himself (Matt. 27:3-5; see also Acts 1:18).

There are also two attempted suicides in the Bible which have their own points of interest, but these I shall not take time to discuss here: Jonah (see 4:3, 8) in Hebrew Scripture and the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:19-34. Other examples are sometimes listed, but these, I think, are rather farfetched and offer very little worthy of serious reflection.

In addition to the seven accounts in scripture, there are other "noble deaths" of martyrdom in Jewish literature from the time of the Second
Ethical Themes Arising from the Texts

What ethical themes arise from the references cited? Are they only seven "deadly sins" as we have been taught by our traditions? Or do they, upon critical analysis, offer insights that can clarify and inform current ethical discussion? By focusing on the ethical dimensions in these stories, I shall not attempt to defend here the statement that none of the accounts contains condemnation of the person or the deed. That, I trust, is obvious.

Although ethical questions on euthanasia also arise in these accounts of self-chosen death, I limit my remarks specifically to suicide. Euthanasia involves some issues that overlap but do not coincide with suicide.

I. The story of Abimelech lifts up, in a peculiar way, the concern for "death with dignity." Knowing he was mortally wounded from the upper millstone thrown by a female defender of the city he was attacking, this macho warrior king calls upon his personal aide to slay him, lest someone say—horror of horrors—"a woman killed him." His subordinate dutifully complies. Abimelech got his wish, for in all the millennia he was remembered for a more "honorable" death than if he had not asked to be killed.

Apart from the obvious need to rise above the chauvinist mores of that ancient culture, two questions arise for us: 1) Under what circumstances is it ethically acceptable to hasten the end of one's life when death is already imminent and when one suffers incurable pain? and 2) When is it permissible to assist someone who, under those extreme circumstances, asks for assistance in suicide? Is it a prerogative reserved only for royalty? Obviously the account of Abimelech's death does not answer the questions it raises for us. For the original writers, and presumably for their readers, such questions were of no concern.

In this account, the close proximity of suicide and euthanasia is clearly seen, but, to the extent that one is actually choosing one's own death, it falls within our working definition of suicide.

II. Ahithophel's death poses several questions. His was the case of a trusted friend and official whose best advice to the king was rejected,
leaving him to cope, we can easily imagine, with disappointment, loss of friendship, and professional shame. But these understandable emotions are not spelled out in the text. What is quite evident, however, is that Ahithophel’s death was a case of rational suicide. He deliberately prepared for his journey home and intentionally put his house in order before carrying out his well-laid plans to hang himself. All of these activities come in a single verse, as if to underscore the careful, step-by-step scheme of reaching a goal firmly implanted from the time the devastating news reached him.

This type of death is not unfamiliar to us. Although most often thought of as a way of atoning for some form of real or supposed shame, as in Japanese hara-kiri (Jap. seppuku), it has been known in other cultures as well; one example of this is the suicide of the German commander of the battleship Bismarck in World War II.

Under the influence of psychology and strong medical persuasion, our society has become accustomed to thinking that any form of suicide must be irrational, an act by someone who was “sick.” It was this assumption of “illness” more than anything else that prompted the 1983 change regarding suicide in Roman Catholic canon law, allowing, in certain circumstances, the Christian burial of a known suicide.

Over the past twenty years, however, there has come a growing insistence by suicidologists, medical personnel, and laypeople that suicide in some cases is clearly a rational choice. We are reminded of this painfully in the deaths of the elderly Jewish couple in New York City who had seen their once comfortable neighborhood transformed into an urban jungle, with all its attendant crime and personal threat. The note they left behind said, “Better to die without fear than to live in terror.” Biblical and ethical aspects of suicide have been a major topic of discussion in Jewish religious journals over the past fifteen years.

The first question raised by Ahithophel’s death is, What conditions in life ever justify one’s leaving it? with its equally important corollary, What bases might be quite unacceptable for such an act? Further, What is the ethical significance of recognizing the reality that suicides can and do occur on a rational basis, like those involving Dr. Kevorkian and others spelled out in Derek Humphry’s immensely popular “how to” book, Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying (Berryville, VA: The Hemlock Society, 1991)? A third question from this text is, What
immediate circumstances might make a rationally chosen self-induced death more easily acceptable? For example, can we give honor to those who make the supreme sacrifice in battle, yet withhold it from those who give themselves to make “things go better” (Jonah’s phrase) for their loved ones on the home front?

III. Samson, one of ancient Israel’s greatest heroes, has been highly praised for his self-chosen demise, because “the dead he slew at his death were more than those whom he had slain during his life” (Judg. 16:30). Some may question whether or not Samson was a suicide in sacrificing himself for his nation. Roman Catholic ethical thought distinguishes between primary and secondary consequences of decisions. But Samson’s self-chosen death also falls clearly within our definition.

What is often overlooked here are the prayers Samson offered before his death, namely, that God would give him a way to gain vengeance over his enemies and would give him the strength to bring down the building upon himself and others.

There can be only two conclusions: either God answered his prayers, which makes the best sense of the author’s intent, or the events occurred as Samson wished without God’s intervention, making the prayers totally ineffective. To be sure, the questions are more theological than ethical. But if God granted Samson’s prayers for vengeance and deliverance, then the theology can have a bearing on ethics, especially for those who believe that the Bible reveals a) how God responds to prayer and b) the kinds of things for which one might rightfully ask God to do. That is, the story could well affirm that devout, Bible-reading, faithful persons have the right to be pro-choice! Ethically, it would seem to follow, individuals should be able to make the decision for self-death for themselves without a single standard to determine all cases in the same way. If Samson was a hero, then so are others who die to help their family and loved ones, as well as their country.

IV. Zimri, a commander of half his king’s chariots, was a man who would be king. But having killed the monarch Elah, he saw that his coup was doomed and so chose to die a fiery death. The text is silent on whether or not he died in some way before the flames reached him. We may assume the writer meant that he did not.

We can identify several reasons why Zimri may have taken this step: disappointment, shame, and, most likely, fear of an even worse
fate when he was captured. But all of these are only possibilities, unspecified in the text.

Self-chosen death by fire has a gruesome history. In recent times we need but recall the self-immolation that occurred at the Pentagon as a protest against this nation’s involvement in the Vietnam Conflict. In the world of grand opera, after Norma, the Druid high priestess, has confessed her own sin, she offers herself as a required sacrifice. In that dramatic moment, her lover, the Roman proconsul Pollione, asks that he might die with her. As the two walk slowly to the pyre, the curtain falls.

As for ethical concerns, this account brings us back to the military defeat syndrome mentioned above. Beyond that, nothing new surfaces to challenge or aid us. Again, the concerns of the writer and the first readers simply were not the ones that plague us today.

V. Before delving into the stories of the death of Saul, by far the most exegetically challenging figure, I turn to Judas, the only recorded suicide in the New Testament.

When we look closely at this suicide in Matthew’s Gospel, it is clear that the report comes merely as a factual account. Any notion that his manner of death was condemned because it was committed by the betrayer of Jesus can only be inserted by way of eisegesis. On the contrary, Matthew seems to go to some length to avoid giving any theological or ethical twist to the account. Most commentators on this text, like those on other texts involving suicide, tend to ignore the implications of the manner of his death altogether, treating it only as a necessary part of the Judas story.

One regrettable exception is the totally negative meaning to the text which appeared in the first edition of the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1915), which listed “Suicide” under “Crimes,” with the comment that “the act was held in deep abhorrence by the Hebrews. Only the remorse of the damned could drive one to it, as witness Saul... and Judas...” (vol. 2, p. 817). Fortunately, the recently revised edition of ISBE has a longer and more acceptable article on the topic (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988, vol. 4, pp. 652f).

A more positive understanding of Judas sees his act of returning the thirty pieces of silver as a form of repentance and his death as an act of atonement. This exegesis has the theological impact of showing God’s acceptance of a person’s self-sacrifice, thus calling into
question the idea of divine condemnation for any and all cases of a self-chosen death.

VI-VII. The final two texts relate to Saul and his armor-bearer. If we follow the account at the end of 1 Samuel, the armor-bearer, having refused to run his king through, as requested, and having seen the king "fall on his own sword," then took the same step. Again, we can well imagine several motives for his doing so: grief for his lost king; despair at not having obeyed a royal command; and fear of what would happen to him when the enemy came upon him. But of these possibilities, the text again says nothing.

Although Saul is mentioned at several points in later texts, his armor-bearer's death is never alluded to, either at the end of Samuel or by any later writer. His manner of death was just another footnote in history, without ethical implication.

But ah! the following account in the first chapter of 2 Samuel muddies the exegetical waters considerably. In this episode, a young Amalekite appears to David with some of Saul's gear, claiming that he came upon the wounded king, who asked him to kill him, which he did. Most scholars, but not all, tend to accept the earlier account as authentic. The second story is then taken as one contrived by the Amalekite to advance his own cause. David, however, had the ambitious one killed immediately for laying violent hands upon the king.

So much for the usual opinions on the two biblical accounts of Saul's death. But there are deeper levels to be considered. Recent scholarship on Saul and the books of Samuel have raised a host of historical, literary, and theological issues. Perhaps most notable among these is the extent to which God was directly intervening in Saul's misfortune and death in order to turn the kingdom over to David. To say the least, we now accept the fact that here, as in many other instances, there is an overlayering of themes and ideas in the very early Hebrew texts.

Ethical Implications of Translation

My last remarks call attention to but one word in the second account as a most interesting example of how exegesis, and particularly lower criticism in establishing the exact text to be translated, can offer special challenges for the ethicist interested in suicide.

In reporting what happened to Saul, the Amalekite quotes the king's
own words. My interest was drawn to this statement when I came across the translation of *The Jerusalem Bible*:

*Take your sword and run me through, for a giddiness has come upon me.*

"Giddiness"? Surely, I thought, this is not a word one would use to describe a person asking someone to kill them. Not a person who was wounded, had lost a battle in which three of his sons had been slain, and was facing the downfall of the kingdom God had given him and had promised to maintain. Incredible!

I then went at once to a major English dictionary, only to learn that there are at least three levels or nuances of meaning for giddiness that I had never encountered. Even more surprising was the realization that the word *giddy* comes from an Old English word which originally meant "God."

This revelation led me on. I checked the original Hebrew on which the translation was based. Surprise number three! The word *hashshabhats* occurs only once in scripture, and nowhere else in Hebrew literature.

Further research into cognate languages and later translations in Greek and Latin, as well as in later commentaries, revealed that a number of ideas were associated with the term, but all were on very weak foundations. For example, the Greek of the Septuagint uses the acceptable but off the mark as a translation, "terrible darkness" (skotos deinon).

All of this leaves the translator with a strange set of options. What are we to do with the problem? Was Saul "giddy" when he asked to be killed? If so, what does that really say about his condition, and what might the several nuances mean for those concerned with biblical exegesis and the ethical theme of suicide?

One choice is to say that Saul was "addled" or "knocked silly" from his physical wounds. A blow to the head, loss of blood, the fatigue of battle, to say nothing of his climb up Mt. Gilboa, could easily have caused him to be in a state where he could still think and reason but not be quite able to do himself in with one clean thrust.

This meaning of the term was used by Dorothy L. Sayers in her mystery novel *Five Red Herrings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1931, p. 200). One of the "suspicious characters" (the title of the original story) gave as his alibi for the time of the murder the fact that he had...
fallen into an abandoned lead mine, saying, "... the moment I was on
my feet, I went all sick and giddy and lost consciousness again."

An earlier literary occurrence is in James Fenimore Cooper's
ever-popular The Last of the Mohicans (New York: Heritage Press,
1932, p. 355). While the elusive evil warrior Magua was seeking to
escape, he climbed the face of a high cliff in the mountains, and as he
"stood at the brow of the mountain, on the very edge of the giddy
height" was shot by the intrepid Hawkeye. The point is that Saul may
have asked to be killed, and subsequently took his own life, because
of some physical condition he was suffering at the time.

A second meaning for giddy could be the notion of dizziness from
mental and emotional burdens. One may be in such a state of emotion
that he or she is incapable of doing the deed, even though rational
enough to know that help is necessary to do so. Another possible
translation could be "insane."

These two meanings, both related to a medical condition, could
adequately describe Saul's condition in the context of the story in 1
Samuel. He had already been described as being in a sad mental state,
including deep depression, deranged and driven enough to exhibit his
somewhat bizarre behavior in turning to witchcraft.

We come now to a third meaning of giddiness, quite different from
the other two in that it allows for a theological condition. If giddy has
the connotation of the original Old English word ged for God, and for
one "possessed of God" (another meaning of insane), it might well
imply that Saul felt his condition was somehow the direct result of
God's intervention against him, made all the worse because it seemed
that God was reneging on an earlier promise to secure Saul's kingdom.

There is one further possibility for understanding the condition of
Saul at the moment of his death: all of the above. Here we see what
recent scholars in the field of narrative mean by the overlayering of
meanings in texts by very astute authors, not merely "recorders of
facts." The possibility of several meanings at once in this story of
suicide may have caused the author of 1 Samuel to choose a very rare,
even unique, word to describe the king's condition, one that drew
attention to its several possible interpretations.

INTERPRETING BIBLICAL TEXTS ON SUICIDE
Summary and Conclusion

The problems for the exegete are obvious. What do they offer ethicists and pastors interested in suicide?

In the first place the text may point up the fact that certain extreme physical, mental, and emotional conditions are a basis for suicide and that such an act in those extreme circumstances is supported by God. Again, there is no condemnation of Saul for taking his own life either in this story or in later references to him in Hebrew scripture and in rabbinic literature.

Second, my conclusion is that the translation "giddy" is quite appropriate for describing Saul's condition and a satisfactory way of justifying his fatal request and final act. The revised edition of *The Jerusalem Bible (The New Jerusalem Bible)* dropped "giddiness" and used the more specific "my head is swimming, although I still have all my strength," which obviously severely limits the meaning. This limitation reminds us of a fact all too often overlooked in the many new versions of the Bible, that *every translation is at the same time an interpretation.*

"Giddiness" might initially mislead people, even New Testament professors, into thinking Saul was simply "foolish," like some carefree adolescent. After all, this was a meaning it held for John Wesley when, in his sermon on "Spiritual Idolatry," he referred to "the giddy, thoughtless world" that believed true happiness in this life was dependent upon anything but God. But the tragic seriousness of the narrative context would hardly admit that kind of meaning.

In sum, a closer look at biblical texts related to suicide offers insights into how we might proceed ethically in considering the subject within academic disciplines, as members of religious communities, and as responsible citizens in society. Ethically speaking, our decisions regarding suicide are to be made apart from any divine condemnation of the act but with a strong presumption that when a person commits suicide for any but the most clear-cut selfish motives, we could expect God to weep, to understand, and to accept without condemnation. Little else can be expected of us.
Walter Harrelson

The Qumran Community's Life, Faith, and Hopes

The flood of discussion and controversy surrounding the Dead Sea Scrolls (delays in publication, talk of conspiracies in withholding damaging information, identifying the community, and so on) may have caused the general public, and even persons much involved in the study of religion and theology, to neglect the life, thought, and faith of the Qumran community. Perhaps that is not the case, but I have noticed that in the frequent talks on the Scrolls that I do, that subject comes last and frequently claims too little time. This essay proposes to remedy that neglect.

But the way of doing so is important to consider. I propose that we make an effort to put ourselves within this community of Qumran and think and feel with them, to the extent that this may be possible. In doing so, we should give them the benefit of the doubt on questions of religious faith and practice, interpreting the evidence a bit in their favor rather than against them. That is a good rule to follow in studying any religious community, past or present, surely. Of course, we cannot and should not forego all critical evaluations, but we can at least try to be generous in our assessment of others, perhaps hoping that they will return the favor in their assessment of us.

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Judaism in Greco-Roman Times

Our first task, however, is to attempt to sketch the religious options that seem to have been most prominent during the two centuries within which the community was most active (about 130 B.C.E. to shortly after 70 C.E.). The first of these options, no doubt, was that familiar religious option—nominal acceptance of the tradition. Those who adopt this option are the religious folk who do not trouble themselves greatly about the niceties of religious belief and practice but who know who they are religiously and who give as much attention to their rituals and observances and beliefs as these seem entitled to receive. We can well imagine that the majority of Jewish believers during this period (like the majority of religious believers today) was of this sort, and of course the very continuation of a religious tradition depends heavily upon the life and work of such adherents.

But there were special religious options that developed as the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean world confronted the all-pervasive Hellenistic culture that swept this world after the death of Alexander the Great (323 B.C.E.). As we know from 2 Maccabees (chapter 4), some of the Palestinian Jews, under the leadership and with the encouragement of the high priest Jason, reacted to that culture with enthusiasm, loving the fresh new world with its enjoyment of the open air, physical and intellectual contests, the free play of ideas, and the rest. This group we can call the Hellenists, those who were genuine apologists for Greek customs and ways of living. They did not, of course, see themselves as having abandoned their faith; they were simply accommodating that faith to the richness of a larger intellectual and cultural world. In the novel by Milton Steinberg, As a Driven Leaf (New York: Behrman House, 1939), this fascination with the world of Hellenism is well portrayed. E. P. Sanders offers details on this option and others in his Judaism: Practice and Belief (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992).

Others, however, while ready to accommodate to the new world politically and culturally, insisted upon keeping their religious boundaries strong and intact. The world of politics and culture belonged to one realm of life, but the substance of religious belief and practice was something entirely different. While such a view would have been anathema to the Pharisees, it was probably a dominant perspective among Sadducees. The Sadducees were, generally
speaking, conservative in religion but practical and "sensible" in matters of economics, politics, culture. Hellenism pervaded the whole of their society; some accommodation had to be made to it. The Sadducees are thought to have been the most successful in meeting the Hellenistic threat. But the manner of their doing so was dangerous indeed; they were ready to insulate religious belief and practice from much of public life. They also took the view that authoritative Scripture was found in the first five books of the Bible (the Torah or Pentateuch), a position shared by the Samaritan community but unacceptable to most Jews.

But there were other forces at work. At the time of the Maccabean revolt against the Syrian authorities (167 B.C.E.), some Jews, like Mattathias and his sons, were ready to resist this Hellenization of Israelite religion with their very lives. Neither glad acceptance of Hellenism nor accommodation to it was bearable. Outright warfare resulted, led by Mattathias's sons, the Maccabees. Among their supporters were some who would not violate the terms of Torah even if it meant defeat in battle and the forfeit of their lives. They refused to do battle on the Sabbath, with the result that many did die, along with their families. But the majority took the view that the preservation of life took precedence over even the Sabbath requirements—a view that is, of course, characteristic of rabbinic Judaism and of Jesus' teaching. Among this group were the Hasidim (Pious Ones), a group of mighty warriors who came to the support of the Maccabees (1 Maccabees 2:29-48). In all likelihood, these Hasidim were the forerunners of the third of our groups, the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were largely a lay group, bent upon seeing to it that the Torah was made clearly relevant to all aspects of the community's daily life. The Pharisees were fundamentally students and teachers of the Law of God. In their view, Torah was capable of being observed to the full, though not without difficulty. And while the first five books of Scripture were the central authority, all of the sacred writings had authority for them as well. The Pharisees, and the rabbis who followed them, underscored the biblical teaching (Psalms 1, 19, 119, etc.) that God's Torah was a precious divine gift, offering the community guidance in the way of faithfulness and truth, no matter what the circumstances of their life. The key was to recognize that God's revelation to Moses had been preserved in two authoritative forms: the written texts preserved on the manuscripts, and the oral texts—equally authoritative—that had been handed down from
generation to generation. With both of these to guide them, the community was indeed able, they believed, to be faithful to God’s Way. The Pharisees offered a highly attractive alternative form of religious life and faith to that demanded by the priestly group that sought to regulate religious affairs in Jerusalem.

Others were drawn to the mystery religions of the time—whether originating in Egypt (the Isis cult) or Greece (Orphic or Pythagorean or other forms) or Asia Minor/Mesopotamia (Artemis or Cybele; Mithraism). The numbers of Jewish converts to these religious communities, however, may have been rather small until after the beginning of the Common Era. But these numbers were to grow, for the attraction of the mystery religions was great indeed. They offered, in distinct ways, a mode of individual salvation from the cares and trials and sufferings of daily life. Eventually, there would emerge those called Gnostics. For them, the way of salvation was this: the immortal soul, which had been flung into historical existence, was required to make its way back to the Source and Ground of all being through the application of the secret knowledge shared within their community.

And finally, we come to the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Here we have another alternative. The Covenanters of Qumran, whom most believe represented the group called Essenes, opted for yet another way of faithfulness in the world. Like the Maccabean zealots, they were ready to be enlisted in God’s war to rid the earth of sinners—but unlike the Maccabees, they saw the set of conflicts that would establish God’s peace and justice as a war presided over by angelic powers, directed by the deity, with the outcome fully assured. The Wars Scroll describes this eschatological battle in terms that remind one of an African ritual war dance—deeply serious and grave, but also essentially a ceremonial act.

These Covenanters also shared much with the Pharisees, for the Covenanters, too, were devoted to God’s Torah. They were to live by it, but they did so in their community, somewhat isolated from the general body of Israel, since apparently they believed it essential for some group of God’s people to devote their lives fully to the divine Covenant and to hold one another responsible for observing its requirements to the letter. Their commentaries on biblical books and on texts drawn from various parts of Scripture underscore this devotion. So also does the strict organization of their community life, their preservation and study of Jewish writings, including many
destined to have no place in the Scripture that the rabbis would preserve. But unlike the Pharisees, they had additional teachings of their own, the teachings of their Teacher of Righteousness—the founder of the community. These teachings are found in the various forms of the Community’s Rules. And there are other legal texts, notably the Temple Scroll and the legal text identified as 4QMMT, that indicate the community’s departures both from the biblical Torah and from what will become standard rabbinical interpretation of the Torah. Some interpreters of 4QMMT find its readings closer to Sadducean teaching than to that of the Pharisees and the rabbis.

The Qumran Covenanters also knew the hunger and longing for communion with God that is characteristic of the mystery religions. Angels abound, mystical texts are present in abundance, and there is even a set of thirteen sabbath hymns sung by the angels to greet the Sabbath’s coming. But unlike the Gnostic or mystery-cult communities, this community is bent on doing its part as God brings consummation of the divine purposes to earth. Moreover, this is a group mysticism rather than an individual quest for salvation.

Josephus speaks of another group, the Zealots, those who are ready to risk all to rid their land of the occupying powers and to welcome their Messianic leader or leaders. It seems highly probable that the Zealots were a different kind of group, one formed from time to time from the populace at large and with representatives from some or all of the above-listed groups. Zealots differed from the others in being almost singlemindedly committed to restoring the Maccabean state and driving out the Roman authorities and any other oppressors. Zealots were the chief instigators of the revolts against Rome in 66-70 and 132-35 C.E., but within their ranks were Pharisees, Sadducees, and in all likelihood, Essenes as well.

The Worldview of the Qumran Covenanters

Clearly, then, we have a quite distinct Jewish community at Qumran, one that is thoroughly Jewish, with features that mark it off from Sadducees, Zealots, Pharisees, and Gnostics (of various sorts). Is it Essene? They certainly have greater affinities with the Essenes (as these are described by ancient references) than with any other group. But one thing is clear enough: there are many continuities between this community and the other groups or parties as well—Sadducees,
Pharisees, Gnostics. There are also a number of unmistakable similarities between the Covenanters of Qumran and the early Christians as portrayed in portions of the New Testament and in post-biblical literature. And there is obvious continuity with Rabbinic Judaism, which in a number of ways continues the Pharisaic movement. At the same time, as we shall see below, these Covenanters of Qumran are certainly not Christians and are not the central source of Christian faith.

But now it is in order to attempt to summarize what the life of faith was like at Qumran, to the extent that we can determine that. What were their characteristic beliefs, hopes, fears? How did they see their relations with other Jews? How did they understand what God had in store for them and for the world as they faced the near future?

The first clue comes from the very fact of their having decided to withdraw from the normal Jewish way of life and form a distinct community near the Dead Sea. Others before them had lived lives that were marked by protests against some features of the settled life of Israel, chief among them the Nazirites and the Rechabites. Nazirites let their hair grow long, following some assumed pattern of behavior characteristic of the period of wilderness wanderings, and they rejected the use of wine and strong drink, apparently in protest against Canaanite customs. The Rechabites, who appeared on the scene later on, were political radicals, fiercely opposed to certain religious practices that they associated with the worship of the Tyrian deities Baal and Asherah. But both Nazirites and Rechabites continued to live within the confines of the majority Jewish community.

Not so the people of Qumran. From their viewpoint, they could not do so, in part at least because the majority community was worshiping the deity and organizing its life in accordance with a calendar that the Qumranites considered erroneous. When sacred time is abused, all worship is endangered. The community could not be content simply to form enclaves in the various localities of Israel and live by their “correct” calendar. They had to organize their life in every respect according to the right identification of times and seasons.

Their calendar, as is well known, was a solar one, with twelve thirty-day months and with four additional days added to bring the calendar into approximate conformity with the actual solar year. The dominant calendar in Israel, as in the ancient Near East generally, was a lunar calendar of thirteen months, allowing for much more irregularity than the Qumranites believed to be allowable. The
Qumran calendar had the merit of enabling the community to observe all its special feasts and fasts on days other than the Sabbath day. Since we know well how important for religious communities the strict observance of appropriate days is and has been through the centuries, we can well appreciate that those in Jerusalem who lived by the “wrong” calendar would fall under the judgment of the Qumran Covenanters.

But Qumran residents were not simply motivated to observe their ceremonial life in correct ways. The urgency of their doing so was tied to their understanding of just how near at hand was the Day of God’s consummation of the divine work for the entire cosmos. This notion is perhaps the most difficult to understand correctly and sympathetically today. If it were merely a matter of one more community that thought that the “end of the world” was at hand, a view proved erroneous countless times in human history, that would be a simple matter to understand, and we could dismiss this religious sect as we dismiss so many others. But for this community, the fact that God’s consummating Day was at hand made a major difference in their lives. What God wanted from them was a distinct life lived before the world, but at some distance from normal social life, a life that would “prepare the way of the Lord.” This fundamental perception—that God was calling them to act and teach and study as a community of the Last Days—seems to me to make all the difference for them, just as the same general kind of belief made all the difference for the early Christian community as well.

But there was more than a single possible way to prepare the Lord’s way. Israel’s prophets understood this demand to fall upon the entire people of God. To live by Torah in the here and now—that was the way to witness to the nearness of God’s Day of peace with righteousness. We can see this viewpoint clearly in the texts that describe that Last Day, texts such as Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-4 or Isaiah 35 and Micah 5:1-5a or Isaiah 9:1-7 and 11:1-9. While these texts differ in detail, they portray a Day on which the purpose of God’s covenant with Israel will find its consummation, as peace with righteousness comes as God’s sheer gift of grace to Israel and evokes in Israel a delighted affirmation of the Way of consummation that God has selected. God’s blessings fall centrally upon Israel, it is true, but they are intended also for the nations of earth.

Such promises of the prophets, as interpreters are seeing more and more clearly, are designed to provide the pattern for Israel’s life in the
then and there, before the fulfillment that God is bringing. These visions and promises offer judgment on any society that fails to measure up to God’s intentions and plans for the human community, for earthly communities are provided with their guidelines in these eschatological visions. They also give hope to Israel and to other earthly communities that share such visions and promises, for they come through to eyes of faith as almost incredible good news, believable only because one has experience of God’s love, justice, and trustworthiness. And they set in motion a further impulse to live now in accordance with these visions, pressing the community of faith to move in the direction laid out by the visions. Thus, the visions judge the contemporary scene, offer hope and encouragement to the faithful, and provide both a moral and an aesthetic impulse to the community and to its individual members, pressing them toward the community that God is initiating and bringing to earth.

Preparing the way, then, includes much more than getting the calendar right. It involves a life lived out of the divine Promise, a life that already, to some extent, provides what it promises, for the biblical communities of faith, in their life and worship, already enjoy elements of the life of faith that lies ahead and beckons them forward.

Even so, the prophets did not call for a separation between the faithful and their not-so-faithful colleagues. Nor did most of the groups listed above: Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots, Rabbis, or Christians. Perhaps only the Gnostics and some of the Christians (those touched by Gnosticism or its earlier equivalent) did so, other than the Essenes. And it is clearly a dangerous teaching for biblical religion to call for such a withdrawal from the normal structures and patterns of community life in order to live a genuinely faithful life.

Community Life at Qumran

How did the community organize its life in order to effect its preparation of the “Way of the Lord”? Here we have sufficient evidence from the Scrolls to be quite confident of a number of points. They organized in general along biblical lines, dividing their company into groups of tens and fifties and hundreds and thousands (though there probably never were as many as a thousand Covenanters at Qumran at a given time). Their community was thoroughly hierarchical in some respects, although provision was made for each
member to have a voice in affairs and for all to make their
collection to the preparation of God’s Way. An Overseer (Hebrew
mebaqqer) gave administrative leadership to the community, which in
other respects was under heavy priestly authority. Priests and Levites
held the highest rank in the community, and for every group of ten, at
least one was required to be a priest.

Detailed rules were laid down for entrance into the Covenant
community, for discipline when one strays from the true path, for
annual reaffirmation of the Covenant (on Pentecost Day), and for
movement up and down along the strict hierarchical path. Even so, as
to prayer and eating and deliberating in council, every member, no
matter how lowly, was understood to be the equal of every other
member. The hierarchy, then, was designed to maintain equality, a
claim often made by those in authority and usually impossible of
being realized.

Much of the daily life of the community was spent in prayer and
study. The study of Scripture was carried on with considerable
freedom. Members of the community (or at least some leading
members of the community) produced commentaries on biblical
books that apparently built upon the general theological outlook of the
community at its founding. The well-known Commentary on
Habakkuk, for example, quotes a verse or two of the biblical book and
then brings the interpretation up to date to specify its meaning for the
Covenanters in their own pilgrimage of faith. The commentator no
doubt would have readily acknowledged a “first” meaning of the book
of Habakkuk, a meaning that continued to stand. But the Habakkuk
testimony also offered concrete guidance for the Covenanters, under
the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit (a term found very
prominently in the Qumran literature). Biblical interpretation, then,
rested on the view that the biblical texts had a “later” or perhaps a
“fuller” meaning than the first and given meaning.

Some commentaries on Scripture simply selected for extended
discussion and interpretation one or more special texts from the Torah
or the historical books or the prophets or the other sacred writings
(especially the Psalms). Here too, however, it seems at least probable
that the Covenanters understood their special readings of distinct
scriptural texts to be additional divine guidance from the texts, not the
only and single meaning of these passages from the sacred writings.

The Covenanters also showed freedom in the selection of texts to
study. It is astonishing to see how many of the apocryphal and

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pseudepigraphical texts had their place in the life of the Covenanters. At this point it is necessary, however, to note that some Qumran scholars today stress the likelihood that many of the documents found in the caves were not the work of the Covenanters at all. Rather, they are believed to be part of a cache of documents laid aside in the caves for safekeeping, probably at the time of the first revolt against Rome (66-70 C.E.). Even if this view is accepted, it is still plausible to assume that the Qumran Covenanters were much interested in the large quantity of esoteric literature (Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and other texts) found at Qumran. Almost certainly, the community itself produced some of the mystical and symbolic literature that appears in such abundance among the manuscript fragments. And if it produced such literature as the Melchizedek text, the Testament of Amram, the Songs for the Sabbath, and the like, surely we have reason to believe that the community would have had much interest in texts such as Enoch and Jubilees (which in fact have a calendar identical with the Qumran calendar), the Testaments of Levi and Naphtali, and the like. We are entitled, then, to conclude that for the Qumran Covenanters the canon of Scripture was loose indeed. They must have been confident of the Spirit's leading in the lives of their leaders, some of whom no doubt composed the new literature, and of the Spirit's active presence and guidance as the individual members studied the Scripture and recorded the fruits of their labors.

Much remains uncertain about the life of the community. Did they copy manuscripts in large numbers in the room of their headquarters building designated by some interpreters as the Scriptorium? Did they make available their teachings, in writing, to members who lived within the larger Jewish community and to other interested parties? Or did they hold themselves strictly aloof from the remainder of the Jewish community? It seems to me highly likely that there was an inner circle of Qumran Covenanters who devoted themselves to study and prayer and a devout life as their way of preparing the way of the Lord, while another contingent of associates lived apart from the Qumran site as the group's associates and supporters. Evidence of the presence of women and children appears in some gravesites near to the Qumran site. This may suggest that while the inner circle at Qumran was male, the community's supporters, some of whom may have lived in the vicinity or at least made regular visits to the site, would have included women as well. Or alternatively, the community could have begun as an all-male society and later changed its practice.
The Qumran Community and the Early Church

How closely did the community resemble early Christianity? I am confident that, at least thus far, no documents from Qumran tell of a messianic figure before the time of Jesus who was put to death by crucifixion, whose life and death were considered salvific for the world, and whom the community anticipated would be raised from death as the firstfruits of the Resurrection. And certainly, no evidence exists that Jesus was born at the site, or spent time there (though, of course, he may have done so), or even that John the Baptist was a community member. Claims of this sort have no support, not in the evidence that I have studied.

Even so, there are themes in the New Testament that remind one of the Covenanters. The contrast drawn between the children of light and the children of darkness, prevalent especially in the Wars Scroll of Qumran, reminds one immediately of the John literature. The anticipation of the consummating work of God is strikingly like the anticipation that pervades the New Testament literature as a whole.

And just as the Covenanters must surely have understood the nearness of the Day to be the guide and spur of their entire life of faith, so too the early Christians took this view. We have made entirely too much, in my judgment, of the notion that the earliest Christians, the early Paul included, were anticipating an almost immediate "return" of the Christ whom God had raised from death, that they had their hopes dashed and as a result had to devise another way of understanding the promise of the Last Days. Is it not much more probable that many among the early Christians, like many among the Qumran Covenanters, were thinking not alone, and probably not primarily, in chronological terms? The faithful who place their confidence in the coming consummation of God's work surely always include many who are not thinking first of when but of how, and are thinking and planning and working to live then and there as sons and daughters of the New Age.

Are there no differences between the Qumran Covenanters and the early Christians? The differences stand out for all to see. There are differences in belief, in practice, and in ethos. The Qumran community is thoroughly Jewish, with a Gnostic tinge, as early Christianity is thoroughly Jewish, with perhaps a Gnostic tinge at its fringe. Both communities believe, with rabbinical Judaism and with the Hebrew Scriptures, in God's providential care of the universe,
which by no means compromises human freedom and the meaningfulness of human decision-making. Biblical religion and the religions that derive from the Bible all make this point. How could they not, since God is the sovereign Creator of the universe and is also the one who created human beings in the divine image? Both communities, along with rabbinical Judaism and the Hebrew Scriptures, know that evil is pervasive in all of life, but even so they know that God’s Creation is and continues to be God’s and to be good. Qumran and early Christianity do indeed stress the ubiquity and power of evil in the world, and Qumran seems to hold it under stricter control than does Christianity—see Jesus’ death on the cross!

The major difference lies where we have already identified it: Qumran found it necessary to withdraw from the community for the sake of the health and salvation of the community. Some Christians later on took the same path. We have no reason to believe that the Covenanters left the Jewish community in order to save their own skins. They were seeking, by their withdrawal, to prepare the way for God to bring redemption and transformation to the life of Israel and to the world’s life. At least, we have reason to believe that this was so. Theirs was no withdrawal from a doomed civilization in order to present themselves, righteous and faithful, to the God who came to receive the righteous and dispose of the faithless and the wicked of earth.

Even so, they saw fit to withdraw and to live a life of purity and fidelity that would help to usher in God’s Day. That was not to be the Jewish or the Christian way. Rabbinical Judaism and Christianity, through the centuries, surely came to know the power and meaning of a spiritual withdrawal from the major community in order to provide a witness to that larger community. Such a witness, no doubt, has its place. But the Qumran Covenanters may have invested too much of their calling and their energies into a life marked by withdrawal. Small wonder, then, that we can read language in which the members are admonished to love all that God has elected and hate all that God has rejected (see the Rule Document). Yigael Yadin, in his fine study of the Temple Scroll, calls specific attention to the contrasting statement in the Gospel of Matthew. In fact, Yadin suggests that Jesus may have had the Qumran Covenanters in mind when he said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies . . .” (Matt. 5:43-44). No text in the Hebrew Scriptures or in the Talmud calls on
one to love one’s neighbor and hate one’s enemy. I am not entirely confident, however, that the Qumran Rule wants its members to hate (= despise) enemies; what may be intended is that one give preference to one’s neighbors. But even if that is the case, the contrast between the two kinds of teaching remains.

The Qumran Covenanters deserve our admiration. From them we have much to learn about how to cope with life in times of grave internal and external dangers. The Pharisees and their followers, the rabbis, took the more practical way, and so in different terms did the early Christians. But the Teacher of Righteousness and his followers did indeed prepare the way of the Lord. They called on a group of faithful Jews to take with deadly seriousness the nearness of the consummation of God’s work on earth. Nothing short of utter fidelity to God’s Torah was good enough for such times. This meant that one had to live at peace with one’s near neighbor in the Covenant community. One had to strive for a rigorously faithful life and, if one failed, to take one’s punishment and try again. One needed regularly to pray, to study, and to search a wide spectrum of literature, ideas, and images for guidance and inspiration. One had to see to it that, day and night, week after week and year after year, some among one’s covenant community were at prayer, some were studying or copying Scripture, some were struggling with documents and poems and visions—even including material that might in fact prove to be heretical. One observed the rituals, one did one’s share of the physical labor called for, one lived a life marked by much privation. And why? In order to witness to the nearness of God’s Day of salvation and peace with righteousness.

Christians speak of consummation as God’s act in Jesus the Christ, but they, too, with the Qumran Covenanters and with the Jews generally, seek to affirm this nearness of what we call the Kingdom or the Presence of God. Our lives are entwined with the lives of these other witnesses to the nearness of God’s Day. When we study Qumran, then, we are seeking to deepen our understanding of our colleagues in the faith. Contrasts there are between them and us; but the similarities and the kinship need underscoring as well.

The Qumran community, at its best, was a potent spiritual movement, claiming the life of faith purposed by God for the whole world and inviting a small, disciplined band to anticipate that life before it fully dawned on earth. That was a costly witness for them, but we can believe that the joys it provided more than compensated.
for the tribulations. Christian movements throughout the centuries have often affirmed the same, have withdrawn from the majority community, and often have come to grief just as the Qumran community did. Even so, the Qumran faithful, and others like them, offer a potent witness to communities and individuals who lack their rigor and their utter confidence in God.

For Further Reading

The most convenient English translation of the texts is that by Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Pelican Books).

An excellent review of the recent controversies surrounding the Scrolls is found in Herschel W. Shanks, ed., *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Random House).

The best videotape of the Scrolls is that edited and presented by Eric M. Meyers, *The Enigma of the Dead Sea Scrolls.*
The only quotation from the Bible in the constitution of the former Union of Socialist Soviet Republics is the famous verse in 2 Thessalonians: "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (3:10). It is curious that this passage has played a larger role in a communist state than it has in mainline churches around the world, where it is occasionally cited as a warning against laziness. The modern Christian understanding of 2 Thess. 3:10 separates it from its original function as a founding instruction of church members, as indicated by the explanation, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this command." When its setting in the early church is restored this and other passages in the Pauline letters disclose a tradition of voluntary communalism that sheds new light on our understanding of early Pauline congregations. What implications might this have for our understanding of North American church life?

Coming to Terms with the Resistance against Communalism

The consideration of these questions must begin with the observation that only one model is currently available to define the congregational

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Mainstream biblical scholarship tends to view the early church as defined by hierarchically organized house churches. In such churches patrons would be in charge, and they are assumed to have provided the space and provisions for the Lord’s Supper. Even passages like 2 Thess. 3:10 are interpreted in the light of such a premise. However, a communal situation of shared resources, involving regularly eating together and relying on the support of members rather than on a patron, would seem to fit the wording more naturally.

One might also expect a reference to early Christian love feasts, or at least an allusion to the Lord’s Supper, in explaining these passages. However, none of these possibilities is even mentioned in the standard commentaries on 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Mainline scholarship on the Lord’s Supper normally avoids any reference to early Christian groups actually sharing their daily meals together or any consideration of a link between the Lord’s Supper and the Love Feast. That the eating in 2 Thess 3:10 might refer to the Lord’s Supper, embedded in a practice of communal meals, is never considered. The purely symbolic meal of modern Christianity, restricted to a bite of bread and a sip of wine or juice, is tacitly presupposed for the early church, an assumption so preposterous that it is never articulated or acknowledged.

The strange constriction of mainline interpreters concerning the Lord’s Supper, the Love Feast, and various forms of eating meals together results in euphemistic explanations of the communal terms strewn throughout the Pauline letters. They are tacitly recontextualized to fit the polite circumstances of modern churches where members live in private homes and gather infrequently for worship in church buildings. Hence, in the parallel passage of 1 Thess. 4:9-12, philadelphia is translated literally as “brotherly love,” which in contemporary usage implies positive feelings of “affection” toward neighbors or other distant church members, while certainly not suggesting the presence of extended families where caring for one another could take concrete, communal form. The reference to the “work of your hands” in 1 Thess. 4:11 is understood to be an admonition to some modern form of middle-class self-reliance, aimed “against slackers who will not work” and who therefore “of necessity must have been economically dependent on others.” Paul’s goal is thus seen to promote “economic self-sufficiency,” which for the modern interpreter and reader seems to imply a capitalistic economy where each family unit should take care of itself. The possibility that
Paul's language might imply communal sharing of the proceeds of the "work of your hands" to provide for a Love Feast is not even considered.

Similarly the references in other letters to "sharing what you have" and being "generous" are construed in terms of occasionally giving alms to the poor, understood to be separate from one's own self-sufficient family. The term koindnia, the technical expression in Greek for sharing things in common, is reduced to "fellowship," which in modern churchly use implies friendly discourse between distant church members who actually have a minimal level of interdependence. This euphemistic tradition prevents modern readers from questioning whether the early Pauline Christians were as individualistic and politely distant as mainline Christians in the modern era or whether their ways of expressing a transformed life may have contained communal elements suppressed by standardized interpretation.

The resistance to a communalist understanding by North American scholars is all the more remarkable when we consider the role of communes in our own nation's history. Mark Holloway traces the impact of the Pilgrims at Plymouth; the Anabaptists; the Mennonites; the Amish; the Labadists; various Bohemian, Moravian, and Baptist experiments; the Quakers and the Shakers; the Rappites and Zoarites; Owen's New Harmony colony; Alcott's Brook Farm; Noyes' Oneida community; the Fourier communities; the Amanites and the Hutterites. The last-mentioned group began among peasants and the urban poor in and around Zurich during the Reformation and fled to Moravia, then to Russia, and finally to North America in the 1870s, where they have expanded to around four hundred agricultural communes, thus constituting the longest-lasting communal organizations in modern times. Their worship centers in the remembrance of the martyrdom of their early members in Europe.

Many of the other utopian groups began in Europe and found they could not flourish there because of harassment by officials which lasted through the 19th century. The cultural environment in Europe remains somewhat hostile to communal ideas down to the present day; aside from monasteries, convents, and deaconess homes associated with mainstream churches, there were relatively few Christian communes in Europe until the modest flowering of house churches and base communities beginning in the 1960s.

Our culture has also witnessed vital analogues to the common
eating patterns of the early church. Many churches still practice some form of the Love Feast or common meal as part of their regular church life. One also thinks of the day-long "Brush Arbor" and "Cane Break" services with picnic meals shared communally by black Christians during slavery times; of the extended periods of eating and living together during open-air revivals since the time of the Great Awakening; of eating together at barn raisings or Sunday school picnics or ice cream socials; of the traditional potluck dinners in churches all over the country. The difference with the older European practice is evident in every town in North America, because churches here tend to have fellowship halls with kitchens. Another distinctive North American development is the creation of huge church campuses, with recreational and educational facilities and a wide range of social services and programs that allow members to live virtually separately from the outside world.

I think it is time that North American scholars begin to wonder whether the communal forms flourishing all around them, often explicitly derived from what religious leaders thought were New Testament precedents, may not in fact have their historical as well as their ideological origins in early Christianity. Could passages in 1 and 2 Thessalonians reflect communal forms of church life? Is the model of a house church, with its hierarchical structure and its reliance on philanthropy rather than mutual sharing, really adequate to account for all the data in the Pauline letters? Could the creation of communal church structures account in part for the extraordinary appeal that Christianity held out to the urban underclass in the Greco-Roman world?

Tenement Churches alongside House Churches

There is indisputable evidence for the traditional picture of house churches in early Christianity, starting with references to the "church in the house" of particular patrons (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; see also 1 Cor. 1:11; 16:15). Although the word *oikos* can refer to the atrium of a Roman villa, a "Peristyl" Greek house, a Hellenistic style of building with rooms around a central courtyard, or even an apartment in a tenement building, most studies of house churches assume a building owned by a patron, somewhat analogous to the situation of middle- or upper-class housing in contemporary Europe or North
Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's calculation of the maximum size of 30 to 40 for a house church congregation rested on the premise of a freestanding villa. His more recent work considers the possibility that the shop space on the ground floor of a tenement building might be used for a "house church" such as Prisca and Aquila sponsored in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome; it might accommodate a group of 10 to 20 believers.

The model of a house church presupposes a patron or patroness who owns or rents the space used by the Christian community. A number of such persons are mentioned in the Pauline letters, including Phoebe, Erastus, Crispus, Stephanus, Gaius, Philemon, Appia, and Nympha. A house church is thus assimilated into the hierarchical social structure of the Greco-Roman world, in which heads of houses exercise legal and familial domination over their relatives and slaves.

In the words of Wayne Meeks, "The head of the household, by normal expectations of the society, would exercise some authority over the group and would have some legal responsibility for it. The structure of the oikos was hierarchical, and contemporary political and moral thought regarded the structure of superior and inferior roles as basic to the well-being of the whole society." This model of a house church has led to the widely accepted theory of Gerd Theissen that such churches were marked by "love-patriarchalism" in which the hierarchical social order is retained while mutual respect and love are being fostered by patrons serving as leaders of the congregations in their houses.

But studies in Thessalonians and Romans led me to question whether the house church model was adequate to explain all of the evidence about church life in the Pauline letters. I was particularly impressed by the study of Roman Christianity by Peter Lampe. Using a topographic method based on the coincidence between five different types of archeological and literary evidence, Lampe showed that two of the most likely areas for early Christian churches were in Trastevere and the section on the Appian Way around the Porta Capena inhabited by the immigrants. In neither area was the situation conducive to the development of "house churches."

Lampe describes Trastevere and the district around the Porta Capena as swampy areas where the poorest population of Rome lived. "Trastevere was the harbor and worker quarter; it contained harbor workers . . . laborers in the many warehouses, seamen and brick and tile workers . . . potters . . . millers working with imported grain . . .

TENEMENT CHURCHES AND PAULINE LOVE FEASTS
tanners and leatherworkers ... (p. 38). Roman statistics indicate that
Trastevere was the most densely populated section of the city with the
highest proportion of high-rise slum dwellings in the city. Lampe also
investigated the statistics concerning bakeries and finds that
Trastevere has the lowest number per square kilometer of any section
of Rome, indicating very low socio-economic conditions. Trastevere
was full of immigrants out of the East and was the site of mystery
religion shrines and temples. This section, which lay across the Tiber
from the rest of Rome, was left untouched by the Roman fire, which
may account in part for the later scapegoating of Christians by Nero
(p. 35).

The area around the Porta Capena was a damp valley with heavy
traffic into the city. Lampe provides this description: “The quarter is
populated by traders, handworkers and transport workers. . . .
Transport work is night work in Rome. . . . An indication of the social
status of transport workers, donkey drivers, and carriers is indicated
by the fact that hardly a cemetery inscription refers to such
profession” (p. 43). To summarize, “In the two regions of Trastevere
and Appian Way/Porta Capena the lowest population lived, so that an
inference about the Christians living there is easy” (p. 52).

Corresponding to the description of these slum districts where the
bulk of the early Christians lived is Lampe’s analysis of the social
background of the names of persons greeted in Romans 16.
Two-thirds of the names indicate Greek rather than Latin background
and hence confirm the immigrant status. After a careful and rather
conservative estimate, he also concludes that “. . . of the 13 persons
about whom something definite can be said, more than two-thirds
point with great certainty to slave origins.” 19 Here as elsewhere in the
eyear church, the bulk of the members consisted of slaves and former
slaves, with the rest coming largely from lower-class handworkers.

An even more compelling inference can be made when one
analyzes the lists of members or leaders in two of the five groupings
Paul identifies in Romans. In Rom. 16:14 Paul refers to “the
brothers,” who are together with five persons: Asyncritus, Phlegon,
Hermes, Patrobus, and Hermas. These names indicate a thoroughly
Gentile membership and ethos, with a mix of slave, freedmen, and
Greek immigrants evident. As Heikki Solin has shown, persons with
Greek names in Rome reflect a social background that was almost
exclusively slave or former slave. 20 Since all five names are Greek
and associated with slavery, it is likely that this church consisted
entirely of persons of low social status. This status makes it highly likely that the church was located in one of the tenements of Trastevere or Porta Capena. Since none of the five names appears to be playing the role of patron for the group, the social structure probably differed from that of the traditional house church. The selection of the title brothers for this group indicates an egalitarian ethos, which would be appropriate for a group without a patron.

Rom. 16:15 refers to another Christian cell that also falls outside the traditional model of a house church under the supervision of a patron. It is identified with the title "the saints," perhaps indicating an affinity with the moral legacy of conservative Jewish Christianity. The names of its leaders or major participants, however, are Greek: Philologus, Julia, Nereus, Nereus's sister, and Olympas. All five appear to be either slaves or former slaves, so that this group would also be an excellent prospect for placement in the slums of Trastevere or Porta Capena.

When one considers the housing situation in the slum districts of Rome and other urban centers during the first century, the plausibility of the house church model for such groupings as the "saints" and "brethren" of Rom. 16:14-15 is further diminished. It is now clear that the majority of early Christian converts lived in the apartment buildings called insulae in the inner cities rather than in private villas. The studies by Frier and Packer show that 90 percent of the free population and an even higher percentage of the slave population in the cities of the empire lived in the upper floors of insulae buildings. The upper portions of the four- and five-story apartment blocks typically contained tiny cubicles of about ten square meters, representing the space for one family. A kind of vertical zoning was characteristic, with larger apartments for upper- or middle-class renters on lower floors and slaves or freedmen crowded into the upper floors. These slum buildings contained no central heating, no running water, and no toilet facilities. Occupants were often fed from a common kitchen; others cooked on charcoal braziers in their rooms. The population density in these districts is difficult for moderns to imagine; John Stambaugh has estimated a population density of 300 per acre for the residential areas of the city of Rome, almost 2.5 times higher than twentieth-century Calcutta and 3 times as high as Manhattan Island.

The question that I have begun to ask is whether church groups consisting entirely of members living in tenement buildings and lacking the sponsorship of a patron may have conducted their services
within the insula itself, either using one of the workshop areas on the ground floor or using space rented by Christian neighbors in upper floors, clearing away the temporary partitions between cubicles to create room for the meeting. In either case the church would not be meeting in space provided by a patron but rather in rented or shared space provided by the members themselves.

I propose we begin thinking about the possibility of “tenement churches,” in addition to the traditional concept of “house churches,” as forms of early Christian communities. On the basis of the evidence in Romans, one would infer that the class structure of tenement churches was mono-dimensional. In contrast to house churches that have an upper- or middle-class patron along with his or her slaves, family, friends and others, the tenement churches consisted entirely of the urban underclass, primarily slaves and former slaves. Lacking a patron who would function as a leader, the pattern of leadership appears to be charismatic and egalitarian in tenement churches. The two groups greeted in Romans have five persons named who are probably the charismatic leaders of the community. If the persons named are the renters of family living spaces in the tenement building rather than charismatic leaders of the group, the social pattern still appears to be egalitarian. No one of the five appears to have a position of prominence over the others.

In such a community, who provides the economic support, the resources for the Lord’s Supper, and the means for hospitality and charity characteristic for early Christianity? The system of love-patriarchalism would certainly not be relevant in a group of slaves and former slaves residing in a densely packed tenement building. Since similar circumstances are implicit in the Galatian, Thessalonian, and Philippian letters, this question cannot be restricted to peculiar conditions within Roman Christianity. Some other system must be implicit in these letters, perhaps one that has been overlooked by an interpretive tradition that, as we have seen, is instinctively hostile to communalism and thus inclined to a euphemistic construal of the relevant terms.

The Pauline Love Feast as a Communal Meal

The path toward an alternative to the concept of love-patriarchalism in early Christian churches has been available since 1951. Bo Reicke’s
classic study of the early Christian systems of diaconal service and the love feast showed that a broad stream of early Christians celebrated the eucharist in the context of a common meal through the fourth century. The direct references to the "Agape" in John 13:1; Jude 12; Ignatius, Smyrna 6:2; 7:1; and 8:2 as well as the discussions of common meals in Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 11 show that the eucharistic liturgy was combined with diaconal service, which was understood as serving meals in celebration with the faith community. Whereas researchers have often attempted to separate the sacramental celebration from the common meal, Reicke showed that early Christian sources, beginning with the biblical evidence, point towards the "single Christian sacrament of table fellowship" (p. 14). The evidence justifies calling all such celebrations in the early church "love feasts." Such meals were marked by eschatological joy at the presence of a new age and of a Master who had triumphed over the principalities and powers. Early Christian writers were ambivalent toward this practice, however, because some Christians tended toward excesses of zealous impatience with the continuation of a fallen world and sometimes engaged in licentious behavior. At times an overly realized eschatology in some of the agape meals led to excessive enthusiasm and conflicts in Paul's churches.

The close association between "agape" and the communal meal documented by Reicke leads me to wonder whether the frequent admonitions "to love the brethren" in the Pauline letters may not have been intended to encourage support and participation in the sacramental celebration. In groups organized as house churches, the primary admonition would obviously be to the patrons, encouraging their involvement in love-patriarchalism. But in the context of groups organized as tenement churches, to whom would these admonitions of love be directed? Certainly not to patrons, because they are not present within the community itself. I think we should consider developing a second interpretive category to be used alongside "love-patriarchalism," namely "love-communalism." If one prefers to avoid the awkwardness of this Germanic sounding expression, perhaps it would be better to speak of "agapic communalism" as the ethical framework suitable for the early Pauline tenement churches. The provisions for the meal in that context would have to come from the sharing of the members. But this is all quite theoretical. Is there direct evidence anywhere in the Pauline letters for this kind of communal support for the love feast?
There is in fact a passage in 2 Thessalonians that could provide such evidence: the verse cited in the Soviet constitution. I believe a case can be made that the form, content, and background of this verse, "If anyone does not want to work, let [him/her] not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10b), point in the direction of a communally supported system of love feasts in the church at Thessalonica. But in addition to the hostility against communalism, the lack of a form-critical analysis of 2 Thess. 3:10b in standard commentaries or in specialized investigations of New Testament forms has kept scholars from considering such implications. The discussions of this verse in commentaries and other investigations tend to understand it as a general admonition to maintain a modern-sounding system of individual self-support. A recent study even argues that the author wishes to "wean such persons from the welfare syndrome" of relying on a patron for economic support. Such comments ignore the distinctive form and function of this saying as well as the relevant communal parallels in the ancient world.

The form of 2 Thess. 3:10 is a typical example of casuistic law, found in various settings in the ancient world. The first half of the saying describes the nature of the offense and the second half provides the legal remedy or consequence. Modified versions of this form are found elsewhere in the Pauline letters, setting forth general rules for congregational behavior (Rom. 14:15; 15:27; 1 Cor. 7:13, 15, 21; 8:13; 9:11; 11:6), but there are no exact parallels in the letters to this classic legal form in which the offense is described in the conditional clause and the sanction in the second clause. Since the sanction implies communal discipline rather than some judicial punishment enacted by an official agency, this saying should be classified as a community regulation.

Instructive parallels to the content of this particular regulation have been found in the Qumran scrolls where the sanctions for violating the rules of the community include exclusion from the table of the "pure," the reduction of food allotments, or excommunication from the community (see 1QS 6:24–7:24). The regulations of Hellenistic and Greco-Roman guilds also prescribe penalties of exclusion from the common meal or from the guild itself for certain offenses, though the payment of fines is a more usual punishment. Deprivation of food was also used in boarding schools to enforce proper academic performance. These and other examples reflect settings in which communities are eating their meals together. In fact one could
generalize that social coercion through deprivation of food in the ancient world presupposes a communal system of some kind. None of the parallels reflects the premise of independent self-support of individuals and families that dominates the interpretation of this verse in mainline churches and standard investigations.

The content of the offense in 2 Thess. 3:10b relates to the unwillingness to work, not to the ability or availability of employment. The verb want in this context implies conscious refusal to accept employment. The sanction is described with a two-word imperative: mede esthieto ("let not eat!"), implying that the point is deprivation of food as such, not temporary exclusion from a particular meal. If the regulation is to be effective, the sanction must be enforceable. This leads us to the question of the social setting implicit in the sanction. The community must have had jurisdiction over the regular eating of its members, which would only have been possible if the community was participating in eating together on an ongoing basis. This inference is confirmed by the parallels from Qumran and the Greco-Roman world, all of which presuppose a situation of common meals organized by the community. It would be impossible to enforce this sanction if the members of the congregation ate all their meals in their own private homes or tenement spaces. There would be no reason to refer to eating in an absolute sense if the sanction merely related to exclusion from occasional sacramental celebrations. The formulation of this community regulation thus demands a love feast system organized on a regular, frequent basis.

Assuming that literary forms reflect specific types of settings, both the creation and the enforcement of this community regulation require very specific conditions. Casuistic law in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East indicates that such rules emerge from the process of corporate jurisprudence rather than individual literary ingenuity. Casuistic law has no authorships in that sense. "These casuistic principles are therefore not, by origin, laws deliberately composed; their authority rests on tradition and custom; they are common law." These considerations make it appear unlikely that the author of 2 Thessalonians simply composed this community regulation. If Paul was the author of 2 Thessalonians, an even stronger case can be made that he did not create the regulation, especially since the form of his advice on community issues never otherwise follows the precise casuistic form of a communal regulation. 2 Thess. 3:10 probably arose out of previous conflicts of a very specific type. The creation of the
regulation required communities that were regularly eating meals together, for which the willingness or unwillingness to work was a factor of sufficient importance to require regulation, and in which the power to deprive members of food was in fact present. The same three conditions would be required for the author of 2 Thessalonians to advance this regulation in the particular context of conflicts in the Thessalonian churches. The form and content of this community rule, therefore, indicate the existence of such conditions both in earlier congregations and in the audience to which 2 Thessalonians was addressed—whether written by Paul in the early 50s or by a deuto-Pauline writer in the '90s. A system of Christian communes was required in which meals were being shared on a regular basis and for which the refusal to work posed a significant threat.

Given the references to “brotherly love” (1 Thess. 4:9) and “well doing” (2 Thess. 3:13) in close proximity to the discussion of labor for bread, it appears likely that the food for the love feasts in Thessalonica was being provided by community members rather than by patrons. If the meals were being provided by patrons, it would be relatively immaterial whether particular guests were gainfully employed or not. Another social structure is implied by the form of this regulation, one in which food was being contributed by the members. In that kind of structure, whenever able-bodied persons participated in the common meal but refused to add their share, working members needed to work harder to provide more food or receive less nourishment themselves. This presents a morale problem of such a scale as to jeopardize the entire system. The form-critical assessment of the community rule thus points to the social structure of a “tenement church” rather than to the traditional “house church,” not only in Thessalonica but in those other early Christian communities where the regulation was formed into “common law.”

The social importance of the regulation for the Thessalonian community is confirmed by the introductory comments in 2 Thess. 3:10: “For when we were with you, we used to give you this command.…” The imperfect verbs point to repetitive instruction, which would have been appropriate only if the instruction were actually crucial to the life of the community. If 2 Thessalonians is a pseudonymous letter, its author apparently wished to present this command as foundational in early Christian catechism. The introductory comments assume an ever larger significance if Paul was in fact the author of 2 Thessalonians because the founding visit was...
cut off unexpectedly before the formation of the congregation was deemed complete. This community regulation must have been of primary relevance for the daily life of the congregation if it had been repeatedly stressed during so short a founding visit (1 Thess. 2:17). In either case a tenement church structure in which communal meals were being provided by the members themselves is the only form of early Christian congregational life for which such instruction could actually be considered absolutely essential.

I believe these and other Pauline churches were devising various ways to continue the communalism of the original Jesus movement and of the experiment of koinonia in Acts 2. Some churches provided resources through patronage and others through egalitarian sharing, but in each case, there was a sense that a new age had dawned and that Jesus was present in the feast. In his recent book on the historical Jesus, John Dominic Crossan writes about "the heart of the original Jesus movement, a shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources." He insists "that its materiality and spirituality, its facticity and symbolism cannot be separated."35 I think the same could be said for the Pauline love feasts in their various forms. They fused sacramental life with regular sharing of material resources in the context of celebrative meals; they joined ecstatic joy at the presence of a new age by forming new families of brothers and sisters to cope with the poverty and alienation in the slums of the inner cities; they united care for the poor with worshipful celebration of Christ as the Lord of the Banquet.

Concluding Reflections on the North American Scene

The development of Pauline tenement churches with a distinctive form of agapeaic communalism constitutes one of what Bernard Lee and Michael Cowan have termed the "dangerous memories" of Christian solidarity that could help us cope with the isolating maladies in this country: "the Christian ethos demands that we challenge any form of individualism that would tolerate inequitable distribution of the world's goods. Such a challenge is a redemption of the individualism that violates the web of relationships which sustains us, that fragments the body of Christ."36 Reflection on the Pauline love feasts could stimulate the contemporary church to develop viable forms of economic cooperation, to seek new ways of integrating the
Lord's Supper into revitalized forms of potluck meals. It may suggest new strategies for the underclass in North American cities to begin coping together, since the patronage system of governmental aid has become so alienating and unreliable. It could lead current church leaders to retrieve the impulses of North American communalism and discover new ways to integrate them into the now faltering mainstream of congregational life.

Notes


5. See Wanamaker’s caption for 2 Thess 3:7-15 in ibid., 279-290.


13. For example, Floyd V. Filson uses the model of the freestanding house at Dura-Europos as the basis for understanding house churches in “The Significance of


17. See Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, tr. J. H. Schütz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 11, 107: “This love-patriarchalism takes social differences for granted but ameliorates them through an obligation of respect and love, an obligation imposed upon those who are socially stronger. From the weaker are required subordination, fidelity, and esteem.”


24. See Branick, *House Church*, 71, for a statement that meeting in such spaces would be impossible, which reveals the overwhelming weight of the traditional model of a patriarchal house church on the imagination of current scholars.


27. B. W. Winter, “If Any Man Does Not Wish to Work...” A Cultural and Historical Setting for 2 Thessalonians 3:6-16,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 40 (1989):309; see also p. 314: “Christians were not only to command the respect of outsiders by being self-sufficient, but they were able to seek the welfare of their city by having the wherewithal to do good to others.” For a critique of this interpretation, see John S.


29. Klaus Berger discusses casuistic formulations under the rubric of "Congregational Order," but does not deal with 2 Thess 3:10 in Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments (Heidelberg: Quelle and Meyer, 1984), 214-16.


31. An example from Lucian, Parastite, 13, is provided by BAGD, Lexicon, 313.


34. Gerhard Liedke, Gestalt und Bezeichnung alttestamentlicher Rechtsätze. Eine formgeschichtlich-terminologische Studie, WMANT 39 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1971), 5f; cited by Boecker, Law, 153-154. Liedke shows that even in instances where Israelite law replicates Ancient Near Eastern jurisprudence there is evidence of its reformulation in judicial situations; see the summary in Rechtsatze, 59.


Leadership Patterns in Central American Base Christian Communities: Implications for the North American Church

My interest in Base Christian Communities began in 1971, when I visited the Roman Catholic parish of San Miguelito in Panama City. After Vatican II (1962-65), a group of Chicago priests had gone there to work with campesinos (peasants) who had come from rural areas into a sprawling shantytown. The priests went door to door, asking families what they wanted them to do. Then, working primarily with men and couples, they developed Bible studies which encouraged reflection and action to change their world. As a result, the people had staged a march on the presidential palace, demanding materials to build streets and schools and to install water, sewers, and electrical service. At the time of my visit, the priests were planning to leave and were putting leadership in the hands of the laity.

In the years since, I have visited Base Communities in Cuernavaca, Mexico, in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, and in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. In April-May, 1992, we lived with the Valdez family, members of the San Pablo Apóstol parish in Managua, where the first Base Communities in Nicaragua were established. (It was from this parish that Ernesto Cardenal got his training to found...
the famous Solentiname community.) We attended Base Communities which were being coordinated by a Mexican Jesuit, Fr. Arnaldo Zenteno, and his associate, Sr. Margarita Zavala. This parish had been founded in the late 1960s by Fr. Jose de la Jara, who had taken three couples to San Miguelito for training.

While at home alone one day, I took a phone message that Fr. de la Jara had died in California. That Sunday, the parish held a magnificent requiem mass for him. The church was packed, and the Nicaragua Folk Mass was used. It was an inspiring and celebrative occasion, with many testimonials as to all Fr. de la Jara had meant to them and how their lives had been changed by the Base Community experience.

Before leaving Central America, I visited Panama once again and talked with Fr. Conrado San Jur, one of the Panamanian priests who had been trained by the original Chicagoans. He told me about Fr. Donald Headley, one of the founding Chicago priests, who was now pastoring on the North side of Chicago. So, to bring the story full circle, after returning home, I went to see Fr. Headley and learned of the Base Community origins from him. He gave me a copy of the manual which the priests first used in the Basic Course of Christian Initiation for the Base Communities in Panama.

The first session of this course, designed for dialogue, begins with these questions: Is there injustice in the world? What types of injustice do you know? How does injustice work? What effects does it produce? Whom does it affect? Are we part of the injustice? The intent here is to raise people's awareness of their involvement in the whole matrix of injustice. The session next moves to a Biblical reflection on the story of Cain and Abel. This is the first lesson in the first Base Community in Central America.

The three words—Ecclesial Base Communities (acronym CEBs)—are carefully chosen. Community refers to a quality of life, people relating to one another in intimate ways. "Community provides the arena for individuals to develop a sense of being related to and in touch with other human persons." The first purpose of the Base Communities was to engage people with each other. They had been oppressed partly by being divided, so just bringing them together and developing care and support for one another was a major step. Ecclesial refers to the "specifically religious and ecclesiastical character" of the CEBs.

The CEB participants are very much aware that their groups are
centered in faith . . . [and] see their activities . . . as a concrete expression of responding to the gospel. . . . They do not intend to provide an experience of church that is an alternative to membership in the institutional church. Rather [it] . . . is seen as the experience of that institutional church itself, but on a smaller level.3

Finally, de Base means of the people, the poor, the masses at the base of the socio-economic pyramid.

So Ecclesial Base Communities are intimate, salvific groups of the poor, meeting together as church to reflect on the Bible, discover its relevance for their daily lives, and decide on action to transform their circumstances.

Mortimer Arias describes a Base Community as:

a discipleship community of twenty-five to thirty-five people . . . [having these] common elements with other Christian cells throughout history: Bible study, hymn singing, catechetical instruction, fellowship, sharing of experiences and concerns.

The focus of this study, however, is not on the Base Communities per se but on their patterns of leadership. How does leadership function in the Base Community?

When I arrived in Nicaragua, I told Fr. Arnaldo that I wanted to meet líderes (leaders). His immediate response was a soft rebuke: “Don’t use that word; in Spanish it connotes the kind of domination and control that is not appropriate for Base Communities. Instead, use the word, coordinador or coordinadora.” Then he asked, “With whom have you talked so far?” When I replied, “With priests, religious, and laity,” he responded with another correction: “You should say that the other way around.” That represents his whole style—not to be an “up-front” leader but rather to stay in the background as a support and resource for the people.

My basic discovery in this study is that THE LEADER IS THE PEOPLE. This will become clear as we examine the aims, characteristics, and methods of Base Community leaders.

The Aims of Leadership

Leadership in the Base Communities has four aims—memoria, evangelización integral, signo or sacramento, and conversión. Each
is introduced, as are the qualities and means of leadership that follow, with a salient quotation from Archbishop Oscar Romero. Romero’s style of leadership is very much a model for all that goes on in the CEBs of Central America.

La Memoria. The Base Communities have recovered the memory of the early church and have reconstituted in the present day the first-century communities of the poor and marginalized. In a striking book called The Memory of the Christian People, Eduardo Hoornaert makes a strong case for the early church being a broad anonymous people’s movement in which mission and evangelism were carried out by nameless people. The apostles, the publicized leaders, were not the primary force behind that expansive movement. Rather, it was the “am ha ‘aretz,” the “people of the earth” in the New Testament, and the later Marcionites and Montanists—small communities of oppressed, exploited people.

Because the experience of the poor in Central America is parallel to that of the marginalized in the Roman Empire, their form of being church is very similar. Because the Christian memory is subconscious in the experience of the oppressed, they express Christian community in similar ways in every era. Leadership in the Central American Base Communities emerges out of the base—the nameless poor—in ways strikingly like that in the first-century tenement churches. And thus the Christian memory is being recovered and reduplicated, as the stories and examples given below will indicate.

Evangelización Integral. The second aim of Base Community leadership is holistic evangelism. In the year of the Quincentenary commemorating the arrival of Columbus, there were big banners hanging from cathedrals all over Central America proclaiming “500 Years of Evangelization,” which I took to mean the Christianization of the indigenous people. But what the Base Communities understand by evangelización integral is relating the gospel to all of life. Mortimer Arias puts it this way:

They do not separate evangelization from social action. . . . Evangelization and human development do go together! . . . This is not numerical church growth. . . . but it is evangelization—making the gospel real and effective in their lives and their community.
I saw two impressive instances. The first was an affirmation by a Guatemalan church of the indigenous Mayan culture, relating the Biblical message to the Mayan traditions. At the Easter vigil in the Parish of Sagrada Familia in Quezaltenango, after the reading of the Genesis creation story, the Mayan account of creation was read as well. Then down the aisle came three indigenous women in full costume, carrying baskets on their heads—one filled with earth, one with wood, and one with vegetables—placing them at the altar, indicating full acceptance of their tradition, here on a Christian holy day. Holistic evangelization was integrating local belief and culture with Christian faith.

The other example was the way the Base Communities were at the heart of their neighborhoods. Nicaragua—and the rest of Central America and the Third World for that matter—is rapidly being devastated by the economic policies of “structural adjustment,” imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank as condition for receiving development loans, this package requires governments to reduce human services like health and education, and to discharge civil servants into the expanding unemployment pool in order to pay interest on their international debts. The loans then must be invested in export industry and agriculture in order to increase their balance of payments (and, not so incidentally, make the rich richer in both their countries and ours). None of this contributes to the well-being of the people. It is a “war against the poor,” in which just as many people are dying as in the former shooting wars in that region.

Nicaragua is such a different place than it was three years ago, before the election. The vitality, enthusiasm, and hope among the masses of people have vanished, replaced by growing unemployment, malnutrition, petty crime, and despair. But what is holding it together are the Base Communities, each made up of just a handful of people, mostly women. They are sustaining the infrastructure that makes the difference between life and death—literally! They provide a soy meal every day for children and mothers. They conduct inoculation campaigns, sewing classes, vocational training, and catechesis. They check baby weights for signs of malnutrition. They are holding life together. That is evangelización integral!

Signo, Sacramento. Leadership in the Base Communities also seeks to be a sign, a sacrament. Renny Golden’s The Hour of the Poor, the Hour of Women, gives reports and interviews with leaders of Base
Communities and people's organizations in El Salvador. One was a woman named Sylvia who was later killed in an army attack on a clinic where she was working. She had been a nun but had left her order because she was being restricted from involvement with the people. She and others formed their own unofficial order and, in the presence of the Base Communities and Archbishop Romero, took vows which they themselves had written. Here is a part of Sylvia's vow:

*In a society whose ideals are power, possession, and pleasure, I pray that I may be a sign of what it really means to love. I will do my best to be a sign that Christ Jesus alone is Lord of history, that He is present here in our midst, and that He is capable of inspiring a love mightier than our own insights, mightier than all the economic and political forces, mightier than death itself.*

This is being a sign, a sacrament, of Christ's sacrificial giving of his life for the redemption of all.

Conversión. A fourth aim of Base Community leadership is conversion. Base Communities are associated primarily with social and political involvement, but they focus on individual conversion as well. Story after story of the early days of the Base Communities speaks about the three demons they were battling against—fatalism, *machismo*, and booze. People were being oppressed and enslaved by these in very individual ways.

One example of an individual conversion with social consequences, found in Tedfilo Cabestrero's *Revolutionaries for the Gospel*, is Teodulo Baez, who says:

*I was a Barabbas, a thief, an exploiter, and a scoundrel. . . . Anything they might have said about me, hell, it was true. [But] now . . . as a Christian, I'm a revolutionary—all the way, dammit! . . . I . . . support this revolutionary process, since . . . it's the first time we Christians in Nicaragua can really go to work and act like real Christians. Because this is a process of liberation for the poor.*

Baez was an absentee landowner. After his conversion, when he went to visit his farm, he saw with new eyes the conditions in which his workers were living. So he gathered them together and announced that he was giving his 500-acre farm to them collectively. This is how
serious he was about living out his newfound faith. He cites Jesus’ parable about “doing to the least of these” as his motivation.

One of the three couples taken by Jose de la Jara for training in San Miguelito was Jenny and Luciano. They returned to develop the first Base Communities in Nicaragua. After they came back, they got their wedding picture out and hung it back up on the wall. Their experience had transformed their marriage. When I entered their home, she began the conversation, while he went to the kitchen to prepare the drinks, which is almost unheard of in that culture.

This kind of thing happened over and over again. People were converted to a lifestyle very similar to that of the first-century Christians, which emphasized, among other radically countercultural values, the equality of men and women.

These, then, as I have discerned them, are the aims of leadership in the Base Communities—re-embodifying the Christian memory, evangelization that integrates gospel with culture and society, being a sign and sacrament of Christ’s redeeming presence, and conversion that transforms all of life.

The Qualities of Leaders

Four qualities of leaders stand out in my experience with people of the CEBs—mística (spiritual discernment), entregado/a or compromiso/a (commitment), autoridad (authority of an empowering kind), and esperanza (hope).

La Mística. As there is no adequate English definition of mística, it is best described in stories. In a little out-of-the-way place in El Salvador called Tierra Blanca, I met Padre Pedro, who had been in hiding for eight years out of fear for his life because of his leadership of Base Communities in the 1970s. He had only six weeks earlier come to this area which had never before had a resident priest. He was beginning to work with them, organizing Bible study, a directiva, an agricultural cooperative, and other structures for survival and postwar reconstruction.

In our conversation Padre Pedro referred to la mística in a way very similar to its use in the moving book about Base Communities, Faith of a People, written by a priest with the pseudonym, Pablo Galdamez. As we were leaving, I was told that he indeed was the
author. So here I had met the man who had written the book that had touched me deeply! In that interview, Pedro described la mística in these words:

*It is a spiritual knowledge or discernment. God the Spirit creates the new person, gives life, appears in the people. Priests, religious, and catechists may train the people for leadership, but not for mística. It is to know what God is doing in the present time, to discern where the Spirit is working. The Spirit helps people to be born anew, speak out work for justice and peace... Mística opens our horizons to the new.*

On the basis of her interviews with women Base Community leaders in El Salvador, Renny Golden speaks of la mística in this way:

*It is as ordinary as sacrifice for others, as inexplicable as the appearance of insurgent hope in those moments when... [we] would predict despair or paralyzing grief. Mística is not mystical in a waxy, metaphysical way... It is always historically embedded... Mística is the soul of the poor, uniquely revealed in women.*

Nine of us—six Salvadorans, our guide, my wife and myself—rode in a six-passenger jeep several miles off the highway over an incredibly rough road, up the slopes of Mount Guazapa to the village of Tres Ceibas, which had been completely destroyed by army helicopters and bombs. The six, who had all lived in that village, showed us the tunnel where they had hidden, the spots where their relatives had died, and the ruins of their church with only the cross still standing. They stood in the rubble that had been their homes and proclaimed, "This is our house!" You could see them rise up with pride, even though it was in ruins. And they were determined to return and rebuild—their village and their lives. We were profoundly moved. That was mística!

On another occasion, we met Alejandro and Exaltacion, the parents of Octavio Ortiz, the third priest murdered by the military in El Salvador. They had lost two other sons in the struggle. Alejandro, over 70 years old, was a lay Delegate of the Word. They were humble campesinos; their faith exuded from them. They had suffered greatly, living in poverty in San Salvador, having escaped with their lives from their rural village in the war zone. And yet the courage, the hope that they expressed to us was incredible. This was mística!
This essay could have begun with the confession, “I have been converted.” For I have, in a profound way. I will never be the same. It happened through meeting people like this, with mistica. They have no education, they have not travelled, they are not sophisticated. But they have a faith that is so deep and a hope that is so inspiring. What they have is mistica.

Entregadola. Compromisola. A second leadership quality is entregadola or compromisola. Both words refer to commitment, but entregadola has a deeper meaning, which is to deliver, to hand over. Leaders have given themselves over to God and to the people. Compromiso is translated commitment, and also means obligation, engagement, or agreement.

When Renny Golden asked a woman named Reina, “What does it mean for you to be entregada?” she replied: “It means to respond to a call ... [not] a direct call from God, [but] a call from our fellow human beings. It simply means to give the necessary response to a situation that you may be facing at any given moment. Our ministry is to identify with the people, to live and share with the people.”

We lived for a month in Managua with the Valdez family, who are entregada. They are Christian revolutionaries, active both in the San Pablo Apóstol Parish and the Sandinista Neighborhood Committee in their barrio. Carmen, the mother, runs a preschool for barrio children. Tatiana, the teenage daughter, organized a day of polio vaccinations. The father, Rafael, manages rural development projects all over Nicaragua. An obvious sign of their compromiso was the steady stream of neighborhood people who came through their house, seeking counsel, encouragement, loans, even a meal. And they were always available. They are exhausted, but they are available. They are entregada.

La Autoridad. The authority exhibited by Base Community leaders is very different from what is common in an authoritarian church and culture. Here again Romero is the model. What they mean, as Letty Russell puts it in Household of Freedom, is an authority that authorizes, the authority of partnership, the authority in community not over community. It is the authority of a servant, of Jesus, who “taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:29) and who washed his disciples feet (John 13:1–11). It is the authority of giving one’s life without fear.

Golden tells of Maria Teresa Tula, who was picked up by
Salvadoran security agents, tortured, gang raped, and sent to prison. In response to international pressure on human rights abuses, President Duarte declared an amnesty and held a press conference to introduce the released prisoners. Maria grasped the microphone... denounced the Salvadoran government for its violation of human rights, for supporting a military that had caused so much death and suffering. She couldn't be stopped. The president and military attachés were helpless... Then Maria Teresa Tulu left the stage and went to another women cradling an infant. She returned with the baby held above her head saying to all present: "Here by the grace of God is my son, Alejandro, born in Hopango [prison], the seed of violence, named for joy. Proof that good comes from suffering."  

This courage, grounded in faith and suffering, is the source of authority in the Ecclesial Base Communities.

La Esperanza. A fourth quality of leadership is esperanza, or hope. The hope exhibited by the people of Central America in the midst of their poverty and misery is nothing short of amazing. Their situation really depressed me, and the only thing that saved me was their hope. Cristina Rios, the coordinadora of a Managua barrio, lives in a little house on an unpaved street where she runs a grocery shop out the front window. She has three or four small children playing on the floor. In her early thirties, Cristina is the core of that community. She maintains hope, not only for herself but for those around her. In the face of economic disintegration and stalking poverty and disease, Cristina and her Base Community continue to serve their barrio with soy meals, basic medical care, and religious nurture. And what keeps her going is hope—a hope grounded in her faith in Jesus Christ and her love for the people.  

Commenting on her acquaintance with Salvadoran CEB leaders, Golden says:

The fuel that drives courage is hope... The hope of the poor... like a phoenix, rises from the ashes of charred villages, pulses in hands that have been shackled and hearts that have been broken. They cannot bomb insurgent hope into oblivion, they cannot torture it to death... they cannot kill off hope in the resettled battle zones. It rises again and again. After ten years of war and 75,000 deaths... Salvadorans still believe that life, not death, will have the last word.
The leader is the people; the people are in community; the community exists in hope.

Means of Leadership

Nine means or strategies of leadership are used in the Base Communities—aprender del pueblo (learning from the people), acompañamiento (accompaniment), comunidad (community), la palabra (the Word of God, the Bible), conscientización (consciousness-raising), denunciar y anuncioar (denouncing injustice and announcing the Good News), inserción (engaging in history-making), formación y servicio de los laicos (the training and service of the laity), and organización (organizational structure).

Aprender del Pueblo. In the book Death and Life in Morazán, Fr. Rogelio Ponseele, whom I met in El Salvador, tells author María López Vigil of how Archbishop Romero learned from the people:

Here we saw . . . a bishop who lived with the people. So we got closer and closer to him then and this gave all the communities a tremendous feeling of really belonging to the church . . . . We valued Monsenor highly for his work, the efforts he made to meet everybody and to visit the most remote villages. From morning to night in his office, there were always people wanting to talk to him. He got close to the whole people. And the whole people came close to him. Not an easy thing for a bishop.

Fr. Rogelio himself also learned from the people. Speaking about his experience as priest to the FMLN compañeros during the fighting, he says:

The compañeros prefer the road that Jesus trod. . . . To believe in Jesus is to follow him. . . . I tell them: 'You are Christians. Because you have his passion for truth and justice, his love for the people, the poor, his determination.' . . . We priests are not humble. . . . We always think we are important because everybody makes us feel important. I have learned from the compañeros the value of humility. . . . I see them as more Christian than we are, because they’ve given their lives totally.

As did Romero and Ponseele, so did I learn from the people. In her dirt floor home in Matagalpa, Nicaragua, María Lourdes Blandon took
me by the arm and said, "Right here Somoza’s Guardia came in, seized my son Enrique, and dragged him out into the street. They beat him, took him off to prison, and tortured him. Some time later they ambushed and killed my other son, Cesar, while he was working on a coffee plantation up in the mountains."

Then she took me to a sewing cooperative where they were making clothes and selling used clothing donated from other countries. Next we went to a hillside outside of town where she and other Mothers of the Heroes and Martyrs had built thirty-two homes with the proceeds from their sewing cooperative to house other mothers who were coming down out of the Contra war zone with nothing, having themselves lost their husbands and sons. I learned from these women what it means to be faithful, to make do with what you have, to transform grief into service, to lead redemptively with courage and hope.

Acompañamiento. A second approach to leadership in the CEBs is acompañamiento, accompaniment of the people, meaning to stand "by the people . . . [which] might translate into helping a parishioner get out of jail, or attending a base community meeting, or celebrating Mass."  

While studying Spanish in Quezaltenango, Guatemala, we met a nun, Madre Munda, who was working with the Base Communities in the Sagrada Familia parish. While we were waiting for her in the parish office, the Spanish priest, Fr. Javier Alaminos, came in and introduced himself. Almost immediately he said, "Would you come live with me during Holy Week?" What a marvelous experience it was to stay with the priests, eating at their table, conversing across the language barrier, and going with them to the various masses, altar displays, and processions that are customary in that season.

Fr. Javier told us how in the early 1980s he had seen several of his catechists "disappeared," remarking that "an animal is safer in Guatemala than a human being." He was on a death list and was counseled to leave, so he went back to Spain and stayed there four months. Then he said to himself, "What good is my faith if I cannot accompany my people in their time of danger and suffering?" So he came back and is still there, accompanying the people.

Rogelio Ponsele describes his ministry of accompaniment this way:

\[
\text{We are . . . accompanying the poor, sharing their lives and troubles, . . . trying to give hope. . . . I am nobody, I go about with my backpack.}
\]
like everyone else, with nothing. What can this priest offer them? . . .
All I can do is accompany them, and share with them this little faith
of mine. 23

Accompanying, as I learned it from Fr. Javier, Fr. Rogelio, and
others, means being with, walking with, sharing both faith and danger
with, caring for, learning from, supporting, encouraging, pastoring,
being an integral part of the life of the people.

La Comunidad. Another means of leadership is la comunidad, the
community. In her interview with Renny Golden, Reina spoke about
the change from church to community this way:

We used to go to church like water jugs, just waiting to have water
poured into us. Our faith was a 'borrowed' faith; the priests allowed
us the privilege of understanding the gospel in the manner that they
explained to us. . . . [But we have] learned that we have a treasure
within us: the life we have lived. And if we take that lived experience
and reflect on it collectively . . . we see that we ourselves have
something to share with others on the journey toward God's Reign. 24

In his massive study of Latin American CEBs, Guillermo Cook,
whom I met in Costa Rica, cites these pastoral priorities of the
comunidades:

(1) Building up a living church rather than the multiplication of
church edifices. . . . (2) Vital participation of the people instead of
inert masses of . . . passive Christians. . . . (3) Training leaders and
increasing the number of well-chosen ministries and ministers... (4)
Integration into the life of the people and its reality [in contrast to]
individualistic, alienating, and alienated faith in Christ. . . . (5)
Sharing in a vital liturgy, which should be in real contact with life,
directed toward God and the life of all, in Jesus, through the Spirit. 25

In the CEBs in which I have participated Bible study is at the core,
with members reflecting on it in relation to daily life. Sometimes they
discuss the conflicts they are having with the hierarchy, reactionary
priests, or antagonistic elements in the parish. Part of each meeting is
devoted to reporting on projects they are engaged in. They have
refreshments. They pray for one another. They welcome guests and
ask them to speak. They do role plays and dinamicas (exercises). They
sing. They laugh. They celebrate. There is a close sense of community,
an obvious love and caring for one another. The laity are the leaders, but the priests and religious who meet with them provide essential resource and support.

La Palabra. The use of the Bible, *la palabra*, is a central means of CEB leadership. John Stam finds the following four elements in the CEB approach to the Bible: earnest searching by people who take the Bible seriously and experience it with intense immediacy and reality; serious conversation about whether they are willing to lay down their own lives for the gospel; group exegesis, inductive rather than deductive; and an approach directly related to life, seeing direct parallels between New Testament and contemporary figures; e.g. Herod = Somoza, Pilate = the U.S. ambassador, the Roman soldiers = Somoza’s National Guard, and the present = the Exile.  

Carlos Mesters from Brazil, whom I heard speak in a Nicaraguan Base Community, identifies three dimensions of the correct use of the Bible by the CEBs: the text (Bible), the con-text (the community), and the pre-text (the social reality).

*With these three elements they seek to hear what the word of God is saying. And for them the word of God is not just the Bible. The word of God is within reality and it can be discovered there with the help of the Bible... When the three elements are integrated—Bible, community, real-life situation—then the word of God becomes a reinforcement, a stimulus for hope and courage.*

Fr. Joseph Mulligan, a Jesuit working with the Base Communities in Managua, identifies the following as their favorite Bible passages: Romans 12 (do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed); Acts 2:42-47 (the early church meeting together for teaching, fellowship, bread, and prayers); Matthew 6 (you cannot serve both God and money, a critique of capitalism); Luke 24 (Christ present with the disciples on the road to Emmaus); Luke 9:57-62 (those who put their hand to the plow and turn back are not fit); Exodus 14-16 (the liberation theme and the desert experience of the liberated people); and Isaiah 40ff. (the promise of return from the Exile).

Reflection on the Bible in relation to the realities of life and issuing in action to change them is at the core of Base Community leadership.

*Conscientización. Conscientización, another means of Base*
Community leadership, a process developed by Paulo Freire, of raising awareness about oppressive life circumstances and one's power to change them, using the three steps of *ver, juzgar, and actuar*, observe, judge, and act. More recently, two other steps, celebrate and evaluate, have been added.

Sr. Margarita Zavala, who works with the CEBs in Managua, described the five steps this way:

1. *Ver* (to observe) means to *partir* (to split open, crack) the social situation or life of the people by analyzing the causes of their problems—the current land conflicts or deepening poverty, for example.

2. *Juzgar* (to judge) means to see the reality in the light of the Word of God, to search for a Biblical text that illuminates the social reality. For example, the promise to Israel to inherit the land reinforces the people's conviction that everyone deserves a place to live.

3. *Actuar* (to act) involves entering into the project of God's salvation/liberation, in search of homes, land, and food. They join in demonstrations to protest inequities and show that injustice is not what God wants. And they act constructively to build community—in the barrios and in the nation.

4. *Celebrar* (to celebrate) is joyfully to lift up faith and life as belonging to God and as a gift to all people—both within and outside the Mass. One experience of mine in this regard was a lively dance with CEB members after we had completed negotiations for adding to a school we together had previously constructed in a Managua barrio.

5. *Evaluar* (to evaluate) is to “stop once in a while and see where we have been, to see if this way is in agreement with the plan of God, and to do this in community.” All is in community.

*Denunciar y Anunciar*. A sixth approach to CEB leadership is to denounce injustice and announce the Good News, a practice which Archbishop Romero exemplified. In a sermon entitled “The Church: Defender of Human Dignity,” preached the day before he was assassinated, he issued this passionate appeal to the government and the military: “In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people... I implore them, I beg them, I order them...: Cease the
repression!" Even in death, however, he found good news: "I shall be offering my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. . . . I will rise again in the people. . . . A bishop will die, but the church of God—the people—will never die."

Felix Jimenez, the second priest to serve the San Pablo Apóstol Parish in Managua, described to me the emergence of denunciar y anunciar in the natural development of the parish. It began with an individualistic and family approach. But gradually, as they studied the Bible, the causes of their suffering became more and more obvious. So they began to address them through denouncing, both by voice and by act. They boycotted the buses to protest a fare hike and later occupied the León cathedral in protest against the alliance of the hierarchy with Somoza.

And Pablo Galdámez, both earlier in a poor barrio in San Salvador and now in remote Tierra Blanca, announces the Good News to the poor of El Salvador:

Jesus. . . signs proclaimed the reign of God. They were invitations to conversion. They were calls to prepare for a new age. . . . and the people he was calling were the people the system rejected: sinners, the blind, pagans, vagrants, the outcasts, the ones 'good' people wouldn't contaminate themselves with. The miracles Jesus worked among them were signs that something new was afoot. . . . something that began with the poor in. . . . the smallest, most forgotten place. . . . New signs. . . [appear] to challenge our eyes to read what God is doing in God's people.

The people of the Base Communities have denounced injustice and announced the Reign of God with great courage and at great risk. Many have lost their lives simply by saying, in word and deed, that God condemns evil, calls for repentance, and offers forgiveness, new life, and a new world of dignity and hope, in Christ Jesus.

Insertión. Like Christ, his followers were also called to insert themselves into the historical moment, and Base Community members regularly respond to this call.

Insertion requires integration into the revolutionary process. In La Cuyatena, El Salvador, I met a priest named David Rodríguez who was also part of the original Base Community movement and who had had to go into hiding for several years. This area had been a war zone, from which the people had fled to hide in the shantytowns of San...
Salvador. Now they were drifting back, throwing up temporary shelters for their families, and he was there organizing them once again into a community. He played the guitar and led them in singing liberation songs, then met with the directiva to make plans for securing food, seed, and building materials.

At that critical time in his country’s history, after the peace accords had been signed, here was David Rodriguez, trying to help his people restructure their society. A priest without a parish because he is too controversial to be given one, he is inserting himself to lead his people in rebuilding their nation and guiding them to develop a community organization to sustain themselves.

**Formación y Servicio de los Laicos.** An eighth leadership strategy of the Base Communities is the formation of the laity for Christian service. In the early years, the formation or training of laity was crucial. With insufficient priests to serve the parishes adequately, with the pre-Vatican II pattern of lay dependency and clerical domination, and with the urgent need for laity to insert themselves into the revolutionary process and the struggle for social transformation, laity had to be recruited, conscientized, trained, and empowered to be the church.

Managua’s San Pablo Apóstol Parish was divided into subgroups, each having a representative on the parish council. Lay people took courses to become Delegates of the Word, who could then lead celebrations of the Word, with or without a priest. Marriage renewal was an important early facet of this process. Women played an increasingly important leadership role, which contributed to their growing sense of dignity and equality. The parish council selected twelve people to take a three-month course, which focused on topics such as Bible, Christology, church history, the Medellin Conference, and group dynamics. Those who completed these courses would assist in the development of communities in both their own parish and other areas.

One impressive product of this formation process is Indiana Acevedo, a present-day Base Community leader in Barrio San Judas, Managua. In addition to being a single mother with six children, ages six to 23, Indiana serves each morning as a social worker with a school for street children, making house visits by bus or on foot all over the city. In the afternoons and evenings, she does formation work in her Base Community, supervising programs in health care, nutrition, cholera prevention, soya feeding, preschool education, youth activities, sex education, sewing instruction, Bible study, and...
catechesis. She also does organizing work with a settlement of twenty families in another part of the city, where displaced people live in hastily constructed shacks with plastic roofs.

When I asked what motivated her investment in these varied forms of service, her response was: "My commitment of faith. I discovered in the Bible that faith without action is dead. God calls me to serve, and I do so happily. I find the presence of God among the people. In the midst of difficulties God is there. I have learned much from the people. Jesus is the center of our life and we meet Jesus in the Bible. I don't understand how anyone can be a Christian and not be a revolutionary, or vice versa."  

Like other animators formed in the Base Community movement, Indiana has a clear sense of being in ministry, is the hub of essential life-giving services in her barrio, and understands Christian discipleship to be transformative of her social reality.

The formation of laity in the Base Communities is a transforming process which raises awareness of injustice, deepens commitment to Christian service and revolutionary action, develops character and leadership ability, and motivates self-giving service to persons and communities in need.

Organización. The leadership strategy of organization supports the other eight approaches. In El Salvador, the Base Community movement began in Aguilares with a team of priests headed by Rutilio Grande, a close friend of Archbishop Romero and the first priest to be assassinated. One of his team members, Padre Salvador Carranza, described to me the early organization in the 1970s.

Teams of two priests and three or four laity went out into the rural villages on fifteen-day missions. They spent most of their time visiting in the homes of the people. Nobody had ever had a priest in their home before. They visited every hut and never ate twice in the same place. On the last day all the people gathered for a celebration, at which it was announced, "This is the beginning of the mission." They left a minimal structure in the community; one animator/leader was chosen for each twelve people.

These missions put the Bible in the hands of the people. The people were afraid of the Bible at first and of expressing themselves in church, but gradually began to gain confidence and participate. The Freire method of helping them to say their word was used, and they found they had a lot to say.
This Biblical reflection made them aware of the structures of oppression—90 percent of the land owned by just twelve wealthy families—so the people decided to organize consumer and agricultural cooperatives to take their economic welfare into their own hands. This evoked opposition from the rich landowners, the government, the press, and the military. Next, a campesino union was formed, and newspapers began denouncing the priests.

So organizations starting very simply, just helping people to discover their faith, led naturally and inevitably to confrontation with the powers. The Word fostered formation which included conscientización. This led to organization which brought about confrontation with injustice, opposition, and death.

In Managua the twenty-two CEBs are organized into a network. Each community sends two representatives to regular Monday night meetings for purposes of reporting, planning, singing, Biblical reflection, support, training for outreach, and ongoing formation. Each community also has its weekly Mass and a meeting for prayer, reflection, and planning to carry out their Christian social obligations.

And now, since the UNO government has drastically cut social programs in the barrios, they do this through natural medicine workshops, soy-feeding programs, sewing classes, buying cooperatives, day-care centers, youth groups, and pastoral outreach into new barrios. In some barrios, the CEB organization has built “Casas de Formación,” or community centers where their activities and service projects are based. On the wall of one of these Casas de Formación I saw an organizational chart which showed the following activities emanating from the CEB hub: Biblical reflections, struggles for peace and life, money-raising suppers, catechism, retreats, natural medicine, and fellowship.

Richard Shaull summarizes the significance of Base Community organization for both church and society in these words:

*What is happening here is that a new form of social organization is in the process of creation, and as this happens, the poor are winning for themselves an authentic place in society for the first time in history. More than this, the poor themselves are creating a model for future society. When they sit around a circle in the base communities, they are expressing visibly their break with hierarchical—or bureaucratic—organization. The crucial thing is mutual*
empowerment. . . . The foundation is laid for the exercise of power from the bottom up, in the wider society as well as in the church.  

All these means, and more, are ways in which the Base Community leadership—the people—seek to be the church, faithful to their understanding of the gospel as it is revealed in their Biblical reflections, relevant to the needs of the world around them, and committed to God's preferential option for the poor and the justice and dignity which is their rightful inheritance as children of the promise.

Conclusion: Implications for the North American Church

The Ecclesial Base Communities are a modern reformation. Their recovery of the intimacy, intentionality, scriptural foundation, and prophetic witness of the first-century church point the whole Christian world toward greater depth, relevance, and faithfulness. They embody prophetic, sacrificial, redemptive discipleship in the cause of "proclaiming the good news of God . . . [that] the time is fulfilled, and the reign of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:14-15).

We in North America no longer live in a churched culture. Christian values and convictions are not even widely known, let alone observed or practiced. The persecution of Central American Christian Base Communities described above has been funded in large part by the United States government. Our tax money has paid for the assassination of Fr. Rutilio Grande and Fr. Octavio Ortiz, the ambush and torture of the sons of Maria Lourdes Blandon, the "disappearance" of Fr. Javier's catechists, the destruction of the village, home, and church of Dolores and Savino, and the torture and rape of Maria Teresa Tula. The grinding poverty, malnutrition, and unemployment which afflict the family and neighbors of Indiana Acevedo and Cristina Rios are caused by U.S. neoliberal economic policies designed to keep the wealth flowing from South to North. Yet the entregado of people like Silvia, David Rodriguez, Pablo Galdamez, and the Valdez family keeps them faithful—to Christ, one another, their people, and us—in the ongoing struggle for justice and dignity. Though we are not worthy, we have much to learn from them:

1. We can learn to remember who we are and what we are called to be as church. As have the CEBs, so must we explore anew la memoria of the Christian people. Our origins were among the nameless, poor, and
marginalized, who met in small, intimate communities, witnessed through a simple, caring lifestyle lived in the name of Jesus, and grew by sharing the Good News of how the Risen Christ could transform both sinful persons and evil systems by the power of love. We are called to be this kind of church.

2. We can learn to open ourselves to conversion. I was converted to a deeper faith and commitment through encounter with the faithful poor of Central America. Go if you can; it will change your life. If you cannot go, talk to those who have been, see the video Romero, read the books mentioned in this article. Expose yourself to the Spirit of God speaking through the persecuted but vibrant Christians of Central America. Invite another conversión.

3. We can learn to ground our ministry and mission in the Word. The witness and power of the Base Communities comes directly from their reflection on la palabra and its relation to their daily life. Bible study belongs at the heart of personal and congregational life. Use these or similar questions: What were the life circumstances of the Biblical people? What was God doing and saying in their midst? How are our life circumstances similar to theirs? What is God saying and doing with us? How will we respond to God’s Word to us? Let this point you into your ministry and mission.

4. We can learn to form ourselves in community. The Central American campesinos were isolated by the forces of oppression. When they came together in comunidad, they gained vision, power, and hope through solidarity. We are isolated by our individualism, self-reliance, mobility, and suburban sprawl. When we come together in small groups or neighborhood cells for sharing, support, and spiritual nurture, we too will gain vision, power, and hope. But, like them, we must not become ingrown and self-satisfied with this sense of community. Community is a gift to be shared. Kept to ourselves it withers; offered for the empowerment of others it grows, deepens, and gains strengths and direction.

5. We can learn to recover a holistic spirituality, evangelization, and mission. It has not occurred to the Base Communities that there is any distinction between spiritual life and social responsibility, evangelism and social concern. Their response to God’s grace in Christ is full-orbed—they give their lives. Can we do any less than full compromiso? Denunciar y anunciar belong together. All demons that enslave—from booze to capitalism—must be denounced. All spirits that liberate—from prayer to women’s empowerment to cooperative arms—must be acclaimed. Evangelización integral incorporates all of life into a wholehearted response to the gospel.

6. We can learn to be in shared ministry, clergy and laity. The leader is the people! Laas means the whole people of God. The clergy as a distinct class were unknown in the early church. It is human pride and lust for power that have elevated them over the laity. The calling of designated leaders is to

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empower not dominate. Fr. Arnaldo and Sr. Margarita know and do this well. They are in the background—visioning, preparing, planning, forming, equipping, facilitating, praying—and the laity in the Base Communities are the coordinators, catechists, animators, and Delegates of the Word. The laity have reclaimed their rightful place as agents—not recipients—of ministry. Formación y servicio de los laicos are crucial to the empowerment of the church for ministry. Can we overcome our preoccupation with clergy rights, roles, and regulations to enable that to happen here as well?

7. We can learn to use our power to empower and our authority to authorize. We can say—and practice—with Oscar Romero, “Authority in the church is not command, but service.” Even as Jesus proclaimed “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27) and “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil. 2:7-8), so we are called to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5) and to become servant leaders. The Base Communities have shown us how to use autoridad to enable others to claim and utilize their gifts for the upbuilding of the whole body. The dominated Central Americans have pointed the way. Will we of a dominant class in a dominant nation walk in it?

8. We can learn to insert ourselves into history, locally and globally. David Rodriguez is making a difference in La Cayatena. Padre Pedro is making a difference in Tierra Blanca. Rutilio Grande made a difference in Aguilares. Jose de la Jara made a difference in San Pablo Apóstol parish. The Valdez family continues to make a difference there, as do Indiana Acevedo in Barrio San Judas and Cristina Rios in Barrio Villa Austria. All have inserted themselves into their local history in appropriate and essential ways. Collectively, they have impacted world history. We are not called to move mountains, only a grain of sand. But God will use this inserción of acts of witness and service into our life situation in ways we may not imagine or intend. The call is to move a step at a time to bring the Reign of God into being in the small space given to us to inhabit and transform.

9. We can learn to be in solidarity with the Church of the Poor. I heard much gratitude in the Base Communities for support received from North American Christians. In solidarity, I have led a work team in building a school in Nicaragua, helped organize a coalition of congregations to receive Central American refugees seeking political asylum, urged Congress to halt military aid to oppressive regimes, and raised funds to assist agricultural cooperatives, clinics, volcano relief, and David Rodriguez’s pivotal work of community organization. The persecuted, suffering people of Central America need and deserve our support. We can be a signo of Christ’s love by standing with them in acompañamiento, which will give them esperanza to continue their struggle for liberation and life.
10. We can learn to confront the Empire on behalf of justice. If we were to read the Bible through the eyes of a Central American Base Community, we would see the Roman Empire as the United States, the U.S. President as the pharaoh, their own armies and death squads as the Egyptian troops or the Roman legions, the capitalist system as a tax collector like Zacchaeus, liberators like Sandino and Castro as their Moses and David, and martyrs like Romero and the six Jesuits as their Christ figures. We need to expose ourselves to this kind of conscientización by learning to view the world through their eyes, and then to develop the organización to oppose the evil in the system that oppresses them. Central American Christians have engaged in peaceful protest, community organization, street demonstrations, and, as a last resort, armed struggle, out of conviction that God was calling them to confront and overthrow their oppressors and build a new society. Their struggle goes on—against overwhelming odds, but with the confidence that the God of the poor struggles with them. Whose side are we on?

The Ecclesial Base Communities of Central America have much to teach us in North America. We who have prided ourselves on being a mission-sending church must now sit at the feet of the likes of Carmen Valdez and Arnaldo Zenteno of Nicaragua, Javier Alaminos and Madre Munda of Guatemala, and David Rodriguez and Alejandro and Exaltación Ortiz of El Salvador to learn from the base up what it means to be eclesia in comunidad.

Notes

1. Parroquia Cristo Redentor, San Miguelito. Curso Basico de Iniciacion Cristiana (Panama City, Panama, n.d.).
3. Ibid., 9.
5. Here and in succeeding sections the Spanish terms are used.
11. Ibid., 156.
15. Golden, The Hour of the Poor, 17.
16. Ibid., 57-58.
18. Golden, The Hour of the Poor; 110.
19. Ibid., 190.
22. Quoted in Phillip Berryman, “Stubborn Hope: Churches, Revolution, and Counterrevolution in Central America” (manuscript), 89-90.
35. For the story of another who was converted, read John S. Munday, Voice of Many Crying (Ocean City, Md.: Skipjack Press, Inc., 1992).
Wallace Gray

Dreaming as a Theological and Ecological Stimulus

Akira Kurosawa, the prize-winning director of the movie Dreams, says, “Man is a genius when he is dreaming.” Dreaming needs to be viewed in a number of possible dimensions if it is to display the genius required by our times. The most obvious dimensions are: waking, sleeping, inspired, imaginative; prophetic in the biblical sense; Christocentric in the spirit of John’s Gospel; experiential in the light of culture shock and minority isolation; “Confucian” in the global-religious setting; ecological in the geological time-frame; experimental in the light of “earth shock”; and brain-specific in terms of essential human survival skills. What follows will illustrate some of the multidimensionality of some contemporary dreams which may be relevant to planetary as well as human and humane survival.

The biblical prophet Joel predicted that God will be the spiritual source for at least some dreams in the future world. In Peter’s Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14-36) Peter used the words of Joel to explain strange phenomena: both the sound which came from heaven like a great rushing wind and the people’s hearing in their own language what others spoke in foreign languages.

And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions. (Joel 2:28, RSV)

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In John’s Gospel Jesus promises the presence of the Spirit with the disciples, presumably not only beyond any one New Testament time (even the Day of Pentecost) but into the indefinite future as well.

*These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, which the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.* (John 14:25-26, RSV)

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (v. 12).

Mine is a waking dream based on memory and scriptural promises but focused on today. On a sabbatical leave in the area of Hiroshima, Japan, my family and I experienced an almost unbelievable degree of interreligious cooperation. Isn’t it reasonable to suppose that what was then possible in Japan is still possible in any specific locale on earth, even in my hometown—or yours? Our family found the interreligious cooperation in Japan most exhilarating. If a Catholic priest missed a chance to fellowship with Protestant missionaries (and perhaps another Catholic or two), it was only because he was ill. (Often the preponderantly Protestant group was invited to meet at a Catholic retreat center.) If a conservative brother missed a similar occasion, the more liberal workers knew a serious scheduling difficulty was the reason. In my town (what about yours?) some ecumenical cooperation is visible, but the closeness we felt as a natural part of life in Japan is not yet a full reality.

The comparison with Japan is interesting. So-called mainline missionaries working through the United Church of Japan (which is similar to the United Church of Canada), as well as missionaries from denominations and smaller independent churches not affiliated with the Church of Japan lived in the Hiroshima area. We enjoyed each other and shared clothing, food, and furniture as need suggested. Individually and collectively we also rose to the occasion for any crisis that affected either a missionary family, as when three children of one minister drowned in a boating accident, or that afflicted any of the people for whom we had separate responsibilities.

My status in Japan was primarily that of a visiting scholar and teacher from Southwestern College, a college in covenant relationship with the United Methodist Church. But it was my private tutoring of a
non-Christian friend in English and his tutoring me in Japanese that caused us to draw close in bilingual Bible study and many other ways. It was his idea to loan us his car for the year! Recently he and his daughter visited Winfield. By some miracle of friendship, they consider our town to be the most important place in the U.S. Still more recently, Yanai-san has sent me the very latest and most useful Japanese dictionary, a large and expensive affair. Although I am never able to keep up with my friend’s gift-giving, either in the cost or number of gifts, I did recently send him a Bible in modern Japanese. He had lost or misplaced some passages from Proverbs which we had studied together. Now he has started reading the entire Bible, but by himself, not in a church context.

Churches in Japan are tiny by Western standards, but a big event in Hiroshima was the annual performance of the Messiah in which the scattered Christians of the area felt privileged to participate. I am sure it still is a cultural and religious event of significance for many Christians and other area residents.

The connection we forged with the Japanese people has moved into other areas of life, particularly that of ecology. Recently my wife and I took two Southwestern students to a five-hour interreligious seminar on “Creation Stories—Past and Present” at Kansas Newman College in Wichita. The keynote speaker was Mary Evelyn Tucker, who is an expert on Japanese Neo-Confucianism. She urged all of us who were gathered, Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, Jews, Blacks, Native Americans, religious feminists, and others, to activate our ancient and modern stories, including the long and stunning history of creation in modern astronomy, for the healing of our planet, which is dying of industrialization, overpopulation, and other problems. She predicted that it is only a matter of time until our “non-sustainable industrial bubble” will burst. In our separate religious traditions we have been so concerned with individual salvation that we have acted as though it is unimportant that we are killing our world. Yet our various religious traditions and spiritualities possess resources for the healing of the planet instead of its further degradation.

In the discussion period I asked how Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714), the Neo-Confucian scholar whom some think of as the “Japanese Aristotle,” might have answered her challenge had he lived in this century. Without hesitation she answered, “He would urge us to show filial piety toward the whole universe.”

It is of more than incidental importance that the title of a book by
one of our major contemporary visionaries is *The Dream of the Earth*. The visionary is Thomas Berry, a historian of cultures and a Catholic priest, one of the chief architects of ecological sanity in theory and practice for our most realistic and frightening human crises and (not incidentally) for the earth's future as well. Berry writes:

> The issue now is of a much greater order of magnitude [than say the Fall of Rome or the rise of scientific understanding], for we have changed in a deleterious manner not simply the structure and functioning of human society; we have changed the very chemistry of the planet, we have altered the biosystems, we have changed the topography and even the geological structure of the planet, structures and functions that have taken hundreds of millions and even billions of years to bring into existence. Such an order of change in its nature and in its order of magnitude has never before entered into earth history or into human consciousness.3

In Kansas a dream lies at the base of The Land Institute, which researches, educates, trains, and informs toward a sustainable agriculture. The Land Institute parallels Berry's work but was independently developed out of the dream of a man named Wes Jackson:

> I cannot stress enough the importance of dreaming. Every single thing about The Land Institute was dreamed in a California bedroom. I lost consciousness of the dream; it became a part of me, and the particulars—such as perennial polyculture, the intern program, the land around us—began to come into place.

Our experiences in Japan and most recently in Kansas have led us to believe in the urgency and possibility of keeping earth habitable through interreligious cooperation. In Japan the strange (though not hostile) culture and the difficult language caused us Christians, and some others, to say, "We need each other." Such need, with a sense of the power and direction of God, helps us dream our dreams and realize our visions by bringing them to productive fruition. Ecological and social disasters constitute what we might appropriately call "Earth Shock." Earth Shock can magnify our need of each other even more than does culture shock, challenging us to work together to realize our best dreams rather than our worst.

But there is a purpose to all our dreams. Nightmares reveal some of
the most frightening gaps, chasms, and intimations of hell and cruel chaos. They warn of the need for new ways of ordering our days and doing our business. More pleasant dreams lure us to reconstruct in accordance with the principles of order in chaos and chaos in order. They invite us to worship at a new altar of the hitherto unknown or too-little-known God, God the Creator and God the Chaos-er.

In the end, dreaming has both a literal and a metaphorical significance. Dreaming in the literal sense is then a mode of enhancing the learning of specific skills. Recent research by the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel and others suggests that

For some types of problem-solving, one should consider not only "sleeping on it," as common wisdom would have it, but perhaps "dreaming on it" as well . . . .

Researchers found that when people are disturbed during the dream stage of sleep—called REM or rapid eye movement sleep—they are more apt to forget skills learned a few hours earlier.

How-to skills such as how to read, type, or fly a plane might be taught most effectively in the afternoon or evening. Dr. Avi Kami, an Institute neuroscientist believes REM sleep is "essential to learning skills because memories can be stored more efficiently during sleep than when a person is awake and bombarded with information."5

Dreaming considered more metaphorically or broadly, on the other hand, is a holistic and intuitive way of enhancing the organic union of our separate skills. With this knowledge to change ourselves intelligently and compassionately, nature's learning to know itself through us may become not a nightmare but an evolution/revolution toward a new and better world for all creation.

Notes

1. For interreligious study I developed the "Bridge Bible" concept which I used in some of my English classes. The idea has continued to appeal to the Reverend Karl Karpa, who is still a missionary in Japan. Briefly, a Bridge Bible is a pamphlet, perhaps worked up on a word processor, which displays on one page a Bible verse in English with a brief comment in English or Japanese by a Christian. On a facing page the same verse appears in Japanese with a parallel or contrasting thought from
Japanese literature or philosophy or personal reflection. The Bridge, as it is constructed or walked/talked across, becomes a basis for deep conversation, exchange, and perhaps spiritual transformation across national, cultural, or religious lines. The Bridge Bible is not a prefabricated product written by a missionary or a committee but rather an ongoing process in which the English teacher and the students not only read the Bridge Bible together but continually update it with the results of their dialogue.


3. Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books), xiii.


For preachers and teachers Easter is, I suspect, a more difficult season in the church year than we have typically acknowledged. Most congregations celebrate Easter with an expectancy that is heightened beyond parallel, and rare is the preacher who is neither daunted nor tempted by such an occasion. Even more so than Christmas, whose secularization permits it to be appropriated in various diluted forms, Easter confronts Christians with the irreducible mystery of their distinctive confession; and mysteries by their very nature are extraordinarily hard for any of us to verbalize. In addition, for many pastors Easter falls at a time far removed from a real vacation. At the very moment when the people of God ask us to articulate to them, for them, the joyous revival of faith, we may feel too tired to be of much help.

Considered within this framework, the five Gospel lections for the season of Easter, Year B, speak with tender force to the church and its ministers. Absorbed with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, these texts—four from John, one from Luke—are no less mindful of the checkered human experience that is pierced by the Easter proclamation. Guided by this material, one may probe the intersection of God's ever-surprising grace with a marvelous range of human C. Clifton Black is Associate Professor of New Testament at the Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas. An ordained elder of The United Methodist Church, he is the author of The Disciples according to Mark: Markan Redaction in Current Debate (1989) and Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter (1994).
response: confusion and confidence, fear and joy, ambivalence and empowerment, grief and belief. As we reach backward, attempting to grasp the intent of the biblical authors, we may be encouraged by their reach forward toward us, toward the perennial doubts and hopes of Christians who in all ages are confronted by the claims of the risen Christ.

Before beginning our work, a few orienting comments are in order. First, the following studies stem from my conviction that our ability to respond to the Bible as scripture is enhanced by our sensitivity to the contexts from which the biblical texts emerged. Accordingly, there is no substitute for patient investigation of the literature’s original setting in religious history. To assert this is neither to don the antiquarian’s mantle nor to rebuff new insights into the Bible’s literary and rhetorical artistry. The biblical witness was every bit as temporally and culturally conditioned as is our own. Without a practical awareness of this fact, sympathetic interpretation of the Bible by the church—or of the church by the Bible—is impeded, if not impossible. If this hermeneutical principle sounds overly academic, then I invite you to translate it into some arena of practical theology. What counselor would responsibly declare to a parishioner, “Don’t tell me about your background; I want to know only what your experience means to me”?

Second, the studies that follow are focused on what one reader takes to be the texts’ primary theological interests. When the interpreter is the minister and the interpretive community is the church, the main reason for exegesis is the recovery of the Bible’s theo-logic, to the end that the people of God may be nourished by scripture to discern and to mediate the ministry of Jesus Christ in a new day. The Bible, of course, may be legitimately perused for its ancient or aesthetic properties, or for a hundred other reasons. But unless exposition invites a substantive theological conversation between the church and its scripture, the gospel has not been offered.

Third, as demonstrated by each of the following lections, biblical interpretation requires biblical knowledge. For help in understanding the Third and Fourth Gospels, the preacher or teacher is blessed with many superb studies and commentaries, a handful of which are catalogued at the close of this essay. At day’s end, however, the biblical authors are their own best interpreters, particularly when their concerns are examined on the canvas of the canon’s comprehensive witness. Therefore, before moving to my musings, the reader would
be best served by closing this journal, opening the Bible, and rereading with care and prayer the Gospels of John and Luke.

Easter Sunday: John 20:1-18

This, the first of the Fourth Gospel’s narratives about the resurrection, bristles with perplexities for the attentive reader. Why did Mary Magdalene come to Jesus’ tomb? On what basis did she conclude that his body had been removed? Frustrated, she laments, “They have taken [him], we know not where.” Who are “they”? Who are “we”? What is the significance of the other disciple’s greater fleetness, yet Simon Peter’s being first inside the tomb? Upon finally entering the tomb, what did the other disciple see and believe? If he believed, why did they “not yet understand the scripture”? Why does Mary suddenly reappear, weeping, outside the tomb? Unlike the others, why does she see not linen wrappings but angels—and for what reason are they there? What prompts the risen Jesus’ refusal of her touch? Why does he claim to have “not yet ascended to the Father,” yet in the next breath dispatches Mary to announce that he is “ascending to the Father”? Scrupulous interpreters may feel tilted by this passage into exegetical vertigo.

Commentators have usually loosened these knots with the explanation that John 20:1-18 overlays a field of divergent traditions that have not been smoothly integrated (among others, the women’s visit to the grave [cf. Mark 16:1-3]; Peter’s inspection of the empty tomb [cf. Luke 24:12]; Magdalene’s vision of, and commission by, the risen Jesus [cf. Matt. 28:9-10]). This assessment is probably accurate. It is also incomplete and somewhat beside the point. Surely the Fourth Evangelist (or, alternatively, the Gospel’s final redactor) did not expect the reader to excavate the text and discriminate these several traditions, which have been left in the text to jostle one another cheek by jowl. If the reader of this pericope experiences a pronounced dizziness—the multiple, conflicted responses that erupt when reality has been sharply canted—then it may be by the Evangelist’s design. After all, this precisely mirrors the response of the disciples at Easter, as portrayed by John.

We might begin with Simon Peter and “the other disciple” (20:2-10). Their most obvious function in this passage is to offer “the testimony of two witnesses,” to corroborate Mary’s discovery of the empty tomb of Jesus (20:1-2; see Deut. 19:15; Matt. 18:16). That
such a role has been assigned to these two figures is surely no accident. In John, as in the Synoptics, Simon Peter serves as a prominent spokesman for the Twelve (see John 6:68; 13:6–9, 36; 18:10, 25). Unique to the Fourth Gospel, however, is “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved” (20:2): possibly an actual person who was believed to have been a companion of Jesus and esteemed by the Johannine community as a model disciple. As elsewhere in John, the roles of these characters are carefully balanced at chapter 20. Peter is first into the tomb, first to observe the linen bandages (19:40) and facial kerchief (20:6–7), a preeminence that obliquely coheres with the different tradition, in 1 Cor. 15:5, that Peter (or “Cephas,” John 1:42) was first among the Twelve to see the risen Lord (though Paul says nothing of the empty crypt). As far back as John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407), preachers have inferred from the description of the cloth wrappings a defense against the charge that the body was stolen (cf. Matt. 28:11–15). Alternatively, we may recall the mummy wrappings that still clung to Lazarus, who was not resurrected but resuscitated (John 11:44). John, however, attributes to Simon Peter no interpretation of the mortuary remains, whose condition is left mysteriously unexplained.

Quicker than Peter—of foot, of eye, of mind—is the Beloved Disciple (John 20:4–5, 8), who throughout the Fourth Gospel is closer to Jesus, more acutely attuned to the wavelength of his love (13:23–25; 19:26–27; 21:7, 20–24). Since John typically assigns contrastive but not rival roles to Peter and this other disciple, we may reasonably assume the same strategy here. Unlike his less perceptive comrade, the Beloved Disciple saw (or “knew”) the evidence and believed—not merely Mary’s report, but those ambiguous traces of divine activity. Yet John does not exaggerate this other disciple’s alacrity: though real, his faith is unformulated and unaware of scripture’s deeper connotations (as perceived by John [20:9]; see also 2:22; 5:39; 12:16). Accordingly, both disciples returned to their homes (20:10), much as Jesus had predicted they would (16:32).

Their exit from the scene creates space for the return of Mary Magdalene (20:11–18), whose experience at Easter adds even more texture to John’s presentation of the resurrection. Like so many throughout the Fourth Gospel (1:38; 6:24; 7:34, 36; 12:21; 18:4, 7, 8), here Mary searches for Jesus, who at first—as he had promised (cf. 13:33)—is not to be found. Literally enacting another of his aphorisms (12:35; cf. 8:12; 12:46), Mary walks in darkness (20:1), not
knowing where she's to go (20:2, 13, 15). By her persistence at the tomb, Mary shares in the other two disciples' commitment to Jesus. By her tears she registers a distinctive response, sheer grief at the loss of her Lord. From this detail (embellished by way of Mark 16:9–11 and Luke 8:2), Ernest Renan concluded that Mary hallucinated the resurrection with "the passion of one possessed" and thus "gave to the world a resuscitated God!" (The Life of Jesus, 1863). Oozing a lugubrious form of nineteenth-century Romanticism, this interpretation is tone-deaf to the bell-like clarity of John's text: this woman is at a dead end, observing angels and even Jesus himself, while utterly blind to their identities (20:11–15).

In Luke the risen Jesus is made known to his disciples at Emmaus in the breaking of bread (24:15–16, 30–31, 35). In John's quite different scene, Mary recognizes her teacher (rabboni) by his calling of her name—an unmistakable allusion to the shepherd who calls his own perceptive sheep by name (John 10:3–4, 14, 27; see also the motifs in 16:16–22). More problematic is Jesus' injunction, "Do not hold on to me (alternatively, "Stop holding on to me"), because I have not yet ascended to the Father" (20:17). We shall needlessly confuse ourselves if we superimpose on this statement Luke's imagery of ascension—a literal elevation, by cloud, of the risen Jesus into heaven (Acts 1:9; cf. Luke 24:51). In John's Gospel "the lifting up of Jesus" telescopes his crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation (see 3:13–14; 8:28; 12:32–33), which suggests that Jesus' ascension is for the Fourth Evangelist not so much a physical event, within time and space, as the restoration of his spiritual relationship with God, within eternity (John 1:1–18; 6:62). By clinging to him, Mary may have attempted to respond to Jesus in a manner no longer appropriate for one who was, in fact, creating unprecedented means by which his followers would relate to him and to God. That new creation is expressed in distinctly familial terms: Jesus' ascension to his Father is to be broadcast to his brothers (so styled for the first time in John), those who are now empowered to become children of the same God (20:17). And the medium of that message, the first witness and joyful evangelist of the risen Christ, is Mary Magdalene (John 20:18), whose several sisters in faith have previously borne witness and homage to Jesus (see 4:28–30, 39–42; 11:27; 12:1–8).

As portrayed by John, the first visitors to the garden tomb may not be far removed from the congregations that assemble at most churches on Easter. In both cases one finds a motley spectrum of response to an
enigma: among us, even within us, are Simon Peter’s indetermination, the Beloved Disciple’s inarticulate faith, Mary Magdalene’s swing from grief to joy. Such variety is to be expected, since no one ventures into the crypt’s obscurity with precisely the same resources. Moreover, in this lection the Fourth Evangelist does not clearly commend the reaction of any disciple over the others—a mature judgment that may free us from the temptation of trying desperately to induce in our listeners some single reaction to the Easter announcement. From start to finish, our congregations come and go at the beckoning of another: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32); “all who received him . . . were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12–13). Discernment and faith are not merit badges that we stitch onto ours or others’ sashes. They are evoked only by the Spirit of Christ (John 3:7–8).

John’s presentation of Christ’s appearance to Mary Magdalene should prevent us from succumbing to another common heresy: that of calculating the benefits of Easter for us as individuals. By his glorification, at the tomb as at the cross, Jesus radically reconstructs our relationship with God and with other followers into a new family of faith (see also John 19:26–27). “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are” (1 John 3:1). This, differently worded, is the message entrusted to Magdalene. Of its very nature, this declaration refers not to an experience by which we are privately bathed, to a joy that “none other has ever known.” Here, rather, is a mandate for witness to fellow disciples: the supremely glad tidings that Jesus’ Father is now genuinely theirs, that they are now authentic sisters and brothers of Jesus. Not the denial of death but the assertion of an irrevocable life is woven into Mary’s testimony to all disciples: “I have seen the Lord” (John 20:18).

Second Sunday of Easter: John 20:19-31

With the elaboration, in John 20:19–31, of the risen Jesus’ appearances to his disciples, the Fourth Evangelist tacitly acknowledges what the church has long known and later made liturgically explicit: that Easter is a season—better, an era—whose meaning cannot be wedged into a single Sunday. In the previous lection we were invited to probe the significance of the resurrection
for those gripped at the tomb by indetermination, belief, or sorrow. In the present pericope John explores the dynamics of faith along another two basic registers of human response, fear and disbelief.

We begin with the disciples, behind locked doors "for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19). Temptations to milk melodrama from this straightforward comment should be resisted. Reflective of later, escalating Jewish and Christian controversies from which the Fourth Gospel originated, "the Jews" in John typify the world's hostile rejection of Jesus as God's unique envoy (see, e.g., 5:18; 10:31–39). Particularly pertinent to the background of 20:19 are those other instances, throughout the Fourth Gospel, where "fear of the Jews" has quashed forthright confession of Jesus, driving his adherents underground (7:13; 9:22; 19:38). It is precisely into this situation that Jesus comes, keeping his earlier promises not to leave them orphaned (14:18–20; 16:16). "Peace be with you" (20:19, 21a) was a conventional greeting among Hebrews; the reader of John knows, however, that the peace given by Jesus to his disciples is quite unconventional (14:27). By way of demonstration, we find in 20:20 a practical exposition of the earlier assurance of Jesus' peace in 16:33; after seeing his hands and side (cruciform evidence that "in the world you face persecution"), the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord (or took heart that Jesus has indeed "conquered the world"). In fulfillment of yet another, poignant promise (16:16–24), the disciples are delivered from pain to joy, with Jesus in the role of midwife.

A church newsletter item recently caught my eye. One congregation, which shall remain nameless, has decided to replace its sanctuary's seating with "the latest in church furnishings": reclining pews with individually adjustable footrests, designed and built by La-Z-Boy. There could be no sharper contrast between this image of the Easter people and that which John presents in 20:216–23. In these spare, densely packed verses, we find the Fourth Evangelist's theology of the church in a nutshell. First, the disciples are commissioned by their Lord on both the model and the basis of Jesus' own commission by the Father (20:21b; see also 13:20; 15:26–27; 17:18). Second, for the discharge of that mission, Jesus breathes into his disciples the vital resource, Holy Spirit (see also 7:39), whose insufflation once twitched dusty nostrils (Gen. 2:7; cf. Wis. 15:11) and later animated dry bones (Ezek. 37:5). John 20:22 should not be construed as some partial bequest of the Spirit at Easter, whose consummation came fifty days later (cf. Acts 2:1–13). These are, to
the contrary, independent and differently nuanced testimonies to a common theological conviction; what John describes here is the experience that Luke associates with Pentecost. Third, the mission’s mandate is explained and warranted as the forgiveness and retention of sins (John 20:23), a concept paralleled in Matthew (16:19; 18:18) and traceable to Isaiah (22:22). Notably, those holed up behind locked doors are themselves now authorized “to open and to shut.”

In a word the Fourth Evangelist attributes to the disciples power over sin. The association of spiritual renewal with righteousness has deep biblical roots (see, e.g., Ezek. 36:25–27). More immediately, in John 16:8–11, proving the world wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgment is stressed as one function of the Paraclete (= the Holy Spirit; see 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13), even as Jesus, to whom the Paraclete bears witness (15:26; 16:13–14), evoked from a benighted world such judgment on itself (3:18–19; 5:26–27; 9:39). What John 20:23 envisions for the church, therefore, is an extension of Jesus’ own witness, guided by Jesus’ own Spirit, to a world whose love or hate of God or of God’s envoys will thereby be revealed (see also 15:18–27; 17:14–19). This, to say the least, is a high ecclesiology, akin to and dependent on the high Christology for which the Fourth Gospel is better known: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (20:21f; see also 14:6–11; 17:18).

“But Thomas . . . , one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came” (20:24). Whether John would have us regard Thomas the doubter sympathetically or pejoratively is a question not easily answered. Part of the difficulty stems from the complexity of John’s overall correlation of faith with sensory perception: while belief based solely on “signs” is suspect (4:48; 6:26), seeing Jesus and his works can lead to genuine belief (6:40; 11:45; 20:30–31). Yet the story of Thomas ultimately points to another form of faith, which blossoms without benefit of seeing Jesus at all (20:29).

Up to this point Thomas has been presented as a no-nonsense loyalist, lacking in perspicacity (11:16; 14:5). That characterization holds in 20:25: notwithstanding the other disciples’ claims, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and thrust my finger right into the place of the nails and thrust my hand right into his side, I’ll never believe it” (author’s translation). Even on Johannine premises there’s something to be said for Thomas’ position: he is, after all, asking for no evidence other than what his colleagues witnessed, on the basis of which they rejoiced (20:20). Moreover, his demand to touch Jesus’
wounds is surely unexceptionable. As Richard Hays has observed, Thomas wants not to trace his finger round Jesus' halo but to verify that the risen Lord is the one who was glorified on the cross.

One week later all previous circumstances are re-created; this time, however, Thomas is in attendance. Jesus reappears, anticipates, and accedes to the doubter, prompting his passage to faith (20:26–27, which subtly echoes the calling of Nathaniel in 1:45–50). Whether Thomas actually accepts Jesus' invitation is not explicit. Unmistakably clear is Thomas's response to Jesus: "My Lord and my God!" (20:28), a confession of faith that honors the Son just as the Father who sent him is honored (5:22–23). The acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord appears to have figured within early Christian credal formulas (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11); acclamation of Jesus as God is, however, rarer in the New Testament (Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:3).

Within the Fourth Gospel Thomas's affirmation stands as the climax to a range of exalted predications made of Jesus (see 1:49; 4:42; 6:69; 9:35-38; 11:27; 16:30; 20:16) and nicely balances similar confessions offered in the book's hymnic prologue (1:1, 18). Now that Jesus has been "lifted up," it is for John entirely appropriate that Jesus be recognized as divine (see 8:28; cf. Pss. 35:23; 91:1–2). Also notable in Thomas's answer are the pronouns, "My Lord and my God." Precisely through the disciple's encounter with Jesus, crucified and risen, an intensely personal relationship with God is forged, much as Jesus indicated to Mary at the tomb (20:17).

Critical though it is, even this confession does not constitute the last word. That belongs to the risen Christ, speaking to Thomas while addressing those other sheep who do not belong to Jesus' contemporary fold (10:16; 17:20). The Greek of the first clause in 20:29 can be punctuated as either a question (thus the NRSV; "Have you believed because you have seen me?") or a declaration (thus the REB: "Because you have seen me you have found faith"). Like the Beloved Disciple and Mary Magdalene, Thomas has come to faith with the benefit of perception (see also 1 John 1:1–3). But what of those in later generations, deprived of such help? Theys is no second-class Christian citizenship; to the contrary, they are blessed for they have believed without having seen (John 20:29; cf. 1 Pet. 1:8). This idea, for John, is no last-minute "consolation prize" for latecomers but the renewal of Jesus' earlier promises to abide with his disciples always, through the Paraclete, even when they can no longer see him (John 14:16–17, 25–26; 16:7, 13, 16).
In the Fourth Gospel Easter is the trigger for Christian mission, empowered by the Christ who has vanquished this world’s deathward spiral. Our commission as believers is nothing less than to throw light on the world’s darkness, to confront the world’s phoniness and evil with God’s truth, justice, and love, as revealed to us by Jesus. To a world that will believe practically anything—thereby revealing that it believes in nothing—John unflinchingly affirms that in Jesus the world meets God and, by that encounter, is confronted with its own sin and bankruptcy of faith. Naturally, the world by and large resists such exposure and tries to smother the light, as John soberly appreciates (3:19–21; 15:20; cf. 9:1–41). For all its pretensions, however, the world does not have power to confer life. That power resides only in the Word, the Son of God (1:4; 5:40; 10:10; 12:25–26), and that life, for believers, is eternal: not merely "endless" but completely reformatted by God’s love, on this side of the grave and beyond (3:15–16; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 20:21). If a sermon on John 20:19-31 sounds less like a march and more like Musak, then strong is the probability that the text’s intent has been betrayed.

Yet even for disciples, belief is a thing of mystery, tinctured with doubt (John 20:24–29; see also Matt. 28:17; Luke 24:10–11). Who among us has not known this to be true? Essentially, the story of Thomas restates John’s theme that faith, from beginning to end, is a gift from the risen Christ (cf. John 1:13; 3:8). The Gospel’s colophon (20:30–31) signals the Evangelist’s intention either to summon ("that you may come to believe," as in some manuscripts) or to sustain ("that you may continue to believe," as in other manuscripts) life-giving faith by recollecting Jesus’ activity (cf. 14:26).

The church’s confession of Jesus as the Christ, Lord, Son of God, even God. The church’s mandate to hold and to release sin. The polarity of frailty and power, of doubt and faith. Few congregations could toss down, in one sitting, a brew so rich. Whichever themes the pastor or educator elects to stress for their listeners, clearly here is much to jettison even the most complacent from their recliner pews.


For the third Sunday of Easter we turn to one of the post-resurrection narratives in the Third Gospel. This episode bears some similarities with the story of the walk to Emmaus, which precedes it. In both, the risen Christ unexpectedly appears to his troubled, doubtful disciples
while they discuss among themselves what has happened (Luke 24:13–17, 25, 36–38). In both, their faculties of perception are enlarged by Christ's own interpretation of his suffering and glory as the fulfillment of scripture (24:26–27, 32, 44–46). In both, mealtimes are the occasion for Christ's self-revelation (24:30–31, 35, 41–43; Acts 10:40–41). In both, the disciples testify to what has occurred (Luke 24:18–24) or are commissioned to give testimony (24:48), with Jerusalem the launchpad of their proclamation (24:33–34, 47).


The Lukan passage is, nevertheless, no rehash of John's account, for the Third Evangelist lays weight on some matters that are developed differently, minimally, or not at all by the Fourth. One obvious difference lies in their portrayals of the disciples' response to the risen Jesus. In John (20:20b) "the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." In Luke, by contrast, their reaction is more ambivalent. At first they were startled, frightened, and stirred up by Jesus' appearance (Luke 24:37–38); but even after seeing his hands and feet, "[t]hey were still incredulous, still astounded, for it seemed too good to be true" (Luke 24:41, REB; see also 24:11, 16). Indeed, not until their return to Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension are the disciples full of joy, blessing God (24:51–52; compare the evolving response of the shepherds in Luke 2:8–20). Lurking beneath this characterization may be an apologetic element: namely, an assurance that the disciples were not predisposed to hallucination but were reluctant to accept Jesus' resurrection even after being exposed to the most blatant, positive evidence. No less for believers than for skeptics, however, Luke's presentation of the apostles strikes a resonant chord: the meaning of the resurrection did not—indeed, could not—register instantly among them. For that to happen, time and guidance by the risen Christ were needed (see also Luke 9:45; 18:34). As in the story of Thomas (John
20:24–29), so also here: sheer proximity to Jesus did not guarantee faith, which required some distance and depth of perspective in order to be more fully formed.

As Luke depicts it, the body of their risen Lord was a critical factor in the disciples' education in faith. No other Gospel so stresses the risen Jesus' hands and feet, his flesh and bones. What, for Luke, is at stake in this description? Once again, the Evangelist may have been defending the earliest disciples against a real or potential accusation that they were "spooked" or "just seeing things." Yet the wording of Luke 24:39–40 seems to suggest an important clarification for startled believers: "Look at my hands and feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (emphasis added). If the hands and feet refer to the marks of Jesus' crucifixion, then Luke is probably accenting the identity of the risen Jesus as the one who was crucified: by such flesh and bones as this one has, he is proved to be the Christ himself. (Contrast the impostors' claims in Luke 21:8.) This, of course, is precisely the point of Luke's messianic exegesis of scripture in 24:46 (see also Acts 2:36).

The same idea may be embedded more obliquely in Jesus' request for food and eating of fish in Luke 24:41–43. While this strangely mundane vignette clashes a bit with Luke's reflections elsewhere on the nature of Jesus' resurrected body (Acts 2:27; 13:35, 37), here the Evangelist may be dramatizing a poignant paradox: the Messiah, who now transcends human limitations (see Luke 24:31, 36, 51), remains recognizable by engagement with human hunger and want, pain and death (see also 1:53; 6:21; 9:10–17). Jesus' resurrection did not wipe out his crucifixion but confirmed and transformed it. To put the matter more poetically, only the Lamb who was slaughtered is worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals (Rev. 5:1–14).

The identity of the exalted Christ with the Jesus of history is underlined once more in Luke 24:44, which picks up another major Lukian theme: "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms might be fulfilled." With Paul (1 Cor. 15:3–4) all of the Evangelists accept the premise that the whole of Jewish scripture, properly understood, finds its fulfillment in Jesus (see, e.g., Matt. 12:15–21; Mark 1:1–3; John 5:39), but on this point none is more emphatic than Luke (24:27; Acts 1:16; 3:18; 13:27, 29). Please notice: Luke does not begin with Jewish scripture, deducing from it God's activity through Jesus, Luke begins with Jesus as the
lens through whom, in retrospect, the meaning of scripture becomes fully intelligible (see also John 12:16). “That the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day” (Luke 24:46; also 24:26; Acts 3:18; 17:2-3; 26:22-23) appears as such on no page of the Hebrew Bible, but Luke has precisely underlined the terms on which “it has thus been written”: by Christ’s own opening of his followers’ minds to connect his destiny with their own scripture. In word as at table (see Luke 23:31, 35) the risen Christ is still among his emissaries as one who serves (22:27), and that service is fundamentally hermeneutical.

From Luke’s point of view, however, scripture prefigures not only Jesus’ destiny but also that of the church. “Thus it is written . . . that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (24:46-48). In this announcement we have the hub of Luke’s theology, since so much of the Third Gospel builds to its articulation and so much of Acts dramatizes its implications. The theme of repentance and forgiveness of sins sums up the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus in Luke (see, e.g., 3:3; 5:20, 32; 17:3-4) and of the apostles in Acts (2:38; 5:31; 8:22). “Bearing witness” to God’s benefactions through Jesus crystallizes, for Luke, the apostolic mission and message (thus, see Acts 2:33; 5:32; 10:39; 22:15; 26:16). At that mission’s heart lies Jerusalem, not as the journey’s end (cf. Isa. 2:2-3; Mic. 4:1-2) but rather as the hub from which radiates a proclamation reaching to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:4, 8; 13:47; adapting a motif found in Isa. 42:6; 49:6).

Like the Fourth Evangelist, Luke interprets the significance of Easter for Jesus’ vindication and his disciples’ mission. Through the resurrection, Luke professes, God has given the church new insight into its Lord, a fresh interpretation of itself, and a mandate to testify to an authentically “new world order.” Whether out of embarrassment or of fear, modern Christians along the moderate mainline may be hesitant to claim this commission as their own. If so, the causes and consequences of such reluctance must be candidly examined for the sake of a world whose values and loyalties are increasingly if not blithely bereft of a discernibly Christian witness. Where Christians have so spiritualized their confession that it lacks flesh and bones; where the church’s mission turns parochially inward upon itself; where its proclamation issues not “in his name” but from a thousand natural cliques that flesh is heir to; where its witnesses shiver in the tatters of their own wherewithal rather than accept “cloth[ing] with
power from on high" (Luke 24:49, whose excision from this lection is theologically dangerous): there, Luke warns, the Easter message has fallen on deaf ears. But ears can be opened and hearts encouraged by the preaching of texts like this.

**Fourth Sunday of Easter: John 10:11-18**

Flashback to an anxious era, two-and-one-half millennia ago, when Israelites were wrenched from their land and deported into Babylonian captivity. In a stern yet moving oracle, Ezekiel compared Israel’s leaders to self-serving shepherds, responsible for the scattering of people who, like sheep, became easy prey for wild beasts and were without anyone to seek them out (Ezek. 34:1-10). Then came the promise: “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God” (Ezek. 34:15). “You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God” (34:31): so compassion would prevail, justice would be done, David’s dynasty would be restored, and a new covenant of peace would be cut (34:16-30). While neither the first nor the last to envisage God or God’s delegate as Israel’s shepherd (see, e.g., Gen. 49:24; Num. 27:15-17; Pss. 23; 78:52-53; Isa. 40:11; Jer. 23:1-4; Zech. 11:4-17), Ezekiel employed that metaphor with uncommon poignancy in an uncommonly harrowing time.

Flash-forward to another time of trauma, a half-millennium later. The temple, rebuilt, had again been toppled during a disastrous Jewish revolt against Roman occupation. In the aftermath of Jerusalem’s fall, the identity of Judaism was sculpted under Pharisaic influence by the study of Torah in synagogue and through retrenchment against those sectarian Jews who confessed Jesus as Messiah. By the time and in the locale of John’s Gospel, the rupture between Judaism and Christianity was clear. Though Jesus still was construed as the consummation of Jewish scripture, traditions, and aspirations (see John 2:13-25; 4:25-26; 5:39-40), he and his disciples were regarded as somehow other than “the Jews,” who for their part were identified as the devil’s murderous progeny (8:44; see also 5:18; 7:1; 11:8). Ironically, five hundred years after Ezekiel, some Jewish terrors thus acquired painful focus as “fear of the Jews” (John 7:13; 9:22; 20:19). Expulsion from a religious center returned as threat or in reality; this time, however, it took shape as a ban from the synagogue, invoked on those who confessed faith in Jesus (9:22; 12:42; 16:2).
Crossbred with the imagery of Ezekiel 34, the assurances that blossom in John 10:11–18 grow from such acidic soil. As we consider this lection, it is worth remembering that Jesus’ pronouncements are directly addressed not to believers (who stand in the background, overhearing) but to a hostile world that is culpably blind to the light (8:12; 9:39–41; 10:19–21). The fact that this excerpt, like so many from the Fourth Gospel, is honed to a polemical edge by no means necessitates its modern interpretation in an adversarial sermon. Indeed, the interpreter should especially beware the temptation to allegorize some of this text’s characters (the hired hand, the wolf), assigning them modern counterparts that are conveniently demonized and homiletically pummeled. More relevant, and more responsible, is the preacher’s or teacher’s awareness that good news, by its very nature, often registers as a threat to the cherished delusions of a faithless world. Depending on the quality of a listener’s reception, words of consolation can land with a dull thud (10:6) or even the blow of a gauntlet thrown down (10:31).

“I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14): thus Jesus interprets a portion of his riddle in John 10:1–6. Whom could that claim possibly offend, and why? Embedded in this and John’s other “I am” (ego eimi) statements is the suggestion of divinity (see also 6:35, 51; 8:12, 24, 58; 10:7, 9; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). Drawing upon conventional language in religious antiquity, including the Hebrew Bible (see, e.g., Exod. 3:6; Isa. 43:10, 25; 51:12; 52:6), the Johannine “I am” formula bespeaks Jesus’ self-revelation of his divine identity. This implication is drawn out in John 10:30 (“The Father and I are one”), which again provokes “the Jews” to attack Jesus for ditheism (10:31–39; see also 5:16–18; 8:58–59). The flock’s sole leader, as well as its only access to salvation (see 10:9–10), is none other than Jesus—a characteristically radical Johannine assertion that provokes both faith and rejection.

What does it mean to refer to Jesus as the shepherd that is “good” (kalos, which might be better translated as “noble,” “model,” or “ideal”)? John specifies two qualifications. First, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” An ordinary shepherd might risk his life for the flock (cf. 1 Sam. 17:34–35); the thief comes only to steal, slaughter, and destroy (John 10:10); the hired hand is bent only on self-preservation (10:12–13). For John, only Jesus models love that relinquishes life in order that others might live (11:50–52; 15:13; 1 John 3:16).

Closely related is the second qualification of model shepherding, met only by Jesus: “I know my own and my own know me, just as the
Father knows me and I know the Father” (John 10:14-15a). Unlike the hired hand, who abandons the sheep since he neither owns nor cares for them (10:12-13), Jesus is as unshakably committed in relationship to his followers, given to him by God (6:37-39; 10:29; 17:6-7, 9, 24; 18:9), as he is perfectly aligned with the will of the Father who sent him (7:28-29; 8:28; 17:25). Such knowledge, attributed here to God, Jesus, and those in communion with God through Jesus, is not styled as *gnosis* (a noun absent from the canon’s Johannine corpus). Neither does John ever suggest that humanity can be liberated by esoteric knowledge. As depicted by the Fourth Gospel, the fundamental human condition is not ignorance, which may be overcome by enlightenment, but sin, from which persons can be delivered only by faith in Christ (3:15-16; 8:24; 16:8-9). Accordingly, the knowledge described in John 10:14-15 rings the bell not of later gnosticism but of those Hebrew prophets who stressed God’s intimate relationship with Israel (Jer. 1:5; Hos. 13:5; Amos 3:2; Nah. 1:7). For John, such relational knowing is predicated on Jesus’ self-sacrificial love: “And I lay down my life for the sheep” (10:15a).

From the acceptance of Jesus as perfect shepherd flows a series of assurances for his sheep. First, the flock is not limited to Jesus’ contemporary followers: also in his charge are other sheep, not of the original fold (10:16a; see also 11:52; 12:20-26), which presumably encompasses the Johannine community and even later generations of Christians (17:20-21; 20:29). Second, the flock’s integrity is not compromised by the admission of receptive latecomers: “Then there will be one sheep herd, one shepherd” (10:16c, Raymond Brown’s translation). The promise of such community would surely have bolstered followers who found themselves lately cut off from the synagogue (9:22, 34). Third, the community’s solidarity is grounded in Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, which for John are two moments in a single, redemptive event (10:17; see also 12:23-24, 32). The point of 10:17 is not that God’s love is brutally warped but rather, that Good Friday and Easter release that obedient love which is held in communion by the Father and the Son (see also 3:16, 35; 17:24). Fourth, the community’s security is warranted by Jesus’ power of disposal of his life. Far from being victimized onto the cross by blind fate, Jesus lays down and again takes up his life, with a freedom of will that is nevertheless lovingly obedient to the Father’s commandment (10:18; see also 8:28-29; 12:49-50; 14:30-31; 15:10). (The harder, alternative reading of 10:18, presented in the NRSV...
margin, is probably to be favored: "No one has taken [my life] from me." Here, as elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel [3:13; 4:38], the earthly Jesus speaks as the risen Christ—a perspectival overlap that reinforces this text's appropriateness for the Easter season.)

Flash-forward nineteen centuries later, to today's church. The chords vibrating in this Johannine lection are complex, and the interpretation of its light and shadow will depend on careful assessment of the needs of one's listeners. To be sure, an undercurrent of judgment runs throughout this passage, and we Christians are as much in position to be confronted by it as John apparently believed of "the Jews." To what extent, and in what ways, has the modern church settled for a jerry-built unity that bypasses attention to Jesus' voice (John 10:16b/c)? Why do some of us seem susceptible to the voice of strangers (10:5)? Why do some of us rebel at the thought of being owned by Christ (10:3–4, 12)? Is there, among these questions, a theological relationship?

But the keynote of this lection is unmistakably consolatory. Like John 17, which amplifies most of its themes, this material, sensitively interpreted, will be gratefully received as cool salve by wounded congregations. Particularly for modern Christians who, like their ancient counterparts, throb with the torment that results from their confession of Jesus as Messiah, few texts are more profoundly reassuring or more nourishing than John 10:11–18. If you love him, feed his sheep (21:17).

Fifth Sunday of Easter: John 15:1-8

In some respects the last of our lections resembles the one before. Both offer quasi-allegorical explanations of complex symbols, with one of whose elements Jesus identifies himself (again using the pregnant formula, ego eimi). Formally, in both, positive affirmations are squared up with corrective counterstatements. Relationships among Jesus, his disciples, and God figure prominently in both interpretations. Yet some fresh avenues are opened up by the figure of the true vine in John 15, whose context is different from the shepherd discourse in chapter 10.

John 10 maps an island of comfort for beleaguered believers in a sea of conflict with unbelievers. By contrast, John 15 is part of the Fourth Gospel's great farewell address (John 14—17), hidden by
Jesus to his disciples. While easing the troubled hearts of those left behind (see also 14:1-31), John 15:1-8 injects a full measure of responsibility to be assumed by Jesus’ followers after Easter. Grief, fear, and the feeling of orphanage are openly acknowledged (see 14:1, 18, 27-28a), but the disciples are to be neither arrested by the past nor stymied by the future. Accordingly, John 15 traces the contours of a pattern of Christian existence in the present that is both possible and enjoined.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. First, and very typically, John orients his readers to Christ and to God, who sent him: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower” (15:1). The vine, of course, was a favorite symbol for Israel from the time of the prophets onwards (Jer. 2:21; 5:10; 6:9; Ezek. 15:1–6; 17:1–10; 19:10–14; Hos. 10:1; Ps. 80:8–16; 2 Esdras 5:23). Perhaps by implied contrast Jesus is presented as the true vine, the only real or authentic vine, much as John elsewhere emphasizes that Jesus is the true light (1:9), the true bread from heaven (6:32, 35), the revealer of the only true God (17:3).

Nor is God irrelevant to the activity of Jesus and his followers: the vinegrower oversees the cultivation (15:2), whose origin and fruition reside in God’s love and God’s glory (15:8–9). Once these principal figures have been thus identified, the way is paved for the interpretation of Jesus’ disciples, articulated in 15:3: “You [pi.] have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.” This, in a sense, is a poetic expression of prevenient grace: if Jesus’ believers have been cleansed (katharoi, v. 3) or pruned (kathairei, v. 2), it is due not to their intrinsic nature but to their receipt of Jesus’ own life-giving word and deed (6:63; 17:8; cf. 5:38; 12:48; 13:8).

Hold fast to that ministry they must: “Abide [meinate] in me as I abide in you” (15:4a). Menein is a weighty Johannine term, extensively developed in 1 John to describe the mutual indwelling of God, Christ, the Spirit, and the believer (see, e.g., 1 John 2:6, 14, 24; 3:24; cf. John 5:38; 6:56; 17:21, 23). Yet, as John 15 unfolds, it becomes clear that the Fourth Evangelist does not conceive of this abiding as some mystical state, achieved by a spiritual elite. Like Paul’s concept of existence “in Christ” (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 2:17), “abiding in the true vine” is the perpetual commitment of all Christians, by definition, to be claimed by Christ’s love and to reciprocate that love in acts of obedience (see also John 8:31–32; 14:15–24; 1 John 4:7–21). Given John’s own elucidation of menein in 15:9–11, we may again wonder if the lectionary has prematurey booted another passage.
From John 15:4b through 15:8, some implications of a life that abides in Christ are worked out by means of balanced contrasts. Jesus' explanation seesaws from warning (vv. 4b, 5c-6) to encouragement (vv. 5ab, 7), but the basic theme does not waver: communion with Christ is the sine qua non of Christian existence, for on such communion depends the believer's ability to bear fruit that is pleasing to God. Whereas Paul (in 1 Cor. 12:4-31) is concerned to interpret the coordinated diversity of gifts within the body of Christ, here the Fourth Evangelist is preoccupied by the importance of the single gift of the Spirit that unites and activates all branches of the one true vine.

What is entailed by such a belief, especially when pondered during the Easter season? To begin with, for the Fourth Evangelist Jesus was not the dead founder of an antique religion; Jesus is the living Lord of a budding church. Perhaps this states the obvious, but sometimes the obvious needs statement. Like the celebration of the Lord's Supper, Easter is no memorial to a dead hero slain in combat but the church's testimony to the source of its life in the present. And make no mistake: in John's estimation we are not the source of our own sustenance. We are neither our own beginning nor end nor current raison d'être. We are, by strict definition, adherents: our identity derives from our adherence, our attachment, our bonding to Christ. "I am the vine; you, the branches; . . . for apart from me you are not able to do anything" (15:5; author's translation). This conviction is basic to the Fourth Gospel's theology and must not be watered down in its interpretation: "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you" (15:16; see also 6:65).

As we have seen in this season's other lections, such knowledge is never an end in itself. Rather, it frames the context out of which the church does its work, or "bears fruit" (John 15:5-6). Adopting imagery as old as the prophets (Ezek. 15:1-8; 19:12; see also Matt. 7:16-20; 13:40), John contrasts branches fruitful and fruitless, the latter being gathered and thrown to the fire. Be it noted that judgment, like joy (John 15:11; 16:20-24) and peace (14:27; 16:33; 20:19-26), constitute the disciples' present experience as well as their expectation of things to come (5:25-29). This chimes perfectly with the Fourth Gospel's well-developed realized eschatology (3:16-21; 11:25-26; 12:31), though such a note is also sounded in the Synoptics (Matt. 3:10; Mark 9:43-47). During Easter, as in all seasons, the church proves its connection with Christ by its fruits, borne in this world and the next.

Yet even that demonstration does not exist for its own sake. By its fecundity the church is wedded ever more securely to Christ, and
therefore to God (John 15:7–8). It is dangerously easy to read only half of these verses as a recipe for self-aggrandizement: "Ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you"; "bear much fruit and become my disciples." But the remainder of these verses carefully delimit the conditions under which Christians experience authentic self-fulfillment: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,... by this my Father is glorified." Petitions offered in Jesus' name, arising from continuance in his word, are those that will be unfailingly honored (see also 8:31–32; 14:13–14; 16:23). From Jesus we learn that genuine discipleship is never for the disciples' benefit alone but ultimately for God's glorification (12:28; 14:13; 17:4). The glorification of Jesus and his disciples is indeed promised in the Fourth Gospel (8:54; 13:31–32; 17:10, 22), but that glory is symbolized by the grain that dies to bear much fruit (12:23–26; 15:12–13). So it is with the vine's branches: even the fruitful are trimmed clean by the gardener to bear more fruit (15:2).

How does one present such a message to modern congregations? With great empathy and self-examination. If we and our listeners approach this text from the posture of self-made women and men, then we shall almost surely be offended by what we hear. For if Christ alone is the source of authentic life, then we, in all our competence and independence, are not. And if God's glorification is the sole end of all fruit that is borne, then we, when cut, could end up bleeding to death (John 15:12–13). As a group the Christians of John's day were more socially vulnerable than we; yet even they appear to have experienced difficulty in understanding their Lord—which is to say, in standing under him. "This is a hard word," admit their narrative surrogates, the disciples; "Who can bear to hear it?" (6:60). The Baptist's testimony is not only frank but the hardest that any of us can ever confess: "I am not the Messiah. He must increase, but I must decrease" (3:28, 30).

Easter is not the validation of counterfeit philosophies of self-help and self-fulfillment. Easter is God's confirmation and promise of help for the helpless, of rejuvenation for the withered, of unquenchable life where once there was only death.

Recently I was asked to complete a survey, circulated by a congregation of which I was once a member. With John's help, perhaps I may yet respond to its questions with answers that echo the voice of the model shepherd:
1. As we grow, what should our building and program priorities be?
   A. Daily child-care
   B. Substance-abuse support groups
   C. Co-dependency support groups
   D. Other: “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

2. Please circle the bracket that best defines the percentage of your gross contribution to this church.
   A. 1% to 3%
   B. 3% to 5%
   C. 5% to 10%
   D. Other: “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

3. Please indicate which factor is most important in choosing or maintaining a church home:
   A. Facilities and programs
   B. Personality of preacher and friendly atmosphere
   C. Location of church and ease of parking
   D. Other: “You did not choose me but I chose you.”

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Quarterly Review is a publication of The United Methodist Publishing House and the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry.