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A Feminist Theology for the Church

Theodore W. Jennings, Jr.
The Permanent Crisis of Liturgy

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

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

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

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

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

QR is printed on acid-free paper.

Lections are taken from Revised Common Lectionary (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

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

Quarterly Review
Spring, 1996

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William James once denigrated a young woman of his acquaintance as a romantic sort who “lived by the immediate aid of the novel.” Judging by the volume of paperback fiction floating through my house, he could be talking about me.

But looking back over last year’s books, I don’t see much evidence of romance. In fact, the novels that helped me most featured outcasts and misfits: a girl who survives a deadly, disfiguring cancer in Autobiography of a Face; an Irish woman who makes a shameful confession to her priest in The All of It; the small-town child prodigy in Isaac and His Devils; Weimar Germany through the eyes of a girl with dwarfism in Stones from the River; the state trooper whose child dies in Souls Raised from the Dead.

I think I know why I loved these books. Their authors share a deeply moral vision of the world. But this vision appears only from the edges of community, not at its center. These writers show us that the edge, with all its deprivations and pain, is a powerful place for seeing the whole fabric and even for mending its tears.

This is a fine vantage point for our issue on worship, it seems to me. Putting ourselves on the sideline in this case means we acknowledge our own need for community in Christ, our own hunger for atonement and celebration and song and family membership. It means letting go of our familiar position at the center on Sunday morning.

Now suddenly there is a lot at stake in our theological view of liturgy. We might respond to the radical view of Ted Jennings, who wants us to see our theological compromises as the gospel joins forces with the trappings of religion. Or with Rowan Crews we might focus on the presence of God in our worship, even when we are convinced that God no longer cares for us. Patrick Vaughn’s sustained reflection
on worship as play might tempt us to do a little less and be a little more in our churches.

Surrounding this core are some articles that can function as background for our theological conversation surrounding General Conference later this year. First, Rebecca Chopp’s fine summary of the foundations of feminist theology, is offered by one whose contributions in this area have been outstanding. The United Methodist Church’s consideration of its Baptism Study has prompted the articles by Ben Witherington and John Gooch; both show a deep commitment to the life of faith as it is lived out in this denomination, although their notions of sacrament differ.

With the lectionary study we have returned to the creative edges. What Gordon Peerman can show us in his study of Matthew’s parables is the power of such stories to counteract the power of death. The word recovery recurs like a musical theme through this piece. Its beauty is not spoiled by such false notes as cure, vindication, or triumph.

In like manner, faith, not proof; hope, not expectation; love, not—(your turn).

Sharon Hels
In my judgment, feminist theology is necessary and vital for the church. There are three reasons I think feminist theology contains good news for the church and for the world. First of all, feminism speaks to real men and women, empowering them to compose their Christian narratives. Secondly, feminist theology is a vital form of Christian symbolic logic, by which I mean it contains a satisfying interpretation of sin and grace, God and Christ, spirit and world. It is systematic not in the sense of a deductive logic but in the way it weaves together a connected, yet flexible, symbolic grammar of Christian meaning and truth. And, finally, feminist theology offers us a new vision of survival and flourishing, with orientative principles that allow us to see and value the world, including ourselves, in new ways. Feminist theology is necessary and true in the Christian vision and thus important and meaningful for contemporary experience. In a day when the church often fails to offer a powerful and provocative spiritual witness, feminist theology offers rich resources to craft a vital Christianity. I believe this is good news for the church.

In its present incarnation, feminist theology has been in existence for at least thirty years. One of the perennial issues of and for feminist theology has been its relation to the church. Feminist theology has a dual origin, in the academy and in the church. At the same time

Rebecca S. Chopp is Dean of Faculty and Academic Affairs and Professor of Theology at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.
women were beginning to write explicitly feminist theologies in seminaries, women in the church were starting feminist religious groups. This dual heritage was, from the perspective of one who lived it, exciting and overwhelming. Feminist theologians were called upon to explore these new issues with the churches, since people largely hadn’t been thinking about women in the Bible or issues of sexual violence and women. But working with churches also meant long battles over women’s ability to give leadership, and feminist theologians carried dual responsibilities for church and seminary in a way that most non-feminist theologians did not.

The relationship between feminist theology and the church is complex and many-sided. Perhaps because my own history was with a group of women who tried very hard to use feminist theology to speak to the changing lives of women, I continue to value the relation between feminist theology and the church. I also believe that theology must speak of God through the church, though not only through the church, since the church itself exists, as Wesley knew so well, to bear witness to God in the world. So the question I want to address concerns the present relevancy of feminist theology for the church. Does feminist theology work in the real world? What can one learn for Christian living from feminist theology? How do we understand feminist theology in the context of the church?

I will begin answering these questions by first placing feminist theology in the context of the rather enormous changes in most women’s lives in the last thirty years. In so doing I want to suggest that from an existential-ecclesial perspective, feminist theology can be read as a practical, narrative theology to help women and men compose their lives. By existential-ecclesial perspective I simply mean the perspective of real persons in our churches who want and need a theology to address the problems and possibilities of finding God in their lives. When students ask me, “Will feminist theology sell in the parish?” I think that is an important (if ill put) question. Theology isn’t about selling a product, but it is about empowering persons to find God in their lives and to live their lives in
relation to God. Feminist theology does this by offering fundamental symbols of faith that both name and express God, self, and church in new ways. Furthermore, I want to suggest that feminist theology, by this mature age of thirty, offers us some fundamental orientative principles and values necessary for the practices of Christian narrativity. This essay has three parts: 1) an interpretation of feminist theology in light of the changes in the lives of U.S. women; 2) points for credible Christian narrativity; 3) orientative principles for real-world theology.

The Location of Feminist Theology

Theology is the Christian community’s language about God and world. Feminist theology shapes Christian language about God and world in and through the voices of women in the community, the struggle over the nature of gender, and the desire to know and speak more truly of a God who works for and with all persons. The term feminist needs to be understood as a kind of linguistic marker for thinking about the tremendous changes in women’s lives in the last thirty years in the United States as well as the concerns for women’s survival and flourishing around the globe. Feminist theology provides a metaphorical and symbolic space to figure out what all the ecclesial and cultural changes mean for theology and, vice versa, what theology brings to those changes.

In at least five areas major cultural upheavals in women’s lives shook the foundations of the traditional narratives about what it is to be a woman, requiring women to write their lives in new ways. These upheavals occurred in the areas of employment, reproductive practices, sexual practices, family structures, and rising rates and awareness of violence against women and children.

White middle-class and working-class women entered the work force in massive numbers during World War II. By the 1950s economic forces in the United States were requiring women to work outside the home in increasing numbers. In 1940, only 15 percent of all married women worked outside the home. By 1960, it was around 30 percent; by 1975, 44 percent of all married women with husbands present worked outside the home. Today at least 78 percent of adult women are in the work force.

Women have always worked; the increasing rate of women’s entrance into “public” work displays only the gendered identification
of work as that which goes on in the public sphere. Many women have worked outside the home, or better said, outside their home. Black women have worked in low-paying jobs, often traveling to other women’s homes to work and then returning to their own homes to work some more. Black women’s work has not been counted, however, as “work” because of the locus of their work in the private realm (white women’s houses). During slavery, 90 to 95 percent of black women worked, and in the years directly after emancipation this percentage moved to roughly 70 percent.

If women across class lines are now involved in what we call the labor force, they have been largely isolated into low-paying, “feminized” jobs. Eighty percent of women work in the jobs with the lowest 20 percent of pay. Indeed 60 percent of all women are employed in clerical and service sectors, where they toil, as Nancy Fraser has said, as feminized and frequently “sexualized” workers.

The second cultural upheaval in women’s lives has to do with the development of sophisticated reproductive technologies and the emergence and popularity of the birth control pill in the 1960s. Women, and families, could control their reproduction—provided, of course, that they could afford it. At least since the early part of the nineteenth century in the United States, many women indicated a growing desire for birth control, including the practice of abortion. There are at least two implications of the rise of reproductive technologies. First, women could and did limit the number of births. Second, the ability to control the number, let alone the timing of births, along with improved health care for women, resulted in women living longer, having years to fill without mother work. Indeed, if mother work once dominated all the years of women’s lives, by the 1960s mother work lasted only a fourth to a third of women’s adult years.

The third cultural upheaval has to do with changing sexual practices and new understandings of the meaning of sexuality. Sexuality, which before was only hinted at, became a dominant motif in all cultural practices—media, advertising, politics. The sexual revolution had enormous effects on U.S. culture, effects largely ignored in theology, preaching, and Christian education. Within Christianity, individuals were given few constructive ways of dealing with the changes, though allowed to go to counseling and pastoral caregivers when problems erupted.

The fourth broad cultural upheaval involves changing family practices and changing perceptions of family. After the 1960s, divorce
statistics showed a steady rise, and different family patterns began to be recognized. Again, this change is in part a matter of perception; for the so-called “traditional” nuclear family is of recent origin, and many groups in the United States have never experienced it as a norm. In addition to changing family patterns, the nuclear family ideology began to shift. The functions assigned to the ideal family since the turn of the nineteenth century—the formation of identity, the nurturing of intimacy, the development of children, and the propagation of morality and values—were narrowed by changing circumstances in economics and social structures and became assumed by other realms or institutions. One important result is the dramatic rise of single-parent, usually mother-headed families. It is predicted that in the future at least one-half of all children will live for at least a time in a single-parent family. Since for married, nondivorced women the average age of becoming widowed is fifty-six, most women will be in single-family situations for a significant part of their lives. Changing family identity, that is, what constitutes a family, is greatly influenced by new family forms among gays and lesbians as well as by new familial practices among single persons.

Rising rates of violence and increased awareness of violence against women is the fifth area of change, though this change may be more a change in the public recognition of this reality than a change in fact. In the U.S., violence is a daily reality for many women and children. Rita Nakashima Brock says quite pointedly: “In the United States suicide is the second most common form of death among teenagers; one in every five children grows up in poverty; one in every three women will be raped as an adult, one in every four daughters and one in every eight sons are molested by the age of eighteen; and every thirty-nine seconds a woman is battered in her own home.” The Center for Disease Control in Atlanta lists domestic violence against women as a leading health threat for women in the U.S.

The changes in work, reproduction, sexuality, and family and rising rates and recognition of violence against women and children reveal at least two facts that must be understood in order to grasp the present cultural realities for most women in the U.S. culture. First, these changed realities are neither the result of individual women’s choices nor the result of efforts by a small group of educated intellectuals to force feminism on the U.S. public. Feminism, more accurately understood, is located within these broader changes that affect the lives of all women (and men). It is important to stress, against any
possible misreading, that topics such as family, marriage, and children are still considered extremely important to many women, though not to all women. And those women who find marriage, family, and children important will have to define them in new ways, both because of the necessity of combining work and family and because of the choices now offered them by changing technological and social factors.

The second, and equally important, changed fact is the recognition that the normative homogeneous narratives concerning "woman" have themselves been an ideology to cover and silence a diversity of practices, narratives, and roles for women in U.S. culture. Women have never all fit the dominant narrative. Within this dialectical space—that the normative narrative does not work for even the middle class, and that women who have lived alternative patterns now find space to express their narratives—women are struggling, coping, experimenting with new ways to live.

On personal-existential, ecclesial, and cultural levels, all these changes require women to figure out their lives in new ways. The previous narratives that we learn from our families, our churches, our cultures, are by and large no longer possible. This causes both grief and relief, of course. But as Mary Catherine Bateson, professor of anthropology and English has noted, for many women in our culture, the primary task is that of composing their lives.

I use the notion of narrative for several reasons. First, as Alasdair MacIntyre contends, narrative history may be the most essential genre for describing human activity. Personal identity is not fixed, according to MacIntyre, but is constructed through narrative, or, in his language, narrative and identity presuppose each other. And narrative, as MacIntyre points out, portrays that we are never the authors of our narratives, but only co-authors, since there are always other influences that can be neither ignored nor minimized.

Narrative, second, is an important term in Christian practice and thought. At least since Augustine's *Confessions*, Western Christian theology has been attuned to narrative as a Christian practice. The Christian belief in baptism and the resultant responsibility that one has to live forward in grace is envisioned as a type of narrativity. From the medieval confessional to the pietist class meeting, the reflective awareness and narrative direction of Christian life is emphasized.

For Christians, of course, the believer's story is written within the sacred story and in the context of a communal story. Christianity has
long attended to particular narratives of what it is to be a woman within church, Scripture, and world. Sidonie Smith has suggested that Renaissance Christianity, for example, allowed four scripts to women: those of the nun, the queen, the wife, and the mother. Smith observes: “These four life scripts establish certain relationships among female speech, female sexuality, and female goodness, among the closed mouth, the closed womb, and the enclosure in house or convent.”

Feminist theology, in many ways, is located among these struggles and desires to form new narratives for and about women. I say narratives because feminist theology does not argue for one narrative for all women. The narratives feminists tell, and the practice of narrativity that feminism encourages for women, must include plots of survival as well as transformation. Plots of survival must be written for women whose lives are threatened; plots of transformation must be written for all women (and men) for the greater flourishing of God’s creation.

Narrating Theology

Feminist theology is about women’s narratives and, as theology, about narratives of God and world in the midst of changing times. Feminist theology isn’t one narrative; it isn’t a kind of Hegelian and Barthian theology in which all the pieces fit nicely together. It is theology more in the classical sense of thinkers such as Luther and Wesley, for whom the needs of the church and of the culture intersect with the possibilities and problems in the Scripture and other theological sources.

In some ways, the theological nature of feminism is what we might call a constellation: a set of points that relate to each other with juxtaposing pulls. A constellation is a type of narrative, but like some forms of classical theology offering us not so much a tight system but a productive space in which to move back and forth from place to place. Like classical theology, feminist theology can be a polemic: feminists are opposed to what they see as the distortion and destruction of God’s people, especially women, in the name of religion. This polemical side to feminist theology is often deemed its most heretical side, though theological polemics is, in some ways, central in the tradition of theology. Augustine wrote against Pelagians...
when he saw them stress too highly human will and thus downplay the
power and priority of God’s grace; Luther was upset about the
Catholic refusal to foreground God’s justifying grace. Feminists insist
that patriarchy is a form of idolatry and sin, and the church needs to
reform itself through God’s grace, freedom, and love.

I will identify three basic points in the feminist constellation: 1) the
diversity of women’s voices; 2) the investigation into the gendered
nature of Christian discourse and practice using internal and external
critique; and 3) the creation of productive discourses of
transformation. Because points one and two are frequently commented
on and because point three is the developing front of feminist
theology, I will give it more attention than the
other two points.

The diversity of women’s voices. The first
point has to do with feminist theology’s
emphasis on the importance of the diversity of
women’s voices. In a way, the simple naming of
the experiences of women by women has been
the first step toward creating a narrative agency
of and by women. Feminist theology, at least in
the latter half of the twentieth century, can be
said to begin officially with the 1960 publication
of Valerie Saiving’s article “The Human
Situation: A Feminine View,” in which she
criticized Reinhold Niebuhr and Anders Nygren
for identifying sin universally with self-assertion
and love with selflessness, arguing that such
forms of sin were based not on human
experience but on man’s experience. Soon
theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether,
Nelle Morton, and Mary Daly began to name
women’s experience. Though feminists no longer assume there is a
woman’s experience, the notion that women
name their experiences and identify experiences
as loci of theological practice is an extremely important step in
creating narrative agency. The naming of one’s own experience is an
essential spiritual activity, as Augustine both taught and showed. One
must voice one’s experience in order to find and name God present in

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our lives. And, as women began to voice publicly their experiences, they named some that hadn’t been a part of “human experience” upon which theologians wrote about: experiences of sexual violence, experiences of friendship between women, experiences of being mothers and daughters, experiences of God’s presence in domestic work, etc. As women narrated these experiences they began to push and question the meaning and changing the meaning of many of these experiences.

Feminist theology uses women’s experience, just as all theology uses human experience. Human experience is always concrete and specific: shaped through crucial influences of culture, politics, language, and the various expressions of subjectivity available at that time. Tradition is, after all, the codified experience of a particular group of persons that gets narrated, written down, and handed on through the generations. Feminist theology as reflecting the experiences of white, middle-class women was called to question by the “experiences” of African American women, of lesbians, of Hispanic American women, and of Asian American women. For instance, Jacqueline Grant, in *White Women’s Christ, Black Women’s Jesus*, examines various white women’s Christologies, showing that despite the differences between biblical, liberationist, and radical feminist Christologies, all share a common assumption of white women’s experiences of Jesus.15 Grant then begins to explore the experiences of Jesus in black women’s lives and in womanist thought.

God works incarnationally—in the particular and the concrete.16 This means not only that particular groups of women will have different experiences but that all our experiences will be distinct. This allows us, as feminist theology insists, the possibility of truly being in relation with one another, for only real difference allows for the possibility of real relation instead of simply fusion.

A theoretical investigation into the gender construction of Christianity using both internal and external critiques. Feminist theology employs various theories to examine how the Christian tradition, church practices, or even current theology is gendered, e.g., how it adopts whatever the current cultural rules are about what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman. Part of this gender critique is the opposition to patriarchy, the structuring of a social order on the natural superiority of men over women through laws, beliefs, practices of etiquette, cultural representation, etc. But, in general, feminist
theologians are after not merely patriarchy as the belief in the natural superiority of men over women but all cultural-political-religious systems that depend upon an ordering of superior and inferior through domination and power. In the words of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza patriarchy is "a differentiated system of graduated domination and subordination that found its classic Western legitimization in the philosophy of otherness." 17

From the earliest days of feminist theology the opposition to forming and speaking of God as male-superior has been insisted upon. As Mary Daly provocatively put it: "If God is male, then male is God." 18 This practice has elevated men over women, providing men some false belief in superiority and providing women continual struggles over self-esteem. The belief that God, as male, elected only men to be ordained has meant that countless numbers of women have ministered without recognition, and the church has been denied the resources of gifted women theologians. Feminist theology follows the Christian insistence that God is above all names for God and thus argues that to name God male and only male is to form a kind of idolatry.

If the image of God as male has functioned within the church to create a two-caste system in relation to the spirituality of women, it has furthermore led to narratives that too often create selves with little dignity or respect. This image of the maleness of God is filled in with values of judgment without love, of distance and transcendence, and without intimacy and immanence. As Carter Hayward has observed, many of the central images of God in theology deny or displace God's relatedness to the earth. 19 And Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite has observed that at its worst, patriarchal images contribute to the abuse of women and to women's acceptance of such abuse. 20

The fact that feminist theology has cast a critical eye on other theological forms and on Christian practice does not make it unique. Conversely, feminist theologians do not share one particular strategy of critique. For some feminists the critique of Christianity is internal, since the classical theological works already offer principles and sources of feminist critique. For other feminist theologians, critique comes from how the traditional discourse functioned and was used in particular ways. And for still other feminist theologians, the critique comes from new voices and new possibilities as a kind of utopian vision.
The Creation of Productive Discourses of Transformation. As feminists criticize the limitation of some Christian ideas and the distortions of some Christian practices, so feminists offer ideas and practices for Christian and human flourishing. Or, theologically speaking, we might say that feminists invoke a description and denouncement of sin, but feminists also offer words and images of grace.

Christian symbols, drawn from and through Scripture, tradition, and contemporary experience create spaces for Christian practices. Indeed, feminist theology focuses on the embodied practices of the Christian way made possible by the rich symbolism and rituals of the faith. For instance, the symbol of God when talked about as the loving Creator may well open us to feel connected with earth, and in turn this connectedness with God as Creator may allow us to open up spirituality as embodied in relatedness to the earth. Or to speak of the church as God's body, as in the body of Christ which we receive and enact in eucharistic practice, may allow us to take bodies seriously and concentrate on the bodies around the outside of our churches that are homeless; the symbolic practice of Eucharist may in turn invite us to think about our own body and begin to experience the body as site of God's grace, the body as the temple of God. Feminist theology works within the traditional symbolic logic of Christian tradition, refusing the literalization of symbols but demanding or requiring the analogical use of symbolic thought.

In order to provide new spaces for personal, ecclesial, and social narratives, feminist theologians have done an immense amount of symbolic work for the church. In a day when academic theologians appear to be preoccupied with theological method, feminist theologians have distinguished themselves by carrying on the symbolic work of systematic theology. Since a review is impossible in this short space, let me concentrate on three of the most important symbols and doctrines: God, anthropology, and ecclesiology.

The symbolic work on the doctrine of God must meet two requirements for feminism. First, such symbolic work must counter false patriarchal notions of God. Second, symbolic work on God must provide God connects with us not to negate what we are but to move us toward grace.

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connections with and spaces for the rest of Christian theology since, as the logic goes, other symbols both draw upon and refer back to God. Theologians pose the problem of patriarchy in different ways. For some, patriarchy is symbolized in the male imagery of God, so feminist constructive efforts focus on supplementing this language with the female language of mother, wisdom, and, to use the phrase of Elisabeth Johnson, *She Who Is.* For other feminists, additional problems arise with the patriarchal language of rigid hierarchical rule of King and Lord, so the images of God as friend and lover are important. I have argued that the language of God as wholly other needs to be replaced by a more grace-filled overflowing relation of God and world in *The Power to Speak.* Instead of patriarchal notions of God that stress separation and domination, feminist theologians tend to emphasize the relatedness and mutuality of God and world. God connects with us not to negate what we are but to move us toward grace. This is an extremely important point, and for those who locate themselves within the Wesleyan heritage a quite familiar one.

If God is spoken of in terms of connection and transformation, regeneration and mutuality, then it will not be surprising that a feminist theological view of the nature of humankind will be likewise distinctive—and decidedly different from neo-orthodox or liberal theological anthropologies. Feminist theologians offer an anthropology that is social, embodied, and valued through relations. And since the ideology of patriarchy, at least in Western Christianity, has been constructed through the notion that men and women are fundamentally different forms of being human, feminist theologians must carefully deconstruct much of the gendered constructs of anthropology. Feminist theologians have used the position of women to examine the basic tenets of modern anthropological constructs: that man is individual, autonomous, and disembodied. In this construct, woman is seen as inferior and as "other" because she represents all the lesser values, such as relationality, interdependence, and embodiment. Feminist theologians have developed a new anthropology that builds on these "lesser" values, arguing that human beings are all relational, interdependent, and embodied.

Within this new anthropology, feminist theologians identify central moral values of love, embodiment, and connectedness, according to ethicist Beverly Harrison. Love, Harrison maintains, is the power to "act-each-other-into-well-being." And since moral theology throughout so much of the Christian tradition has been dominated by an active
body/mind dualism, feminists must also construct embodiment as a moral value. Finally, the moral value of mutuality has to do with a quality of friendship reciprocity among self, others, and world.

When the symbolic focus on God as relational and caring for the transformation of God’s creation, gets joined with an anthropology that is communal, embodied, and mutual, the church becomes transformed into what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has called the *ekklesia*, the community of God’s redemptive presence, where women and men can be emancipated from sin and transformed into freedom. In this sense the ecclesia is defined by the presence of the Spirit.

Feminist theologians have done a great deal of work on reconceptualizing an ecclesiology that is, as Schussler Fiorenza maintains, an already and a not yet, already in our midst as an emerging possibility and not yet fully realized in the present.

Feminist theologians offer us exciting and richly textured understandings of the ecclesia. This work can be grouped around three fundamental symbols: the ecclesia as the counter-public of justice, the ecclesia as the community of friends, and the ecclesia and the spirituality of connectedness. Feminist theologians suggest that the church is a place where justice can be envisioned and practiced both within the church and for the broader world. For feminism, Christianity is about justice: not merely distributive justice—justice that distributes the excess of wealth among the poor—but communicative justice. Communicative justice is the process and practice of communal living so that each person has a voice in self-determination and community determination.

Feminists also see the possibility of naming the church as a community of friends. Feminists envision the church as a community of truth-telling, of hope, of nurturing connections. Deeply tied to the image of the church as justice, feminist theologians speak of an ecclesial reality in which grace is present in the fullness of relations. Letty Russell images this kind of substantive community and justice in the language of the church as roundtable connection, kitchen table solidarity, and welcome-table partnership. In a day in which many churches desperately seek to form new language of community, feminist theology offers theological images and symbols that can be realized in the present.

Feminists image the church as spaces of spirituality, of spaces where persons live intensely a connection to God, others, self, and world. This connectedness, according to Sallie McFague, leads both to

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a natural piety and to ethical response, which in turn is rooted in an appreciation of creation:

It is, finally, at a deep level, an aesthetic and religious sense, a response of wonder at and appreciation for the unbelievably vast, old, rich, diverse and surprising cosmos, of which one's self is an infinitesimal but conscious part, the part able to sing its praises.27

As McFague points out, this spirituality includes an attitude of piety and an ethical response. The ethical response is to live in respect for the differences and the diversity of creation, to help the planet and humans to flourish, and to tend the connections within which we live. The relation of ethics, aesthetics, and religious sense produces spiritual values, including the values of mutuality, embodiment, and openness.

**Living in the Real World: Resources for Survival and Transformation**

My argument then, is that feminist theology must be located within the context of the dramatic and changing realities for men and women in this country. Though I think it is fair to argue that feminist theology originates out of a kind of crisis of narrativity for middle- and working-class women, its theological appeal is to the crisis of survival and flourishing for women, men, and children all over the globe. Feminist theology offers us particular symbolic work, only a little of which I have been able to mention. Such symbolic work helps women, and men, to write our narratives, to find God in our lives, and to live our lives unto God. Feminist theology also offers us some important orientative principles for our ongoing theological work.28 By orientative principles, or what the pragmatists call leading principles, I mean fundamental principles of organizing our understanding and acting. If symbols provide the “stuff” of our narratives, orientative principles provide strands that link these symbols together in the practices of our lives. I want to suggest that feminism gives us three orientative principles: 1) seeing and valuing through connection rather than opposition, based on a fundamental belief of the relatedness of God and world; 2) the power of Christian practices, that combine
ritual, belief, and discipleship through symbolic practices; and 3) a focus on the communal and corporate as constituting Christianity.

Seeing and valuing through connection rather than opposition, based on a fundamental belief of the relatedness of God and world. At its most basic level theology helps us to see and to value the world in which we live. It provides us with our preferred values, shows us how the different parts are related, and gives us principles for interpreting and valuing identity. There are all sorts of different theological patterning. Many may recall H. Richard Niebuhr’s book *Christ and Culture*, in which he talked about different patterns between the world and God.  

Recent thinkers, including philosophers, social scientists, and theologians, have identified oppositional thinking as one of the dominant and problematic patterns of the time. According to Patricia Hill Collins, oppositional thinking is almost a reflex action among North Americans, given our haste to construe everything in dualities, such as either male or female, white or black, etc.  

Then we intensify this interpretive lens by relating the differences we see in terms of opposition: one set of values and characteristics get assigned to male, and the other utterly to female. Finally, of course, we relate such differences through the lens of domination and objectification.

This oppositional thinking is fairly pervasive in U.S. culture: I can establish my identity and goodness only by making you the bad guy. We see this oppositional thinking operating in much Christian infighting, in identity politics, and even in theology in all the attempts to make God utterly other than, or completely over all. Theological oppositional thinking can be very complex, and even slightly seductive, when we assume that we are the only “real” Christians and all others who think anything different are bad or immoral. 

Feminist theologians offer a set of very different orientative principles based on a rich symbolism of relatedness of God and world. Feminist theologians see and value all the differences among people, and how these differences can relate in a variety of ways. Rather than

Feminist theology assumes that we will be blessed, not cursed, through difference.
oppositional thinking, feminist theology provides a kind of connected thinking that seeks to empathetically find positions of similarity and difference, and to see both as abundant riches.

As Diana Teitjens Meyers has recently suggested, feminists offer a kind of empathetic valuing, empathetic in the sense of being able to imaginatively construe how the world must be to another person and thus not assume the other person’s experience is or has to be exactly like mine. Invoking a kind of empathy of respectfulness, feminist theology assumes that we will be blessed, not cursed, through difference.

**The power of Christian practices that combine ritual, belief, and discipleship.** Christian theology, throughout its history, has variously understood Christianity to be a contemplative way, a kind of piety or a body of correct ideas. One of the dominant questions for our day is what is Christianity? Many on the present scene insist that Christianity is fundamentally correct belief, a set of propositions to which one subscribes. Within the tradition, the importance of the creeds cannot be ignored. But Christianity has traditionally involved not only ideas to which we assent but rituals which we perform and partake, disciplined ways of spirituality, and fundamental practices such as narrativity, community building, and missions.

Feminist theology provides an orientative principle to the religious practices of Christianity that includes, but is broader than, the correct formulation of belief. To say this differently, belief is set in the context of rich symbolic practices. By the term *practice* I mean socially shared forms of behavior that mediate between what are often called subjective and objective dimensions. A practice is a pattern of meaning and action that is both communally constructed and individually instantiated. The notion of practice draws us to inquire into the shared activities of groups of persons that provide meaning and orientation to the world and that guide action. Worship, for instance, is a shared practice of the Christian faith in which Christians are formed and through which Christians interact with God and others. To express an idea about worship, such as reverence to God, does not fully capture the complex and rich pattern of actions, intentions, emotions, judgments, and meaning that constitutes worship.

Feminists prioritize practices as a way of stressing the ideas but also the very embodiment of the Christian way. For instance, worship does involve meaningful and true ideas, but it also involves the movements of bodies, the sensorial engagement of sight, hearing, taste, smell and
feeling, and the involvements of affective, ethical, and cognitive dimensions of experience. Or the practice of narrativity includes not only the ideas about God or self but the relationships one has, the embodiment of sacred worth as a child of God, the discipleship of faith in the constancy of spiritual connectedness. The feminist focus on practice provides the church an embodied, engaged, and richly textured vision of Christian life. To relate theological reflection in and through practices allows us to move beyond the split between thought and practice, belief and discipleship.

A focus on the church, the communal and corporate, as constituting Christianity. In Theology of Hope Jürgen Moltmann criticized the modern church for its individualism, for its cult of existential feel-good religion, for its privatization into groups of like-minded people, and its corporate form as simply one more modern institution. The church, Moltmann claimed, is a secondary place for believers. Moltmann argued what most North Americans believe, since polls show that 80 percent of all North Americans believe you can be a good Christian without ever going to church.

And yet, a shift to the other extreme—that of a kind of Christian communitarianism—is equally problematic. For Christianity has long sensed the importance of narrativity, of the individual composing his or her life in a context. And it is impossible for most of us, if not all of us, to separate from the world economically, culturally, politically, linguistically, and morally in order to live in a pure Christian community.

Feminism refuses the option of Christian individualism or Christian communitarianism and instead understands the church as constituting but not determining personal narrative. For feminists the ecclesia has an extremely important role in constituting and carrying out Christianity. As I have already mentioned, a great deal of work is done in feminist theology around reconceiving the church as a countersphere of justice, a community of friendship, and a spirituality of connectedness.

It is important to clarify the notion that the church constitutes but does not determine personal narratives. For feminist theologians the individual ability and responsibility to compose one’s narrative is central to Christianity, and it is done best in a communal context. The phrase coined by Nelle Morton, still very popular in feminist theology, “hearing one another into speech,” identifies the communal context of crafting one’s life. Another illustration of the constituting nature of the corporate and communal is the refusal of feminist theologians to...
write theology for everyone at all times and all places. Indeed, feminist theologians often speak of theology as an act of quilting, contributing one piece to the broader theological quilt. Theology is never final, or total, or complete; but rather one adds one’s own voice, perspective, piece. A student of mine put it this way as she was writing about feminist theology and feminist preaching:

The crazy quilt represents what Christian feminist theology is about. The quilt itself represents the piecing together of our everyday experience in a communal act of love and the acceptance of all people and life experiences. It redefines beauty and by redefining what is beautiful, feminist theology deconstructs and reorders values, norms, and structures.35

Feminist theology is good news for the church. It is not that feminist theology is the only or absolute form of good news but simply that its resources have much to offer a church that is hungering and thirsting for a vital form of the gospel. I do not think feminist theology is without its problems nor do I think every feminist theologian would agree with my own assessment or interpretation of feminist theology. But thirty years into its maturity, feminist theology has some vital and necessary resources for us all.

Notes

4. Degler, At Odds, 227-228.
6. Important exceptions were lesbian theologians who began to compose their narratives in theological terms. See, for instance, Carter Ward, Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and Love of God (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).


11. Ibid., 38.


16. See also Chung Hyun Kysung, Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990); and Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, En La Lucha: In the Struggle (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).


18. Daly, Beyond God the Father, 19.


25. Schüssler Fiorenza has developed this notion of the church as a countersphere of justice in But She Said and Discipleship of Equals.


Theodore W. Jennings, Jr.

The Permanent Crisis of Liturgy

Over the course of the last several years I have given considerable attention to developing a theological reflection that takes the liturgical action of the people of God as its starting point. Thus far, reflections on prayer and praise, on the confession and forgiveness of sins, and on the affirmation of faith, have given expression to this perspective. At the same time I have accompanied these theological reflections with work on the nature of ritual action from the standpoint of phenomenology and philosophy of religion.

This concentration on liturgy as the starting point for theological and ethical reflection may suggest that I take worship itself to be an essential and indispensable expression of the gospel and of Christian life and faith; that I suppose that to be a Christian is to be one who participates in the worship of the gathered community; and that this is essential to Christian identity.

I think nothing of the sort. Being a Christian has nothing to do with worship and what is now called liturgy. So far from being central to the life of faith, these activities should be regarded as marginal and peripheral. They may be somewhat helpful, but they are more often positively dangerous to the health of faithful discipleship. The idea that by going to church—by attending worship—we have done something that places us in relation to the God of Jesus Christ or that

Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. is Professor of Constructive Theology at the Chicago Theological Seminary and author of *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics and Loyalty to God: The Apostles Creed in Life and Liturgy.*
we have done something that participates in the reign of God is the most catastrophic delusion that infects the life of faith.

If this is the way I see worship, why spend so much energy on it? Because it is experienced by so many would-be followers of Jesus as central and essential, because it may and does lead to profound confusion concerning the call and claim of the gospel, and because I hope and believe that it may also become an unlikely instrument for conversion to the life of faithful discipleship.

Accordingly, I want to suggest the ways in which our liturgy and worship are deeply problematic for the life of faith understood as participation in the way of Jesus Christ. I contend that if we take it for granted that worship is an appropriate activity for faith, then we have lost sight of the gospel. We have begun to worship the false gods of religion rather than to follow the One who comes to inaugurate the reign of justice and generosity and joy.

The gospel is always inherently antiliturgical, antireligious. But this does not invalidate the project of a liturgical theology; instead, this is the very basis and ground of a serious reflection on liturgy. Thus, my aim is not to try to persuade people to give up worship and liturgy and ritual. Rather, I want to show that our liturgical life is always in a permanent state of crisis when it is confronted by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel as Crisis

Before proceeding to a specific discussion of liturgy and the sphere of religion, it is important that we place this discussion in a wider context. It is critical to recall that the gospel places every sphere of human life in crisis. All the ways that we organize our life in the world are brought into question by the announcement of the inbreaking of the divine reign of justice, generosity, and joy. When the gospel enters the sphere of economics, it produces a counter- or even an anti-economics. When the gospel enters the sphere of politics, it engenders a counter- or anti-politics. When the gospel enters the sphere of marriage and family life, it engenders a counter- or anti-family. And when the gospel enters the sphere of religion, it produces a kind of counter- or anti-religion.

We are not to abandon these spheres of life (even if we could) but to subvert, transgress, and transform them. Thus, we should no more abandon religion and ritual than we should abandon politics or...
economics or sexuality. But Christianity is no more at home in this sphere than it is in the patriarchal family, the hierarchical social order, or the economy of greed.

In order to be more clear about the subversive relation of Christianity to the spheres of everyday life we should remind ourselves of the way these contradictions are typically expressed. In the area of getting and spending, of saving and investing, of distribution and acquisition, the enactment of the gospel produces a countereconomics. In the Gospel of Mark, for example, when the crowds around Jesus are hungry and the disciples think of returning to the market economy of the village, Jesus instead suggests the distribution of the meager resources of the poor as the way to produce abundance (6:34–44). The disciples are sent out into the world without a penny in their pockets or even a change of underwear (Mark 6:8–9) in order to be dependent upon the kindness of strangers, whose kindness is the sign of the inbreaking of the divine reign. Accordingly, the earliest community of faith is constituted by the pooling of resources to feed the hungry and clothe the naked (Acts 2:44–45). Nothing of this makes sense in the economics of the world. It only makes sense on the extraordinary supposition that the divine reign of generosity is at hand.

Similarly in the field of politics, “Among the nations those who wish to be leaders lord it over the others, but among you the leader will be the slave of the rest” (Mark 10:42–45). Thus does Jesus mark the absolute qualitative distinction between the politics of this world and the politics of the new age that is dawning and which dawns whenever people take this path. It is quite clear that Jesus seeks to overthrow the power arrangements of this world, but he does this by nonviolent confrontation and resistance—the path, that is, of martyrdom. This is the alternative politics of the reign of God.

Even today, on the public debate about marriage and family values, Jesus’ mission and messages makes for a crisis. He renounces the traditional structures of the family based on blood ties and inheritance and instead advocates collaboration in the cause of God as that which makes for sisters and brothers (Mark 3:31–35). But while the new family has mothers, there are and can be no fathers (Matt. 23:9). Jesus

When the gospel enters into the dimensions of life in the world, it produces a cataclysm.
overturns marriage and family values so thoroughly that he can be remembered as saying that anyone who does not hate mother and father and brother and sister and spouse and child is not worthy of the reign of God (Luke 14:26–27).

When the gospel enters into the dimensions of life in the world, it produces a cataclysm. Nowhere is this more evident than in the sphere of religion, of temple and priest, sacrifice and ritual, worship and liturgy.

How often some preachers remind their congregations that Jesus attended synagogue and temple. Yet seldom do we mention that Jesus enters these places only in order to cause a riot. Whether it is to repudiate the privileges of those who think of themselves as the people of God, to overthrow prohibitions against work on the sabbath, to taunt the upholders of religion and respectability, or to blockade the temple, Jesus enters sacred space only to obliterate the wall of separation between sacred and profane that is the very heart and soul of the religious impulse.

He subordinates religion to human welfare of the most ordinary kind, not hesitating even to take issue with scripture, the written instruction of Israel’s God. And his attitude is infectious, leading his followers to ignore even the most rudimentary religious practices of ritual washing, fasting, or sabbath observance. He goes away to pray, it is true. But he does so not in a congregation but in the desert, and he explicitly forbids his followers to pray in public (Matt. 6:6). If you must be religious, he seems to say, then hide it away.

No wonder his death is marked by the rending of the temple veil, the final obliteration of the possibility of separating the holy from the profane, the sacred from the secular. The death of Jesus is the end of religion, the unveiling of all religion as an offense against God. Thereafter Paul, who transforms the gospel of the messiah into the good news for the nations, will designate all that belongs to religion, whether it be circumcision or holy days, as “flesh” (Gal. 4:8–11; 5:1–6).

It can scarcely be surprising then that the early communities of faith were regarded as hotbeds of what today might be called “secular humanism.” Like the most dangerous philosophies of their day, they rejected all forms of worship: sacrifice, temple, priesthood. All that the Hellenistic world understood as religion these strange Christians regarded as sheer superstition and idolatry. Thus, one of the most common charges against the Christians was that they were atheists and irreverent. The first Christian theologians, the apologists, responded to this charge by borrowing a critique of religious practice then
circulating among the philosophers, especially the Epicureans and Cynics. But there was one crucial difference: they were irreligious for God's sake.

In this way the early Christian movement was able to draw not only upon the most radical traditions of philosophy but also upon the heritage of the prophets whose message had been radicalized and intensified by Jesus of Nazareth. For it was the prophets who rejected the religion not only of the nations but most especially of Israel itself, in the name of the God of the Exodus, the God who desires justice rather than, instead of, worship.

This God rejects religion because we use it so well to distract ourselves from that in which God is really interested: justice and mercy for the weak and despised, the vulnerable and the marginalized. It is only the practice of this justice which can in any way correspond to the nature of the One who acted through Moses, who speaks through the prophets, and whose intent is to inaugurate the new world of justice and generosity and joy.

**The Religious Problem**

Now, my friends, this must be familiar. After all, it is in the Bible. It is not hidden away in arcane texts but echoes like a trumpet blast through the whole Word of God. This must be the basis for any reflection upon our worship and liturgy, any reflection, that is to say, on our own participation in the sphere of religion. The radical and comprehensive critique of religion is the beginning and the aim of any liturgical theology that pretends to have any connection whatsoever to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Otherwise, our theology of worship will become the intellectual justification for superstition and idolatry.

Does this mean that we should abandon religion? No, no more than we should abandon politics or economics. For it is the character of the gospel as message that it must be articulated, must come to expression, in the languages of every culture. Likewise, religion has its part to play in culture: for most, perhaps all, cultures, religion constitutes what Tillich called the depth dimension. Anthropologists suggest that religion is often the expression of the most basic structure of meaning and communication within a culture. To leave religion untouched by the gospel would mean that we forfeit the possibility of encountering a culture at its dimension of depth. It would mean that
we do not seize upon the possibility of communicating the gospel in the terms of the basic grammar of a culture. Since the gospel is the announcement and enactment of the inbreaking of the reign of God, it must come to expression in this sphere just as it must come to expression in all other spheres of human life. Just as the gospel comes to expression, and must do so, in the public arena of politics and economics and in the more private realms of marriage and family values, so also must it come to expression in the sphere of religion.

But here we approach the greatest danger to our faith. The economic and political, the domestic and psychological structures of this world receive their legitimation and are represented as corresponding to the divine by means of religion. Ritual activity sets forth the basic paradigms of action in the world and community; these patterns sustain the world and community and maintain the arrangements of power and privilege in the world. In terms of the gospel, this means that this domain of religion is one of idolatry and superstition. It is the place where we encounter the principalities and powers that make the world impervious to the inbreaking of the divine reign of justice and generosity and joy. Religion is the deep structure, what Paul calls the stoicheia tou kosmou, of the world that is passing away (Gal. 4:3, 9; Col. 2:20).

The gospel must penetrate the sphere of religion because religion is a part, and often the most fundamental part, of human life. But by entering into religion the gospel is most in danger of being lost, of becoming its own opposite, of becoming the religious sanctification of the world that is passing away. This is the essential dilemma of a liturgical theology.

In order to see what is at stake here, let me give a couple of illustrations from the early church. To show how the cross of Jesus had turned the world upside down, early Christian theologians took the risk of communicating the meaning of the cross in terms of sacrifice, that is, using the religious language and practice of the Hellenistic world. All cultures, whether Jewish or “pagan,” practiced sacrifice, the presentation of animal or cereal offerings to the divine. This practice presented a wealth of possibilities for communicating to the people the significance of the gospel in the familiar idiom of the culture. Of course, there were a number of other discourses into which the meaning of the cross was articulated: the language of criminal law, for example, or of the manumission of slaves. But alongside these possibilities the early Christian theologians also risked bringing the
gospel to expression in the language of religious practice, that is, the language of sacrifice.

In this appropriation of the language of sacrifice, the practice of sacrifice as commonly understood was abolished. For it was claimed that the understanding of the cross as sacrifice meant that no other sacrifice now made any sense. This is the burden of the argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The very text which makes most use of the language of religious practice also abolishes this practice as now outmoded.

Another illustration of this same dynamic is found in the language of the Book of the Apocalypse. It is often recognized that this text makes much use of liturgical language. More recently it has been realized that the language of praise is borrowed from the Roman imperial liturgy for the appearance of the emperor, for example, in hailing the appearing one as lord of lords and king of kings. In appropriating the liturgy of empire in order to address those who are in danger of persecution by the same empire, the seer subverts the religious language of the Roman Empire. The world emperor who is king of kings is precisely the victim of the imperial order, the lamb slain from the foundation of the earth.

There is nothing about the gospel which makes it "at home" in the domain of sacrificial or imperial practices. The gospel is brought to expression in these terms not because the gospel is itself an alternative imperial cult or an alternative sacrificial system but because these are discourses and practices that are familiar to those for whom the gospel is intended. These discourses are appropriated in the same way that the discourses of mystery cult or gnostic speculation or stoic or epicurean or cynic popular philosophy are also appropriated: in order to bring the gospel to expression in the discursive domains of the intended hearers of the gospel.

The gospel has no native language, no discourse that is its own.

The PERMANENT CRISIS OF LITURGY
can then take this language at face value in such a way that it actually legitimates imperial rule. Then the language of king of kings is transferred back to the design of sanctifying imperial structures rather than subverting them, making Christianity the stabilizing pillar, the religious justification for imperial policy. From Constantine onwards, autocrats have exploited this possibility of turning the gospel on its head.

Sacrificial language has been similarly exploited. The subversive appropriation of this language can come to be forgotten to the extent that Christianity has been construed as a sacrificial cult. Thus, the “Lord’s Supper” came to be understood as the offering of a sacrifice by the priest upon the altar in a temple. In this way Christianity assumes the characteristics of opulent sanctuary, priestcraft, and offerings that are ostensibly rendered to God but actually support the voracious appetites of a religious establishment. For the “common people” this is surrounded by an aura of cultic mystery and indeed superstition that, instead of liberating them from darkness, actually perpetuates that which the gospel abolishes.

Thus the subversive appropriation of cultic language is itself subverted, or rather perverted, into a set of religious sanctions to perpetuate a world that is perishing.

This danger was clearly seen by the reformers and especially by the so-called left wing of the Reformation. Some even proposed the elimination of the specifically religious or cultic aspects of Christian expression. I think there is ample justification for the most extreme forms of suspicion directed against religious ritual. But, again, I do not suppose that the only justifiable remedy is to simply abandon worship and liturgy, ritual and sacrament.

This is true because human beings seem to be, at least in large numbers, incurably religious. So long as people express the meaning of their lives in religious ways then the gospel must use this means to announce and enact the liberative word concerning the action of God in the mission and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Paul, who was willing to become all things to all people so that some might be claimed for the gospel, is exemplary here. For the sake of those held captive by religious discourse and practice we must be bold to enter into this alien and dangerous territory—for the sake of the gospel. But exactly how are we to make use of this domain for the sake of the life of faith?
Liturgy as Paradigm for Life

In order to understand this properly it is well to recall the programmatic suggestion of Paul: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your rational worship” (Rom. 12:1).

What is “rational worship”? It is our form of life, our “lifestyle.” It is this which is conformed to the will of the God who comes to us outside the precincts of sacred space and time in the mission and ministry, the execution and resurrection of Jesus. To offer up our bodies means to offer our way of being in the world, our visible, everyday, and ordinary form of life, our way of engaging the world of other persons. This is what it means to have and to be a “body.” It is therefore important that we “not be conformed to the world but transformed by the renovation of [our] mind,” i.e., our orientation to the world. It is this which must be renewed so that we not be in conformity with the way things are but are instead transformed and transforming.

Our rational worship is thus opposed to irrational worship, to a worship that perpetuates the world as it is by giving that world a kind of religious sanction and legitimation. This is the irrational worship that the world knows as religion. Religion in the ordinary sense distracts us from the transformation of heaven and earth by encouraging us to play religious games that assure our life in the old earth and transportation to the old heaven.

Irrational worship is that which transpires in temples and is supervised by priests, which perpetuates the distinction between sacred and profane, between the religious and the secular, between the holy and the worldly. It is this irrational worship, which Paul also calls flesh, which is abolished by the overthrow of the old order through the cross of Jesus.

True worship on the other hand is the form of life in the world that announces and enacts the transformation of the world through the gospel of God concerning Jesus Christ. It is our life with others, a life which exhibits the commitment of God to the least of all, that establishes a new society exhibiting true justice.
But if our true and rational worship is our life in the world, our life with others, our existence as enactment of the coming of the dominion of justice and generosity and joy, then what is the role of worship in the old worldly and fleshly sense of religious ritual and liturgy? I have tried to argue in other contexts that our so-called “public worship” has as its only possible justification that it actually forms and shapes our life in the world in such a way as to enable us to live a life that enacts the inbreaking of the divine reign, and so the transformation of heaven and earth.

Insofar as our religion distracts us from discipleship in the world, insofar as it serves as a respite or escape from the world or an alternative religious sphere into which we may briefly escape, then that worship is not the expression but the repudiation of the gospel. It becomes the worship of the anti-Christ, the enactment of the anti-gospel, the religious repudiation of God. It is flesh in the false guise of spirit.

Thus I have suggested that public prayer, which is forbidden by Jesus as a religious activity, may be permissible as the demonstration of forms of yearning for God’s coming—yearning that shapes our life in the world as solidarity with those who groan under the yoke of oppression and death, those who hunger and thirst for the dominion of justice and life.

Or the activity of confessing our sins may model for us ways of becoming clear about our own collaboration in bondage and brokenness so that in our everyday life in the world we may unmask and renounce the idols that enslave us and our world.

Or with the affirmation of faith we may declare our loyalty to the crucified so that we will be enabled to follow Jesus and participate in his mission and ministry of announcing and enacting the coming reign of God, even if it means also sharing in his destiny.

All of this means that what we do in church may enable us to practice patterns of activity that equip us to become faithful companions of Jesus and so heirs of the new creation.

Application

The description I have given of the permanent crisis of liturgy may seem far removed from the weekly work of preparing the order of worship for our congregations. Since congregations do worship, and
pastors have responsibility for overseeing this activity, is there any practical application of all this to our work of worship?

I think understanding the permanent crisis of worship can make a great difference in the life of the gathered community. To make this point I want to close with some remarks about one element of our liturgy which has received all too little attention even though it is often perceived as the whole point of the gathering for worship: the collection of our tithes and offerings.

When I was a student I heard the story of the enterprising evangelist who made his living among the poor of the inner city. He would preach with great power and eloquence. After the offering was received he would take the money and toss it all in the air. In this way, he told his people, God could take all he wanted. And the rest, it was clear, was what God intended for the use of his unworthy servant, the evangelist himself. Consequently the evangelist was a wealthy man, and he maintained that his wealth had been given to him by God.

The first time I heard this story I was astonished both at the audacity of the preacher and the gullibility of his hearers. But I am less astonished now, for I have seen something of the world and have even been a pastor myself. I know now that what this evangelist did is precisely what we all do, though we seldom take the risk of tossing the money into the air where God might get her hands on it. Rather, we set it upon the altar with solemn words about its being given to God for the work of God’s reign. Thereafter, it is deposited in a bank and the bills are paid, including, of course, our salary, health insurance, pension, transportation allowance, housing allowance, and whatever else may be essential in the budget. We do not get rich perhaps. After all, we are more clever than that. Besides, some of the money has to pay the salaries of district superintendents, bishops, administrators, church bureaucrats and, lest I forgot, seminary professors as well.

It does not take a theologian to notice this. I cannot tell you how often people I meet, especially people of the working classes who have been alienated from churches, point to this as the Achilles heel of our church life. They will remark, quite sensibly, it seems to me, that preachers in particular and churches in general appear to make the payment of a kind of tax the essential point of worship. One goes to church to have money taken from your pocket and placed in the preacher’s pocket—or, at least, the church’s pocket.

At some time or another all of us have felt deeply embarrassed about this. It is difficult not to feel a bit like a prostitute when it comes...
time to set the church budget or to have something called stewardship Sunday. We console ourselves with the reflection that it is necessary for the church to survive and for us to feed our families and for the building and program to be maintained or even expanded. Most of the time we persuade ourselves that all of this is somehow or other related to doing the work of God even if we are not able to say precisely how this is so. In any case, it is our job to see to it that the budget is made, apportionments paid, and the church maintained.

There is much here that is difficult to justify. John Wesley knew the dangers of money in religion, and so the Large Minutes contains the instruction that all preaching houses should be made as simple and inexpensive as possible. Otherwise, he said, we would have to be dependent on rich men. And if we became dependent upon them it would be the end of Methodist discipline and doctrine, too. His words have been verified in the experience of nearly every pastor in Christendom. The appetite for finer sanctuaries, for better professional compensation, for more up-to-date plants and equipment, programs and publications is, or seems to be, insatiable.

And all of this comes to a head at the moment in our worship when we “take up the collection.” It is here, for example, that our use of scripture becomes most self-serving and indeed willfully distorted. We speak of tithing. Yet there is and can be no justification in the New Testament for this practice. For New Testament Christianity abolished the temple and the altar, the priesthood and the sacrificial system which was maintained by the temple tax.

We use stories of the good that is done by that portion of the money collected which is used for providing shelter for the homeless or food for the hungry, but we never say what a minuscule proportion of our budgets is actually destined for the direct relief of the poor. Is this not what is called a “bait and switch” tactic in the
rapacious world of consumer capitalism? We speak of presenting our offerings to God, but we know it goes in the bank to pay the bills.

No matter how we disguise it with imposing music from the choir, sententious scraps of scripture, or solemn words of prayer, it all rings false and therefore falsifies all that we say and do in our worship. For here is a case where religion gains the upper hand over the gospel, and the gospel merely legitimizes the maintenance of religion with all its trappings.

By this example we teach the people of God that scripture may be distorted for self-serving ends; that the church may substitute for God; that the business of religion is securing and maintaining our existence, individual and institutional, in the world; that the church is but the mirror of consumer capitalism and so its liturgical legitimation. How can we be delivered from this quagmire of self-serving hypocrisy and egregious bad faith?

Actually I think a rather simple modification of this element of our worship can work wonders. So I make a very modest suggestion. Whatever we do with money collected for the private use of our religious establishment, we should never put it anywhere near the altar of that God who says: "I hate, I despise your festivals ... and your solemn assemblies" (Amos 5:21). To this altar rather we bring only and exclusively that which is destined immediately and directly to the poor, the destitute, to those whom God has made God's own charge and care. By the altar of this God we may heap the clothes we give to the naked, the food we offer to the hungry, the money that goes to provide them with shelter and job training and health care. Here we place the letters we write demanding the release of prisoners of conscience, the time we spend befriending criminals and prostitutes and defending the despised and disreputable. Here we place, in short, all that which specifically and directly benefits these least whom our Lord calls his own flesh and blood.

For this and this alone is an offering that has to do with the God of the prophets, that God who has become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, the God in whose mission of world redemption and transformation we are graciously permitted and indeed relentlessly summoned to participate.

In this way we would reclaim the pentecostal experience of the early church of which it was said: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed to all, as any had need." (Acts 2:44-45). And again: "Now the company of those who believed were of one
heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the disciples' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need" (Acts 4:32, 34). In this way we would also correspond to the practice of Wesley's societies, where all the money collected was given away to the needy even when it became necessary by other means to pay for the costs of the movement.  

By such a simple liturgical innovation we would, at a stroke, give greater integrity to our worship, model honesty rather than dishonesty in our use of the Bible, and practice the values of generosity and gratitude that abolish the worldly values of debt and merit. We could prepare ourselves to imitate in our daily lives the One who "though he was rich, for our sakes became poor."

Conclusion

In our age as in every age our worship is caught in a cultural crisis. Now as always and everywhere we are faced with the challenge of bringing the gospel to expression in the cultural idiom of our time and place so that this gospel may be incarnate in the experience of the people whom God has claimed for the new creation.

But the crisis in liturgy goes beyond the momentary issues of particular cultural expressions and clashes. For what is really at stake here and everywhere is a clash of eons. There is the old world of self-interest and anxiety which gives divine sanction to the structures of falsehood and death, of bondage and brokenness through the practices of religion. And there is the new world of the reign of God breaking in wherever the gospel is announced and enacted, breaking in and transforming every area of life into the new creation, a new heaven and a new earth.

It is to this conflict in eons and to our confidence in the triumph of God that all that we do may and must give testimony, even what we do in the area of our worship. For here, too, it is true that whoever will save one's own life will lose it, but whoever will surrender life for the sake of the gospel will find true life, abundant and overflowing.
Notes

1. A revised version of the Denham Lecture, given at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, in 1994.

2. Life as Worship: Prayer and Praise in Jesus’ Name (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982).


A friend of mine recently conducted the funeral service for two infants who had died in an apartment fire. Afterwards, he said to me, “If it had not been for the liturgy of the church—the prayers, the hymns, the words of committal—we could not have stood there at the grave and buried those two little girls.” The liturgy gave these mourners a place to stand as they confronted the abyss of evil. It expressed their grief and their hope.

The pastoral value of worship for those afflicted by evil has long been recognized. Yet we have rarely considered worship as a place to stand when viewing the problem of evil theologically. Protestant theology in particular has neglected worship as a setting and source for critical theological reflection. This article will explore the problem of evil from a liturgical perspective. It seeks to ground theological reflection on the issue in the liturgy itself.

Theologian Douglas Hall has written:

*With the problem of human suffering it is especially true that answers are on the whole both inadequate and inappropriate. What is needed most, whether in the theological classroom or in the pastoral situation, is a place to which to refer the question...*}

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Rowan D. Crews, Jr. is Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Claflin College, Orangeburg, South Carolina, one of eleven Historically Black Colleges and Universities related to the United Methodist Church.
In what follows, I hope to demonstrate the theological appropriateness of referring the question of evil to worship.

The Theological Significance of the Lament

Using "A Service of Death and Resurrection" from the United Methodist Book of Worship, the congregation at the funeral of the two infants prayed:

God of us all, your love never ends.  
When all else fails, you still are God.  
We pray to you for one another in our need,  
and for all, anywhere, who mourn with us this day.

Here, as in the biblical psalms of lament, human suffering is brought before God. This is the function of the lament, so well described by the superscription of Psalm 102: "A prayer of one afflicted, when faint and pleading before the Lord." The lament, Claus Westermann observes, is the means by which human affliction is brought before God. As such, the lament is already worship. For worship is, at least in part, the human address to God, bringing every matter of life before God. The liturgical expression of suffering is perhaps most obvious in the funeral service (see, too, the healing services), but it also appears in the regular Sunday worship of the church, during which the congregation typically prays for the ill and dying, the poor and oppressed, the unemployed, and victims of violence.

While the lament reveals an essential aspect of worship, it also provides a critical insight into suffering. As Westermann writes:

Human suffering, no matter what it is, is not something which only affects the sufferer alone and which he himself must overcome; suffering is a matter to be brought before God.

In the biblical tradition, suffering is met and combated by worship. We cannot bear our suffering by ourselves. We need God to carry the burden for us. The writer of Exodus states the matter with unsurpassable simplicity: "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God" (2:23). It is insufficient—in fact impossible—to treat suffering on a
purely human level, with strictly human means. From the perspective of the lament, suffering is a profoundly theological problem; that is, it is first and foremost God's problem, whatever our responsibility may be. The lament calls upon God to be God in the face of our suffering. "When all else fails, you still are God," prayed the mourners at the funeral.

While suffering, from the viewpoint of worship, is a deeply theological issue, it is not a theoretical problem. A brief comparison of the lament with theodicy will prove this point. From the Greek for "justification of God," theodicy means a defense of God's goodness and power in the face of evil. The theodicy problem is usually expressed as a logical "trilemma":

1. God is all-powerful.
2. God is all-loving.
3. Yet, evil exists.

The theodicist works to reconcile these three propositions without logical contradiction. David Griffin provides a clear and useful example of how theodicy poses and answers the issue of evil. He solves the problem by qualifying the first proposition (most theocists in the Christian tradition do not question the second and third). If the creation is to be a genuine creation and not merely a puppet of God, then, argues Griffin, the creation must possess its own power of self-determination. Consequently, God cannot possess all the power there is and, therefore, cannot unilaterally effect the best possible state of affairs. God does possess all the power there is consistent with there being other agents of power, and God does all that God can to move us toward the good. However, God cannot force the creation in that direction. Therefore, the possibility of evil exists.

"My solution," Griffin concludes, "dissolves the problem of evil by denying the doctrine of omnipotence fundamental to it."9

It is not my purpose here to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Griffin's process theodicy. I will leave that to others.10 I want to make only this point: the "trilemma" of theodicy, as Griffin illustrates, is purely a theoretical undertaking. It is a conceptual riddle, having nothing to do with those who suffer.

By contrast, the lament is the cry of the anguished themselves. I quote again from "A Service of Death and Resurrection":

We pray to you for one another in our need,
and for all, anywhere, who mourn with us this day.11
The issue here is not the logical quandary of the theodicy “trilemma” and its resolution but the need of these mourners for God’s grace and comfort. Remarkably, there is not a trace of the theodicy problem in the entire funeral service, which is devoted to supplication and proclamation rather than metaphysical speculation. The liturgy occupies itself not with the justification of evil but with our deliverance from it. The concluding petition of the Lord’s Prayer—“Deliver us from evil”—resounds throughout Christian worship: in prayers for the sick and the tempted, in words of pardon to sinners, in the sermon which proclaims good news to the oppressed, and in the sacraments which invoke Christ’s liberating presence.12

In modern times, theodicy has so dominated the discussion of the problem of evil that in the minds of many the two are virtually synonymous. When Griffin alleges that he has solved “the problem of evil,” he means the theodicy problem. It is frequently assumed that when theological reflection takes up the issue of evil, it must address this particular formulation of it. As Theodore Jennings has observed:

“It is a very common error to suppose that this way of setting up the question is universal and to suppose that all responses to the fact of evil, innocent suffering, etc. are responses to the question as thus formulated.”13

Yet, clearly, worship is not in the theodicy business. Indeed, in one crucial respect, the two are fundamentally at odds with one another. Whereas the sole purpose of theodicy is to let God off the hook for evil, worship pins God to it.

You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves.*
But I, O LORD, cry out to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
O LORD, why do you cast me off?
Ps. 88:6-7; 13-14

This, too, is worship. As was said earlier, the lament calls upon God to be God in the face of suffering. Yet, at the same time, it can also indict
God for apparently failing to be God. The lament does not rationalize evil. It does not excuse God but accuses God. In language difficult for us to understand, the psalmist holds God directly responsible for the psalmist’s awful plight.

Westermann argues that the complaint against God has largely faded from Christian worship and that the churches are more comfortable with the confession of sin and intercession than with accusation. Nevertheless, the accusation of God remains firmly imbedded in the liturgical tradition. The United Methodist Hymnal, for one, includes in its Psalter (among other laments): “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” (Ps. 13:1); “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1); and “I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink because of your indignation and anger; for you have taken me up and thrown me aside” (Ps. 102:9–10). Our predecessors in the faith apparently saw no need to protect God from such worship or to rush immediately to God’s defense. They could allow the indictment of God to remain unanswered. Psalm 88 is especially instructive in this respect: whereas most of the psalms of lament conclude with a vow to praise God, if not outright exaltation of God’s saving power, Psalm 88 ends as it begins, without a glimmer of hope or relief.

If theodicy seeks the absence of contradiction, the lament, in the view of Walter Brueggemann, expresses honestly the “disorder and disorientation” that characterize affliction. The lament gives suffering a voice rather than silencing it.

“Everything must be brought to speech, and everything brought to speech must be addressed to God, who is the final reference for all life.”

The issue of evil, then, does not appear in the liturgy apart from those who suffer evil. The practice of “sharing the concerns of the congregation,” during which worshippers offer the names of persons and communities to be remembered in prayer, reveals that evil is not abstract but painfully concrete. Thus, the congregation prays...
specifically for Sarah, who has cancer, for the people of war-torn Bosnia, and for the youth of our inner cities, whose lives are in jeopardy. "In an identifiably Christian context," Kenneth Surin correctly judges, "the 'problem of evil' arises . . . when particular narratives of events of pain, dereliction, anguish, oppression, torture," and so on "come into collision with the Christian community's narratives, which are inextricably bound up with the redeeming reality of the triune God." Yet, there is still the danger of abstraction here: we must not allow "narratives of suffering" to substitute for sufferers themselves. Our stories do not need redemption from evil and death—we do. Put bluntly, from the perspective of the liturgy, there is no "problem of evil"—only sufferers in their distress.

### Praise Out of the Depths

Thus far we have concentrated on the significance of the lament. However, lament does not stand alone in the liturgy but is uttered in the context of praise. Just as the lament can accuse God unreservedly, praise can exalt God unreservedly. In its articulation of God's love and power, the liturgy is completely unapologetic. Whereas theodicy seeks to comprehend exactly God's love and power in the face of evil—to dissolve this mystery—praise is our admittance that, ultimately, we cannot. To know fully the love of God in Christ, according to Ephesians, is to know that it surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3:19). The writer of the letter must himself resort to praise and worship to set forth God's love properly:

> Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20-21)

Praise is caught up in the "far more" of God, reveling in God's incalculable and unpredictable ability to redeem and bless. Yet praise does not exalt God at the expense of those who are lowly and in agony. Nor is it so caught up in the glory of God that it is oblivious to their suffering. Quite the opposite: praise makes God available to the afflicted. Returning to the lament from "A Service
of Death and Resurrection,” we see that it is only on the basis of praise:

**God of us all, your love never ends.**

*When all else fails, you still are God.*

that the lament can then be prayed:

*We pray to you for one another in our need...*

As Jennings has written, “The possibility of praise is the basis of prayer.” The mourners’ praise of God articulates the ground of their hope—namely, God’s love in Jesus Christ. Through God’s love, mourners can cope with their loss. This does not mean that praise, in a facile way, is the “answer” to suffering. Nor is the task of worship to motivate sufferers to praise God when in their pain they cannot. The relationship between lament and praise is not this simple or forced but is much more dialectical, as Jennings has demonstrated. The longing and yearning of the lament—its character as search and supplication—express an absence of God. Jennings describes the “groaning of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:20) in the lament as a yearning “for that which founds existence and generates life” and “an opening and orienting of existence to that which transcends and grounds existence.” Lament is motivated and urged on by the absence of that which it seeks and to which it opens and orients itself, as this prayer from “A Service of Death and Resurrection” shows:

*To those who doubt, give light;*

*to those who are weak, strength;*

*to all who have sinned, mercy;*

*to all who borrow, your peace.*

Lamenters seek none other than the God of praise, who indeed is light, strength, etc., yet who is perceived by lamenters to be absent.

If lament expresses absence, praise, in Jennings’ view, expresses the presence of God, whether received or anticipated. Praise exalts the God who is the transcendent source of life, who “grounds our existence” even when evil seeks to undermine it. Praise sustains lamenters in their seeking and searching by asserting what they may
not be able to perceive; that is, the presence of God in their lives. I quote another prayer from the funeral liturgy:

_Almighty God, our Father, from whom we come, and to whom our spirits return: You have been our dwelling place in all generations, You are our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble._

Here, praise remembers God’s constant faithfulness in the past and thus can claim the presence of God even now. On the strength of praise, lamenters can then go on in the same prayer to ask:

_Grant us your blessing in this hour, and enable us so to put our trust in you that our spirits may grow calm and our hearts be comforted._

The absence of God, articulated in the lament, is therefore never absolute. God’s absence is always qualified, says Jennings, as a “no-longer present” or a “not-yet present.” One might even add a “waiting to be present” or “coming to be present.” Moreover, the presence of God, celebrated in praise, makes possible the articulation of God’s perceived absence: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness ... that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). Only in the presence of God can we pray, even if our prayer is one of God-forsakenness. The dialectic of God’s absence and presence, a polarity articulated by the tension between lament and praise, characterizes all worship.

This is so because the same polarity lies at the center of salvation itself. Jesus’ own praise of God makes God available to lamenters. According to the Gospel of John, God sends Jesus to glorify (doxazo) the Father. The verb doxazo, which can also be translated as “to praise,” means to make known God’s holy name, to demonstrate God’s saving reality to humanity (John 17:26; also Heb. 2:12). In John, Jesus’ glorification, or praise, of God occurs precisely at the point of the lament. Sufferers come to Jesus and he hears their plea. John describes human brokenness in a way that recalls the painful realism of the psalms. Take, for example, the invalid at Bethzatha: “Sir,” he says to Jesus, “I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else
steps down ahead of me” (John 5:7). Jesus’ praise of God consists in enabling the lame to walk, healing the sick, and raising the dead. Jesus’ “liturgy”—his “work” (ergon, as in John 4:34)—is to save the lost. Because it is good news for the afflicted, the Kingdom is inherently joyful and comes—appropriately enough—through Jesus’ praise of the Father. Jesus’ joy in God renders Jesus vulnerable to the afflicted, yet also able to redeem them. Redemption from evil and suffering is itself an act of worship: we are saved by Jesus’ perfect embodiment of lament and praise. “The human actions of Jesus’ life,” Edward Schillebeeckx has written, “show us their character as acts of redemption of his fellow man. . . .” Yet these same acts are also Jesus’ “true adoration and acknowledgement of God’s divine existence; they are a service of praise. . . .”

Jesus unites doxology and deliverance. On the cross, Jesus’ worship of God is complete, as is his identification with lamenters in their agony. His adoration of God is mysteriously hidden within his accusation of God: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). In his final act of worship, praying that we might be forgiven (Luke 23:34), Jesus dies for us sinners and sufferers. He is laid to rest in the grave, which, for the psalmist, is the most imponderable affliction of all: the inability of the dead to praise God. Death, though, silences us and thus seemingly defeats God’s purpose for us. “Do the shades rise up to praise you?” (Ps. 88:10; cf. Ps. 115:17; and Isa. 38:18).

Yet one of the dead, Jesus Christ, has risen to do just that. Even now, as the resurrected Lord, Christ continues to redeem us by his worship of God. His resurrected glory does not seal him off from our laments; rather, he “is able for all times to save those who approach God through him since he lives always to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). The funeral liturgy includes this prayer of thanksgiving for the “High Priest of Heaven”:

Above all else we thank you for Jesus,
who knew our griefs,
who died our death and rose for our sake,
and who lives and prays for us.

In Jesus, God has heard our cry of God-forsakenness and has defeated the power of death and sin. “Life which has been restored by deliverance out of sheol,” writes Westermann, “finds its meaning in
At its origin, and in its totality, Christian worship is an answered lament. The worship of the church arises "out of the depths" of death and is expressed as praise to God for our new life in Christ. In short, worship is our sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When He Appears, We Shall Be like Him

The sacramental sign of new life in Christ is baptism.

*Dying, Christ destroyed our death,*
*Rising, Christ restored our life.*

*Christ will come again in glory.*
*As in baptism we put on Christ,*
*so in Christ may we be clothed with glory.*

Spoken by the worship leader as part of "The Gathering," these are the very first words of the funeral liturgy. They establish baptism as the basis of the entire service. Mourners gather, grieve, and praise God in remembrance of baptism. Indeed, "A Service of Death and Resurrection" echoes at many points the United Methodist baptismal liturgy. From this confession of sin:

*Help us and heal us,*
*raising us from our sins to a better life.*

to this prayer of commendation:

*Receive our loved ones into the arms of your mercy.*
*Raise them up with all your people.*
*Receive us also, and raise us into a new life.*
*Help us so to love and serve you in this world* *
*that we may enter into your joy in the world to come.*

we hear strains of the baptismal epiclesis "that, dying and being raised with Christ, we may share in his final victory." In our affliction, we pray that our baptism may yet be fulfilled, for God's fulfillment of our baptism is simultaneously our deliverance from evil and death.

"Raise us into a new life." Baptism is no theodicy—no justification of evil—but a transformation of the afflicted. In worship, Christ calls
us to himself, that he might heal and renew us by his love. He identifies with us in our affliction so that we, in response, might identify with him. In the liturgy, we pray to God that we might become more like Christ in his death and resurrection; namely, open to God and each other in love. Those lamenting the death of the infants may thus find a way to mourn that is honest, loving, and hopeful. Baptism forms the church as a community of compassion, in which the lament can be voiced and heard, no matter how bitter the complaint. As a consequence of baptism, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). Having been drawn together by Christ in his love, we find new life even as we struggle with the old. In the compassion of the community, we see the first light of resurrection.

Redemption from evil is inseparable from new life in Christ. We pray to Christ to redeem us; he redeems us—heals us—by converting us into his likeness. We become what we worship. From the perspective of the liturgy, the eschatological fulfillment of creation in Christ is the resolution of evil. Addressing mourners during "The Gathering," the worship leader continues:

_Here and now, dear friends, we are God's children. What we shall be has not yet been revealed; but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is._

_Those who have this hope purify themselves as Christ is pure._

Though suffering and sin seek to rob us of our true identity, we are still God's children. We glimpse our childhood in worship. Quoting the old entrance prayer of the Mass—"I will go up to the altar of God, to God, the giver of youth and happiness"—the Roman Catholic theologian Romano Guardini once likened worship to a child playing. When it plays, the child

does not aim at anything. It has no purpose. It does not want to do anything but to exercise its youthful powers, pour forth its life in an aimless series of movements, words and actions, and by this to develop and to realize itself more fully. . . . That is what play means; it is life, pouring itself forth without an aim,
Similarly, worship is the divinely ordained "game" in which we, by grace, fulfill the word of God and become as little children, "with no other aim or purpose than that of living and existing in His sight. . . ." In worship, we can realize our destiny as children of the Father through the mediation of the Son and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. We come to delight in and praise the boundless creativity of the Trinity.

The "playfulness of the liturgy," understood as the realization of our childhood (or personhood) before God, is also the source of its seriousness. Says Guardini, "The liturgy has laid down the serious rules of the sacred game which the soul plays before God." Child's play is serious in that the realization of childhood is at stake. Likewise, in worship, the human destiny to praise and enjoy God is at issue.

In worship, we occasionally experience this fulfillment and freedom—even frivolity—as a prelude to the life to come. Yet, we also know the weightiness of affliction. "Deliver us from evil." We struggle and pray for our unencumbered childhood in God.

When Christ comes in final victory, however, and defeats forever the power of sin and death, we will "obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21) promised to us in baptism. To be remade in the image of Christ is the fulfillment of our destiny as children of God. In their darkness, guided by the light of the liturgy, the mourners strain to see Christ himself, who is the hope of the living and the dead. "When he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." From the perspective of the liturgy, the resolution of evil lies not in a theodicy or abstract theory of God and evil but in the person of Jesus Christ. In worship we invoke not philosophical propositions—not even theological beliefs about God's love and power in Jesus Christ—but Christ himself. Lament and praise transcend theoretical concepts of God and evil—even the words of the liturgy—to reach the living Lord, who alone can redeem us from our affliction.

Conclusion: Worship as Primordial Theology

The "problem of evil" changes dramatically when the defining theological context is no longer a theoretical discussion of God and
evil but the encounter with God in worship. "Answer me when I call," Job demanded of God (cf. Job 13:22). If we can address God with our suffering, it is because God also addresses us. It is the idol—the god of false worship—who, as the prophets of Israel warned, has nothing to say to the afflicted (Jer. 10:5) and cannot save (Isa. 45:20).

But the God of Jesus Christ speaks. This God does not ignore the cry of the needy. In preaching, we hear God's liberating word; in sacrament, we experience God's healing presence; in hymns, we sing God's praises for God's constant care. Call and response characterize worship: our call and God's response, but also God's call and our response. In the past, we in the Protestant traditions particularly have lost sight of the deeply theological nature of this dialogue in worship. We have reserved the term "theology" for systematic, dogmatic, or doctrinal studies. Although worship is sometimes designated as "practical" or "pastoral theology," even these terms do not do it justice. Worship is more like primordial theology. It is the living, ongoing discourse between God and humanity, containing the most elemental forms of theo-logy (theos = God, logia = words) or God-talk: God's word to us in preaching and sacrament, our word to God in prayer and praise, and our words about God in testimony and confession. Systematic theology and other forms of reflective theology (such as this article) derive from and point to worship. It is our encounter with God, not reflection upon this encounter, which redeems us from evil.

Westermann observes that Western theology has been dominated by objective thinking about God, but in the Old Testament, he insists, God-talk is characterized by "dialogical thinking" (Martin Buber's term). For the Old Testament, the subject of theology is an event, a discourse between God and humanity.

It can only speak of God's saving acts within a whole series of events, and that necessarily involves some kind of verbal exchange between God and man. This latter includes both the
cry of man in distress and the response of praise which the saved make to God.47

Our struggle with evil and affliction, if we are open to God, has the character of worship.48 Wrote Martin Luther, “God considers his name hallowed and honored when we name it and call upon it in adversity and need.”49 In our affliction, we cry to God; we listen for God’s word; we seek God’s response and presence. God-forsakenness cannot be solved conceptually—its only solution is God’s very self. In the dialogue between God and sufferers, for some inscrutable reason, God does not speak at times. There are also times when we, in the anguish of our affliction, cannot or will not speak to God. Some sufferers refuse to worship at all. For those who do worship, participation in the liturgy may deepen the sense of pain before healing it. This is to be expected from worship centered on a cross.

It is our encounter with God which makes worship so significant theologically for the problem of suffering: worship is a dialogue between God and the afflicted which censors neither the reality of suffering nor the redemptive power of God but allows amply for the expression of both. Rejecting traditional theodicy, Surin has argued that:

"Neither belief in an omnipotent, omniscient and morally benevolent divinity, nor its negation, can "solve" the "problem of evil." This "problem," if it is to be overcome, must be placed in a theological context void of any apologetic intent. That is, it will be a context which enables us to reconnect the concept of good and gracious "godness" with the reality in which the sufferer is situated."50

Worship, I submit, is just such a context. Worship does not defend God but praises God. The praise of God is its own end. Precisely as such, praise unapologetically renders God available to lamenters seeking God and their freedom as God’s children.51

Notes


11. *UMBW*, 149.


20. *UMBW*, 149.


22. Ibid., 188.

23. *UMBW*, 149.


26. Jennings, 188.

27. Westermann, 161.


30. *UMBW*, 875.

31. Westermann, 110.

32. *UMBW*, 141.

33. *UMBW*, 139. See also *Companion to the Book of Services: Introduction, Commentary, and Instructions for Using the New United Methodist Services* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 136-147, hereafter referred to as *Companion*. The commentary of the *Companion* on "A Service of Death of Resurrection" is highly recommended.

34. *UMBW*, 143.

35. Ibid., 150.

36. Ibid., 90.


38. UMBW, 41.


41. Ibid., 182–183.


45. On the recovery of the pattern of call and response in United Methodist worship, see Companion, 51, and UMBW, 16–32.


47. Westermann, 261.

48. “Suffering can, if at all, find verbal expression in very many ways. One specific way however comes closest to suffering man, since it combines all despair and all hope. This is prayer.” Eberhard Jüngel, “The Christian Understanding of Suffering” in Journal of Theology for South Africa, No. 65 (December 1988): 15.


50. Susan, 104.

51. I want to thank Dr. James Howell, pastor, Davidson United Methodist Church, Davidson, North Carolina, for his helpful criticism of this paper. All of its errors and shortcomings are mine.

THE PRAISE OF GOD AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL
The Sanctuary as Playground: A Metaphor for Our Experience of Worship

Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3)

As the pastor of two small congregations, one of my primary responsibilities is leading worship. In my reflection upon my experience as preacher and liturgist, one image has consistently appeared: a playground. I initially dismissed this image as frivolous, but it has continued to push against me and demand my attention. Slowly, I have come to appreciate the power of this metaphor—and of metaphor itself. The humble image of the playground captures many dimensions of the experience of worship. Furthermore, as a metaphor it provides a gateway for further thought on Christian faith and practice.

The Holding Environment

Playgrounds are often bounded by a fence. They are open at certain times and closed at others. School playgrounds, for example, are

J. Patrick Vaughn is pastor of Tirzah Presbyterian Church in Waxhaw, North Carolina and Old Waxhaw Presbyterian Church in Lancaster, South Carolina. He is also a pastoral counselor in training at the Presbyterian Samaritan Counseling Center in Charlotte, North Carolina.
usually available to children only during recess. Roads near a playground are lined with yellow signs warning, "Children At Play." Playgrounds are also incomplete without adult supervision. During recess teachers share the responsibility of watching over and caring for the children. All of these measures offer children a basic sense of safety, reliability, and security. Without them, the free abandonment of play is simply impossible.

Like a playground, a sanctuary’s most important dimension may well be safety and security. Congregations meet for worship at regularly scheduled intervals. Though varying greatly from one community of faith to another, all churches have some form of liturgy or order of worship. The liturgist or preacher also has the responsibility of watching over and caring for the congregation as it meets to be with God. These facets of worship provide the congregation with a basic sense of safety, reliability, and security.

For example, I have a ninety-year-old friend who becomes quite agitated if her Sunday morning worship service lasts longer than an hour. She is not being obstinate or cantankerous. At this particular point in her life, she simply needs clear boundaries. The exact parameters of the church’s liturgy provide her with a sense of safety and reliability in the midst of her rather precarious existence.

Psychologist Donald Winnicott described such bounded experiences as the holding environment. Arnold Modell has written a useful definition: "The term derives from the maternal function of holding the infant, but, taken as a metaphor, it has a much broader application and extends beyond the infantile period—where the holding is literal and not metaphorical—to the broader caretaking functions of the parent in relation to the older child." The mother's holding provides the trust necessary for the child to grow and mature. If the mother holds too tightly, the infant is constricted and confined; normal and healthy development is hindered. If the mother’s holding is too loose, the infant feels unprotected and vulnerable to danger. This, too, impedes healthy maturation.
As a playground the sanctuary offers the community of faith a holding environment which makes Christian worship possible. The basic trust provided by the playground enables the congregation to love and care for one another, to form a community including strangers and even enemies, and to lose themselves in the free abandonment of worshipful play and playful worship. This holding environment offers a setting in which a relationship with God can be experienced and nurtured. It allows for the congregation to respond to God with praise and thanksgiving, with financial gifts and renewed discipleship.

In addition, the holding environment provides a basic sense of trust and security so that God’s people can hear God’s word proclaimed. It provides the milieu in which God’s grace can be received and safely explored. The holding embrace of God also makes it possible for the community of faith to be held accountable, to hear the word of truth. God’s acceptance in the security of the playground enables us to stand with Isaiah and confess, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips” (6:5). The holding environment even enables the community of faith to hear God’s indictment of playless worship: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies” (Amos 5:21).

The Power of Metaphor

At this point it is worth remembering that by their very nature metaphors are powerful forms of communication. By holding in tension the similar and the dissimilar they are able to express the deepest and most multifaceted experiences of human existence. They help to articulate the ineffable, the indescribable, and the incomprehensible.

Consider, for example, that playground experiences often have profound and enduring impacts on the lives of children. On the playground knees are skinned and bones are broken. Some children excel at athletics and are regularly chosen first for a game of hide and seek or basketball or Red Rover. Others, less skilled, overweight or underdeveloped, are repeatedly chosen last. At the swing sets, slide, and the sandbox friendships are made and broken. Playgrounds are filled with the sound of children laughing and children crying. On the
playground we begin to know intimately that human life is marked by both joy and sorrow.

These childhood experiences are repeated in adulthood, for adults, too, suffer ridicule from others, injury from unjust social structures. They too bear the loss of relationships through death and divorce and celebrate victories over violence and oppression. For adults the metaphor of the playground portrays worship as a place of basic safety and trust where both joy and sorrow might be shared with God. Worship also prompts us to comprehend and articulate our experiences of life.

In other words, metaphors are powerful because they serve in the process of integration. In *Metaphor and Meaning in Psychotherapy* Ellen Siegelman has noted that "the hallmark of a living metaphor is the intense feeling that surrounds it. Metaphor is a way to mobilize and release affect. Because it uses the concrete and visual, which is the first language any of us know, it has powerful connections with the unconscious . . . all metaphors are connecting operations." Metaphors are like bridges linking the conscious and unconscious, childhood and adulthood, body and soul, heart and mind, affect and thought, brother and sister, God and child. The metaphor of the sanctuary as playground, I believe, helps us integrate our worship. It gives us a means of sharing and making sense of our experience of God. Through imaging worship as play we have the hope of more fully worshipping God and being in community with our neighbors. As the Shema states, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4-5). The metaphor of the sanctuary as playground helps us to move towards such integration.

Ritualized Learning

Playgrounds are places of ritualized learning. Children learn that in baseball three strikes means "You're out!" and getting tagged in a game of chase means "You're it!" More importantly, through play children learn to cooperate and relate with one another, to work as a team, to negotiate personal boundaries, to respect others. Play engages children in an interpersonal process and introduces them to an enhanced social network.
Erik Erikson has suggested that play is a form of ritual that is vital to psychosocial development. He writes that ritualization

is used only for a certain kind of informal and yet prescribed interplay between persons who repeat it at meaningful intervals and in recurring contexts. It has, we claim, adaptive value for all participants and for their group living. For it furthers and guides, from the beginning of existence, that stage-wise instinctual investment in the social process that must do for human adaptation what the instinctive fit into a section of nature will do for an animal species.

Quite simply, through the ritual of play children learn to live in society.

Recently, I taught an eight-month confirmation class for three young people who wished to join the church. I explored with them the biblical roots of Reformed worship. I reviewed the meaning of the sacraments. Mostly, however, we played together. To be sure, this included thirty minutes of basketball at the beginning of class as well as occasional trips to a local pizzeria restaurant. But the idea of play involved much more than that. I arranged with the session for them to participate more fully in the worship service. Throughout the confirmation process they greeted people at the door, distributed the bulletins, and collected the morning offering. We attended a presbytery meeting (horror of horrors!), We also attended a presbytery-wide youth retreat so they could experience more personally and actively the richness of our denomination’s connectional system. We visited an elderly member of the congregation so that they could understand that being a church member means caring for others. Through such play they matured as disciples.

Similarly, the sanctuary as playground reminds us that worship is a ritual in which we learn to live in the faith community. In the play of worship we learn how to pray and how to serve. We hear the story of our God repeated again and again. We learn to cooperate and relate to one another, to work together, to respect one another’s boundaries. As Stanley Hauerwas has written:

We become faithful just to the extent that we learn to participate in the activities of the people of God we call the church. Therefore, it becomes our duty to be a people who submit to the
discipline of the liturgy, as it is there that we are trained with the skills rightly to know the story. We are required to care for one another and to accept the care of others, for it is by learning to be cared for that we learn to care.  

This is not simply an intellectual exercise. It is a playful, interpersonal ritual in which we discover what it means to be a disciple.  

Community and Vulnerability  
Play can be personal and private; a lone individual can play Solitaire or a video game. Essentially, however, play is interpersonal and social. The sanctuary as playground celebrates relationship with God and with neighbor. As play the worship of the community of faith reflects the communal, relational nature of God. Leonardo Boff has said that the doctrine of the Trinity "is the revelation of God as God is, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in eternal correlation, interpenetration, love and communion, which make them one sole God. The fact that God is triune means unity in diversity." The God who eternally plays together seeks us out to play with us. Worship is the human response to the divine invitation to play.  
But this can prove to be very difficult. Like all mutually satisfying relationships, play involves forsaking a measure of control over one's life and being open to the unexpected or unforeseen. It means that we take seriously the nuances that appear in our relationships with members of our church. It means that we risk sharing our thoughts, feelings, and faith experiences with our congregation as well as taking seriously their thoughts, feelings and faith experiences.  

The God who eternally plays together seeks us out to play with us. Worship is the human response to the divine invitation to play.  

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Last year I suggested to a male colleague that he imagine the sanctuary as a playground with a slide in the center aisle, a swing in the pulpit and a set of monkey bars in the choir loft. His response was striking. His body stiffened, a look of alarm spread across his face, and he said, “I just wouldn’t feel comfortable doing that.” I do not believe that his response is unique, especially for male members of the clergy. Generally, while women tend to be more open to attachment and closeness in our culture, men are more comfortable with distance and separation.

The sanctuary as playground pushes us men to engage our relationships, more fully and more deeply. This metaphor confronts us with our fears of intimacy, fears that James Nelson has poignantly described. He writes:

*Underneath all explanations for men’s difficulty in friendship I believe there lies one pervasive and haunting theme: fear. Fear of vulnerability. Fear of our emotions. Fear of being uncovered, found out. So my fear leads me to my desire to control—to be in control of situations, to be in control of my feelings, to be in control of my relationships. Then I will be safe. No one will really know my weakness and vulnerability. No one will really know my doubts. No one will really know that I am not the producer and achiever I pretend to be. Therein lies my real terror.*

Some of us clergymen will experience terror as we confront these fears. We may feel genuine alarm when we are pushed to deepen our ability to be in relationship. Hopefully, as we allow the image of the playground to shape and form our worship and, therefore, our lives, we might just discover anew the relational holding of the God who wants us to be free of our fears and be able to play.

**Proclamation**

I experience preaching as a form of play, a creative endeavor which requires the work of our playful imaginations. In the movie *Hook*, Robin Williams stars as an adult Peter Pan, a grown-up who has forgotten how to play. He has even forgotten that he was once a child. When Captain Hook kidnaps his children, however, he is forced to
return to Never Land. He struggles to remember how to fly, how to 
fight, and how to play. In one scene he sits down to dinner with his old 
friends, but he sees no food on the table. The children see it, but he is 
unable. Following an exchange of playful insults, a bounteous feast 
begins to appear before him. The Lost Boys exclaim, “You’re doing 
it!”

“Doing what?” Peter asks.
“Using your imagination,” they respond.

Garrett Green has suggested that our imagination is the faculty by 
which we pattern experiences and meaning. To imagine is to see the 
world in a certain way, to connect seemingly disparate events into a 
meaningful pattern. Preaching is an exercise in imagining what is 
not readily apparent, seeing what is not visible to the naked eye.
Green writes:

Proclamation . . . can be described as an appeal to the 
imagination of the hearers through the images of scripture. The 
preacher’s task is to mediate and facilitate that encounter by 
his or her own imagination, which becomes the link between 
scripture and congregation. The preacher must therefore pay 
particular attention to the imagery of the biblical text, seeking 
to present it with such clarity and force that it will be seen and 
heard by the congregation. To save sinners, God seizes them by 
the imagination: the preacher places himself at the service of 
this saving act by the obedient and lucid engagement of his 
own imagination.

In the sanctuary as playground the preacher invites the congregation 
to play, to imagine puzzling, comforting, and even disturbing 
connections between the images of scripture and the images of 
contemporary life. Does Elisha’s curse upon the children in 2 Kings 
2:23–25 have anything to do with the plight of children in the world 
today when power is abused? What about Martha’s surprising and 
even scandalous profession of faith in John 11:27 and the professions 
of faith in our time that are also considered scandalous? Or perhaps 
the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:29–37 and our own 
priestly inability to see the wounded in our path? It is said that “blood 
is thicker than water.” What might be the connection between 
contemporary images of blood kinship and the baptismal waters of 
Jesus Christ? The playground proclamation can never be understood
as the presenting of data or the imparting of knowledge. It is the playful and communal attempt to see who God is and what God is about in the world.

The playground can even offer us a hermeneutic to re-imagine Christian theology. For example, the doctrine of justification describes God making right our relationships with God. Through the hermeneutic of the playground justification may be imagined as God’s holding of God’s people. Sanctification describes the work of the Holy Spirit in nurturing us as disciples. Through the hermeneutic of the playground sanctification may be understood as ritualized learning. This metaphor celebrates the Spirit’s work in our play.

In the hermeneutic of the playground the doctrine of the Trinity is embodied through the communal play of congregational life; the resurrection is celebrated in laughter. In the hermeneutic of the playground the doctrine of the incarnation includes acceptance of our own physical bodies.

The hermeneutic of the playground also cautions us about the power of sin. Playgrounds are not always safe. Firearms are discharged, and boys and girls lose their lives. Drugs are sold, and addicts are born. Play is transformed into unbounded competition or violence. This metaphor confronts the sin and evil of those who seek to respond to God’s invitation to play. In short, in the sanctuary as playground Christian doctrine is never finalized or complete. This hermeneutic reminds us that there is always more play to enjoy.

**Physical Play**

Children’s play is wonderfully physical. They run; they jump up and down; they sweat and get tired. Likewise, worship engages not only our hearts and souls and imaginations but also our bodies. We kneel; we stand and sing; we might even dance, lift up our arms in prayer, join hands, or hug. The sanctuary as playground challenges our human tendency to accept a dualistic interpretation of faith and of life (body/soul, spirit/flesh, mind/heart). It reminds us that God has
created us as whole selves and, indeed, that God seeks to engage our entire being in worship and play.

Siegelman has emphasized the importance of metaphor in communication and in the therapeutic process. She notes that metaphors are fundamentally grounded in physical experiences and sensations. "Metaphor making . . . is the primary quality of all new language and the unconscious. It draws on our earliest experiences, which are experiences of the body. Metaphor, the basic way of increasing our understanding, uses body experience through which it reaches to nonbodily experience." For example, as noted earlier, one of the most important elements of the mother-infant relationship is the mother’s capacity to hold her baby. If the holding is not secure, the infant may fear being dropped. This bodily fear and sensation are captured in such metaphors as falling from grace, falling upon hard times, and falling into the hands of the enemy. Metaphors are rooted in physical experience and serve as powerful means of communication.

Ultimately the sanctuary as playground calls us to a deeper appreciation of the power of metaphor itself. The sensitive use of metaphors offers to enhance our preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. As we develop greater sensitivity to our own bodily experiences, we might discover anew the God who comes to us in human flesh. Metaphors can shape and influence one another. As we discern how the metaphors of the Christian community have interacted with the central metaphors of our own lives, we can gain insight into the twists and turns of our particular faith journey. In short, as we become more sensitive to the power of metaphor we have the hope of a deeper and more vital faith.

Further, the metaphor of the playground moves us to reconsider the primary, bodily rooted metaphors of the faith tradition, the sacraments. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are physical celebrations of God’s saving work. Moreover, metaphors are pliable. They are “quite concrete words rooted in visible reality but yet are enormously elastic, giving full play to imagination in stretching and extending far beyond the concrete referent to touch all kinds of experiences.” The sacraments cannot be limited to the “spiritual” dimension of life. They cannot be confined even within the walls of the sanctuary. These bodily rooted metaphors extend to touch the way we live.

Since the sacrament of Baptism makes use of the natural resource of water, we are compelled to question how we despoil God’s creation. As a celebration of human solidarity in Christ, we are called to
challenge any power or government that engages in oppression, racism, or sexism. The sacrament of the Eucharist demands a similar response. It gives us pause to consider the struggle not only of those whose hearts ache for peace and justice but of those whose swollen stomachs cry out for food and water. Migliore writes,

Christians cannot share this bread and wine while refusing to share their daily bread and wine with the millions of hungry people in the world. There is an intrinsic connection between responsible participation in the Lord's Supper and commitment to a fairer distribution of the goods of the earth to all its people.  

The physical nature of playful worship strengthens this metaphorical connection between the sacraments and daily living.

A Form of Profession

Worship is celebration. As the psalmist writes, “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (118:24). Along with the great creeds of the church, one of the most profound professions of faith is the laughter of the people of God. This is not the laughter of derision. It does not communicate indifference or a lack of compassion. In a world in which children starve and women are sexually abused, in this world of mayhem and violence and fear, deep, joyful laughter expresses the trust of the community of faith that God's love and grace have already defeated the powers of sin and evil.

About ten months after my ordination I moderated a meeting of the session of one of my churches. When the chairman of the worship committee gave his report, he suggested that it was time to have another mini-revival. Mini-revival? I did not know what to expect. I soon learned that the church had a tradition in which a local minister would be invited to preach a series of evening worship services. It was called “mini” because the services spanned three nights rather than an entire week. It sounded like a great idea. But instead of endorsing his recommendation simply “because it had been done that way before,” I decided to be frank with my own approval. “I look forward to hearing some good preaching. Since I am in the pulpit every Sunday, I don't get to hear good preaching anymore.” With an expression of mischievous
longing, one elder sighed, "I know just what you mean." Immediately, the room erupted into laughter. I think I even heard God laughing with us. Such is the life of a people who are shaped by the play of worship.

Playing with God

The sanctuary as playground reminds us that worship is an end in itself. As the Westminster Catechism affirms, the chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.24 Certainly, play is ritualized learning. Through play children learn to live in society, and believers learn about discipleship. Play, however, is often enjoyed simply for its own sake. Baseball, jump rope, and hopscotch might be good exercise and help to keep one healthy, but children do not engage in play for these reasons. They play because they enjoy themselves. They enjoy the moment. They play simply for the sake of playing.

Likewise, worship is not a means to an end. In worship God asks us to play and simply to be with God. In writing about theological reflection James Whitehead has noted:

The paradigm of play—and play as an endless number of invigorating, exhausting leaps—reminds us that such challenging exercises of reflection and decision are our Christian life... Frequently Christian purposefulness has turned even the play of liturgy to other ends—whether filling Sunday coffers or saving souls. And yet we recognize that liturgy is, as celebration, for its own sake. In gratitude, reconciliation, and mourning, we celebrate the presence of God and power of God. We know that such celebrations effect community, but this comes as a grace of the liturgy rather than its goal.25

In the play of worship God is enjoyed.

Appropriately, then, this metaphor challenges our tendency to engage in playless worship. Whitehead has described the absence of play in human life as the "mis-imagination of adult maturity."26 Erikson has defined ritualism as "ritual-like behavior patterns marked by stereotyped repetition and illusory pretenses that obliterate the integrative value of communal organization."27 The lack of the capacity to play, to imagine, to be spontaneous, to engage deeply in
relationships severely weakens our experience of God. We are left with empty mis-imagination and cold ritualism.

Perhaps we cannot pry our fingers loose of the control we have over ourselves or others. Perhaps we want to deny the physical nature of our life. Perhaps we do not want to imagine worship as play because we know that relationships involve vulnerability. Perhaps we are so driven for achievement that we cannot accept that worship is an end itself. Perhaps our shame is so deep that we cannot believe that we are entitled to enjoy ourselves in God's presence. Winnicott once said that if a therapist is unable to play, he or she is unsuitable for the work.28 This may be true of pastors as well. Hopefully, all of us who serve the community of faith will discover the holding we need to be able to play more fully.

Epilogue

The first time I ever preached a sermon I was about nine years old! My brother and I had walked across town to the playground behind the elementary school. We enjoyed the swings. We climbed on the monkey bars. We jumped up and down, and then we walked towards the slide. It was an incredibly tall slide and very slick. When we got to the slide, however, two other boys walked over and said they wanted to play on it. Then they began to push us around and said that we could not use the slide when they were using it. I listened to raving banter for a few minutes, and then I began to preach. I calmly and clearly explained to them that God did not want us acting like bullies and that there was nothing preventing all of us from having a good time. They were as surprised as I was. During the rest of the afternoon the four of us had lots of fun. I believe that every time I have preached or led worship since, it has also been on the playground, the playground of God that we call a sanctuary.

Notes

1. Reformed worship emphasizes the tension between order and ardor. Too much structure leads to rigidity and cold, sterile emptiness. Too little structure leads to chaotic and even frightening unpredictability. Fulfilling worship tends to the tension between form and freedom.


4. Indeed, the lack of a satisfactory holding environment in a person's development obstructs the human capacity to engage in relationship, to play, to discover and know meaning. Roger Lewin and Clarence Schulz utilize Winnicott's theory in their treatment of individuals suffering from borderline personality disorders. These are people whose deprivation of maternal holding have contributed to a lack of internal psychic structure and who are vulnerable to their often chaotic affects. These authors write, "By holding we mean an action, literal or symbolic, that has the effect of supplementing the existing psychic infrastructure so as to render what might be an overwhelming situation less overwhelming, thus providing the patient a degree of increased security that allows for continued development effort and experimenting with new ways of experiencing that may have not only more adaptive promise but more promise in terms of self-realization... for the experiencing self, adaptation is in the service of the search for meaning, one of life's great pleasures as well as one of life's great pains." See Losing and Fusing: Borderline Transitional Object and Self Relations (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1992), pp. 115-117.

5. The heart of the prophet's message is found in 5:24: "But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream." As I describe later in this essay, play involves the development, nurture, and celebration of relationships. Amos denounced the people's lack of relationship with the poor and needy. Their worship was indeed playless!


7. Siegelman, xi.


10. Hauerwas and William Willimon have stated this point quite succinctly: "Christian ethics is... not something that comes naturally. It can only be learned. We are claiming, then, that a primary way of learning to be disciples is by being in contact with others who are disciples... There is no substitute for living around other Christians. See Resident Aliens (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 102.


13. I focus on the struggles of men because a vast majority of the clergy is male. Also, as a man I am more familiar with the resistance that we males have in relationships. It should be pointed out, however, that this metaphor of the playground...
will also challenge women to deepen their capacity for relationship by pushing them to strengthen their boundaries and increase their capacity for separateness. Emotional fusion is not equivalent to relationship.


16. Ibid., 149.

17. Boff has written, “Only a human community of brothers and sisters, built on relationships of communion and participation, can be a living symbol of the eternal Trinity.” *Trinity and Society*, 22.

18. Such dualism is analogous to the psychological concept of “splitting.” This is one of the psyche’s defenses against unbearable emotional and relational chaos. Splitting gives one’s world a degree of structure and, thus, offers some sense of reliability and safety. It helps to compensate for deprivation in the maternal holding environment but does not allow for the acceptance of the rich ambiguity, complexity, and integration of faith and life. See N. Gregory Hamilton, *Self and Others: Object Relations Theory in Practice* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1988), 76–82.


21. I am indebted to Daniel Migliore for helping me to see with more clarity the connection between the sacraments and ethics. See *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 224–226.


26. Ibid., 43.

27. Erikson, 46.

The trouble actually began some time ago, when the new hymnal was produced. Though there are many wonderful things to be said about our new hymnal, somehow, before we had had a really meaningful public dialogue about our theology of baptism, we were given a liturgy which not merely suggested but clearly indicated that people become Christians by means of baptism. To be sure, this liturgy was only one of several which we could use, but nevertheless there it was as plain as life. Furthermore, this liturgy was deemed appropriate to be used with infants as well as adults.

To add to this we now have the recent study on baptism which we will be discussing and debating at the 1996 General Conference. It is my considered judgment that baptism is going to be one of the major issues of that Conference—or at least it ought to be. Thus, it behooves us before the liturgical freight train gathers too much more steam and gets too much further down the track to begin to do some serious thinking about our theology of baptism.

I have no doubt that those who produced the statement on baptism worked quite hard to try to produce something faithful to both the Biblical and the Wesleyan witness, as well as to the testimony of the tradition and experience of the larger church. I know well many of those involved in this process, and they are my friends. I am also fully aware

Ben Witherington III is Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Asbury Theological Seminary.
of the difficulty of producing a statement that is faithful to the various facets of our heritage. In particular, Wesley’s remarks on baptism are not always clear, and as Albert Outler long ago pointed out, Wesley did not successfully resolve the tensions between his Anglican sacramental heritage and the theology he preached during the revival. This being the case, one might have hoped that the committee would have paid a bit more attention to the New Testament evidence itself and what scholars say about that evidence, instead of simply constructing an approach to baptism by appropriating one portion of what Wesley affirmed about the matter and trying to resolve the tension in the tradition that way. Surprisingly, there were no New Testament scholars on the Baptism Study Committee.

Whatever the source of the less than satisfactory character of this new study on baptism, it must be said that this study cannot pass muster as it stands on one very crucial issue. I am referring to the fact that it suggests that we should affirm a doctrine of justification by grace through baptism, not to be confused with justification by grace through faith, which was the cry of the 18th-century Wesleyan Revival.

It seems to be a law that the more soteriology one loads into his or her theology of baptism, the less one sees faith as crucial for salvation. The reverse of this could also be said. The problem then becomes how to have a sacramental view of baptism, including infant baptism, without making faith either superfluous or merely an important addendum. I put the matter this way because there is no doubt that Wesley had a sacramental view of baptism. He certainly believed it conveyed grace. He also certainly believed that justification came through faith. How then does one put these two things together?

My essential complaint with the new study is that it gets the emphasis wrong, in fact, badly wrong. The new statement ignores Wesley’s warning to “lean not on that broken reed baptism” as well as the fact that he hardly even alludes to baptism in his sermon on “The Means of Grace.” It also ignores St. Paul’s relief when he says “I thank God I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius” (1 Cor. 1:14). It is unimaginable that either a Paul or a John Wesley could have remarked “I thank God that I proclaimed the Word to none of you.” This tells us something about the relative importance of baptism as opposed to preaching and faith in the theologies of these two crucial figures.

If we are to put the emphasis in the right place in analyzing the soteriology of Wesley, and for that matter the soteriology reflected in Acts and the letters of Paul, then we would do well to ponder words
like those found in Rom. 10:9–17, which remind us that being a Christian necessarily involves having faith in Jesus Christ and that belief comes from hearing and responding to the preached word: “so faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” John Wesley not only believed this with all his heart, but he gave his life to making disciples by preaching, not by baptism. He even said he lived by preaching. It is not an accident that the Standard Sermons of Wesley hammer home the theme of salvation or justification by grace through faith, not by baptism.

It is also worthwhile at this juncture to say something about the crucial text which served as the basis for the title of the recent baptismal study document sent to the church. I am referring to John 3:5–6. Despite what medieval exegetes thought, this text in all likelihood has nothing to do with water baptism, infant or otherwise. What we have here is a clear case of Semitic parallelism, with verse 6 making plain the meaning of verse 5. The discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus is about two kinds of birth, one that is natural and physical and one that is supernatural (from above) and spiritual. The discussion is not about what happens at baptism. The reference to being born of water is explained in the very next verse to mean being born of flesh, which must be distinguished from being born of Spirit. In fact, water was often a Jewish metaphor for various parts of the process that leads to physical birth, including, of course, the breaking of the waters and the coming forth of the child. The text here literally speaks of “being born out of water.” With births happening in homes, a first-century person would know very well what was being referred to here—they would have seen the whole birthing process and recognized the reference to physical birth, not to baptism. There is no sound exegetical basis for using John 3:5 as a warrant to assume that one gets the Holy Spirit with water baptism. What Jesus is speaking of is that both physical birth and spiritual birth (from above) are necessary if a human being is going to enter God’s kingdom.

One of the major conclusions of a recent New Testament study by J. D. G. Dunn and others, a study which is conversant with both the biblical and the Wesleyan tradition, is that baptismal language is often used in the New Testament not to discuss the rite itself, but rather in a metaphorical way to discuss the reality of which baptism is a symbol. For example, in 1 Cor. 12:13 we read “for in one Spirit we were all baptized in one body... and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” Paul in this same letter has already said there were some in Corinth on
whom he had not performed the ritual of water baptism, but he says here that all Christians (whether in Corinth or elsewhere) have been baptized in (or by) one Spirit. Here he is using baptismal language to talk about conversion—the point at which one is joined to the body of Christ and received the Holy Spirit as a resource for spiritual life. Notice that it is the Spirit, if anyone, who is said here to do the "baptizing" he has in mind here, not Paul or another Christian leader. Such examples could easily be multiplied, but the point is that one must be careful not to mistake the metaphorical use of baptismal language for a discussion about what happens when the rite is performed.

If we are honest we must admit that baptism played a secondary though important role in the first-century church just as it did in the Wesleyan Revival; secondary, that is, when compared to preaching and faith. It is especially striking that no text clearly and specifically refers to the baptism of infants in the whole NT! This fact ought to tell us something about where our theological priorities ought to lie when we are talking about salvation. One thing is clear: we must not "water down" the essential salvation message of Wesley about justification by grace through faith, for without this message there never would have been a Methodist movement or, for that matter, a Protestant Reformation!

Does this mean that baptism, including infant baptism, is nothing more than a symbol and not also a means of grace? I think not. How then can we be true to our sacramental heritage without "watering down" our theology of justification by grace through faith? My constructive proposal "calmly considered," which draws on our Wesleyan heritage but doesn't simply "baptize" it, would be as follows: 1) infant baptism should be seen as a sacrament of prevenient not justifying or sanctifying grace; 2) this would mean, to get a bit more technical, that by this grace one is enabled to respond later consciously and freely to justifying grace. It could also be said to mean that the guilt (though not

We must find a way to affirm the sacrament of baptism without allowing baptism to swallow up our whole theology of salvation.
the taint or stain of original sin is removed by such a baptismal rite; 3) this would also mean that one is not made a Christian by infant baptism; rather baptism is a preparatory rite, making straight the way for salvation through faith later on; 4) this further means that infant baptism should not be allowed to be seen as the only prerequisite for church membership. If one is joined to the body of Christ by means of justifying grace through faith, then infant baptism must be seen to accomplish something less than this; 5) this also in turn means that, whatever revisions we make in regard to our views of confirmation, it is not a good idea to abandon the idea all together; for this process aids people in making a conscious and public response of faith to the work of God's grace in their lives, something the Bible and our heritage suggests is essential.

Doubtless we could instantly increase our church roles (and apportionments) a good deal if we simply declared people Christians because they have received baptism, even infant baptism. We might not need Vision 2000 if we followed this approach. If we do this, however, we will simply be making the same mistakes the medieval church made, mistakes which the Protestant Reformation sought to correct. One of the reasons for the Protestant protest in the first place was that salvation by baptism amounted to salvation by clerically controlled activity. In other words, it was a power move, one to which Wesley's movement of salvation by lay preaching gave the lie.

In sum, I think there is a bridge over these troubled waters, but it is not the one constructed by the recent baptismal study offered to our church. We must find a way to affirm the sacrament of baptism without, on the one hand, allowing baptism to swallow up our whole theology of salvation or, on the other hand, suggesting that baptism is nothing but an infant dedication rite. The key, I would suggest, is seeing this meaningful rite of passage, this boundary defining act, as a sacrament of prevenient grace. On these terms, repentance, faith, the new birth, justification, and sanctification are all rightly affirmed as still necessary for salvation. On these terms the Wesleyan baby is not thrown out, or better said, not drowned with too great a quantity of baptismal water.

The recent, final revisions of the baptismal document are certainly steps in the right direction, but they do not go far enough. It is not just that baptismal regeneration is not taught in the New Testament and is a dubious part of our Wesleyan heritage (by way of Anglicanism), it is that the New Testament teaches something else about how one
becomes a Christian. It suggests again and again that faith in Jesus Christ is absolutely necessary for salvation, while water baptism has only a second order sort of necessity (i.e., it is necessary to perform it in order to obey the Lord’s command in Matt. 28). We do not believe that most Quakers are lost simply because they have not received water baptism any more than Wesley did. This also means that we do not think that baptism is either sufficient or absolutely necessary for salvation (or, to put it another way, that it makes a person a Christian). Perhaps one could distinguish between becoming a proper member of the institutional church and becoming a Christian, but if baptism is only related to the former it means something less than the “christening” of a formerly non-Christian person. The discussion of these matters leads us into the deep waters of soteriology. May God give us wisdom as we debate and discuss the baptismal document at the General Conference we are about to have.
Some Thoughts toward a Theology of Confirmation

As United Methodists have studied the meaning of baptism the past two quadrennia, the question has surfaced again and again, “If one becomes a member of the church in baptism, then what do we do with confirmation?” Or, sometimes, “Why do we have confirmation at all?” The struggle over the meaning of baptism has raised the question of the theological grounding for confirmation. What is it? What does it mean? Why do we do it?

The title for this article was chosen deliberately. This is not a complete theology of confirmation but “some thoughts toward a theology of confirmation.” It is incomplete, too brief, and needs more conversation and study. It is a contribution to the ongoing conversation about the meaning of confirmation in United Methodism.

To begin to look at the meaning of confirmation, we must back up and start with the meaning of the rites of initiation. In the liturgy (“The Services of the Baptismal Covenant”), confirmation and baptism are part of a unified rite. So we begin with “Baptismal Covenant I” in The United Methodist Hymnal. What happens in baptism?

Through the Sacrament of Baptism
we are initiated into Christ’s holy church.
We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation
and given new birth through water and the Spirit.
All this is God’s gift, offered to us without price.

John O. Gooch is a clergy member of the Missouri East Conference, a member of the Committee to Study Baptism and Related Rites, and co-author and editor of the *Follow Me* confirmation resources.
Note that this rite combines baptism and confirmation. It is "all one does" to become a part of the church (except for the question about faithful participation in the life of the congregation, which is a question about commitment and ministry, not about membership). That is part of the dilemma. In this article, we will explore what Christian initiation means and some elements of a theology of confirmation. We begin with the New Testament.

Some New Testament Metaphors of Initiation

The New Testament uses several images for initiation. They include:

* union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5; Col. 2:12)
* incorporation into Christ's Body, the church (1 Cor. 12:13)
* adoption into the family of God (Gal. 4:4-7)
* being clothed with Christ (Gal. 3:27-28)
* the new birth in Christ (John 3:5; Titus 3:5)
* forgiveness of sin (1 Cor. 6:11; Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21; Heb. 10:22)
* the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 19:1-7; 1 Cor. 6:11)
* sanctification (1 Cor. 6:11)

These are baptismal metaphors. They are also foundational to any theology of confirmation, since they reference what was originally a unified rite. There is, of course, no evidence for anything like what we call "confirmation" in the New Testament. But the laying on of hands and invoking of the Holy Spirit appeared very early in the life of the church, so we are justified in our use of the metaphors for both baptism and confirmation.²

Union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5; Col. 2:12). The metaphor of dying with Christ and being raised with him obviously depends on baptism by immersion, since the image is of being buried in a watery grave and rising to new life. This was, indeed, a dominant idea in the early church, since in that missionary setting, adults were the majority of those being baptized. The renunciation of Satan, an anointing of exorcism, the nakedness of the person being baptized, the anointing and invocation of the Holy Spirit, the clean white robe with which the newly baptized was clothed, all helped to reinforce the metaphor. The second anointing, together with...
the laying on of hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, was called “confirmation” in the early church and was understood as a part of that single rite. The image is still helpful for persons baptized as adults, who are choosing between an old way of life and a new one (always provided, of course, that the preaching and nurture of the church and the preparation of the person for baptism have helped clarify the meaning of that choice). It is less helpful when we think about infant baptisms, with “confirmation” being delayed until adolescence. So one regrets that this is still the dominant metaphor of initiation, even in “By Water and the Spirit.”

Incorporation into Christ’s Body, the Church (1 Cor. 12:13). Clearly initiation is into something. But what does “Christ’s Body, the Church” mean? In the New Testament, it seems to have meant the company of all those who profess Christ as Lord and Savior. There was only one church, which met in various locations all over the Mediterranean and beyond. Today, because of concern over polity questions, we are less sure. What do we mean by “Body” and to what extent are we incorporated, made a part of it? Do we mean incorporation into some mystical “Body of Christ” which may have a spiritual meaning but no concrete expression? Do we mean incorporation into the church universal, as confirmation seemed to mean in the theological expression that helped introduce the rite to Methodism in 1964? Or do we mean incorporation into the church as a concrete entity, God’s people in the world, living in local congregations, denominations and other gatherings? Unless we want to adopt some kind of Gnostic vision of the church, it seems clear that the Body into which we are incorporated is the concrete, visible, expression, i.e., the local church and the denomination. To say that a person is initiated into the Body of Christ but not into any tangible expression of that body makes no sense.

Adoption into the Family of God (Gal. 4:4-7). Originally the metaphor probably referred to the practice of freeing a slave and adopting him into the family, making him the heir. Paul uses the metaphor to describe the change in the life of the Christian. The person who was “like a slave” is now a child of God. The adopted son inherits the property and has full rights in the family. In our day, to be adopted is to be chosen. An adopted child is wanted, loved, chosen, made a part of the family in a special way. The child who had no
family, who was, in a sense, homeless, now has a family and a home. Note the practical implications of the metaphor. We do not say, “Well, you’re adopted so you’re almost a member of the family.” The person adopted is a full member of the family, with all the privileges that go with family membership. He or she also carries responsibilities, which increase with age and maturity.

**Being clothed with Christ (Gal. 3:27-28).** Baptism is not just an outward rite or ceremony. Something happens in baptism: we “put on Christ.” The image is one of shedding dirty old clothes and bathing. After we are clean, we put on clean clothes, in this case, “Christ,” to celebrate the newness of life. In the early church, this was literally true. One took off one’s old clothes (and renounced Satan and evil), entered the water naked, came out of the water, and was clothed in a new, white garment. I’ve often wondered about the power of that metaphor for youth and adults being baptized/confirmed. What would the Christian life be like if we took seriously the image of being clothed with Christ? If we saw ourselves as persons who “wear Christ” as part of our daily lives? A recent series of TV commercials for Levi's 501 jeans shows the wearers doing some amazing acts of physical prowess. The closing line for at least one of the commercials is “They’re even better broken in.” What kinds of amazing things could the Christian do while “wearing Christ”? And would that not be even better broken in, after one is used to “wearing Christ,” to living out the power and the commitment of baptism/confirmation?

**New birth in Christ (John 3:5; Titus 3:5).** New birth, say both the gospel and the liturgy, is one of the gifts of baptism. What does it mean to be born again? Nicodemus asked the obvious question: can one really begin again? Is it possible to have a life so new it’s as if one were “born again”? This metaphor has powerful appeal, because we associate babies with innocence and hope and joy. But the metaphor also draws us into the divisive question of baptismal regeneration. Are we born again in baptism? Or is baptism simply a symbol of our being born again? That is, does the sacrament actually “do something,” or is it only a sign of something done elsewhere? Or is it both? John and Titus each suggest that regeneration comes by both water and the Spirit. The Greek word for “regeneration” used in Titus suggests a whole range of meaning for the ancient world. Both the world and humanity, being corrupt, would pass away. But within the Christian a
new act of creation, of being born again, has already taken place. The Christian is no longer subject to the powers but is a new creation, “free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2). So, at least for the Pauline community, “baptism became the focal point for the entire pattern of Christian redemption...”

John Wesley clearly believed that regeneration came through baptism. In his “Treatise on Baptism,” he says:

By water, then, as a means, the water of baptism, we are regenerated or born again; whence it is also called by the Apostle, “the washing of regeneration.” Our church ascribes no greater virtue to baptism than Christ himself has done. Nor does she ascribe it to the outward washing, but to the inward grace, which, added thereto, makes it a sacrament. Herein a principle of grace is infused, which will not be wholly taken away, unless we quench the Holy Spirit of God by long-continued wickedness.

Wesley is not willing to say that the water is sufficient, as if the rite carried a power of its own. The principle of grace (the Holy Spirit) is also required. But he is also not willing to say that the water is only a symbol. It clearly carries more power for him than mere symbol.

But what does regeneration mean for our day? Is one born again? Is there a new being, free from the law of sin and death? If one believes in new birth through the Spirit, how impossible is it to believe that God’s grace works through both water and Spirit? Is that not the clear word of Scripture?

Forgiveness of sin (1 Cor. 6:11; Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21; Heb. 10:22). By sheer weight of numbers, this is a powerful metaphor. One finds it in all ages of the church. Oddly enough, it is perhaps less popular in our day because of the modern insistence on the purity and innocence of infants. To paraphrase a popular book title of some years ago, whatever became of original sin?

Again, there is a formidable question. Are sins forgiven in Christian initiation, or is the rite a sign of sin already forgiven? Cannot God work in both ways? Does it have to be either/or? We all agree that forgiveness is a gift from God, something we could never do for ourselves. Can we not also say that God can work forgiveness when and where God will, both through rites and independent of rites?
The gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 19:1-7; 1 Cor. 6:11). The Spirit confirms a new birth, a new being in Christ, a person reborn in God, who is called to live a life of holiness. The gift of the Spirit recalls the descent of the Spirit on Jesus in his baptism, and, perhaps, on the church at Pentecost. There is a new life, a new beginning. The Spirit blesses what has happened in baptism/confirmation and declares the baptized/confirmed person a child of God, in whom God is well pleased. This, too, is a baptismal image that has been a continuing theme in the life of the church.

In baptism/confirmation, the gift of the Spirit is symbolized by the laying on of hands. In the ancient world, blessings were always given through the laying on of hands. The stories of Isaac blessing Jacob and Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph are good examples of the power of acted metaphor. The imagery continues in The United Methodist Church. We lay hands on the person being baptized/confirmed and invoke the presence and power of the Spirit for that life. We lay hands on a person being ordained and invoke the presence and power of the Spirit for ordination. Do we believe that we literally command the Spirit to enter the person at that point? Surely not. But is there any less power in the action as a result? Does not the acted metaphor convey the power of the community and of the Spirit, who acts in and through the community? Do we not join ourselves with the Holy Spirit in a giving of gifts when we lay on hands? (If there is no power in the rite, as some United Methodist bishops insist about baptism, why are they unwilling to have laity involved in the laying on of hands at ordination? If it is only a sign, what does it matter whose hands are involved?)

Sanctification (1 Cor. 6:11). Paul clearly says that the baptized person has been sanctified, or made holy. Again one will ask, how much power do we give to the metaphor? Should we take it literally and say that one is actually sanctified in baptism? What about the baptism of infants? What about baptisms that are truly formal rites on the part of the person being baptized, and there is little meaning behind them? Do we believe that somehow this person is made holy?

Perhaps it would be helpful to remember that, biblically, sanctification means "making whole or complete." In baptism/confirmation a person is born again, clothed with Christ, dies and rises again with Christ, made whole. One trajectory of thought in the early church, associated most clearly with Irenaeus (ca. 185) and Tertullian.
One doubts that United Methodists are ready to overturn completely 200 years of insistence on infant baptism.

An Historical Perspective

The unified rite broke apart under both theological and ecclesiological pressure. Infants were baptized at an earlier age, partly because the influence of Augustine’s theology of original sin put the fear of damnation into parents’ hearts. Baptisms were carried out by parish priests. But the laying on of hands (confirmation) was reserved for the bishop, and bishops were not always readily available. Hence the
custom of delaying confirmation until such time as a bishop was present for the laying on of hands. By the High Middle Ages, confirmation was recognized as a separate sacrament, and theologians began casting about for a theology to undergird it.

One strand of sacramental theology, dating from the early third century, holds that sacraments are efficacious in and of themselves, ex opere operato. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage in the middle of the third century, argued that the moral condition of the person administering the sacrament is no impediment to its efficacy. Another element in this strand of thought says that the sacrament works somehow in and of itself, regardless of the faith of the person receiving it. In the case of Christian initiation, for example, this would mean that baptism and confirmation (whether in a unified rite or separate) would confer the grace of God in the life of the person receiving them, no matter what the faith or moral state of the person.

The Protestant reformers threw out the whole idea of confirmation as a sacrament and replaced it with a system of catechesis. Their emphasis was on the importance of a profession of faith in Christ and on understanding what the faith meant.

In United Methodist discussions about baptism and confirmation, the Reformation has often been the pivot on which all else turns. We insist that there has to be a profession of faith. The problem is what profession means in practical, pastoral terms. Do we wait to confirm persons until they can make a mature confession of faith? Or do we go to the opposite extreme and confirm children of younger and younger age who cannot possibly understand what they are affirming? Whatever one thinks of catechesis as an educational tool, is there not some value in understanding what it is that one professes? And is there not some value and power in the rite itself? Is there not something "objective" that happens in and to a person being confirmed?

With this background in mind we can finally ask, What is confirmation and how does it function in The United Methodist Church?

What Is Confirmation?

In an earlier theology of confirmation, as we have already seen, baptism connected one with Christ, whereas confirmation connected one with the church universal. At some later time one became a member of a local church and a denomination. That theology emphasized both "degrees

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of membership” and “joining the church” as if they were divorced from the sacrament of baptism. That is clearly inadequate to explain what happens in Christian initiation.

Another perspective heard often in United Methodist churches is that confirmation somehow is necessary to “complete” baptism, though there is not always clarity on how baptism is incomplete. So far as one can tell, this idea first surfaced in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, who was trying to justify a rite that was far different from the practice of the early church. The unified rite had been separated, primarily for reasons of polity, and confirmation came much later in life. Careful thought suggests that baptism is complete in itself; what God does in baptism is done and does not need to be “completed” or “tidied up” in a later rite. But that still does not explain what confirmation is in and of itself. The biblical metaphors for baptism/confirmation (a unified rite) still hold. Building on them, I offer “some thoughts toward a theology of confirmation.”

**Confirmation is an act of the Holy Spirit.** The liturgy (Baptismal Covenant I) says:

> The holy Spirit work within you, that being born of water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

This statement accompanies the laying on of hands, the confirmation part of the unified rite. It is also used in confirmation or reaffirmation of faith for those persons baptized as infants. The Holy Spirit gives us new birth through baptism (and prcvent and justifying grace). Now the Spirit is invoked to give us power to live out our baptism as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

One enduring question (or set of questions) about confirmation is: What is confirmed? Is it faith? Is it the person? And who does the confirming? Is it the pastor? The congregation? The Holy Spirit? The clear answer is that we confirm God’s action already taken in baptism. At the same time the Holy Spirit confirms in a person’s life what God has already done (and continues to do) and enables that person to live out the implications of what God has done.

It is certainly true that faith is involved in confirmation. We expect that a person being confirmed will have some kind of faith in God through Jesus Christ. But even faith is a gift from God. We continue to
confirm God’s act. The person being confirmed is strengthened in the faith and strengthened for life in Christ. But this, too, is God’s act.

It is certainly true that the pastor is the agent of confirmation. It is the pastor’s hands that are laid on the confirmand, and the pastor who invokes the Holy Spirit. But it is not the pastor who confirms. The pastor is only the agent of the Spirit. Likewise, it is true that the congregation is involved in confirmation. The congregation renews its collective commitment to God and to each other. The congregation makes a new commitment to the person(s) being confirmed and pledges full support in living the life of faithful discipleship. But the congregation also stands in need of the same grace and strength it promises. So the full work of confirmation is the work of the Holy Spirit. Confirmation is by grace.

**Confirmation is a means of grace.** In confirmation, youth experience the grace of God in a more mature way than was possible at their baptism (for those who were baptized as infants). It is God’s grace that brings us to the event and enables us to respond to it. Prevenient grace worked through the Holy Spirit and the community of faith to cause youth to want to be confirmed. Justifying and sanctifying grace work through the time of preparation for the rite—and the rite itself—to draw the individual and the community to a new life, a new commitment, a new sense of meaning and direction.

When we say us in the previous paragraph, we mean both the individual(s) making the commitment and the community that receives the individual(s). Whatever happens in the life of the church, we are not strong enough or faithful enough to stand on our own. We all stand in need of God’s grace. Confirmation is one of the “ordinary means” by which God works in the life of the church to give grace.

Obviously, a personal response to grace is required. Individuals—and the community—are called to respond to grace, to affirm their faith, to live a life of faithful discipleship. Confirmation ties together God’s act in Christ (prevenient grace, salvation, new birth) and our response to God’s act. It also ties together the sacramental and Reformation emphases of grace and faith.

**Confirmation is one of the first significant moments in which we affirm the faith into which we were baptized.** In the struggle for a theology of confirmation, we find the continuing clash between the unified rite of baptism/confirmation, which suggests the sacrament is
all we need, and the Reformation insistence on the importance of a profession of faith and of the importance of learning what the faith means. How can we reconcile the two?

In the rite of confirmation, we ask persons to renew the covenant that was made in their baptism. They are asked to affirm "the faith into which (they) were baptized." That is, they are asked to affirm the faith of the church. This is why the responsive use of the Apostles’ Creed is such an important part of the ritual. Persons affirm the creed, the apostolic teaching, the tradition of the church. This is not an empty, impersonal act. If preparation for confirmation has been faithful, confirmands will also be affirming their own faith. For they will have claimed the faith of the church as their own. The profession of faith will be not just empty words but a profession that they believe what the church believes, that the "faith once delivered to the saints" is the faith which they claim as their own. We affirm the content of the faith as well as our response to it. So the rite of confirmation brings together God’s act in Christ (prevenient grace, salvation, new birth) and our response in faith. It embodies the sacramental emphasis on God’s action and the Reformation emphasis on profession of faith.

The process of confirmation preparation and the rite itself contribute to the formation of Christian identity. This is an incredibly important point. Boys' Town has done in-depth research on spiritual formation with high-risk youth. One of their conclusions is that identification with a particular denomination is an important asset for youth in dealing with the temptations of high-risk behaviors.14 More: building identity is an important part of spiritual formation.15 The need for such an identity surfaces in comments such as, "My Lutheran friends know what they believe. Why don’t I know what I believe?" Such questions are really pleas for identity. "Who am I? Does being a United Methodist make any difference?"

Christians in the United Methodist tradition build their faith lives on Wesley’s "way of salvation" (original sin, justification, sanctification) and on holiness as a way of life. There are important theological, moral, practical, and ecclesiological implications of that simple statement. Confirmation preparation helps youth and adults understand the meaning of their faith and its implications for their lives. It builds in them a strong sense of identity as a person who believes and lives in those ways.
Confirmation is a focus on discipleship. The goal of confirmation (both as a rite and as an educational discipline) is to shape disciples of Jesus Christ, for whom church membership is one way of living out what it means to be a disciple. Confirmation helps youth become disciples of Jesus Christ by:

a. recognizing, affirming, and celebrating the transforming grace of God in Jesus Christ;
b. responding to God’s claim on their lives;
c. witnessing to their faith;
d. living into the communion of saints in its ministry to the world.

All these elements relate to discipleship, to accepting and affirming faith, making a commitment to follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and living faith in the world. The last two statements relate also to vocation (as a calling, not as a way to make a living) and to ministry.

Confirmation reminds us that our vocation is to be a Christian. All persons whom God has touched are “called” to be Christians. That is our vocation (from the Latin, vocare, to call). We are called to be Christians not in an abstract sense but in a very real one. We are called to be an incarnation of the faith, as Jesus of Nazareth was an incarnation of the Word. United Methodists affirm that calling, that incarnation, in specific terms. Our vocation is to live as Christians in the United Methodist tradition, giving flesh and blood to the “way of salvation” and the reality of holiness in the ordinary matters of daily life.

The people of God are the Church made visible in the world. It is they who must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced. There can be no evasion or delegation of this responsibility; the Church is either faithful as a witnessing and serving community, or it loses its vitality and its impact on an unbelieving world.16

Our vocation is given to us in baptism. Confirmation reminds us of that vocation—which is our call to ministry.

Confirmation ratifies the call to ministry given in baptism. In baptism, at whatever age, Christians are called to ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. At one time, United Methodists and their predecessor bodies referred to this call to ministry as “the priesthood of all
believers.” The essential meaning of priesthood was lost in the growing anti-Catholicism of the nineteenth century, and that time-honored phrase came to express more individualism and independence than an awareness of God’s claim on our lives. The common understanding of priesthood of all believers became something like, “I don’t need a priest. I can talk to God directly.” No hint of ministry there.

As United Methodists have reflected more deeply on the meaning of Christian initiation, we have come to recognize the claim God puts on our lives in baptism and have used the phrase “the general ministry of all Christians” to express the reality of that claim. As The Book of Discipline recognizes, confirmation plays an important role in the process of responding to God’s call to ministry.

Baptism is followed by nurture and the consequent awareness by the baptized of the claim to ministry in Christ placed upon their lives by the church. Such a ministry is ratified in confirmation, when the pledges of Baptism are accepted and renewed for life and mission.

Those pledges of baptism include resisting evil, injustice, and oppression and serving Christ as Lord. Certainly infants and young children are not ready to live out those commitments to any degree of fullness.

Confirmation (both as rite and preparation) ratifies the claims and provides the opportunity for a more mature commitment to ministry.

The moment of confirmation in adolescence is still not the full commitment to ministry, however. A part of the process of sanctification includes continual commitment to ministry in the name of Jesus Christ, with regular opportunities to ratify and ritualize that commitment.

Confirmation is a rite of sanctification. Sanctification is both gracious gift and call to life. The holy life is both a gift to be cherished and a battle to be won. Confirmation both affirms the gift and calls to battle. In confirmation, we recognize a new level of maturity in Christian faith and life and the call for continued growth. So one is not sanctified in confirmation. Rather, one affirms the gift and accepts the call. Confirmation recognizes the reality of God’s acting through a lifelong process of change and nurture and serves as an “Ebenezer,” a way of marking one’s passage through struggle and growth. To that end, confirmation need not be a once-and-for-all rite.
Unlike Baptism, Confirmation is a repeatable rite. The Christian life does not end with confirmation in adolescence. We continue to grow in knowledge, experience, faith. Growth brings with it new challenges, new understandings of faith, and the need for new commitment. Young adolescents who make a faith commitment and are confirmed in seventh grade (or even younger, in some cases) are different people when they reach eleventh or twelfth grade. They have a variety of new experiences and vast new knowledge. They ask questions in different ways. Their experience of God and community has changed, and they are no longer satisfied with simple answers to faith questions.

Theologically, that process of growth in faith and understanding is part of God’s gift of sanctification. Confirmation as a repeatable rite is an important tool in the process. Confirmation education and rites should be offered for anyone who reaches a new stage of faith and commitment in his or her life. This ritualizing of changed lives keeps the Reformation emphasis on struggling with faith, making honest commitments, seeking to grow in faith and understanding. It affirms the power of the Holy Spirit in these lives and invokes the presence of the Spirit for the next stage of the journey. It affirms the place of the congregation in nurturing and challenging lives for growth.\(^1\)

Confirmation as a repeatable rite allows for the ritualizing of growth in one’s faith without raising the specter of rebaptism. The statement pastors often hear, ”Now that I know what I believe and what I’m doing, I want to be really baptized,” need not become an issue. If a person has been taught the meaning of her baptism, then she knows God has acted in a complete way in that act. If a person understands confirmation as an act of commitment, rather than “joining the church,” he is comfortable with the reality that one may celebrate the rite of confirmation again and again, as one grows in faith and understanding.

A congregation that is comfortable with confirmation as a repeatable rite rejoices over and over as its members witness to and celebrate the presence of God’s spirit in their lives through significant change.
A congregation that is comfortable with confirmation as a repeatable rite rejoices over and over as its members witness to and celebrate the presence of God's spirit in their lives through significant change. The ritual of Baptismal Renewal (Baptismal Covenant IV in The United Methodist Hymnal) is a rich resource for helping both individuals and congregations discover and celebrate times of renewal in their lives.

Confirmation as a repeatable rite means that Christians can celebrate God's presence in their lives in all kinds of growth and change. Graduations, first jobs, military service, marriage, divorce, the births of children, job changes, job loss, death, illness, all are times of stress and potential growth. Part of the process of dealing with significant change is the struggle with the meaning of life. What does my life mean, now, in this new situation? What is my relationship with God? Am I angry with God? Close to God? Discovering God in new ways? What is happening in my life and what does it mean?

Every moment of witness and renewal should be a time for gaining new understanding of one's life and faith in this new situation. Short-term classes, intense conversations with pastors and/or mentors, guided reading programs, all provide the opportunity for rethinking faith and internalizing growth.

Confirmation as a repeatable rite opens the possibility of commitment to new forms of ministry. A young adolescent makes a willing commitment to ministry in confirmation. But that same person, as a college student or young adult, discovers the power of working for others through Habitat for Humanity, or some other expression of service. Confirmation as a repeatable rite allows for that person to witness to and celebrate that ministry. It also provides the opportunity for reflection on the theological meaning of that commitment.

**Confirmation and Church Membership**

What we have not said is as important as what we have said. Confirmation does not make one a member of the church. Church membership clearly comes through baptism. For youth and adults who are baptized as infants, raised in the community of the church, nurtured in love, and active in the life of the church, how could we say, "Now you are ready to join the church and become a full member"? How does one "become a member" of a body to which one
has fully belonged for years? For youth and adults who were not baptized as infants, the unified rite of baptism/confirmation brings them into full membership. Both groups may, in fact, share in the same preparation for the rite. Some are baptized/confirmed in a unified rite and become members of the church. Others are confirmed as continuing members of the church as they affirm their faith at new levels of understanding and commitment.

Notes

2. Gregory Dix, The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome (London: SPCK, 1968), xlii, argues that Hippolytus reflects practices that go back to at least A.D. 100 in Rome. The structure of "Baptismal Covenant I" closely follows the structure of the early Roman service, as reported by Hippolytus.
3. See ibid., 30-43, for a detailed description of the baptismal rite, which also included the first participation in the Eucharist, and the meaning of the rite, as it was understood in Rome early in the second century. Tertullian, On Baptism, 6-8, and The Chapter 3, testify to the same understanding in Carthage, as does Justin Martyr, First Apology, 61, 65, for Asia Minor and The Apostolic Constitutions, 7, for Syria.
5. Baptism Confirmation . . . implications for the younger generation (New York: Department of Youth Ministry, National Council of Churches, USA, n.d.). This document was intended as a study document but, in the absence of any alternative, became a kind of de facto theology of confirmation. It described a three-stage process in which one was “baptized into Christ, confirmed in the church universal, and received into membership in the local church.”
6. See note 3.
8. “Treatise on Baptism” in The Works of John Wesley, 3rd ed., vol. X. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 192. The argument that this is the work not of John Wesley but of his father, Samuel, and can therefore be disregarded loses all force when we remember that John continually claimed this work as his own thought and had it reprinted several times during his life.
10. This is the doctrine of recapitulation. For fuller details, see ibid., 66-88. This doctrine is implied by the ritual found in Hippolytus.
11. Cyprian's arguments are scattered through his letters and through his works *On the Lapsed,* and *On the Unity of the Catholic Church.* Basically, he argues that the power of the sacrament is in God's working through it, not in the moral standing of the priest. He does, however, insist that baptisms by heretics or schismatics, however moral, are not valid baptisms, because they are outside the church.


13. *By Water and the Spirit,* 44.


17. Ibid., Par. 106. See also Par. 104.


**Reading List**

*Baptism Confirmation... implications for the younger generation. New York: Department of Youth Ministry, National Council of Churches, USA, n.d.*


Some time toward the end of the first century of the Common Era, an evangelist most likely living in the Syrian city of Antioch wrote what we know as the Gospel according to Matthew. This writer combined Mark's Gospel, the collection of sayings now known as Q, and special material of his own to create a Jewish text for a largely Jewish-Christian community. Written with a keen awareness of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., Matthew is concerned to show how the Jewish tradition is best carried forward in a Jewish-Christian context. The author of Matthew believed that his community's identity as followers of Jesus not only was compatible with their Jewish heritage but was in fact the expression of true fidelity to that heritage.

The Matthean community, however, faced a serious problem. How should they explain to themselves and to potential converts that not all Jews accept their Christian claims about Jesus? Matthew's community considered itself within the framework of Judaism, yet it had to acknowledge a growing tension with other Jewish groups. Paul treats a similar concern in Romans 9-11: How to grapple with the mystery of the rejection of the gospel by other Jews. Although written some thirty years after Paul and in another place, Matthew is no less concerned with the gospel's mixed reception. It is this mystery of the...
limited acceptance of the gospel within Jewish circles that Matthew addresses in the propers for our consideration.1

July 6, 1996, the 6th Sunday after Pentecost


Ps. 45:10-17
Rom. 7:15-25

“You Nobodies Will Find Rest.”

“We played the flute for you and you did not dance. We wailed, and you did not mourn” (11:17). Matthew 11-13 (which contains propers 9-12 in this study) has as its theme the Son and the Kingdom meeting opposition and rejection. Following Matthew’s mission discourse in chapter 10, chapter 11 begins with the ominous note of John the Baptist’s imprisonment and continues with a consideration of the relationship between John and Jesus and their common rejection by their generation.

Proper 9 begins with a somewhat obscure parable about two groups of children playing, or more accurately failing to play, with each other. One group suggests the wedding game and plays the flute, but the other group will not dance. Switching games, the first group tries the funeral game and begins to wail, but the other group will not join in mourning. Wedding game or funeral game, the second group rejects both and will have none of the happy game or the sad game.

Jesus is saying that “this generation” of his contemporaries rejects both the fasting, ascetic John and the feasting Jesus who ate and drank with sinners. Just as the funeral John was rejected, so Jesus, although piping a very different tune, is rejected. Likewise, the Matthean community is being rejected by Jews who cannot accept the good news proclaimed by that community.2 Setting the stories of John’s rejection and execution along with Jesus’ experiences of conflict, opposition, rejection, and execution permits the community to use both the crucified Messiah and his forerunner as companions and models for facing its own rejection.

Matthew interprets Jesus’ rejection through the lens of the traditional Wisdom myth, which represented Wisdom as coming to earth and suffering rejection but ultimate vindication. In the background here is an inner-Jewish debate about what and where Wisdom is. For Matthew, Jesus is the divine Wisdom incarnate.
Wisdom is the person of the Son and his teaching, and Wisdom is to be found in the school of Jesus. But it is to infants and not to the professionally wise that Jesus reveals the Father.

On one level, then, the Matthean community feels tension with other Jews and finds solidarity with Jesus and John and their experiences of rejection. There is in addition to this a somewhat more subtle tension embedded in this text: the tension between the markedly different programs of the fasting John and the feasting Jesus.

John Dominic Crossan sees John the Baptist as a peasant apocalyptic prophet who reenacted the model of Moses and Joshua, leading crowds of people into the wilderness so they could recross the Jordan into the Promised Land, baptized for forgiveness of sins to await the avenging and redeeming God. Once a purified people were prepared, God would do what no human strength ever could and destroy Roman power; Crossan argues that Jesus, along with John, began as an apocalyptic believer but in time broke with John’s vision of a future apocalyptic kingdom. It was the crisis of John’s own execution, Crossan speculates, that led Jesus to understand a God who would not operate through immanent apocalyptic restoration. Instead, Jesus points to the activity of God’s kingdom present and active here and now.

In Matthew 11:11 we see a sign of this break from the John the Baptist movement. Jesus says that the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist. And in the Gospel of Thomas: “But I have said that whoever among you becomes a child will know the kingdom and will become greater than John.” To our ears the conjunction between infant children and the kingdom is so familiar that it has no more rhetorical punch than the standard stained glass...
window of Jesus blessing the little children. But Crossan reminds us that to the ancient Mediterranean mind, a child was nobody unless its father accepted it as a member of the family, and the alternative was exposing it in the gutter or garbage heap to die of abandonment. Pagan writers were surprised that Jewish parents did not practice potential infanticide. But even for Jews, a Kingdom of Children, Crossan writes, is a Kingdom of Nobodies. In the honor and shame societies of the ancient Mediterranean it was an insult for an adult to be compared to a child.¹

If it is to infants that divine Wisdom comes, to Nothings and Nobodies, and not (as expected) to sages, then it is to those on the margins to whom the kingdom is most accessible—the destitute, the persecuted, and the despised. To these who are weary and carrying heavy burdens Jesus offers the yoke of his teaching, a yoke which, unlike that of other Jewish teachers, is light. A Nobody finds rest by taking the yoke of Jesus.⁵

A Nobody Received

While I was doing the research for this article, a friend told me about something he had witnessed at a 12-Step meeting. He had listened that day to a woman whose children had just been removed from her custody because her drug use had made it impossible for her to care for them. She had come out of desperation to this meeting: for her there was simply no place left to go. After she had told her story, an old-timer with more than fifteen years of drug-free living said, "I want you to know something. You probably feel very alone now and as though no one in the world is as bad as you. But everything that you have done, we in this room have done. And we have done more.

"For right now, just keep coming back to meetings. Just keep coming back. Right now you can’t even imagine loving yourself. Whether you will be able to in the future I can’t say. But keep coming back and let us love you while you can’t love yourself. For, say, three years or so. Then let’s see."

This story captures for me several themes present in the propers for our consideration, and I believe that they speak a word of good news to her situation.

This woman is weary and carrying heavy burdens. At the bottom of her life, she has joined the Kingdom of Nothings and Nobodies. Who willingly joins that kingdom? No one comes gladly to a 12-Step
meeting at first. They come when their lives have become, in 12-Step language, unmanageable. This woman, too, has come to a para-church group where she can begin to tell her story in safety and have it received without condemnation. Although the name of Jesus will not be named as such in her 12-Step meeting, that meeting will always end with the ritual question, “Who keeps us sober?” And the response from a circle of Nobodies whose hands are joined, “Our Father, who art in heaven . . . .”

At a meeting of anonymous Nobodies this woman may become as a child, picked up from the gutter of her life, taken, held, and blessed by her inclusion in that circle. From that first indispensable step, acknowledging an incontrovertible fact, that her life has become unmanageable, she may then haltingly move toward placing her life in the care of those people and God. If, as she is encouraged, she keeps coming back, she may see others whose lives are becoming progressively free of bondage to drugs. She will hear of a Higher Power into whose hands she will see others giving themselves and finding rest.

If she keeps coming back she will have to deal with what is probably a lifelong problem of rejection: rejection by others, rejection by herself. In fact, it has been an attempt to soothe this intolerable pain of rejection that has led her into the illusory solace of drugs. The temporary relief of her pain, however, became a trap which would not let her go and dragged her deeper down in the grip of rejection.

Here at the bottom is an opportunity: to keep coming back is to become a part of a community which will sponsor the recovery of her true identity as a child of God. She must begin to recover or die; her alternatives are this stark. Her salvation will not come by a future apocalyptic righting of wrongs or by changing the externals of her situation but by the patient working of the steps in the here and now, a slow sanctification with its predictable slips and falls.

First, she may simply experience the relief of her burden in her welcome in this group of other self-acknowledged marginal infants. Then she may recognize that there is indeed someone in her worth saving. She is not, much as she may feel herself, just Nothing Nobody rubbish to be thrown on the garbage heap. Child of God, she is worthy of a recovery of a new life. There is much that she must learn in this school for sufferers in order to learn to live well. But the saving knowledge that she is not a bad person, whatever harmful things she may have done and have suffered, will give her rest.

Later, after she has come to know her essential goodness, she will make a fearless moral inventory of herself. Fearless because she need
fear no condemnation. The truth to be learned in this school is for her well-being, not for her laceration by herself or anyone else. The truth to be learned in this school is a freedom from her addiction of self-destruction for a life of hope.

July 14, 1996, the 7th Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 10: Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23.

Ps. 119:105-112
Gen. 25:19-34
Rom. 8:1-11

“If you have ears, use them!”

Chapter 13 contains Matthew’s lengthy parable discourse and concludes with the story of Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth. Chapter 14 begins with an account of the death of John the Baptist, followed by Jesus’ withdrawal to a deserted place and the feeding of the five thousand. Before examining the parable of the Sower, a few general remarks on the narrative world of the parable are in order. Here I follow Bernard Brandon Scott, whose Hear Then the Parable I have found indispensable for this lectionary study.

Scott identifies three coordinates of the narrative world of the parable: the everyday, the unclean, and the miraculous. Jesus’ parables draw their stock of images from the everyday world of the peasant. Home and farm, masters and servants, the family, village, city, and beyond serve to outline a map of the peasant’s world: the artifacts of everyday life, the patron-client model of hierarchy, and the identification of insiders and outsiders comprise his parabolic world.

The unclean as a coordinate of the parable shows up in parable after parable, for those under our consideration the Leaven, the Mustard Seed, the Wheat and Weeds, and the Treasure. That God’s kingdom could be active in a place where the listener would expect only corruption must have been (and still is) a most unexpected locus for divine activity. But as Thomas Keating observes in his fine collection of homilies on the parables, “God’s favor and mercy is evoked in direct proportion to our destitution—to our lack of inner and outer resources.”

Finally, the miraculous as a coordinate of the parable shows up in unexpectedly muted and hidden ways. Because there is a tension between our experience of the vicissitudes of life and our expectations of the sovereignty of God, we might expect miracle to resolve this...
tension. The symbol of the kingdom of God involves the myth of
God’s ruling over the world and restoring the world to the chosen
people. How will God rule and overcome the discrepancies between
our expectations of life and the unsatisfactory present?

Two answers are our inheritance from the Hebrew Bible. The
apocalyptic myth (e.g., John the Baptist) dreams of a fantasy future world
or another world in which God will rule. The wisdom myth (the proverbs
of the professional sage on how to cope with life) involves the fantasy of
a perfect present life. Scott sees Jesus as both anti-apocalyptic and
anti-wisdom, though the tradition has confessed him as both messiah and
rabbi. His parables present an everyday world, at times tragic and
unclean, where any miracle resolving the tensions of life is muted or
hidden. Instead, the God of the parables is one in radical alliance with
people. Rather than resolving the tensions of our lives, “the threat of the
parable is that it subverts the myths that sustain our world and force us to
see a world with which God is in solidarity.” The parables of Matthew
13 perform just this function: both subverting the expected sustaining
myths of the hearers and presenting a God present in the very tensions of
the lives of those hearers.

Organized as a day of parables, Matthew’s chapter 13 pictures Jesus
the teacher seated in a boat; his audience is the general crowd. Scott
sees the order of the chapter in this fashion:

A A Sower Went Out
B Interpretation
A The Wheat and Tares
B A Grain of Mustard Seed
B The Leaven
A Interpretation
B Treasure
B A Merchant
A The Net

Three parables, A Sower Went Out, the Wheat and Tares, and the
Net all speak to the theme of separation. All receive interpretations,
universally agreed to come from the hand of the evangelist rather than
from the mouth of Jesus himself. Two sets of doublets, without
interpretation, separate the Wheat and Tares and the Net.

The parable of the Sower focuses not on the person of the sower but
on the seeds and their yields and as such draws attention to the fact of
failure. If Matthew is concerned to explain the mixed reception of the gospel, this parable is an excellent vehicle for his purposes. The Matthean community can explain to itself the non-reception of the gospel as due to the work of the evil one, to the shallowness of the hearer, or to worldly concerns and the desire for wealth. Those who reject the word are outsiders; those who receive the word are insiders. The Matthean community would, of course, identify itself with the good seed.

The harvest of a hundredfold, sixty, and thirty, is not, Scott notes, a fantastic crop, a common eschatological expectation. It is \textit{contra Jeremias} a normal, average-to-good harvest. Yet this everyday crop is nonetheless miraculous in that common wisdom sees germination as a sign of miracle. "The hearer is left with a kingdom in which failure, miracle, and normality are coordinates... In the end the harvest is ordinary and everyday. In failure and everydayness lies the miracle of God's activity." 8

Does this parable have any light to shed on the woman received into the 12-Step group? What has happened to this woman that life has taken such poor root in her? Why is she addicted? Is it due to the activity of the evil one? Personal shallowness? A preference for worldly concerns? Is this woman either a bad seed or one whose life is nothing but a failure? Certainly she could see herself and be seen by others as an outsider, one whose life had not borne any decent harvest, blaming herself or her circumstances, most likely both. Could it be possible, however, that God's activity might be hidden even in the failure of her life? Might failure simply be the soil in which the germ of a new life might grow? I believe that the other parables will make just this case.

July 21, 1996, the 8th Sunday after Pentecost


Ps. 139:1-12, 23-24
Gen. 28:19-19a
Rom. 8:12-25

"Where Did These Weeds Come From?"

Like the parable of the Sower, the parable of the Wheat and Tares has an appended allegorical interpretation. As Crossan says, once you read that interpretation, it is almost impossible to see the parable except through that lens. Matthew and the insiders need to know what to do with the outsiders who reject their gospel. This parable, along with the
Net, counsels patience and tolerance for the present, leaving separation and judgment to God at the end time. For Matthew's purposes the pressing need was what to do with outsiders, and he employed this and other parables to serve those purposes.

But what if there was another, different thrust to this parable at the level of its original performance by Jesus? Darnel (weeds, tares) is a noxious weed which ruins the quality of grain and is dangerous to the health of anyone eating bread made from flour so adulterated. Crossan argues that Jesus' peasant hearers would have greatly enjoyed the predicament of this householder who, unlike them, had slaves to cultivate the fields which, unlike them, he would have owned. For the unfortunate householder was (what a shame!) faced with two choices and neither of them good: let the darnel grow—or uproot it and lose the whole crop. Darnel in this reading is an image of the kingdom, growing and undesirable to some but nonetheless so mixed in as to be incapable of being uprooted. Why does Jesus use darnel as an image for the kingdom? An answer will perhaps become clearer when we examine the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven.

How can something undesirable be an image of the kingdom of God's activity? We have seen how the woman who lost her children found at her point of greatest need a group of people who did not try to uproot her from their company. Having known themselves as lost and undesirable, they were able to discern in her (arguably as few others could) the image of God. They had no need to uproot her or cast her out but left judgment to God and God alone. This woman might even hear of persons with some significant time in recovery who had come to see their addictions as the means by which grace and the kingdom of God had come decisively into their lives. Addiction had brought them to their knees and to their need for God. Addiction and darnel, unwelcome and unwanted in themselves, poison to those who imbibe and ingest, problems both; but the woman and landowner alike are stuck with them, facts which will not go away. What shall we do with stubborn, unwanted realities over which we are powerless? What shall we do with realities which remind us that we are not God? Cast them out, burn them, uproot them, fight them? Or receive them, acknowledge them, welcome them, embrace them?
July 28, 1996, the 9th Sunday after Pentecost
Ps. 105:1–11, 45b
Gen. 29:15–28
Rom. 8:26–39

"Someone Sowed Mustard Seed in His Field."

Jesus' hearers would have said incredulously to themselves, "What? Someone sowed mustard seed in a field? The equivalent for us might be to hear that someone had poured sand in his gas tank. We need to know several facts about planting mustard seeds in a field in Jesus' day. First, the law of diverse kinds forbade the planting of two different seeds in the same field (Lev. 19:19). The mustard plant in particular has dangerous takeover properties and crowds out other plants and crops in field and garden. Moreover, the birds in its branches would have been unwelcome devourers of any seed sown in the field. Finally, the mustard seed grows not, in fact, into a great tree but into a modest shrub several feet in height.

How shall we understand what Jesus and Matthew are up to in this parable? From the viewpoint of Jesus' peasant hearers, this planting and growth are a scandal, illegitimate and unclean. Jesus is most provocative in saying that the kingdom is like darnel, like a mustard seed, associated with uncleanness, just like Jesus himself, one rejected and unwanted, one who associates with the outcast and unclean.

Matthew, however, cannot resist making this image of uncleanness into something else, making what botanically speaking is a shrub into a tree which would recall the cedars of Lebanon, a symbol of Israel's national dominance. Thus, the image of the unclean becomes reversed in the tradition and quite something else again, something grand and lofty. The tradition has reworked a challenging image into something more acceptable to the dominant cultural myth, the eventual triumph of Israel.

To drive the point home about uncleanness and scandal a third and decisive time, we need to explore the parable of the Leaven. In the ancient world leaven was made by putting a piece of bread in a damp and dark place until it rotted and stank. The archetype of the unclean, leaven was a symbol of moral corruption. In Israel the unleavened was associated with the holy, the leavened with the unholy everyday. In addition it is a woman, symbolically associated with the ritually impure, who is the main character of the parable, as opposed to the (as
it was thought) ritually pure male. The kingdom is like unclean leaven and an impure woman! Finally, three measures is a bushel of flour = 128 cups = 16 five-pound bags = 101 pounds of dough! Here is yet another provocative image of the kingdom, an image of corruption on a grand scale. In this same proper the parable of the Treasure involves a scandal. Someone finds treasure buried in a field. Neither the field nor the treasure belongs to him; thus, his finding of the treasure and purchase of the field become the occasion for corruption. In the parable of the Pearl, the merchant sells all he has to buy the pearl. The pearl is priceless but useless unless he sells it.

In the course of this day of parables, Jesus calls into question any sure knowledge of the holy and good as the place where the kingdom is active. For here is the kingdom, active among the marginal, the outcast, and morally corrupt. The kingdom can appear in the most unexpected of places in the guise of the apparently impure and corrupt: in leaven, mustard seed, and weeds. God, it seems, is in solidarity with persons in everyday circumstances, not altogether pure. How miraculous it must have seemed to these persons on the margins or outcast to have the kingdom drawing near them in the person of Jesus. And not only drawing near but inviting even them, especially them, to table fellowship with him. That invitation stands to this day, even to a woman whose children have been removed from her care because of her addiction.

August 4, 1996, the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 13: Matthew 14:13-21

Ps. 17:7, 15
Gen. 32:22-31
Rom. 9:1-5

"They Need Not Go Away."

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is the only miracle recorded by all four Gospels. Matthew places it following his day of parables, Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth, and the account of the death of John the Baptist. Having heard of John’s death, Jesus withdraws to a deserted place. Before examining this miracle, we need to remember how offensive Jesus’ open table was to a culture based on honor and shame. In sharing his table with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus opened himself to the charge that he himself was without honor or shame. Ignoring
distinctions of male and female, poor and rich, insider and outsider, he welcomed all into his company.

In the action of the meal itself we hear a familiar sequence. Jesus took, blessed, broke, and gave the meal of bread and fish to those with him. Crossan notes that the taking and blessing would have been the actions of a master; but the breaking and giving the duties of a slave, or more likely in the experience of those present, woman's work. Like any housewife, Jesus serves the meal to all. "Long before Jesus was the host, he was the hostess."

Here in a deserted place, following the death of John, surely an event of great significance to Jesus, Jesus apparently performs the manna miracle and feeds the hungry crowd. But as Parker Palmer observes, perhaps it is just the temptation to turn stones into bread that Jesus avoids. He neither sends the crowd away nor runs from them himself. He meets them at their point of need. In the Markan and Lucan versions, he divides the faceless crowd into human scale groupings of fifties or hundreds. He and his disciples then model sharing in a situation of apparent scarcity. They give the people simply what they have: it is more than enough. All are satisfied in this giving of what they have. They meet the kingdom in the here and now of their everyday hunger and its satisfaction.

Conclusion

In like fashion a woman who has come into a deserted and barren place in her life is met at her point of need. She, too, is one of the five thousand invited to sit down with the others and eat. No one is excluded from this table. An Outsider, a Nobody, is welcomed in a human scale, 12-Step group. She is served there first by being given a seat in this group telling and listening to stories. Stories are what all in this circle have to bring. Here she can bring what she has, too, her own story. For some time she will need to be fed from the stores and stories of others. This is as it should be. When her stores are replenished in due time she may share with another from her own stores and story, giving to her or him with great gladness and thanksgiving. So the circle of inclusion at this meal which knows no Nobodies and no Nothings continues in time and place. Here and now the Kingdom draws near.
Notes


8. Ibid., 343-362.

9. Ibid., 373-387.


13. Ibid., 262-263, 403-404.

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