W. Paul Jones

Monastic Practices for the Non-Monk

Jeffrey Gros

Roman Catholics and United Methodists in Dialogue

Kathleen Black

Beyond the Spoken Word: Preaching as Presence
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Introduction

Although few of us ever live out the hammock-resting-lemonade-sipping-lazy-hazy-crazy-days-of-summer fantasy to our full satisfaction, once the summer is over life speeds up again—and we usually have to race around just to keep up. Into this energetic state of affairs we insert the headline article of this issue written by Paul Jones. As an antidote to the frenzy in the air and to build a disciplined soul for all seasons, he offers borderline perversity: “If you feel like sitting, stand. Give away your favorite sweater. Forego a special TV show. Turn off the final minutes of a close game. Postpone reading a new magazine. Stay cold. Endure heat. Stare at but do not touch a dessert. Eat Brussels sprouts.” Monasticism—adapted faithfully to our times and circumstances—is available wisdom for our age, rooted in an ancient tradition of Christian practice.

And what of our relationship with the Roman Catholic Church in which that monastic movement was born? From an institutional perspective this time, Jeffrey Gros explores the ties that bind our two churches. Its theme is ecumenism, but it would be unfair to leave the article with that label. The Greek that stands behind the unlovely word ecumenism has a graceful meaning: oikoumene signifies the world as a household, to which one belongs and in which one has a share. As the psalmist puts it, “How good and pleasant it is when covenant kin sit together in unity . . . for there the Lord has ordained the blessing of enduring life” (Ps. 133, James L. Mays trans.)

Imagine for a moment that you have been cornered by an earnest new member of the church who wants to know which English translation of the Bible is “the best.” Now it would be wonderful thing to rise up like a renowned biblical scholar and make the sort of pronouncement that ends discussion. James Barr, who needs no introduction to scripture students, has taken on this very issue. But he
resists the temptation to put his weight behind one translation or another, and his reasons why give us a fascinating look at the place of the Bible in contemporary society.

The two pieces that follow, which constitute the heart of this issue, have to do with proclamation. Here the person as human being and not human doing comes into full force. Kathleen Black challenges us to reach across the abyss of silence for a greater, more inclusive understanding of the Word; William Dorman and Ron Allen counsel us to wait and receive the Word as an honored guest. Their statements, rounded out with a theological reflection by Robb Shoaf and a lectionary study on Hebrews by Paul Duerksen, are meant to invigorate our fall activities with silence, hopefulness, and receptivity. This journal will always hold space open for theological essays based on life experience in ministry, and we invite your submissions. Please write or call for instructions on how to prepare a manuscript for publication!

I leave you with some images of autumn from Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass:

The big doors of the country-barn stand open and ready,
The dried grass of the harvest-time loads the slow-drawn wagon.
The clear light plays on the brown gray and green intertinged,
The armfuls are packed to the sagging mow:
I am there . . . I help. . . .

Sharon Hels
If ever there was a country where [persons] loved comfort, pleasure and material security, good health and conversation about the weather and the World Series and the Rose Bowl; if ever there was a land where silence made [persons] nervous and prayer drove them crazy and penance scared them to death, it is America.


Classical spirituality is often divided into two types: apostolic and monastic. Apostolic is a spirituality capable of being practiced by those called to an “apostolate,” that is, an active vocation. Because of the demands of living in “the world,” this spirituality is unusually supplemental to one’s secular work. Monastic spirituality, on the other hand, is in its purest form characteristic of those whose apostolate is spirituality. Trappists, for example, living in remote areas where they are economically self-supporting, are able to restructure their space and time so as to make “seeking God” their reason for being. Life for them is given one day at a time. By dividing these twenty-four hours by the Trinity (i.e., by three), the resulting eight periods, each marked by corporate worship, form a pilgrimage by which the monks can live the whole of salvation history each day.
The recent resurgence of interest in spirituality is, unfortunately, occurring at a time when the resources for apostolic ("active") spirituality have been largely marginalized and subverted by modern culture. Since our societal preoccupation is with "doing," there is much to be gained by examining monastic spirituality, whose focus is upon "being." The resulting dialogue can help restore the countercultural dimension of Christian spirituality.

Silence: The Emptiness of Timeless Listening

Modern society is soggy with sound. We are downright noisy—in our work, our lifestyle, our environment. Even when silence gasps for breath, we tend to choke it down with distraction—from boisterous radio commercials to unwatched TV. To open a monastery door, however, is to be consumed by a resounding silence. Guests learn to whisper, for here silence is the general rule, and sound the abnormal state of affairs. "Speak," we are told, "only if it improves the silence." Silence is spiritually filling; noise is what drains. Idle chatter, jaggad, twaddle, gibble-gabble, chit-chat—these are the compost which feed gossip, ridicule, cynicism, off-color words and stories.

Every child is pressured, early on, to learn the "skill" of "making conversation." Such small talk is really parallel monologues, making sound of anything that comes to mind, judging its success by the infrequency of embarrassing silence. This flow of noise contrasts with the monastic feast of souls, learned by becoming comfortable in the presence of others without speaking. In passing, one need only nod, wink, or wave—just enough for the Spirit in me to acknowledge the Spirit's birthing in the other as friend.

This monastic way of silence threatens many people. It exposes as arrogant our hot and cold running commentary on everything, as if each thought that runs through one's head is worthy of public broadcast. "Low self-esteem" is a popular phrase for portraying the human condition out of which noise oozes. Thus it is silence, experienced profoundly by Jesus in the desert, that tempts us to swallow whole society's three deceptive "cures": power, prestige, possessions. These are the external expressions of the bravado by which we adorn our insecurity, wrapping our smallness in stereophonic aggressiveness. Unless monastic-like silence periodically floods and rethreatens these empty pretensions, there is
no escape from what G. K. Chesterton calls this “tiny and tawdry theatre in which your own little plot is always being played.”

A convention or conference is a revealing expression of the “fall.” Here is a classic distillation of noisy self-importance—seeking and competing and collecting and impressing—cloaking the anemia of inwardness with the games of outwardness. But redemption begins with silence, if only in an empty hotel room after midnight, where the self is introduced to its malnourished soul.

Current efforts to create non-smoking spaces reflect a growing awareness of the contamination that results from the public practices of others. Sound is one such contamination, and its invasion into the heads of everyone nearby witnesses to the fact that space is not ours to own. Joseph Wood Krutch once insisted that to lose the wilderness is to destroy the soul. Those who hike the deep forests sense silence as symbolic of that for which the soul aches. Contemplative monks provide the Name for this ache. The intimate splendor of silence is the interiority of God. Wrapped in an immense indigency that echoes the chambers of the heart, our images of God evaporate, until silence becomes the mystery which is prayer. Monastic walls are tempered by years of such silence, of monks melting into God. One absorbs it into one’s pores as a gentle peace, until it congeals as one’s serene core.

Jesus was one of the silent ones—living a hidden life for 30 years, restoring himself nightly by prayer in the silent hills, justifying his short active apostolate by opening not his mouth. Such silence does not come naturally. Even in the monastery it keeps eroding. Thus monks must practice silence upon silence, going apart from the community for a weekly desert day, a monthly hermitage stay, an extended annual retreat.

Yet in a real sense, silence is not soundless. While Martha frantically tried to keep pressure cooker and microwave going simultaneously in the kitchen, Mary chose as “the better part” silence at the feet of Jesus in order to listen. It is the quiet self who hears the birds at daybreak, a child giggling, wind in the cedars, the crackling of fire, even the humorous crunch of breakfast cereal. Heard from a silent center, such sounds render living a lively gift of praise.

Sacred Space: the Monastic Cell

Wise advice from the desert monastics was: “Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.” The power of such sacred space functions in several ways.
As Sanctuary. In contrast to our modern obsession with total openness, the necessity of privacy needs reaffirming. Monastic communities are rediscovering the indispensability of inviolable space for each person. Accountable only to God, one goes there without the possibility of intrusion. The monastic cell, where no one else is permitted, recalls the resistance of youth to having their rooms defined by parental order or their fascination with tree houses and secret places. The frantic running of persons to a ringing telephone, no matter what they are doing, reflects the inability of the modern soul to affirm its right to non-invasion. Desperate is a mother whose only defense is a locked bathroom door. A spouse who insists on opening all letters, who reads another's journal, who inquires about each phone call, who ridicules a "Please Do Not Disturb" sign—such a person tramples on virgin souls with muddy feet. The cell as sanctuary witnesses to the self's celibate center, where only God enters, after knocking.3

As Self-Encounter. A cell not only symbolizes a "where" but a "when." Each person needs extended alone time, as in a retreat where a door firmly closes out all distractions, cuts off normal support mechanisms, and forces an encounter with one's own naked self. Steadfastness in the monastic cell, says Trappist Charles Cummings, is a determination to hold my ground until I learn to live with myself—with all my faults, failings, emptiness, and unfulfillment. In our self-indulgent society, to avoid a "cell" is to risk forfeiting the dynamics of being healed and being called.4

As Mystery. Harvey Cox once celebrated the "secular city" as the place where mystery has been resolved into problems to be solved. He came to recognize the myopia of life so lived.5 Deep in every religion is a place of sacred mystery. For Israel, it was the holy of holies, in the center of which was the sacred ark. It was entered only once each year by a person divinely chosen by lot. The monastery calls its sacred space the cloister, that enclosure which itself has as center the veiled eucharistic tabernacle. There is mystery about a monastery into which one enters, never to leave again. Each of us needs a sacred place, if only the corner of a room blessed by sacramentals—a special rock, picture, book, letter, trinket—of value only to the one knowing their silent secrets. To the outsider, Israel's sacred ark was only a wooden box holding two rough rocks. But for the Hebrews, to go near was to
experience tangible sacredness as the measure of meaning for everything daily. Without such a sacred center for the turning wheel, “all is vanity,” a boring repetition bringing “weariness of the flesh.” (Eccl. 12:8, 12)

Liturgy: Structuring Time and Space

Worship is no random assemblage of ingredients—hymns, readings, prayers. As a structured whole, liturgy is a revelatory gestalt through which the meaning of the Whole is rehearsed. Because life splinters without structure, each person’s life is shaped by “liturgy,” either by imposition, habit, or choice. The monastic choice, as we indicated, is periodic worship structuring the day’s parts as a meaningful whole. Just as the cosmos began with the Spirit moving over the dark and formless deep (Gen. 1:1), so each monastic day begins with the early darkness of Vigils, awaiting life’s resurrection. Lauds celebrates daybreak as this renewed gift of re-creation. Throughout the day, bells keep calling forth the structure of God’s history with us. At Vespers, our works are lifted eucharistically as offering into the Divine pilgrimage. And with a sprinkling that recalls Baptism as having been a dying of our death, Compline (“complete”) is a relinquishing of our lives (“Into thy hands I commit my spirit”) into the Great Silence as the sleep of death.

To such liturgy we bring our music, poetry, vestments, furnishings, glass, wood, and stone as sacred time renders common things sacred by glorifying God as artist of the universe. Bread, wine, water, oil, fire, the common elements of daily life, are choreographed by signs and gestures until time itself becomes liturgy, and space the chalice for our senses. Non-monks have no option but to have their time and space formed. Even if one’s Lauds is the “Today Show,” and Compline’s gesture a putting out of the cat, formed by ritual we will be. Even if one’s sacred vessels are made of styrofoam and plastic, and one’s genuflection is with a credit card, formed by sacramentals we will be.

Crucial, then, for the Christian is the emergence of rituals and objects capable of rehearsing an alternative rhythm to society’s flabby and exploitive patterns. Trappists recite all 150 psalms in a two-week period—traditionally by memory for resaying during their work. Certainly the non-monk can learn several psalms by heart as daily
resource for remembering. Digital watches can recall one’s spiritual identity just as faithfully as village bells once called our ancestors thrice daily to stop and say the Angelus. Options are many: an “alarm clock” made of a timer set to turn on a stereo tape of Gregorian chant, tablecloths the color of the liturgical seasons, special dishes and special clothing for special celebrations, a mantra for gentleness during rush hour traffic, a list of saint days (adding your own) on the refrigerator door, a cup of “holy” water by the door (“When did we see thee thirsty”), a ritual question (e.g., “What am I doing with my life?”) asked faithfully when one enters an elevator, a word of thankfulness upon entering one’s front door. These are the “priestly” words and gestures that render life holy. And just as Eucharist is the monk’s daily event of centering, so for the non-monk eucharistic prayer can be a “returning thanks” over one’s main meal. Then it is that serving dishes become colorful patens, collages of sight, smell, and taste, drawing together the sun, earth, sky, and rain, with growers, producers, grocers and cooks as co-celebrants.

St. Paul understood well the goal for which these monastic practices are means. “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:17). Spirituality is not only a doing but a way of living. Just as falling in love creates an indelible sense of the presence of the other—kept lively by thoughts and memories—so the monk’s life thrives on the analogy of sensual love for characterizing one’s relation with the incarnate Presence. Monks begin worship with a Psalm as mantra (“O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me”). Repeated regularly to the beat of one’s heart or the rhythm of one’s breathing, it becomes engraved as liturgy in one’s subconscious mind, chanting itself unceasingly—much as a melody heard early in the morning can persist all day, even into sleep.

Stability and the Movable Feast

For much of their lives, my parents traveled less than thirty miles from their birthplace. Yet their children and relatives are now scattered throughout the country. In one generation, transiency has become our lifestyle, and temporariness the quality of our commitments. Therefore, the Trappist vow of stability appears anachronistic. Physically, it is a promise to remain rooted for life in one place; spiritually, it is the promise to be faithful to where one has been led.
While life vaporizes without such grounding, rootlessness is the price paid for the modern “life of advantage”—staying as long as it is comfortable, relating until the relationship gets tough, persevering until something that looks better comes along.

In contrast, the monastery is neither a community of advantage nor a retreat from problems into the security of like-minded friends. Monks do not choose, but are chosen—called to be where God places them, with all its inevitable flaws, aggravations, and unlikely colleagues. The monk is not permitted the comfort of splitting into compatibility groups, those with like education, personality, or temperament. I know few monks who would prefer their monastery just the way it is, or who would have recruited those particular persons as its residents. Stability is a form of ascesis, that disciplining through which one transcends the inane. A special breed are those who learn to bear patiently the idiosyncrasies of others, clean sinks for those indifferent to putting caps back on the toothpaste, listen compassionately to lopsided thinking and do so without resentment, requital, or dishonesty. There is a great difference between society’s host of exiles (those without a genuine home) and monks as pilgrims (those together on their way home). As pilgrims, Christians move while remaining at rest, anchored in a disciplined stability that provides manna for any desert.

Erik Erikson discerned that each person’s mature years are characterized by a polarity: the search for integrity or the experience of final despair. After years of frantic doing which rests on the fear that nothing will make sense if one stops running, there dawns a haunting realization that nothing will make sense unless one stops. Taking a stand, putting down roots, watering one’s soul from within—these are marks of the transition from “making something of one’s self” to being freed to “be who one is.” Stability, whatever form it takes, is requisite if one is to stop hiding. Monks may have it easier here, for their inner stability has external support. Non-monks may need their own special symbols—a homestead revisited, an old cemetery, a family Bible, a note of commitment hidden away in one’s wallet. Or, for the time being, one might have to settle for the studied familiarity of the back of one’s hand. Whatever, the purpose is to facilitate what Cummings calls an interior at-homeness of the heart. Ironically, by staying put long enough to taste it, one comes finally to know the meaning of being “homesick at home.”

Such stability is particularly difficult for today’s young people.
Persons formerly entered the monastery at an early age. Today, novice masters advise later entry, with delayed vows, for experience is disclosing that youth are socialized so that discipline of any kind is incredibly difficult. Comfort has become our flaccid norm—heating the cold, air-conditioning the heat, turning night into day, day into night—all with the convenience of a switch, a pill, a gadget. We ride elevators, then buy step exercise machines; we drive everywhere and covet a treadmill. This obsession to arrange, ease, and glamorize our lives rests on a dismissal of deferred satisfaction as unhealthy repression.

In reaction, *ad hoc* groups of stability have emerged all around as support and accountability for our fledgling wills. From Weight Watchers to Alcoholics Anonymous, persons are discovering what musicians, athletes, and saints have long known: the necessity of self-discipline through commitment to communal accountability. In the meantime, however, the church has retreated from providing models. For example, since Vatican II, traditional Lenten disciplines are perceived as negative; and the Mass itself, once centered in sacrifice, is becoming congenial table fellowship. In contrast, the monastic trek follows Israel and Jesus into the desert—confronting temptations head-on—by resisting the comfortable, the prestigious, and the easy. This spirituality scripture characterizes with such words as: will, vows, determination, courage, faithfulness, perseverance, and discipleship. Understandably, St. Paul uses athletic analogies for this spiritual life. “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things” (1 Cor. 9:25), so as to be able to fight the good fight and finish the race by keeping the faith (2 Tim. 4:7).

A central contribution of monasticism, then, is the disciplined soul. While hair shirts are “out,” during Lent there is a fast of bread and water on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, and often on every Friday. In Protestantism, John Wesley regarded such disciplining of the will through fasting as so necessary that he required it of every preacher: “Will you recommend fasting or abstinence, both by precept and example?” By analogy, the military understands the disciplining of boot camp as essential if one is to become steadfast and obedient. The Christian equivalent is the desert experience. The non-monk can sample this by setting aside a portion of each day for doing the contrary of what “feels good.” If you feel like sitting, stand. Give away your favorite sweater. Forgo a special TV show. Turn off the final minutes of a close game. Postpone reading a new magazine. Stay
cold. Endure heat. Stare at but do not touch a dessert. Eat Brussels sprouts. Although minute, such acts can teach that “just saying no” is no simple matter.

The heart of discipline is commitment. The monk undergoes years of discipline—as observer, postulant, novice, and under temporary vows—and only then is one to be ready for solemn (life) vows. Monks as celibates witness against the private ownership of the self and for spiritual monogamy as foundational. Interestingly, traditional marriage vows capture the monastic vows:

I take you [God] . . . to have and to hold
from this day forward, for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.
This is my solemn vow.13

For the monk, however, unless such vows are made first and foremost to Christ through a concrete Christian community as his body, they dare not be made to a person—without idolatry, and likely divorce. There is only One who is worthy of a commitment that is unconditional, irrevocable, uncalculated, and intrinsic. Once this priority is clear, Christians are freed for the joy of multiple sub-commitments as community, one of which may be marriage. The loneliness of the nuclear family, torn from its former support as part of an extended family, calls us to recognize in monasticism a model for the church as extended community. In addition, such promises, made liturgically, give rise to committed friendships that can survive time, distance, and human weakness.14

Lectio Divina and the Cult of Fast Foods

In this day of instant news and speed reading, where everything is rapid, condensed, and “user friendly,” the monastic practice of Lectio divina appears strange. While Lectio divina means reading scripture and spiritual books, its importance resides in its method. St. Benedict expected the monk to do it for 2 to 3 hours daily in summer and five hours in the winter. Its method is to read, very slowly, as if re-re-reading, preferably out loud. Each word is tasted, the rhythm of each phrase acknowledged bodily, and the scenes made food for the
imagination. One begins with prayer, making clear the expectation: to be personally addressed.

This is not Bible study but praying the scripture—not to be informed but to participate—until in the midst of what is seen and heard, one is found by that which has one’s name on it. So claimed, one rests in a meaning that is beyond concept or thought. Much as a poet, one is drawn from the literal, into the metaphorical, toward the spiritual. Yet everything about our culture discounts Lectio divina as being functionally useless, “a waste of time.” To do something for its own sake is droll in a culture where everything is priced by its utility. But in the monastery, the “useless” is the heart of spirituality.

Work as Means and End

Work, along with prayer and reading, form the monastic triangle. This placement has important implications for our work-defined society.

Work as Prophetic. St. Benedict called monastic liturgies the Opus Dei, the work of God, celebrating all of creation as the Opus Dei. Work is an expression of praise. Luther, himself a monk, insisted that secular jobs can be as much a divine calling as priesthood. Thus, while a monk’s work often resembles that of workers outside the monastery, it is actually religious, for its motivation is referential. It is done for God. Genesis portrays work before the fall as essential to being human. We are called as gardeners to complete the creation (Gen. 1:27–31; 2:15). While work after the Fall takes on a personally penitential dimension, its positive corporate function remains restorative. Labor is the prophetic call to heal a wounded earth. Monks traditionally go to the most forsaken and barren places, gardening the waste land into a foretaste of Eden restored. Thus St. Bernard founded his monastery in a robber’s lair and called it “Clairvaux” or “bright place.” A monastery is to be a paradisus claustralis, a cloistered paradise where monks model a “eucharistic transformation of creation.” Employment that does not have this potential goal, is questionable—for society in general, and the Christian in particular.

The propheticism of work deals not only with ends but with means. When the bell for daily office rings, one goes, leaving the sentence unfinished, the row of corn not fully hoed. The meaning of work resides as much in the doing as in the being done. Since work is
essential for being human, our obsession with “labor-saving” devices is doubtful. Monastic communities are laboratories in social alternatives to modernity’s magnitude, velocity, power, efficiency, and planned obsolescence. Monks oppose large-scale projects, insisting that the products and technology used must serve the deeper needs of the human spirit. Preference is for labor-intensity over ecological exploitation, noncompetitive labor-sharing over “efficient” unemployment, assured benefits over the inequality of profits. It is in the monastery that one grasps the Christian nature of common ownership, motivation without reward, and the joy of working for its own sake.

Rarely in the secular world does a person’s work have intrinsic value, loved for its own sake. Labor has become instrumental, valued for wages whereby to purchase what supposedly does have value. The monastic two-handled cup provides a symbolic contrast. In modern culture, efficiency encourages the doing of several things at the same time in order to get more done. But the monk grasps the cup with both hands, savoring the hot fragrance of coffee for its own sake, without a free hand tempted to diminish the drinking from being an end in itself. Once the difference is experienced, one no longer takes a walk; a walk takes us. Dishwashing is not to “get it over with.” It becomes an immersion event, sloshing water as if playing with Jonah’s whale. Even repetitive jobs are redeemable, rendering their methodical movement a spiritual mantra.

Work as Holism. While monastic tasks may be assigned according to ability, they are often assigned to establish a special commonness. In Cuba, court judges do menial labor in the neighborhood where they are to judge; and doctors work among those whom they are to heal. Similarly in the monastery, the abbot washes the dishes of the newest members, the novice master takes a turn at scrubbing toilets, and the hermit washes the clothes of the community. In an age of isolating specialization, there is a lesson to be learned here.

But there is more. Monks labor not to increase their comfort but so as not to be a burden. Life is not a right but a shared gift, witnessed to when working is humble, hidden, and unrecognized. Clean clothes appear mysteriously in one’s stall, and hallways sparkle as if never dirty; one need not ask for salt or ketchup, for the brothers on the right and on the left have adopted your preferences into their concerns. To be hidden with Christ in God is to forgo the need to be noticed and
thus freed to sweep in corners where no one will ever know. Present at
the center is grace. The fragile ego needs less massaging, for one
knows one’s self as unconditionally accepted by the Almighty Lord of
Creation. Doing, no longer to get, is redeemed as the grateful response
for having already received the pearl of great price.

**Work as Purgation.** While we resist a life of hiddenness, (secretly
coveting praise), Jesus makes our situation clear: “When you have
done all that is commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we
have only done what was our duty’ ” (Luke 17:10). The experience
which often happens devastatingly in the secular world at retirement
happens daily in the monastery, usually gently. No monk is
indispensable. No job has one’s name written on it for long. The
monastic hallways lead, in effect, into the desert; for the monk must
have purged away culture’s idolatry of ambition, competition, and
possessions. It is in the monastery that it makes sense to be assigned to
wash a floor that is already clean.

There is no salvation outside the church—for each person must
have a community in which to drop the mask of pretentiousness.
“Who are you?” the secular world asks. “Engineer.” “Secretary.”
“Housewife.” The monk answers, “I am a child of God.” So the
This is the only reply one will get. It is a way of talking about “soul”
without using the name.

Once one is secure in being the one for whom Christ died, all work
becomes holy. Freed of neediness, one works for the sake of working.
What is involved is upending the relation of being and doing. Doing
no longer in order to be, “being” becomes the foundation for “doing”.
As a result, work is no longer work. It becomes play.

**Work as Rhythm.** Scripture makes cosmic the rhythm of work and
sabbath (Gen. 1:1–2:3). So does the monastery. Today’s activism is
legitimate doing carried to an illegitimate extreme. Capitalism’s
formation socializes us to run up the down escalator, even on our days
off. Lamentably, such drivenness is sanctified by the heretical
“Protestant work ethic”: justification by work alone. “Workaholism” is
a name for the sickness that results from this contagion. It is
widespread, for it cloaks our deep insecurity about our insignificance
by seducing us into the arrogance of attempting to *deserve* acceptance.
We become addicted to the perpetual motion, even when our hollowness hints that the goal is a mechanical rabbit.

Monks forfeit this deceptive lure of the future. They know that life is on the dole, given in one-day portions. Since there is no carryover, there is no tomorrow about which to think. At each Compline, one returns one's life to God, daily. Since we deserve coal in our stocking, if there is to be another day, it will be pure gift, brand new, gift-wrapped, with one’s name handwritten. Each dawn is an Easter resurrection.

So simple. Yet the indictment of how convoluted we make it comes when we hear Merton’s insistence: authentic spirituality is the ability to do nothing and feel no guilt. Christian life must be one of alternation. We are lethal unless our workdays alternate with sabbaths, labor with rest, intensity with enjoyment. As a child, the church raised me to experience the sabbath as duty, not as joy. Yet scripture is clear. God, resting on the seventh day, makes holy leisure vital to living, offering with standing ovation a creation in which we may play together. Monasteries symbolize such permission, offering even to force-feed us into doing nothing. “Become as a little child,” Jesus said, relearning to play in the sandbox of the world— in foretaste of creation’s “eighth day” when the Kingdom will redawn as the eternal sabbath in God.

Sunday is a special day for the monk. It is the sabbath of sabbaths, restoring the playful heart whereby each day can be a Sunday. The Sabbath, centering in God as the satisfaction of all one’s yearnings, has the power to transform even the most compulsive worker into a gentle, free, and compassionate soul. Such weekly renewal is re-rehearsed daily in the discipline of contemplation. Here one chooses a set period of time in which to be physically disengaged from one’s doing. Through the repetition of a word or phrase, the mind is kept out of one’s way, as one comes to rest in union, as peaceful sabbatical, with one’s God.

A Final Thought—With Two-Handled Cup

In the end, what value do monasteries and monastic practices have for non-monks? As challenge to our cultural accommodation, they invite balance to Christian lives that have lost their savor. Without the desert, Sinai is like any other mountain. Without fasting, Thanksgiving is only
a threat to one's diet. Without Advent, Christmas is an expensive day off. Without Lent, Easter is hyperbole, complete with chocolate bunny.16

Notes

6. This idea is developed further in W. Paul Jones, "The Rhythms of Life," *Weavings* (Sept.-Oct. 1987).
8. E.g., St. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote nearly one hundred sermons on the Song of Solomon; see *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (New York: Paulist, 1987), 207-278.
14. This idea is developed at length in W. Paul Jones, "Commitment and the Circles of Friendship," *Weavings*, (March-April, 1992).
Jeffrey Gros

Toward Full Communion: Roman Catholics and Methodists in Dialogue

For the United Methodist Church in the United States, one of the most important relationships is that with the Roman Catholic Church. One might think otherwise, since the United Methodist Church has specific commitments to union with the Consultation on Church Union churches (COCU) and strong conciliar commitments. Likewise, it is important for the Roman Catholic Church, although its relationships with the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox and with the Anglicans and the success of the U.S. Lutheran/Catholic dialogues would lead one to expect its relationship to the UMC to be less central. However, given the demography and religious culture of the United States, certain concrete affinities shared in spirituality and social action, and specific tensions inherent in the relationship, this particular Christian partnership is of central importance. With the 1993 Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, "Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life, and Witness" on the horizon, these two U.S. churches carry a particularly weighty responsibility.

In this brief essay, I would like first to note the importance of the relationship and some of the affinities between the two churches. Then I would like to talk about the vision of full unity which Methodists and Catholics share, the work of the United Methodist/Roman Catholic

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dialogue in the U.S. and the International Dialogue. The primary theological focus of these discussions is ecclesiology. However, as will be noted, they imply an exploration of common ground and mutual discovery which must take place before issues that divide the church can be brought to the surface for resolution. There are currently many opportunities for fruitful dialogue. At the international level, the dialogue in Faith and Order is sponsored by the Commission of the World Council of Churches to which the Roman Catholic Church and many Methodist churches belong as full members. International dialogue is also sponsored by the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in the Vatican. The U.S. dialogue between the United Methodist Church and the Roman Catholic Church is sponsored by the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns (GCCUIC) and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

These dialogues represent the churches’ commitment to a long pilgrimage together, expected to cover decades if not centuries, the goal of which is to reconcile the differences that have emerged in the four hundred years of separation in the West. No one issue dominates the theological discussion, but all issues dividing the churches are open for discussion. An overview of the results will be given here, with no pretensions to providing a penetrating theological analysis or evaluation of any of them. The essay will end with a few concrete reflections of hope for the future.

The U.S. Context

First of all, before looking at the theological issues, it is important to note some common elements. These two churches share a catholic sense of disciplinary accountability, the authority of the church to appoint ministers, collegial structures of decisionmaking, and evenly spread constituency across the country. In almost any ecumenical structure in which Catholics and Methodists participate, they provide unique leadership because of their numbers, their ability to exercise leadership in all of their congregations, and the mutual accountability of their ministers. This does not mean, of course, that Methodists and Catholics are without their own internal tensions which intrude from both churches into the ecumenical setting. These tensions are both
sociological and theological. And, as we will see, the size and resources of these two churches provide for potential conflict between them.

Furthermore, tensions between these two churches magnify when they come into the ecumenical community with a variety of other partners. More will be said about these difficulties later when we look at the specifics of the dialogue. However, from the start it is important to note not only the gifts Catholics and Methodists bring into the ecumenical arena but the responsibilities placed on these two churches because of their size, resources, and heritages among the churches.

Together these churches "recognize that the divisions underlying this last [present denominational separation] usage are contrary to the unity Christ wills for his Church. In obedience to Him who will bring about this unity we are committed to a vision that includes the goal of full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life." Given this common recognition and the commitments it entails, the implications for leadership in the American Christian community are immense.

Like the Roman Catholic Church, United Methodists can easily be complacent because of their size and self-assurance as a church. A recent comment by Michael Kinnamon, made lovingly about United Methodists, could as easily apply to Roman Catholics:

... the biggest objection I hear from your-our-ecumenical partners is that the Methodists are too self-sufficient.

The Catholic church, being the largest in the world and having a secure self-confidence about God's will for it and many members who still live out of the spirituality of church generated centuries before the Second Vatican Council (and who see it as the only Church fully in accord with the divine will) is even more susceptible to self-sufficiency than Methodists. One would have to say that not only congregations but some organs of leadership in the Catholic community can identify with the finding about Methodist congregations:

Many congregations appeared to view themselves as normative, and their way of being the church as simply "the way it is."

Only an ecumenical partnership can help lead Catholics, and for that matter, Methodists, outside of this spiritual isolation and
ecclesiological reductionism. While these are sociological and psychological facts, they shape theological and spiritual reflection. The sociological context, especially for the U.S. ecumenical movement, and the theological reflection in the two communions has begun to shift radically in the last twenty years. The relationship between these two churches and the theological contributions of the dialogues reviewed below are essential elements in this shift.

Catholic/Methodist Common Ground

Catholics and Methodists never divided from one another. Rather, the followers of John Wesley felt compelled after the American Revolution to continue his mission and adapt to the frontier a form of church and message best suited for “spreading biblical holiness across the land.” Having been denied orders by the Bishop of London—one might think for political reasons—a presbyteral succession has been maintained in Methodist orders, though a threefold ministry prevails in the four major Methodist churches in the United States. This lack of specific estrangement is both a gift and a liability in our quest for full reconciliation. To begin with the liability: we have had to go through a process of discerning both our affinities and differences before determining what needs to be reconciled. As will be noted, the slowness of this particular dialogue can be attributed, among other things, to this process, which has clarified a wide range of common ground.

Roman Catholics tend to look favorably on the theology and ecclesiology of John Wesley, which because of its High Anglicanism, patristic base, and strong sacramentalism seems quite congruent as a basis for moving forward. However, as the international dialogue has noted from the beginning, Wesley's letter to a Roman Catholic (1749), his theology, and even his intent for the societies (to remain within the Anglican Communion) are seen in light of the subsequent developments within Methodism. Neither the Roman Catholic Church nor the United Methodist Church are as they were in the eighteenth century. In 1970 the United Methodist Church duly noted this shift by reevaluating its historic appraisal of Catholicism.

Methodist claims to be “nonconfessional” and devoid of a “magisterium” are misleading to those outside the Wesleyan heritage. The discussions of how Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason
are related to the Christian faith are deeply rooted within United Methodist life, always with their ecumenical commitments as one component of the discussion. Likewise, as the dialogues have shown, Methodists are not without a word to speak to the world and the Christian community, whether spoken of as "magisterium" or not. It is true that mission and social witness more than sacramental questions lend themselves to Methodist consensus and clarity, as, for example, contrasting results of teaching on peace and ordained ministry demonstrate. Methodist ecumenical partners experience an assertiveness and often definite confessional precision in ecumenical encounters. The current World Council study, "Toward the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today," and the Methodist and the Episcopal churches' reservations on the Consultation on Church Union should stimulate clarification and widespread engagement on this issue.

Likewise, Wesley, in talking of the person of a Catholic spirit, presumes a firm sacramental, confessional, and ecclesial commitment as the core of the confidence to reach out with a breadth of heart:

\[\ldots\text{while he is steadily fixed in his religious principles, in what he believed to be the truth as it is in Jesus; while he firmly adheres to that worship of God which he judges to be most acceptable in his sight; and while he is united by the tenderest and closest ties to one particular congregation; his heart is enlarged toward all [human]kind, those he knows and those he does not.}\ldots\]

In the modern ecumenical movement we are able to take a step further than Wesley's admirable ecumenical spirituality—which, of course, is a necessary prerequisite in our people—to the hope for and action on behalf of full visible unity in truth, worship, and "congregation," that is communion. The dialogues recounted below propose a common "evangelical catholic" theology unimaginined in Wesley's day.

Catholic ecumenists tend to know Methodists best through the works of Albert Outler. His basic contributions to the understanding of Scripture and Tradition, the patristic heritage, American religion, and the resources of John Wesley have made a marked contribution to the renewal of Roman Catholics as well as of Methodists. Furthermore, he has been a major contributor and interpreter of the ecumenical movement and its progress towards the theological bases
for full communion. However, it is important for Methodists' ecumenical partners to see Outler’s contribution in the context of the full diversity of points of view represented by Methodism today. The publication of “The Letter to a Roman Catholic” and Wesley’s Sermons with Outler’s commentary plus early enthusiastic ecumenical encounters may have brought a false euphoria to the relationship. The opening of common ground has been a prelude to the careful and exacting theological work required prior to full communion. On the other hand, these early affinities must be recalled and sustained as the relationship matures and endures the normal pressures of growing intimacy. Many Catholics and Methodists who have not kept up with the international and U.S. dialogues and the common work in Faith and Order may not see clearly what common ground has been created between us.

The elements noted here are developed in the dialogue: the catholic and corporate understanding of Church which gives us both institutional vigor and missionary potential in this country and abroad, the commitment to spirituality and Christian experience within that context, and the strong social witness. We have mentioned above how the catholic structure/connectional systems of our two churches are both affinities and ecumenical resources. More detailed work on this commonality will undoubtedly emerge now that we have the rich basis of dialogue on authority, ecclesiology, and communion.

From its origins Wesley’s movement was “accused” of being Roman Catholic in its soteriology. That is, Wesley’s emphasis on personal holiness, spirituality, and the road to perfection was deemed to rely too heavily on the sanctification dimension of the justification/sanctification elements in Christ’s work in the human spirit. On the local and pastoral level, this affinity has meant that Holiness, African, and United Methodists have felt quite at home in Catholic spiritual renewal movements and that Catholics have found strong resonances in the spirituality of Methodism. The practical and quite local challenges include translating the theological dialogue into a movement for spiritual renewal, reconciliation, and deepening of our understanding of the common tradition.

The United Methodist Church has more than any other been the embodiment of the Social Gospel movement in the United States. Its Social Creed (1908), like many of the social encyclicals of the Roman Catholic Church, makes impossible a dualism between faith and action, piety and prophecy, personal faith and public policy advocacy.
Of course, within our churches the social witness causes certain tensions, as we have seen with the peace pastoral of the bishops of both of our churches and with church leaders' continued outspoken opposition to racism and calls for economic justice.

While this affinity can put Methodists and Catholics together on the front lines in the gospel work for peace, justice, and the integrity of creation, it also creates tension in the dialogue between us. This shows up most graphically in the contemporary concern over abortion. While our ethical concerns for the unborn and for the rights of women are rooted in the same gospel, and even similar pastoral teaching, our public policy advocacy is often polarized. The same is the case for questions emerging from the end of life. Since our churches produce high energy in the public policy arena, it is even more urgent for local communities to consider thoughtfully the agreements we have reached together, the documents of one another's churches on these matters, and how we can give a reconciling Christian witness even in the midst of different positions in the public policy arena.

Finally, both of our churches are unalterably committed to the ecumenical movement and its penultimate goal of common witness, service, prayer, and action as well as its ultimate goal of full communion. Thus, the dialogue on the international level has as its clear goal:

\[
\text{a vision that includes the goal of full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life.}^{13}
\]

This goal can be reached, however, only by the careful study, evaluation, and assimilation of those areas where agreements have been reached and careful study and internal renewal of our churches toward transcending the remaining differences. For many of our people this will mean understanding our differences and our separate histories so that the further challenges become clear to them. "Full communion," as defined below in the Conciliar Fellowship/Communion theology of Faith and Order and COCU, has replaced "Organic Union" as the common language for a united church. The concept of full communion does not deny the importance of organic images of the New Testament, like Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12, etc.) but helps persons understand that union need not entail bureaucracies or decisionmaking structures as they may have known them in their church or others' churches.
Our affinity is both a gift and a cause of tension. Methodist ecclesiology emerges from a missionary drive. The schism with Anglicanism came from Methodism's willingness to adapt with minimal theological resources and a maximum openness to the newly emerging American culture. For this reason, ecumenical action will usually precede an appreciation of dialogue, doctrinal agreement, and sacramental exactitude. Catholics, with a similar feeling of the importance of mission, will, however, see the sacramental, confessional and ecclesiological issues as the center and source of the unity we seek. Even the agreements reached by our officially appointed theologians will carry different weight and interest in our differing communities. We need to face these difficulties honestly; otherwise, there is the threat of two different ecumenical movements developing in this country, with the two largest ecumenically committed churches driving their centers.

The Vision of a United Church

While the Roman Catholic/Methodist dialogue has produced an impressive record of agreement, United Methodists may find their vision of visible unity more nourished by the multilateral relationships in the Faith and Order Movement and in the U.S. COCU. However, since the Roman Catholic Church is a full member of Faith and Order and follows the consultation quite closely, these texts provide a useful background for the more specific agreements and outstanding differences between Methodists and Catholics. Indeed, the first round of international dialogues between the two traditions recognized that some of the goals "may be as well or even better achieved in a multilateral cooperation" and noted the importance of building on bilateral texts produced with other churches.

The vision of a united church as put forward by the World Council of Churches is embodied in an ecclesiology of koinonia, communion, fellowship. As noted in Outler's research, the Wesleyan heritage has a particular contribution to make to the ecumenical convergence on koinonia. The specific image that has been under discussion is that of a Conciliar Communion or Fellowship, outlined at the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council (1975). United Methodists have affirmed in their response to the World Council text, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry that:
...the general understanding that the visible unity of the church of Jesus Christ requires three conditions (1) a common expression of the apostolic faith; (2) mutual recognition and acceptance of each communion's doctrines of baptism, eucharist and ministry; and (3) commonly accepted ways of deciding and acting together for life and mission in the world.

The United Methodist Council of Bishops has gone on record affirming this framework, or agenda, for filling out an ecclesiological base for full visible unity. In its response to the same document the Vatican also affirms this goal and its theological contours as they have begun to be filled out to date.

United Methodist ecclesiology further specifies this vision of Conciliar Communion in its bilateral relationship to the Roman Catholic Church in the international dialogue. More proximately, in a national context, it does so with its COCU partners in a vision of a united church as a "Covenant Communion." In addition to the three elements indicated above, rituals of reconciliation and recognition of ministries and three other elements have been proposed: 1) commitment to seek unity with wholeness; 2) mutual recognition of each other as churches; 3) engaging together in Christ's mission. The proposed juridical bonds among these nine churches—ways of deciding and acting together—are embodied in the formation of "Covenanting Councils."

Of course, we would expect that union among these heirs of the Reformation and subsequent reforms would precede full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, these proposals are integral to the one pilgrimage towards full unity, to which the Roman Catholic Church is fully committed in God's good time. The international Catholic/Methodist dialogue has taken full account of the work of the consultation and been informed by it in its own formulations.

The Specific Roman Catholic/Methodist Dialogues

Methodist and Catholic bilateral discussions, both together and with other partners, can be seen within the matrix of the wider multilateral ecumenical discussions, where we seek one common ecclesiology to encompass our diversity in a united church. So also the Methodist/Catholic U.S. dialogue is seen in the context of the international dialogue. As noted before, the goal of international
dialogue is full communion, *koinonia*. The theological base of this communion is articulated:

> We have found that *koinonia*, *both as a concept and an experience*, is *more important than any particular model of Church union that we are yet able to propose*. . . . *For believers it involves both communion and community. It includes participation in God through Christ in the Spirit by which believers become adopted children of the same Father and members of the one Body of Christ sharing in the same Spirit. And it includes deep fellowship among participants, a fellowship which is both visible and invisible, finding expression in faith and order, in prayer and sacrament, in mission and service. Many different gifts have been developed in our traditions, even in separation. Although we already share some of our riches with one another, we look forward to a greater sharing as we come closer together in full unity.*

In the context of this ecclesiological vision, the Vatican and World Methodist Council have sponsored five series of four- to five-year dialogues which have produced a significant amount of material. The ecclesiological, ethical, missiological, and soteriological agreements are not of such a level of maturity to be put before the respective churches for evaluation and action. However, were Roman Catholic and Methodist seminarians of the churches who are members of the World Methodist Council to be trained in the light of this material over the next quarter of a century, the whole ecumenical climate in the United States would undoubtedly be revolutionized.

It is these five dialogues, more than any national conversations, that document the common ground and move us toward resolving remaining church-dividing issues. In our two churches juridical action and institutional change can only take place when there has been adequate education and experience of the *koinonia* to which the theological formulations attest.

**Method.** The method selected in this dialogue varies considerably from that used in COCU, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, or Catholic dialogues with the Lutheran World Federation, where specific issues of historical separation can be identified and reconciled:
Our concern, rather, has been to set out theological perspectives within which such more specific questions may be viewed. We propose these perspectives as consistent with the doctrinal positions of both churches but not as a full exposition of them.

Nonetheless, this dialogue builds creatively on the work of Catholics with Anglicans and Lutherans. Thus, in local dialogues when discussing ministry or Lord's Supper not only COCU and World Council BEM texts would enhance Catholic/Methodist understanding their dialogues but also the Anglican/Roman Catholic Final Report. In discussing authority and the Petrine Office in the context of these dialogues, the biblical work of the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic dialogue will amplify the discussion.

The method of approach varies somewhat from the christocentric methodology of Faith and Order, COCU, and some other bilaterals. It seems to begin with a comparative ecclesiology that can be noted particularly in the first three rounds. In the fourth round there is an attempt to move toward a more christocentric approach, with comparative statements kept to a minimum in order to surface unresolved issues for further work. There is an attempt in the third round also to develop a “more popular style” and to publish results as they emerged over the five-year period.

The goal of full communion is not clear from the very beginning of the dialogue: “if not of full organic union, at least sharing at Holy Communion . . .” Of course, for some Methodists this would be minimalist, or even a non-goal, since Communion is seen as a converting ordinance to which not only Roman Catholics but even the unbaptized are welcomed. However, the subsequent clarity developed in World Council, COCU, and other bilaterals which give shape to the shared goal of Conciliar Communion brought the prospect of a more coherent vision as the conversations developed. For this reason, the earlier dialogue results need to be seen as serving a goal which only became clear with time.

A second important development to note in reading the entire series is a certain methodological reticence to attempt formulations and proposals to the churches for action and reception. This may be rooted in the Methodist claim to be noncredal, in an early optimism about the prospects of union, or in the internal structure of the World Methodist Council and its various meanings for the variety of member churches.
However, it leads on occasion to a depreciation of ecumenical formulations themselves as "being drained of blood by the clumsy surgery characteristic of committees." With the emergence of BEM and the quality of statements Roman Catholics were experiencing out of their Anglican and Lutheran dialogues, this self-deprecation no longer occurs after 1976.

Finally, the methodology is unique in that it has used regional/national dialogue groups to develop not only case studies but agreed text drafts for the international conversation, thus facilitating both the process of local reconciliation and the process of international productivity. This technique recommends itself to other international relationships. It is interesting to note that the United States World Methodist Council churches or the United Methodist Church and U.S. Roman Catholics are not used for this process.

From the very beginning this dialogue has been concerned about communication and has surfaced some concrete suggestions. Many of these ideals have yet to be realized in the participating churches.

The five series are cumulative, raising issues and points of divergence in one round that find their more extensive treatment and agreements in later rounds of the dialogue. This means that when the results are mature enough for evaluation and even action by the churches, they will need to be synthesized. This, of course, may be decades away. In the meantime, using the material in ecumenical and ecclesiological formation will necessitate taking account of this progression and development.

Issues Treated. The issues have been diverse, and only a synthesis of the whole in the context of its ecclesiological purpose can give adequate focus to the discussion. However, from the very beginning the development of ecclesiology has been seen against the background of the Church in the Modern World, the Contemporary Situation and the Church's Call to Mission.

After discussing agenda and method, the first report (1971) develops its major section "Christianity and the Contemporary World." While some of the formulations of this text bear the stamp of the theology of that era, the contextual method and mission orientation of unity toward the world will undoubtedly be the permanent matrix and method by which these churches will be led to deeper communion in faith and sacrament. The second major theme is Spirituality, one which recurs throughout the dialogue and which has its influence in
the U.S. dialogue. Issues of Christian home and family, including ethical concerns, eucharist, ministry, and authority, are raised both to identify future agenda and to note areas of disagreement in need of reconciliation. Already abortion and care of the aged are on the agenda.

Spirituality has been a key and recurring theme, with extended treatment given to the doctrine of grace in the Wesleyan and Tridentine formulations, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and mission, all yielding amazing areas of agreement. The second report, “Common Witness and Salvation Today” (1976), again begins with mission. This discussion is linked with the World Council 1982 Bangkok World Conference theme. In this period further work on spirituality, ministry, eucharist, authority, marriage, and moral questions is developed. This dialogue, reflecting on a report based on Methodist/Catholic work in Great Britain, proposes a judgment of consensus concerning a statement about euthanasia:

'It seems to provide a good example of a moral question on which we can all agree. After examining the arguments, the statement rejects voluntary euthanasia but recognises that doctors attempting the adequate control of pain have occasionally to use treatment which has the side effect of shortening life.^^ ^29

That this has not shown itself to be a true statement of the consensus has been noted in the U.S. dialogue “Holy Living, and Holy Dying.”^^ It is more useful to view this second report as a contribution to mutual understanding and developing methodology than as a setting forth of finalized formulations.

The third report (1981) is more focused and theologically developed, though for that reason it may be seen to be more theoretical and less popular in style. The Holy Spirit is the theological center of the discussion, applied in the areas of Christian experience, authority, and spirituality. Given the debates on experience within Methodism and on authority within Catholicism and among the churches, this approach has only begun to make its contribution.

Indeed, this dialogue may be an important resource to all of the churches as they approach these themes together. The decision to take this approach is both methodological and theological:
...we believe that emotions surrounding such relatively modern terms as infallibility and irreformability can be diminished if they are looked at in the light of our shared doctrine concerning the Holy Spirit.  

This dialogue in its treatment of grace was able to develop a degree of agreement Roman Catholics had yet to find with any of the other Reformation churches. From this basis, further work has been produced on moral decisionmaking and Christian marriage, even to the point of agreement on marital sacramentality.

In the fourth series (1986) the issue of the Church is dealt with directly, including such very specific church-dividing issues as the sacraments, teaching office, ministry, and Petrine ministry. It is in this discussion that the koinonia ecclesiology is clarified; the results of other bilateral and multilateral agreements are used most skillfully; and the confessional character of the church, presumably including the United Methodist Church, is affirmed:

Properly understood the decisions of the ecumenical councils which met in the first centuries command assent throughout the whole Church, and there is no reason to think that at the end of the patristic era God stopped enabling his Church to speak in such a way.

Most Roman Catholics would be surprised at the openness of Methodists even to an understanding of a reformed and renewed role for the Bishop of Rome:

Methodists accept that whatever is properly required for the unity of the whole of Christ's Church must by that very fact be God's will for his Church. A universal primacy might well serve as focus of and ministry for unity of the whole Church.

Of course, these proposals will have to be evaluated and tested, and monographs will have to be produced spelling out what they would mean if they became the bases for action in the two communities. However, they show a clarity and specificity that has emerged only gradually in this dialogue.

The most recent report (1991) is even more positive, focused, and clear, but is likewise rather abstract. It is even less likely to elicit
concrete responses or to lead from dialogue to decision. However, for that reason it may be more important, since the theme “Apostolic Tradition” embodies one of the most enduring differences between the Catholic Church and those of the Reformation: the role of continuity and creative adaptation in passing on the Christian heritage into the modern world. If it is to be a resource for reconciliation and not merely the “Dead Faith of the Living,” tradition must be seen as a dynamic power to transform and enliven community and energize the church for its role in society. This dialogue ends with convergences and divergences, including that over the ordination of women. For this very reason, it will be an important resource in the discussions in each community, helping ministry, history, and the church’s role in the future to come more clearly and realistically into focus.

On the basis of this convergence in Mission, Christology, Ecclesiology, and Pneumatology, the opportunity for common activity in mission and witness in the local context are vast. When taken alongside the World Council discussions in which Methodists and Catholics share and the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican bilaterals with Catholics on which these texts draw, these five series of dialogues present an impressive level of common faith and witness and a solid ground for formation of our people in the understanding of the real, if yet imperfect, communion we already share.

The question is sometimes raised as to why the ordination of women has not been treated in detail. The gradual process selected by the international dialogue, the fact that it has not yet developed concrete proposals for mutual recognition and reconciliation of ministries, added to the presence of other church-dividing questions such as apostolic succession, a common understanding of episcopacy/presbyterate, or the relationship of ordination to the Lord’s Supper—all these factors indicate that this dialogue is actually in its early stages. Since Methodists ordained women and Roman Catholics did not at the time of the beginning of the dialogue, there has been no attempt to move away from the issue, but the period of exploration of common ground has been necessary before taking on the variety of church-dividing issues around ministry, including gender.

One would expect that the international dialogue would take up this issue before any of the national dialogues, since it has produced more agreement on ministry to date, and it draws on a richer cultural and theological inclusiveness of Methodism and Catholicism than is available in any one nation or culture. Because Anglicans and
Catholics come to the dialogue with historic controversies on ministries on the one hand and greater harmony of theological understanding on the other, this topic has been taken up earlier and has caused greater attention in the media. The fact that the United Methodist Church is still considering its own theology of ministry and that the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has no clear consensus on how to put forward its teaching on the roles of women and men in the church indicates how internal discussions impact the ecumenical encounter.

The U.S. Dialogue

The dialogue between the United Methodist Church and the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops is less extensive than the work of these two churches in Faith and Order or in international Dialogues, but it is significant and in some senses pioneering. The four rounds of dialogue that have occurred since 1966 have covered two ethical themes: “Shared Convictions about Education” and “Holy Living and Holy Dying,” touching theological, pastoral, and social dimensions of the end of life on this earth. The latter is of particular importance in laying out the vast amount of theological and pastoral agreement when on occasion, as in Washington State in 1991, Methodists and Catholics presented different witness to the public policy implications of this Christian concern for compassion and pastoral care to the dying.

An important, almost archival, dissertation already exists on this dialogue, with very specific analysis and suggestions which will need to be taken into account in any further work between these two churches. In addition to synthesizing the dynamic, process, convergences, contributions, and shortcomings of the U.S. dialogue, the author makes three recommendations: 1) That the dialogue make its purpose clear and its mode of reception definite; 2) that the dialogue participants have clearly before them the history and content of the dialogue and its wider ecumenical context; and 3) that the dialogue consider treating authority, ministry, ordination of women, models of the Church, and models of Christian unity.

In the context of the wide area of theological agreement demonstrated in the BEM study of the World Council, the Catholic and Methodist responses thereto, and the international dialogue, the
U.S. dialogue has pursued issues of “Holiness and Spirituality of the Ordained Ministry” and “Eucharistic Celebration.”\textsuperscript{40} One can argue that its agreements are much more modest than those between Catholics and Methodists in their World Council responses and their international dialogue. For the local study and even professional seminary preparation, it will be important to see these U.S. findings as specifications and supports to the more significant international contributions on which they depend and to which they are related. It will be important for Catholics and Methodists to work together to help all of these documents serve their internal renewal and reconciliation on local levels of ministry.

The Future

It is not clear where Methodist and Catholic relations will develop in the future. Given the size and gifts of these two churches in the U.S., they carry a unique responsibility in the wider ecumenical field. Given their relational priorities— with Orthodox, Anglicans, and Lutherans on the Catholic side and with the churches of the Consultation on Church Union on the Methodist side, they can provide rich resources for common reconciling efforts and a common vision of koinonia, given further specification by these particular relationships and the overarching conciliar contribution. In the context of the 1993 World Conference on Faith and Order, these two churches have a unique opportunity and responsibility to the U.S. ecumenical movement to hold up a prospect of reconciliation and mission that can begin to harvest and share this vision. Therefore, it is essential that this specific dialogue in the U.S. deepen its discussion about the nature of the church and help the people understand the international and U.S. progress achieved to date.

Of course, collaboration in social witness and service is a routine affair whenever sufficient agreement exists in cities and states across the land and occasionally on the national level as well. However, it is in public witness that Methodist and Catholic size and vigor are an ambivalent ecumenical gift. Witness can always be quicker and more specific if done without the tedious commitment to common study, reflection, formulation, and action that are necessary for ecumenical common witness. Many of our leading social advocates may see the unity of the church as secondary to the success of the issue to which
their Christian zeal is committed. Coalitional public policy advocacy and the gospel call to full unity must be kept in creative balance and productive tension.

Specifically, these two churches can provide educational programs in their seminary contexts, as the United Methodists have already begun to do among their theological educators. From the very first of the international reports there have been calls for communication and the suggestion “that Catholic dioceses and Methodist districts establish local, joint committees to foster and encourage better mutual understanding between members of the clergy, local churches, and lay organisations.” It has been the Catholic impression that Lutherans and Episcopalians have been more eager to take this sort of initiative together.

Suggestions about interchurch families have been both a resource to local ecumenism and a challenge to our divided churches, as the dialogue notes:

We are agreed that marriage in which one spouse is Methodist and one Roman Catholic presents a special opportunity and responsibility for joint pastoral concern by both our churches. . . . The difficulties inherent in inter-church marriages should compel us not only to work with greater zeal for fuller ecclesial unity, but also to do everything possible to help the partners of such marriages to use them as a means of grace and of ecumenical growth.

Many districts/dioceses have followed this initiative by developing guidelines for Methodist/Catholic interchurch couples and families. Specific suggestions for consultation and exchange of documents are made for the national levels of these churches. Certainly the Roman Catholic Church has been well served in its magisterial teaching on peace and the economy by ecumenical consultation. Both churches have benefitted from the sharing of documents on ministry, ethical issues, and processes for evaluating ecumenical proposals. United Methodists have much to teach Roman Catholics about ecumenical processes, having been involved in the modern ecumenical moment for almost twice the length of time and having well-developed internal structures of catholic accountability. We can pray for the time even short of full communion, when we experience
koinonia so deeply that neither of our churches would want to teach or speak without regular consultation with the other.

Both churches have significant investments in the U.S. Hispanic community and in Latin American members of our church. The approaches of our U.S. churches to the culture and to one another is grounded in a significantly different history and ecumenical basis than in the Hispanic community and in Latin America. Can North/South dialogue be enhanced ecumenically by Catholic/Methodist dialogue, for which we have a relatively positive twenty-five-year experience in the U.S.?45

Given the rich harvest of agreement, might not the educational establishments of the Roman Catholic and United Methodist churches in the United States be challenged to do an audit of their educational, ministry training, and ministerial formation programs to see if they yet adequately incorporate the ecumenical spirituality and explicit levels of agreement articulated in these dialogues? Do not ecumenists, on the other hand, have the challenge of providing advice on how to inculcate an educational program that will give not only the content but also the experiential basis for living out the koinonia in leadership that is articulated in dialogue?

Wesley spoke, in his famous sermon “The Catholic (by which he meant ecumenical) Spirit.” His heirs in our day have given admirable witness to that pioneering impulse. As partners, there is a great mission of reconciliation before us. For the results so far developed we can be grateful and for the hoped-for full communion we can continue to work and pray.

Notes


4. It has been suggested by one ecumenist that there is but one “fault line” among
Western churches: "Contrary to what one might expect from the proliferation of Western bilateral dialogues, which cross each other organizationally in all directions, and from the mere existence of multilateral dialogues, there is again only one such (fault) line. It runs between Catholic and Protestant—between the Roman Catholic Church, together with those Protestants who on any given question support it, and what is on any given question the remainder of the Protestants." Robert W. Jensen, *The Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 6. While Roman Catholic official responses to ecumenical texts seem to imply this is the Catholic position as well, Catholic ecumenists tend to take their dialogue partners on their own self-understanding, however they perceive themselves relating to one another.


6. Note the "Resolution of Intent, unanimously adopted by the General Conference of the United Methodist Church, . . . April 23, 1970. Disavowing the traditional polemical understanding of those among its 'articles of religion' which were part of an anti-Catholic inheritance from a less happy age, the resolution gives courageous practical and public expression of that 'change of heart' which the Second Vatican Council saw as the soul of the ecumenical movement, and a solemn responsibility of all in every Church." DR 71, GA 388.


14. DR 71, GA, 310.

15. "His concept of Christian koinonia was more Greek than Latin, and this explains his freedom to correct what he regarded as the excessive sacerdotalism within the Anglican ecclesiology that he had inherited. At the center of all these ideas was his understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit as God's personal presence in the believer's heart and will, and in the Spirit-filled community and its


20. DR 71, Db 76, Honolulu Report, 1981 [hereafter HR 81], in GA., NR 86, SR 91, in GA II.

21. SR 91, 3.


24. NR 86. Preface.

25. DR 71, GA, 310.


27. Ibid., 341.

28. DR 71, GA, 328, 337.


30. “Here the participants in the dialogue did not reach unanimity. In the situations described, some of the participants considered that euthanasia, given certain circumstances, might be an ethically permissible action . . . .” General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns of the United Methodist Church/Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Holy Living and Holy Dying* (Cincinnati: General Board of Global Ministries, 1989), 13. [hereafter HL/HD] to be published in BU II.

31. HR 81, GA, 377.

32. Ibid., 370. It should be noted that the dialogue deals briefly with justification, but concentrates on prevenient grace in Trent and Wesley in ways that make the substantive work found necessary in the Lutheran/Catholic and Anglican/Catholic dialogues unnecessary here. Ironically, this then makes such an historic agreement less dramatic, traumatic, and therefore less interesting beyond the theological community!

33. Ibid. 382.

34. NR 86, #66.

35. Ibid., #58.
36. "Agreed Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue of Canada on
the Experience of the Ministries of Women in Canada," Ecumenism, 103 (September,

37. In BU, 295.


39. Steven D. Russalesi, A History of the Roman Catholic—United Methodist
Dialogue in the United States: A Theological Appraisal (Ann Arbor: University

40. BU, 297, 307 respectively.

41. Russell Richey, ed., Ecumenical and Interreligious Perspectives: Globalization

42. DR 71, GA 335.

43. Ibid., 324.

44. DbR 76, GA 363.

(May 28, 1992): 40-44.
Modern English Bible Versions as a Problem for the Church

One of the striking cultural changes of our time has been the tremendous alteration in the status and character of the English Bible. The change has come very suddenly and very completely, and yet there has been rather little discussion of it. People are aware that there are now many versions of the Bible in English to choose from, and they may ask plaintively from time to time which one is likely to be the best. But not so many have noticed the essential fact within all this, namely, that the multiplicity of English Bible versions has brought about a change in the whole mode in which we may use the Bible in the churches, a change which affects spiritual attitudes and which produces important pastoral problems. It is to these changes and these spiritual and pastoral problems that this lecture is dedicated.

The subject, we may confidently assume, is one that would have been of major interest to A. S. Peake, in whose memory this lecture is given. Arthur Samuel Peake (1865-1929), an English Methodist layman, was, in the words of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (2nd edition, 1974), "an accurate, balanced, and cautious scholar" whose "influence was such that he raised the whole standard of the ministry of the Methodist Church." Peake, while a major scholar in his own right and well attuned to all the currents of scholarship in his time, was convinced, and rightly, that the modes by which the scholarly world understood the scriptures were accessible to

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the Christian laity and that this accessibility was an essential presupposition for the soundness of life within the church. But this principle necessarily carries with it the implication of interest in the adequacy of biblical translation: for, if the life of proper scholarship depends on the use of the original languages, Hebrew and Greek at least, the assimilation of that scholarship by the main body of the laity has to be done within the English language. And the importance of the vernacular form of the scriptures was always a central principle of Protestantism, and one upon which Methodism depended very heavily.

The Shift from an Authorized Version

Let's go back, then, over the facts of the basic change that has overtaken us. At the end of the Second World War there was still, for practical purposes, only one English Bible which was universally in use, the King James, or Authorized, Version. Other English versions did, indeed, exist. Roman Catholics to some extent used the Douai-Rheims version, but of course at that time reading of the English Bible was far from widespread in Catholic church life, and there still was something of the tradition that the layperson should not read the Bible for himself or herself and should obtain information about its teaching only when filtered through the teaching authority of the priesthood. Returning to Protestant traditions, there was the Revised Version of 1881 and 1885, which had marked the great advances in textual criticism, but which otherwise came to be little used in the churches or in personal devotion and made little impact on the average Bible reader. More radical changes appeared in the twentieth century with Moffat (New Testament, 1913; Old Testament, 1924); and, after the war, J. B. Phillips made a substantial impression with his Letters to Young Churches (1947), which expressed the message of the epistles in an idiom quite different from the traditional.

But these were, in spite of all recognition, very minor and marginal exceptions. For the vast majority of Christians, and especially for the more evangelical groups who laid most emphasis upon scripture as the sole guide in faith and conduct, the Bible was, at the end of the Second World War, still in effect the King James Version. People knew its wording exactly; in spite of its occasional archaisms, they quoted it just as it stood. At school we learned great chunks of it by heart:
Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. (Isa. 53:1–2)

This was the essential poetry of our religion; we learned these passages not because the school was religious (it was not) but because it was part of our cultural inheritance that these very words should be known to be central.

And the words of the King James Version were not only the essential poetry and imagery of religion, they were also the fount of doctrinal truth:

*Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned; For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. But not as the offence, so also is the free gift.*

(Rom. 5:12-15)

Doctrine could be proved, and was proved, directly from the exact form of these words. This was normal. Sometimes the words were strange: “imputed,” “similitude”; the syntax could be odd: “not as the offence, so also is the free gift.” But most people did not worry about this. It was known, of course, that there was a Hebrew and a Greek wording that lay behind the King James Version and that something useful might be learned if these languages were known; but in fact this consideration did not have very much effect, and people worked as if the English Bible, in this version, was the final source from which true doctrine could be expected to be extracted. As late as 1945, and indeed some time after that, the King James Version was still effectively “The Bible.” Moreover, the English Bible, thus understood, was a common heritage for an enormous area of English-speaking Christianity: at least within all Protestantism and all Anglicanism, within all colors of opinion from Unitarianism at one end of the spectrum to fundamentalism at the other, this Bible could be taken as common
ground. People could seek to ground their faith upon the Bible precisely because the Bible in this sense was agreed common ground.

In the decades after the war this position began to change rather rapidly. Among the translations that appeared three are particular milestones. The first was the RSV or Revised Standard Version, originated in the United States (New Testament, 1946; Old Testament, 1952). The RSV remained rather well within the tradition of the King James Version; the absurd hostility with which it was received in some quarters, as when people said that it was communist-inspired, only served to increase its reputation. The second, and something of a quite different character, was the Jerusalem Bible. It appeared in 1966 and was of Roman Catholic origin; it was based very largely on the French Bible de Jérusalem, and it broke away very substantially from the style of the traditional Protestant English Bibles, including the RSV. It marked a great increase in the reading of the Bible by the Roman Catholic laity in the wake of the Second Vatican Council; and it was an annotated Bible, a point of much importance to which we shall return. And the third was the New English Bible.

The Case of the New English Bible

The New English Bible was, however, much more a milestone in the development of our religious culture than was either of these other two. It appeared, as you remember, in the New Testament in 1961, as a complete Bible in 1970. The plan for its production had been solemnly agreed upon by the major churches. Central biblical scholars from all over Britain were engaged in the work of translation. The impression created, if it was not explicitly stated, was that it was to be not just one among many new versions of the Bible but the main and more or less definitive one, the best that could possibly be done. It was conceived of as “our new Bible,” as the front-page article of The Times Literary Supplement of 19 March 1970 expressed it: “the Completion of our New Bible.” But on the other hand, in style and approach it departed very radically from the King James Version. Its language did not seem, in the eyes of many, to have the tones and accents of the holy as the older English versions had seemed to convey them.

What happened with the New English Bible, then, was partly a general reaction to its literary quality, partly a specific reaction to its
philological treatment of the Old Testament. The Old Testament and the New, as the layman seldom realizes, went in quite different directions in the NEB. In the Old Testament the new version was full of highly idiomatic renderings, some of them so strange that competent Hebrew scholars had no idea at all on what basis they had been thought up. Sir Godfrey Driver, director of the Old Testament panel, had been allowed to insert into the new version literally hundreds of novel interpretations which scholars generally found completely unconvincing. And, apart from the special features of the Old Testament, the NEB as a whole fell under widespread criticism for the tone and register of its language. Mr. T. S. Eliot said that its English was a symptom of the decay of the English language in the middle of the twentieth century and that if used for religious purposes it would become an active agent of decadence. All this criticism was somewhat strange, for at least some of the workers on the translation and the scholars who supported it were people highly conscious of literary values—like my late colleague, George B. Caird, who thought that the NEB was “incomparably the best” version of modern times. Caird was insistent on the values of metaphor, of usage, of literary level, on all the qualities that, according to T. S. Eliot and other literary figures, were noticeably lacking from the NEB. The upshot of this will be mentioned in a moment.

Now the New English Bible was launched with a blaze of publicity, and it sold quite well—to begin with. People thought that it was to be “our new Bible”; perhaps it might become a new “authorized” version. But this glow faded. Criticism of the language continued and was mingled with criticism of the language of all the various liturgical reforms that came about in various churches in the following years. The New English Bible did not have, in the long run, the overwhelming response that had been expected. In North America, after good initial sales, it came to be largely ignored. The faults in its Old Testament were deeply damaging to its reputation among scholars. It achieved the position of being respected and accepted as one modern Bible translation among others, and it will no doubt continue to have that status. But it will never become “our new Bible,” will never gain anything like the centrality that the King James Version used to have. It was not long before it had to be reissued in a revised form as the Revised English Bible. Many peculiarities in the Old Testament have been removed and other elements have been
revised, but it will still not be likely to do better than to be one modern Bible version among others.

Let us restate the criticism against the language of the New English Bible in this way: admitting that the NEB told you the meaning of the Bible fairly well, and in reasonably good English—not everyone will accept that, but let us grant it for the purpose of our argument—even so, it seemed that it was, perhaps, better at saying in its own way what the biblical writers had meant than in conveying what was the biblical way of saying it. It did not convey the biblical speech, the biblical style, the grain of the biblical diction; and in this respect it fell below the level of the older translations like the KJV and below the level of a modern one in the same tradition like the RSV. It tended to paraphrase the meaning in a modern speech register rather than to introduce the reader into the modes of biblical speech. And this is perhaps the reason why, even if its translators strove very hard to achieve a good level of language and style, people often felt that what emerged did not have the atmosphere of the Bible after all. There was an element of paraphrase into modern scholar's English, a loss of initiation into the form of biblical speech. In this respect, as it happened, it fell considerably behind the level of the best modern translation of basically traditional type, the RSV.

And it is here that we see the blindness and foolishness of the many literary figures who excoriated the NEB for its language and its literary qualities or lack of them. Their viewpoint was too often centered in the past, in a united Christendom with one standard Bible version linked with and allied to the language of a standard liturgy. In that past world the King James Version had functioned magnificently, and the New English Bible, it was said, lacked the qualities that would have enabled it to do the same. But all such argument was irrelevant; for we were then passing into a new situation, the one in which we live today and will perhaps always continue to live, the world in which there is no standard English Bible but a couple of dozen or more, competing in the same marketplace. All, or almost all, of these newer Bibles will be, and are, far inferior in scholarship, care, effort, and dedication to what was done by the creators of the New English Bible. So all the attacks of literati on the New English Bible, even when justified, were largely a waste of time, for these learned people failed to grasp the completely different situation into which we were then about to enter.
The Reasons for New English Translations

What were the factors that caused all this change to take place? The first is the sheer size of the English-speaking market for the Bible. It includes very large populations, especially in North America, Australia, New Zealand, parts of Africa, and the West Indies; and these are regions with a strong Protestant tradition of Bible reading. The sort of efflorescence of new Bible versions that we have seen in the English-speaking world could not take place in the more limited world of Norwegian, or Afrikaans, or Portuguese. Take the case of Sweden, where a new Bible translation is in the process of production. There it is a governmental matter. The Swedish government, convinced of the need for a new Swedish Bible, appointed a commission to work on the problems, to carry out public discussion through preliminary publications, and eventually to produce a full translation. In other words, the phrase "our new Bible," so unwisely applied to the NEB here, will be appropriate there. Maybe, if the NEB had been an overwhelming success and had achieved universal acceptance and favor, that would have happened here, too; but the NEB had to compete with so many other possibilities, and its own appearance coincided so fatally with the sudden appearance on the scene of just these others.

The second such factor has been the enterprise or, some would say, the greed of publishers. Bible sales are good business. The book is a best-seller, and no royalties have to be paid to the author. Unquestionably, some of the newer Bible versions have been, in part at least, not responsible attempts to express the meaning of the Bible in a new English dress but selfish attempts to cash in on the booming business of religion, to package the article attractively for a big sale to a wide public. The third factor was sectarianism. In modern Bible translation things have been moving in two opposite directions at the same time: on the one hand towards ecumenicity, on the other towards partisanship and bias. The big translation projects, the RSV and NEB and the like, had a base in a wide consensus of the churches. A Bible like the Jerusalem Bible, though of Catholic origin, was not at all biased in a Catholic direction and came to be widely used in non-Roman churches and in private reading of Protestants. "It is a Catholic version, in the sense that it was produced by Catholic scholars," but "it is not a version for Catholics in particular, but for Bible readers in general," wrote Professor F. F. Bruce.2 "The work
throughout," he continues, "reflects the text and interpretation generally accepted in the interconfessional world of biblical scholarship." And, since then, ecumenical Bible translations, with (perhaps) a Catholic and a Protestant scholar working together on the same book, have become part of the scene in a number of languages, for example, in French.

While there are steps forward, however, there can also be steps backward. Take the case of the conservative evangelical and fundamentalist tradition within Christianity. Its devotion to the King James Version was extreme, and even today one finds outlying pockets for which the KJV represents the highest possible point of accuracy and authority. Nowhere was the exact diction and wording of the KJV more treasured and exploited than in this sector. From it came, predictably, the assaults on the RSV, the absurdity of which, as already mentioned, only served in the end to strengthen the authority of that newer American version. The criticism, writes Bruce, "was so manifestly exaggerated that it was widely discounted." In the event, Bruce wrote, "no change in Christian doctrine is involved or implied in the readings and renderings of the RSV; every article of the historic faith of the Church can be established as readily and as plainly from it as from the older versions in whose tradition it stands." And, most striking of all, the orthodoxy of the RSV was finally established by the highest of all authorities when the Inter-Varsity Fellowship turned to using it in the second edition of its *New Bible Commentary* (1970).

The Question of Evangelical Translations

But this was not the end of the story. If on the one hand the conservative acceptance of the RSV as usable betokened a certain willingness to work along with the main currents of Christendom, there still existed the impulse to evangelical separatism, the unwillingness to do anything or accept anything that was not totally and purely "evangelical." The most important manifestation of this latter tendency is the so-called NIV, or New International Version, (New Testament, 1973; whole Bible, 1978).

The preface to this version begins with one of the most whopping falsehoods ever to be written into a Bible version by a group of "Bible believers" such as the promoters of the version were, for it says that the people who worked on the version came from many
denominations and this "helped to safeguard the translation from sectarian bias." The contrary is the case; the NIV was a sectarian project from the beginning. It was, as it itself says, planned by committees of the Christian Reformed Church and the National Association of Evangelicals. The name *International*, as is well known to anyone experienced in the literature, is a code word meaning "acceptable for conservatives and fundamentalists." The reason for the existence of the NIV is not, and never was, that it was in any way better, or had better principles of translation, or better scholarship behind it, or that it had solved the problem of style as between archaic "biblical" style and conversational "modern" style. Its reason for existence was purely and simply that it was produced by and for evangelicals and for them only.

Now there is perhaps nothing wrong in this; any person or group of persons can translate the Bible if they wish to do so. But it must be asked whether it is a wise course for evangelicals to follow, seen from their own point of view and their own interests. For when you think of it, it is a reversal of the entire traditional strategy which evangelicals had followed in their use of the King James Version. That version was the version of the entire church, except for the Roman and Greek churches—everyone used it. It was common, public property. Evangelicals could therefore appeal to the Bible, which we all revere and want to obey, and say, "Here it says so and so; we are presenting to you the evangelical interpretations of these words that are in the Bible which we all acknowledge." The moment you produce an evangelical Bible, one produced by evangelicals deliberately for that reason, then you forfeit the right to that strategy. The moment you do that, you are laying yourself open to the charge that traditional Protestantism (mostly wrongly, of course) laid against traditional Roman Catholicism, namely, that it had tampered with the text of the Bible in order to make it say what Catholics wanted it to say. Any evangelical Bible version is liable to the same suspicion: the Bible has been slanted or presented in such a way as to make it say the sort of things that evangelicals want it to say.

Give us an example, you may say. Well, there is one obvious example. Some people say that you can know the character of any Bible translation by looking at one verse, even at one word; the verse is Isa. 7:14, the word is the one which is "young woman" in the NEB, in RSV, and so on. Now the question is not whether Jesus was born by a virgin birth; that is another matter. The question is whether the
prophet Isaiah used a word that meant “virgin.” Roman Catholics certainly believe in a virgin birth, but the Jerusalem Bible says “maiden” here, and its annotation says that the “virgin” of the Greek text is “more explicit than” the Hebrew ‘alma, which, it says, means “either a young girl or a young, recently married woman.” Quite so. That is what is commonly said. Even so evangelical a work as the New Bible Dictionary of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (London, 1962) says something of the same kind: the Isaiah passage “has been regarded since early Christian times as a prophecy of the virgin birth of Christ” (of course it has), and the Greek word parthenos “is a legitimate translation” but “imports” into the story the implication that the woman was to be a virgin. This meant that “the door was left open for Matthew and the early Church to see a remarkable verbal correspondence with what happened at the birth of Jesus Christ (article “Virgin” by J. B. Taylor, p. 1312). Now the NIV says nothing of all this. It prints the word virgin and gives no note to indicate that something different might be meant. Did the translators of the NIV have specific information from Hebrew that showed them that it meant exactly “virgin”? Probably not. Probably they knew quite well what other scholars know and what is accepted by so evangelical a work as the New Bible Dictionary. They knew this well enough, but they printed virgin because that is what their constituency demanded. They were falsifying the Bible in order to please their readership.

Let me give another quick example—not that I am here to criticize the New International Version or any other but just to show the sort of thing that can happen and that you might not notice until someone calls it to your attention. In Gen. 2:17 God commands the first man, according to the NIV: “But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.” Well, you may say, what’s funny about that? The answer lies in the word when. For the exact wording we have to leave the NIV and go to another version, the KJV: “For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die”; RSV: “For in the day that you eat of it you shall die”; Jerusalem Bible: “For on the day you eat of it you shall most surely die.”

Why does the NIV obscure the actual Hebrew wording “on the day that”? The answer is obvious: what God said on this matter did not come true. Adam and Eve disobeyed, and they were punished; but they did not die on the day of their disobedience. It was the serpent, who said that they would not die, who was proved right; and it was
God's threat of death that did not come to pass. Adam, far from dying on that day, lived to the advanced age of 930 years (Gen. 5:5). The passage is one of the clear cases where God says something will happen and something else happens, something entirely different. It is a sign of one of the tiny cracks that runs across the apparently smooth face of scripture. For this reason the actual verbal form of Gen. 2:17 is concealed from its readers by the NIV—not in itself so very important a matter but typical of the tendency now in vogue. The major Bible translations, written and commissioned by the major churches with open cooperation of scholarship, sincerely seek to put the facts of the Bible before the reader. It is the conservative evangelical, sectarian kind of Bible, now increasing in popularity, that conceals and disguises the facts of the Bible because these facts would, if known, be uncomfortable to the established views of its constituency.

So this is one of the new problems. Bibles are being written in English which have as one of their main aims the pleasing of the sort of Bible readers who will buy them and like them, and it is especially on the side of the more evangelical readership that this is at present happening. The terms like get saved, come to Christ, and the like, which are the currency of evangelical talk, begin to appear in versions of the Bible as if that was what the Bible at that point actually said. In other words, paraphrase begins to take over from the presentation of actual patterns of biblical diction. And this means that all the values that truly and rightly attached to the past love for the King James Version have been cast aside by the very people who were most devoted to that classic text; for the only reason for the devotion that King James inspired was if one could say with confidence that it truly reflected the contours and meanings of the Hebrew and Greek originals.

**Text and Annotation**

This brings us to our next point, and that is the question of the annotated Bible as against the plain, unvarnished Bible text. The Jerusalem Bible, as I mentioned, was from the beginning an annotated Bible, and that was a good Catholic tradition: the Bible needed explanation, explanation from experienced scholars, and explanation from church authority, if the average person was to understand it. By contrast, the main Protestant tradition emphasized the Bible itself. The
volume should contain nothing but the words of scripture itself, which were both divine in origin and perspicuous in character; nothing that was merely human should be mixed in with the biblical text. The readers should read the Word of God and not be confused by human explanations. Even to include the Old Testament Apocrypha, which by some standards did not count as inspired scripture, was forbidden. This was, rightly or wrongly, a major traditional Protestant position.

Cutting across this emphasis and contradicting it, however, was another Protestant and evangelical position, and one manifested most clearly in the Scofield Reference Bible, the most important single document of fundamentalism. The Scofield Bible was an annotated Bible: it was not a Bible translation but a set of notes. The text printed was, in the original Scofield Bible, the King James Version. More recently, the Scofield notes have been mated, en secondes noces as it were, with the New International Version in the New Scofield Study System, as it is called (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). Curiously, this highly Protestant approach to the Bible enters into something closer to the traditional Roman Catholic kind of exposition: the reader cannot be left to read the text for himself or herself but must be guided by the expert expositor, who will show the reader how the entire text fits in with the theories of premillennial dispensationalism, theories that are unquestionably sectarian, being propagated by small groups of self-appointed “teachers” and unquestionably heretical by the standards of traditional Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, and yet nevertheless widely disseminated and accepted in evangelical religion. For, according to dispensationalism, the age of the church is a sort of afterthought, an interim stage between two stages in which God works through Israel, through the Jews. The kingdom, to which the church looks forward, is a completely different matter from the church: it is a restored Jewish kingdom.

And so on. Our point for the present purpose is simply that they are disseminated through annotations to an English Bible text. The question about annotations is only whether they are by competent scholars or not. Scofield, though his notes have been so influential, was not a competent scholar; and no one ever supposed that he was. He was a Kansas lawyer and politician, and he had no serious linguistic, literary, or historical education. He simply looked at the English Bible as he saw it and built great structures on impressions he had formed out of the English words which could not have been taken
seriously by anyone who knew the ancient world and its languages and cultures.

However, we are not here to talk about Scofield and his ideas. All I want to say is that, in spite of traditional Protestant resistance to the annotated Bible, evangelical Christianity has already displayed an enormous degree of willingness to swallow the comments of an annotated Bible, and we may perhaps take it as probable from now on that the annotated Bible, or “Study Edition,” or whatever it is to be called, is likely to become more important in Protestant Bible reading. And excellent such works already exist, for example, the New Oxford Annotated Bible with RSV text, notes edited by the learned B. M. Metzger and H. G. May, or (in another format) the Companion to the New Testament (New English Bible) by A. E. Harvey (1970). It is likely that future Bible versions, as they are published, will have with them an annotated Study Edition and other aids to learning, because without these they will not be able to compete and make their virtues appreciated.

Why then is the annotated Bible likely to be so much more important? One reason, I suspect, is that the focus of biblical learning has in considerable measure moved away from the minister and the pulpit. Either the average member of the clergy no longer aspires to be an expositor of the Bible or the people no longer expect him or her to be one; I’m not sure which. But it means that the study of the Bible has moved away from the sermon by the ordained minister; it has moved to the private person’s devotional reading or to his or her simply enquiring study or to the study group of ten or fifteen people sitting around a table. For them it is not enough just to have the English Bible text, for they have questions they want to ask: when was this written, what was the problem at the time, what is the balance of interests and motives in the text? They expect and require guidance along these lines, and basically these are scholarly questions, to which scholarly answers are required.

But, going beyond this, the annotated Bible is favored for a reason that has been obvious throughout this discussion; there no longer is one given and final English Bible text to which one must turn. When new versions of the Bible have been proposed, people have sometimes said how important it is that we should know exactly what the biblical text says. Accuracy is so essential, and that is a right remark. But, at least in the English-language realm, things have worked out in the opposite way; the more the Bible has been translated in modern times,
the less the reader can know what it actually says. For at one time you
could say here it is, in the Authorized Version; and it might be right or
wrong, but at least people were dealing with one agreed form of
words, for the most part. But no one can say that now. You can’t really
say the truth is here in the NEB or in the Good News Bible or in the
New International—you simply don’t know. The proliferation of the
versions of the Bible, in the English-speaking realm at least, has
underlined something that scholarship always knew and emphasized:
for a discriminating knowledge of the Bible, there is no way around a
knowledge of the original languages, Hebrew and Greek. Far from
modern translations satisfying this need, they have made it a good deal
more serious. People have got to ask, if they are serious about the
Bible, what does this word mean in the Greek? Does the Hebrew
mean “virgin” or not? The annotated Bible offers notes that give some
contact between the ordinary Bible reader and that kind of scholarly
discussion. Our present situation, with a multifarious set of English
Bible versions, only makes it the more obvious.

Choosing among English Bible Versions

How will people react to this? Some will want to stick to the King
James because it is the old and the familiar, and I personally very
much like that idea. But then it is easy for me, for as I read King
James I know the Hebrew and the Greek words registered at every
point. If you don’t have that knowledge, King James can be very
misleading. Some have tried to bring King James up to date, removing
some of the older words and polishing it up a bit—not a bad idea, but
it was done with outstanding incompetence and inconsistency. Some
will put their money on one particular horse like the New
International, because they belong to that section of Christianity and
think they can trust its product. Some will go for whatever sounds nice
and good to their ear at the time. Some, I have heard, make a virtue
out of necessity and say, “Let’s take a year to read this version, and
then the next year we’ll go through it all again with another one, and
so on.” For the average clergyman or clergywoman or church leader,
who wants to use the Bible as a central channel of communication
with the people, these different habits present quite a number of
problems.

You will notice that I have at no time tried to tell you what is the
best English Bible version; and that is deliberate, partly because I
don’t know. I don’t read the English Bible much. I almost always
work from the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and I’m not in a position to
tell you that this one or that one is the best. All I can say is that, so far
as I have seen, none of the existing versions is so bad that you would
get a completely wrong picture of Christianity from reading it—that is
to say, from reading the text of the version. Annotations are a different
matter; they can really put you on the wrong track; and that is, I
suppose, why so many always opposed them altogether.

But there is really no hope, now, that we will have a standard and
agreed-upon English Bible text within the next century, or indeed ever. The
only way would be if we worked towards an ecumenical Bible with strong
scholarship behind it, and it turned out to be so very good that everyone,
just everyone, liked it. But so far we haven’t discovered that vein of gold;
it’s behind us, in the King James, but we don’t seem able to find it again.

I will just say one thing about biblical translation as a whole. The
modern style has been, in most cases, for a very complex
committee-based translation process. Committees and panels are formed,
minutes are kept, meetings are held, travel and hotel expenses have to be
paid, documents get lost, editors mess up what others have done—all
these familiar features of modern organizational life are present; and the
whole thing costs a lot of money which has to be got back by extensive
advertising and promotion to persuade people that they should buy the
resulting product. Now the two largest and broadest-based operations of
this kind have been the RSV and the New English Bible, and they have
both after a few years had to come out with revisions after substantial
work. These revisions (The Revised English Bible, 1989; The New
Revised Standard Version, 1991) will, I believe, be the best that
committee-style translations can do for the next few decades, perhaps for
a century. Let us hope so. We will not get any further by doing the same
thing again every thirty years.

My own opinion is that the committee method of translation is
inevitably slow, dulling, and destructive of brilliance and creativity. Of
the three great Bible translations of history, only the King James was a
committee product; and it, after all, was very largely a minor revision
of an English Bible that went back to Tyndale, who had done it on his
own. The other two great translations were done by individuals and
very fast: (a) the Latin Vulgate, over which St. Jerome took a lot of
time because he had many other things to do, but when he was
working on it he worked very fast, and (b) the Luther Bible, which
Luther himself translated from the original languages, taking a few months for each Testament. Individual translations are much cheaper, much faster, and more likely to achieve qualities of style. If they are not good, you can simply forget them; if they are good, you may like them and bring them to the fore. After all, of modern English versions one of the most highly esteemed was that of Father Knox, and it was only because it was done from the Vulgate and not from the Hebrew and Greek that it did not achieve higher recognition.

A concluding thought: Christianity in a way is founded on translation. From the beginning it implies translatability of the sacred text. In this respect it is different from Judaism, which after some wanderings in the wilderness of Greek returned very firmly to the Hebrew, and still more from Islam, which never permitted any translation from Arabic at all except for very limited purposes. The New Testament used most of the time not the original text of the Old but the translated Greek text, and it used it to prove points of doctrinal importance even when it disagreed with the Hebrew. But, most of all, Christianity from an early time, much as it revered the "very words" of the Lord Jesus, never made any attempt to preserve them in the original language in which he spoke them. Here and there a word is preserved in Hebrew or Aramaic, but there is seldom any great significance in this; and the teaching of Jesus as a whole, every sentence of it, is preserved for us only in Greek translation; we don't have the "original" at all, and from a very early time we never did. So Christianity depends on translatability of its message; and that means, on the one hand, that we have only an adequate, and never a perfect, impression of what was said. On the other hand, it means that an adequate impression is truly adequate; it is sufficient to bring us in touch with the living voice of God and with the truth that God has revealed.

Notes

3. Bruce, 218f.
4. Bruce, 197.
5. Bruce, 200.
Kathy Black

Beyond the Spoken Word: Preaching as Presence

Preaching in a deaf church for seven years taught me much about the variety of ways that language and communication occur without speech or hearing. Sign language was the primary mode of communication, and worship was "proclaimed" in visual and kinesthetic forms—drama, slides, liturgical dance, and mime. Theologically, I wasn't prepared for this reality because so much of the language of faith and ministry, as well as the common methods of worship and preaching, are based on the assumption that everyone speaks and hears. The language that we use is oral/aural language. Yet preaching in a deaf church brought home the reality that some people cannot hear, some cannot speak, and some cannot speak or hear; but neither ability is constitutive of one's intelligence or faith response. Those within the deaf community perceive the world differently because of linguistic and cultural experiences that are not based in a spoken, linear language but in American Sign Language, which has its own grammar, syntax, lexicon and, idioms.

Our Christian identity—its history and theology—is deeply rooted in "the Word." It is difficult to discuss homiletics without dealing with the various meanings of Word/word. Similarly, words like speaker, hearers, and listeners are common vocabulary in the field of homiletics. Most homileticians refer to the congregation as the

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“hearers” or “listeners” and to the preacher as the “speaker.” Charles Bartow says that “preaching as communication requires two elements—both talking and listening.”

These terms are a daily reality in most of our lives. We really don’t think twice about them. We use them as if everyone has the ability to be a speaker and a hearer. In reality, however, these terms are used by persons with a specific perspective—that of being a hearing person who has the capability of speech. That is not everyone’s reality. It is certainly not true within the deaf community. Using one’s experience is natural when trying to communicate concepts. Universalizing one’s particular experience, however, can often be oppressive and exclusive for those who do not experience the world from that perspective.

Homiletical literature has always assumed that everyone could hear and speak. That reality has never before been questioned. From my own experience as a hearing person who has been involved in the deaf community, reading contemporary homiletical literature is a fascinating yet frustrating task. Throughout the literature, authors often equate word with speech and speech with language. In addition, because speech is equated with language, one’s ability to think and one’s intelligence is also equated with one’s ability to speak.

It is important to recognize the various uses of Word and word as they pertain to the preaching of the gospel. In addition, analyzing how word and speech, and speech and language are used interchangeably will provide an insight into how language is used to define one’s ability to have faith and to define the basis of personhood. This article will then discuss the image of preaching as an oral act and how silence functions within the worship life of this community.

In the midst of his language about speech and hearing, Brueggemann also discusses “real communion.” While discussed in verbal terms, communion also implies a related presence. Likewise, Thomas Long utilizes the word communion in an attempt to describe the God who speaks in relationship with a people who hear. While still using primarily oral-aural language, Fred Craddock, David Buttrick, and Sheldon Tostengard also use the term presence to describe the preaching event in terms of face-to-face communication. These terms imply that preaching is more than speaking and hearing. However, the language they use is still oral/aural language. Before these concepts of preaching as communion and presence can become a reality for us, we first need
to ascertain how we got to this point and what theories and theologies have influenced the almost exclusively oral/aural language we use to describe the preaching event.

**Concepts of “Word/word”**

The term *word* has been used in homiletical literature to mean a great host of things. Consider the following: God’s Word (meaning Jesus as the Incarnation of God), God’s Word (meaning the Bible), The Word of God (meaning both Jesus and the Bible), Word and Sacrament (meaning preaching or proclamation), Preaching the Word (usually meaning the gospel of Jesus Christ), Ministry of the Word (usually meaning preaching), and the word of God or the word of the “Lord” (meaning God’s communicating acts to the people). We also talk about the words of the hymns (meaning the printed text) or the words of the sermon (most often meaning oral communication). It is difficult to imagine preaching without using the concept of “Word/word” in one of its several meanings.

In itself, the term *word* is not problematic. However, when *word* becomes equated with *speech*, then a major shift has occurred. Martin Luther made his understanding of *word* very clear: “*Word... was preeminently the spoken word of the gospel of Jesus, a word spoken with the mouth and heard with the ear.*”

In some of the homiletical literature, all words are not equated with speech, but there is a common understanding that “true” words or “real” words are those that are spoken. Richard Lischer states that the word as sound is the “more fundamental and primal reality” and that “sound produced by the spoken word is the most alive and real of all.” Walter Ong states: “... the real word, the spoken word, in a profound sense is of itself bound to ongoing, lived human existence, and... without the word the disjunction necessary for abstract thinking cannot be achieved.” Ong defends himself by borrowing from Hebrew culture which he interprets as focused on the auditory sensorium, equating word with the spoken word.

Ong is not the only theologian or homiletician who builds his argument on Hebrew culture and Biblical authority. Buttrick states that “No wonder the Bible is big on words: God created with a Word, and we have faith by hearing.” Tostengard emphasizes God’s voice in the creation act: “Clearly, God did not create with great hands but with a
word, a spoken word which summoned the creation into being. God spoke and it was so." Luther believed that "by employing His [sic] Speech or Word to create the world God had made His Word the essential and constitutive element in all His dealing with the world." The spoken word derives its importance in the field of homiletics not only from Biblical authority or from the fact that most people are able to speak and hear. It also stems from theories that equate the oral word with hearing and the printed word with sight. Speech and hearing are considered communal events and vision is seen as a solitary experience. Therefore, the tendency is to evaluate the spoken word above the written.

Orality is prior to and more important than the printed word. . . . Seeing is something that one can and should do alone, whereas speaking and hearing is a communal event. Speech establishes the specifically human relation that takes the edge off the cruelty of vision. . . . Vision by contrast is of itself a one-way operation.

The distinction between vision/individuality and hearing/community is a false dichotomy based on the printed word alone, not the sense of vision. Vision as an individual experience is certainly not true in relationship to the deaf community. Vision is necessary because communication can only happen face-to-face since one cannot “see” someone in another room. Vision is of necessity communal.

That spoken words are necessary for being in this world is a common presumption in a culture whose worldview is based on hearing and speaking. It is even more so in the field of homiletics, where we as clergy derive part of our reason for being on our ability as speakers and the congregation’s role as hearers. We may supplement the spoken word with facial expressions, gestures, and body language, but they are peripheral to the emphasis placed on speech and hearing. The reality is, however, that words are not only primarily associated with speech in the homiletical literature but speech is equated with language.

Speech and Language

The problem with equating speech and language is that one then assumes that if a person does not have speech (language), one has no
ability to think and therefore little or no intellectual ability. My immediate experience has been with the deaf community who do not have understandable speech or who choose not to use their voice. Hearing people commonly assume that they must be mentally and intellectually impaired as well. Society looks upon people without speech as people without language and therefore without intelligence. Communication is the key to community, and communication and language can occur in nonverbal, nonoral ways. While the value of the content of the oral word may seem to be lessening in our culture, the value of the spoken word itself, the value of speech as the primary means of communication, is still as paramount today as ever.

The homiletical literature is filled with this basic assumption: that speech is required for language and therefore speech is necessary for intelligence. Craddock quotes Heidegger’s assertion that “the capacity to hear and speak language is primordial.” Craddock goes on to say that “it is generally recognized that sound is the most immediate sensory coefficient of thought, and speaking is closely related to thinking.” This echoes a point made by Ong:

The historical fact is that the world of sound . . . has proved in all cultures the most immediate sensory coefficient of thought. . . . The terms in which all men do their thinking correspond to words, that is, to sounds.

Ong comments not only on language’s dependency on speech but also on the physical apparatus required for language:

Languages come from within and they are distinctively human in that, among other things, they require man’s own kind of oral and vocal apparatus.

Referring to Susanne Langer’s Philosophy in a New Key, Tostengard states:

Langer has observed that the particular phenomenon which separates us from the animals is language. We are the animals who speak. Speech is the culmination of our bodily existence and the enactment of our spiritual dimension. Speech is bodily, issuing from the mouth to the ear. Speech is spiritual, exploding into meaning in an instant, then disappearing without letting us
control or change it. Speech is also a part of the best of our mental work because thinking and language go together.\textsuperscript{15}

In addition to equating speech with language and language with intelligence, some theologians and homileticians also imply that what makes us human and mirrors the image of God is our ability to speak and hear.

What Makes Us Human?

Wilder states it very clearly: “Indeed, man is created in the image of God in the sense that he, too, speaks, names and communicates.”\textsuperscript{16} According to Craddock, “Man is a speaking animal.”\textsuperscript{17} “That people can speak and hear is their primary gift.”\textsuperscript{18} Brueggemann emphasizes that “we are indeed speech creatures: we live by words, words spoken, words heard, words addressed and answered.”\textsuperscript{19} Tostengard also believes that the spoken word is the only proper way to address God:

> When the heavens gave praise to God, it had to be in the form of sound, of speech or song. How else can anyone or anything properly thank a God who creates with a word?\textsuperscript{20}

From the comments above, it is interesting to note that one’s ability to speak is the focus of our humanity. It is that ability which makes us like our Creator, which gives us the ability for language and therefore intelligence. However, it is the sense of hearing that is required for faith in God.

“Faith Comes by Hearing” (Rom. 10:17)

It’s amazing how many homileticians utilize this text from Romans, which was made very popular by Luther. Because preaching is (in the minds of most) based in orality, and since the task of preaching is proclaiming the “Word” of God, there is a commonly held belief in the literature that one needs the sense of hearing in order to “hear” the word and have faith.

Craddock states repeatedly that “the event of the Word of God needs the ear, for faith comes by hearing.”\textsuperscript{21} Buttrick concurs when he says, “If ‘faith comes from hearing,’ then we must strive to be
heard.” Brueggemann states that “it is speech and only speech that bonds God and human creatures.” Charles Rice reiterates Luther and Paul when he says, “Faith is an acoustical affair, ... it comes from hearing the Word.” Wilder likewise supports the union of faith and hearing: “... the faith identifies itself fundamentally with the arts of hearing as against those of sight and touch.”

Wilson Steward quotes Luther, who establishes once and for all the importance of the ears—good hearing—for faith: 

*God no longer requires the feet or the hands or any other member; He requires only the ears. ... For if you ask a Christian what the work is by which he becomes worthy of the name “Christian,” he will be able to give absolutely no other answer than that it is the hearing of the Word of God, that is, faith. Therefore the ears alone are the organs of a Christian man, for he is justified and declared to be a Christian, not because of the works of any members but because of faith.*

The theology that stresses the role of hearing in one’s faith development along with the oral-aural emphasis of the preaching act has been a constant since the Protestant Reformation, if not since the beginning of the church. It seems only natural, then, that speech and hearing would be intricately woven into homiletical theory. The field of preaching depends on communication. That is indisputable. The question is, what kind of communication? Are speech and hearing the only means of communication? Is “hearing” really necessary for faith?

**Preaching as an Oral Act**

While Rice stated that faith was an “acoustical affair,” Henry Grady Davis, Lischer, and Craddock are strong supporters of Luther’s understanding that preaching is an ‘acoustical event.’ Ong, along with Rice and Craddock, also talks about preaching as “an event in sound.”

It is understandable that theorists of preaching would consider speech and hearing to being paramount. That has been its history and tradition. Historically, preaching is tied to rhetoric; rhetoric is based on the three elements of speaker, speech, and audience (hearers). Today preaching is still identified with oral communication. While that is
true in most cases, it is not true for all preachers or congregations. Not all people do speak or hear. It is time that the field of homiletics recognizes that preaching as an oral-aural act is not a universal reality.

I realize that many homileticians would argue that their use of "hearers," "listeners," "speaker," etc. is metaphorical in character rather than literal. However, language cannot be used haphazardly. It is comfortable to use hearing and speaking imagery because that is the reality for most of us. However, as we have seen, many go beyond a metaphorical imaging of what happens in the preaching act. For them, language begins to define God, faith, and even what constitutes humanity. Metaphors are based in a physical reality, and there is a fine line drawn between the literal and metaphorical meanings. The use of hearing and speaking vocabulary to define personhood and more importantly the image of God denies their presence in those who cannot speak or hear. (It is similar to using all-male language when humankind is intended. Sexist language is not only exclusive; it incorrectly defines a universal reality as being male.) Hearing and speaking vocabulary is exclusive and defines a universal reality that is not true for all.

For those who are deaf, faith itself can seem impossible to attain when it is based in hearing the spoken "Word." If one assumed that those who make this equation are simply ignorant of the deaf community and signed languages, the metaphorical use of hearing and speaking language would not be less oppressive, but it would be easier to accept. The reality however, is that some homileticians use the deaf community to support their oral-aural view or use "deaf/dumb" language to make their point.

Critique of the Homiletical Literature’s Use of Deafness

The use of "deaf" and "dumb" language can be considered metaphorical. However, in a time when the negative impact of sexist and racist language is clearly acknowledged, I think it is crucial to examine the statements homileticians have made that include "deaf" and "dumb" language. The use of dumb in regard to one's inability to speak automatically implies what we have noted above—that a person without speech is basically a nonperson because of the implied lack of intellectual capability.

Several homileticians use dumb in relating to a speaking God versus
a "nonverbal" god. Also several comments made in the homiletical literature use deaf and dumb as examples of how preachers should or should not be. Davis warns preachers against using words that don’t sound well together and teaches preachers how to listen for rhyme in prose. He states “only a temporarily deaf man could write ‘irresponsible in evading giving.’” Wilder encourages preachers to become “dumb” so they can stop babbling and use spoken language effectively. “We have to become dumb before we can learn to use names and words faithfully again.”

The use of the word dumb is in itself offensive no matter what use is given it. The use of the word deaf as a metaphor is irritating to many and offensive to some. However, Craddock, Ong, Wilder, and Tostengard go way beyond using deaf and dumb as metaphors. They recognize the existence of deaf children and adults and use their supposedly “intellectual inferiority” to prove their point that hearing is necessary not only for faith but also for psychological well-being.

Craddock writes:

*The vitally significant function of spoken words has been shown in work with the deaf. Pedagogical techniques have been developed for introducing deaf-mutes, indirectly of course, to the world of sound because it has been established that if left unattended, the congenitally deaf are more intellectually retarded than the congenitally blind. Parallels are also to be found in the emotional problems of the deaf.*

Craddock does not state what sources or studies support this statement. He does quote from Wilder, who cites a passage from an article published in 1960 in the American Journal of Psychotherapy:

*The importance of auditory experiences for the interpretation of reality is proven through observation of deaf children. . . . A world without sound is a dead world; when sound is eliminated from our experience, it becomes clear how inadequate and ambiguous is the visual experience if not accompanied by auditory interpretation . . . vision alone without acoustic perceptions does not provide understanding.*

This article was written by a psychologist, Clemens E. Benda, who had/has no professional (or personal, as far as I could ascertain)
connection with deaf people at all. His comments about deafness are blatantly stated without any supporting reference or footnote. Craddock quotes Benda in order to prove his theory, but neither shows evidence to support their statements about deafness.

Without substantiating his claim, Ong states that deaf children can learn only from those who do have speech. He also claims that without sound, "deaf-mutes" are inferior intellectually:

*Until the pedagogical techniques for introducing deaf-mutes more thoroughly, if always indirectly, into the oral-aural world were perfected in the past few generations, deaf-mutes always grew up intellectually subnormal.*

Since *Presence of the Word* was written in 1967, when the knowledge of American Sign Language and signed languages in general as true languages was still young, Ong can be excused for his additional statements regarding languages in general: "Neither do we have any instances of languages which are not in one way or another constituted in sound."

However, the impact of these statements and opinions did not die out in the 1960s or even 1970s. Though not giving credit, Tostengard in his 1989 publication most assuredly received his information from Craddock. Both authors, in not footnoting what studies support their suppositions, perpetuate false beliefs in an attempt to support their own position. Tostengard remarks that:

*A modern person intuitively believes that not having sight would be the worst thing that could happen to anyone whereas studies show that children who cannot hear or speak, when left unattended, are more seriously impoverished than the blind.*

In a time when numerous deaf people hold Ph.D.'s; when a deaf person is president of a university; when deaf people are executives at IBM, writers, linguists, and even seminary professors, it seems absurd that misinformation of this kind is still being published. It signals the fact that our reality, our way of being in the world, our relationships, our learning, our teaching and our preaching are so dependent on a world that hears and speaks that our minds have difficulty fathoming any other existence.

In reality, deaf children forced to deny their visual and kinesthetic
language in preference for an oral method of communicating are often impoverished because they spend their educational years mimicking someone's mouth movements without gaining any language structure at all, when they could be learning history, science, mathematics, and religion.

The field of homiletics and all homileticians are called on by various minority groups to be more sensitive to the language we use and the information we put forth as "fact" about a particular cultural group other than our own. The Deaf Culture and perspectives from those with various disabilities have seldom before been included in that list of minority groups. The field of homiletics is about preaching the gospel to all people—not only those who can hear and speak.

The Role of Silence

In addition to these comments about the intellectual, emotional, and physical detriment the lack of sound causes to people who are deaf, both Craddock and Tostengard discuss the dangers of silence. Silence, according to Craddock, is destructive. Therefore relationships can exist only through the spoken word:

*Not only for the deaf but for everyone, silence distorts reality and eventually destroys emotional and social health. Each individual discovers himself and matures in relating to others. These fundamental and essential relationships are developed and sustained by words spoken.*

Tostengard is certainly against silence, although he does not use the deaf community to prove his point. He bases his theory on the unsuitability of silence in a community that is oral by nature. According to Tostengard, the only acceptable reason for silence in a liturgical setting is respect for the dead.

*Talk is the key to the gathering; and if, for a moment, there should be silence, it could only be out of respect for someone who has died or in prayer for some greater word from beyond.*

The church as an oral community, and therefore as a place where silence has no role, is deeply rooted in the theology of Martin Luther.
Tostengard says that Luther “wouldn’t have liked a silent church. He couldn’t imagine a church without sound.” Luther was trying to reform the Roman Church and in so doing emphasized orality and being “heard.” However, the 1990s are very different. Many Protestants are rediscovering the mystics and the role of silence in their lives. However, in most contemporary homiletical theory, the issue of silence is steeped in the theology that God must be heard and that the ability to speak is not only our greatest God-given gift but very possibly that which makes us in the image of God. Brueggemann states, “It is the new, sovereign, gracious speech of God that breaks the grip of silence.”

The more silence is seen as a negative of sound or the absence of God (since God comes to us as a spoken word), the more difficult it is to imagine living in a world that is silent. It implies that silence is somehow living in a void.

A theological perspective that labels silence as destructive, or at the least, improper behavior for a Christian community, again implies (intentionally or not) that there is something destructive or improper about the living reality of those within the deaf community who often identify with “silence” in the names of their clubs and newspapers. More importantly, it implies that God can only reveal Godself to us through the spoken word and through our ability to hear God. This in itself is idolatry in that we worship one aspect of God’s revelation—God speaking and humans hearing. We limit the ways God reveals Godself to us.

Presence

If pressed, most theologians would admit that the “voice” of God is not necessarily “heard” through physical “hearing” but is felt or sensed. Likewise, most homileticians would say that presence, relationality, and communication methods are more crucial to the preaching act than the physical act of “speaking” and “hearing.” Buttrick says, “The language of preaching is ultimately a language of presence,” and Wilder states that “indeed, his (Jesus’) whole manifestation was a presence.” Many of the same homileticians argue for the importance of speech and hearing because they value “face-to-face” communication. The end goal is basically the same, but the language we use to reach that goal is often very exclusive. While
still stressing the spoken word, Wilder advocates for this bodily presence when he talks about “oral and live face-to-face communication.” Craddock affirms that “preaching is Incarnational.” Incarnational to me means bodily presence. Craddock, on the other hand, still connects incarnation with speech when he says “as the Word came in the flesh, so the Word comes in the form of human speech.” Nonetheless, his deeper meaning must imply presence and face-to-face communication. Otherwise, the theology is shallow.

The reality is that life is in many ways incapable of full expression in any language. It is very complicated and difficult to put into words all that we feel and experience. Therefore, most people express themselves visually and kinesthetically as well as orally and aurally. Speech and hearing are crucial but they do not exhaust the act of communication. Presence and relationality are the depth dimension of every language whether spoken or signed.

The movement toward defining the preaching event in terms of presence, communion, and embodiment has not begun to address the language we use in describing the unique communication that takes place in the act of preaching. The exclusive use of speaking and hearing images, metaphors, and language limits rather than enhances this most important event in the life of the church. Expanding our imaginations and therefore our language will better convey the complexities involved in the unique act of communication called preaching.

Notes

5. Ibid., 12.
7. Tostengard, 60.

9. Tostengard, 20, 43.


12. Ibid., 32.


17. Craddock, 34.

18. Ibid., 42.


20. Tostengard, 62.


22. Buttrick, 211.

23. Brueggemann, 49.


26. Wilson, 121.


30. Davis, 269.


33. Ibid., 28.


36. Ibid., 141.

37. Tostengard, 44.


39. Tostengard, 16.
40. Ibid., 13.
41. Brueggemann, 49.
42. Buttrick, 184.
43. Wilder, 22.
44. Ibid., 21.
Preaching as Hospitality

Hospitality has become a significant theme in theological literature in the past fifteen years. It appears in biblical studies to explain significant dimensions of the ministries of Jesus and of the early church. The Lord's Supper and Christian education are interpreted as events of hospitality. In theological ethics, it is a framework for moral discourse. A pastoral psychologist contends that individuals must be hospitable to aspects of themselves that are "foreign" to them in order to be healthy. The essence of the Eastern Orthodox lifestyle has been called hospitality. And hospitality is a metaphor for the conduct of public life.

The notion of hospitality also provides a provocative lens through which to view preaching. In this article, we first review the meaning of hospitality in the world of the Bible. We then consider how the biblical text is a stranger. In the heart of the article, we explore how the preacher might entertain this guest in the study and how the preacher might help the congregation receive this guest in the sermon.

Hospitality in the World of the Bible

Hospitality is the act of receiving strangers into one's community, ordinarily for a limited period of time. The practice of hospitality was a fundamental component of life in the Mediterranean world of

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antiquity and was carefully governed by rules.\textsuperscript{8} Strangers were those who were \textit{not} known to the community.\textsuperscript{9}

When a traveling stranger arrived in the community, someone from the Israelite community was to invite the traveler to stay in a local home. The newcomer could go to the gate of the village where one of the locals would receive the stranger and take the stranger home. The Israelite family would provide food for the guest (and the stranger’s animals), a bath, and shelter. More importantly, the Israelites would welcome the stranger into their own circle of care and companionship. The guest enjoyed the protection of the host community from enemies and typically benefited from the local laws prescribing justice. The ethics of hospitality were designed to sustain the life of the stranger and to respect the integrity of the visitor.

The rules of hospitality in Israel were modified in the case of the stranger who resided for long periods. But such foreigners or resident aliens were still welcome in the community and were accorded many basic rights within the Israelite legal system (e.g., Lev. 24:16, 22).

Several of Israel’s theologians based the practice of offering hospitality to the stranger on Israel’s relationship with God. The community was itself once a stranger subsequently welcomed into the embrace of God and into their own land (e.g., Exod. 22:21; 23:9; Deut. 5:14–15; 10:17–19). God watches over the stranger (e.g., Ps. 146:9). Consequently, the community is to manifest its identity by welcoming strangers (e.g., Jer. 22:3; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5).

When the stranger appeared, the people could not always tell immediately whether the stranger came as friend or foe. The rules of hospitality created an environment in which both host and guest could receive one another in safety. And, significantly, the rules usually applied equally to friend and foe. Both host and guest had designated responsibilities. The host provided certain things and the guest reciprocated. At the least, the practice of hospitality deferred the ruin that the foe would bring to the community. Hospitality could transform foe into friend. A friend, of course, would feel blessed by the reception and would wish blessing on the host group.

A model of Israelite hospitality is Abraham and Sarah’s reception of the three visitors in Gen. 18:1–15. As this story reveals, the stranger could bring wondrous and unexpected blessing to the hospitable family. But even when the guest did not bring good fortune, the visit could be an occasion for conversation and reflection.

The practice of welcoming the stranger is a significant motif in the
Gospels, the letters of Paul, and most other writings of the Second Testament.10 Heb. 13:2 is a window into early Christian attitudes toward the stranger. The text recalls Abraham and Sarah in saying, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Indeed, Jesus himself sometimes appears as a stranger (e.g., Luke 24:13–35).

As Thomas Ogletree points out, hospitality affects both the guest and the host.

*On the one hand, hospitality requires a recognition of a stranger’s vulnerability in an alien social world. Strangers need shelter and sustenance in their travels, especially when they are moving through a hostile environment. On the other hand, hospitality designates occasions of potential discovery which can open up our narrow, provincial worlds. Strangers have stories to tell which we have never heard before, stories which can redirect our seeing and stimulate our imaginations.*11

Thus, the visit of a stranger could amount to revelation.

**The Text as Stranger**

It may seem odd to speak of a biblical text as a stranger. After all, a text appears to be an inanimate object, whereas the stranger of antiquity was a living person. However, preachers frequently experience interaction with a text as conversation, as give and take, as questioning and being questioned, as being pushed to recognition or being given a gift, as moment of insight. A text has the character of a Thou.12 While a text may not be an independently functioning consciousness, the preacher’s relationship with a biblical passage is much like the relationship with a person. A text is an other who claims our attention and who makes its own witness concerning God and the world. Indeed, a pericope sometimes seems to talk with the preacher: sometimes in the sweet tones of a new lover, sometimes in the stern voice of an angry judge, sometimes in melancholy, sometimes in extravagance that has gone beyond itself. The voices of the Bible are as many as the grains of sand on the seashore.

Incidentally, the literary form and context of the text may give us clues as to the character of the text and to the nature of the
conversation. Our anticipations differ when we talk with poets or teachers or storytellers or hymn writers, or rhetoricians. Thus, when we come to a poetic text, we might anticipate our interaction with it to be of a more poetic character than when we open the door to a legal suit. A hymn may call for a different response than an oracle of judgment. We help the text be heard on its own terms when we pay attention to its persona.\(^{13}\)

As a thou, a text has its own integrity. It has the right to be who it is (and not who we wish it to be). The preacher wants to hear the word which the text speaks as fully as possible in the text’s own voice and nuance.

But how can a biblical text be likened to a stranger? After all, parts of the Bible have been a part of human consciousness for almost 4,000 years. Is the Bible not as familiar and comfortable as the old coat in the hall closet that has become stretched and shaped to the contours of your body?

Surely every preacher has greeted a text as an old friend only to find that as the pastor becomes reacquainted (or better acquainted) the passage is more like a stranger than a well-known buddy. In fact, the preacher may not be as familiar with the text as the preacher imagines. The preacher may not remember the text itself but may remember her or his impressions of the text. As the preacher enters the passage, the passage may be strange to contemporary ears and eyes. This is hardly surprising given the time, distance, and changes in worldview that separate us from the ancient readings. An axehead floating on the water? Indeed! And if the text seems strange to the preacher, who has an introduction to the world of the Bible through critical study, how much more unusual the text can seem to the layperson who may be even less acquainted with the world of the Bible than the preacher. The text is often like a stranger.

There are positive values in regarding the pericope as a stranger. Our senses become more keen in the presence of an unknown. We listen, look, smell, touch carefully in order to ascertain the identity of this other. We pay more attention to our intuition than under ordinary circumstances. What do I feel about this character? Familiarity with another can cause us to overlook qualities in the other that are important but that we filter out of our perception. People often approach the known with biases (either positive or negative) which prejudice our interaction. The stranger can often lead us past the roadblocks of familiarity to startle us with new information, insight,
discovery. Parents, for instance, offer a child guidance into some aspect of life, but the child stares at them with a blank look of incomprehension. Only a few days later, another adult (a coach, a teacher, a youth group sponsor, the parent of a friend) says the same thing and it is as if lightning strikes. The presence of an outsider can awaken us to our own hopes and fears which long ago sank beneath the surface of awareness. Most importantly, the stranger can awaken us to news and blessing from worlds which we had not imagined. The text as stranger has such qualities.\(^{14}\)

Of course, there are also risks in thinking of Biblical passages as strangers. I may not take a stranger seriously precisely because she or he is so out of the ordinary. “This bird is so bizarre that I cannot imagine any points of connection between it and me.” Strangers can be embarrassing, especially in the presence of people we want to impress. The strangeness of the other can be so intense that we are afraid to approach the visitor. In the most extreme instance we can feel such alienation and hostility towards the stranger that we reject (and even do violence to) the outsider.

When the preacher opens the Bible, the preacher cannot know in advance whether the text will be a welcome or an unwelcome guest. But by approaching the passage as a stranger, the preacher is likely to let the text retain qualities of otherness that allow the encounter with the text to offer possibilities that hold promise and benefit.

**Hospitality in the Preacher’s Study**

In the study and the pulpit, the preacher can practice hospitality towards the text. That is, the preacher can welcome the text much as the people of the ancient world welcomed a stranger. A passage does not need food, bath, and lodging, but it does require an environment in which the text is free to be itself. This freedom enables the text to relate authentically with the congregation and then to continue its journey through time and space.

In the Ancient Near East, hospitality nearly always included conversation that gave guests a chance to reveal themselves to the host on their own terms. This is a goal of the preacher’s conversation with the pericope. However, contemporary emphasis on the hermeneutic of suspicion and ideology criticism stress that it is all but impossible for the contemporary preacher to receive the pristine witness of the text.\(^{15}\)
Our own predispositions, biases, intuitions, and values are always a part of the medium of our conversation with a text. Hermeneutics of the last twenty years has discovered that these can both distort our greeting of the text and serve as positive points of contact. I have prejudices, for instance. My prejudice may block me from hearing significant aspects of the text. Or the fact of my prejudice may give empathetic identification with persons in the text who are prejudiced. As a good host, the preacher seeks to be aware of these realities so that they can take an appropriate part in the conversation. In particular, preachers want to avoid looking into the text and seeing nothing but our own reflections.

Ministers sometimes speak of “investigating” a text. However, this is inappropriate to a homiletics of hospitality. Investigation implies a one-way relationship in which the researcher performs investigative procedures upon the subject of investigation. The text is not an anesthetized body on whom the preacher performs a surgical procedure called exegesis. The researcher in the natural sciences and the social sciences makes important discoveries but is not (typically) personally affected by the outcome of the investigation. Police investigation often leads to interrogation. The archaeologist digs through the dust of history. However, such models do not serve a homiletics of hospitality, for the metaphor of hospitality implies mutuality and reciprocity. When the host or hostess of antiquity admits the stranger into the house, they indicate that they are willing to be touched (and even changed) by the stranger. The preacher, like the ancients, becomes voluntarily vulnerable to the stranger. The practice of hospitality, then, is not to be romanticized. The pastor takes a great risk by opening the door to the guest. The preacher may be deeply changed.

Conversations take on different characters according to the nature and relationship of the people involved. A conversation develops one way when it involves people who have never before known one another. What is your name? From where do you come? What brings you here? What do you do? What about your family? Whom do you know? How do you relate to others? Gradually, the partners can develop a sense of relationship that enables them to trust one another with the secrets of their hearts. What do you want, especially from me? What can we offer one another at this intersection of our histories?

When preachers encounter a text for the first time (especially if sermon preparation is taking place at the end of the week), we
frequently assume breadth and depth of familiarity with a passage that we do not have. We thus sometimes preach from texts only in caricature. By contrast, the host and hostess of the world of the Bible would often spend a day preparing a festive meal for the guest. A lamb roasted too quickly and too close to the fire becomes dry and crusty. But when roasted for a long time at a proper distance above the fire, it is tender and succulent. The diners savor each bite. And in Israel, the host and hostess would spend the whole evening eating, drinking, and talking with the guest. Hospitality takes time.

The preacher wants to introduce the text to the congregation. The pastor will bring the text as stranger into the midst of the community. The preacher especially wants to know two things: (a) How may I help the text speak its word? and (b) How does the text help me see myself and our community and situation?

When two conversation partners are becoming reacquainted, they often recapitulate their common memories and catch up on what has happened to each since the last time they were together. Prior history sometimes allows the conversation to move fairly quickly to significant depths. In the process of dialogue, those involved likely discover that they have changed since their previous encounter and that their perceptions of one another have changed.

The wording of the text does not change (except in cases when textual criticism calls for a reconstruction of the actual wording of the passage), but the preacher often becomes aware of different dimensions of the text than before. This often results from the fact that the pastor is at a different moment in life and is concerned about different things and hence is sensitive to different nuances in the text.

Scholars today speak of texts being multivalent: the property of texts containing more meanings than can be identified in any single encounter. This accounts for the phenomenon of coming to a text on which a minister has preached a dozen times and reading it as if for the first time.

Preachers may want to pay special attention to texts to whom they have not previously opened the door. Why have I avoided this passage? Maybe I have simply never noticed it. Perhaps the passage seems too hard to understand. Or perhaps I am afraid because the pericope contains material that is threatening. The text may ask too much of me and my congregation. Or it may present a view of God and the world that makes me very uncomfortable. But at just this point, the hermeneutic of hospitality reminds us that the stranger often
brings unexpected but important news. We cannot prejudge the blessing that a guest may bring into our community when we receive it openly and honestly. Even if the guest brings unpleasant news, our encounter may lead to discoveries that are important. For instance, the awareness of why we do not like a guest may help us relate more honestly and critically to that guest in the future.

The Sermon as Hospitality

The sermon is an occasion of hospitality in which the preacher helps the congregation receive the text. The preacher hopes that the sermon will have the character of a conversation in which congregation and text can discover an appropriate relationship.

The preacher is a kind of double host or hostess. The preacher continues to be the host for the text. But the preacher is also a hostess for the congregation, introducing text and community. The preacher seeks to honor the integrity of each and to create an environment in which the congregation can hear the text and can decide how it is likely to be affected by the encounter with the passage.

The preacher’s conversation with the text normally reveals that the preacher and the text are in one of four relationships with the congregation: (1) friends, (2) acquaintances, (3) enemies, (4) evolving relationship.

Each of these relationships results in different emphases in the moment of hospitality that is the sermon. In every case, however, the homilist seeks for the sermon to be a kind of “protected time” in which congregation and text can become accurately and sensitively acquainted. When the sermon ends, congregation and passage can adjust their life patterns in response to the encounter.

Some texts are friends. These passages contain information that is vital and that will strengthen the congregation’s understanding of God, the world, and the congregation’s response to God in the world. The minister wants to introduce the congregation to the text on the analogy of introducing one good friend to another. The hostess seeks to help these friends discover their commonalities. The host wants each to identify and appreciate the strong qualities of the other. The preacher hopes that the congregation can develop empathy with the friend and that a relationship of trust will be the outcome of the conversation.
The hospitality accorded a friend does not differ in kind from that afforded to other relationships, but it often has special qualities of familiarity, warmth, and trust.

How does the preacher show hospitality towards text and congregation in the sermon that introduces friend to friend? One basic responsibility is to describe the text in vivid language so that the congregation can see and appreciate the fine qualities of this friend. The pastor wants the congregation to develop its own relationship with the passage (and not simply to live superficially with the passage through the sermon). The preacher may want to spend considerable time helping the listeners get an accurate picture of the passage.

The preacher may also want to draw out the benefits of knowing this friend in very specific ways. What does this stranger-becoming-friend offer to the listeners that can help them on their day-to-day journey? The preacher might want to show how this text-friend is networked to other places the congregation will visit during the week. The pastor hopes that the sermon will help the community feel warmly and deeply about the passage.

For example, Rom. 5:1-12 explains the consequences of justification by grace. The homilist would want the congregation to understand the meaning of justification. The preacher cannot assume that the congregation has much understanding of this vital Christian notion. Can the pastor pull out a photo album so that the congregation can see what justification looks like in pictures from the past and present?

In particular, Rom. 5:1-12 claims that the death of Christ reveals that we are justified. This will likely puzzle the congregation. How can the death of a person reveal justification? Beyond this, the preacher will probably ask, What does justification mean for each individual listener’s self-understanding and behavior? What does it mean for the relationships of each listener with other people? What are the characteristics of the justified community? What are some situations in the home, in the workplace, in play in which justification by grace makes a positive contribution to the listener’s thinking and behavior? Along the way, the preacher might contrast the justification that comes from God with the ways in which the congregation seeks to justify itself. These other ways prove, in the end, to be false friends who cannot be trusted (Rom. 5:1-12). The preacher might hope for the congregation to feel justified in the depths of their hearts and to want to treat other people as also justified.
Some texts are acquaintances. The preacher recognizes the passage and knows a little bit about this stranger, but the knowledge has not penetrated deeply. The preacher has the sense that the passage may contain some valuable insight or guidance, but the two have not spent enough time together either in quality or quantity for the preacher to regard the passage as a friend. The minister may have positive inclinations toward the pericope but may also still recognize gaps in knowledge and may have questions that stand in the way of a trusted friendship, at least for now.

The pastor wants the congregation to meet this acquaintance and to learn as much as possible about the passage. The pastor may want to point out the strangeness of the text. This strangeness may be at the level of understanding. The text may use words that are unfamiliar and without precise analogy in the contemporary cultural setting. The strangeness may be in cosmology. The passage may presume a view of the universe—its composition and working—that is foreign. The strangeness may be conceptual or moral. The passage may use ideas which (on the surface at least) appear to be unfamiliar or unwelcome to the contemporary mind. After careful conversation with the passage, the preacher may sense positive elements in the text and yet may be undecided about the precise values of the text as a companion on life’s journey.

In this situation, the preacher may want to help the congregation name and express its own questions about the text. In addition, the pastor may want to identify points of promise and limitation in the passage. Certainly, the pastor wants to encourage the community to continue to dialogue with the pericope; for with passages as with people, there is sometimes no substitute for spending significant amounts of time together in order to develop a trusting, significant relationship. In the case of the congregation’s relationship with this text, the future is open.

For instance, 1 Pet. 3:19-20 claims that Christ preached to the spirits in prison. Scholars debate the details of interpretation. Are these spirits the dead who were disobedient in the days of Noah? Are they demons whom Enoch describes as chained in the netherworld? What does Christ say to them?17 But even when the details of interpretation are resolved, the preacher and the church are still left with the question of what to make of this passage. If the preacher decides that it testifies to the fact that no one is outside the range of God’s grace, then the preacher must bring the passage into dialogue with other texts.
that are more exclusive. If the preacher concludes that the pericope describes an event that took place only once (and will not be repeated), then the preacher must wrestle with the possibility that the scope of God's grace is limited and conditional. While this text is tantalizing in its possibilities, it is probably in the category of acquaintance for most pastors and congregations.

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers reminds us that members of the congregation may have perspectives on a pericope which are illuminating, even for the pastor. Indeed, once in a while, historical-critical and literary-critical consciousness prevent a pastor from hearing the fullness of the witness of a text. The parishioner can sometimes help the pastor's relationship with the text move from acquaintance to friend. The parishioner can be the hostess who brings together the strangers of preacher and passage.

A few texts are enemies. An enemy undermines the community's life and vision. These passages corrupt important aspects of the congregation's vision of God, life, and its purposes in the world. Such passages typically deny that God's universal and unconditional love is for each and every created entity. And (or) they deny that God's will for justice is for each and every created entity. At their worst, these passages can present toxic views of God and can license abuse of human beings, animals, and the environment. Yet, in the mode of hospitality, the preacher remembers that the first responsibility of the hostess or host is to receive the stranger as a guest. The preacher seeks for the sermon to be a "safe house" where the congregation can hear what the text has to say and can think and talk about its implications.

Many members of a congregation tacitly assume that since a text is in the Bible, it can be applied in positive ways to their life situations (even when the applications take some hermeneutical stretching). Two homiletical implications follow. First, the pastor may need to help the congregation discern the sinister character of such a passage. Even when the pastor finds the pericope problematic or distasteful, one of the basic rules of hospitality is to honor the integrity of the guest and to treat the guest with respect. It would be inhospitable to introduce the text in caricature. Second, the preacher may need to expose the weakness of the text with great sensitivity for the congregation. If the congregation shares the view of the text and if the view of the congregation is deeply entrenched, the preacher may need to employ
maximum homiletical creativity in order to maintain the good will of the congregation during the sermon.

1 Tim. 2:8–15 is such a text. The author prescribes the submission of the wife to the husband. The basis for this view is the author’s exegesis of the story of Adam and Eve in Eden. “Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” The woman can be saved through childbearing if she continues in faith, love, and holiness in a modest way. 1 Tim. 2:8–15 is pernicious in two ways. For one, it sets forth an erroneous exegesis of Gen. 3:1–6. In Genesis, Adam is equally a transgressor. For another, the text authorizes the superiority of the husband over the wife. To be sure, in its Hellenistic context, the passage does not allow the husband unlimited dominance over the wife, but the text still buttresses patriarchy. Without intending to do so, the text has contributed to emotional and physical abuse of women. If released in the church without interpretation, this text could wreak havoc in the lives of women and men.

When meeting a text that appears to be an unwelcome visitor, the preacher needs to be very careful not to dismiss the text too quickly. The pastor needs to be sure to have a clear grasp of ancient assumptions and associations that ancient people presumed to be in the ears of those who would hear the text. This calls for careful listening to the commentaries, Bible dictionaries, various forms of criticism (especially ideology criticism), and other interpretive helps. Pastors do not want to embarrass either the text or themselves by misrepresenting a text through neglect of the responsibilities of the host to learn the ways of the stranger. If the text is not an enemy but only appears to be so, contemporary hermeneutics can often furnish a bridge from confusion and misrepresentation to clarity of understanding and recognition of the helpfulness of the text.

In Israel of old, being hospitable to the enemy had definite virtues. It gave the community an opportunity to learn about the enemy at close range. This allowed the people better to recognize the enemy when they met the hostile one in another context. It allowed them to get a sense of how the enemy operates, and it lessened the chance that the community would regard the enemy in caricature. Indeed, the host and hostess might develop empathy with the enemy which could discourage them from dealing with the enemy in an arbitrary manner. As the enemy left the camp, though still an enemy, the encounter had served the community very well.
Similarly, although a text may be intractable, a congregation’s encounter with it can be extremely helpful; for it clarifies the relationship of God and the community to the text, and it lessens the likelihood of forms of violence resulting from the congregation’s future encounters with the text.

Our understanding of some texts evolves with changes in perception. A few texts have been regarded one way by the preacher and (or) the congregation, but a change of circumstance has altered the way the text is viewed. For instance, the community may come into the possession of new exegetical information that causes it to hear the text with new ears. Or it may realize that the text (even when properly understood) has an unhealthy effect upon the life of the church and the world or vice versa. A text which has been a friend can come to be received as an acquaintance or an enemy. Or a passage that was an enemy or an acquaintance can transmute into a friend. Likewise, an enemy or a friend can become an acquaintance.

Such a case calls for a careful homiletical conversation. This is particularly true when the preacher has made discoveries about the significance of a passage which are not yet known by members of the congregation. The preacher needs to bring the community into the shift of perspective. Otherwise, the hearers may be lost. They may be thinking about the text on one channel while the preacher is talking on another. At the least, this can lead to confusion. At the worst, the congregation can become alienated and hostile. The sermon and the preacher lose credibility, regardless of the correctness of the content of the sermon.

This situation suggests a simple form for the homiletical conversation. The preacher might begin, “I used to think of this passage in the following ways...” In the later parts of the sermon, the preacher can indicate, “But now I realize that the passage means the following...” Of course, the minister needs to give the reasons for the change of perspective. When asking listeners to change their minds, a study of listeners has discovered that they are inclined to be sympathetic with the preacher when the preacher tells the story of her or his change of heart. Exegetical and theological autobiography become homiletical resource.

Gen. 9:20–29 is such a case. The great flood is over. Noah plants a vineyard. He makes wine, becomes drunk, and lies naked in his tent. Noah’s son, Ham, sees his naked father. In popular exegesis, Noah
curses Ham. In many Euro-American churches to this very day, some Christians believe that the curse of Ham is the darkening of his skin color. According to this view, Ham’s skin was white prior to the curse. After the curse, his skin was black. At the popular level, then, this text is an enemy, for it has contributed directly to the enslavement and continuing oppression of people of color. Even today, this exegesis supports racial bias in the minds of some. However, this popular interpretation is mistaken. There is no indication in the text itself that the curse is a change in skin pigmentation. In any event, the curse does not fall directly on Ham but on one of his sons. The text can then move from being an enemy to becoming an acquaintance.

Conclusion

We have focused upon the sermon as an occasion of hospitality for text, preacher, and community. Beyond this, the sermon can also be an opportunity to extend hospitality to other realities and persons (past and present) who are strangers to pastor and people. For instance, through the medium of the sermon, a Euro-American congregation might receive realities of the African-American world. This is a particularly important role in the waning years of the twentieth century, for our culture is increasingly balkanized; people and communities relate to one another through caricature, suspicion, malevolence, and even brutality. The sermon can be a public forum where differing viewpoints are heard on their own terms and where these different voices are respected in their own integrity. Conversation with these strangers will likely reveal that some are friends, others acquaintances, still others enemies. In the course of engaging the others, transformations will doubtless occur. Some considered as enemies will turn out to be friends. Some thought to be friends will reveal hidden agenda that cause the friendship to sour. In all cases, the homiletics of hospitality ought to encourage an environment of understanding in which the minister and the congregation can discover the depths and complexities of these others. After the conversation, enemies may still be enemies, but the church ought better to be able to relate to them with greater insight. The public forum could then be less a place of combat and more a community of common anguish and struggle.

Hospitality offers a vivid and positive image for the occasion of the
sermon. Strangers meet in a sanctuary (literally) that allows them to respect one another’s integrity. Relationships can change. Acquaintances and enemies can become friends. False friends can be exposed. Real friendships can be deepened. Even when conversation only intensifies the community’s awareness of the danger of the enemy, the community’s relationship with the enemy may be transformed. As the people become aware of why the enemy came to be an enemy, they may gain understanding and empathy even if they cannot embrace the enemy’s point of view. The congregation’s fear and hatred of a stranger may be displaced by compassion. So, when the stranger knocks at the study, let the preacher open the door, fill the bath, turn down the bed, and begin to prepare the meal.

Notes


8. For reviews of the rules and practices of hospitality in the world of the Bible, see the Bible dictionaries, e.g., “Hospitality,” “Sojourner,” “Stranger,” “Guest.”

9. Biblical Israel divided strangers into categories. While the vocabulary of strangerhood changed from time to time, we may speak generally of those who were short-term guests (who stayed no more than a few days) and long-term guests (who became temporary residents within Israel.)
10. For discussion, see the bibliography in note 1.


18. For further discussion of the criteria for identifying a text as an enemy, see Clark M. Williamson and Ronald J. Allen, *A Credible and Timely Word* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1992) 91–120.


A little boy in the first grade sits with a sheet of white paper and a fresh box of crayons in front of him. He has enough colors and imagination to draw anything he wants, but he chooses a house. The teacher looks over his shoulder and remarks, "What a nice house! I see a roof and a door... but why are there no windows?" "Don't need them," he replies. "But what about sunlight?" she says. "They have electric lights." "Well, what about a cool breeze in the summer?" "Central air conditioning" is the response.

A house with no windows. It's hard to imagine. Why? Because we are beings who need some contact with the environment that surrounds us, even if it is only the view through a window. Yet, how easily satisfied we are to simply exist, looking out "windows"; bystanders who forget that we are created for participation in the world and not simply to be spectators watching it go by.

The premise of this article is that theology should be seen not as a window to observe the world but as a door through which we are invited to pass. Like the biblical witness, which is kerygmatic rather than analytic in nature, theology should provide an invitation to the very life it proclaims. Objective research and systematic treatment of the doctrines of the Church have been crucial to the life of faith and

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therefore must continue. But though they may point to life, the resultant theology in the Church must be invitational. Theology as an introduction not just to Christian thought but to the Christian life should be a watchword for churches and seminaries as we enter the twenty-first century.

Living behind Closed Doors

As a society that spends more time inside than out, how thankful we should be for windows! Through them we are able to "observe" what is going on in the world around, to see, in some cases to hear. They allow us to watch at a distance, separated from the world outside. But the separation isn't complete; in fact, it varies with the seasons. On a warm summer evening the window may have a screen. We can then hear the rolling hum of crickets, feel the smooth cool breeze, and smell the freshly cut grass. On a cold winter morning we have less interaction and can only imagine the crispness of the air outside. Then the piece of glass placed in the window protects us from the brisk air but also traps the air within the house, which soon becomes stale. Likewise, communion with the world may be a human need, and may afford us many pleasures, but in the face of a challenging and sometimes hostile environment it is much easier to seek safety and comfort, behind the glass... as observers.

Now, it is true that the life of observation yields much fruit. Take the modern scientist. To discover what is real she must create a safe environment from which she is sure there will be no interchange between observer and observed. The window is a perfect analogue. Whether it is small enough to fit inside a microscope or large enough for a telescope, whether it reveals a view of synapses between neurons or the beating of a fetus's heart, it is a window nevertheless.

The advances in modern technology have made observation into an art form which may dominate the twenty-first century as well. For in the last century modern technology and science have made great strides in the art of observation. A short generation ago, the radio, as a miracle of modern technology, brought fresh news into our living rooms. Yet, we still needed to use our imagination to add faces and places to the voices and sounds. The following generation brought television and with it a chance to witness the reality of events through sight as well as sound. The cost was a loss of personal imagination. In
the same generation satellites enabled us to witness events anywhere in the world with the crystal clarity we have in talking with our next-door neighbor. One does not need to go outside to experience life; it can all be found on a 19-inch television screen.

Our youth have been recipients of the great bounty of technology and the miracle of miniaturization. In the 1980s they played video games at the mall. Now, they carry them in their pockets. Involvement with the world is limited once again by a window, this time small enough to fit in the palm of their hands. The wonder of observation, all the fun of life, without really having to think or sweat. In the midst of this wonderment they continue to be academically outscored by their counterparts overseas and shown to be less physically fit than past generations. They, as we, have succumbed to what Kierkegaard called “the objective tendency which makes everyone an observer.”

Windows on the World

The modern intellect leans toward objectivity and therefore embraces nothing for fear of wrinkling its suit. All is kept at a distance. What is known is watched but not really seen, listened to but not heard. This perspective remains attractive in the life of faith for the Christian, for there is a strong desire in the Christian Church to glean from science a better way of understanding the world. Science has launched men and women into the heavens and watched the developing child before its first breath is taken. It has built roads over rivers and made crossing oceans no more than a game of hop, skip, and jump. If a rational, detached point of view will help us understand and mold the world around us, then maybe we should apply the same method to the Christian faith, its doctrine and its documents. This may open the heavens to us as well. Maybe, like the astronauts, we would come a little closer to God.

And it may be that if we dress like the intellectual observer, others will regard us with respect and finally listen to what we have to say. The suit doesn’t quite fit, but that’s all right. We now have dignity and authority; we can walk in the midst of the crowd with our heads held high.

But the Christian is in a different situation. The believer’s faith is refreshed by the rain and warmed by the sun; its nourishment comes from interaction with not separation from the world around. We may not accomplish spectacular things, and we may very well look foolish.
The biblical witness contains endless metaphors—not formulas—for understanding God's relationship to humanity. They are drawn from the common stock of everyday life: a relationship of love, established by divine covenant, responded to by disobedience and finally trust. It is revealed by birds in flight, flowers in a field, simple shepherds, and despised tax collectors. Lost coins, lost sheep, baking bread, and a wedding feast, all describe some part of our relationship to God—a relationship more deeply understood and expressed subjectively than objectively.

The Christian is called to observe and understand what the Faith "says," but she is also called to accept its invitation to come outside to play, to come out from behind closed doors.

A View from the Ivory Tower

In his book *Theologia* Edward Farley describes the historical process by which theological education has turned from the subjective experience of the Faith to a study about the Faith. The difference lies in the elementary distinction between knowing something and perceiving it. Jesus loves us, this we know, because the Bible tells us so—but we perceive it through the love of the Sunday school teacher who offers us milk and homemade cookies.

What has been lost is a sense of unity between the believer and the Faith itself. Although this is not its declared intent, theological education permits the Christian faith to be removed from its original setting, observed, and studied at a distance. It may be reincorporated into our psyche, or persona, at a later date. For some, this means graduation from seminary and life in a local church or some other arena for ministry. There they are likely to hear the comment, "I bet they didn't teach you this in seminary!" A joke, yes, but this is also a subtle accusation by those outside the academic environment that seminary is an artificial representation of the outside world. The Faith has been removed from its organic environment (the life of the believer) to be studied. It is then hoped that this examined faith can be transplanted back into the individual and the Church. Yet, as any gardener knows, transplanting is a dangerous business.

At times it may seem that the life or death of the plant is secondary. Transplanting is a way of life and survival rate is unimportant. Methodology becomes an end in itself. Because methodology is the
common link with the scientific community, this gives some weight to the accusation that seminaries continue to seek credibility in academia to the exclusion of the Church. That may be why Farley emphasizes that the more clergy education focuses on clerical tasks, the less able ministers are to carry them out. It is not that these tasks are unimportant for ministry—quite the contrary. But they need the rich nourishment of a believing soul to be effective in ministry.

For example, how should the minister carry out the primary responsibility of sharing the truth? In the scientific fields we should need clear-cut, experimentally proven evidence attached to anything that bore the name truth. Is this the same for the Church of Christ? In one sense it is. Those who have staunchly defended the doctrines of the Church throughout the centuries claim there is a call for rational verification of the Faith. But even they arrive at the edge of a cliff and must confess with Paul that the gospel is a “stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” We are brought back quite abruptly from these abstractions to the church pew on Easter morning and the cracking, off-key voice of the man with a sixth-grade education who sings “I Know That My Redeemer Lives.” And he does! He no longer looks out a window; he has passed through the door.

The gospel brings life, and life brings vitality to the message. But at a distance it has no life and we find the gospel is only “repeated not proclaimed.”

The Comfortable Pew

The theological school is not alone. It is easy for those in the local church to look at the world through the window of their own parish, yet it is difficult to accept that the world can look back. The Church must realize that although she is separated from an academic setting, she exists in the same culture with it; and the same people pass through her doors. Those who teach in the seminary and work in the lab still find a common place to share a simple meal of bread and wine together. As we clergy ask whether the bread and wine become for us the body and blood of Christ, the question may also be directed to the communicants. Are you transformed by the gospel, or do you remain the same? Are we changed by the message to meet the needs of a world hungering for salvation, or do we change the message so we can remain the same and fit in with the society around us?
Secularization occurs in the Church as well as in theological education, even though it takes different form. The problem of simply "observing" the Faith has contributed to the decline of mainline Christian churches in the last fifty years. The situation in the churches is not identical with that of the seminaries, but they do run along parallel lines. That is, the more formalized and objective the Church becomes, the more it suffers spiritually. Thus, a church's effectiveness is judged according to objective "activities" rather than spiritual depth. As a living, dynamic faith loses ground, passion is replaced by bureaucracy. In part this loss of the dynamic nature of Christian faith results from passing the Faith from one generation to another, if the new generation does no more than collect its inheritance. As the old saying goes: Grandfather had a farm, father had a garden, son had a can opener. The decline in mainline churches in the United States and Europe is paralleled by the tremendous flourishing of the Christian church in Africa and Asia. A primary reason may be that these first-generation Christians have not been able to observe the Faith at a distance. In fact, the choice to become a Christian may cause alienation from family, friends, and culture. People don't make such sacrifices in life if they have only observed things from a safe distance. No, the Christian Faith has touched them so deeply that they are shaken out of the stupor of common belief and brought to the crossroads. Their decision proves that they are no longer bystanders. The observer keeps everything in tact, neat as a pin; the new Christian finds that everything is up for grabs.

There seems to be no clear culprit in this entire process. There have been many attempts to identify one, with quite different conclusions. But I believe there is a common denominator: the separation of faith from practice, and theology from experience. The end result has been, for many, a declining role of the church and the faith in individual and family life. In his book *The Search for America's Faith*, George Gallup observes, "While the persons queried were asking for more relevance in daily life, they resented the failure of the churches to deepen their perception of God and to widen their experience in spiritual pursuits." Those who choose to remain outside the church perceive that the body of Christ has lost its life's blood. The church has been embalmed, given color and all outward appearance of life. Her life's blood has been replaced with that which only imitates the spiritual life, specifically those sources of knowledge that seem more relevant to the needs of today's society and culture. These sciences,
especially psychology and sociology, have offered some insight into the human condition. They have given color to her cheeks. Yet alone, they bring no life; they remain sciences of observation more than vehicles of proclamation.\textsuperscript{11}

**Theology: Windowsill or Threshold**

The problem that church and seminary face today is not primarily one of programming or methodology. The problem is rather one of orientation to the Faith itself. It is not merely a question of contemporary relevance but basic Christian identity. We know, in varying degrees, what it means to believe as a Christian, but we have lost sight of how that applies to being one. Observation and participation are not the same. Something is learned from both, but what a difference!

We have greatly expanded the powers of observation through science, archeology, psychology, and higher criticism. Yes, the window has grown in size. But the windowsill upon which we sit to observe must become a threshold over which we must pass. Faith is given to be absorbed for empowerment and the life of discipleship. Theology should be an invitation to rather than a discussion about life. We might compare it to the difference between a botanist describing a tree and reading Frost’s poem “Birches”:

\begin{quote}
\textit{... Often you must have seen them}
\textit{Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning}
\textit{After a rain. They click upon themselves}
\textit{As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored}
\textit{As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.}
\textit{Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells}
\textit{Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust}"
\textit{Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away}
\textit{You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.}\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Unlike the first-grade artist who left windows out of his house, we will always need to examine life closely. Yet there comes a time when the shades are drawn and we must hear the guiding voice saying, “You have been in long enough; it’s time to go outside. You need to bask in the sun and feel the cool breeze.” Theology should touch the soul as
well as stimulate the intellect. Rising high to provide a vision of God, it should also swing low enough to touch the human heart where it is. As David heard Nathan, and a woman drawing water listened to Jesus, we shall hear the very voice of God say, “You are the one.” It is witnessed by the burly man sheepishly affirming, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” It is a heart strangely warmed.

Notes


4. Farley, 128.

5. As I read Bible studies and sermons prepared by seminarians, I am quickly taken back to my first years in a church where my own preaching and teaching may have been more informative than inspirational.

6. Karl Barth refers to theology as the “happy science.” It is interesting that he uses such a subjective description of an objective enterprise. He says that theology is devoted, as any science, to the true freedom of its object, which in this case is God. Karl Barth, “Evangelical Theology,” audiotape, Creative Resources, Waco, Texas. 1965, 1971.


8. “This situation is something of a paradox: the better the organization, the less it will represent the spiritual aspects of religion, since organization is primarily rational and religious experience is primarily nonrational.” C. Ellis Nelson, *How Faith Matures* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster-John Knox Press, 1989) George Gallup “observes” the same tendency. In a survey he found that 56 percent of those unchurched believed the Church was overly concerned with organizational issues; see George Gallup Jr., David Poling, *The Search for America’s Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon 1980), 85.

9. Farley’s book *Theologia* has prompted many responses, among them Hough and Cobb’s *Christian Identity and Theological Education*. This in turn has led to a counter-response in a series of articles edited by Don S. Browning entitled *The Education of the Practical Theologian: Responses to Joseph Hough and John Cobb’s Christian Identity and Theological Education*. Farley’s emphasis upon the unity of theological education and its involvement of the laity has been refocused by Hough and Cobb, who state: “There can be no clear unity to theological education until there
is recovery of clarity about the nature of professional leadership within the church” (Hough/Cobb, 5).


11. Nelson makes reference to this fact in what he calls “the desacralizing of religion.” He mentions the link that Don Browning makes between this and a privatization of pastoral care in which nondirective counseling techniques refer the solution not to the gospel but back upon the counselee. Nelson, 38.

Paul Dean Duerksen

Images of Jesus Christ as Perfect High Priest for God’s People

In his study of the Epistle to the Hebrews," the New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann wrote of the “wandering people of God.” That remains an apt metaphor for the people of God who are described in this early Christian treatise. A major portion of the anonymous author’s final exhortations (10:26–11:10; 11:13–13:15) contain the images and the reminders that the audience, as believers and followers of Christ, is at present a homeless, wandering people. Others also have recognized that “the nature and the goal of the salvific process (in Hebrews) find expression in the evocative image of the wandering people of God, aliens and sojourners on earth who seek for a ‘heavenly homeland’ (11:13-16), a heavenly ‘city’ founded by God himself” (11:10; 12:22-24).

And yet this characterization of the believers is in a way ironic, given the likely situation of its original recipients. They would have included well-educated and even well-to-do persons living a settled life in the midst of the Pax Romana, very possibly in the urban and semi-urban vicinity of Rome itself, or at least across the Italian countryside. The final greeting (13:24) certainly suggests that “those own homeland knowing that this doctrine was directed there.” Thus, it is likely we have an urban or semi-urban group of Christians

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of at least moderate means living in Italy, perhaps in Rome itself or its suburban countryside. So, though they are regarded as "homeless" and "wandering" spiritually, they do know something of the real, stable, settled life as Christians in a cosmopolitan but also hostile environment.

That the recipients knew of opposition from nonbelievers is evident from a few internal statements. The author indicates that in their earlier days as believers they "met the test of great suffering and held firm" (10:32, REB). Such suffering involved public exposure to abuse and possibly physical torment (10:33) of a type which did not evidently lead to the violent deaths of these Christians. That would be indicated by the author’s allusion to none of them having "shed blood" in "the struggle against sin" (12:4), though there are other good explanations for this last remark as well. But even without intense physical abuse these disciples "shared the suffering of those who were in prison" and even "cheerfully accepted the seizure” of their possessions, knowing that they “had a better, more lasting possession” (10:34, REB).

This last reminder supports the view that at least some of these Italian Christians were relatively well-to-do property owners, belonging to the upper levels of society. From our historical experience as a church we will readily think of times in which other wealthy believers have fallen away from the faith under the threat of persecutions. In fact, other New Testament documents and literary forms know of this very problem among the first generations of the primitive church. Jesus’ parable of the sower (Mark 4:3–9 with interpretation in 4:13–20), possibly also addressed to a “Greater Roman” church community, speaks forthrightly of those who would receive the word with joy but would deny it with the coming of afflictions and persecution related to that word about the kingdom (Mark 4:16–17). The parable with its explanation sounds a great deal like the situation to which the recipients of this epistle are exposed. Persecutions are coming, and many of the original converts are falling away, or seriously considering it. Therefore, the writer exhorts them to hold firm to what they have received (2:1; 3:6, 14; 10:23), and even to advance upon it as they can (4:16; 6:1, 18–20; 10:19–22; 13:13). The stern warnings about the consequences of apostasy, of actually giving up and turning away from faith in Jesus as the Messiah, go hand in hand with such positive exhortations (6:4–6; 10:26–31; 12:15–17; cf. 4:11; 13:9). Indeed, it is, no doubt, for this reason that the
writer himself classifies his document as a “word of exhortation” (13:22). Exhortation is not all negative! It is a reminder that there are some things which believers ought to avoid for their own good health; and for that same total spiritual health in this age and in the one to come, there are some things to which the community must cling and aspire.

As is well known in modern New Testament scholarship, the presence of a literary witness to certain kinds of persecution (such as are found in Hebrews) is of little help in locating a precise date for the document and its audience. Even within the first century of “primitive Christianity” there were overlapping periods and phases of local or regionalized persecutions—and very different reasons for these persecutions—as the Book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles attest. Therefore, one may not automatically assume that the “Hebrews” belong in the time of Nero’s blame of the Christians (64 C.E.). Nor may one assume that since the writer speaks of the priestly sacrificial cult as continuing, that his treatise must be dated prior to 70 C.E. As Harold Attridge points out, other Christian and Hellenistic writers, familiar with the traditions of Judaism, do precisely the same thing literarily when historically the temple and its cult are no more.

Hebrews itself indicates that it belongs at the earliest to the second generation of Christians (2:3; cf. 5:12; 10:32). And, of course, the quotation of a portion of Hebrews in 1 Clement (ca. 98 C.E.), presumes a date prior to this long doctrinal circular. A date in the early 90s, during the initial oppressions of Emperor Domitian, is attractive. But this difficulty of being more precise about matters of date and audience really serves to increase the value of this epistle as a whole for the modern audiences of the Western churches. We too live in an urban world, where many Christians possess financial resources and face temptations to worldliness and stinginess that such possessions always invite; and we live in a secular climate of the “post-Christian/church age”: God, Jesus, and the Church are no longer positive, attractive notions! Hebrews is thus sufficiently general to speak to us moderns and yet also penetratingly specific in its message and in its awareness of the challenges of living as followers of the great High Priest in a world which does not know, understand, or desire him. It is therefore sufficiently specific to speak a very direct and relevant word from God to us today. The following brief analysis will hopefully assist the preacher/teacher in recovering that “living and active word” of God for our modern audiences.
One rightely gathers from the lofty introduction (1:1–4) that we have something other than an "ordinary" New Testament epistle; we have instead what may well have been a document written in a high style that was intended to be read as a circular treatise by an extended community of Christians. We gain the impression that the writer knew in advance that he was producing something of enduring and of crucial importance for his receiver-community. And immediately in this splendid exordium he introduces two themes of major importance for the entire document.

The first has to do with the unsurpassed greatness of this Son of God whom God has in these last days appointed as "heir of all things" (1:2). Since he bears in himself the very representative impress and radiance of the Most High's own glory, it is no wonder that his very name (containing his essential character) is greater than that of the angels. And with those angels he is compared in the succeeding verses (1:5–13) by way of a rabbinic, eclectic style of scriptural citation (compare with Paul in Rom. 3:9–18). For the writer the Christian scriptures (the Hebrew Bible!) demonstrate that the Son of God is greater than any of the eternal servants and messengers of God that we call angels.

One has here an intimation of one of the fears this pastoral writer has for his community. They live at a time and in a day when the Messiah Jesus, this same Son of God, has many competitors! Perhaps due to some form of Hellenistic or Gnostic influence, this community exhibits an excessive fascination with the divine, and normally invisible, creatures who have access to God but are not sufficient in themselves for the salvation of humankind. Do we have here an excessive and wayward reverential emphasis by some members of this community on the lives and activities of angels? If so, we have seen something similar to this in the Hellenistic Christian community at Colossae (Col. 2:18). Such creatures could have been regarded by some as real competitors to the Lord of the Church by virtue of the belief that these beings had appeared to prominent church members and due to the fact that (as in our own time!) the distracting rumors of such appearances rapidly gained the fascination of willing audiences from both the Jews and the Christians.

One is reminded today of the competition this same Son of God faces with creatures and beings that are (according to this text) other
than and far less than himself. One thinks immediately of the
distractions to the church by those who chase "U.F.O.'s," follow "New
Age" ideas and practices, or depend on horoscopes. Christians
especially who are tempted by such "spiritual" diversions need once
again the strong warning that none of these things (or any living
beings which are beyond humanity as we know it) can compete or
compare with the Christ "through whom (God) made the ages"
themselves (1:2).

The second and related theme is likewise introduced in these
opening verses. The community has listened to the witness of the
ancestors of faith and to the prophets up to this present age. Those
witnesses are still of use in that they point to the arrival, ministry, and
exaltation of God's Son. And yet now, with his appearance, it is the
witness of his word which remains of surpassing importance for the
church. In saying that God has now at last "spoken to us by a son"
(1:2), the writer is not really interested in the actual teachings of Jesus
as found in the Gospel witness but in his actions which lead to and
insure the salvation of all humanity. With reference to God's
"speaking" then, the writer really means the saving actions of God
through this one who is the fully legitimate, "once-for-all" Messiah. In
a way and for this writer his "actions do speak louder than words."

As proof of the superiority of the Son the writer quotes (or
misquotes!) a selection from the eighth psalm. For him the "Son of
Man" is not, as in Hebrew, an ordinary man elected by God for
kingship in Israel but (evidently) the "Son of Man" of the Synoptic
Gospels! For a while (says the writer) this son was "a bit less" than the
angels, while he walked the earth and shared our humanity. But that
time has passed, and now all things (including the angels) exist under
full subjection to this Jesus (2:6-8); that is, they continue under his
irresistible authority.

And here is the great paradox of this second set of lection verses
which is also the great and timeless paradox for Christians living
anywhere and in any age: how are we to believe in this one whom we
cannot now see in the flesh? Yes, we do still "see Jesus" in his recited
and remembered saving actions on our behalf! But isn't it difficult to
believe, in this troubled, death-filled world, that all created things are
even now subject to him? The writer of Hebrews demands a great deal
from suffering Christians in all ages, but he seems to be aware of it.
The Jesus that we are constantly to have in view is one who
experienced death by suffering as one of us and for all of us. And we
may also see him in our mind's eye, as accepted by God, "crowned with glory and honor" (2:9).

The Word of God and the Priest of God: Hebrews 4:12–16

The lection for this week combines in one text two different but leading ideas which are brought together in a causal and consequential way. Therefore, it may make more sense for the preacher/teacher to deal with 4:12–13 with its previous and preparatory set of verses (at least 4:1–11); likewise, 4:14–16 should be read with 5:1–10 since we have here the real introduction of the long discourse on Jesus as the "once for all" high priest of all humanity.

Though our congregations may be less biblically literate than in previous times, many will have heard the phrase which opens our passage: "For the word (message!) of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, and penetrating to the extent of separating life and spirit, as indeed (a sword does with) joint and marrow, and discerning of both considerations and ideas from the heart" (4:12). Many will in fact have heard of this verse in connection with the call to all Christians to have the utmost reverence for the Bible as the word of God. Let it be said here that the writer has almost nothing of the kind in mind!

In fact, if there is at all a call to revere and trust in a written word of scripture, it is only to that word which the writer has himself just quoted (Ps. 95:7–11, especially v. 11) in 3:11, 3:15, and 4:3. The writer admonishes that today, if one hears the voice of God, one should not harden the heart as at the time of Israel's provocation (Num. 20:2–13); for God swore in his wrath (says the psalmist) that the rebellious would never enter into his rest (meaning the promised land of Canaan). Likewise, the writer of this epistle intends to warn his readers (on the one hand) about the importance of entering wholeheartedly into the salvation that God is bringing by way of Jesus Christ; and (on the other) about the dangers of treating as trivial this once-for-all, once-in-history opportunity to gain an eternal "rest" through Christ.

To this extent, one could speak of the ways one had experienced a word of God from scripture which did seem to guide one into a period or location of rest, as opposed to allowing one to slip into a time or place of unease or distress. Members of any congregation will relate
to such stories about the way various teachings in the Bible will have served to expose their own hearts, reveal their own plans and goals as true or false, or save one of them a great deal of pain and trouble.

But even this is not at the center of the writer's concerns. For him, quite probably, the "alive and effective word of God" (favorably compared with the standard issue blade of the Roman infantry in his day), was that *preached message* by which they were originally won to faith in Christ (4:2). The writer claims that the folk who heard the "Old Testament" message are like those of today who have heard the good news of Jesus. Those Israelites of the past also heard God's promise of intention to lead them to a place of rest. But it did not do them any good since they had not joined themselves with others of the faith who had heard and believed (cf. REB). Already then, this passage looks ahead to the example of those who had also heard God's word (his call to faithfulness) and who had for God's cause endured many trials (10:39–11:40). Thus the present lection (especially 4:12–13) calls the present faithful audience to think again of that word which they first heard and to which they responded with strong confidence. Because that human response to that proclaimed word of God's promise in Christ is constantly under close scrutiny (4:13), God observes what the message of the gospel does to us—as well as what we do with it!

The second portion of the lection points to God's renewed word of promise (or "confession") which is to be seized upon and believed (4:14); it is also the first developed word about Jesus as God's faithful high priest (see previously brief allusions at 2:17; 3:1). Here the writer introduces the major subthemes of Jesus' role as high priest (4:14–16). The Son of God, Jesus, is the one who has gone ahead of us to the heavenly realm (see also 1 Pet. 3:22). We are fortunate, claims the writer, in that we have a high priest who is well able to sympathize with our weakness. The paradox is that he has himself fully experienced the raw trial of being completely human, and yet he remains without sin. This is why we can and should go to him: we have received grace in this man Jesus so that we can and will receive God's mercy and grace on whatever timely occasion we may need such help. The writer thus thinks of specific times of trial or testing into which anyone and everyone may enter. At such times the modern believer will view this
as God's open invitation to turn to himself for mercy, understanding, and forgiveness.

**Christ as Suffering Priest—The Heart of the Matter:**

**Hebrews 5:1–10**

The previous remarks provide a necessary foundation for the interpretation of this lection. The stern warning which follows repeats the pattern which is found throughout the epistle: thesis, scriptural support, affirmations, admonitions/warnings. Moreover the developed warning against apostasy (5:11–6:12) should remind the interpreter of the writer's preparatory remarks about the importance of "the message for their hearing" (*ho logos tres akses*, 4:2; cf. 4:12, 13, 14).

Thus 5:1–10 clearly belongs with 4:14–16 and is sandwiched between warnings about holding to God's messages—old and new—which lead to "rest" (salvation).

In the lection itself we learn more about the scriptural (if not historical) background of the priesthood to which Jesus was exalted following his obedient death. Everything the writer says initially leads up to his quotation of Psalm 110:4 as evidence for the priestly position of Christ (5:6). This single theme will be expounded through several dimensions for the next five chapters until the long hortatory section (beginning at 10:19).

However, the modern expositor should not ignore the valuable preliminary information found in 5:1–4. These statements help one understand the notion of priesthood in the Jewish-Hellenistic world, some of which is relevant for the general ministry of the laity today, as well as the modern ordained ministry: every priest is received from among his/her fellow human beings and is appointed over the things belonging in the sphere of divine worship. The priest in ancient classical Judaism (who was always male) serves on behalf of the local community, specifically so as to offer gifts, including sacrifices for sins. The comforting thing about any such good and capable priest is that he is always able to bear patiently with those who are ignorant and who habitually stray; the priest himself, if he possesses any self-awareness at all, knows himself to be constantly beset by the very weaknesses and failings of those whom he serves. For this reason the priest in the divine ritual must make sin offerings not only for his community but for himself as well. Nor does any priest take on this
important position by himself, but he is called by God in the way that Aaron of old was formally summoned and installed.

Of course, what the writer is leading up to is that Christ experienced ordinary human life with its trials and sufferings. He knows our normal state of weakness and oppression (2:9, 17–18; 4:15), and yet through all of this, he remained without sin. This means especially that as a man he faced, just as we do, many unavoidable hardships in life. Yet he did not let any of these obstacles draw him off the main course of God’s will for his life; nor did he, under any such trials, deliberately remove himself from the possibility always of responding positively to the grace of God. He did not, in other words, lose faith. Therefore (and unlike the Jewish chief priests), he never needed to make atonement for himself according to the ritual for the annual “day of atonement” (stated more clearly at 7:26–28; 9:25–28; 10:11–13; cf. Lev. 16; 23:26–32).

But the immediate concern of the writer has to do with his last remark (5:4) and so leads to his quotation of two psalms of Judean kingship. These establish (for him) that Jesus, in keeping with the Aaronic mode of priestly ordination, did not presume to make himself God’s priest. Rather, God spoke, summoned the earthly man Jesus, named him Son, and appointed him to be a priest forever “after the manner of Melchizedek” (5:5–6).

One should not see in the phrase “the order of Melchizedek” (as in many translations) any justification for modern orders of priesthood and ministry which have arisen since medieval times. The word *taxin* here indicates especially “kind, condition, variety,” meaning here “the entirely different nature of Melchizedek priesthood as compared with that of Aaron (7:11).”

But lest we think of this Son and Priest as so lofty that he is out of touch with the unjust suffering of so many today, we are reminded that when Jesus was alive in the flesh, he also knew of undeserved, inescapable suffering. Like any normal human being Jesus was afraid of death, the great unknown. How good it is to know that he, too, prayed, begging the God who could have rescued him to do so. The writer is graphic: this man’s prayers were unembarrassed shouts and outcries to God along with tears of fear and agony. And this outpouring of the man Jesus was not from bitterness or resentment of the divine for the fate of death that was becoming evident and imminent to him. No, he wept in petitionary prayer out of reverence (*eulabeia*) for God; what is certainly implied here is that Jesus pled for
an outcome to his situation which was less final and painful. One recalls here the Gospel scenes of Jesus praying with grief on the Mount of Olives just before his arrest (Luke 22:39–46; cf. Mark 14:32–42; Matt. 26:36–44). The preacher/worship leader should in fact feel free to substitute one of these readings (preferably Luke 22) for Mark 10:35–45, especially if Hebrews 5 becomes the basis for the sermon.

The final verses remind us that even the one appointed as Son of God learned obedience through the suffering which led to the end of his earthly life. But in this the plan of God was completed in him so that this same Jesus could become the source of salvation for all ages. This willing, submissive death led directly, then, to his appointment as high priest. This raises the question that if we are at all like this man Jesus, and he like us, what do we learn from our suffering once we are done with it? What becomes a new and permanent part of our character as a result of having experienced unrelenting suffering?

**A Perfect, Everlasting High Priest: Hebrews 7:23–28**

The reader of this text should see the need to read (preferably) vv. 11–22 with this lection. At the very least vv. 15–22 should be read since the Greek *kata tosouto* ("referring to such a thing") of verse 22 resumes the *kai kath hoson* ("also according to which") of verse 20. The latter in turn looks back to 7:17, which contains the scripture passage that this writer views as God’s oath, uttered once for all, concerning Christ and his priesthood: "You are a priest forever, according to the class of Melchizedek."

It is this divine oath which our writer believes to be the foundational reason for viewing Jesus as the supreme high priest; and this forms the first of several major contrasts in our passage. In fact, the contrasts between the ordinary human priests and Christ as the "once for all" (7:27) high priest provides a helpful mechanism for developing a sermon or lesson on our passage. One easily sees the importance of God’s oath for the writer in that the term for a “sworn affirmation” (*orkomosia*) occurs only here in the New Testament (7:20, 21, 28). Jesus makes a better high priest because God appointed him by a public, legally binding oath (as found in Israel’s scriptures); whereas the typical chief priests are only appointed by a “law of
fleshly command” (kata nomon entoles sarkines, 7:16), as befits the needs of each passing generation (7:20–21, 28).

This point leads to the second (and more important) element of contrast between priestly types: Jesus lives forever as the guarantor of a new and greater covenant (7:22). But the ordinary priests live a comparatively brief, hard life: “Many others have become priests since each one is prevented by death from continuing” (in that capacity;” 7:23). Jesus, on the other hand, remains forever. Likewise, his priestly office must be one which accommodates this everlasting life: his is an office which does not naturally come to an end and cannot be nullified (in the legal sense).¹¹

And the real importance of these claims about the eternal priesthood of Christ comes out in the writer’s statement of what the Messiah habitually does for all believers (7:25): “... for which reason [his being a priest with unending life and office] he is able to continue saving to the point of completion those who approach God through him, since he always lives so as to be interceding on their behalf.” Though this translation is a bit awkward, it does serve to capture the ongoing, continuous nature of the present stem verbs and infinitives of verse 25. We might list the important ideas of this one highly important section as follows: (1) Jesus fulfills and completes the vicarious function of a high priest which is at present only inadequately portrayed in the duties of the mortal Jewish high priests, (2) that function involves saving his people (any “who approach God through him”); (3) he is sufficiently powerful to save us entirely and finally from all human trials; (4) this is his primary reason for continuing alive in the exalted, resurrected form (though resurrection as such is not a major part of the Hebrews Christology; see 6:2 and the commentaries). He lives now to save us: that is, to a large extent the saving work of Christ for humanity comes in what he does for us following his own death; (5) finally, the precise way that he labors before God to save us is by his continual intercession. Entynchanein (“to intercede,” 7:25) is a term from the realm of legal proceedings which take place before a king or ruler (as in 1-2 Maccabees and Acts 25:24). Thus, “Christ is the intercessor who appears for the believer in the heavenly court... Here Christ does not... declare the merits of the faithful... but as the one who has always stood on their side interceding, he gives assistance.”¹²

In my opinion the best-ever popular portrayal of this intercessory action by Christ is found in J. R. R. Tolkien’s little-known short story,
Leaf By Niggle. In that tale a selfish “wanna-be” artist dies and goes to a kind of purgatory where he is forced to perform menial odd jobs around a rigid schedule. Finally his day of evaluation by the supervisors comes, and he is placed alone in a room where he is allowed to overhear a conversation about himself by two highly knowledgeable and authoritative voices. One of these (evidently representing the Father in Tolkien’s scheme?) is deeper, harsher, and negatively critical about Niggle’s entire life. But the “Second Voice” speaks with deep compassion and sympathy for Niggle’s lot in life. This voice speaks as one who knows intimately the natural human state with all of its challenges and peccadillos. It understands Niggle from the inside out and answers every accusation of the First Voice. The latter finally concurs that Niggle’s is a case for “gentle treatment” by admitting to the Second Voice that “... you have the last word. It is your task, of course, to put the best interpretation on the facts. Sometimes they will bear it.”¹³

This may sound overly imaginative, and yet it is appropriate. The Hebrews author himself gives rise to this kind of speculation about the nature of Christ’s ongoing intercessory work by using the term enthynchanein with its image of court proceedings (cf. Paul in Rom. 8:27, 34).

Finally we are once again consoled by the last great contrast introduced in our passage: Jesus the High Priest, unlike the others, remains guiltless and undefiled; he does not therefore need to offer a sacrifice first for his own sins and then for the people (7:26–27). One is reminded once again of the paradox of the life of this one who was human and remained sinless before God and yet not only sympathizes fully with us but intercedes for us on the basis of his full knowledge of the human state! There is certainly good news here—but also mystery! The modern interpreter is invited to meditate on this mystery which defies full human comprehension.

Obtaining an Everlasting Redemption: Hebrews 9:11-14

By now the reader of Hebrews will have become familiar not only with the manner in which the writer uses comparisons in describing the standing of Christ; one will also recognize the ready use of contrasts as a part of that literary technique. And so we have both in this last lection. However, one could miss the breadth and fullness of
that contrast between Christ’s offering of himself and that of the Jewish high priest if one does not also read 9:1–10. There we see that the overriding contrast in this section is between the two different covenants which have been introduced: the first, instituted by Moses and Aaron and enacted at the traveling sanctuary-tent (perhaps confused by the writer’s ignorance of the relatively recent configuration of the Jerusalem Temple and its sacrificial precincts, as in 9:7–8); the second and greater covenant being that inaugurated by Christ, “the high priest of good things already in existence” (9:11, REB). Thus we have a continuation of that contrast of covenants which began with 8:1.

These prior verses also call our attention to the writer’s use of a kind of typological symbolism in interpreting a tradition from the Pentateuch. Thus, “tent” (skene) in 9:2 refers to an actual tent used in the sacrificial worship. But in 9:8 the writer now views the outer tent’s continued existence as symbolizing that the way into the inner sanctum remains closed by virtue of the former (Aaronic) covenant. Finally “tent” is used metaphorically (9:11) to refer to a greater, albeit invisible and uncreated, institution of grace which marks the doorway into a direct and “once and for all” (9:12) access to God. And through this “tent entrance” Christ as perfect high priest entered in order to atone completely and finally for all human sin.

What is especially thought-provoking about our passage is the writer’s view of the contrasting effects of the two covenant rituals on the worshippers; and this is particularly relevant for people today. This is developed through his use of the terms latreueinio (“to serve, worship”) and syneidesis (“conscience”) in 9:9 and 9:14. Normally in Hebrews the first verb appears to refer to those who conduct the sacrificial worship, i.e. the priests (as in 8:5; 9:9; 10:2). However, in 9:14 (as also in 10:2; 12:28) the writer begins to offer the alternative, more general meaning for latreuein, that of common worship by the assembled people of God. In other words, thanks to the completely effective self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ, those who worship God may do so together and more directly and effectively. The acts and rites of worship include not just the officiating priests but also any and all of the laity who gather out of reverence formally to adore God’s being and the saving work that flows from this.

What an encouraging insight this is for our day! Ordained pastors live at a time when there is (at least in some churches) an explosion of activity and involvement by the lay people at nearly every level of
church leadership. More to the point, though, is the importance of instructing our laity that they have come to participate in the worship of God and not to attend a theatrical performance by a minority elite! The message found here encourages the involvement of the laity: all believers have been given access to God through Christ, who has once for all opened a direct way to God for the gifts and praises of his people.

The second term for our consideration which has to do with the inner human effects of Christ’s atoning work: syneidesis (9:9, 14). The sacrifices under the former covenant were unable to produce a clear, “perfect” conscience in those who worshipped (meaning perhaps those who provided the sacrificial animal; cf. 9:10). By “conscience” the writer is describing (especially) moral consciousness, “usually of a bad deed.” He is even more explicit about this in his statement of 10:2 where, under the law, the animal sacrifices could not eliminate a “consciousness of sin” in those who worshipped (latreuontas; see above). But the “once for all” self-offering of Christ somehow mysteriously “cleanses our conscience from (its) dead works (those which were sinful and unjust) in order to be serving (in worship only?) the living God” (9:14).

Perhaps the writer is describing the mysterious release from debt and obligation which the believer comes to know in placing his/her faith in Christ. Not that the human consciousness is automatically and “once for all” purged of evil thoughts, negative actions, or bad choices! What is intended here is the reminder that any priest could very well go through all required ritual motions in the ceremony for his own expiation. And yet he found that his own personal sense of guilt over known wrongs—no doubt brought to mind in the midst of the sacrificial rite itself—could not be eliminated by these ritual actions. But there is this release that comes to one in knowing that not only may I not atone for my own deeds but that neither I nor any other human being is able to do this for me. The good news is God’s announcement here that we cannot eliminate our own guilt (which so often will be a day-to-day thing even for the most dedicated Christian). But Christ’s sacrifice does transform the mind of the believer so as to eliminate that guilty conscience which would keep us overly preoccupied with ourselves and always busy trying to hide from that guilt or correct it ourselves. Instead we always have access to “constant cleansing” (kathariei) of our guilty self. And that is always enough!
Notes


4. Attridge, ABD, 3, 100.

5. Attridge, The Epistle to the Hebrews, 97.


7. Attridge, ABD, 3, 102.


11. Note the possible dual meaning of apartheid (“permanent, untransferable”) as in Attridge, Hebrews, 210.

12. EDNT, 1, 461-462.


14. EDNT, 3, 301.

Recommended Reading


The long-discussed decline of the American Protestant mainstream denominations in numbers of members and cultural influence has led some to speculate that we are witnessing the gradual death of an institution—an end characterized (like that predicted of the world by T. S. Eliot) "not with a bang but a whimper." The United States has never had an established church per se—but it used to be that mainstream or "old-line" denominations could count on the support of and a general coherence of values with the larger society. Those days are long gone. The effect of increasing awareness of religious pluralism has led to, in effect, a "disestablishment" of the mainstream Protestant traditions and a crisis in identity that has thrust them on a new journey for self-definition. A prevalent symptom (or, as some would prefer, a leading cause) of the decline is the dissolution of denominational "identity"—the cultural "glue" that makes a denomination a specific and constitutive community for its members.

Beyond Establishment is a collection of sixteen studies, each of which treats a specific dimension or case of how the maintenance of denominational identity has been made problematic by this de facto disestablishment. It is not a comprehensive or theological treatment of the issue but a series of sociological case studies from which

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conclusions are drawn. The questions which the volume treats are these: What "plausibility structures" exist by which a denomination can communicate to its members its particular identity? How effective are those structures? And what trends can we expect of them in the near future? We find studies of such diverse topics as Sunday schools, denominational colleges, women's missionary groups, retreat centers, hymn-singing, and ordination practices—all of which are just some of the vehicles by which denominations have carried their identities to subsequent generations.

Daniel Olson notes in the opening chapter that the very commitment to diversity that makes the mainstream denominations attractive to people who are uncomfortable in conservative or fundamentalist churches also has the ironic effect of decreasing the ability of the denomination to form a sustainable subculture. This will be recognized as good news by all who are committed to a reality of church which transcends barriers along racial, gender, and class lines. However, he also notes that this diversity has been interpreted to include diversity of beliefs and that this "diversity of beliefs among mainline attenders undercuts their ability to find a common language to communicate interpersonally the meaning of their faith for their lives" [49].

Subsequent chapters treat other factors in the crisis of denominational identity: the demise of overt denominational emphases in denominationally created colleges, the growing tendency in seminaries away from service to one denominational community, and the interesting argument by Lawrence N. Jones that African-American Christians share an identity based on their common experience of suffering that well outweighs the identity they receive from participation in denominations. Methodists will be particularly interested in the chapter by Russell E. Richey on the close connection between Methodist identity and a providential view of history. Richey shows how the increasing difficulty of claiming that Methodism in the United States has enjoyed God's special blessing has affected Methodist identity. One of the most striking chapters is that of Creighton Lacy on denominationalism from a world (non-Western) perspective. He shows, persuasively, I believe, how much denominationalism depends for its existence on the peculiarities of U.S./Western culture and how ill-suited it is where the Church is growing in other contexts. Citing trends already prevalent among missionaries and Third World churches, he is one of the few authors to
argue that denominationalism should be dismantled on specifically theological grounds—for its fracturing of the unity of the Body of Christ.

Despite the seemingly insurmountable problems facing the mainstream denominations, the editors, nevertheless, argue that we should not expect the early demise of denominations but that they will continue to be bearers of religious identity for some time. Denominations still “enable individuals to locate themselves religiously in a diverse, multicultural society” [351]. As the editors note in the introduction, when asked to describe their religious affiliation, 85 percent of U.S. residents name a denomination [14]. But does this identity mean very much any more? Where people express agreement with denominational principles it is often in a secondary sense. That is, the agreement is less likely to be in traditional doctrinal matters as in broad agreement with mainstream principles such as openness and diversity. As one UCC layperson tellingly said of her church, “Being pluralistic is our identity” [70].

Where the identity remains strong is precisely where you would expect it to be strong: among denominational executives and leaders whose lives and works are invested in the maintenance of the identity. This is amply illustrated by Louis B. Weeks in a study based on interviews with executives in the Presbyterian Church (USA), among whom a reasonably specific denominational culture is still definable. It is also telling that in Donald A. Luidens’s study of the Reformed Church in America, their response to a steady decline in membership has been almost entirely directed inwardly. Although sociological analysis indicates that the RCA’s are caught in external cultural trends, the leaders tend to believe that the problems rest within the denomination itself and that the solution lies in the direction of clarifying and marketing their traditional identity. Luidens is doubtful that this will provide anything but short-term gains, if that much, and only hints at a more thoroughgoing solution—the move toward a more sectarian relationship with the broader culture [265]. The pull towards sectarianism goes against the grain of mainstream commitment, but as the voices (both reactionary and postmodern) for this move grow louder it is an option which merits more comment than afforded in this volume.

Although the editors argue for a continued place for denominations, I found the evidence presented in the studies shows that it is increasingly unlikely that we can expect anything like a rebirth or
renewal. For United Methodists the message is clear: the attempts to strengthen and redefine denominational identity by General Conference rewriting of the theological and historical statements in the Book of Discipline will not likely meet with success. They are examples of a “top-down” approach to providing an identity. In other words, those who have the most stake in maintaining that identity try to communicate it to people in the local congregations. However, as pastoral experience and congregational studies teach us, they are increasingly likely to be attending a church because of location, programs, or personal taste than they are because it is the tradition they inherited. The programs and pronouncements of church bureaucrats fall on seemingly deaf ears, ears that are owned by people whose personal commitment to the denomination is of a decidedly different nature than that of the hierarchs.

Whether you celebrate the decline in denominationalism as a step forward out of a divisive past or you think it a tragic loss of necessary distinctiveness within the Body of Christ, this is a book that merits your serious attention. For those who have a stake in the maintenance or recovery of denominational identity, it is an education in what your project is up against. For those who believe that denominations are all but dead in a post-establishment world, it is a study in the tenacity of a social structure.
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