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Contents

Introduction
Sharon J. Hels .................................................... 225

Articles
Calling Prowls About in Our Lives
Rosemary S. Keller ........................................ 227

Our Theologies of Preaching
J. Irwin Trotter ................................................. 237

When the Pain Outweighs the Promise: Some Reflections on the “Problem” of Clergy Morale
Leroy T. Howe ................................................. 251

The Crisis of Males in Ministry
William S. Reed ................................................. 263

Suffering into Wholeness: Vulnerability and the Imprisoned Child Within
J. Paul Jones .................................................... 275

The Idealization of Male Strength in the Pulpit
Richard T. Frazier ........................................... 287

QR Lectionary Study

Light in the Darkness: Rediscovering Advent Hope in the Lectionary Texts from Isaiah
David Carr ....................................................... 295

Critical Response

Abortion and the Quadrilateral: A Reply to Kathy Rudy
James C. Howell ............................................. 321
Introduction

I just can’t get that monster out of my mind!” So runs the title of an essay by Joan Didion, part of her provocative collection entitled Slouching Toward Bethlehem.

The monster on my mind these days is Frankenstein, he of the neck bolts and stitched up scars and straight-legged gait. The scientific creation who wants to be human but ends up terrorizing the neighborhood—at least in some versions. A new book portrays him as the unwitting victim of his master’s (actually, Dr. Frankenstein’s) mania to prove himself superior to the nature-worshipping women who challenge him. So the doctor uses his technical genius to build a Creature, an instrument of vengeance. Interesting twist on an old tale.

I like the idea of focusing on who makes the monster rather than the monster himself because it makes the story relevant in a different way. We are all building a creature that may or may not become human one day: ourselves. Who will this being on the laboratory table become? Will it have a brain and a heart? Guts? Compassion? Memories? Courage? And where shall we look for the elements of this humanity? Building the human while seeking God: that is our major project, our vocation, our call.

This issue is devoted to the concept of vocation, both root and branches. Rosemary Skinner Keller writes that call is “prowling around in our lives.” This marvelous image conveys the danger as well as the excitement of making such a commitment. Keller, a historian, evokes a vision of turn-of-the-century Chicago, visited and commented on by sociologist Max Weber and his perceptive wife, Marianne. During this time Chicago was earning its poetic designation as the “city of big shoulders” because of the vast amount of physical labor required to run its markets and industries. Immigrants arrived daily to make their fortunes—or just to survive—in America. In this context, some found success, others did not. That story continues in our cities today: How shall we build the human?
Irwin Trotter opens with a similarly pointed question in his article on theologies of preaching. Just what is it that we think we are doing? For many of us, preaching is a passion; for others, an arduous labor. But its theological dimensions are powerful whether we love it or not. Like all good classifications, Trotter’s categories can be used diagnostically. Never mind what we actually do when we preach. What framework are we attracted to, and why?

The three articles at the core of this issue address the question of call at points of crisis. The first piece, by Leroy Howe, is a case study of Joe, who never understood the power of his own deeply held expectations of ministry. The second, by Will Reed, is his own story of loss and recovery. And the third, by Paul Jones, describes the origins of inner conflict in both psychological and theological terms. These are three distinct voices, but all share the quality of compassion and wisdom gained by hard experience.

Though deeply personal, the dilemmas described in these pages are not restricted to the writers alone. Those of us—male or female, of whatever race or national origin—who endure radical disappointment in life may have to settle in for a long season of grief. Once again, it is a matter of building (or rebuilding) the human.

Perhaps it is good to end on a note of hope as David Carr tackles the Advent lections from Isaiah. In the midst of all this introspection, it may be well to simply pull out the text and discover anew that God is in our midst. In the words of a prayer from the synagogue:

Days pass and the years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles. Lord, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing; let there be moments when Your Presence, like lightning, illumine the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder: How filled with awe is this place, and we did not know it! Blessed is the Eternal One, the holy God!

Rosemary S. Keller

Calling Prowls About in Our Lives

[Today] the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when, on the other hand, it need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.¹


The idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs." These words have a haunting effect on me, and they provide a Secular Text with which to introduce

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this essay. For Max Weber’s words speak deeply to the “spirit problem” of modern women and men who seek a deeper sense of purpose—even a God-given “calling,” to use such an outmoded word—than that which is sanctioned or envisioned by “the culture of disbelief” at the end of the twentieth century.

Max Weber, the German professor considered to be the founder of the modern academic discipline of sociology, wrote these words almost 100 years ago. Apart of the little-known, almost “hidden,” history of Weber is that these words were written immediately after he returned home from a three-month trip to the United States in 1904.

He had presented an academic paper at the “Conference of Arts and Science,” a part of the World Exposition in St. Louis. But the most valued aspect of the journey for Max and his wife, Marianne Weber, was their opportunity to travel extensively in the United States. He wrote in private letters that he observed “the crystallization of the American spirit” in the cities, and most of all in Chicago. “The spirit of capitalism,” as he defined it, was a condition not simply of individuals investing their worth in personal upward career mobility, but of an entire social system that placed its faith in economic acquisition and supremacy.

“The Protestant Ethic” as a Western Classic

Weber spent the first 181 pages of The Protestant Ethic spelling out his thesis that religion and religious institutions have aided and abetted the evolution of secularism by failing to stand over against its faith in money and material goods. Then, in the concluding three pages, he honed in on “the spirit problem” as he experienced it personally throughout his life and about which he lectured and wrote until his death: many people, and particularly that broad, difficult-to-define “middle class” to whom his book was directed, want a more significant meaning, a greater usefulness in their lives than the superficial goals of money and status that secular society offers.

Weber’s words mirror our present late-twentieth-century society to itself “by revealing its origin from the past,” in the words of Frederick Jackson Turner, the distinguished North American historian of Weber’s generation at the turn-of-the-century. In helping us to understand the present spiritual predicament of many persons within and outside our churches and in seminary, let us state that “spirit
problem" in question form: How can calling from God become something that does not "prowl about" on the edges of our lives but defines the center of our beings?

Nature of Call

First, let us clear away some of the debris, "the scattered remains of something broken or destroyed, the ruins and rubble" associated with the word call. Modern people shy away from identifying their lives with a calling from God because the language is so foreign to the culture and national character of our secular society.

Recently I met a professor who teaches in another Chicago-area seminary who told me he had taught at the University of Munich. I excitedly shared with him about Max Weber, who also had taught at the University of Munich 100 years earlier, and about Weber's inner struggle to actualize the calling that prowled about in his life throughout his entire adulthood. My seminary colleague looked at me in disbelief to convey that he thought Weber was out of touch with the times even to think in such terms. Yet, this colleague comes from a religious tradition that affirms calling at the heart of its creed.

His response is understandable considering the way in which society deals with religious calling today. For instance, the word is simply "nowhere" in terms of a dictionary definition. The 1980 American Heritage Dictionary devotes two-thirds of a column in very fine print to defining "call" as it relates to baseball, billiards, poker, and finance; only near the end of the column does it refer to call as "a vocation, as to the ministry."

Another response is also understandable. Some of my Ph.D. students in a seminar said that they were hesitant to use the word because of the heavy freight it carried in their own religious traditions. Too often, calling had been pressed upon them as a cataclysmic, once-in-a-lifetime emotional experience essential if one was to have an "authentic" religious vocation.

As modern religious persons, we are called to cast off some words and phrases that are not appropriate because they are exclusive or demeaning in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity. But calling from God is not one of those phrases. As the Sacred Text of Ephesians 4:1 affirms, it is one of the most inclusive and egalitarian expressions of our faith and commitment as people of God. Envisioning the ministry
of all God's people, lay and clergy alike, Paul states, "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called."

If calling from God is "nowhere" in terms of a dictionary definition, it is "everywhere" in terms of our need for meaning and purposefulness at the heart of our existence. Today many people experience calling prowling about on the fringes of their lives, though they may not be at ease in using the word "calling." They may describe an undefined vague yearning for "something more," or an aching to be continually faithful to a long-held commitment to God at the center of their lives. Whatever they call it, countless persons identify with the desire to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called."

Ephesians 4 addresses the meaning of calling at the center of our lives. Foremost, the text is about a way of life; and secondarily, it is about a particular kind of work that a person does.

The Reverend Peter Gomes, the passionate African-American Pastor-in-Residence at Harvard University, preached on this text in the Duke University chapel. As he put it, this text is about a "quality of life"; that is what our vocation is all about. Our vocation as Christians is to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. The Sacred Text is not primarily about "What are you going to do when you grow up?" or "What are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

The Puritans used the term General Calling, meaning the certain kind of life required of all God's followers for the common good, the welfare of the entire community, the response to God with the whole of our beings. Then, secondarily, they used the term Particular Callings to refer to different kinds of work that we might do to serve God and our neighbors.

The emphasis of the Puritans and of the writer of Ephesians is different than Weber's. His focus is upon work and upon what has happened in modern capitalistic societies where "calling" has lost its spiritual grounding and where the highest personal and social purpose becomes pursuit of wealth and status.

To counter that economic compulsion at the heart of middle-class life requires an alternative center to one's life, an alternative identity to that which is ordained and imposed upon us by secular society. As Peter Gomes puts it, "Your life work is not what you do but who you are. You are who you are in Jesus Christ." His grandmother
continually told him that his ancestors were born into a slave system, but they were not born slaves. And for us here today, the primary identity of each of us is as a child of God, not foremost as an African-American, Asian-American, Euro-American, Hispanic-American, or Native American, male or female. Our vocation, our purpose as children of God, is to lead lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called. And the quality of our life is directly tied to the qualities that build up the Body of Christ, if they apply mutually and equally to all persons in the community, not in a manner of hierarchy and subordination. Some of those qualities are given in the Sacred Text: humility, gentleness, patience, the bearing of each other's burdens, and the effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

An alternative vision of vocation to that of the work ethic, so sacred to secular society, lies in the General Calling of all Christians to "a certain kind of life," "a quality of life." However, the texts, both Sacred and Secular, also relate to one's "Particular Callings," to the work or occupations that she or he holds. I want to turn now to the dialogue between the Sacred and Secular Texts related to calling as our work.

Call and Community

At the Garrett-Evangelical Faculty Retreat last year, we focused on the topic: "What is the quality (ties) of Leadership which we are seeking to develop in students at G-ETS who are preparing for ministry?" Each faculty member prepared his or her own brief statement on the subject before the retreat began, and we were addressed on the issue by several persons within our community. The faculty understood our discussion there to be the beginning of ongoing dialogue on the subject throughout the year. And what could be more at the heart of our vocation as a seminary than this question about the quality of leadership for ministry? I want to add to this dialogue by reflecting in terms of ministerial leadership on the Sacred and Secular Texts chosen for today.

What does the Sacred Text of Ephesians 4 say about calling related to work in terms of preparation for ministry—clergy, diaconal, and lay, professional and volunteer? "The gifts Christ gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and
teachers." There is a certain ordering here. It is not incidental in this
text that the first named were the "apostles," the disciples appointed
by Christ to proclaim the gospel. Even more importantly, however, I
believe that the text is not setting one particular office and officer
within the community as the sole leader. It would follow that in the
church the pastor is not the only one who brings leadership; and in the
seminary the president, dean, and other vice presidents are not the
only ones, simply because of their positions, who are the leaders. The
writer recognizes that the full functions of leadership are much more
widely shared because of the particular giftedness of several persons
in the community and because of the several functions that need to be
performed. Rather, the "variety of gifts" to be apostles, prophets,
evangelists, pastors or teachers are all given for one purpose: "to equip
all the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of
Christ."

The point is this: The Sacred Text is all about community, not about
exaltation of individuals. It is not about raising certain persons above
others for individual status or glorification as "leaders." The "life and
work of ministry," not "leadership," is the primary category, ministry
more broadly defined as the work of the entire community. That is the
purpose of particular leadership functions performed within the
community as the Body of Christ.

In light of this second point, what the Sacred Text tells us about
leadership as preparation for ministry, let us return now to dialogue
with Weber's words. My own teaching and research have much of
their focus in biographical studies and in the way in which leadership
is understood through the life experiences of women and men. It was
notable to me to see Marianne Weber's biographical reference, from
the Webers' visit to Chicago in 1904, to a life and work of calling from
God which embodied the cooperative, community-style of leadership
which I see as the focus of the Sacred Text of Ephesians. The
sharpness of Marianne Weber's insights into the particular conditions
in Chicago contrasts markedly with Max Weber's more abstract
statement in The Protestant Ethic:

In Chicago, Marianne Weber wrote, she and her husband saw not
only "the face of this monster [of the frantic business and industrial
society] which indifferently swallowed up everything individual." They
also saw "gentle features that bespoke a capacity for love as well
as kindness, justice, and a tenacious desire for beauty and spirituality.
On the billboard there was a poster proclaiming CHRIST IN
CHICAGO," a reference to the famous conference and book by the British journalist William Stead in 1894, a decade before, entitled "If Christ Came to Chicago, What Would He Do?" Was this a brazen mockery?" Marianne Weber continued. "No, this eternal spirit dwells there, too, for example, in the work of a woman who had the courage of her convictions."

That woman was Jane Addams, who, along with several other female leaders, founded Hull House, the first social settlement in the United States. This institution flourished over the years through the cooperative leadership of a notable circle of women who founded the settlement in the midst of the newly arrived immigrant population of Chicago as a secular expression of the calling from God felt by Addams and several members of her team.

It is an historical distortion that only Jane Addams's name has been connected with Hull House as its founder and leader. Today the cooperative and collegial leadership of others who worked beside her—including Ellen Gates Starr, Florence Kelley, Julia Lathrop, and Alice Hamilton—is coming to public attention through the research of feminist historians.

But perhaps no North American of her day or of our own more notably personifies the movement from calling prowling about on the fringes to calling as the centered focus of life than does Jane Addams. She grew up in a churchgoing home, in which she and her father went one Sunday to the Presbyterian church and another to the Quaker meeting. Jane first sought to fulfill her own search as a teenager for a religious calling by obeying her father's wish that she attend Rockford Female Seminary and become a single woman foreign missionary. However, her vocational journey led her to seek "a secular outlet for her essentially religious nature."

Addams believed in the essential oneness, the bondedness, of humanity that transcended class, racial, and religious differences. This vision became the unifying basis of the work of Hull House. Her essay on "The Subjective Necessity of Social Settlements" is a clear, straightforward statement that middle-class persons (such as herself and a notable segment of young people of her own generation) needed a purposeful outlet for their energies that served the needs of persons who lacked the material benefits so taken for granted by her own class. Further, while she and other middle-class women and men formed a cooperative core of leadership in the avowed ministry of Hull House, Addams always clearly understood the relationship
between Hull House middle-class social workers and the newly arrived working-class immigrants. Both were gaining, giving, and learning from each other. The social workers were the designated leaders, but the whole body was being equipped to serve in ministry to one another.

Call to Ministry

If ministerial leadership functions collaboratively to empower all the saints for the work of ministry, it fulfills the work of the church as stated in Ephesians 4. Mortimer Arias has written that John Wesley’s evangelism “was not the evangelization of pagans in far away lands or the growth of church membership, but it was an effort to incarnate the gospel in a ‘Christian’ land! To put it other-wise, it was not so much to church the unchurched, as to evangelize the churched”—to equip the church for its ministry. Arias then goes on, in a refreshing way, to apply the connection between ministerial leadership and the ministry of all Christians to the work of denominational structures of the church today:

What would be the functional equivalent in the United States [of Basic Ecclesial Communities in Latin America], in this huge religious supermarket with 138 million church members, with so many denominational structures at all levels functioning as complete churches? . . . Sometimes I wonder if the task forces, coalitions, and networks are not in some ways functional equivalents of grassroots communities, in spite of their ad-hoc nature and their sometimes elitist composition. Shouldn’t we look at them as alternative, or perfectible, structures for discipleship and mission? Their efforts to be consistent Christians in a world of so many problems and challenges, to commit themselves to an area of human need and Christian witness, and to express their solidarity with the poor at home and abroad are some signs of the incarnation of the gospel in persons and communities. Addressed toward the world, this belongs to the essence of the holistic evangelism in the Wesleyan tradition.

Too often the leadership of the churches has fallen short of its calling to empower all the saints for ministry because the blatant sins of sexism,

234 QUARTERLY REVIEW / FALL 1995
racism, and classism have been practiced within the churches' structures. Alice Chai, the Korean-American woman who received the annual “Barrier Breaker” Award from the California-Pacific Annual Conference Commission on the Status and Role of Women in 1989, describes her experience of growing up in the oldest Methodist church in Seoul:

One of the complaints I had about the church was that, even though my grandmother and other female relatives were more spiritual and hardworking members of the church, mostly my father and other male relatives with social status and wealth became church elders and officials. My great aunt, who devoted eighty-some years of her life to the church as a “Bible woman” (a lay woman evangelist), was finally allowed to give a prayer at the dedication ceremony of the new church building when she was nearly ninety years old.7

We have moved through this dialogue between our Sacred and Secular Texts from focusing simply on calling in the life and work of the individual to interpreting calling as the quality of life and the heart of the work of the community. I want to conclude with a very down-to-earth story that over many years has powerfully conveyed to me the work of the community to lead a life worthy of the calling to which it has been called.

Bishop Roy Sano tells of his journey as a boy during World War II when his Japanese-American family was hauled off to a detention camp. The Quakers sponsored a resettlement program and found housing and employment for these dispossessed persons in Media, Pennsylvania. The Methodist church there, which became a home to young Roy Sano, had an active youth group, a vigorous Bible class with boys and girls and men and women ages 14–65 meeting together, an effective choir, and much more.

In his words: “Those Christians in the Media church communicated the love of God through their programs and personal interactions. Thus, when I went forward and knelt at the altar, I believe it was a young man saying in his way, I acknowledge publicly that I yield my life to this island of acceptance in a sea of rejection.... The Christians in Media communicated an acceptance to us as people that made it possible to hear an inner witness of the Spirit with our spirits that we are children of God.”8

CALLING PROWLS ABOUT IN OUR LIVES
It is my prayer for us as individuals, for our seminaries, and for all the institutions of our church that we may respond "to the calling to which we are called" and that, in turn, "the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

Notes

Our Theologies of Preaching

What do we think we are doing when we preach? If we could answer that question, we would have the beginnings of a theology of preaching.

In the last two decades a blizzard of books has been published in North America about preaching, mostly focused on style and method. These books have been helpful, without a doubt improving the standard of preaching in our churches.

But every manual of preaching carries with it also an implicit theology. The popularity of certain manuals must reflect in part the acceptance of their implied theology. We preachers are eclectic, using different methods on different Sundays. But would we not be more effective if we were aware of the implicit theologies?

By just reading the homiletics themselves, I have identified four theological classifications. These writers may not agree with my typology, and I admit the categories are not in all cases a perfect fit; but perhaps this paper will help begin the discussion.

One should note at the beginning that the two most-used North American preaching styles are not mentioned here: evangelical and problem-centered (psychological). These styles have such wide acceptance that their practitioners do not require a manual, and virtually none have been written in the last 25 years. In any case, the homiletics cited in this paper are proposing to take preaching beyond what is commonly practiced.

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Preach the Theology of the Text

One traditional theology of preaching describes the preacher as that public speaker who “proclaims” the theology of the text in the modern context. The Bible has the official theology (knowledge of God) and it is that theology that has saving power. Karl Barth reclaimed this understanding for the twentieth century, but its history goes back to the establishment of an authoritative canon.

Barth’s informal lectures on preaching have recently been republished\(^1\) in English from notes of seminars given in 1932 and 1933. Reading these pages, we are reminded once again of the gigantic influence of this man, who claimed that his journey into theology was only that of a poor preacher searching for the meaning of the text. For him the basic task of the preacher is to proclaim the reconciliation of humanity with God in Christ—which Barth finds in every text. In practice he relies on Reformed theology as his hermeneutical key.

Although certainly neither a literalist nor an inerrantist, Barth nevertheless espoused a biblical positivism that made his method difficult for many North American preachers. “I have not to say something, but merely repeat something... Our task is simply to follow the distinctive movement of thought in the text, to stay with this, and not with a plan that arises out of it.”\(^2\) This is a severe discipline, with no particular concern for being engaging, relevant, or popular.

James A. Sanders also finds a unitive theology in the Bible taken as a whole, out of which the preacher can work.\(^3\) Given is “the freedom of the God of grace.” The Word sometimes comes out of God’s freedom, and the preaching then is “prophetic.” This should be the preaching norm in most of our comfortable middle-class churches. But sometimes the Word comes out of God’s grace, and the preaching then is “constitutive.” This is the norm for preaching to the poor and oppressed.

The task of the preacher is to decide how God’s nature is appropriate for this time and context, through a prophetic or a constitutive Word. There is resonance here with Karl Barth, who declared that the judgment of God is at the same time the mercy of God; and the mercy of God is the judgment of God. We preachers are latter-day prophets who are judged true or false not by our orthodoxy.
but by the appropriateness of our focus on God's action for a particular human situation.

So in Sanders there is also this faithfulness to the theology of the text.

_biblical preaching in context means re-presenting today the message of a biblical passage for the contemporary context, scoring as closely as possible for the modern hearer the point or points scored originally by the biblical authors and thinkers in their time._

... with, of course, the appropriate prophetic or constitutive spin.

David Buttrick is one who draws from several theological sources, modern linguistics, philosophy, and phenomenology. But for Buttrick preaching is primarily "mediation" of the theology in the text. Following 1 Cor. 1:10-30, he defines our authority as preachers and as the Church as the "foolishness of Christ crucified." Preaching places the Church under that authority, "Preaching remembers Jesus Christ crucified in the midst of a being-saved community;..." Preaching mediates between that cruciform authority and the present church community within their context.

So far Buttrick sounds like Barth. But unlike Barth, Buttrick cares about the communication of the Word, the technical details of mediation. The continuation of the sentence quoted above is "... thus preaching is the articulation of Christian faith-consciousness." Buttrick wants more than mere rational assent; he wants to penetrate and change the group consciousness. He is therefore concerned with method, with symbol, image, and story. He wants us to open the way for "fields of understanding produced by symbols of revelation." Thus, when it comes to the use of the text, structures of consciousness already in the text can be used to mediate the text to the present congregation. At the very least, there is a structure in the text of "the consciousness of being-saved-in-the-world." This is evidently an enduring structure of Christian consciousness always available for sermon mediation. Buttrick speaks of a "double consciousness." "A consciousness of being saved that views the world, and a human worldly consciousness startled by being-saved." So the preacher has the role of mediator between those states of consciousness. But in interpreting the text, preachers "should not expect to be led to
propositional truth but rather to bewonderment, gratitude, and faith.”

Buttrick here begins to break out of this traditional category.

On balance, all three of these homileticians look for and assume a consistent theology in the text, which for them is very close to traditional Reformed theology. That classic Protestant theology is their hermeneutical key. When we preach we are applying the way the text speaks of God (theology) to the modern congregation’s context and the way it relates to that context.

Preach out of Spiritual Experience

Another group of homiletic writings take an almost opposite understanding of what we are doing when we preach. When we preach, we are speaking out of the authority of the congregation’s experience of God. The preacher quite literally steps out of the congregation into the pulpit.

An almost classic statement of this comes from Thomas G. Long. His The Witness of Preaching, used widely now as a basic text, begins with this observation:

Regardless of where worship leaders emerge physically and architecturally, theologically they come from within the community of faith and not to it from the outside.

Nearly 200 years before, Friedrich Schleiermacher described the sermon as “representative communication.” The presence of Christ through the Spirit in the congregation is the source of the preacher’s authority.

In Long’s second chapter, he asks the very question we are working on: What does it mean to preach? He answers the question with four alternative images of the preacher. We have just discussed what he calls the “Herald”; there are also the “Pastor” and the “Storyteller.” But the one he favors is the “Witness.”

The preacher has the authority of one who has “seen and heard,” but the preacher is not wiser or more experienced in the Spirit than others in the congregation. “The preacher is the one whom the congregation sends on their behalf, week after week, to the scripture.” The preacher goes to scripture not to find facts about God “but to encounter a Presence . . . it is not the preacher who goes to the
scripture; it is the congregation that goes to the scripture by means of the preacher.”

The location of this preacher/witness is critical—the preacher is in the midst of and out of a particular faith community and their experience of their mission in their context. The starting point is not the text but the congregation’s experience of God. The text is also taken seriously, but it too reflects the spiritual experience of the original audience and resonates with their experience.

Thomas H. Troeger in his latest book, The Parable of Ten Preachers, stresses the need of preachers to find their own “voice.” The various voices in a homiletics class emerge from the different backgrounds, the different congregations and their spiritual experiences, out of which the preacher steps into the pulpit. The students represent the pluralism of current classes in homiletics. Troeger accurately depicts the great variety of voices now seeking the pulpit.

In the last chapter, Jason, Troeger’s characterization of the more conventional rural preacher, puts in writing how valuable the witnesses of his classmates were to him.

I do not pray that they preach as I would but that they may faithfully speak the vision which the Spirit gives them, a vision that I finally have enough grace to realize will probably be far different and far greater than the imaginings of my heart.

Schleiermacher would have added that it would be the Spirit herself that brought unity into their diversity. And he would also stress that given the limited vision of each voice, the preacher is responsible for relating his/her voice in the sermon to the whole of Christian theology.

The Spirit as the source and guide in preaching is important for Troeger.

*The Spirit gets through one way or another* [here he describes common events infused with the Spirit]. . . *The Spirit, implacable and unpredictable, descends, and that is why I must preach: not because my words are the only way to redemption, but because I cannot contain myself for the excitement of telling all the different ways God comes.*
And like Schleiermacher, Troeger believes that aesthetics is an important path by which the Spirit reaches us.

Frederick Buechner has challenged all preachers in this century with his storytelling ability and his magical way with words. Is he a novelist who sometimes preaches or a preacher who has wandered off into writing novels? Just as Schleiermacher put his theology into a mini-novel, *Christmas Eve*, so Buechner sees the theological issues as part and parcel of the human condition.

In *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*, Buechner draws a comic/tragic figure of Henry Ward Beecher, initiating the famous Beecher Lectures at Yale, and bringing to that all of his humanness, including not only his eloquence but also his procrastination, his alleged womanizing, even his cutting his chin shaving that morning. The noisy preacher must begin with silence, with the quiet acknowledgment of his/her humanity.

And that humanity emerges in the tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale forms by which human beings have forever given expression to their deepest experience. Here is his summary at the end:

> Let the preacher tell the truth... the tragic truth of the Gospel, which is that the world where God is absent is a dark and echoing emptiness; and the comic truth of the Gospel, which is that it is into the depth of his absence that God makes himself present in such unlikely ways and to such unlikely people that old Sarah and Abraham... and you and I laugh until the tears roll down our cheeks. And finally... as the tale too good not to be true because to dismiss it as untrue is to dismiss along with it that catch of the breath, that beat and lifting of the heart near to or even accompanied by tears, which I believe is the deepest intuition of truth that we have.11

The preacher speaks out of “the deepest intuition of truth that we have,” out of the spiritual experience of the congregation, the tragedy, comedy, and hope that is the expression of all human life. The gospel is that God, as known in Christ, is there in the reality of everyday life. The preacher has only to point to the places where God emerges in human experience, using tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale.

Preaching under this theological orientation is often very moving, just because it touches us where we are. Such preachers do not shrink from the use of art, and not just the art of speaking but the arts in all
their forms. Those preachers share with Tillich the insight that the gospel is the answer to the questions raised in culture, in human experience. God is known largely as Spirit let loose in the world and is not narrowly confined to a text.\textsuperscript{18}

**Preach for the Either/Or Decision**

Mention of the sermon vehicle of "story" provides a transition into another theological framework for preaching. Fred B. Craddock is the most influential homiletician of this generation. His *As One without Authority* broke upon the scene with disturbing resonance, as if we had been waiting for it but could not quite embrace it. He challenged the deductive sermon with the inductive. He was bold enough to push us to the theological implications. Deductive is "authoritarian" and "condescending." Inductive is "participatory" and "enabling" and has respect for the hearer, particularly for the need of the hearer to make his/her own ultimate decisions.

> Those who walk away from the word of God do so because they "will not," but they excuse themselves saying "I can not." The preacher is moved by this "I can not" and so begins to remove all obstacles in order to usher in faith: art, drama, and parable are fully explained, applications are complete, and exhortations are exhaustive. The poor listener, denied any room to say No is thereby denied the room to say Yes.\textsuperscript{19}

Although in that book he attributes some of his inspiration for the inductive method to the study of parables by such as Ernst Fuchs, Amos Wilder, and Robert Funk,\textsuperscript{20} he also makes direct reference to existentialism in his discussion of arguments against inductive method. But it is in his second book, *Overhearing the Gospel*, that Craddock openly acknowledges his debt to Søren Kierkegaard. Here he confesses that it is from Kierkegaard that he learned to distinguish the direct from the indirect method of communication and the times when each is appropriate.\textsuperscript{22} There is a time and place for the transfer of information directly. But when we are up to our necks in information, what is lacking and desperately needed is the will to decide, to begin to act on the information. Craddock quotes a Kierkegaard scholar's summary:
The ideal requirement of Christian speech consists of this: it must not only talk about the listener's situation between the twin possibilities of offense and faith, but must place him in that situation—and in order to do this it must first create that situation.  

Creating that situation of either/or for the listener is the task of preaching, and the method is inductive. 

Narrative or story preaching as it developed in the 1970s was more ostensibly influenced by biblical literary criticism (the study of parables) and by secular literary critics and analysis. Only Craddock openly acknowledges a theological debt to Søren Kierkegaard. But I believe most story preachers share this theological point of view, that of setting up for decision. This is not the simplistic evangelical decision. It is the existentialist "leap of faith." Kierkegaard's fingerprints are here in skepticism of theological "systems"; in indirect communication to encourage the "leap of faith"; in the focus on the individual and his/her decision, not on a community consciousness. 

The same theology is implicit in another practitioner of the narrative style of preaching, Eugene L. Lowry. Two ingredients are needed for every sermon: a homiletical bind and a narrative plot. The bind consists of a real problem, like the choice between two or several goods, the possible resolution of which unfolds in the sermon narrative plot. 

Lowry offers two plot types for sermons: a movie plot (starts with a bind and moves to an unknown resolution) and a television series (begins with a bind but week after week moves to a known resolution). The latter is most like a sermon, since the congregation already knows the gospel. Yet the gospel in the sermon will always be a radical reversal of human expectations. So even though the resolution is expected, it will come as a surprise that time and again positions the hearer in the place that calls for radical decision. 

In *Doing Time in the Pulpit* Lowry focuses on narrative preaching through an analysis of time. Time is both outward and inward, a distinction Kierkegaard would recognize. In a congregation there are as many inner clocks as there are people (Kierkegaard's individualism). But time can also be kairotic (revealing), which is usually occasioned by story, either on the stage, from the pulpit, or out of the Bible. The sermon, then, is "to prompt such intersection of God's time (kairos) with our outer and inner times (chronos) that the kairotic event happens."
kairos, of course, is prompted primarily through the narrative plot. Kairos time is the time for decision, and the preacher is the prompter.

Narrative preaching has been influenced by the biblical narrative critics Wilder, Funk, and Crossan. It inherited the Biblical Theology movement of the 1950s, with its "drama of the Bible." Curiously, the "narrative theology" of the 1970s seems not to have been an influence. Narrative preaching focuses on the "transformative texts" like parables, consistently presenting the confrontive God of either/or. We meet God in the narrative when confronted surprisingly by a crucial choice.

Preach the Struggle for Social Justice

Sociological biblical analysis returned to the church on the wings of liberation theology. Here is God as the God of social justice, working through social dynamics. First in Latin America, theologians found Marxist categories helpful in defending the poor. The most important principle in their work was "hermeneutical suspicion," namely, that even theologians always think in terms that unconsciously protect their own self-interest.

Justo and Catherine Gonzalez were the first to write specifically about preaching out of this point of view in their Liberation Preaching (1980). They relied heavily on theologians such as Gutierrez, Cone, Bonino, Reuther, Russell, and Segundo.

The Bible is written from the perspective of the powerless; it expresses a "preferential option for the poor." "God seems to choose those who have been made to feel like outcasts, those who are powerless and marginal, and then gives them a new sense of self-worth." So the text must be heard and preached "from below," from the perspective of the oppressed. We must not listen to the text by ourselves (the Lone Ranger), but in preaching we must be aware of the powerless who are present and the powerless who are not present (in our middle-class congregations). It may prove a very costly role to preach to a congregation made up mostly of those who have been co-opted by the oppressors and who are not aware of how they themselves are oppressed. Preachers must always be aware and take into account the social "context" of the sermon. Preaching must "raise the consciousness" of the congregation so that they in turn can effect the God-inspired social revolutions.
The theology of this style of preaching is that of God's guarantee of the instability of the unjust order and the social relevance of the Kingdom (to use Jesus' social metaphor).

The goal toward which we move is the fulfillment of the promises of the Kingdom. As citizens of that Kingdom we must renounce service to the present order. . . Since in Christ the Kingdom has come, we can now live out of that new order.2

God is the guarantor of justice in human relations and is to be found in the courage and rebellion of the oppressed.

It is notable that the Gonzalezes, whenever they have written on this subject, have also stressed the role of liturgy and especially of the Eucharist. This is quite consistent with the social perspective they use to understand God and God's actions.29

While he was not specifically writing about preaching, Robert McAfee Brown in *Theology in a New Key* described preaching in the "base communities" in Central America.30 He declares that the major message of the Bible is "To know God is to do justice" (Jer. 22:13-16). Therefore, if we want to know God we go to the oppressed and listen to them. Preaching becomes a task of drawing out from the congregation what they already know about interpreting the text "from below." The preacher's role is to enable them to articulate that. Brown offers a model sermon from an actual base community,31 radically different from all other sermon types.

What conception of God lies behind such a homiletic? Franklin J. Woo, writing from China about N. K. Gottwald's hermeneutic in *The Tribes of Israel*, uses an insightful phrase: this sociological approach is "unabashedly incarnational."32 Woo goes on to ask:

What is religion in this setting? A possible answer is that it is survival. It is the human struggle for life itself—its meaning, purposes and destiny even among tremendous and impossible odds.33

God is an active agent in the historical, sociological process. Preaching has the responsibility of clarifying the role of social realities in theological formation. "Theological representations" (ideas of God) are deeply involved in the power struggles going on in society.
Preaching must not use “God” naively but be ever aware of the social context, in both text and congregation.

Walter Brueggemann declares that “the preacher in the act of interpretation and proclamation of the text is engaged in world making.” In preaching we contrast the injustices of this present world with a life-world that is “credible” but presents a more just option in which the congregation can live. The sermon will be either “transformative” or “stabilizing,” “in the service of discontinuity or in the service of equilibrium,” as suggested by the context. (Note a kind of similarity to Sanders’s prophetic and constitutive.) He develops these into four possible sermon strategies.

Christine M. Smith in *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance* has applied this perspective to addressing the dehumanizing isms of our day: “handicappism, ageism, sexism, heterosexism, racism, and classism.” Through years of struggling with these isms and the shock of exposure on a trip to Guatemala, she has come to label these interlocking isms as “radical evil.” Such evils can be exercised in preaching only by weeping (sharing our own experience of the evil), confession (admitting our collusion with evil systems), and resistance (the theology and praxis of intentionally undermining the evil). She summarizes the theology of this kind of preaching:

*Preaching is an act of public theological naming. It is an act of disclosing and articulating the truths about our present human existence. It is an act of bringing new reality into existence, an act of creation. It is also an act of redeeming and transforming reality, an act of shattering illusions, and cracking open limited perspectives. It is nothing less than the interpretation of our present world and an invitation to build a profoundly different new world.*

Although Smith uses texts responsibly, it is notable that this definition has no reference to the use of the Bible. God is more likely to be discovered in the experience of the insulted and injured of our society and in the call for justice.
Postscript

A final word: these four categories are not mutually exclusive. Most of us would like to preach in all these ways, and we do. But is there theological warrant for doing so? We live in a period when there are no great systematic theologies; theologies of preaching reflect this pluralism. But the question still haunts us and forces us to reflect on our practice: What do we think we are doing when we preach?

Notes

2. Ibid., 49.
4. Barth repeats this many times, in various versions. His discussion of Romans 9–11 in the Romansbrief is one version. Also in various places in Church Dogmatics, i.e. "(The election of the Church) reveals that even God's judgment is sustained and surrounded by God's mercy, even His severity by His kindness, even His wrath by His love." Volume II, Part 2, Par. 34,2, The Judgment and Mercy of God, G. W. Bromley, T. F. Torrance, eds. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 211.
5. Sanders, 5.
8. Ibid., 276–277.
9. Ibid., 279.
11. It is important to be precise about Schleiermacher's meaning here. He is not using psychological or ideological categories. "Religious self-consciousness (Schleiermacher's phrase) is the becoming aware of the divine Spirit in human life; it is the manifestation of the divine will and divine Spirit in the process of the Spirit's growing dominion over the flesh." Martin Redeker, Schleiermacher: Life and Thought, trans. John Wallhausser (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).
12. Long, 44.
13. Ibid., 45.


18. Another form of this style is traditional African American preaching, where sermons must lead back to the spiritual experience of the congregation. This has had in turn a profound influence on Pentecostalism. See Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).


20. Ibid., 52.

21. Ibid., 69.


27. Ibid., 17.

28. Ibid., 112-113.


31. Ibid., 98-100.


33. Ibid., 184.


36. Ibid., 2.
When the Pain Outweighs the Promise: Some Reflections on the “Problem” of Clergy Morale

Though there are many considerations which must go into each person’s decision to prepare for the ordained ministry, one seems preeminent: an abiding, inescapable sense of a call, or even summons, from God. When faithful practice of ministry begins to prove difficult, as inevitably it will, a vital sense of personal call may be all that will sustain and strengthen those struggling in seemingly impossible circumstances. As a single consideration seems central to understanding what keeps people in ordained ministry, there also seems to be one overarching consideration leading people to leave it: the loss of enthusiasm resulting from frustrated expectations. “It wasn’t at all what I expected or what I was lead to believe it would be like.” This essay offers some thoughts on the role of disappointment in undermining staying power in the ordained ministry. It begins with the story of one young minister who chose an especially cruel manner of dealing with this travail, and it concludes by suggesting that loss of morale in the ministry is a function of misplaced faithfulness.

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The "Case" of Joe

We came eager for the retreat to begin, feeling the depletion which overcrowded schedules make inevitable. We were looking forward to time away in the company of kindred souls who know what it is like to become so involved caring for others that nurturing one's own personhood and spirituality falls far down on the priority list. The sponsors of the retreat were experienced in bringing together just the right combination of pastoral care and counseling professionals, and we knew we would be well cared for as we nurtured one another. Most of us had attended other groups, and we knew that in this one, too, we would form friendships of lasting significance. And so, around the coffee pots and the doughnuts, coffee cakes, fruit danishes, cookies, and a small bowl of apples (their providers happily overlooking our frown-inducing penchant for counting calories, parsing fat content, rightly dividing good and bad cholesterol, and inserting the attainment of litheness into the process of going on to perfection), the conversation was lively, the munching undiscriminating, and the enthusiasm contagious. Or so we wanted to believe. But we could not help noticing that one new participant seemed especially reticent during the time of fellowship.

When we gathered as a group, we introduced ourselves briefly, shared what spiritual issues we hoped to work on during the week, and expressed what we wanted to receive from the leader. By the end of the sharing, it was clear that the participant we had noticed earlier, whom I will call "Joe," had come for more than renewal. His hesitancy appeared more like a mask for deeper feelings of sadness mixed with anger, and he struggled unsuccessfully to present himself coherently. Over the next few hours, Joe gave the rest of us his caring attention, listening intently and commenting perceptively and appropriately when we expressed our own personal concerns. But he did not claim the group's time to share his own distress. When he finally did begin to speak of his pain, his speech became labored, tears welled in his eyes, and he seemed to be able to tell his story only in piecemeal fashion. It was frustrating to know how deeply Joe was hurting and how much he hoped to receive in the group but to be so in the dark about where to begin to help—especially when the rest of us were experiencing one gift of grace after another from each other and from the retreat leader.

Haltingly, Joe eventually did manage to give us a reasonably clear picture of himself. Born and raised in a "good" Christian family whose members worshipped together in a church somewhat more...
conservative than any of our own, Joe seemed headed for the ministry from an early age. His precocious interest in reading and studying the Bible, his perfect-attendance record in church all the way through high school, his obedience to his elders, and his respectful behavior toward his peers all seemed to confirm that he was indeed suited for “the things of the Lord.” Members of his church commented frequently to his parents about Joe’s quiet but conscientious “spiritual ways.” Following graduation from a small denominational college, Joe married his high school sweetheart and together they enrolled in seminary, she to prepare for a career in Christian education and he to study for pastoral ministry. It was not too long before several seminary faculty members strongly encouraged Joe to pursue further study in Bible following graduation. He was admitted to and subsequently graduated from the Ph.D program of a prestigious, nondenominational university.

And then Joe’s troubles began in earnest. Returning to his undergraduate institution to teach scripture, he began to arouse negative reactions from pre-theological students for what they perceived as suspiciously deviant views of biblical truth. When his first published article appeared in a “liberal” theological journal, several of his faculty colleagues began to withdraw from him. Joe countered his wife’s own “alarmed” reactions with devout protestations of his theological orthodoxy. Clearly, Joe was unaware of how far his theology had diverged from the community of faith of which he continued to feel himself a part. And because of that, it came as a devastating surprise to him not to receive a renewal of his teaching contract at the college. An eight-month search finally led to a pastoral appointment, requiring Joe and his family to uproot to a part of the country completely unfamiliar to them. His wife could not find a church-related job in the new area. Over the next five years, two more churches terminated Joe as their pastor, praising him for his dedication and long working days but making clear that they regarded the content of his preaching and teaching too liberal for their people. Unable to find either a pastoral or a teaching appointment, Joe was now working in the bookstore of another religious denomination. His wife complained that he “is not the man I married and the man I planned to spend the rest of my life with.”

When Joe finally found it possible to express his lament in our group, he put it this way: “I’ve always done what was expected of me, and I can’t understand why people just couldn’t see that.” “What more
could I have done to show my love for the Lord than I did do?" "I've let down everybody who matters to me, including myself, and there's just nothing left." Over the course of our week together, several members of our group spent time with Joe, each contributing in different ways to helping him recover a sense of having a meaningful future within which he can discern God's call anew. My own conversations with Joe focused on widening his perception of the horizons of teaching ministry beyond that of his own theologically rigid denomination. At the end of the time together, he expressed to all of us his appreciation for our ministering to him. He acknowledged and owned that he had something to offer us and that it strengthened him to realize that he did. His parting comment to me was, "You know, it might just be a plus and not a minus in the interviews I'll be having that my peers found me too liberal for them!" Handshakes and hugs all around ended our retreat. We left personally enriched, and especially hopeful about Joe.

Five weeks later, our retreat leader contacted each of us with the news that Joe had been found at the bottom of a deep ravine, crushed inside his car. The lack of skid marks on the road above suggested to the police that Joe had made no attempt to avoid going over the side. His widow was devastated, unable to cope with her feelings of loss, anger, betrayal, and guilt. His parents were inconsolable.

Reactions and Reflections

Each of us in ministry has her or his own account to share of that moment when the sense of failure in fulfilling one's calling was the most devastating. Hearing that Joe had taken his life was that moment for me. His was the first suicide that I was called to deal with in my own ministry, and little of my theological training, counseling practice, and study proved immediately helpful at alleviating the first feelings which swept over me. As it turned out, I was not alone in my reactions. Several in our group grappled with feelings similar to mine over the next few weeks. Only honest sharing among ourselves brought healing to our communal sense of having failed Joe, ourselves, and all who trusted in us to be effective caregivers. I cannot speak for other group members, but I can reflect on why Joe's suicide was so overwhelming to me at the time.

My first reflections centered on my feelings of having failed Joe and on the thought that it was my failure which might have cost him
his life. The collage of ensuing thoughts is not an unfamiliar one. I did not do enough to get Joe out of his depression. I did not see to it that he got help back home after he promised to do so. Maybe I just missed how depressed Joe was in the first place. How could he have done this to his family? How could he have done this to us? And I call myself a counselor! And so on and so on. “If only I had...” Other members of our group shared these thoughts and more besides. Sorting them out in the company of caring friends and colleagues helped us work through our reactions and self-doubts. Though all of us felt that there may have been things that we had left undone and other things that we might have done in our time with Joe, we nevertheless concluded both that we had ministered well to him and that we had allowed ourselves to be ministered to by him. We agreed to keep Joe and his family in our thoughts and prayers as we also allowed ourselves to let guilt and self-recrimination give way to appropriate grief.

Further reflection, however, makes plain that neither I nor our group had really gotten to the heart of our difficulties with Joe’s death and our questions about our own ministry to him. True, we had demonstrated care for Joe in many ways during our encounters with him. And following his death, we had engaged in more than a proper amount of conscientious and fitting reflection on our work with him. What we did not deal with adequately, however, both during and after our time with him, were the ways in which Joe himself had brought about the failure of his own ministry. In particular, I concentrated my conversations with Joe almost exclusively on helping him sort out options for his future. In doing so, I did not give him enough encouragement to come to terms with the blatantly evident ways his theological development could only serve to make more difficult his remaining loyal to his denominational tradition. I did not challenge sufficiently the naivety he had artfully cultivated as a way of remaining oblivious to his mounting dilemma. And I did not invite him to reexamine some of the decisions he made which only served to provoke people to reject his contributions out of hand. (For instance, building an Old Testament course around the documentary hypothesis and arguing that the “hypothesis” had been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt is not a salutary way to reach those churched in his own fundamentalist denomination.)

What might have led our group to avoid dealing with the self-defeating behaviors which were at the heart of Joe’s disappointment and despair? In my own case, I believe it had to do
with an unwillingness to contemplate the possibility that my expectations for my own ministry might come to naught, just as Joe’s had. I did not want to deal straight on with Joe’s distressing career in ministry because I feared that the roots of Joe’s problems may be finding sustenance in my own psyche as well. Simply put, it was easier to reflect on what else I could have done for Joe than to enter more fully into the patterns of feeling, deliberating, and acting which led Joe, and which sooner or later lead most of us, close to the brink of soul-destroying rage and hopelessness in the practice of ministry. One widely prevalent way of fending off the seriousness of the problem is to label it a problem of “morale” in the ministry and to frame the problem in terms of the difficulties external circumstances create for fulfilling our expectations of ourselves as ministers. With this observation, I want to consider more deeply the issues with which this essay is primarily concerned.

The Hermeneutics of Disappointment, or How Ministry Becomes a Curse Rather Than a Blessing

Early on, Joe created a life plan for himself replete with vivid images of the happy consequences which would follow from his faithfully executing what the plan called him to do and to be. Family and church members endorsed Joe’s plan. Diligently carrying out his marching orders, Joe cultivated the form of piety approved by those who expressed their confidence in and admiration of him: studying to show himself approved by God and sacrificing self-serving interests to make himself available to God and the church. In return, Joe expected to receive all the blessings which the faithful bestow on those who defend the form of religion and protect people from its substance.

Unfortunately for Joe, a little learning went a long way to undermine his acceptability among even his most ardent supporters. Unaware of the effect his years of careful study had on his theology, Joe looked forward unrealistically to the reception he would receive upon coming “home.” Both as a teacher and a pastor he was utterly vulnerable to the vicissitudes of shifting loyalties and allegiances which are the warp and woof of most religious leaders’ lives. When students, colleagues, and parishioners rejected his best efforts on their behalf, Joe, an employee of the church rather than a servant of the Word, became a homeless soul, wandering in astonishment and
dismay among the wreckage of his calling and his life. What finally destroyed him was uncontainable disappointment over frustrated expectations and a premature judgment that the church he loved had betrayed him. Rather than reconsider what he had come to expect as a fitting reward for loyal service in the ministry and rather than seek a fresh discernment of God’s will for his life, Joe permitted others’ rejection to ravage his soul without succor and vented his rage by hurling all that God had given him into his Creator’s anguished face.

Joe’s death leaves as an unnerving legacy a question that can be put as follows: What if things do not turn out as we expect them to in our own ministry? Over the thirty years I have been privileged to teach students preparing for the ordained ministry, I have encountered only a small handful who were not sincerely motivated by infectious idealism and a confidence that the God who has guided them like Moses and the Israelites across their own Mount Nebo now stands ready to lead them into a land filled with people eager to welcome them. To be sure, some felt from time to time more secure gazing across the land than they did venturing down the mountain. Others acknowledged doubts that they were up to the jobs ahead. And still others, accepting the greetings of proud family members on the afternoon of their graduation, whispered in my ear their wonderment: “How did I get myself into this?” But all in all, my students completed their education with an abiding sense that their anticipation would outweigh their anxiety, that their successes would be more numerous than their failures, that progress would put sameness and stagnation to rout, and that nurturing fellowship would dissipate isolation. Having long since given up any realistic hope of being paid adequately for their services, they nevertheless shone with optimism that they and their families would be compensated in all kinds of offsetting ways. All in all, the trade-offs looked favorable indeed.

If there is to be any hope of prevailing against the myriad obstacles to effective pastoral ministry, it is crucial to see to it that the trade-offs do look favorable, despite all appearances to the contrary. With increasing tenacity we hold onto our high expectations, in spite of the circumstances, resistance, obstacles, and crises that contradict them. We also ignore the possibility that the incongruity between what we expect and what we receive from our ministry may be a necessary component of faithful service in God’s name. Grasping our optimism for dear life prepares us not at all to deal with the disappointments which inevitably follow upon the dashed hopes, surrendered dreams,
diminished vision, collapsing support, and family strife to which every pastor is ever vulnerable. That such disappointments follow high hopes means that when they break in upon us, they usually do so with crushing force. Then, the pain of our professional existence begins to outweigh its promise.

The longer we remain in professional ministry, the greater the possibility for accumulating painful feelings, and the more likely it is that those feelings will contribute to a less satisfying and fulfilling ministry. The painful feelings which arise in the practice of ministry are many and varied. A brief list would include: feelings of anger over others' indifference or rejection, over not being treated as we feel we deserve, over not being where we think we ought to be at a particular stage of our careers; feelings of guilt for not "performing" as we should or as others expect; feelings of shame over not being the person we want to be or believe we ought to be; and feelings of anxiety that others will see us differently than the way we want them to see us. Close to the heart of all our pain is the agony of disappointment, that things just do not work out as we expect them to in our congregations, in our denominational relationships, in our communities, in our families, in ourselves, and even in our relationship with God. Our disappointments are directly proportional to the quality and the intensity of our expectations; the more passionate our fantasies, the more considered our hopes, and the more encompassing our vision, the more vulnerable we make ourselves to the torrent of disappointments which follow when reality jests with our wishes, disdains our commitments, and undermines our strivings.

One venerable way to deal with such disappointment is to blame someone else for our difficulties: we are suffering because others have let us down or done us in. Another is to redouble our efforts at living up to the expectations we have formed for ourselves; try harder and "make it" next time. Still another is to persuade ourselves that our setbacks are only temporary: we really can do what "they" all say we can't; others will meet their commitments after all; God is on our side for the long pull; and all things come to those who remain faithful to the end. Any such approach will do, so long as it leaves us sovereign over our expectations. What we are not as ready to accept is the possibility that we might have to change some of the expectations we have so carefully nurtured. We will not let go of our expectations because this would be to give up our self-determination and to let the world "out there" get the better of us. But clinging to expectations...
which cry out for reassessment leads only to festering, grinding
disappointment which we keep at bay only by deluding ourselves,
blaming others, or both.

It is tempting to believe that most of the pains which accompany the
practice of ministry originate in the misfortunes which occur with
numbing regularity to its practitioners: an unappreciative spouse’s
emotional withdrawal or abandonment; recurrent illnesses; a child’s
acting-out in spite of having been reared in a “good, Christian home”; a
staff-parish committee’s unwillingness to pay salaries appropriate to
assigned responsibilities; an administrative board’s rejection of its
pastor’s most considered recommendations for long-range planning;
staff members’ unwillingness to work cooperatively; parishioners’
gossip about one another and about the parsonage family; the bishop’s
shuffling of pastors from one appointment to another like pieces on a
cheesboard; the “system’s” hypocrisy toward its ceilings on
professional advancement; and so on and so on. Such perfidies
“should” not exist in the kind of world and church Christians seek to
live in; and “if only” they in fact did not so exist, then ministry would
hold out an abundance of satisfactions for us unceasingly, and we
would have to confront disappointment no more. The majestic
sweetness of such reasoning, as well as its pervasiveness, is truly
awesome. Unfortunately, it is also toxic to spiritual growth.

For the fact of the matter is that most of the pains which accompany
fulfilling the call to ministry have little to do with what does and does
not happen to us; they have to do far more with our own expectations
of what should and should not, what must and must not happen, and
most of all, with our unwillingness to subject those expectations to the
kind of critical assessment we are usually prepared to bring to bear on
almost everything else we do in ministry. Far too much energy which
otherwise could be available for fruitful service to others goes into
holding onto unrealistic and self-serving expectations which are
inimical to effective ministry. Some hold on by holding themselves
increasingly accountable for meeting the impossible demands they
have placed on themselves and form a spirituality characterized by
unremitting anxiety, rigidity, hyper-conscientiousness, and boundless
self-abasement. Others bask in winsome ideas about how things will
be for them soon, when the lion lies down with the lamb; when the
fair-minded convert the covetous; when kindness overcomes
pushiness, perversity, and pejoration; and when the jungle out there
becomes a friendly neighborhood. And even more bring to a high art

WHEN THE PAIN OUTWEIGHS THE PROMISE
259
the litany of complaint and the euphony of the whine, expanding exponentially the numbers of those who can be held individually and corporately responsible for the perverse transgressions of justice which prevent the sincerely motivated from receiving what is properly due them in ministry: "it" is always someone else's fault, and the only adjustment good and faithful servants should ever have to make to the world in which bad things happen to good people is to make ready to enjoy all things anew when the offending parties are removed from the scene.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have been striving to make one fundamental point. It is that disaffection in our practice of ministry creeps into our souls insidiously not because untoward things happen to us which run counter to the support and rewards we feel we deserve but rather because we leave ourselves exposed to the infection by certain decisions we keep on making, no matter what. The fatal decision is to hold petulantly to a set of expectations whose foundation is self-interest. Some pay homage to the decision by ratcheting up their work level to better ensure that their questionable expectations nevertheless will be met (e.g. for a better salary, more benefits, a more appreciative congregation and denominational hierarchy, peace at home, upward mobility on the appointments ladder, prestigious committee and board memberships, not to mention election to the episcopacy as a resolution of mid-life crisis). Others allow themselves to fall into paranoid scenarios of how other people and uncontrollable circumstances will always get in the way of what they want and should have (e.g. recalcitrant parishioners, selfish colleagues, a white male-dominated hierarchy, affirmative action goals, an unsupportive spouse, symptomatic children, traumatic experiences in earlier life, damaging accusations, debilitating illness). Both strategies lead to the same devastating consequence: increased self-absorption with corresponding depletion of heart for the cause of Christ in the world. The so-called crisis of morale in the ministry is, in short, self-inflicted; resolution is possible only for those courageous enough to look at themselves with an eye out not for what others might do to make them feel better about themselves, their work, and their future but rather for
what God continues to ask of them in the here and now, with no
guarantee of a happy outcome in this life.

For the living of these and every interval of days, our faith
continues to offer us a sobering reminder: the expectations for
ourselves and our world which are truly relevant are those which God
our Creator is constantly composing, in which we receive from
moment to moment God's invitation to exist, not merely in the form of
standing-out but in the form of a dwelling in and with God and all that
God loves. We are created as members of one human race, for
partnership with our Creator and with all of humanity, to tend the
created order carefully as God's representatives on the earth. As part of
our destiny, we bear God's own image in creation, sharing in proper
proportion something of the power of God's own creative capabilities:
for reasoned reflection, deliberation, and planning; for deciding from
carefully considered alternatives and accepting responsibility for the
outcomes of our decisions; for joyfully participating in God's creative,
sustaining, and redemptive work in the world; for communication and
communion with God and God's creatures; and for loving service
dedicated to others' well-being. So equipped, we can rightly expect to
find our greatest satisfactions in this life through loving and serving
God in all that we do, certainly in our professional practice but also
and especially in all our relationships.

The life that God holds out to us, in contrast to the life we believe
we have the right to define for ourselves, is life given for others.
Paradoxically, in such a life we find not only self-fulfillment but also
self-renewal. The call to live is a call to serve God's kingdom and
not merely our own careers. Those who find it possible to heed the
call testify eloquently that their own sense of vocation is inseparable
from a deep and abiding yearning to discern what God is doing and to
share in it, irrespective of outcome measures. They invite our attention
to the fact that how things are and how things should go are finally
matters for God's determination and not our own. When we make our
own representations of "what it is all about" our preeminent concern,
we lay ourselves open to the frustrated visions and intolerable
disappointments which define the diminishing-morale and burnout
syndromes epidemic across current ministerial practice.

The fratricidal conflicts taking place in our churches
today—between conservatives and liberals, the evangelism-minded
and the passionate advocates of social ministry, universalists and
exclusivists, the powerful and the abused, connectionists and
localists, feminists and indifferent/hostile males, ecumenicals and sectarians, advocates of growth and advocates of faithful witnessing, to name only a few—are held rigidly in place by intransigent visions of how things must be. Deformed by the hostile spirits of their advocates, the visions become mere obsessions shouted by fanatics. The tragedy of obsession-driven blindness is that it obscures the life all of us have ready-to-hand: life in and with God. It is this life that is all we ever need. Expectations that there must be something “more” to be had than this, if only we are sufficiently hard-working or conniving, can have truly lethal consequences. Unless, perhaps, we are foolish enough to take Joe’s otherwise outrageous death as our own lifeline.
At age thirty-four, though outwardly successful in ministry, I entered therapy in crisis. Untrained in psychological terminology, I described the situation to my therapist by saying, "I am burned out and depleted." I was diagnosed with major depression, went through two years of personal therapy, was divorced and began a process of vocational evaluation and change that is about to be completed some seven years later. Since that time I have discovered through extensive reading and conversation that more and more clergy, particularly male clergy, are feeling overwhelmed by the demands of their ministries and find themselves in some type of crisis. It has been reported that 75 percent of male clergy have experienced a significant crisis due to stress in their ministry and that 37 percent have been involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with someone in the church. Public scandals involving overstressed clergy often result from sexual misconduct with parishioners, but prolonged stress among clergy is also a factor as clergy find themselves in crisis and experiencing depression, marital discord, alcoholism, drug abuse, overeating, and other addictions and mental illness. The Southern Baptist Convention reported recently that, after maternity benefits, the largest portion of the $64.2 million paid to pastors in medical claims in 1989 was for stress-related illness. Clergy stress and burnout is a concern of many denominations and judicatories. In the United Methodist Church,
many annual conferences are conducting seminars on clergy sexual misconduct, which is often related to boundaries loosened by stress. My own pain and crisis in ministry as a United Methodist male clergy person have opened doors for me to talk confidentially with clergy in my own denomination and in other denominations who are in crisis or have been. Many of these clergy find themselves “burned out” and in a state of depression. Many are also struggling with issues around their careers in ministry such as their “calling” and vocational direction. For some, this struggle has resulted in a change of careers or a complete redirection or change of emphasis in ministry.

The goals of this paper are to examine some of the underlying causes of clergy burnout, stress, and crisis and their predictability in the life cycle of the male clergy person. The possible underlying causes and their interaction to be reviewed include a narcissistic personality style, the demands of parish life, and the needs of the clergy person’s family and spouse. In response to those possible causes and factors, this paper will also review some possible structures for vocational change, redirection, and redefinition of appropriate ministry. Most often clergy and churches find themselves trying to resolve a problem, but it is important to note that prevention is much easier. The last segment of the paper will focus on some suggestions in this area.

Characteristics of Male Clergy

Male clergy can be characterized generally in a variety of ways. These include distinctively male qualities as lived out in the midst of the adult life-cycle and various psychological considerations as noted by several different authors and clinicians who have studied males in general and clergy in particular. Sam Keen states that work is one of the rites of manhood and that a male’s work is directly correlative to his sense of worth.

In the secular theology of economic man Work has replaced God as the source from whom all blessings flow. . . . As a form of secular piety Work now satisfies many of the functions once served by religion . . . . the world of work provides meaning for our lives as males.
Even books written for the business world, such as the best-seller of a few years back *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies*, understand the importance of work for most men. In this book Tom Peters and Bob Waterman list six characteristics of the male worker from a psychological perspective, the final being, "We desperately need meaning in our lives and will sacrifice a great deal to institutions that will provide meaning for us." The church as an institution represents for many male clergy the "ultimate" institution as the male clergy person (and also the female clergy person) represents God. Though many approach their work as a calling, male clergy often find the meaning of their lives inherent in the work of their ministry, be it as a pastor in a local church or in some form of specialized ministry.

Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser note that "we serve a church that honors frenzied activity and long hours. We are recognized and rewarded for our doing, not for our being." For many clergy, male and female, the place or location of one's ministry defines who they are. In the United Methodist Church, for example, many clergy define their worth with a quick look at the back of the conference journal to determine in rank order where they stand among other clergy on such issues as salary and benefits, church membership, Sunday school and worship attendance and over one hundred annually reported measurements of clergy "success." In conversations with clergy in other denominations I have found similar comparisons being made among colleagues in ministry. Another factor is the constant demands of ministry, which include visitation, pastoral counseling, administration, preaching, teaching, facilitating church growth, and crisis intervention. These can often be overwhelming. The characteristically male understanding of work sets male clergy up for the experience of burnout, stress, and crisis that is not uncommon in the profession. But the common response is often unhelpful. "Too often burnout is approached simplistically with seminars on time management, or advice on relaxing more, and the need for hobbies."

The problem is much deeper than many realize. According to Robert L. Randall, "the loss of personal and spiritual cohesion in pastors and parishes is psychologically rooted in the injuries to and weaknesses in their 'self.' " Randall finds that psychodynamic self psychology, based on the contributions of Heinz Kohut, is helpful in understanding the personality of some clergy who seem susceptible to burnout and inappropriate behaviors in response to the demands and
stresses of ministry. The intensity, persistence, and character of many unmet psychological needs shape the pattern and depth of many struggles facing male clergy persons and ultimately influence their very survival. This happens as clergy suffer injuries to self-esteem, become uncertain about themselves, fear that they are losing their grip, and then respond with varying degrees of rage and or depressive withdrawal. Such a diminished sense of self can be called narcissism. In his book *The Effective Minister: Psychological and Social Considerations*, Michael E. Cavanaugh identifies several qualities of ministers who function largely according to a narcissistic self:

- They tend to overwork because they are working 50 percent for the Lord and 75 percent for themselves, which means that they are working at least 25 percent more than is good for them.
- They focus more on how they are doing in the pastoral relationship than on how the person in the relationship is doing.
- They overreact to frustration and failure because their ego involvement is greater than their soul involvement.
- They view other people as rungs on the ladder of their personal success, placing subtle pressure on people to react in ways that will make the minister feel successful.
- They have creative and well-disguised ways of letting their virtues and successes be generally known in order to boost their status.
- They are unduly energized by compliments and inordinately demoralized when their efforts are unnoticed or unaffirmed.
- They approach each new pastoral relationship as a chance to succeed or fail rather than as an opportunity to bring peace.

Another common characteristic is grandiosity, an unrealistic view of one’s own capacities and ability to fulfill expectations. For instance, many male clergy choose to not outwardly demand for themselves but instead try to make congregations love them by trying to fulfill all of their needs. This grandiosity, that allows a clergy person to believe that he can fulfill all of a congregation’s needs, eventually works to be self-defeating as he comes up against the demands of parish ministry. The demands of the unconscious grandiose self drain off energy that is
needed for normal maturation and development. Thus, when the clergy person is unable to encourage the congregation through grandiosity to make love to him or her, their self is threatened. In addition, the male pastor who feels a divine calling and who is also struggling with issues around grandiosity may move further away from persons and close down his ability to be vulnerable and enjoy an appropriate intimacy in his personal relationships and in the parish life.

An additional danger lurks for clergy who try to fulfill grandiose ambitions by trying to please everyone in a parish and by using parishioners as self-mirroring objects. Behaving in this way, clergy sometimes feel pressured to speak for God. They must then fulfill the high expectations of the congregation, which are difficult; but they must also satisfy the high expectations of God. "If they had parents who were difficult to satisfy, they may feel that it is equally difficult to satisfy God." The very difficulty of doing the work of God may add to the pressure; many clergy hide behind that grandiose self in an effort to mask intense feelings of inadequacy. Eventually a pastor must work harder and harder to keep up with his own expectations, the expectations of God, and the trained expectations of the congregation so as to preserve the grandiose self.

Ministers are usually unaware of these patterns of self-defeating behavior, especially when they are encouraged by congregations who relate to a pastor as an idealized self-object. A minister may know intellectually of a congregation's idealization; however, the idealization is still so flattering at times that he will work even harder to gain even more idealization. This then becomes a vicious loop that is difficult for a pastor and the congregation to extricate themselves from unless it is addressed openly by both parties. Sometimes churches and pastors together participate in developing an addictive system that perpetuates itself as pastor and congregation "are obsessed with not being good enough, not doing enough, and not being able to be perfect as the system defines perfect." A pastor may even "train" a congregation to be this way through his own inappropriate grandiosity.

The male pastor may experience struggles around many of these issues in his late thirties or early forties. Daniel Levinson in The Seasons of a Man's Life reminds the reader that the late thirties mark a transition period as the culmination of early adulthood takes place. "At around forty a man can make some judgment regarding his relative success or failure in meeting the goals he set for himself in the
enterprise of Becoming One's Own Man." For many men, including male clergy, success here means that the enterprise has flourished: he has achieved the desired position on his ladder; he has been affirmed within his occupational and social world; he is becoming a senior member of that world with all the rewards and responsibilities that seniority brings. Often, according to Levinson, a man looks forward to a key event that in his mind carries the ultimate message of his affirmation by society. This key event takes on a magical quality in the man's private fantasy world.

For male clergy, who tend to be more narcissistic and grandiose than the male population as a whole, the "key event" as noted by Levinson takes on perhaps more magical qualities than for the general population. For male clergy persons the key event is often the attainment of a certain level of pastoral leadership, measured by church membership and salary in the United Methodist Church, for example, or church membership and Sunday school attendance in a Southern Baptist church. Every denomination has its appropriate measurements of what success is and male clergy persons identify for themselves through the use of these measurements the attainment of their own "Key Events." If the key event goes the right way, he will know that he has truly succeeded and is assured of a happy future. A poor outcome, on the other hand, will mean that he has failed in a profound sense, that not only his work but his person has been found wanting and without value. Since typical male clergy are more prone to grandiosity, failure is more likely because the initial expectations are often higher. With failure, the typical narcissistic male clergy person experiences a deep sense of woundedness. The minister then often withdraws through the use of various defenses and finds himself isolated from family, from his spouse, and from the few friends that he has.

The descriptive effort throughout this paper has been to show how many of the struggles of male clergy persons are based upon a conflict between age-appropriate "passages," as Gail Sheehy calls them, and the underlying narcissistic tensions face by many male clergy persons. Clergy whose self-cohesion lacks firmness and whose self-esteem is vulnerable are prone to respond with degrees of rage, depression, or inappropriate acting out when their pressing narcissistic needs are thwarted by the lack of attainment of "key events" and unempathic self-object figures such as the church and its parishioners.
The Restoration of Clergy

It has been said that life is what happens to us while we are making plans for it. In reflecting upon the story of Zacchaeus, Frederick Borsch states that “this is what so suddenly happened to Zacchaeus when salvation came to his house, and he was able to be recognized as a part of the true house of Israel.” Zacchaeus had run on ahead to see who Jesus was. Then Jesus called to him, “Hurry, come down, for I must stay at your house today.” So Zacchaeus “hurried down.”

“Today, salvation has come.” Many male clergy persons have come to learn that the unexpected moments of life are often opportunities for God’s gracefulness. The chance for the most growth in life comes frequently as a gift in the midst of crises and interruptions. The crises may take the form of divorce, congregational unrest, depression, sexual acting out, or addictive behaviors out of control. For many male clergy persons the unexpected takes place when “key events” don’t take place as planned. This can also often happen as male clergy persons do not receive the empathic response to their ministry that they so desire.

So how do restoration and grace come in these “interruptions” of life? How can vocational change of emphasis in ministry foster a restoration of the narcissistic male clergy person? For many male clergy a crisis in ministry or in their personal life is an entry point into personal therapy. William Arnold reminds us that “if we are going to be effective in our pastoral care of others, then we must be aware and caring of ourselves as well.” With the continual effort and support of the self-object therapist, improvement in the total functioning of the male clergy person takes place. Through the transformation of narcissism into a healthier narcissism which is lived out in ideals, creativity, humor, wisdom, and newfound empathy for others, improvement in the total functioning of the personality comes about. “The pastor’s . . . . disturbed self-cohesion is regained by feeling empathically understood.”

Empathy then is the means by which weak, inadequately structured, or disordered selves are psychologically restored. In many ways empathy can be experienced as the grace of God by which the self of a struggling pastor is psychologically redeemed. The experience of feeling empathically understood becomes concretized for pastors, is preserved within their selves for future use, by empathic understandings of their own and others’ narcissistic needs. The
presence of healthy, nurturing self-object figures is indispensable for the healthy maintenance of the self. Too often male clergy respond inappropriately to unhealthy self-objects and find themselves in crisis. Knowing the difference between the two and also developing an understanding of how transference and countertransference can develop in a congregation and a pastor is extremely important to the male clergy person. This understanding can be appropriately and helpfully explored in ecumenical clergy support groups unencumbered by denominational strivings and competitiveness. Perhaps the most relevant therapeutic factor of such groups is what Ervin Yalom calls “universalism,” which is the healing power of discovering that one is not alone and the ability to see oneself in others. In addition are the factors of “interpersonal learning (the gaining of insight into what one’s behavior is, how it affects others, and what the motivations for that behavior are) and group cohesiveness (the sense of belonging, acceptance and validation).”

In conditions of acceptance and understanding, group members will be more inclined to express and explore themselves and to become aware of and integrate hitherto unacceptable aspects of the self and relate more deeply to others.

Individual therapy can be helpful to the male clergy person as he seeks to redirect or redefine his ministry. If in the therapeutic process he decides to make a significant career change, career counseling may be significantly important. Richard Bolles reminds such persons that “clergy have been living in a sub-culture within our general culture, and when they want to go job-hunting out in the secular world it is crucial not only that they know the skills they have been using during their time in the parish, but that these skills and fields of knowledge be taken out of clergy jargon and expressed in language understood in the general marketplace.” Christopher Moore’s new book, Opening the Clergy Parachute, provides a short list of counseling and career development centers founded primarily to help clergy in their career development.

There is no self-resurrection in the church. No pastor by his own efforts can raise himself from the psychological and spiritual deadness that may accompany a crisis of ministry. Career Development counseling together with psychoanalytic therapy can be very helpful to clergy in crisis, whether they be male or female. However, in gender-specific ways both male and female clergy face unique problems, challenges, and opportunities in the vocations that they have chosen.
Notes

1. From a survey of male pastors by the Fuller Institute of Church Growth as reported by Dr. Arch Hart of Fuller Theological Seminary.


9. Olsen and Grosch, 300.


12. Gail Sheehy wrote a book entitled *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life.* In this book, which is based upon Levinson's book and research, she refers to the various predictable crises of adult life as "Passages."


THE CRISIS OF MALES IN MINISTRY 271
Bibliography


**Articles**


"The soul knows for certain only that it is hungry."
—Simone Weil, Waiting for God

Vulnerability is the capacity to be wounded. This is what our society teaches us to avoid at all costs. Yet Christianity insists that salvation begins by facing one's wounds, made necessary because vulnerability is the inevitable condition of being human. "Original sin" is the church's name for this primal fact: that each person is damaged merchandise, and each life begins with a deficit account.

In her book The Drama of the Gifted Child (New York: Basic, 1981), psychoanalyst Alice Miller brings insights into this situation by exploring our plight as being "prisoners of childhood." While her "resolution" is steadfastly humanistic, the brilliance of her analysis invites a theological reinterpretation, intersecting the therapeutic process for wholeness with the Christian pilgrimage for healing through vulnerability.

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The Childhood Dilemma

While self-love and love of others are often contrasted, one cannot love others with other than a devious love if one cannot love one's self as one truly is. But for many of us, if not all, the true self remains deeply hidden. Psychoanalysis rests on the insistence that cure of mental illness resides in the emotional discovery and acceptance of a person's unique childhood history, thereby freeing one from its crippling illusions.

Childhood's conflicntual experiences are repressed, hidden ominously in the memory's dark recesses. While the effects may be handily exhibited, it is difficult to recover their causal pain, which is held in forgotten memories of particularized loneliness, desertion, and fears of rejection and abandonment. This condition is true not only of the abused child. Disorders are abundant even in children who report having had caring parents, from whom they received much encouragement. They enter therapy with the firm belief that their childhood was happy, and that they were the pride of their parents. But behind their depression is discovered a gnawing feeling of emptiness, self-doubt, and meaninglessness. These deep feelings creep uninvited from the cellar of the unconscious—whenever the drug of accomplishment fails, when they are not "on top," or when they have betrayed their ideal self-image. These "workaholics" are afraid to risk doing nothing, for constant activity is their only defense against this anxiety.

Miller focuses her study on apparently "gifted persons," at least by society's standards. What consistently disturbs them is the certainty that they are at fault for their depression. When their childhood is probed, however, their environment is exposed as one in which they were controlled, manipulated, and driven to achieve. These persons often deny this painful struggle characterizing their childhood. In doing so, they bury as well an awareness of their true needs—beyond the need for achievement as a way of escaping ongoing self-criticism.

The Primal Need

Every human being has the primary need to be respected as the person one really is, at the center from which one's activity originates. When this happens, there is healthy self-esteem. But only rarely, if ever, does this happen. Instead, parents who themselves did not experience respect
as children become deprived adult-children, searching throughout their lives for what their own parents could not give them at the right time. What they crave is the presence of a person who is completely aware of them, takes them seriously, and enfolds their real self within the ongoing embrace called love. But when this deep need is unmet, unhealthy roots are set down which sabotage one's actions into exploitation.

This search for unconditional acceptance never fully succeeds, for every child is born into a wounded context. Each childhood is orchestrated by parents who themselves were irrevocably deprived by their parental context when their selves were first being formed. Thus, to a greater or lesser extent, each person is compelled to seek gratification through substitute means. Since most persons are not forced to deal seriously with this dilemma until it becomes severe in adulthood, the most available objects for their attempted gratification are their own children. Newborn children are so dependent on their parents that they must do everything possible to avoid losing them through rejection or abandonment. From the child’s first day onward, then, there is no option but to muster all one’s resources to this end, like a plant turning with the motion of the sun in order to survive.

When a person’s self-image is low, therapists almost universally discover that the person had a primary parent who, being emotionally insecure at the core, depended for his or her equilibrium upon the child’s behaving in a circumscribed way. While parents attempt to hide this insecurity behind a facade, children have an amazing ability to intuit the real situation. As a result, the parental need so defines a child’s formation that a particular role is unknowingly assigned. The child often assumes responsibility for sibling behavior as well—as a way of earning acceptance by establishing the “perfect” environment that would please the parents. Little wonder, then, that we who have been forced early to develop sensitivity to the unconscious signals of parental need are often the persons most drawn to vocations of ministry—a calling promising to satisfy those deep needs for respect, understanding, sympathy, and belonging. Thus, we tend to turn weaknesses into apparent strengths rather than having the weaknesses healed.

Repressed Feelings

The vulnerability we are describing rests in the fact that the acceptance a child needs can never be earned because of the insatiable
needs of the parent. Thus, the child represses those feelings parentally regarded as being negative and unworthy (e.g., anger, anxiety, jealousy, envy, impotence). To give in to such real emotions would render the child-parent relation unbearable. As a result, Miller observes, a child's happiest experiences are often in such arenas as nature, where one can enjoy without hurting one's parents or making them feel insecure or so reducing the parents' power that the fragile family equilibrium is endangered. The child is forced to master this art of burying feelings, for they could be safely experienced only if the child senses a guarantee of primal understanding and support.

The irony is that while the parent may spend incredible time and energy raising the child “successfully”—that is, in forming the child according to the parent's own needs—the result is a “Catch 22.” On the one hand, the child can never satisfy the parent's primal unmet need. On the other hand, in being forced to try, as the only apparent way to earn acceptance, the child is doomed to remain forever frustrated, unfulfilled, and “unworthy,” with a growing sense of guilt for the whole situation.

Whatever defense mechanisms the child develops, they are determined efforts to repress the painful original situation and the emotions belonging to it. Such accommodation to parental need births a “false self,” for the child who reveals only what is expected fuses so completely with these appearances that the real self is lost. To stay alive as a real self would have meant expressing strong feelings that risk loss of parental acceptance. So one makes a trade. Through conformity, a mask of parental need is projected onto the child, rendering that child a substitute for the parent's own early loss. Through such unhealthy bonding, growing children never achieve genuine separation from parents. Even as adults, they remain dependent upon affirmation from surrogate parents, whether colleagues, friends, or especially their own children. As introjects, they must always keep their true selves concealed. Thus, the loneliness experienced in the parental home becomes a movable famine—a defining isolation within the self wherever one goes.

**Double Vulnerability**

Because such a child is often the recipient of parental devotion, this widespread dilemma becomes hard to recognize from the outside.
Children inevitably gain the impression that their own situation is the exception, for which they are guilty. But the child that is "loved" is in actuality the parent's own alter ego, as surrogate parent. Such "love" is not what is needed, for the acceptance is always conditional, granted on the condition that the child appear as the false self. Thus, while achievement is encouraged for the affirmation that it brings to the proud parent, each achievement in fact tends to abort further the child's pilgrimage toward authentic life.

Both psychoanalysis and Christianity recognize that there is no healing until this childhood dilemma becomes so unbearable that the person is confronted by the dual faces of vulnerability. The adult must so encounter the childhood deadlock that one mourns, once and for all, an insatiability that can never be parentally met. The second face of vulnerability is a recognition that the lifelong process by which one has been attempting to earn acceptance is not only impossible; it has been a vicious circle from the beginning. The self one has been trying to get accepted is not even a real self. In fact, the love which one has earned with such self-denying effort was not meant for one's real self, and any appreciation gained has not been for one's self but for one's achievement. This is "crucifixion"—to be brought to the conclusion that one has been loved for the convenient child that one has pretended to be. The child was an appearance, carefully honed out of parental need; the real self remained imprisoned in the cellar. The price paid for such a substitution was the loss of one's childhood, for from the beginning one was required to be a "little adult."

Redemptive Vulnerability

The first stage of redemptive vulnerability, then, entails this painful confession that one survived only through the denial of feelings. A classic example are children who, facing their mother's death, are told, "You must be brave; don't cry; go to your room and play nicely." They have been "playing nicely" ever since. The informing norm from childhood on is that of appearance—what impression one is making, even to the point of tailoring the feelings one is allowed to have.

The second stage requires supportive permission to feel out the various periods of childhood as they are permitted to surface. In secular therapy, this stage often requires a transference figure with whom one feels sufficiently safe to release these difficult feelings.
This is painful, for in childhood the expression of such feelings meant risking rejection, isolation, or abandonment as the penalty for “unfit” behavior. As trust builds, however, the negative feelings that formerly threatened self-respect are permitted to flow. This mourning of profound loss is the beginning of healing, if only because one begins to feel again. Reconciliation at this stage involves one’s self as an adult meeting one’s self as a two-year-old child and crying bitterly in reunion.

In this new togetherness, anger, even rage, pours out, against the parent who never was really available. Freedom requires release of these deepest feelings whose repression over the years has taken its daily toll on one’s energy. Out pours those feelings which respectability not only did not permit to be expressed but would never even tolerate their being acknowledged. But on the far side of his anger a special kind of marveling can emerge: of how much individuality has actually survived. There is a “me” after all!

While this process does not bring the hoped-for parental homecoming, what is discovered is a new home. The home where one has never been before is a homecoming with one’s imprisoned self. Freed from dependency on how one appears to others, one can be sustained through even the worst of times by becoming faithful to one’s own true self.

A third stage brings an even broader conclusion. Not only is my childhood “game” over, but all such games must be called as no contest. For everyone, the outcome is rigged from the beginning. The ideal parent which I once so urgently needed would have been empathic, open, available, understanding, and understandable, without unintelligible contradictions. But not only was this not the case for me, but such parents have never existed—for anyone—for everyone carries with them an “unmastered past.” Original sin is “originating sin,” the unfulfilled needs of the parents being visited as scarring on the children at least to the third and fourth generation. The bottom line which one must draw with heavy tears is the awareness that the unconditional human acceptance for which one has always ached will never be. In fact, as long as the illusion remains that it might, for that long will I be tempted to seek my surrogate parent in someone else. Notorious is the phenomenon of persons marrying their parental clone.

What Miller calls grieving is really an ongoing confession so deep that one will never again aspire to use someone else as an echo, or control others so that their center is me, or establish a co-dependency.
that guarantees that I will never again be deserted, or demand full attention and admiration through jealousy. Suicide is a self-defeating willingness to throw away a false self. Conversion, in contrast, is the vulnerability of forfeiting the game by acknowledging that all the players are false selves.

Originating Sin

Our description thus far of healing through vulnerability makes common cause with much secular psychoanalytic understanding. What we have been describing as the human condition, however, is what Christianity calls “original sin.” Involved is not only the impact of parent upon child but a continuity from history’s first parents in an endless line of maiming. “Original sin” means that the race precedes the self, so that no one is born neutral into neutrality. The self always begins with a social residue, with a borrowed insignificance, as it were. Thus freedom is not an intrinsic quality but a state to be gained through healing.

Herein lies the importance of Christianity. It offers “salvation,” which means to render one healthy and whole. The basic need of the child reflects the nature of the church. The transference figure is Jesus, experienced through the body of Christ or its representative as a real family of graced acceptance. Christian community occurs where the truth can be spoken in love, where one is allowed to be afraid when threatened and angry when unfulfilled. It is where one dares to recognize one’s primal need and to express it, for real love is no longer promised as a reward for not asking. Grace is the key for such healing through vulnerability, for Christian acceptance does not require one to be “special” in any way; belonging does not bring with it the prior requirement to please anyone.

Sin

Psychoanalysis identifies the two basic unsatisfactory reactions to the human condition as “grandiosity” and “depression.” Grandiosity is the effort to gain acceptance through achievement. Depression is its inevitable correlate—resulting from any failure, for the “self” is made to rest on the fragile foundation of unending achievement. Grandiosity
is the defense against depression; depression is the defense against the profound pain of recognizing that one has forfeited one's real self. This understanding correlates well with the Christian identification of pride and sloth as the two primal expressions of sin. Pride is the grandiose attempt at self-justification through imposing one's needs on others. Sloth is self-justification through permitting one's self to become the projection of others in order to obtain vicarious identity through loss of self. Either way, acceptance attempted through achievement or conformity provides no satiable substitute for love. One can never get enough of it, as the pent-up anger over imprisonment of the real self keeps oozing out in destructive behaviors called "sins." What Calvin identified as our depraved nature turns out to be rooted in our deprived condition.

Psychoanalysis declares that the way out is through access to one's pain, so losing all illusions that, in Miller's words, I can "experience myself as shabby, petty, mean, helpless, humiliated, demanding, resentful, confused, sad and lonely." Protestant hymnology understands well this confessional crucifixion: "Just as I am, without one plea... poor, wretched, blind." A measure of wholeness is the degree to which one can mourn loss without depression, for one's self-esteem is based on the authenticity of one's feelings rather than on the possession of certain qualities. The child's need to be loved for the person she really is at any given time was always tempered, experienced as anxiety lest one's actions would fail to fulfill parental expectations.

The Christian Uniqueness

Such common cause between psychoanalysis and Christianity brings us to the crucial point where the strong contrast between the two must be identified. The secular context rests on the assumption that since each person is ultimately alone, wholeness means becoming comfortable in that aloneness. Freedom comes through so mourning the fact that the needed parental love is forever unavailable that there emerges a stoic acceptance of one's real, feeling self. Health, says Miller, means the freedom to be average, as contrasted with continuing the severe standards for one's self that one has never been able to meet. Without such self-acceptance, one is doomed to repeat the past by reversing the roles, attempting personally and corporately...
to become stronger by using the weaker—seducing and abandoning others because that is what happened to oneself; or seeking unconscious revenge on one's parents through one's own children or friends.

The common grounding between psychoanalysis and Christianity is acceptance through vulnerability, freed from the whims of acceptance by others. Merton agrees in recognizing a primal mark of Christian existence as the ability to do nothing and feel no guilt. But for the Christian, the psychoanalytic solution is flawed, for the imprisoned self, the one now called upon to accept itself, not only is in fact unacceptable to others but remains unacceptable to one's own self! That acceptance which one has craved for a lifetime, that acceptance which one now grieves as impossible to receive from one's parents, is likewise impossible to receive from one's own self. Self-acceptance can never be pure, self-constituted, or self-sustainable. It is always feeble, for it remains vulnerably derivative. Thus, in the end, the dilemma is not really acceptance of one's self as acceptable but to be accepted in spite of one's unacceptable. The issue is not "I'm OK, you're OK," but "Neither of us is OK, but somehow that is OK." This is the paradox which pushes us beyond the humanistic level into a transcendent dimension, into the realm called spiritual.

Miller insists that the craving for unconditional love is a frustrated vestige of one's aborted childhood. Mourning its impossibility removes it as a goal, freeing one to be a feeling self. But for the Christian, one's frustrated childhood is, in actuality, the human story shared by all. While psychoanalysis is useful in purging negative vulnerability, there is no substitute for unconditional love as positive vulnerability. "Just as I am, thou wilt receive, Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve." The extent of psychoanalytic acceptance is measured by the ability of the patient to pay. What is to be grieved, then, is not the unavailability of unconditional love but its parental unavailability. The Christian as spiritual director or the small covenant group as a representative body of Christ are key vehicles of transparency for the Divine-human experience so universally craved. Merton describes it as the awareness that "God loves you, is present to you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons." This is grace, that state of healing rooted in an unconditional acceptance which is forever at odds with justification by one's own doing.

Miller's verbatim from one of her patients is far more perceptive than her own humanistic solution. "The deeper the hole in my
mother’s heart was, the bigger the jewels in her crown needed to be. My poor mother needed these jewels because, at bottom, all her activity served only to suppress something in herself, perhaps a longing... It is not her fault. She tried so hard, but she had not been given the gift.” Not given the gift? This description of what the child needed and never got is captured by the word grace, that unconditional acceptance of the self as one truly is, without strings. Its healing capacity rests in the fact that grace as totally gift provides that supportive and loving context which gives the self energizing permission to leave its imprisonment. Peter likened it to an angel, coming as he was chained in a prison between two persons assigned to guarantee his good behavior. As his chains fell off, “Peter came to himself” (Acts 12:11). Grace is never achieved, demanded, acquired, or grasped. Either it is present as gift or it is forever missing—and with it, the true self. Damnation rests not so much in the lost opportunity of childhood as in the aborting of one’s childhood craving for unconditional love. Through compensation, it becomes covered over until it festers as an insatiable ache.

Thus, there is far more to mourn than the dilemma with one’s parents. One must mourn the human condition as such—grieve over the vulnerability of all human love—of each and for each person, no matter what the situation. There is even more. Not only must one mourn. One must mourn not only that unconditional acceptance is humanly unavailable but one must continue to confess one’s insatiable need for it. It is in this double vulnerability that one experiences the meaning of “God.” As Unconditional Ground of every being, healing comes in knowing that “the gift” has never really been missing, from any of us. Rather, we have been driven from the gift by false looking in deadened places. Even our efforts to hide our suffering childhood by idealizing our parents is a secret craving for grace, for each person has the need to be loved unconditionally, even if one must invent a parental fairy tale by which to survive.

Salvation is the excitement of learning to live one’s life in the context of inevitable vulnerability, through total dependence upon an Unconditional Acceptance that is forever unavailable by our efforts. That fear of abandonment which we most feared as children has already happened, and no effort can change that. But mourning this parental impossibility can open us profoundly to a vulnerability that knows no equal. Grace means living each moment of one’s life on the dole, as it were, needing nothing more than to live by gift alone.
Falling in love is an apt analogy—the joy of being unworthy! “What can she possibly see in me?” points to the experience that tempted St. Paul to ask ironically, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (Rom. 6:1).

Psychoanalysis, then, creates a trusting relationship with a therapist by which the past can be acted out without fear of rejection until one is strong enough to continue through the inner strength of self-acceptance. The Christian, however, goes deeper, identifying the psychological drama of childhood as a metaphysical parable—of the Divine-human separation and reunion. This is the stage that enables forgiveness. Grieving one’s dilemma extends it into a new understanding. “I know now that my mother was the way she was because she never received from her father the one thing which she too needed.” Here anger as catharsis moves one into the mutual sadness of forgiveness: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

And as the “I” becomes experienced as “we,” the final stage of healing is reached—that of thankfulness. Ironically, in acknowledging our woundedness we come to experience ourselves as having been blessed. Through recognizing our cravings as insatiable on the finite level comes the revelation that our ache has really been for the One who transcends this vicious circle tainting all of history. God is the name for that Unconditional Acceptance which alone is steadfast against the fears of rejection and abandonment in which finitude itself is daily marinated.

Such thankfulness for the ongoing giftness of life encouraged John Milton to speak of the “fortunate fall.” The insatiable hole near our solar plexus, which each of us has carried for a lifetime, turns out in the end to be the sacred void which Christianity calls “soul.” Soul is the self’s center point, the “holy of holies” where only God can enter without muddy shoes. “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16). To the degree that the soul becomes Spirit occupied, to that degree is the self healed to interact with others without undue expectations—for we no longer need them to fill our void. And we, in turn, are freed from the temptation to fill their voids with our own needs. Sanctification is what the church calls such healing, a growth in grace which points to that state of authentic existence in which we can “always and for everything give thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father” (Eph. 5:20).
Sinclair Lewis sums up his character's appeal on the first page of the novel:

"...as to Elmer Gantry, even more than his bulk, his thick black hair, his venturesome black eyes, you remembered that arousing baritone. ... He never said anything that was important, and he always said it sonorously. He could make 'Good morning' seem profound as Kant, welcoming as a brass band, and uplifting as a cathedral organ. It was a cello, his voice, and in the enchantment of it you did not hear... his boasting,..."  

We in the United States have learned to look up to male authority—to admire it, aspire to it (if we are male ourselves), and feel secure when protected by a strong, attractive man and his influence. We want our leaders to be men who look good and sound good, whether they say anything important or not.

When our idealization is constructive, we are able to utilize the strength of another to grow. By identifying with the powerful male we feel strong enough both to soothe ourselves and to grow in our values. We hope this positive process occurs in our relationships with fathers and heroes, teachers and ministers, and other authorities.

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When idealization fails, however, our emotional and moral development is stunted, for we look to another person for something we should be finding and nurturing in ourselves. We are unable to internalize the authority’s strength and use it for our own growth.

Remember the televangelists of recent years, men who looked good in public as they proclaimed definite, conventional beliefs about faith and family. Appearance and image were the sources of their power. Appearance and image also became their abuse of power, as followers were left with false security and the empty experience of a “narcissistic glow.” (“You are a wonderful minister for being so strong.” “No, you are a wonderful parishioner for being so devoted.”) TV clergy and audience fed off each other in ways that were idolatrous and mutually seductive.

Local congregations often have similar dynamics. A minister is more likely to rise in the church system if he is male, white, attractive, heterosexual, smooth, and confident; appears strong; and has the power to persuade and inspire. Many solid pastors are overlooked. Perhaps they seem too quiet and ordinary, too much like the rest of us. They do not have the “right stuff” to elicit the idealization of others.

When male “strength” is overidealized a church becomes superficial and political, intent on looking good and feeling good. Inspiration is the norm for sermonic fare, with preachers ignoring genuine spirituality, imagination, pastoral care, and prophetic ministry. The real men are usually absent, leaving a facade of piety and self-assurance in the pulpit.

While people in the pews may like what they see and hear, they do not really grow. How can they when there is no creative tension that would spark growth, when what they are told is limited to what they want to hear?

While my main concern involves the harm done to parishioners who are stuck in their idealizations, I am also concerned with wounds suffered by pastors. Ministers do not deserve to be put through the popularity contests that generally pass for parish life. Many get bruised badly. Others learn to accommodate at the price of becoming shallow. Some men keep their integrity and grow in pastoral competence. Too many church members, however, make matters difficult with expectations of high-profile male authority. Their ministers often feel incredible pressure and loneliness.
Dealing with the Dynamics of Idealization

The issue is not whether idealization occurs in the congregation. We could hardly imagine any vital pastorate without significant idealization. The issue is rather one of overidealization, the kind of idealizing that does not evolve into personal growth and the claiming of one’s own values and inner authority. Overidealization leaves the admirer focused on the man in the pulpit to the neglect of message and process. Spiritual growth becomes stunted.

When problems with idealization exist, it is a matter of unresolved needs on one or both sides, pastor or parishioners would suggest three areas for consideration.

**The Pastor’s Need to be Idealized.** A male minister would do well to question the extent to which he hungers for the praise of others. How much does he need to be the authority for his people, the solo artist performing in the limelight? To what extent does he enjoy the admiration of congregation and community? How upset or depleted does he become with criticism, or even lack of attention?

Note that just as these are not yes-or-no questions, overidealization is not a yes-or-no matter. A successful pastor must at least be a bit of a ham or show-off. The issue is the extent of need. When the need to be admired is too great the pastor operates out of a significant blind spot, playing largely for the applause and mirroring of his people. Objectivity and the capacity for empathy suffer.

Personal counseling can help with unresolved needs such as these. So too can a good support system consisting of family, friends, and colleagues. Specific issues such as workaholic tendencies, difficulty setting limits, control needs, and personal emptiness are best faced directly and openly, in relationships of trust and care.

The development of a personal support system in the congregation, though on a different, more limited level of sharing, is also important, as individuals and groups are used for appropriate care and consultation. The pastor is helped as thoughtful evaluation of his ministry is received. In fact, if regular, realistic assessment does not occur, something is missing. Genuine support cannot be given in the context of a narcissistic glow.

**The Parishioner’s Need to Idealize.** The other place to look regarding overidealization is the congregation and the need parishioners have to admire a male authority. Note that the pastoral goal is not to *eliminate* or *disparage* the idealizing needs of parishioners, but rather to use those needs in the service of the healthy
internalization of values and the development of personal authority. We want to help people think for themselves and experience a deepened spirituality, while staying connected with a solid, vibrant community of faith.

A team approach to ministry helps minimize the possibility of overidealization. As we embrace the concept of the priesthood of believers, we enable laity to look to themselves to provide the basic community and ministry of the church. Ordained clergy do not need to be the only ones set apart. An extensive use of small groups and a facilitative style of leadership can help in this regard.

Recent feminist literature lets us see models of authority (both human and divine) other than the traditional, male, hierarchical authority so often idealized in our culture. Sallie McFague’s Models of God comes to mind as a helpful resource. The goal is not the elimination of external authority or God’s transcendence but the expansion of our parishioners’ experience so that collaborative models of relatedness and ministry become a genuine possibility.

Then there is preaching. Preaching, perhaps unfortunately, is a setup for overidealization. At one point in every Protestant service all eyes turn to the ordained person, generally male, ascending the pulpit to preach the Word. Congregational need and attentiveness are such that if the man performs well, he will almost certainly be idealized . . . and greatly idealized by many.

We may wonder, of course, if it is desirable to take the person of the preacher out of the spotlight, given the incarnational dimensions of ministry. I would suggest, however, some shifts in attitude and practice that allow us to emphasize the person of the preacher in a different, more theologically authentic and useful way:

We can be as dialogical as possible, asking for and expecting parishioners to be involved in exploring the topic at hand. If we really value their contributions, they will believe us. Eventually they may become more reflective and conversant with us and with each other.

We can be careful not to be too smooth, confident, or sonorous. Humility is anything but smooth. A thin line often exists between publicly displayed confidence and arrogance.

We can sharpen up the internal tension of our parishioners rather than offer ready-made opinions and positions. They know what is right. The problem is that that belief is often in tension with something else they know is right. If they are to grow, they need to push ahead and struggle with their tensions rather than deny them.
We can utilize the language of paradox and metaphor, seeking to engage the whole person and stimulate ongoing reflection, struggle, and wonder. While proclamation has its place, it is limited when used as the only means of communicating.

We can be careful of illustrations that are merely inspirational or that posit self-sacrifice as the ultimate goal. While no one will disagree with such stories, we will almost certainly be too far ahead of our people to be useful. We may also put parishioners struggling with self-care (most women and many men) in a terrible bind as we inadvertently encourage them to continue denying themselves. We may shame them as well.

We can be careful of prophetic stances that are popular. The popular prophet feigns risk, which, ironically, leaves him even more highly idealized by many people.

We can speak of our doubts as well as our certainties. Our sharing may invite others to risk moving ahead in the struggles of life in their own way and time. Appropriate sharing offers our parishioners an in-depth pastoral relationship to use as they can.

I would also suggest we make use of the "disappointing moment" in various aspects of church life. As we listen to our people talk about any disappointment they feel in our leadership, they may sense the strength of an involved, caring, and (relatively) nonanxious pastor. Paradoxically, they thus encounter some very healthy qualities to idealize. We might note that God has often been in exactly such a place with believers, as seen, for example, in the difficult and tempestuous experience with Job. The struggle with disappointment, whether with God or pastor, can be a surprising but rich part of the faith journey.

Rumi, the thirteenth-century Persian mystic, said that "the real guru is one who has killed the idol you have made of him." If true of gurus, it is equally true of pastors.

The Pastor's Need to Idealize. We pastors can help with the problem of over-idealization as we deal first with our own need to be idealized and find personal support. We also help as we respond pastorally to the idealizing needs of parishioners, seeking to provide a different, more useful model and leadership style. A third possibility also suggests itself, a possibility that parallels the above dynamics.

We ministers help ourselves as we deal more deeply and directly with our own need to idealize male authorities, e.g., bishops, district superintendents, and various national leaders in and out of the church. In doing so we may gain a measure of freedom from the idolatrous tendencies of idealization and move toward greater wholeness. The
experience of freedom and mutuality in one set of relationships has the potential for being generalized to other relationships.

How do we do this?

We can look beneath the surface and remember that God’s voice comes from the most unexpected places.

We can be wary of men who enjoy power.

We can take the voices of women and minority church leaders seriously.

We can question the system and share our concerns with others, i.e., with both peers and authorities.

We can value relationships with good mentors, to include both women and men.

We can expect a higher level of pastoral care for ourselves and our families.

We can be wary of messages that are popular and inspirational.

We can deal directly with our felt inadequacies rather than looking to others to make us feel whole.

We can search for the man behind the authoritative message, and, if close at hand, provide in-depth support and concern when we find him.

We can create and nurture pockets of community that enable us to get on with our spiritual growth in our own particular time and way.

Not surprisingly, these are just the things parishioners can do as they deal with the dynamics of idealization within both congregation and society. The dominant mindset in our culture believes that the "strong" male authority has the answers, and that his answers and strength provide security for others. As minister and parishioner challenge (and subvert) this notion they prepare the foundation for more authentic pastoral relatedness.

Moving Beyond Overidealization

The problem with male authority arises when minister and congregation are distracted from the business of Christianity and become a kind of mutual admiration society, focused on the wonder of their particular relationship. When that happens clergy and laity can no longer help each other, for they are stuck in a symbiotic union that offers little potential for freedom or growth.

In contrast, the way out of overidealization involves an honest examination of self and a move to a different kind of pastoral
relationship, one based on openness, equality, and a more genuine spirituality.

Notes

2. My thoughts on idealization are based on Heinz Kohut’s Self Psychology.
3. While idealization of maternal authority is both possible and desirable, North Americans learn especially to idealize men. The cultural context is part of the problem.
If there is one thing one should know about the Book of Isaiah as we read it during Advent, it is the following: the book presents a daring vision of hope on the other side of loss and suffering. This vision can speak to the often unseen, painful side of Christmas. The standard Christmas myth that we see on TV tells us that we should be happy. We are often surrounded by images of families getting together, parties, and the Christmas marketing blitz. Yet as any pastor well knows, this winter season is a time of darkness for many. Whatever pain one is experiencing is accentuated through the contrast with others. In particular, people are often reminded at Christmas of family members and others who are not there to celebrate.

Christian Advent worship can be so exclusively positive in emphasis that it risks further isolating those whose pain is most acute in this time. Even the Isaiah texts selected for the lectionary have been pruned so that they focus exclusively on hope. The lectionary reading regarding God’s lifting up of Zion (Isa. 2:1-5) does not go on to include the judgment that will precede this process (Isa. 2:6-4:1). The reading about the royal shoot coming forth from the stump (Isa. 11:1-9) does not include God’s previous cutting down of the “tree”...
that preceded that stamp (Isa. 10:33-34). So also, the reading regarding Isaiah’s prophecy about the birth of “Immanuel” (Hebrew for “God with us”) to a young woman (Isa. 7:10-16) ends before he finishes prophesying regarding the (possibly) dreadful days that will come upon Ahaz’s house (7:17). The celebration of God’s liberation of Judah and establishment of a just king there (Isa. 9:2-7) leaves out the preceding mention of the previous subjugation of the North by the Assyrians (Isa. 9:1). Even the totally positive celebration of God’s healing of those who cannot hear, see, walk, or speak (Isa 35:1-10) sounds different if read as a sequel to God’s earlier commission of Isaiah to “make the people’s mind dim, make their ears dull, and shut their eyes tight” (Isa 6:10).

In every case, salvation in these texts is linked with suffering: the lifting up of Zion follows the removal of Judah’s false pride; the rise of the messianic shoot follows the destruction of the previous tree; the prophecy of a son named “God is with us” is accompanied by potential judgment for Ahaz; and the healing of God’s blinded and deaf people is a reversal of God’s earlier closing of their eyes and stopping up of their ears.

This is not to say that present congregations would automatically feel much better if they heard these words of judgment read along with the words of hope. Instead, what I mean to suggest is the following: that these words of Christmas hope in Isaiah might sound more real if they were read in the context of the harder words associated with them. And indeed, is it not true that pain and liberating growth are often associated just as Isaiah so often asserts? As long as things are going great, we often don’t get around to major new steps on our spiritual journey. The most we can do is the spiritual equivalent of rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Paradoxically, sometimes we must hit an iceberg to really get moving. It has been said that “We make plans according to our ideas, but we obey our pain.” With God’s help, pain—including pain not caused by any misdeed of ours—can be used as an opportunity for growth. To be sure, we don’t want to seek out or glorify pain. Nevertheless, once we have it, texts like these from Isaiah can help us find hope on the other side of suffering.

Isaiah 2:1-5

The lectionary starts where the core of Isaiah starts, with a word of hope in Isa. 2:2-4 that sets the tone for all that follows. The very
beginning of the book is a call to repentance in Isaiah 1 that is
generally recognized to serve as the introduction to the whole. Next
comes the superscription in Isa. 2:1. This verse begins the body of the
book through labeling what follows as the “word that Isaiah, son of
Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” Following immediately
on this programmatic label, the vision regarding Zion in Isa. 2:2-4
occupies a strategic position. Indeed, ancient commentators like John
Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyrus argued that Isa. 2:2-4 was a
second preface to the book, instructing us regarding what the entire
following text is about. In particular, these ancient church fathers read Isa. 2:2-4 as
introducing Isaiah's special focus on “the calling of the gentiles.” In
reading Isa. 2:2-4 this way, these interpreters were perceptively
picking up on one of the most radical components of the text. Judeans
hearing Isa. 2:2-4 would have been quite familiar with the idea of a
pilgrimage of Israelites to Jerusalem. Indeed, the lectionary psalm for
this Sunday, Psalm 122, was written to be sung on just such a
pilgrimage:

(1) I was glad when they said to me,
    “Let us go to the house of the LORD!”
(2) Our feet are standing
    within your gates, O Jerusalem.
(3) Jerusalem—built as a city
    that is bound firmly together.
(4) To it the tribes go up,
    the tribes of the LORD,
    as was decreed for Israel,
    to give thanks to the name of the LORD
(5) For there the thrones for judgment were set up,
    the thrones of the house of David. (Ps. 122:1-5)

Here in this Psalm we see many parallels to Isa. 2:2-4—the call to go
up in pilgrimage to the house of the LORD/God of Israel (Ps. 122:1; cf.
Isa. 2:3), the idea of many people being involved in the process (Ps.
122:4; cf. Isa. 2:2-3), and the ultimate idea that justice is to be found
in Jerusalem (Ps. 122:5; cf. Isa. 2:3-4). But where Psalm 122
emphasized that it was the tribes, indeed the “tribes of Israel,” who
would go to Jerusalem (Ps. 122:4), Isa. 2:2-4 now stresses that “all the
nations” and “many peoples” will be streaming in pilgrimage to
Jerusalem. Only later does the passage turn to invite the Judeans to come along (Isa. 2:5).

Not only that, but the author of this text goes all the way in proclaiming the idea of this international pilgrimage to Zion. Some Biblical texts—building on ancient pre-Israelite theology—envision Zion as the primal source of water. Streams flow out from it to water the rest of the world (Zech. 14:8; cf. Ps. 46:4; Isa. 8:6-7; Ezek. 47:1; Joel 4:18). Now, however, this text proclaims that the rest of the world will “flow” back to Zion (Isa. 2:2b). It is as if the riverbeds of the world flowing from Zion have become roads, and Zion’s waters flowing out have been replaced by God-thirsty pilgrims coming in.

The second half of this vision, Isa. 2:3b-4, focuses on the one and only reason why these nations are coming to Zion: in order to be instructed by God: “divine instruction will go out from Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” This is the sense in which Zion will be “established” at the top of the mountains as was promised at the outset of the vision (Isa. 2:2). Next, the passage goes on to describe the amazing consequences of God’s establishment of Zion. God will “settle disputes” between nations and “arbitrate” between peoples. As a result, they will then hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks (Isa. 2:4). Thus, God’s establishment of justice in a world of unjust empires will result in the nations’ destroying the weapons they once used to defend themselves. In doing so, they will be reversing an ancient call to arms. In the past people were called upon in time of war to transform their farming implements into weapons (see Joel 3:10). Now God’s final establishment of justice in Zion will lead them to a final reversal of that call, building a peaceful economy founded on God’s just arbitration between nations.

Thus, this passage envisions nothing less than God’s establishment of an actual just and peaceful world order. Neither will this order be established by military conquest nor will a world mission bring it into being. Instead, the nations will be attracted to Zion by God’s instruction and God’s establishment of justice there. The process here is much like that envisioned in the eleventh tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous: “Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion.” That means that the best advertiser for AA is how God has transformed the lives of alcoholics who have used the program. So also here: the nations will be attracted to Zion because they thirst for the divine instruction and justice to be found there. Like the miraculous change that
can come over an alcoholic with the onset of recovery, the transformation of Zion will be not just spiritual but also visible: Zion will shine as a beacon of actual, earthly divine justice in a torn, unjust world.

Now, thousands of years removed from Isaiah, it is easy to try to tone down the hope in this passage. Given the world’s ongoing injustice and warfare, one might be tempted to say that this text is not really predicting an actual social process. Instead we might say that it envisions a transcendent peace or an inner spiritual transformation. Or we might redirect the vision so that it calls us to engage energetically in trying to get the nations to come to Zion. From Constantine onward, many of our forebears tried to spread the faith through force of arms, and it is tempting even now to put too much trust in innovative marketing to spread the gospel. Nevertheless, that is not the transformation being envisioned here. God is the main subject of the verbs in this text. It is God who is attracting the nations of the world through God’s establishment of an actual, just social order in Zion. As seen in the New Testament, the nations will then stream to God “because of the many acts of saving justice you [God] have done” (Rev. 15:4). The people’s task is simply to “let [their] light shine,” to be a “city on a hill-top” (Matt. 5:14-16).

This is where we get to the difficult part. The lectionary reading ends with a call to the house of Jacob to join the nations in walking “in the light of the LORD” (Isa. 2:5; cf. Isa. 2:3a). So far so good. Nevertheless, as Sweeney has persuasively argued, this invitation is inextricably connected to the text that follows it, Isa. 2:6-4:6. This section announces that Zion is not yet ready to be “established” as promised in Isa. 2:2-4. Such restoration of Zion can occur only when its rich and powerful inhabitants have been humbled. Only when these falsely proud “tall trees” of Israel are cut down (Isa. 2:6-22) will God then be able to raise Zion up. Then the city will rise like a seedling in a clear-cut forest (Isa. 4:2-6). Then and only then will the “house of Jacob” be ready to accept God’s invitation to “come and walk in the light” toward Zion (Isa. 2:5).

The church has traditionally understood itself to be Zion/the house of Jacob in Isa. 2:2-4, but it ended this self-identification as soon as it moved into the harsh words regarding Zion’s inhabitants (Isa. 2:6-4:1). Yet at the very least, the lectionary has left the call of Isa. 2:5 in the reading for today: “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.” Read in context, this conclusion to the lectionary
reading can encourage us to look at the obstacles to God’s restoration of “Zion.” Let us examine those ways in which we are rich and proud that are similar to Judah’s ways as depicted in Isa. 2:6-4:1. Certainly our U.S. society is characterized right now by a widespread belief in the right of the rich to their wealth and the blameworthiness of the poor for their plight. This text envisions a painful divine leveling of such unequal social relationships, a divine cutting down of the wealthy “tall trees” of the world. Only then will any community be ready to be a beacon of justice for the world, to rise as a sapling in the cut forest.

On a personal level this text also can be used to interpret suffering as an opportunity for a liberating dependence on God. This approach has often helped many people salvage a shred of positive value from otherwise agonizing experiences. Rather than letting their suffering be meaningless, they have interpreted their pain as God’s purification of them from prideful self-reliance and God’s redirection of them toward the divine source of growth and action. That having been said, I must raise a major caution: such an approach can also easily become a vicious, spirit-denying process. Victims are often tempted to blame themselves for their ills, and the above reading of Isaiah could provide ammunition to do just that. All too easily, the very oppressed people who most need a sense of self-worth could be led through such a reading to blame their ills on previous false pride. More specifically, the potentially negative interpretive potential of the condemnation of women in Isa. 3:16-4:1 must be recognized. In sum, these passages following Isa. 2:1-5 are a volatile mix of spiritual insight and potentially spirit-denying polemic.

So, with the broader context in mind, we return to the lectionary passage in Isa. 2:1-5 itself: a superscription beginning the body of the Book of Isaiah (Isa. 2:1), a majestic vision of God’s attraction of the nations to Zion through giving instruction and establishing justice there (Isa. 2:2-4), and an invitation to the “house of Jacob” to join the nations in a (potentially difficult!) walk toward Zion (Isa. 2:5). If we read the text carefully, it is hard to link such an incredible vision to the realities of today. Nevertheless, the other lectionary passages for the day say that the time of this transformation is nearer than we think: “the son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour (Matt. 24:44); “the night is far gone, the day is near” (Rom. 13:12). So begins the Advent season, read through the lens of Isa. 2:1-5 and its companion passages in the lectionary.
Isaiah 11:1-10

Not only does this passage speak of a stump, but the passage itself is cut off in the lectionary! The lectionary reading begins with the following image: a “branch” comes forth from the “stump” of Jesse, and a “shoot” blossoms from Jesse’s “roots” (Isa. 11:1). Where did this “stump” come from? This question is answered by the previous passage, Isa. 10:33-34. There God has been cutting down the high trees of Lebanon. These trees are the nations of the world, including Judah. This forest cutting by God is the fulfillment of God’s prophecy of judgment on the falsely lifted-up leaders of Judah (cf. Isa. 2:6-22) and upon the falsely proud nations who will subjugate Judah (10:5-19).

Yet this judgment is not the final word. Instead, the forest felling in Isa. 10:33-34 is the prelude to a process of renewal. A burned forest may look permanently dead. A stump may appear to have no life left in it. But the prophet uses the tree imagery here to speak of hope on the other side of apparent total destruction: a branch comes forth from the seemingly dead stump, and a shoot from the cut-off roots. Elsewhere in the Bible we see a similar use of this imagery. Job speaks of the “hope” of a tree. If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and though its stump “dies in the ground,” water will make it grow again (Job 14:7-9). In addition, within Isaiah itself we have been prepared for this image. Isaiah has earlier spoken of a sapling coming forth after God lowers the falsely proud Judeans (Isa. 4:2-6). Later the text said that God told him that the tiny remnant left after God’s judgment would be like a smoking stump (Isa. 6:13). Still later, we heard that a child will be able to write down the few “trees” left in the broader international forest (Isa. 10:19). Only now, however, in Isaiah 10:33–11:10, are the stump and the sapling so closely brought together in Isaiah’s prophecy, linking apparent death with irresistible life.

Within the context of the lectionary for this Sunday, this complex of images in Isa. 10:33–11:9 provides an Old Testament word of grace to balance the word of judgment in the New Testament Gospel reading. In Matt. 3:1-11, John the Baptist proclaims that God with ax in hand is about to cut down trees. Similarly, Isa. 10:33-34 describes how God with ax in hand will cut down the trees with terrifying power. In this case, however, the Old Testament reading goes beyond its New Testament parallel to describe the hope to be found on the other side of God’s forest-cutting process.
With that in mind, let us take a closer look at exactly what kind of hope Isa. 11:1-10 has to offer. Isa. 2:2-4 said that God would send out God’s instruction from Zion and that justice and peace would be established there. Isa. 11:1-10 tells *how* this will take place. God’s “spirit” of wisdom will rest on a new king, and he will defend the rights of the poor (Isa. 11:3b-5) and initiate a new, peaceful world order (Isa. 11:6-9). Now, the audience of this text would have known each of these elements from the theology—now seen in texts such as Psalms 2, 72, and 110—Israel used to articulate God’s relation to the dynasty of David. At the same time, however, this text develops such royal theology in its own way:

1) Whereas other Israelite texts speak of the “spirit of the Lord” resting primarily on the “judges,” Isa. 11:2-3 emphasizes this theme as the central description of the king’s qualities. Moreover, it does so through a striking wordplay that can be reproduced only through stretching the translation somewhat: “the breath of the Lord will rest upon him,... and he shall breathe the fear of the Lord” (Isa. 11:3a).

2) Although other Israelite and ancient Near Eastern texts speak widely of the king’s divinely granted wisdom, Isa. 11:2-4 emphasizes the king’s wisdom to the exclusion of other powers of the king. For example, royal hymns such as Psalm 2 or 110 focus primarily on the king’s military powers. In contrast, five out of six of the king’s characteristics in Isa. 11:2-3 have to do with his wisdom. He will have a spirit of “wisdom and insight,” “planning and power,” “knowledge and fear of the Lord.” Later, the text will speak of the king striking and even killing with the “rod of his mouth and the breath of his lips” (Isa. 11:4). This king will certainly not be nonviolent, but his power transcends that of armies.

3) Isa. 11:1-9 is distinguished from other royal texts in the intensity of its focus on cosmic peace as an outgrowth of the king’s just rule. To be sure, many royal theological texts see blessing in the land as flowing forth from the king’s justice. Indeed, Psalm 72, the lectionary psalm for today, is a beautiful example of how Israel looked to the king for justice and blessing. Nevertheless, Isaiah 11:3-9 is unique in its vision of *an encompassing cosmic peace* following upon the king’s establishment of justice. This peace is centered on Mount Zion. Moreover, it is grounded in a knowledge of God analogous to the king’s unique wisdom: “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as
the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9). Such a striking emphasis on peace is unique enough that some scholars have been tempted to identify Isa. 11:6-9 or part of it as a secondary addition to Isa. 11:1-5. There is little evidence, however, to justify such an approach. Instead, it seems as if it would be better just to recognize the unique way Isa. 11:1-9 combines royal motifs with Zion-centered images of cosmic peace.

In sum, Isa. 11:1-9 draws deeply on the various streams of ancient royal theology but adapts each element to fit its particular focus on a just peace established by a wise, spirit-gifted king.

This passage enriches the Advent vision that we started with in Isa. 2:1-5. Whereas Isa. 2:1 talked of the “latter days,” Isa. 11:1-10 talks more specifically of a regeneration coming after God’s forest-cutting process. Whereas Isa. 2:4a focused on God’s “judging” and “arbitrating” between nations, Isa 11:4 speaks now of a king “judging” and “arbitrating” on behalf of the “marginalized” and “oppressed.” Finally, whereas Isa. 2:4b looked toward the nations transforming their weapons back into farming implements, Isa. 11:6-9 goes yet further. In it the entire animal kingdom will return to an original state of primeval peace (cf. Gen. 1:29-31).

There is one prominent aspect of Isa. 2:1-5 that has not yet emerged in our discussion but does come toward the end of Isa. 11:1-10: the nations. Isa. 11:10 tells us how the “root of Jesse” will stand as a risen “battle standard” for the nations, who will seek it out. Just as in the case of Isa. 2:2-4, the nations are streaming toward a beacon that God has raised up for them. Moreover, just as Isa. 2:2-4 was related to the material that followed it, so also Isa. 11:1-10 is related to what precedes it. For example, a preceding text, Isa. 5:26, had spoken of God’s setting up such a battle standard for the Assyrians to seek out when they came to destroy Judah. Now, however, God is setting up the royal “root of Jesse” as a raised battle standard to attract all nations to participate in the just and peaceful order flowing out from his rule.

So we have a remarkable vision of hope in Isa. 11:1-10. Much of the debate surrounding it has focused on identifying what the original historical context of this vision was. The royal imagery of Isa. 1:2-5 makes clear that this “shoot” is a new king coming forth from a dynastic “stump” related to David’s line. Scholars have disagreed, however, about exactly which period this passage originally described.
Could the eighth-century prophet Isaiah have been speaking of the rise of a king after the Assyrian's subjugation of Judah? Could a later, seventh-century prophet be speaking instead of the almost total destruction of David's line before the accession of a new "shoot," the young king Josiah? Or might this text actually be the words of a still later writer, looking back on the end of David's line during the exile and looking forward to the arising of a future Messiah? In the final analysis, we do not know the answers to these questions. Nevertheless, the variety of answers already shows one thing quite clearly: the flexibility of this imagery to interpret defeat and restoration in a variety of circumstances. And so it can function for us now.

More specifically, this text can refresh our vision of Jesus in an Advent time often dominated by false idolatry of family happiness and materialism. Read through the lens of Isa. 11:1-10, the baby Jesus is the shoot sprouting forth on the other side of a devastating process of divine clear-cutting. Those facing Advent with a feeling of hopelessness can identify with this and take heart. The hope on the other side of this process is clear. Not only will the coming king "breathe" the "fear of the LORD," but he wears as his closest garment solidarity with the poor and secure provision for them (Isa. 11:5). Cosmic, environmental peace will follow on his reign (11:6-9).

Now during Advent we identify this promised king with Jesus, but we must be clear on the difficulty of maintaining such an identification. Challenged by medieval Christians to engage in a debate over Judaism and Christianity in Barcelona, a wise rabbi, Nachmanides, poignantly asked what became of the older vision of the Messiah. He noted that texts like Isa. 11:1-10 predict the onset of justice and peace with the coming of the Messiah. Yet, things are not so: "From the time of Jesus to the present, the world has been filled with violence and injustice, and the Christians have shed more blood than all other peoples." So now, the question comes to us. Christ means "Messiah," and the Messiahs in our tradition means a just peace. Where is it? Nachmanides' honest reading of the tradition calls into question any downgrading of Christmas hope to fit our lowered confidence in God's power to change the world.

Texts like Isaiah can keep asking such questions. Where is this "root of Jesse"? How has he "struck the earth with the rod of his mouth"? Why do they still "hurt and destroy on God's holy mountain"? In the midst of the darkness of Advent, these questions are appropriate. On
the one hand, we proclaim that Christ is born, that the shoot has already sprung forth. On the other hand, in our broken world, it often seems as if God is still in the tree-cutting business, and we stand amidst smoldering stumps.

So, we live in the tension of Advent. Like the nations “seeking out” the root of Jesse, we still look forward to, hunger and thirst for Christ’s arrival in the future. At the same time, insofar as we are already parts of Christ’s body, we already stand at the heart of God’s justice and peace-creating process. Isa. 11:1-10 will allow for us to yearn for nothing less. It will allow us to be nothing less.

Isaiah 35:1-10

Isaiah 35 opens the second half of the Book of Isaiah with joy. This is a bridge passage. The blindness of the people in the first half of the book (Isa. 6:9-10; 29:9-10) is about to be ended (cf. Isa. 29:18; 30:20-21; 32:3). The various wastelands predicted in the first half of the book (Isa. 5:9-10; 6:11; 34:9-15), are replaced now with the image of a blooming desert. In this way, Isaiah 35 already anticipates these and other images in Isaiah 40-55: the reversal of the people’s blindness (42:7; cf. 42:18-19; 43:8-9), the watering of desert places (Isa. 43:19-20; 44:3), and the creation of a highway through the wilderness (Isa. 40:3-4) upon which the people God has redeemed can return home (Isa. 51:11). It is almost as if the author of Isaiah 35 cannot wait for the prophecies in Isaiah 40-55. Already he calls on those with “weak hands,” “feeble knees,” and a “fearful heart” to rejoice over the coming liberation of God’s people that will be announced more fully in Isaiah 40-66.

More specifically, Isaiah 35 calls on its audience to rejoice over the impending beginning of the pilgrimage toward Zion that was proclaimed in Isa. 2:2-5: the desert is blooming, the highway is being built, and the people are being equipped to walk on it. Even the animal world that will eventually be peaceful in the latter days (Isa. 11:6-9) will be prevented from bothering the returnees (Isa. 35:9). Yet there is at least one crucial element here that was not present in those passages: Isaiah 35 describes this coming redemption as a new Exodus. Israel, dispersed throughout the nations, is about to engage in an Exodus through the desert on its way back to Zion. This Exodus is different in important ways from the old one out of Egypt: the
wilderness itself will bloom, the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the
lame will leap, the speechless will sing for joy, and the highway will
be absolutely safe. No nations or wild animals will threaten the people
as they return from Zion. This is not just the same old thing, however
amazing that was. This is an Exodus "squared."

Within the Christian tradition, this passage—along with others like
it (Isa. 29:18-19; 61:1)—has been particularly crucial in describing the
marks of the onset of God’s transformation of the cosmos. In a Q
passage whose Matthean version is included in the lectionary for
today, John asks, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait
John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame
walk, those with skin conditions are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead
are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt.
11:4-5//Luke 7:22; cf. Mark 7:37). Indeed, in having Jesus refer to the
walking of the lame, this Matthean text goes beyond its Lukan
parallel. Here Matthew is probably enriching his source material so
that it now directly refers to Jesus’ fulfillment of the promise in Isa.
35:6 that the lame would leap like deer.

Within our medically advanced society it is hard to fully appreciate
how these promises would have sounded to the ancient Israelites who
originally heard them or the later Christians who reinterpreted them in
relation to Jesus. The people who wrote and heard these texts felt
more vulnerable than we do to disablement and sickness. The life
expectancy of people then was radically lower; malnutrition was
widespread; there were few of today’s helps for the physically
challenged; the list of untreatable diseases was much longer than it is
today; and the lack of knowledge of the causes of sickness meant that
the sick and disabled were often marginalized even more than they are
now. Within this context, God had to be counted upon as the primary
physician. We in the modern world often conceive of God as healing
through medical technology or as working miracles in places where
technology fails. In contrast, these ancient readers would have known
God as their primary hope in the face of many of life’s most serious
medical crises. So when Isaiah 35 proclaims the coming of a God who
will "heal" the blind, deaf, speechless and lame, this ancient audience
would have seen a very familiar face. Therefore, this is no isolated
miracle incident. This is God doing some of what God does best. It is
but one mark of God’s hand in a broader liberative process. God is
making God's broken people whole again and equipping them to walk home in a second Exodus.

Isaiah 35 is certainly not the only text suggesting a reinterpretation of Christmas along such Exodus lines. Already, the lectionary moves this direction by having the Lukan song of Mary replace the psalm for the day. In this passage Mary celebrates how God has shown strength with God's Exodus "arm," scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, lifted the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:47-55). In addition, Matthew's infancy narrative carefully correlates the story of Jesus' birth with the story of Moses before the Exodus. In Matthew 1–2 Jesus, like Moses, is threatened by a ruler who tries to kill all of the babies of his generation; in both cases the threatened infant's family returns upon the death of the ruler who sought their life; and both Jesus and Moses are portrayed as beginning a process that will end the oppression of Israel. In this way, Matthew's early story of Jesus prepares us for Matthew's ongoing portrayal of him as a second Moses—or perhaps better a "meta-Moses"—preaching his biggest sermon from a Sinai-like mountain and initiating the second Exodus predicted in texts like Isaiah 35 (Matt. 11:2-11).

Yet let us not move too quickly to replace Isaiah 35 with these texts in the New Testament that resonate with it. For the history of Christian interpretation of the Gospels makes it quite clear that we can get so focused on the "miracle" element in Jesus' ministry that we can forget how this healing is but one part of a broader process. It is an important element, to be sure. Nevertheless, Isaiah 35 draws on the incredible visionary resources of the Isaiah tradition to claim much more. God is bringing back God's broken people from slavery; God is making the desert bloom; God has built a safe highway through it; and God is equipping all—no matter how hurt—to walk on that highway toward Zion.

We are being called to think big, to be ridiculously hopeful. Looking through the lens of Isaiah 35, we can see how Christmas is the beginning of a second Exodus process, a process much bigger than the first. Indeed, the Christ event tells us that this second Exodus is to be yet bigger than the Israel-focused liberation that is envisioned in Isaiah 35. Not only Israel but now all are on their way out of Egypt; the sick are about to be healed; the poor of all nations are being liberated; and God is establishing a cosmic, environmental peace radiating outward from Zion. All those during Advent who are of
"fearful heart," who have "weak hands" and "feeble knees" (Isa. 35:3-4)—all who are broken in and by this season: be strong, "Here is your God!"

Isaiah 7:10-17

Especially when read within the context of Christmas, this text appears clear at first. The Gospel reading from Matthew narrates the discovery that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and the text goes on to say clearly that this "took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: Look, a virgin will conceive, and give birth to a son, and she will call him 'Immanuel.'" (Matt. 1:22-23).

Read in light of the Christmas story in Matthew, Isa. 7:10-17 appears to be an anticipation of Jesus' birth. This Old Testament passage seems to tell us that Jesus is this "Immanuel," this "God with us."

A closer look, however, reveals some problems with this approach. First of all, as is well known, Matthew is working with an old Greek translation of Isaiah, not the Hebrew version. According to the Hebrew, a "young woman" will conceive, give birth, and name her son "Immanuel." It was only later that a Greek translator of this Hebrew text chose to render "young woman" with a Greek word that can mean either "young woman" or "virgin." Indeed, it is quite possible that the translator already understood Isaiah to be proclaiming a virgin birth. As Rosel has pointed out, a number of Greek texts associated with Alexandria speak of a virgin birth of a remarkable baby at the outset of a golden eon. Perhaps in this context, the one who translated Isaiah into Greek understood Isaiah to be proclaiming just such a miraculous birth heralding God's salvation.

Be that as it may, we now have a striking divergence: Matthew—working with this old Greek reinterpretation of Isaiah—says that the virgin birth took place in order to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy, but the early Hebrew of that prophecy proclaims no virgin birth. Faced with this divergence of prophecy and fulfillment, some Christian translations have adapted their translation of the Hebrew text of Isaiah so that it matches Matthew's use of the Greek translation of that text. Nevertheless, that is to twist the Hebrew and ignore the problem.

This initial puzzle can serve as a warning signal telling us that we may not have read Isa. 7:10-17 closely enough. The more one examines previous studies of this passage, the more the mystery of
this passage emerges. First of all, scholars show a remarkable diversity in identifying who the woman and son are: the prophet’s wife and his son, the king’s wife and his son, or perhaps an unidentified woman present at the time of the prophecy.39

Perhaps even more fundamentally, scholars are not agreed on the basic import of the prophecy. Is it even a positive prophecy of a deliverer figure? Many would say not. And yet there are many elements in Isaiah’s prophecy in general, and in this text in particular, that suggest a potential positive core to the message in Isa. 7:10-17. Scholars have written again and again on the passage, attempting to definitively resolve the ambiguity one way or the other: promise or judgment. In particular, many have attempted to eliminate the crossovers in the passage by identifying certain positive or negative parts of it as later secondary additions to an early core. In doing so, they have made some plausible observations regarding the formation of the passage. Nevertheless, the overall discussion has pointed out a more important feature of the reading for this Sunday: this Christmas Sunday reading is fundamentally untamable. It cannot be pinned down to just one interpretation. That is part of its dynamism as it continues to speak to community after community in century after century. Let us diverge for a moment to get a clearer focus on the passage’s fundamental ambiguity.

The case for a reading of Isa. 7:10-17 as a judgment scene. Many, if not most, contemporary critical scholars would argue that Isa. 7:10-17 in its present form and context is a judgment scene. After all, this prophecy to Ahaz is preceded by Isaiah’s earlier commission to make the hearts of Israel “fat” (Isa. 6:9-10). Moreover, Isa. 7:14 follows upon an apparent place where Isaiah seems to be working with a fat-hearted king: just after Isaiah told Ahaz that he must believe in order to be established (Isa. 7:9b), Ahaz has demonstrated his apparent unbelief by turning down God’s offer of a sign (Isa. 7:10-12).40 As expected, Isaiah replies quite negatively to Ahaz’s refusal: “Listen house of David, is it not enough that you weary human beings, that you weary my God as well?” (Isa. 7:13). This sounds a lot like a prophetic accusation. Indeed, Isaiah has shifted in this accusation from referring to the Lord as Ahaz’s God (Isa. 7:11) to referring exclusively to “my” God (Isa. 7:13).41 Next, Isa. 7:14 starts with a word that usually introduces an announcement of judgment elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible: “therefore.” Within this context, what follows
promises to be a description of consequences of Ahaz's misdeeds, not an annunciation of a miracle or hoped-for deliverer figure. Although the name "God with us" normally has positive connotations for the royal dynasty (cf. 2 Sam. 7:9; 2 Kings 1:37; Ps. 89:21-25), now it may mean the baby will be born into a time when you name a child with the wish-name "Let God be with us." To be sure, Isaiah goes on to affirm that God will follow through on the rescue God has already promised (Isa. 7:15-16; cf. Isa. 7:4-9a). Nevertheless, in the verse left out of the lectionary, Isa. 7:17, Isaiah goes still further to give what is easily interpreted as the expected announcement of punishment: the Lord is about the bring upon Ahaz, his dynastic house and his people "days which have not come since Ephraim split off from Judah." Later in the book this promise appears to be fulfilled in the Assyrians' attack on Judah in the time of King Hezekiah (Isa. 36-37; see also 38). In this case, however, the narrative carefully contrasts Hezekiah's response of faith with his father, Ahaz's, lack of faith. Read in this context, Isa. 7:10-17 can easily be interpreted as an example of how a king's lack of faith will result in judgment from God.

The case for a reading of Isa. 7:10-17 as a promise scene. Conversely, it is easy to interpret this passage in the opposite way, as a promise scene. Yes, Ahaz's refusal is viewed negatively in Isa. 7:13, and yes the "therefore" at the outset of 7:14 usually introduces announcements of judgment. Nevertheless, one need stretch the passage only a little to read it as God's promise of ultimate salvation to Judah despite Ahaz's lack of faith. At the very least, an early form of the prophecy was probably positive. The other symbolic names associated with Isaiah all point to the eventual rescue of Judah (cf. 7:3; 8:1-4), and Isaiah's prophecy appears to have been infused with the thoroughly positive Zion theology found in the psalms, particularly Psalm 46. This theology features a belief in Jerusalem's invulnerability from enemy attack. Indeed, the superscription at the outset of Psalm 46 can be interpreted to refer to "young women" ("young woman" in Isa. 7:14), and the same psalm ends with a promise that "the LORD of armies will be with us," a promise that sounds a lot like the name of the promised child in 7:14, "God with us." Such background would predispose us to expect a positive message from Isaiah here, and indeed, much of his message in Isa. 7:14-17 can be read as just that. I have already mentioned that the name "God with us" would normally be understood as a reassuring statement. In addition, both the birth
annunciation and the “sign” that Isaiah gives in 7:14 would normally accompany the announcement of good tidings to the hearer. Even the announcement in 7:17 of “days which have not come since Ephraim split from Judah” is not necessarily bad. It could be understood as a promise of good times such as have not existed since the existence of David and Solomon’s United Kingdom. Given all this, perhaps Isaiah in 7:14-17 is actually giving Ahaz the positive “sign” offered to him in Isa 7:11 despite Ahaz’s refusal to ask for it. Although Ahaz’s refusal to cooperate wearies Isaiah’s God, it also shows how acutely Ahaz needs to be convinced of God’s rescue. “Therefore” Isaiah gives it to him.

In sum, Isa. 7:10-17 is a beautiful example of the how difficult it can often be to nail down scripture to only one meaning. Either way, the passage can inform our understanding of Advent. On the one hand, we may read this text as an indictment of our unbelief and an announcement of God’s purging response to it. Even if God reduces us to a smoldering stump (Isa. 6:9-13; 10:33-34), we know from other texts in Isaiah that this will not be God’s final word. Indeed, the refrain for this Sunday’s lectionary psalm provides an image to reinforce this: “I am the vine; you are the branches, rooted in faith and love.” Though we, the branches, may be burned, we can grow back through drawing on the lifegiving power of the Christ vine to which we are grafted. This is not an easy hope, but it may be a real one, especially for those feeling cut off or burned in this time of Advent.

On the other hand, the text can be read as an indication of God’s resolution to be with us despite our unbelief. Like Ahaz, we moderns may not be ready to trust in God’s saving power. Like Ahaz, we may clothe our disbelief in God’s power in learned, pious refusal of God’s signs. Nevertheless, God will not wait on our belief or be dependent on it. Instead, God gives us the sign of restoration anyway: a son will be born to a young woman; he will be called “God with us.” Christ is born!

Anytime one is faced with such a multiplicity of potential interpretations of scripture, it is easy to pick the one with which we most agree. Nevertheless, it is often the perspective with which we disagree that has the most to teach us, including in scripture. So we must be careful not to let the Christmas spirit quickly lead us into an unreservedly positive picture of Isa. 7:10-17. Either way God is offering us hope in this passage. Nevertheless, the promise may be of a transformation involving pain as well. The text tantalizes us with its “sign”—Immanuel, “God with us.” Is he—as a result of our prideful
unbelief—a forest-cutting purger, or is he—despite our unbelief—a redeemer, or is he some mixture of both? In this time of Advent we anxiously wait for the answer.

Isaiah 9:2-7

Whereas all of the texts discussed above look forward to God's redemption, Isaiah 9:2-7 celebrates it. This makes this passage particularly appropriate at this point during Advent, on Christmas. It takes up the threads of promise that we have discussed and weaves them into a tapestry celebrating God's work in Israel.

Already the process begins in the prelude to our passage, Isa. 9:1b (In the former time...). Although this half verse is left out of the lectionary, and although it may not have been an original part of the saying beginning in Isa. 9:2, this text in its present position gives the context for what happens in 9:2 and following. It describes the pullout of the Assyrians from provinces they had taken earlier:

In the former time he [God] brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
But in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

Now for the first time in our trip through Advent passages in Isaiah, we are looking back on a process of redemption. There was a former time when God used the armies of Assyria to subjugate parts of the North. But now the "latter time" has come, when God has made glorious the "way" of the sea, Transjordan, and Galilee. This proclamation in turn resonates with Isa. 2:1-5, the passage standing at the outset of our Advent pilgrimage. Now, the "latter days" have come (cf. Isa. 2:2). Now, the "way" is opened (cf. Isa. 2:5). The only thing left is to set foot on the path, to "come and walk in the light" (Isa. 2:5).

Exactly that happens at the outset of our lectionary passage: "the people who walked in darkness, have seen a great light" (Isa. 9:2).

From here on out this passage celebrates the onset of the redemption promised in the passages we have discussed. For example, just as Isa. 2:4a predicted that God would judge between nations and arbitrate between peoples, so now Isa. 9:4-5 celebrates God's liberation of Israel from the Assyrians. Just as Isa. 2:4b predicted the trans-
formation of the weapons of war into farming implements, so now Isa. 9:5 speaks of the burning of war garments.

**With Isa. 9:6 we see the deliverer king that we saw in Isa. 11:1-10.**

Now, however, he is here and receives the throne names appropriate to a Judean king: “planner of wonders, hero God, everlasting father, prince of peace” (Isa. 9:6). This celebration of an event that has already occurred is why it makes sense to put Isa. 9:2-7 after Isa. 11:1-10 in the lectionary, even though Isa. 9:2-7 occurs earlier in the book. Just as the royal figure in Isa. 11:1-10 sprouted up after the forest-cutting of Isa. 10:33-34, so now this king in Isa. 9:6-7 arises on the other side of the imposition of the Assyrian “yoke” on Israel. Moreover, this king, like that king in Isa. 11:3-5, brings justice. He will establish David’s throne and his kingdom “with justice and solidarity from now into eternity” (Isa. 9:7; adapted from the NRSV). Finally, the text doubly emphasizes in 9:6-7 that this king’s just rule will bring an everlasting peace. He is setting into motion the international—indeed cosmic—peace envisioned in Isa. 2:4 and 11:6-9.

The links between Isaiah 9:2-7 and Isaiah 35 are less obvious but nevertheless significant. Both texts envision God’s present liberation in terms of God’s ancient acts of liberation for Israel. Isaiah 35 linked God’s future redemption of Judah to God’s past act in the Exodus. Now Isa. 9:4 links God’s liberation of Judah from Assyria to God’s past liberation of Israel from the Midianites. Taken together, these texts assert that God has always been and continues to be Israel’s liberator, from the ancient time of the Exodus and of the judges into the present (Isa. 9:4) and on into the future (Isa. 35:1-10).

Finally, Isa. 9:6-7 is easily read as celebrating the birth of the “son” who was promised in Isa. 7:14. To be sure, this son in 9:2-7 is never named “Immanuel.” Nevertheless, just as the son predicted in 7:14 was to be named “God with us” (Immanuel), so now our passage exclaims “a son has been born to us,” and he is named “mighty God.” Moreover, if we read Isa. 7:16-17 as a positive promise of the liberation and blooming of Judah associated with this son, then Isa. 9:2-7 fits quite well. Judah is being liberated not only from Israel and Syria (cf. 7:16) but Assyria as well. Finally, Isa. 7:17 can be read as a prediction of the end of the long-term split with the North, an end implied in 9:1-7. The new king of Isa. 9:2-7 is taking the throne of “David and his kingdom” (Isa. 9:7) and will preside over the newly
freed Northern territories (Isa. 9:1). Such days have not been seen “since Ephraim [Northern Israel] turned aside from Judah” (Isa. 7:17).

These potential connections to Isa. 7:10-17 are among the indicators that have led some scholars to see Isa. 9:2-7 as a celebration of the accession of Hezekiah to the throne after his father Ahaz. Such would be a natural reading of the book in its present form. Others have argued that Isa. 9:2-7 only secondarily builds on Isa. 7:10-17 and that 9:2-7 actually celebrates the accession of king Josiah one hundred years after Isaiah’s career. Certainly, the child motif of Isa. 9:6 would fit the child-king Josiah well, and the implicit references in 9:2-7 to liberation from the Assyrians and reunification of North and South fit Josiah’s reign better than Hezekiah’s. In either case, this passage is looking back on events and celebrating them. In itself it is not a prophecy of a coming king.

The mix of time references in this passage, however, provides the final piece to help us interpret Christmas. Twice this passage goes from past to future. First, Isa. 9:1-4 describes God’s already-accomplished liberation from Assyria before going on to anticipate how the bloody boots and garments will be fuel for the fire (Isa. 9:5). Second, the passage celebrates the accession and gift of throne names to the new king (Isa. 9:6) before going on in 9:7 to look forward to his coming reign:

To peace, there will be no end
for the throne of David and his kingdom
To establish it and strengthen it
With justice and solidarity from now into eternity
The zeal of the LORD of armies is doing this.

This is a celebration, but not just of past acts. Instead, Isa. 9:2-7 is a celebration of the breaking forth of God’s salvation already in the present, but a salvation that will work itself out further in the future. Read in light of the other passages from Isaiah, we can see how this is just the beginning. The liberation of Judah is but an anticipation of God’s judging between all nations (Isa. 2:4). The peace which Judah will experience is but a foretaste of a broader, cosmic peace (Isa. 2:4; 11:6-9). Zion has only begun to be lifted up above the other mountains, and the nations have not yet come. The time, however, is coming!

So also, now during Advent, we can read Christmas through the lens of this passage. “A child has been born for us, a son given to us.”
Jesus is born, and with his birth we celebrate the onset of God's program to establish a universal, just peace. As we have seen, this redemptive process can be hard. God may cut down some trees in the process of transforming God's people, but God's liberation process is already underway. The second Exodus proclaimed in Isaiah 35 is already in motion. God's "zeal" will make sure the job gets done (Isa. 9:7).

What a staggering thought in a world so often dominated by signs of hopelessness! These passages have themselves given us many images for the brokenness that God will mend: God-thirsty nations (Isa. 2:3); a clear-cut forest (Isa. 10:33-34); a barren wasteland (Isa. 35:1-2); a people with weak hands and feeble knees (Isa. 35:3); those of weak heart (Isa. 35:4); the blind, deaf, lame, and speechless (Isa. 35:6); those walking in darkness (Isa. 9:2) ... To all of these and more God's incredible promises come during Advent. Our task is not to respond like Ahaz but to believe in God's words of unbelievable hope. This and nothing less is the Advent celebration to which Isa. 9:2-7 calls us.

Selected Bibliography of English-Language Resources on Isaiah 1-39


Although somewhat old, this is an excellent, balanced commentary on this portion of Isaiah.


Chapters 2-5 offer a stimulating look at one way to read the Isaiah book as a whole.


Part B of this book is a beautiful exploration of how Isaiah uses tree and vegetation metaphors to bind together suffering and healing.


This commentary provides good examples of the recent trend to read texts of Isaiah in their broader literary context.

This is a major study of the structure and setting of Isaiah 1-39 and texts in it.


This is the standard reference work on Isaiah, excellent for surveying the wealth of older historical-critical scholarship on these chapters of the book. The rest of his commentary on Isaiah 1-39 should be appearing soon.

Notes

1. This translation is from the New Jerusalem Bible. The other translations in this article are the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated.


4. Zeek. 8:20-23 would be another major exemplar of this idea along with some similar texts from Isaiah 56-66.


7. I have revised the NRSV translation of the first half of this couplet in order to simplify it. For observations regarding the basic structural division between 2:2-3 and 3:4-6 see R. Hubbard, "Jai alai, hermeneutics and Isaianic Peace," 188-189; and M. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-4 and the Post-Exilic Understanding of the Isaianic Tradition*, BZAW 171 (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 136-8, and his forthcoming commentary, *Isaiah 1-39 with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*, Forms of Old Testament Literature, 16 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995 or 1996). My thanks go to him for making this fine work available to me in preliminary form as I prepared this article.


9. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd. ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1976), 564. My thanks to students in the Master of Arts in Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Ministry at Methodist Theological School in Ohio for challenging me to find links such as this between Biblical traditions and the addiction recovery process.


11. For discussion of links of this passage from Matthew to Isa. 2:2-4 see Lohfink, "Schwerter zu Pflugscharen," 203-204. Lohfink points out the continuity between this approach and the earliest lines of Christian interpretation of this passage, 191-195.
12. This continuation of the vision in Isa. 2:2-4 is the aspect of the text that most distinguishes it from its counterpart in Micah 4:1-3. For a theologically oriented discussion of the continuation of both versions of this vision see H. W. Wolff, "Swords into Plowshares: Misuse of a Word of Prophecy," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 12 (1985): 142-143.


14. Ibid., 139-163.


16. C. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 95, argues that judgment against Assyria is meant here rather than judgment against Judah. His points regarding the judgment against Assyria here are well taken, but two things argue for the presence of Judah as well: a) the previous predictions of the cutting down of Judah’s leadership (e.g. Isa. 2:6-3:15; cf. 1:24-26) and b) the immediately following reference to an obviously Judaean stump (Isa. 11:1).


19. The wordplay is on the Hebrew words ruah, "spirit," "wind"), and harthd, "his smell" or "his delight"), both of which derive from the root rwj, "breath," "blow." Many previous interpreters, such as H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, trans. T. Trapp, *Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991, 461), have argued on various grounds that this half verse is secondary. Nevertheless, this wordplay on rwj/harthd suggests that it may be an original conclusion to the series beginning in Isa. 11:2. As such it doubly emphasizes the importance of the last element in that series, through indicating that this spirit will not just rest on the coming king. He will "inhale" it.

20. For discussion of the translation of these terms and their wisdom associations see Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*, 471-4.

21. Ibid., 463-464 gives some ancient Near Eastern analogies to Isa. 11:6-9, but they all focus on the outpouring of blessing on the land as the result of the king’s rule.


LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS: REDISCOVERING ADVENT HOPE 317
23. Here I have diverged from the NRSV in order to make the parallels in language between Isa. 2:4 and 11:4 clearer. In addition, I have consciously translated the Hebrew words for poor with words that have clearer social referents than those in the NRSV.

24. Battle standard” is my translation of the word נֶס in Hebrew. The translation of this word as “signal” in the NRSV does not indicate the more specific idea being represented here.

25. This observation comes from M. Sweeney’s forthcoming commentary, Isaiah 1-39.

26. See, for example, Wildberger, Isaiah 1-12, 465-469. This is the option favored by the present author.

27. Nelson, There Is Hope for a Tree, 139-40. Sweeney argues in more detail for this position in his forthcoming commentary, “Isaiah 1-39.”


29. Wildberger, Isaiah 1-12, 478. The term “solidarity” is used here to render the Hebrew word ישוק in 11:4 rather than the usual translation of this word with the somewhat empty “righteousness.” This better reflects the focus of ישוק on the maintenance of right relationships.


33. Sweeney, Isaiah 1-4, 20-21 and his forthcoming Isaiah 1-39. Following on Steck’s word Besiegte Heimkehr, 59-71, Sweeney discusses passages elsewhere in the Book of Isaiah that likewise predict this new Exodus, such as Isa. 11:11-16 and 62:10-12.

34. Clements, “Patterns in the Prophetic Canon,” 199.


36. Although Isa. 7:17 is not part of the lectionary reading, it will be included through this and later discussions because it is an essential part of the present pericope.

37. M. Rehm provides an emphatic refutation of attempts to interpret 'almah here as "virgin,"” Das Wort’almah in Is. 7:14,” Biblische Zeitschrift 8 (1964), 89-101. For a discussion in English see Wildberger, Isaiah 1-12, 308.

318

39. For discussion see Wildberger, Isaiah 1-12, 308-310 and Seitz, Isaiah 1-39, 60-71, 78-80. The latter argues for an identification of the son with Hezekiah.

40. Elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern literature, in the Aqhat epic, we have a similar refusal by a human of a divine offer. In this case, Aqhat refuses the offers of Anat for his bow (KTU 1.17-19, 26-33). Anat replies with unequivocal judgment. This example of a negative divine response to the human refusal of an earlier offer by the god is another bit of data suggesting that the original audience of this text would have expected a negative divine response to Ahaz’s reply in Isa. 7:12.

41. Lust, "The Immanuel Figure," 466.

42. On the similarities and differences between Isaiah 7 and 36-39 see in particular E. W. Conrad, Reading Isaiah, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 36-46.


44. For a more detailed list of parallels and discussion of different interpretations of the Psalm 46 superscription, see C. Stuhlmeuier, "Psalm 46 and the Prophecy of Isaiah Evolving into a Prophetic, Messianic, Role," in The Psalms and Other Studies on the Old Testament, eds. J. Knight; L. Sinclair (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1990), 21-222.

45. As many have observed, the lack of a conjunction between Isa. 7:16 and 7:17 suggests that Isa. 7:17 is an expansion of the word of promise found in 7:16, not a contradiction or qualification of it.


49. This part of the text is underlined because it deviates from the standard translations. Most English translations start with a past-tense verb—as in the former time he brought into contempt”—but then continue with a future tense verb”—but in the latter time he will make glorious.” These two Hebrew verb forms, however, are grammatically identical (Hebrew perfects). Both refer to completed action. Although one might stretch the translation to have these identical grammatical forms refer to totally different times, it is much more straightforward to understand both to be referring to the past. J. A. Emerton, “Some linguistic and historical problems in Isaiah 8:23,” Journal of Semitic Studies 14 (1969): 157-158.

50. For example, other Jewish texts imply a link between the king and God (Ps. 45:7) and link him particularly with the welfare, "shalom," of the land (Psalm 72). The translation of these names is discussed in some detail by Wildberger, Isaiah 1-12,
402-406. Barth, Jesaja-Worte, 169-170 rightly stresses (over against parts of Wildberger's discussion) the links of these names to conventional royal ideology in Judah.

51. The word for “yoke” that is used here is actually an Assyrian loan word. Barth, Jesaja-Worte, 173.

52. Seitz, Isaiah 1-39, 74, 87.

53. For recent developments of views like this see Clements, Isaiah 1-39, 103-105 (with citations of the older literature) and Seitz, Isaiah 1-39, 84-87. The latter links the oracle to Hezekiah but argues against setting it in the context of his accession.

54. Barth, “Jesaja-Worte,” 170-177. This would be true even if one did not include Isa. 9:1 (Hebrew 8:23) in the passage.

55. This against approaches such as Werner’s “Eschatologische Texte,” 21-46) which treat 9:1-7 as an eschatological prophecy.

56. I have modified the NRSV in this translation.
James C. Howell

Abortion and the Quadrilateral: A Reply to Kathy Rudy

Last Spring, Kathy Rudy published an intriguing article in this journal in which she explored the application of the Methodist quadrilateral to the contemporary issue of abortion. A hopeful approach this is, since so often a pronouncement on abortion is little more than a visceral preference for one of the two prevailing political options, not attached in any meaningful way to our normal modes of theological discourse. This mirrors what transpires in our entire culture, for whom moral choice is often wholly subjective, the mere expression of preference; Alasdair Maclntyre dubs this "emotivism." 1

But Professor Rudy regards scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as confusing, a cacophony of discordant voices, overheard as saying either yes or no. We are left with the impression that the quadrilateral can be employed to argue whatever you wish. Having described the ambivalence issuing from the quadrilateral, Rudy proceeds to articulate what seems to be little more than her own visceral preference on the issue of abortion. We would like to listen again to the witness of the quadrilateral in relationship to abortion. I sense there is more solid direction in this method than might appear at first blush.

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In Methodism, the quadrilateral is not binding. Wesley never dictated its authority in his rules. We never solemnly pledge, “I will faithfully and thoroughly apply the quadrilateral in my theological thinking.” The quadrilateral is not prescriptive but rather descriptive of our openness, of our pluralism. As Methodists we celebrate our risky commitment to avoid simplistic thinking, to steer away from biblicism, to dare to explore those murky waters among the Bible and all we can discern about its background, our rich and at times polluted streams of historical thought, our brains, and the real world where life is actually lived. As Methodists, we need to hang on to all four as we think, pray, and act. Perhaps with abortion we may wisely say more and less than Rudy supposes. Let us take each of these elements in turn.

Scripture. Wesley (a self-proclaimed homo unius libri) clearly exalted the Bible as the primary authority in matters theological; it is probably most faithful to Methodist origins to construe tradition, reason, and experience as the threefold manner in which we let the Bible do its work on us and in the church. But in our day, historical criticism has made us wary of pontificating too firmly on “the biblical view” of anything. Certainly we are wise nowadays to think of the Bible in the manner of Garrett Green,2 who sees scripture as providing the paradigm for the exercise of our theological imagination. Like corrective lenses, the Bible and its stories, laws, sermons, and songs shape our perspective for thinking. As such, the Bible need not speak directly to and about each and every issue. Not surprisingly, the Bible says nothing about the twentieth-century medical procedure called “abortion” that happens thousands of times daily; scripture never says, “Thou shalt not abort.” But does the Bible not inform our consideration?

Walter Brueggemann is right about our speaking about the Bible in this postmodernist era: “Our task is to fund—to provide the pieces, materials, and resources out of which a new world can be imagined. Our responsibility then is not a grand scheme or a coherent system, but the voicing of a lot of little pieces out of which people can put life together in fresh configurations.”3 Here are three little pieces: (a) Both the right-to-life and the right-to-choose positions are wrongheaded. Which right is right? I cannot find in the Bible any positive affirmation of any analogue to “rights”; indeed, such “rights” are now regarded as problematical in philosophical ethics and jurisprudence.4
In the Bible, the seizure of rights is always problematical. Adam and Eve grasp the fruit; Jacob swipes the right of primogeniture; David exercises his royal prerogative to take Bathsheba; the prodigal son has a right to his inheritance; the twelve-hour laborers in the vineyard surely have a right to more than one denarius; the rich young ruler hangs on to what is his. Biblical models of faith, Hannah, Jeremiah, Mary, Paul, and Jesus himself, are the very ones who lay down their rights. If anyone's “rights” are defended, they are those of the widow, the orphan, the alien. And this word-group translated “rights” may better be understood as “justice”; “justice” is when no one turns a blind eye to the helpless.  

In the Bible’s perspective, life is not a right; it is a gift. Our decisions are not rights but responsibilities. Rudy follows Beverly Wichtung Harrison’s opinion that God intends women to have the freedom to control their bodies and destinies; but scripture’s sense is that women and men are free not when they are in control of their bodies and destinies but rather only when they offer their bodies and futures to God. Jesus is our exemplar: he laid down his rights, gave his life, for the life of others who in turn should “have this mind” as well. Scripture can reshape our mindset on abortion: our paradigm is controlled not by rights but by notions of gift and responsibility.  

(b) Carol Meyers has helped us understand what life was like for women in biblical times. As Israelites scraped out a subsistence living, children were very much wanted, for economic as well as reasons of the heart. Even if abortions and abandonment happened in ancient times, the Bible’s attitude toward children is one not of selectivity but of deep desire and welcome. The Bible loves, celebrates, and craves children, life, albeit under social and economic conditions that are alien to our own. In the biblical anthropology, life is in the womb because God wills it so. Psalm 139:13-16, the banner prooftext of the pro-life movement, is not a commandment from Mt. Sinai! But it is a doxological celebration of fetal life and its hopeful future.  

(c) Thirdly, the Bible is pretty clear about who is God and who isn’t. God is God, and other goods are subordinate to this greatest of goods. Sadly, Rudy seems to have elevated women’s rights and their careers and their self-fulfillment to an ultimate level. Anything that inhibits the woman and her pursuit of her desires and position is suspect. Thankfully, feminists have prophetically challenged all of us to a truer faith and practice, reminding us that men and their careers are not our gods either. We can now see with clarity how the social
structures and preconceptions of an earlier millennium, unsympathetic as they may be to our modern zeal for the freedom and fulfillment of half the human race, are not finally the heart of the biblical agenda.

But as Christians we need not baptize any modern ideology in order to hear its challenge. In the Bible, no one's rights or career or self-fulfillment can usurp the highest good of following Christ. What is the "canon," the ultimate authority for Rudy? It does not appear to be scripture, however understood through the quadrilateral. The measure for theological evaluation in much feminist thought derives not from the Bible itself but from women's experience and struggle. This measure is inadequate theologically. Our responsibility as interpreters is to get at the theological drift of the Bible and its message, not to locate any single twentieth-century agenda. That requires a deft scraping away of a chronic overlay of androcentrism. But as we extricate ourselves from centuries of sexist subjugation of women and their concerns, we cannot plunge into a new idolatry. Women and their careers are not our gods—a conclusion that may appear to be anti-feminist but in its deepest sense is not.

I am appalled at Rudy's comments about how children and our responsibilities as parents "diminish our capacity to do well at whatever we're trying to do... We need access to abortion... just to keep ourselves in the game." I have three children, and the truth is that they do diminish my capacity to be a more effective pastor or writer of an article on abortion. But my calling is to be a parent, to rock my child at 3:00 a.m., to do less professionally and more parentally. The Bible shapes my thinking in such a way that I do not regard myself or my career as diminished because of my children; rather I am enriched and challenged by them. Let us take a hard look at the choice Rudy suggests: Shall I continue my "dreams"? Or have the baby?

Rudy claims that women cannot become good doctors, lawyers, businesswomen, professors, and ministers if they must carry and care for children. I know women who have carried and still care for children who are superb doctors, lawyers, businesswomen, professors, and ministers. But even so, are these the only women who matter? Does an ethical decision about abortion really hinge on the aspirations of upwardly mobile women? What about women who are not on such a career track? The biblical mindset could never be, "Why am I stuck with this child when I really should be climbing the professional ladder?" We need to remember that every time we trumpet the right to an abortion, there is a woman listening who has at great cost but with
deep pride and joy seen her commitment to a life within through a lonely pregnancy and difficult child-rearing. As the pieces of the Bible fund our imaginations, we are moved to value children and to comprehend our vocation as parents to care for them.

Beyond any question, men fail in their responsibility, and women still are unfairly disadvantaged in today's culture. But the Bible itself, patriarchal as it may be, would insist that better enforcement of better legislation and a genuine calling of negligent males to repentance are more faithful approaches than the practice of abortion. In scripture, fetal life is positively regarded (Jeremiah 1; Luke 1; Psalm 139). Bonhoeffer wrote that the very existence of the embryo is evidence of God's intention to bring forth a human being. But perhaps a wiser theology would entrust to us a co-creator role as we strive to be good stewards of our bodies and our sexuality. Which leads us to consider the quadrilateral's second leg.

**Tradition.** "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," we are wise to contemplate what our theological ancestors have to say; indeed, we are pygmies on the shoulders of giants (Bernard of Chartres). At the same time, Hegel is right: "What experience and history teach is this—that peoples and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it." While our theological tradition cannot directly answer our abortion question, there is a pertinent item to consider.

Lisa Sowle Cahill has summarized the tradition as follows: "The general parameters of a 'biblical' sexual morality are not in great dispute. Sex, in both the Hebrew and the early Christian scriptures, is assumed to belong in heterosexual marriage. . . . There is scarcely any doubt that premarital sex, adultery, divorce, prostitution, and homosexuality are not included in the ideal." Tradition is really nothing more or less than a sequence of attempts to comprehend the meaning of scripture in new times and places. And our tradition is clearly in agreement that sexual intercourse is intended by God for marriage, most likely because the family is the environment in which the potential consequences of sex, namely children, can be accepted and cherished. This age-old warning against sex outside of marriage has even been exaggerated, celibacy being regarded as some higher calling, with sex denigrated as the epitome of guilt. Of course, theologians, clergy and laity alike, wink at this most basic of Christian positions, often because of our own behavior. Rudy,
along with the vast majority of people in our culture, seems to regard
sexual activity as inevitable—hence the desirability of birth control,
and of how to handle things once birth control fails. But isn't it at the
heart of the Christian vision that God's dream would be for sex to be
practiced by those prepared to accept and care for children that may
issue from sexual union?

Mind you, this kind of idealism can hardly cope with what really
goes on in the lives of people. "Just say no" campaigns aimed at drugs
or sex are impotent before the passions of the young and the
not-so-young. Yet isn't it still the Church's task to portray a higher
adventure, a stewardship of this awesome, precious gift from God, our
procreative potential? Clearly we have not been up to this challenge;
perhaps we had better remain quiet about sexual morality until we
learn again how to teach a nobler sexual ethic, and more importantly,
until we learn how to embody it in wholesome marriages that will
appear intriguing and compelling to persons making sexual decisions.

In resignation we say, "People will have sex anyway," or "People
will have abortions anyway." While Stanley Hauerwas reminds us that
this kind of thinking can be construed as a subtle recommendation, we
do need to grapple with what to do while we're working toward
our ideal. We can find a map to a place to stand between and above
idealism and resignation, I believe, as we consider reason, and even
more importantly, experience.

Reason. Rudy's application of reason drifts toward a meditation on
the point in life at which we begin to reason. Wesley's intention was
that we need not switch off our brains in theology and that we need
not fear learning and truth from others at the intellectual table. Yet he
would invite us into a camaraderie with Augustine's and Anselm's
vision that our faith, or actually God's power, can enhance and exalt
our reasoning.

I would imagine that for many, the notion of "conscience" might
enter the discussion at this point. While our own Discipline urges that
a woman follow the dictates of her conscience, we should note that the
Bible does not teach that we are naturally equipped with a moral
governor that says "don't" or "it's okay." Our capacity for
self-deception and rationalization is frightening indeed. The point is
not that women cannot decide and men must do so for them. Rather,
we are all of us flawed in our decision-making; "conscience," far from
being a gift of God, is probably no more than what Freud
characterized as the superego, a vast tapestry of messages, many parental in origin; others picked up on the street, from the media, from teachers, a few even in the pew, varying wildly from person to person. Conscience as construed in our day is not a helpful ethical compass. Lacking innate moral equipment, we must let God reshape our minds and wills in gradual conformity or, to put it better, in gracious transformation to the mind of Christ.

In the application of our reasoning minds, we may simply learn and listen. Both sides in the abortion debate fire salvos across “no man’s land,” as pro-lifers and pro-choicers bludgeon each other with disinformation and inflammatory passion. And yet most of the hurled stereotypes don’t fit, leaving the vast majority of us “caught between slogans.”

In the summer of 1992, after David Souter cast the deciding vote in Casey v. Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania, both sides upbraided the court in the press. Far too much freight has been attached to abortion: for conservatives, Roe v. Wade is the consummate symbol of the triumph of secularism; in a surprising alliance of Protestant Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, abortion has been seized as the crucial turf that cannot be surrendered. For liberals, support of abortion rights is a litmus test of whether you are sympathetic to women and equality; to be anti-abortion has become virtually identical to being anti-feminist. Neither liberals, for all their compassion and understanding of systemic causes of social problems, nor conservatives, for all their zeal for moral responsibility and individual righteousness, can lead us out of our dilemma.

Reasoning may allow us to discover why the current debate is at such an impasse. MacIntyre labels the two stands as “incommensurable”; since rival presuppositions and thought processes involved are incommensurate, that is, sharing nothing in common, neither argument can be won—or lost, leaving little but shrill, indignant protest to be appreciated only by those who already share the premise of the protestor. Somehow, just being aware of where we are helps defuse the explosiveness, a first step toward understanding and potentially creative solutions.

Certainly the Church could foster a climate of understanding regarding the legal issues. Mary Ann Glendon has demonstrated how in many countries legislation is framed more constructively, less divisively, and is therefore more responsive to the backgrounds and futures of persons involved. Laws elsewhere are more engaged with women’s crises, more intentional about striving to help the woman to...
deliver the child, and more generous in support of the women involved. *Roe v. Wade* was enunciated in such absolutist terms that it can elicit nothing but a virulent and violent response. The very fact that the courts unilaterally settled the issue, preempting the more democratic give and take of the legislative process, has only hardened and closed out genuine debate. Perhaps reason could nudge our legislative and judicial system toward such a sensible middle (or higher) ground. Consider these wise words from Texas community organizer Ernesto Cortes: "Politics is about relationships which enable people to disagree, argue, interrupt one another, clarify, confront and negotiate, and through this process . . . forge a compromise and a consensus which enables them to act. In politics, it is not enough to be right . . . one also has to be reasonable, that is one has to be willing to make concessions and exercise judgment in forging a deal."21

Reason sensitively applied could help all of us grasp the profoundly personal stories and issues that go into the statistics on abortion. We can meet and listen to women and hear their anguish and anxiety. Real people never turn out to be anything like their caricatures in political invective. If any piece of fiction tells the truth about women, pregnancies, unwanted children, and abortion, it is John Irving's terrific *Cider House Rules*.

And who knows? Over time, reason in the form of medical science may tell us more about the beginnings of human life, findings that could supplement what we already can see visually of intrauterine life.22 One day a doctor showed me several dishes of aborted matter. What I saw was far from unrecognizable anatomically. What does our mind tell us about abortion when we look closely at what in fact is aborted?

Reason can diligently understand where people really are and strive to proclaim the gospel to them in word and deed. Karl Barth, while strongly opposed to abortion, spoke of the life in the womb as one "for whose life the Son of God has died, for whose unavoidable part in the guilt of all humanity and future individual guilt He has already paid the price. The true light of the world shines already in the darkness of the mother's womb."23 How do we accomplish this proclamation?

*Experience.* Like many Methodists, Rudy construes "experience" in its usual twentieth-century usage as what we perceive as we move about in the world. But in Wesleyan thought, the rationale for including experience is that our theology must become a
flesh-and-blood reality; it must be experienced to be true. As Colin Williams put it, "Experience therefore is the appropriation of authority, not the source of authority." What a timely word for our therapeutic milieu, which too easily confuses what we "feel" with theological truth. For Wesley, "experience is not the test of truth, but truth the test of experience."

This appropriation of authority lies in the work of the Church. We are not called to take sides or to bully but to listen, to be supportive, to address the deep human hurt that gives rise to the need for an abortion. Are we personally acquainted with persons who have had an abortion, who have been scared to death of pregnancy, who were woefully unprepared for motherhood, or at high risk of delivering a severely impaired baby? Have we familiarized ourselves with their hurts and fears? Norma McCorvey, alias Jane Roe of the landmark 1973 abortion case, grew up with alcoholic parents, was pregnant at sixteen, beaten by her husband, out of school, out of work, pregnant again, and in total desperation at age 21. When interviewed by Linda Coffee and Sarah Weddington, her attorneys, she said she felt "like a pool cue in a china cabinet, like a big idiot." Before we say a word about abortion, we need to ask: what are we as a Church prepared to do for the Norma McCorveys of the world who feel like pool cues in china cabinets?

In our society the right to privacy has turned into the right to be left alone. And that is precisely what we have done to countless pregnant women. Are we serious about ministry to women, to single parents, to the disenfranchised, to children? We are innovative at "childcare" programs, but they are targeted at the Ozzie and Harriet types in the suburbs. What should we be doing for mothers and children trapped in hopelessness, who feel they have no choices, who are not readily welcomed and mentored in this world? Perhaps the Church should portray by its experience what it means to be more than a mere collective of rights-grasping individuals, what it means to be a community of hospitality, welcome, and caring, shoulderling responsibility for each other and especially those in difficult circumstances.

Mother Teresa, who must know something about unwanted children and compassion, surprised her audience in her 1979 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech by saying, "The greatest destroyer of peace today is the crime against the unborn. The nations with legal abortion are the poorest nations." But the Church dare not utter a word about abortion until we have addressed and engaged the hurt, the skewed nature of
life where people live it, until we have made a difference for some pool cues, for some would-be "big idiots." Once we get our ministry in motion, once we are doing something about the plethora of problems that give rise to abortion, then maybe we can say if we're for it or against it.

This raises the question that Rudy says we must go beyond: Is abortion right or wrong? This is precisely the question we cannot fail to address! As pastor, I do have people coming into my office, pregnant at such "untimely" moments. They desperately want to know what's right and wrong. Others come, seeking resolution of long-term ethical anguish from an abortion years ago: Was it right or wrong? Should I feel guilty? Should I confess? Or be thankful?

Why not as Methodist Christians say that abortion is wrong? Why indulge in what the late Walker Percy, physician and novelist, called "the chronic misuse of words" to disguise what takes place during an abortion?28 Let's bracket those extraordinary cases of ectopic pregnancy, rape, or some of the horrifying genetic deficiencies (as in the famous 1962 thalidomide case of Sherri Finkbine). Surely in God's loving wishes for us, abortion is not a good to be desired. As the faith community we could never gather in worship and celebrate an abortion. It's wrong; it's never good. Stanley Hauerwas said that abortion is "a morally unhappy practice";24 or as Robert Cooper categorized it, "abortion is a moral tragedy, not a moral right."30 Neither the quadrilateral nor any other faithful theological tool can ever make it right or good somehow. I have a friend whose child, born with an unexpected and terrible genetic abnormality, lived less than an hour. I asked, "If you had known, would you have had an abortion?" He answered, "Yes, but with all the grief of having lost a child."

Any "no" to abortion must be said humbly with many disclaimers and challenges. Hauerwas wisely adds, "There may well be circumstances when abortions are morally permissible if still morally tragic."30 Once Paul Lehmann was asked about abortion. After a long, complex answer that mystified the audience, a questioner asked, "Dr. Lehmann, are you against abortion—yes or no?" To which he replied, "Yes... and no. In that order."32

But the moral undesirability of abortion does not in itself settle the legal issue. In the early days of the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr., used to say, "The law can keep a man from lynching me, but the law cannot make a man love me."33 Jurisprudence cannot enforce a more faithful stewarding of our sexual potential; it cannot
compel us to want, accept, and love children, and it certainly cannot motivate us to engage in significant ministry to pool cues in china cabinets. Long before we advocate legal changes, our faith must be zealous in engaging this agenda of love against which there is no law.

So the quadrilateral does enable us to explore the complexities and ambiguities inherent in abortion as the deeply human issue that it is. No simple answer or position will do, as we might expect. But the itinerary mapped out for us by the pieces of Scripture that shape our imagination, behind the great explorers in our historic tradition, in the tireless application of our mind and wits to understand, and perhaps most importantly through the mandate to do something for and with the real people effected, while not comfortably followed, surely will lead toward the truth.

Notes

4. MacIntyre, After Virtue, 67-69, where he says "There is no expression in any ancient or medieval language correctly translated by our expression 'a right' until the close of the Middle Ages: the concept lacks any means of expression in Hebrew, Greek, Latin or Arabic, classical or medieval, let alone in Old English, or in Japanese even as late as the mid-nineteenth century. The truth is plain: there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and unicorns." On the insidious penetration of rights into our legal system, see the marvelous work of Mary Ann Glendon, Rights Talk (New York: The Free Press, 1991). This is the theological starting-point of The Durham Declaration: "Contemporary culture insists that we own our bodies and that we have a right to do with them whatever we want. However, we United Methodist Christians declare that this is false. We believe that we are not our own. We do not own our selves or our bodies. God owns us."
8. Consider Byron White’s dissent in Planned Parenthood of Central Missouri v. Danforth: “A father’s interest in having a child—perhaps his only child—may be unmatched by any other interest in his life. It is truly surprising that the majority finds in the Constitution a rule that the state must assign a greater value to a mother’s decision to cut off a potential human life by abortion than to a father’s decision to let it mature into a child” (quoted in Marian Faux, Roe v. Wade [New York: Mentor, 1988], 331). Anything in jurisprudence or in our common philosophy that encourages rather than discourages the father’s connectedness to the entire process is surely good for all involved.


12. See Peter Brown’s brilliant and eloquent analysis in The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity (New York: Columbia University, 1988). This trend is clear, John Boswell’s recent and popular work (Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe, 1994) notwithstanding.

13. Perhaps it is instructive to notice how we assert that “birth control fails,” rather than the more positive and perhaps individually responsible, “intercourse succeeds.” Our common blaming of birth control belies precisely the mindset that would have sex without responsibility for its potential consequences.

14. Stanley Hauerwas, A Community of Character (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1981), 178. Not without cause do pro-choice advocates frighten us with their prediction of a return to poisons, potions, knitting needles, nail files, wire, and blows to the abdomen should abortion be outlawed; see Linda Gordon, Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America (New York: Penguin, 1976). Yet I am not advocating a legal change, and if we could function properly as the Church we could see major changes without a return to the nightmares of pre-Roe v. Wade years. As Martin Luther King, Jr., proclaimed on receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, “I refuse to accept the idea that the ‘inevitability’ of man’s present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal ‘oughtness’ that forever confronts him” (A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. James Melvin Washington [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986], 225.

15. James William McClendon argues that “conscience” is actually the bastion of Paul’s opponents! See Ethics: Systematic Theology, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 98-103. Indeed, “conscience” and “rights” may be construed as curious bedfellows, co-conspirators in the demise of our decision-making, which seems somehow self-authenticating.

17. For what follows in this paragraph, see the detailed account and analysis in Elizabeth Mensch and Alan Freeman, The Politics of Virtue: Is Abortion Debatable? (Durham: Duke University, 1993), 1, 80ff, 125ff; Mensch and Freeman zero in on the almost cultlike role of Francis Schaeffer, for whom the Roe decision was the quintessential example of humanism winning the contest of worldviews. We need to be aware that the gridlock perhaps leads to the likes of Paul Hill and John Salvi. Randall Terry cut ask, “Was it perhaps inevitable that the violent abortion industry should itself reap a portion of what it has sown?” (“Bitter Fruit,” The Charlotte Observer, January 5, 1995, p. 11A). The reaper has come indeed, although as the fruit of the nearly three decades of nasty invective sown by all involved.


19. MacIntyre, After Virtue, 8, on “incommensurability.”

20. Mary Ann Glendon, Abortion and Divorce in Western Law: American Failures, European Challenges (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987) offers suggestions so sensible and practical that it’s amazing they are not pursued. She notes that the U.S. has a higher per capita rate of abortion than any Western country, which she traces to our attitudes about privacy, self-interest, and a disregard for children—which attitudes she feels are imposed by the very laws designed to legislate these matters. “Please consider what a set of legal arrangements that places individual liberty or mere lifestyle over innocent life says about, and may do to, the people and the society that produces them. In the long run, the way in which we name things and imagine them may be decisive about the way we feel and act with respect to them, and for the kind of people we ourselves become” (62).


22. Although pro-choice activists have been known to resist showing photographs of fetuses to pregnant women contemplating abortion, reason may dictate that we need not fear what we can know and even see because of the kind of technology used to create a book like that of the popular A Child Is Born by Lennart Nilsson (New York: Delacorte, 1977).


25. Ibid., 34. The tone of Kathy Rudy’s article strikes me as the “theology as the sharing of my personal journey of thought”—an all-too-familiar approach that is simply a highly informed version of what is dubbed “Sheilanism” in Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, Robert N. Bellah et al. (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 221; Sheila Larson, like most of us in the U.S., has her “own” theology, leaving us with literally over 200 million tiny denominations of private thought.

26. See the narrative of the case by Faux, Roe v. Wade, 18.
27. See Glendon, Rights Talk, 42-75, esp. 48, 65. Just how controversial the 1965 Griswold v. Connecticut case, which established the right to privacy, has been is articulated with bibliography in Mensch and Freeman, 223, n. 53.


30. Mensch and Freeman, 152.

31. Hauerwas, Community of Character, 197.

32. Mensch and Freeman, 219, n. 22.

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