The Christian Life: More than the Church
Eugene TeSelle

Practical Preaching from the Epistles
Marjorie Suchocki

The Disproportionate Cost of Being a Pastor
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The contact was brief and pointed. After class, one of my students walked up to me and said, "I was sent to get you." "Get me for what?" "A small group of Christians is gathering every week to form an intentional community. We decided that you should be in our group. Will you join us?" He mentioned a few names, all familiar to me. For a moment, I felt pretty special. After all, without even knowing it I had made the team, and the persons he named had a reputation for being serious and right-minded. An ecumenical base community right here in Nashville! And then I—a post-Watergate boomer with plenty of suspicion for institutions and bureaucracies—I turned it down. Fumbling around for the right words, I said I was happy with my congregation and already involved as much as I want to be. It sounded lame but it was true. He listened, smiled, and our communication was over. It was never mentioned again.

Now, ten years later, and a member of the same church, I think I would make the same decision. This is not because membership in a congregation has become easier. I've had my share of frustrations and disappointments with my church, and God knows I am not the world's greatest parishioner. The issue is deeper than this, however. The local parish is the classic form of Christian community, but it is not identical with it. What if I couldn't physically get to church? What if I needed help with a specific difficulty? What if I felt strangled by the conventions of weekly worship? Or what if I wanted to explore new ground in theology, liturgy, or peace and justice issues? Most of us settle into a congregation for the long haul, despite the routine numbing effect. Some of us never will. We may have a hard time understanding each other's choices, but the integrity of that choice must be honored.

The articles in this issue raise the question of essential nature of Christian community in some interesting ways. Gene TeSelle points us
in the right direction with a sweeping historical view of alternative Christian communities. Without disputing the value of the congregational model, TeSelle shows us clearly that voluntary Christian communities have always found a place in the church. What we find here is not a polarity between pew-sitters and the rest, but a complex interweaving of ideals, pressures, and realities. We are bound together by one gospel. But throughout our history, we have agreed to disagree about how we will gather and live out our Christian commitment. We have created institutions for ourselves. And, as in times past, the question today is still, Are these particular institutions aiding or hindering us in our journey of faith? This is a daring question, based on the freedom to choose our course rather than merely to drift.

If we have determined that one congregation or another deserves our respect and loyalty, we ask that it hear and respond to our needs. The following three articles, addressed to parish ministers, are based on this premise. Marjorie Suchocki asks for more preaching on the Epistles—and then explains both why and how to do it. Kathleen Black asks for more sensitivity to the relationship between healing and community in the Gospels and today's churches—and points out some pitfalls we may not have recognized. Joseph Webb asks for sermons mindful of the text and contemporary experience—and points out the problems with more passive, "listening" approaches to scripture. These requests should make it clear that the parish environment is no place to hide from intellectual challenge.

Finally, we have three articles that adopt the perspective of the pastor, whose concern for Christian community will be evident on a daily basis whether anybody is around or not, even if no one is there to observe it. Warren Carter shows the value of setting the lectionary aside to say what we need to about Advent—a gift many of us laypeople would treasure from our pastors this fall. John Tyson offers a scripture lesson charged with compassion for those who minister to God's people. And Paul Stroble offers and invites our insights about Ephesians and Corinthians—beginning the process suggested by Dr. Suchocki earlier in the issue.

Happy reading, and all God's blessings on your ministry this fall!

Sharon Hels
The Christian Life: More than the Church

Criticisms of "the institutional church" have often been heard, and not only in our own day. One of the time-honored expressions of discontent is adherence to voluntary organizations. These may take the form of movements which supplement what is offered by the church, or go outside it, or work within it, or disrupt and divide it, or try to transform it.

In this essay I want to focus on one specific cause for dissension and diversity among Christians (without claiming that it is the only one): the view that the Christian life may be expressed and institutionalized in other ways than what we usually call church—in other words, that the Christian life is "more than the church."

The Christian life seems richer than the formal life of the church in at least two ways. On the one side, the church does not extend very far into what we have come to call "spirituality": piety, mysticism, what is done with inwardness, in solitude. It is not surprising that in the early church the Gnostics, followed more cautiously by Clement and Origen, used the term ecclesiastical with a certain condescension, affirming the legitimacy of the church but noting its limited ability to help those who have "deeper" questions and "deeper" insights. The Pietists similarly acknowledged the official church, but in an instrumental and penultimate way, as an external support to the development of an inward piety. Within the official church they

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developed the conventicle, the ecclesiola in ecclesia, where authentic Christian devotion could be cultivated more fruitfully. All who have participated in prayer groups or study groups will recognize the tendency. Sometimes people find it necessary to undertake a kind of “internal emigration” and seek God in their own ways, as, say, women mystics did in the Middle Ages and many active church women do today.

But even the “normal” life of the church is filled with criticism of the sterility of its members, its ministers, or especially its theological professors. The case is often made that pietistic or “renewal” groups are the soul of the church, maintaining vitality in an institution that would otherwise become routinized and dead. One can even see a steady influence of personal piety upon the liturgy and hymnody of the church as its leaders accommodate the religious preferences of the people. But what is “spirituality” to some can seem to be pure provocation to others. The planners of the RE-imagining Conference in the Twin Cities in November 1993 saw the event in terms of spirituality, as an opportunity for women to share new images with each other; hostile observers redescribed it in political and heresiological terms.

“What we usually call church” is therefore delimited by a degree of inwardness that it cannot fully satisfy. But it is also delimited by a more intense outwardness. In Christian history we constantly encounter voluntary movements which attempt not simply to lead the Christian life in a committed way but to institutionalize it on a shared and continuous basis. Very soon—within New Testament times—there came to be a differentiation between the local churches and the “wandering charismatics” who, following the guidelines of Matthew 10, sought more intense modes of self-denial, service, and mutual discipline. In the late second century the apocryphal acts of the apostles exalt the role of widows and other female ascetics, and Thecla was a model of the autonomous woman for several centuries, until she was replaced by Mary in the late fourth century.

There has always been some awareness, then, of forms of Christian life and organization other than the local congregation. No slight is
intended in suggesting that the "organized" or "institutional" church has limits. As Tillich has pointed out, the separate existence of the church is a sign of what it proclaims, namely that the world is not yet under the reign of God. Thus, we find

a religious culture beside a secular culture, a temple beside a town hall, a Lord's Supper beside a daily supper, prayer beside work, meditation beside research, caritas beside eros.7

If the church has hope, it is in the midst of present struggles; if it has life, it is "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3); if it has righteousness, it is the justification of the ungodly; if it is told to sell all it has (Matt. 19:21), it finds it easier to have its wealth as though it had it not (1 Cor. 7:30-31); if it claims to be the church of all nations and all classes, it prefers to show it forth through pulpit exchanges or the occasional singing of exotic hymns in homogeneous congregations. No wonder much of what the church does takes the form of worship, ritual, the "cultic" or "symbolic" playing out of something that has not quite taken root in the earthly life of the present.8 And no wonder there will always be those who seek a more adequate realization of its expectations, either more "inwardly" or more "outwardly" than the institutional church can achieve. The institutional church, when it is criticized for expenditures that might have been used for the poor, says, like the earthly Jesus, "You always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish" (Mark 14:7), and, "The days will come... when [you can] fast" (Mark 2:20). But there have always been those who expect the church to do more. Many in the abolition movement, for example, felt that the churches were not doing enough, and many of them broke with organized religion entirely.9

It is important to add, however, that this "outwardness" does not simply take the form of "good works" or "Christian ethics," as though everything could be expressed directly through action. A voluntary organization offers a different form of institutionalization, a way of organizing and acting together which is concerned not merely with "doing" or "not doing" but with symbolically expressing a commitment within the shared world of earthly life and experience. Like "what we usually call church," it is often symbolic, not expecting immediate results. The difference is in symbolizing its commitment not cultically but in "worldly" terms. Precisely because the voluntary...
organization places itself "in the world" it carries heavier responsibilities for the quite worldly consequences of this symbolic action. We can see this immediately when we consider some contemporary examples. When one testifies publicly against, say, colonialist domination or against abortion, one may be throwing one's weight, whatever one's "spiritual motivations," behind political forces which may be quite indifferent to those motivations—or may in fact be using them in a totally cynical way.

**Historical Precedents: Monasticism and Reform**

It was in the monastic communities of late antiquity and the Middle Ages that a large-scale attempt was made to give explicit, institutional form to the ideal Christian life. Many different communities arose, each with its special mode of life and ministry, and often developing new and more participatory forms of government. In Eastern Orthodoxy the monks maintained a certain independence from the Byzantine emperors and the bishops controlled by them, symbolizing the transcendence of Christianity over earthly institutions and the need to treat high and low alike. Early Russian monasticism specialized in self-denial and works of charity. The "poverty movement" and the Gregorian reform in the eleventh century grew from a new asceticism, quite different from the moderation of the Benedictines. In our own day we see that it is more often the religious communities, not the bishops, who live out their Christian commitment by organizing stockholder resolutions or investing in alternative funds, by picketing and risking arrest, or by doing mission work among the marginalized in the slums or the countryside of Latin America.

Monasticism grew up alongside the church, almost independently of it, as one of the earliest "para-church" movements. The Catholic understanding of religious communities is expressed in Vatican II's Monasticism grew up alongside the church, almost independently of it, as one of the earliest "para-church" movements.
Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. They are not the creatures of the hierarchical church; they are initiated by pious men and women who voluntarily respond to the divine call of the "evangelical counsels," and the appropriate role of the hierarchy is to nurture them and give general regulation to their affairs.12

The independence of the religious orders, and especially the exemption of the mendicants from the ordinary jurisdiction of the local bishops, aroused many of the same resentments as the "specialized ministries" or "ministries beyond the congregation" of today. But the issue was broader than monks and mendicants. The Middle Ages also saw a vital "lay movement," which strove for a degree of religious participation and moral perfection beyond that offered by the official church. The reforming popes of the eleventh century encouraged the laity to boycott corrupt priests. The pivotal pope of the Middle Ages, Innocent III (1198-1216), shared personally in the religious renewal of the age and gave official recognition to both lay piety and the mendicants. Communities of women such as the Beguines, who organized schools and hospitals and orphanages in the towns of Northern Europe, aroused resentment because of their independence but also admiration because of their self-supporting way of life. The popes repeatedly demanded "perpetual enclosure," total segregation from the world, for all women under religious vows. But women kept finding ways to bypass the requirement, and in the nineteenth century they gained approval for their "apostolic communities" of various kinds.13 Thus, the Catholic Church has dealt with many of the same issues faced by the Protestant churches in nineteenth- and twentieth-century North America. Because it could not so easily split when there were unresolved differences, the Catholic Church has learned to live with pluralism and even to develop theoretical justifications for it which are usually lacking in Protestantism.

Despite Protestantism's opposition to celibacy and its aggressive assertion of the family, property, and the daily calling—certainly the most programmatic attempt we have seen to make Christianity "normal"—the spirit of asceticism was carried over into it or arose anew. Ritschl sensed that many features of the "radical Reformation" of the Anabaptists, the disciplinarian spirit among the Reformed, and the voluntary groups organized by the Pietists grew historically out of the Middle Ages: specifically, he thought, via the Franciscans who moved among the ordinary people.14 More broadly, Max Weber
recognized that the "Protestant ethic" was a successor to the *industria* of medieval monasticism. The Student Volunteer Movement, like earlier and later mission movements, expressed the impulse to devote oneself wholeheartedly to a great endeavor (ambiguous though it was in the age of imperialism). And every generation of seminary students with which I have been acquainted has expressed some yearning to organize an "intentional community" of mutual support, with a devotional and financial discipline which is unavailable in the normal life of the church and the ministry. Such attempts are usually stillborn because of issues of money, sex, and power—precisely the issues which monasticism tried to address with its triple vow.

The institutionalization of the Christian life as a way of being "in but not of the world" was attempted in another way by the Anabaptists, the Hutterites, and the Moravians, inventing an entire way of life in which every act could be a religious testimony. What they did was not a Protestant monopoly. Alexander von Humboldt, seeing the Capuchins' communities for the Indians in Venezuela, was reminded of the establishments of the Moravian Brethren. Similar things had been said of the Jesuit communities in Paraguay, by that time wiped out as a result of ecclesiastical and political ambitions. The Moravian missionary community in Serampore, with its communal, self-sustaining way of life, became the model for the Baptist missions in India—and, with modifications, the "missionary compound" throughout the East.

And while we are thinking of Latin America we must recall the "base communities" of our own generation. In some cases (especially in Brazil) these were organized by the official church, almost as "sub-parishes." In other cases they grew up as an alternative to the ordinary life of the church, sometimes through the endeavors of religious orders, sometimes by popular demand as a grassroots version of the *cursillos* and other establishment movements, sometimes for refuge, the only places with "space" in a repressive political environment.

The purpose of this quick survey is not to suggest that every "voluntary society" has the same nobility and dedication as the examples cited. It is rather to take note of the continuing search for more organized modes of self-dedication, mission, or service than can be accommodated in everyday life—or in the ordinary activities of the churches.
Toward a Theoretical Framework

By this time many readers will recall that a similar threefold typology—church, sect, and mysticism—was put forward by Ernst Troeltsch and has become a standard method of analysis in the sociology of religion.19 To Troeltsch the “church” type is characterized by a certain “compromise” with the world (this may mean adaptation to external circumstances even before the Constantinian era, but certainly after it; most precisely it means hesitation about trying to anticipate God’s judgment and excluding the unregenerate from the church). The “sect” type is “without compromise,” oppositional, offering an alternative within the world to the life of the world. And the “mysticism” type is “indifferent to both,” being concerned not with the world but with an inward spirituality.20

In many respects it is the same thesis. I have been concerned to point out, inductively, and in order to make an ecclesiological point, that there are Christian impulses that cannot be satisfied by “what we usually call church” and thus seek other modes of expression. Troeltsch’s concern was more directly sociological, asking about the various forms of social organization of Christianity.

Troeltsch enunciated two contrasting theses, both of which must be kept in mind.

1. Usually, he noted, the mystical impulse depends upon and flourishes within some kind of “church” organization. The same thing could be said about the sect type, which has found its most varied development within the medieval and modern Catholic Church and in the “voluntary societies” of North American Protestantism. In all such cases there is a sort of “internal emigration,” devoting energy to inward piety or to outward dedication without an exodus from the church, without taking the next step of the “come-outer.”

2. Troeltsch was also aware that both the mystical and the sect impulse can become organized as “churches,” sustaining themselves independently. This is precisely why the Protestant Reformation was so interesting to him from a sociological point of view.21 There were the various Anabaptist churches of the “sect” type, the Quakers and Schwenkfelders of the “mysticism” type, and “mixed” forms such as the “free churches” of the English Nonconformists and North American Protestantism.22 Perhaps the classic laboratory was seventeenth-century Holland, where the Reformed Church experimented with all three tendencies (sometimes in the same
circles): maintenance of church discipline by the "consistory" of the congregation in opposition to the Erastian tendencies of the civil magistrate, a sectarian insistence on a church of "visible saints" whose Christian experience was to be regularly examined by the minister (a pattern that began in England and spread simultaneously to Holland and to New England), and mystical inwardness in conventicles or "societies of the pious."

Troeltsch thought he saw a historical and logical sequence in these competing ways the church understood and organized itself: first as a divine institution, tempted to make excessive claims for itself; then as an association on the sect model, too individualistic and contractual in its self-understandings and most satisfactorily, in his view, as a community, compatible with the "mystical" tendency but acknowledging an indispensable role for institutions and traditions. The third of these, he thought, was the authentically Protestant understanding of the church, for it gave a place to conscience and individual insight (what Catholic controversialists labeled "the principle of private judgment") but also insisted on "confessional" statements based on tradition and shared worship.

Theological Fault Lines

What do these three modes of Christian expression mean for our theology—and polity—of the church? When "sect" and "mysticism" manage to stay within the framework of the church, despite severe tensions, what makes it possible? And when they become organized separately, as "alternative churches," what is its significance? Two points stand out, and they are shared by Catholics and Protestants, though with different nuances. In terms of church government we are dealing with an area repeatedly judged to be voluntary, not required as a matter of Christian obligation or church "law." Similarly, in terms of doctrine, this area belongs not to what is "essential to salvation" (the church, whether Catholic or Protestant, guards this very carefully) but to Christian freedom. The two are also linked inasmuch as freedom from the claim that this or that belief, this or that practice, is "essential to salvation" is quite compatible with feeling called to pursue this or that mode of witness and service, not only individually but collectively. Indeed, there is repeated evidence of an urge to express the doctrine of Christian freedom in positive and
collective ways through voluntary organizations of many different kinds.

The differentiation between what is "essential to salvation" and what belongs to "Christian freedom," firmly rooted in Paul's epistles, seems to resolve many of the important disputes in Christian history. The objection of the Protestant mainstream to monasticism or to the Anabaptists or to certain kinds of social activism has been not so much because of these movements' zeal for discipleship (indeed, this has often aroused admiration). Rather, it is due to a perception that their way of life is being made "essential to salvation" rather than that it is a positive expression of "Christian freedom." The same can be said of pietistic or evangelistic movements on the more "mystical" side of the spectrum. Likewise, they are admired, but they will be opposed if they make exclusive claims and insist that all persons replicate their own kind of Christian experience. In sum, the church will resist claims that the proper model for understanding what it is can be found in the monastery, the camp meeting, or the base community—even though we can all identify congregations which, in the exercise of their Christian freedom, specialize in one or another of these modes of discipleship. It is quite appropriate then, when some of the Protestant denominations today encourage voluntary issue-oriented networks that engage in advocacy on specific issues such as civil rights and religious liberties, women and families, health care, or the Middle East.

The early church already had disputes between "sectarians" who insisted upon a perfect church and those who took a more inclusive position. Two movements that are now classified as sectarian were the Montanists and the Donatists, and in answer to them the "Catholic" doctrine of the church was developed. There are many historical uncertainties concerning the Montanists, but they claimed prophetic gifts, took an incautious attitude toward martyrdom, and placed strict moral demands upon their adherents. The Donatists demanded a pure church, at least a church whose clergy

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were not tainted by collaboration with the persecuting Empire. Their argument was that one cannot confer what one does not possess and, thus, that an impure clergy, when they baptize or ordain, will not sanctify but stain the recipients. Opposing their position, Augustine made at least three contributions to the theology of the "church type": the theory that the sacraments are Christ's and therefore do not depend upon the personal sanctity of the minister (desirable though this is); a hesitancy about drawing definitive boundaries between the redeemed and the lost, recognizing that this is not under human control; and an emphasis upon the "bond of unity and peace" in the Holy Spirit, which encouraged people to treasure the unity of the church more than their firmest opinions.26

The spirit of "compromise" in the Catholic Church was not as total as many suppose. If the church abandoned expectations of poverty or community of goods on the part of all its members and welcomed people of property, this was only with the understanding that they regard their property as a trust held in behalf of the poor. Furthermore, almsgiving became one of the essentials of the Christian life.27 But an element of perfectionism persisted. John Cassian, the first classic writer in Western monasticism, argued that the earliest church was a monastic community. His first bit of evidence was a passage in Eusebius, who, in reading Philo's description of the Therapeutae in Alexandria, thought he recognized the first Christian church in that city, a monastic community founded by Mark.28 But this "Alexandrine" theory could be topped by the "Jerusalemite" theory.29 According to Acts 2:44, and then 4:32 and 35, the earliest church in Jerusalem held all in common. Cassian concluded, then, that it was only when the gospel went to the Gentiles that the apostles made the concessions listed in Acts 15:28-29 because of their weak faith and the remnants of pagan custom, but that such concessions should not be regarded as either permanent or desirable.30 We should note the parallels with the argument of contemporary feminists that the early church was an egalitarian community of love, which lost its character as it moved from the private to the public sphere and bishops not only imposed a stifling uniformity but suppressed or eradicated the more authentic kinds of spirituality.31

Cassian's ideas were inherited by the Reform Movement of the eleventh century, which urged celibacy and the common life upon all the clergy and was linked with the "poverty movement" as well.32 Several different movements, then, could recognize themselves in the earliest
church—the monastic communities, which, following Cassian, assumed that they were the original church; the "canons," clergy who served the world as apostles and pastors but lived the "common life" of Acts 4; and even the laity, who could view the gospel itself as the true "rule" and baptism as sufficient authorization, for a life of poverty and simplicity.33

The Catholic Church rejected the perfectionism implied by this interpretation of the earliest church. While it honored those who dedicated themselves wholly to contemplation, community, and service, it accommodated to the demands of the family, the economy, and the state. A classic theological argument for this more inclusive view of the church is found in Thomas Aquinas. He reasons that Christian perfection, properly speaking, consists in love for God and neighbor. The monastic life, while it is undeniably "instrumental" to this perfection, is not identical with it and must always be "referred" to love as the higher value. Therefore, the monastic life is not commanded but only counseled, because commands, which are binding on all Christians, prohibit those things that are contrary to love, while the counsels of perfection (summarized as celibacy, poverty, and obedience) are warnings against "impediments" to perfect love (such as marriage and worldly occupations) which nonetheless are not contrary to love.34

In Protestantism we occasionally find objections to the very existence of monastic or perfectionist groups (what I have called, more broadly, "lifestyle" or "outwardness" movements). The criticism is twofold.35 One is a historical judgment linked with the interpretation of Scripture. Where such phenomena seem rooted in the New Testament, the accusation is that they rest on a misplaced primitivism, following practices of the early church which were in fact conditioned by their time; where they are later developments, they are deemed superfluous because they are not in the New Testament. The second is a doctrinal allegation that they are associated with some classic Christian heresies, both in their

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“flight from the world” and in their tendency toward “works righteousness.”

Both objections must be answered. As to the first, there is indeed a
difference between what is “essential” to Christianity and what is a
matter of Christian freedom; and the division runs through all
generations of Christianity, even the first. But the very fact that we
find celibacy and poverty being extolled in the first generation—and
by Jesus himself—suggests that such things lie within the range of
Christian freedom, not simply as a personal choice but as public
testimony to values that are pertinent to the Christian life. And this
brings us to the second objection. A life of dedication, which may
include celibacy and poverty and many other sacrifices, need not
imply “works righteousness” or “perfectionism” or “flight from the
world” at all but may be a mode of life freely chosen, a mode of
proclamation that may benefit Christians and non-Christians alike,
even though it is not “essential to salvation.”

What this suggests, in turn, is that the proper sphere of “church” is
what is “essential to salvation” (variously focused in gospel, faith, or
sacraments). And it may explain why “what we call church” has
always been ready for what Troeltsch called “compromise” with
human weakness, for it knows that it cannot insist on too much
beyond the gospel of justification, whether this is understood in terms
of Catholic sacramentalism or Protestant faith. But where it has the
gift of wisdom the church will also give leeway for Christian freedom
to express itself more fully, in both “inwardness” and “outwardness.”

The Catholic Church learned how to do this, often painfully, in late
antiquity and the Middle Ages. The Protestant churches, although they
knew how to speak theologically about Christian freedom, learned
only slowly to give similar space in their institutional practice. The
original Protestant impulse was to throw Christian freedom directly
into the world, where it ran headlong into the magistrate and the
marketplace; indeed, there was often collusion between an established
church and the magistrate whose divine authorization it defended. It
was only gradually, as civil society gained more freedom, that
Christian freedom in the Protestant world also learned to express itself
in more institutionalized ways: in pietist conventicles, in Wesleyan
“class meetings,” and in mission and benevolence societies. Troeltsch
even identified this as the difference between the “old Protestantism”
of the Reformation era and the “new Protestantism” that arose in the
second half of the seventeenth century.
Repeatedly the church has been led, then, to acknowledge the legitimacy of "spirituality groups" and "intentional communities" and "voluntary societies" as positive expressions of Christian freedom, especially when social conditions have opened the space for them—and, more than that, as inevitable institutionalizations of the Christian commitment, useful expressions or symbolizations of what Christianity involves.

Diversity seems to be inevitable; at least it has been present throughout the history of Christianity. We find movements that supplement the life of the church (mission and service organizations, for example, or movements of spirituality or discipleship); that criticize the church and seek changes in policy; that complement the church, offering a vitality that, in their view, it would otherwise lack; or that reform the church, sometimes by reviving old standards, sometimes by suggesting new ones, and sometimes by seeking tolerance for greater diversity.

How do we respond to the fact of diversity? In our fear of difference and uncertainty we can reassert the conventional ways of doing things. We may engage in winner-take-all campaigns or think that it is our responsibility to resolve all issues. On the other hand, we can come to terms with diversity, acknowledge its inevitability, appreciate it as an expression of the richness of Christianity. We might also see the practical value of voluntary groups as a "pressure valve," relieving tensions which could otherwise burst the organizational church.

The better alternative, then, seems to be a more open-textured conception of the church in particular and the Christian life more generally. This will involve both practical and theoretical tasks. The practical challenge is to learn how to live together with those with whom we disagree, sometimes strongly. The theological challenge is to understand that many of our disagreements are, in fact, not over "essentials" but over matters that lie within the range of Christian freedom.
Notes

1. Early testimony to this is found in Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III.15.2. The Valentinians felt that they were an "elite" able to understand the full depth of the gospel, not rejecting the beliefs and writings honored by the others but transcending their literalism. Thus, they condescendingly accepted the others, but as merely "psychic" rather than "spiritual," capable of salvation merely through faith rather than knowledge and through good works rather than spirituality. Irenaeus says that they used the same language as the majority but interpreted it differently, then complained when the majority held itself aloof from them. For Origen's assertion of the superiority of the "spiritual" over those who held merely "ecclesiastical" authority, see Joseph W. Trigg, "The Charismatic Intellectual: Origen's Understanding of Religious Leadership," Church History 50.1 (March 1981): 5–19, summarized in Joseph W. Trigg, Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 140–146.

2. While the Pietists within German Lutheranism are best known, it is agreed that they were influenced by an earlier Reformed piety which emphasized "experiential religion." This originated in England with Perkins and Ames and spread to the Netherlands, where the Synod of Dordrecht gave permission for special gatherings of adults concerned with the state of their soul, and thus "societies of the pious" (as they called themselves) or "convoyticles" (as they were called by others) became a widespread phenomenon, not only within the Reformed Church but outside it.


4. Today we think of the Anglican tradition as rich in hymnody. But for centuries the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer permitted only the use of Scriptural psalms and canticles—a policy that was useful to a comprehensive national church, because it offered a uniformity based on Scripture, not merely on the law of the realm. The restriction was gradually eroded during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as bishops or vicars adopted metrical psalms from the Dissenters, then hymns expressing intense religious feeling from the Methodists, and finally traditional hymns from the broadly Catholic tradition. See Thomas K. McCall, "The Matter and Manner of Praise: The Controversial Evolution of Hymnody in the Church of England, 1760–1840" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1994).


8. A still classic statement is David E. Aune, The Cultic Setting of Realized Eschatology in Early Christianity, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 27 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), which shows how a number of early writings think of final salvation as being partially realized in the present—and, in most cases, realized only in the context of worship.

surveys the “come-outers” in New Englanders who, in the revivalist spirit of the time, organized voluntary organizations within the churches or formed new churches or went on to reject all churches and all organizations. A broader survey is John R. McKivigan, *The War against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and Northern Churches, 1830–1865* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).


11. The current scholarly consensus is that monastic institutions first developed among women—the “widows” of 1 Tim. 5:3–16, then “virgins” and “deaconesses,” who were even considered an “order” of the church, the model was taken up by males around the year 300, and they also were considered an “order.” See the classic article by E. A. Judge, “The Origins of Monasticism,” *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 20 (1977): 72-89; and more recently James E. Goehring, “The Origins of Monasticism,” *Enrollment, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. Harold W. Attridge and Golcle Hata, Studia Post-Biblica 42 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 233–55, esp. 242–43. During the course of the fourth century the notion of their being an “order” of the church dropped from consideration, and the monastic movement became more parallel to the church. The church, now involved more deeply in politics and culture, even acknowledged monasticism as a more adequate expression of the original Christian ideals. This is the feature most emphasized by a past generation of historians, e.g., Adolf von Harnack, *Monasticism: Its Ideals and History*, trans. E. L. Lellott and F. H. Marseille (London: Williams & Norgate, 1901), 44–47, and Herbert B. Workman, *The Evolution of the Monastic Ideal from the Forties Times Down to the Coming of the Friars: A Second Chapter in the History of Christian Renunciation* (London: Epworth Press, 1913), 11–14.


14. Albrecht Ritschl, *Three Essays*, translated and with an introduction by Philip Hefner (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 114–122. Richard Kieckhefer has recently shown that one of the significant features of the late Middle Ages was the imitation of monastic religiosity in popular devotions under the influence of Franciscans and Dominicans, who moved among the people, and even Carthusian recluses, who dwell in the midst of the towns. See his “Major Currents in Late Medieval Devotion,” *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 75–108.


18. Probably the most comprehensive survey of their rise and significance is Edward L. Cleary, *Crisis and Change: The Church in Latin America Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985). A balanced sociological analysis can be found in *The Progressive*. 

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE


24. It is important to keep Troeltsch’s three “types” in mutual tension with each other. Sociologists of religion spend too much time trying to classify denominations or religious movements in terms of one or another “type”; it is more interesting to see the three types in their mutual interrelationships and tensions within the life of a denomination or a tradition.

25. Max Weber, with his usual insight, noted that Christian movements become “sectarian” in his sense neither because they lack a relationship to the state (this can happen to any group under specific circumstances) nor because they are based on voluntary membership and a congregational covenant (the Dutch Reformed communities were organized this way because of the political situation in the late sixteenth century) but because they “did not wish to include the unregenerate.” This primary goal then required the addition of the other two principles of voluntarism and separation from any establishment (Weber, *Protestant Ethics*, 254–55, n. 173).

26. This is especially striking in Augustine’s *On Baptism*, II.6.8 and VII.2.3, where he uses Cyprian against Cyprian—and against the Donatists. Cyprian, even though he sincerely believed that those who had been baptized by schismatics were not part of the household of faith, was willing to maintain communion with those who held a different view in order not to break the unity of the church.


29. The terms come from Adalbert de Vogüé, O.S.B., “Monachisme et église dans la pensée de Cassien,” *Théologie de la vie monastique. Études sur la tradition*
patristique, Théologie 49 (Paris: Aubier, 1961), 214. He comments that, while the first involves “secession from the world,” the second involves a perfectionist “secession from the church”—though for the purpose of serving it and reforming it (222-225).

The investigation is continued in Pier Cesare Bori, Chiesa primitiva. L’immagine della comunità delle origini—Acri 2,42-47; 4, 32-37—nella storia della chiesa antica (Rcessi e ricerche di scienze religiose; Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 1974), 145-159.

30. Conferences XVIII.5-8.


32. For several decades Glenn W. Olsen has been following out the theme of the primitive church as a symbol for reform in the early Middle Ages. A programmatic essay is “The Idea of the Ecclesia Primitiva in the Writings of the Twelfth-Century Canonists,” Traditio 25 (1969): 61-86; and an overview is to be found in his essay “Recovering the Homeland: Acts 4:32 and the Ecclesia Primitiva in St. Bernard’s Sermons on the Song of Songs,” Word and Spirit: A Monastic Review 12 (1990): 92-117.


34. Summa Theologiae II-II q. 184, a. 3. There are ironic similarities with Melanchthon’s Apology for the Augsburg Confession, chapter 27, which defines “Christian perfection” as fear of God, faith, and love for God and neighbor—but then goes on to condemn the monks’ desertion of home and court, wife and children.

35. The classic expression of both of these is in Ritschl, in the passage cited above (note 14).
I speak as a layperson, and therefore as one who benefits deeply from the preaching I hear weekly. These sermons have touched my heart with God’s grace on many an occasion. Yet I confess to a longing to hear sermons more often that are preached from the Epistles, which are perhaps the richest explicitly theological resource in all scripture. Not only can preaching from the Epistles draw parishioners into the pastor’s theological thinking but it also has the power to draw laity into their own more responsible thinking.

Sometimes I fancy that it is because seminary preparation only included one or two courses in theology that I do not hear more theology in sermons. But mostly I think we who are in the seminaries have failed pastors by not providing sufficient continuing education in the area of theology, so that pastors do not feel entirely comfortable sharing theology with laity. Perhaps there is an insecurity in venturing into theology so publicly as in a pulpit. But if we are to take seriously the fullness of what it is to be a Christian community, we must deal fully with the rational as well as the emotional and ethical aspects of Christianity. God works through our intellects as well as our hearts and our wills—and, in fact, our rational, emotional, and volitional capacities are so intertwined that to neglect any one is to weaken the other two.

I can give many a personal testimony to the importance of deepening the theological sensitivity of the laity. There was a period

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in my own life—as happens with us all—when I could not rely on my emotions to get me through a particular trial, because my emotions were precisely what was in trouble. Everything I had counted on seemed topsy-turvy, threatened with dissolution; I spiraled into a terrible depression. I remember sitting by the winter window, staring out into hopelessness. Sometimes it seemed as if the very best way out would be to die. But in my head I knew that God is a God of resurrection power, and my way of framing that power in a time of despair was to acknowledge that God was with me in the depths, tasting these depths. Through God’s faithful presence I could count on tiny new possibilities, graces, that could bring me through. My emotions were no help—they were the problem—but my way through was in clinging to what I knew rather than what I felt. God can reach us through our intellects when our emotions fail, just as God can reach us through our emotions when our intellects fail. If pastors do not encourage the growth of the intellectual life of faith, then do we not put hindrances in the path of the very grace of God? The toughest times of the Christian life are when one’s emotional supports crumble. During those times we need not only the supplemental support of others who surround us with their own emotional strength but also the resources that come from the sheer rational knowledge that God works with us for our good, even in the midst of terrible tragedy. We need to be thinking Christians.

Theology can be included explicitly in preaching by preaching from the Epistles. Here we have in nascent form all the Christian theology that has ever been developed. All the various theological traditions within Christianity claim their roots in the Epistles, drawn from the foundational message variously expressed that God is for us and has redeemed us in Jesus Christ so that we might live lives of faith and love together in community.

But how to preach theology from the Epistles? Admittedly, it is not always easy; theology does not leap from the texts ready-made. The church, in the process of believing, living, and proclaiming its faith...
that God is for us, has interpreted the texts in various theological ways. These interpretations, while rooted in texts, have blended text, history, worldviews, and experience in such a way that every doctrine goes beyond the texts themselves but is often read back into the texts. A further complication is that since theology is in the texts in a nascent rather than fully developed form, one can read more than one theology from the texts or into the texts. One need only cite a Baptist and a United Methodist reading of baptismal texts to show that more than the text itself is involved in our interpretations. As if this weren’t complication enough, the texts themselves can yield conflicting theologies. For example, the charismatic theology of the church in Pauline letters conflicts with the authoritarian and hierarchical ecclesiology of the Pastoral Epistles.

Instead of allowing this complexity to discourage preaching theologically from the epistles, I suggest that it can make such preaching challenging and freeing. If there are already different theologies at work in the text, by what right do we demand uniformity of doctrine as a condition for the strength and unity of the church today? Being a New Testament church endorses theological diversity in the church and frees us to think and preach theologically. It’s as if the texts invite us into the adventure of thinking theologically, with room for experimenting with ways of expressing God’s work for us, daring to follow suggestions, make mistakes, back up, and try again, always attempting to go deeper. By including divergent theologies, and thereby laughing—maybe gently, maybe riotously—at our penchant for absolute accuracy in our theological way of expressing God’s work, the texts invite us to trust God more than the texts; they point us beyond themselves to the reality of a life of faith that trusts God enough to dare to think.

To facilitate theological preaching from the Epistles, I offer several practical suggestions from a theologian’s point of view. Since Wesley habitually included advices in his writings, United Methodists at least will not take it amiss if I presume to follow his example.

On Reading the Text

My first advice concerns how one reads the text, and it will come as no surprise that I suggest it be read prayerfully. The open inquiry of a prayerful reading of the texts makes room for God’s guidance as we
read; there is an illumining power that can in fact take us deeply into these words of our ancestors in the faith, who attempted like us to give a reason for faith.

While reading, watch for the theological pattern. This pattern often unfolds in dramatic or narrative fashion, with a cosmic scope; but it is more than a story. Rather, it is a narrative that incorporates the great themes of Christian theology: the nature of God, the human condition, what God has done for us in Christ, God’s continuing presence with us through the Spirit, and God’s goals for us in this life and in the everlasting life that is our end. That the themes are interrelated is precisely what gives theology its narrative pattern in scripture. Each of these themes forms the basis for theological doctrines of God, anthropology, soteriology, Christology, sanctification, Providence, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

In reading the Epistles, then, ask the question: How does this text fit into the writer’s variation of the story that God is for us in Jesus Christ? Which aspect of the story is emphasized? What is the focus of this text? Is it the nature of God? The human condition? God’s answer to the human condition in the work of Christ? The sacramental life of the church? The ethical life of the church? The purpose and end of creation? Every epistle addresses one or more of these questions. Read the text in order to identify its focus and ask the question of how this focus fits into the story.

I also suggest that the epistle be read as a whole before preaching from any part. None of the epistles is very long, and we need to see the whole in order to recognize the relation of the particular passage to that whole. Each theological theme tends to be interwoven into the whole. Theology seldom comes in snippets. It is developed in definable patterns, and we will see these only by understanding any single text within its wider flow.

For example, Romans 5 is a rich chapter dealing with sin and salvation. But Romans 5 actually begins with Rom. 1:16. Following
Paul’s introductory parts of the letter, the sixteenth verse epitomizes the teaching that will follow in the body of the letter. The remainder of the chapter through Romans 3 details Paul’s view of the human condition, both Jew and Gentile. This condition is one of unmitigated sin, and the answer to sin is the power of God that works through faith. In Romans 4 Paul details how the Jews as well as the Gentiles are made righteous by faith, and Romans 5 and 6 culminate the section by describing the basis of justification by faith. This basis is what I call “the great exchange” accomplished through Christ. Romans 7 contrasts righteousness through faith with righteousness through the law, and Romans 8 is that great song of liberty and love that results from justification through faith. In Romans 9–11 Paul muses on the role of the Jewish law and the Jews themselves in his reconceptualization of justification by faith. In chapters 12–14 he develops the ethical implications of faith, and he concludes his letter in chapter 15 by summarizing his message and speaking of his immediate plans for travel, and in chapter 16 by personally greeting several of the persons in the church at Rome. Notice, then, the flow of the theology: It begins essentially with the human condition (anthropology and sin) and tells what God has done about that condition (soteriology, Christology) and therefore how we should live together (ecclesiology and theological ethics). To preach on sin and salvation from Romans 5, then, one must develop the themes while remaining true to the background of the greater theological story that is essentially told from Romans 1:16 through Romans 15.

But given the richness of the text, there is more than one theological theme offered for preaching. One could easily develop sermons from Romans that focus more deeply on the nature of faith, the cross of Christ, divine Providence, grace, and the relation of both God’s grace and our faith to the law. The form of theology chosen depends on the particular text as it may appear in a lectionary for those of us who are lectionary preachers, or on the contemporary circumstances that may make one rather than another of these doctrines pertinent in the life of the congregation. But whichever doctrine is chosen, it should be developed in the context of its wider background in the epistle as a whole.

For another example, consider a sermon based on the letter to the Ephesians. Ephesians deals with the theme of the relation between Jew and Gentile, but whereas in Romans such a theme was addressed in the context of justification through faith as opposed to the law, in
Ephesians the issue is the great mystery of the togetherness of Jew and Gentile in one body in Christ. Ephesians is divided into two parts: chapters 1–3, which set the context of Jewish/Gentile unity within the cosmic and implicitly trinitarian work of God, and chapters 4–6, which develop the ethical implications of the first three chapters. Theological themes easily developed from the first three chapters of Ephesians are the nature of God; the interrelation of Father, Christ, and Spirit, or God as Trinity; the unity of the church; and grace, Providence, and wisdom. Once again the letter tells the narrative story, but instead of starting with the human condition, as Paul does in Romans, the writer starts with the divine condition in the eternal life of God. Ephesians is more cosmic in its scope than Romans.

In preaching from an epistle, then, look for the role the preaching text plays in the epistle as a whole. Ask if the story of salvation is approached from the cosmic perspective—rooted in the nature of God—or the human perspective—which usually develops the nature of sin. When the text begins with the focus on God, let the sermon also keep the praise of God in central focus. Then the structure of the sermon will be V-shaped, beginning with God, descending to what God has done for us in human history through Christ and the effects of this work, and rising again by concluding with the praise of God. When the text begins with the human condition, let the structure of the sermon invert that V: begin with the plight of humanity described by the writer, rise to the role of God in addressing this plight, and return again to the human condition as corrected by the work of God. To stay with the examples of Romans and Ephesians, a sermon based on Romans 5 would begin with the condition of sin, move to soteriology in “the great exchange,” and come back again to the human condition, this time the correction of sin by living the resurrection life of Christ. But to preach on a passage from the first three chapters of Ephesians would invite us into the mystery of the trinitarian life of God, show the implications of this for the diversity within the church, and leave us with the praise of God.

Selecting the Doctrine

My second advice concerns selecting a doctrine. How does one move from reading a text in order to discover the theological understanding conveyed in the text to selection of one doctrine rather than another
for communication in sermon fashion? Again, it is important to read
the text prayerfully, opening oneself to the text, which will preach first
to the preacher, and opening oneself also to the concerns of the
congregation. Whatever the contemporary concerns of the
congregation, there is a theological issue at the root of the concern. Is
it division in the congregation itself? Ecclesiology and sanctification
may be an issue. Has a congregation become so ingrown that its care
for the world beyond its walls is perfunctory at best and stereotypical
at worst? In such a case a pastor might select a text that leads to
discussion of the Trinity. In this doctrine, we say that God’s internal
love is already a communal love, but it is so great that God does not
contain it but loves beyond Godself to the creation of a world. The
church, in the image of God, cannot keep its love focused on itself but
must, in the power of the Spirit, spread its love abroad in the world.
Or one might take a text focusing upon Christology and the imitation
of Christ in mission. Is there a need to invite reflection on a particular
time in the church year, such as Advent? The lectionary epistle
sections for Advent always present the Christian life first in light of
eschatology and finally in light of Christology. How does Christ come
to us? What is the call of the reign of God? What is our final end?
How do all of these relate to what God has done for us in Christ? Such
are the theological themes of the Advent epistle passages.

Instead of preaching from portions of the Epistles, such as in the
lectionary, why not preach successively through a whole epistle? This
can help a congregation to understand the interrelated nature of
theology. Such preaching calls for careful analysis of the text as a
whole in order to understand how the theology of each part fits into
the letter as a whole and how the various doctrines relate to each other.
For example, the ecclesiology of Ephesians 3 is an application of the
implicitly trinitarian understanding of God developed in Ephesians 1.
Both together find their culmination in the focal point of the three
chapters, which is the mystery of the new unity of Jew and Gentile.

Another method of selecting a doctrine was suggested to me by
Mary Kraus, pastor at Dunbarton United Methodist Church in
Washington, D.C. This pastor regularly reads the Epistles with
members of her congregation, and in the course of the group
discussion theological themes emerge which then provide the basis for
further reflection in preaching. One strong advantage of this method is
that the congregation is already engaged in the text prior to the
sermon, so that the sermon encounters them in the middle of the story,
as it were. Furthermore, since each text has an infinite number of applications, it is already at work pragmatically in the hearts of the people. The illumination of theology through the sermon interacts with the illumination already begun in the group study and in personal appropriation of the texts.

Finally, of course, we may be guided by our own puzzlement. When we seek a clearer understanding of a particular way of Christian thinking, exploring the Epistles through sermons can be a way of reaching greater clarity. Reading the Epistles meditatively and venturing into them through preaching sharpens not only our own theological thinking but also that of those who think with us through the power of the sermon.

**Researching the Text**

My third advice is to research the text. The theologies contained within each epistle have a two-thousand-year-old history. The issues named in the text became the stuff of Christian reflection, spurring centuries of Christian self-understanding. The very fact that we turn to the text and find a familiar theological theme is likely the result of the fact that we read the text not as if we are first-century Christians but like the twentieth-century Christians we are. Each text is overlaid with centuries of ways of reading it. For example, many texts refer to God in a triadic way, speaking of God as "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" and also as Spirit. We often read such texts as if they were trinitarian. While they are important to what became Trinitarian doctrine, the texts themselves do not assert that doctrine. How, then, did we come to the doctrine of the Trinity—and what, exactly, does it mean? The word *trinity* was coined in the second century by Tertullian as a way of understanding how God's own self was present in Jesus. Fully developed Trinitarian theology did not

Why not preach successively through a whole epistle? This can help a congregation understand the interrelated nature of theology.

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emerge until the Nicene Council in 325, and then not without considerable controversy for the next one-hundred years at least. So when we explore those triadic texts and find the basis for the Trinity, we are doing so because our reading has been conditioned by traditional Christian interpretation, which influences what we see in the text.

I recommend a few of my own favorite resources as guides to a better understanding of the historical development of doctrine. The first is J. N. D. Kelly’s Early Christian Doctrine, which portrays the growth of doctrine within the first five centuries of Christianity in narrative fashion. This easy-to-read resource can be used to enrich sermons on doctrines suggested by the Epistles.

A second resource also focusing theology within the first five centuries is a series called Sources of Early Christian Thought, edited by William G. Rusch. Each book in the series gives a more detailed account than the overview provided by Kelly and includes not only an extensive introductory essay but excerpts from early writers. For example, the volume called The Trinitarian Controversy presents writings from Tertullian, Arius, and Augustine, as well an introductory overview of their Trinitarian theology. The series covers all the major doctrines and is an excellent resource for a preaching library.

I also recommend an exceedingly rich compendium of thought through the nineteenth century: R. Seeberg’s Textbook on the History of Doctrine. Written in Germany around the turn of the century, it is not exactly what one would read on a cold stormy night, curled up next to the fire. On the one hand, this is a Lutheran-biased book that tells in more detail than one might want to know just who thought what about which doctrine. But as a reference book giving the cut-and-dried facts about any and every doctrine, it can’t be beat. This incredibly rich resource takes us through 19 centuries of Christian thought. To use it, one only has to look up a topic in the index and then begin the adventure of looking up the references, and jotting down pertinent information. This book can evoke the wonder of the Christian intellectual journey that has led to precisely where we are today. It shows the incredibly diverse nature of theology, enough so that no Christian studying it could ever again insist there is only one way to believe any particular doctrine. What a rich mixture of nuanced thought patterns we have! To realize this is to gain the freedom to add our own prayerful interpretation to the reading of the text—for each of
us is invited into the joy of thinking together about the hope that is within us as Christians.

Finally, each preacher should uncover her or his own tradition’s basic theological texts to know in better detail how its richness has contributed to the ongoing Christian theological story. To reread Wesley or Calvin or Luther or Campbell, or whoever grounds one’s form of Christianity, is to enter again into the roots of who we are and to re-form our historical identity. Contemporary interpreters of one’s tradition are likewise helpful, such as John B. Cobb, Jr. in his appropriation of Wesley’s theology in *Grace and Responsibility,* or Randy Maddox’s *Responsible Grace.* Both can inspire Methodists with their theological adaptation of Wesley’s thought for today. In reading any theologian of stature, such as Wesley or Cobb or Maddox, it is good to keep in mind that they gain a place in history precisely because of their courage to argue with the past they have received. Thus, there is no requirement that we slavishly agree with any theologian we read. To the contrary, in debating the issues, we show ourselves to be faithful inheritors of the reshaped tradition that this theologian has forged for us.

As a final resource, I heartily commend another text by John B. Cobb, Jr., one written to all layfolk of whatever tradition: *Becoming a Thinking Christian.* This small book challenges us all to enter into theological exploration in order that we might reach deeply into our identity as Christians.

These are some of my favorite resources for theology, and I recommend them heartily. They provide grist for theological mills and offer enlightenment as to why we believe as we do at this juncture of Christian history. To delve into them will by no means lead to preaching on all one discovers—but a preacher could become so intrigued that she or he might call for a group of laity to join in on this background study of the history of what we have done with the implicit theology of the Epistles. Pastors and congregations can together enter into the excitement of thinking deeply into faith.

**Contextualizing the Text**

The context of sermons from the Epistles is both historical and contemporary. I’ve pointed toward the historical context with my suggestions for research, but the deepest and most important context is
the place of the church in today's world. One starts out, I believe, by prayerfully caring for the world around us. What are the issues in the congregation? What are the issues in the surrounding city, or countryside, or county, or nation? The Epistles certainly weren't addressed to us: We are not the Christians in Corinth, Ephesus, Colossae, Rome or Philippi. Paul knew nothing about the church that is in the United States; he did not consciously write to us.

And yet he did write to us, by the grace of God. I've already referred to the cosmic scope of the theological narrative: Paul and the other writers deal with history in the context of eternity; they tell us of God's own self in deepest caring for the earth and its history; they tell us of a work that always needs doing in every age and of a great destiny of the love and praise of God for all eternity. The scope of theology cannot be confined to any one church; it spills over to apply to every church in every age. The letters are addressed to us!

We cannot approach a text as if we were encased in a vacuum tube that strips us of our own time and place. It's more as if the glasses we use when we read the text are supplied for us not only by our own place in history but also by the particular issues that grip us in our own lives or the life of our congregation. Sometimes the context is an event on the international or national scene. When we read the text through glasses provided by our own context, we might find ourselves having double vision. On the one hand, we will be reading with a view of the past as given through historical study of the text and its theological themes. But on the other hand, we read with a view colored by the urgency of the present. And there will be a convergence, so that the contemporary issue will give a different perspective on an ancient doctrine—or an ancient doctrine will give illumination for a contemporary issue. Our task is to be faithful to both: to study the text and its own context as faithfully as possible. But this faithfulness also calls upon us to know our own context and to be clear about what takes place as we entwine the two contexts.

While each of us is individual, there is so very much we share that no journey is isolated. The things that trouble me trouble others as well. There are others in a congregation who face the same struggles as the preacher. The context of all our sermons is not only the text and its immediate and subsequent history; it is not only the issues in contemporary society; it is the issues that engage our own souls. In a sense the sermon is always preached first to the preacher.

PRACTICAL PREACHING FROM THE EPistles
And having felt the sermon as it preached itself to us, we earn the right to preach it to others.

As a lay theologian, then, I encourage pastors to take us all, and themselves as well, more deeply into the faith that God is for us. Congregations need a theological literacy about who we are as God’s peculiar people; we need food for our intellects that goes beyond "baptized common sense"; we need the deep things of God. The Epistles are a way into these things, for they are theological commentaries on the gospel story. Insofar as preachers immerse themselves in the text, the historical context, and the contemporary context, they will find themselves growing theologically. And in their own growth, by the grace and love of God, they will discover that their congregations will grow as well.

Notes

Last Spring, a young man named Sig died. He was the 24-year-old son of one of our seminary students. Sig was born with a form of epilepsy that was never totally controlled but was being managed by medication. He became involved in a church that welcomed him warmly and included him in their fellowship. But this church preached that if he just had enough faith, he would be cured of his epilepsy. Encouraged to prove just how much faith he had, Sig stopped taking his medication. Soon afterwards, he suffered a severe seizure and died. As his mother says, he “overdosed on religion.”

For the past several years, I have been struggling with the impact preaching the Gospel healing miracle stories has on persons like Sig—persons with various disabilities. The story of Blind Bartimaeus, the man born blind in John 9, the cure of the deaf man in Mark, the ten lepers in Luke, the woman with the flow of blood, the man known as legion because he was thought to be possessed by so many demons, the boy with convulsions, and the man who was paralyzed and lowered through the roof of a house. There are many of these texts in the Gospels, nine of which are included in the Revised Common Lectionary.

How we preach these texts has been of great concern for me because I have spent much of my life in ministry with persons with various disabilities, and I myself live with what might be called a
hidden disability or a form of chronic illness. So I pay careful attention to how these texts are interpreted from the pulpit. It is my belief that the way we preach these texts has an impact on the lives of persons with disabilities (and not often a positive impact) and that how we preach these texts contributes greatly to the way our society treats persons with disabilities.

Since healing is really what many persons with disabilities seek, I want to say a word about the difference between healing and cure. When preaching the Gospel healing narratives, homileticians often use these terms interchangeably, or the term healing is used when cure is what is really meant. We proclaim that Bartimaeus was "healed" but we are really preaching the belief that Bartimaeus was "cured." He was once blind, but now he can see. Yet in the English language, these are two very different words. To cure is to eliminate the symptoms, if not the disease, itself.

Healing, on the other hand, has many meanings attached to it. Consider the phrases healing presence, healing moment, and healing service. Each of these images elicits a sense of peace and well-being—but they do not imply cure. While individuals or even groups may hope, even pray, for a cure for a particular person, the intent is to bring some sense of well-being into the person's life, a sense of comfort, support, and peace. Linda is blind and will be physically blind for the rest of her life, but she can still experience much healing in the midst of her blindness.

It is clear that Jesus' ministry to persons with disabilities brought social, psychological, and spiritual healing to the person's life. Cultural attitudes and religious laws ostracized persons with disabilities from the social, political, and religious spheres and often from their family as well. Physical cure was one of the few ways in which they were allowed back into their various communities. It was this reintegration back into community life which provided the true healing. One of the questions that I would like to pursue is whether the sermons we preach on these texts are healing for persons with various disabilities and diseases today.

**Bridging the Gap**

One of the most difficult tasks biblical preachers face on a weekly basis is understanding the text in its own context and then deciding
how that text has application (if any) for today. The times we live in are drastically different than they were two thousand years ago in the Hellenistic world. This makes it very difficult to deal with then Gospel healing texts. If someone were to encourage us to apply seventeenth- or even eighteenth-century medical concepts to diseases today, we would be appalled at the very notion. And yet we often uncritically apply the medical worldview of biblical times to contemporary disability issues.

We are not totally naive, however. Clearly there are diseases today that did not exist (to our knowledge) during Jesus’ day, such as cancer and AIDS. We know that the causes of many diseases were not known, that genetics was not understood, and that the first-century worldview created other explanations for causes and cures of diseases and illnesses. The concept of fate—misfortune and fortune, God’s curse or God’s blessing—was often cited as the cause of both disease and cure. Few preachers today would consider relating that medical worldview to contemporary diseases or disabilities such as chicken pox, pneumonia, cancer, or a broken leg. Who would think to say that our yearly bout with the flu was God’s curse, a punishment for our sins? Yet there is still an underlying assumption that some disabilities are caused by God for various reasons.

But who determines which disabilities and illnesses fall under the realm of God’s displeasure and which do not? In some churches first-century medical views are applied to the modern-day disease known as AIDS. Disabilities such as deafness, blindness, and paralysis are often treated in relationship to first-century medical models simply because they are found in the biblical texts. We preach the “demon possession” texts and attempt to apply a first-century concept of demons to persons living with various mental illnesses today. Many of us unintentionally or perhaps even intentionally apply first-century understandings of the nature of illness to a postmodern congregation because of the “authority” of the biblical text.

Homiletical Emphases

Over the years the sermons I have heard on these texts tend to be preached in one of two ways. Each approach has its own understanding of the nature of the Bible, its own accompanying theological perspective, and its own homiletical emphasis. There is a
third and fourth approach to these texts—to try to explain them scientifically and to avoid preaching them altogether. But for the most part, sermons on these texts come from two different perspectives.

**Preaching Faith.** The first approach to these texts comes from a more conservative theological perspective that interprets the Bible literally. The major theme emerging from these texts is that of faith. The cause of disabilities and illnesses (in the biblical texts and in our world today) is attributed to God's will. In this way people attempt to make meaning out of suffering. Disability is usually understood to be caused by God—a sign that God is punishing the person for some sin committed or at the very least that God is testing one's faith. Disability then, becomes equated with sin and lack of faith.

These Gospel healing narratives are preached emphasizing the faith of the person with the disability in the text. It is the faith of the various individuals that inspires Jesus to cure their disabilities. The connection is then made that if we have enough faith, we, too, can be cured of the various ills that inflict us. At times, this interpretation must ignore the evidence. In the case of the man born blind, for example, the text says his faith evolved only *after* he was cured of his blindness (John 9:35-38); and as far as we know from the biblical account, the man who was deaf had no idea what was happening to him until after he could hear (Mark 7:31-37). Mark tells us it was the faith of the friends that Jesus praised in the story of the man who was paralyzed (Mark 2:1-12); the woman with the flow of blood was cured without Jesus' knowing beforehand about it. It was not Jesus' knowledge of her faith that inspired him to cure her (Mark 5:25-34).

Still however, these texts are often preached that faith is required *before* cure or healing is possible. This interpretation not only mistakenly limits the church's healing ministry to the baptized community of faith; it also contributes to the theology that equates disability with sin and the absence of disability with faith. For those in our world who still live with a disability, the message is that they must be living in sin, because if they had enough faith they would be cured of their disability. The reverse is also implied. If you don't have a disability or illness, you must have lots of faith (which we know is not the case). It suggests that for people of faith, nothing bad will happen (which we know by biblical witness and experience is also not the case).

But the truth is that no amount of faith will cure a person whose leg has been amputated. And if we preach explicitly or implicitly that sin
is the cause of the disability, how do we deal with babies born with
disabilities? For what sins are they being punished? How is their faith
being tested? Who determines if and how much faith they have? My
dear friend's son, Ashlan, was born with Down's Syndrome; David,
the son of a minister in San Francisco, was born deaf and blind. He
had to be tube-fed, and he died at the age of four. Robbie, who was
born with Adrenoleukodystrophy, was totally blind and deaf by the
age of six and unable to move by the age of seven; he died at age
eight. The first time I officiated at a funeral, it was the funeral of
Robbie.

At what age does one's disability become a result of their sin, what
disabilities require faith before cure, and which ones do we finally
accept as incurable? And how is this interpretation of these texts
healing for persons who live with a disability every day of their life?
Does it encourage faith or erect barriers to faith?

There are many faithful people who live with diseases and
disabilities, just as there are many unfaithful people who live strong,
healthy lives. We cannot continue to use physical wholeness as a
measuring rod of one's Christian faith. Jesus' ministry to these persons
was one of healing. But preaching cure as a sign of one's faith is not
healing for persons with disabilities today. In preaching these texts, we
often imply implicitly or explicitly that cure is the proof of one's faith,
but that message is not healing. Faith in the comforting presence of
God in the midst of disability, however, can be very healing.

Preaching Metaphorically

Many preachers from mainline denominations neither want to avoid
preaching these texts nor want to explain them away scientifically. But
they do not believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible and are not
willing to make a commitment to contemporary miraculous faith
cures. And the truth is, they don't want to deny the possibility of
miracles, the impact of sin on one's life, or the importance of faith.
They believe the Bible is important for the continuance of the
Christian faith and therefore has a place in the public witness we call
preaching.

Theologically they vary in their understanding of the cause of
disease and disability. For some, meaning is found by attributing
suffering to the realm of God's will—not necessarily that God is
punishing the person for some sin committed or even that God is testing one's faith. God's will is defined more in terms of personal growth. God gives persons diseases or disabilities because there is a lesson in patience and receiving from others that needs to be learned. Or suffering creates character. And for those who don't want to name anything specific, disability is relegated to that realm of the mysterious where God's ways are not our ways and we may never understand why God caused a person to have a particular disability or at least allowed it. But the underlying belief is still the same whether we understand it or not. Disability is still under the overall design of God's plan for this person's life.

For others, however, it is difficult to believe that God has any part in causing disability or disease. God's presence is there helping us through the struggles of life, upholding us and comforting us; but the illness or disability itself is not God's will.

The issues are complicated and diverse. To avoid the literal interpretation and the rational, scientific interpretation, many choose to preach these texts metaphorically. In liberal thought, metaphorical interpretation has been encouraged for many years. While the texts are stories about specific people in a particular time and place, the person with the disability in the text is often used by the Gospel writers as a representative for a larger group. Particularly in the Gospel of Mark, it is the disciples who ask irrelevant questions, who argue about unimportant things, and who do not seem to grasp the significance of Jesus' ministry. For Mark, then, these texts function both as stories of actual physical miracles and as symbolic constructs to emphasize the inability or refusal of the disciples to understand who Jesus was. The disciples were "blind" and "deaf" in relationship to Jesus' purpose on earth.

In preaching, then, attention is taken away from the particular individual in the text with the physical disability. Instead, the congregation as a whole takes on the disability—metaphorically speaking, of course. The congregation becomes the contemporary disciples who are "deaf" to...
God's commands, "blind" to the saving grace of Jesus, and in need of cure. Although this is consistent with Mark's usage, there are several problems in dealing with "blindness," "deafness," "paralysis," "muteness" or any other disability as a metaphor. Metaphorical interpretations equate the physical disability of a few with the sins of many: i.e., "we are all deaf to the word of God."

In religious vocabulary, blindness, deafness, and paralysis are always used in negative ways. The metaphorical use of these terms is then identified with "refusal to understand" or "disobedience to God" or "refusal to act according to the will of God" and are therefore labeled as willful, selfish, and sinful behaviors. Consider the following quotes:

- You can be blind in a pew, and deaf in front of an altar.
- It is the blindness of humankind who praises the miracle-worker . . . but wants nothing to do with his cross.
- People are too deaf to catch the sobs of grief . . . too hard of hearing, to catch the rumble of discontent over injustice.

In short, using these terms metaphorically equates the sin of those who can see, hear, and move, with the physical reality of those who cannot. The result is that the words themselves carry with them the negative connotation; deafness, blindness, and paralysis become equated with sin. The negative metaphorical usage is transferred onto those who live with these physical realities on a daily basis.

By using these terms metaphorically, we also imply that blindness, deafness, and paralysis are choices people make: a person chooses not to see/understand, a person chooses not to listen, and a person chooses not to move/act. Blindness, deafness, and paralysis are not choices made but a physical inability to see, hear, or move. The issue is not one of conscious decision or control. This contrasts strongly with the situation of sin their disabilities are mistakenly chosen to symbolize.

The negative result may be somewhat softened by those preachers who clarify their metaphorical use of these terms by preceding them with the word "spiritual," as in "spiritual blindness" or "spiritual deafness." But for those who live with these physical realities, using blindness, deafness, and paralysis metaphorically continues to contribute to the negative, oppressive attitudes people have towards persons who are blind, deaf, or paralyzed.
What we mean by these metaphors is a judgment against insensitivity and indifference, or outright disobedience—not deafness and blindness per se. The sinful implications of sensory language become commonplace as its metaphorical usage becomes accepted truth in homiletical discourse. Sensitivity to the way we use sensory language adds another dimension to the struggle for inclusive and emancipatory liturgical language.

A Healing Homiletic

How can preachers prepare sermons on these texts that are faithful to the text and not oppressive to persons who live with those particular disabilities today? What does it mean to preach the Gospel healing narratives today in a way that is liberating and healing for those who have disabilities similar to those in the Gospel texts? Does it mean that all sermons on these texts should be preached only to persons with disabilities? No. Does it mean that the lived reality and experiences of persons with those particular disabilities should be seriously taken into consideration when preparing sermons on these texts? Yes, absolutely. If we do not, then the very people Jesus healed and welcomed into the family of God will be rejected and ostracized from the faith communities of today.

An underlying question we can ask ourselves as we prepare to preach on these texts is, "What is healing for persons with disabilities today?" It is not only a homiletical question; it is also a pastoral care issue and a theological quandary for some.

1. For those living with cancer and other diseases, cure is certainly a hope that they cling to. But in the case of permanent disabilities, such as deafness, blindness, and certain forms of paralysis, it is often not the physical aspect of the disability that needs healing the most. The statement "If someone offered me a cure, I'd take it; but I don't need it" sums up what many
people with permanent disabilities feel. It would be nice not to have to live with the limitations posed by the physical disability, but it is the social isolation and alienation people experience that is the most difficult aspect of the disability. Most people would rather get on with living—developing meaningful interdependent relationships in a caring community—rather than spend their limited energy and finances on seeking a cure. Does our preaching facilitate reconciliation and healing of relationships or isolation from the gathered community?

2. In preaching these texts, comparisons can be made as long as sensory language is not used in relationship to sin. Instead of saying we are blind, deaf, mute, or paralyzed to the will of God, we should say what we mean: “we do not understand who Jesus is,” “we ignore God’s will for our lives,” “we do not testify to God’s presence in our world” or “we refuse to act on God’s behalf,” etc. I realize that the homiletical literature is stressing metaphorical language because of its richness. But in this case, at whose expense? We know now that using the terms black and white metaphorically (where black equals evil and white equals purity) contributes to negative attitudes towards those who are black. Likewise, using sensory language like deaf and blind in relationship to sin supports negative attitudes towards those who live with those disabilities. I believe it is best to avoid equating the physical reality of disability with these “sinful” behaviors of others.

3. Another way to preach these texts without using sensory language is to pay close attention in the text to the situation of the person with the disability. Most are ostracized and rejected by their social and religious communities not because of some sinful act they committed but simply because of some aspect of who they are—some part of their being. In our pluralistic and multicultural communities it is important to ask, “When have you been isolated or ostracized from your community because of who you are, not by what you have done?” or “When have we isolated or ostracized someone from our community because of our own fears about who they are?”

4. The greatest shock to those whom Jesus healed was the many cultural and religious boundaries that Jesus crossed to address their need. In touching the man with leprosy, Jesus broke the ritual purity code. Jesus should have become ritually unclean himself, but instead, the man with leprosy was no longer outcast; he returned to his family and religious community (Mark 1:40-45). In the story of the woman with the flow of blood, we are told that Jesus stops and recognizes the
woman’s touch. Here is a woman who is not supposed to be in public unaccompanied by a man, an unclean woman who is supposed to keep her distance and shout “unclean” as she passes by. But Jesus stops, recognizes her, and calls her “daughter.”

We might not have government-enforced purity laws today, but in our churches and society, we certainly have unwritten purity codes—implicit understandings of who is acceptable and who is not. These boundaries are often drawn along economic and racial lines or are based on someone’s idea of what is acceptable for the sphere of the holy and what is not. Those who are homeless or exhibiting behaviors that stem from some form of mental illness, those whose physical appearance is considered unacceptable, those whose sexual orientation is different from the norm—all fall under our purity codes. What unwritten purity codes are operating in your congregation? What boundaries have our communities of faith established to protect themselves from those considered unclean today?

5. In preaching these texts, emphasis could also be given to the behavior—the actions of the person in the text with the disability. Although they were located on the margins of society and expected to be passive and out of sight, Bartimaeus, the woman with the flow of blood, the man with leprosy, and the Syrophoenician woman—all took matters into their own hands. They were bold and active, taking the initiative in their own journey towards well-being. The crowd tried to silence Bartimaeus. Jesus himself tried to silence the Syrophoenician woman when he said, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Mark 7:27). But in the end, their perseverance and boldness was rewarded by a deep healing. Our tendency is to judge those who take the initiative because we feel they should stay on the margins—which makes it hard for us to enable people in their search for well-being.

6. Another way to preach some of these texts is to focus on the response of the crowds. In the story of the boy with convulsions, the crowd gathers around gawking (Mark 9:14-29). Some wonder why the disciples were unable to cure the boy; others are perversely fascinated by the boy’s bizarre behavior, while still others have come to wonder at the power of Jesus. But in the story of the man who was living in the tombs, the one they called “Legion,” the crowd is seized with fear at what Jesus has done and they send Jesus away (Mark 5:1-20).

The crowd surrounding Bartimaeus tried to shut him up—to make him sit down and behave like a proper blind beggar. But it only took
the attention of one respected leader to change the crowd’s attitude. When Jesus stopped and called Bartimaeus to him, the crowd changed its tune (Mark 10:46-52). How do we respond to the unfamiliar, to the out-of-the-ordinary, to those who are unlike us? Are we seized with fear and try to banish them? Or do we simply try to silence them? Do we enforce an expectation of passivity—out of sight and out of mind—on those we consider less important than we? Or maybe we are just among the curious bystanders. Where are the leaders today who are willing to stop and offer attention and respect to those on the margins?

In prayer and study you will find many more possibilities for preaching these texts. Personally, I do not believe that my disability or anyone else’s is the will of God. I do, however, strongly believe that God’s presence infuses our lives with strength and grace and love to manage whatever struggles come our way. God wills the well-being of each one of us at every moment of our lives. However, we are all interdependent upon each other and the natural world. God depends on us to be God’s agents of healing in the world as much as we depend on God to undergird us with everlasting love and care.

I began with the story about the unfortunate death of Rev. Meredyth Bellows’s son Sig. I would like to close with a different story that was told by another Claremont student—Deborah Lerner—in a sermon on the man living in the tombs, one called “Legion.”

A little girl was late getting home from school. Her mother became more and more worried as the afternoon wore on. When she finally arrived, the mother said, “Where have you been? I’ve been worried sick!” The little girl responded, “Well, I was almost home, but then I saw Suzie sitting on the curb crying. Her dolly was broken.” Her mother, relieved, said, “Oh! So you stopped to help her fix her dolly?” The little girl...
with the wisdom of the universe said, "No. I sat down on the curb, and I helped Suzie cry." 

I agree with Deborah’s comment on that story: “I believe that when God’s precious children suffer, God sits down and helps them cry.”

May our preaching of these texts bring true healing into the lives of persons with disabilities and all those who struggle in our wounded world.

Notes

2. Similar challenges are being brought by African-Americans concerning the metaphorical usage of black and white. Black is used metaphorically to denote a negative, evil, sinful element while white denotes “purity” and “goodness.” The use of language is a symbolic act; and when words/symbols are always used in negative terms, the language contributes to the oppressive way people view and treat those who have blindness or blackness as part of their essential identity. Language does make a difference. The entire non-gendered or inclusive language movement among feminist Christians is an attempt to make this point.
3. The Interpreter’s Bible; vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1951), 820.
5. The Interpreter’s Bible; vol. 7, 757.
6. Excerpted from a sermon given by the Reverend Deborah Lerner, 6/95. She remembered the illustration from the preaching of the Reverend DeWane Zimmerman, First UMC, Phoenix, AZ.
What is the preacher to do with the Bible? On the surface, it seems like an easy question, but in reality it is not. In fact, it is probably the most daunting question with which the preacher today must cope. The reason is that the relationship between the preacher and the Bible is now in the throes of a profound controversy, one that is already changing not only the nature of Christian preaching but even the nature of the Christian gospel itself.

In 1978, North American New Testament scholar Leander Keck published a book titled *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching*. It came at a time when a movement to refurbish preaching was in the air. The preaching literature that followed during the 1980s gives evidence that Keck’s book virtually set the homiletical agenda for that next decade, and, one could easily argue, into the present. Keck bemoaned the quality of preaching, attributing its decline in large part to the fact that preachers had turned their backs on the Bible. The problem, he said, was not that historical critical method had made the Bible untenable for the pulpit—though scholars generally believed this to be the case. Rather, Keck argued, preachers had not used the historical critical method intensely enough. Sermon preparation needed more and better historical critical work. Along with Keck’s main theme—that historical criticism was the preacher’s
ally and not his or her enemy—he sketched other themes that were followed homiletically through the 1980s. It was Keck, for example, who picked up and developed the Bultmannian notion that preachers really could separate their historical and intellectual problems from their preaching of the “faith” of the Bible. It was Keck who articulated the idea of “listening” to the text, using, as he said, historical critical methods to do that. Most importantly, it was Keck who in that book fleshed out a durable definition of biblical preaching, saying that it existed wherever the biblical text “governed” not only the sermon’s content but also its form and its function.

Two years after that book appeared, Keck was appointed dean of Yale Divinity School. He held that highly visible post throughout the decade of the eighties, stepping down as dean in 1990. Then, two years later in 1992, Keck was invited by the Yale Divinity faculty to give the Lyman Beecher Lectures in preaching—far and away the most prestigious lectures each year in preaching. In 1993, Keck’s Lyman Beecher lectures were published in a little book titled *The Church Confident: Christianity Can Repent, but It Must Not Whimper.* While Keck’s four lectures were more about the state of North American Protestantism than about preaching, his old concern about “the Bible in the pulpit” had not gone away. As a result of this work, Keck’s homiletical influence is and will be significant for some time to come. Because of this, and because I want to lay my analysis of preaching in contrast to Keck’s 1992 comments, it is important to know something of the argument of his Beecher Lectures.

What Keck did, in part, was lay out what he calls three “stances” toward the Bible, which are discussed as discrete “hermeneutics.” The first is the “hermeneutic of suspicion,” a concept that has been in theological currency for some time now. For Keck, though, the hermeneutic of suspicion is nothing more than the research stance undergirding good, “scientific” biblical study, i.e., historical-critical method. This hermeneutic has been, he says, “fundamental in the modern historiography and so has come to govern the historical-critical study of the Bible and of the formation of Christian doctrine as well.” This “hermeneutic of suspicion” produces, to use Keck’s words, “unprejudiced . . . reliability of information,” since this is the hermeneutic that places the burden of proof “on the evidence by requiring it to substantiate its credibility as strongly as possible.”

Most hermeneutical scholars would quarrel with that description, or I certainly hope they would. The hermeneutic of suspicion is much,
much stronger than Keck makes it. In point of fact, the hermeneutic of suspicion represents a deeply skeptical and challenging view of both the Bible and its creedal formulations.⁶

The reason Keck defines the hermeneutic of suspicion as he does is because he wants to contrast it with his next “hermeneutic”—and he wants the contrast to be as sharp as he can make it. For Keck, the central problem of theology and the church today is that, as he puts it, the “hermeneutic of suspicion has become the hermeneutic of alienation.” And here the going gets much rougher. For him, this hermeneutic of alienation has become, as it were, like a cancer threatening the church from the inside. How does he define this hermeneutic? The hermeneutic of alienation, he says, is one which interrogates evidence “in order to document an alleged truth already in hand.” In the hermeneutic of suspicion, Keck adds, “the tradition is tested in order to establish its degree of credibility to an unprejudiced observer, but in the hermeneutic of alienation the tradition is accused so that the committed righteous can distance themselves from it.” For Keck, “the motor that drives this hermeneutic of alienation is moral outrage at the world’s evils, on the one hand, and the need to deal with a sense of guilt for participating in them and benefiting from them, on the other.”⁷ Later, Keck adds that “with alienation goes the need to identify and to identify with those who are either at the edge or on the bottom of the established system, for such self-identification atones for the sin of complicity.”⁸

What is strikingly clear, though stated only indirectly, is that what Keck calls, condemningly, the hermeneutic of alienation is in fact represented by the various kinds of current liberalisation hermeneutics. These are the hermeneutics that do, in fact, seek social justice, human dignity, and equality as primary goals and then interact with Christian scriptures seeking theological direction and spiritual

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insight into this extraordinary human enterprise. Keck adds that the goal of alienation-driven theology is not developing the capacity for independent thinking grounded in a solid grasp of the tradition, but empowerment and “when the goal is power, whether to hold it or to gain it, the quest for truth is an early casualty.” He concludes, then, that the more theology becomes politicized, the less possible becomes an unprejudiced examination of the issues—precisely what is needed most in our day.”

There is even more to Keck’s discussion than this, though. For one thing, the hermeneutic of alienation also represents for Keck a direct assault on what he calls the “classic liberal Protestant theologies,” those which, in the past, confined themselves to addressing such “intellectual difficulties” as the three-story universe, miracles, or a literal Second Coming. Today, he sees, the new “objections to Christianity” do not find particular beliefs objectionable but find the Christian faith itself objectionable. To quote Keck, “That non-Christians find the Christian faith objectionable is not new. . . . What is new is that the antipathy toward the Christian tradition and its culture now comes from Christian theologians themselves.” Keck’s attack this time is squarely aimed at that growing number of sophisticated religious scholars, theologians, and historians who are boldly studying and calling into question the entire historical infrastructure of the Christian heritage itself—scholars, it should be noted, who are being heard and understood by a growing number of thinking preachers today.

Still another dimension of Keck’s argument cannot be bypassed. Under the heading of the “hermeneutic of alienation” Keck attacks the growing number of influential feminist theologians as well. Referring directly to feminist scholarship, he says that many of the current objections to Christianity present themselves as, in his word, “moral” objections. To support this, Keck then quotes from Patricia Wilson-Kastner’s 1983 book, *Faith, Feminism and the Christ,* where she says that “to refer to ‘God’ in certain feminist circles is sometimes perceived as a hostile act, or at best one emerging from ignorance.” This Keck takes to verify a central and, for him, highly inflammatory feminist theological contention that to refer to God in the language of the classic Protestant tradition represents an “immoral act.”

The problem is that Keck’s Lyman Beecher lectures contain a biting and highly influential attack on not one, but as many as three, orientations to the Bible that at least some of us view as not only valid
but crucial to understanding and developing present and future preaching. This means that Keck’s interpretation of a so-called “hermeneutic of alienation” must be vigorously rejected if we are to walk through the most creative and exciting doors of preaching that are opening today. Look behind those doors briefly. Behind one, we can see some scholars and preachers who are finally attempting to stand within various cultures of poverty and oppression and critique the Bible and the Christian tradition through the eyes of those cultures—and they are learning how to preach of liberation and justice within and from within those cultures.13 Behind a second door, we can see a new group of scholars struggling to relate recent understandings of myth and cultural formation to the development of Christian mythic formations—scholars who still believe it important to learn how to preach of peace and transcendence even with those mythic understandings in place.14 Behind yet another, a third door, we can see a host of first-rate feminist scholars who are rightly working to recast in deeply radical ways traditional Christian language and metaphor so that it speaks from and to the experience of women—and if that means, as it clearly does, declaring as “immoral” much androcentric theological and biblical language and imagery, then so be it. And if that all means that preaching itself must change to reflect those enormous shifts, then there are some of us, male and female alike, ready to change the nature of our preaching.15 But Keck’s hermeneutic of alienation wants to close those doors, both theologically and homiletically.

We must still ask what “hermeneutic” does Keck then propose. His third one, which he calls a “hermeneutic of affirmation.” It is the one, he says, that can handle the “reform” of certain dimensions of the received Christian tradition but one that remains essentially unchanged in its

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"hearing"—an important term for Keck—of both the biblical and the traditional witness. As he says, "the hermeneutic of affirmation is a persistent but pained loyalty to a heritage, which, though flawed, nonetheless has given us what faith we have and which is supple enough to survive what we will do to it."  

No preacher that I know of would quarrel with the idea that many biblical texts need to be affirmed in the pulpit—texts of love, of justice, of grace, of human worth, of forgiving and being forgiven. Many of us, however, would prefer to talk about preaching to affirm people, rather than to affirm texts, knowing that many texts by both their nature and their historical use have not affirmed people. But even saying all this does not yet deal with the central question with which we began. What is to be the preacher's working attitude toward the Bible? How, in other words, is the preacher to "work with" the Bible, to draw from it, to preach it or about it? The prevailing homiletical wisdom—and it is wisdom that still shows Keck's 1978 influence—is that the preacher is to "listen" to the Bible, to listen to this pericope or that poem or that parable, to "listen" as the priest goes into a holy place to "listen" to the voice of God. Then, after that and the study that comprises the "listening," the preacher shapes a sermon that, in both its form and content, conveys whatever that text's form and content conveys.  

We have already suggested, though, that there is an emerging but still very diverse body of Christian scholarship that simply does not accept Keck's definition or description of a "hermeneutic of affirmation" and all that goes with it. So maybe it is time, by way of pulling pieces together, to try a different tack. Maybe it is time to explore a different place for the preacher to stand with respect to the Bible. Maybe it is time to think about a new definition of "biblical preaching." Instead of a hermeneutic either of suspicion or of affirmation—and particularly instead of a hermeneutic of alienation—I want to suggest a "hermeneutic of intervention," a stance that places the preacher clearly in that "space" or "gap" between the Bible and the people, whether those people are inside or outside the church. The implication of the "intervention" metaphor is that the preacher can move back and forth between Bible and people, speaking out at one time from the people to the Bible and then, at another, from the Bible to the people. The preacher is placed in a position, as it were, to challenge and think critically about both "sides." The "preacher as intervener" has other connotations, too. For
example, when people are "too close," as in a brawl, someone must "intervene" to "break it up," to push them apart; and there is a time to do that when the Bible's "holiness" is too tightly grasped. Or when two parties are too far apart, too distant, someone must "intervene" to bring them together; and there is a time to do that as well, as when a biblical "word" cannot be, or is not being, heard as clearly as it should be. Or when two parties want to get together, but cannot, someone is called to "intervene," to mediate, not standing on one side or the other, not "listening" to one side only in order to speak but working back and forth between both sides from the "gap" between them.

But let's explore the intervention metaphor further with preaching in mind. While it allows the preacher to speak to people from and about the Bible, it also requires the preacher, on behalf of the people, to seriously challenge the Bible and then to share the outcomes of those challenges with the people. I want to outline three levels of intervention and challenge to the Bible that, in my judgment, can and should be carried out by preachers.

At the first level, preachers can help people understand what the Bible itself actually is, where it came from, and how it got to be in the cultural form in which we know it. This involves bringing canon and the history of the canon into sermon work. It involves helping people grasp the distance between biblical "events" and "recollections" of those events. Beyond that, though, it is time to challenge the ambiguously divine, if not supernatural, standing that Western culture has given to the Bible, recognizing that such a privileged "standing" has been gradually eroding since at least the Enlightenment. In what some have taken to be a startling essay last year,18 Robin Scroggs, a New Testament

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professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, proposed that the time has come for the church to give up any claim that the Bible is in any way authoritative for “guidance in contemporary faith and morals.” It is time to admit, Scroggs said, that the Bible is a human document that can best be understood as “only” the “foundational” document for the Christian faith. This, Scroggs added, would finally allow free and unfettered discussion of biblical ideas while insuring that the biblical texts remain essential to contemporary reflection. While some homileticians have expressed outrage at this suggestion, many preachers, I think, would not. For them, what Scroggs proposed is what they already believe and practice, whether they do so explicitly or in a de facto way. Scroggs’s proposal is not unlike Burton Mack’s description of the “Bible as epic,” the church’s own epic, which arose as a complex mythic construction during the formative decades of the church’s emergence.

More and more preachers are recognizing that their “authority” for preaching is not a book, not the Bible, despite the Bible’s “tradition”; the historic and mythic nature of the documents themselves will not support that. The authority for preaching arises instead from the community in which one labors, and it is that proximate community (along with, in part, the larger ecclesiastical community) that must constantly renew that authority. When the community confers authority, it invariably asks, whether implicitly or explicitly, for a sense of integrity and openness from the one who stands in the pulpit. As a result, preachers can treat the Bible honestly, as an indispensable resource but as ultimately foundational or as the epic mythological basis for faith. Preachers can honestly help people to cope with the reality of a Bible that reflects the formation of a complex of religious myth, but important myths that give genuine form and meaning to our particular religious expression. There is no debunking going on here. The twentieth century has already done that for the vast majority of thinking people. The preacher’s honest task is to “intervene,” in a sense, so that even in the pulpit the Bible is not lost but can be treated for what it is: a complex set of marvelous, if mysterious, human documents set in a time and place far removed from ours, documents that provide a striking account of a religion that impacts our lives right down to this moment.

We should turn this one other direction as well. The preacher need not be afraid—as many still are—of the very creative work of the so-called Jesus Seminar scholars. That group’s commentary materials
that are now appearing are worth every preacher’s time and thought. Those materials, too, help to shape our understanding of the Bible, and people need the preacher’s open, candid intervention in order to grasp, again with honesty and integrity, the mythic and legendary nature of the stories and statements found in biblical documents. A few homileticians themselves are starting to come to grips with this. The problem for many, however, is that they can go a long way with the traditions and the myths—some throughout the Gospels, in fact—until they come to what they see as the originating event of the Christian faith, the resurrection of Jesus. There the mythic has to be somehow overcome, and faith in the actuality of that event itself must become vital. For some scholars, though, and even for a growing number of preachers, when one understands the nature of mythic construction, there is no justification for lifting out and treating the resurrection stories differently than the rest of the church’s mythic achievements.

Can we be honest about that as preachers? Can we help people be honest about it? Can we find in the Jesus stories and myths—even the myth of resurrection—what John Dominic Crossan and others have called God’s great “parable of Jesus”? Can we find in the biblical documents those great mythic symbols of sacrifice and “newness of life” and treat them publicly and empathetically for what they are—symbols that still may embrace the idea of “pluralist community,” even in the midst of this badly tilting world? The answer is, yes, we can; and for most people today there would be great relief and attraction in such candor. Our task as preachers is, on one hand, to be honest with people about those documents and traditions, and, on the other, to find in our interaction with those myths and traditions new ways to summon people to lives of sacrificial service to others, to συνοικία?

There is a second stage to our “hermeneutic of intervention”; it calls us to systematically stand outside of and to challenge biblical texts

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themselves. For help with this, we men have to look no further than to the growing army of extraordinarily talented feminist exegetes and homileticians. Without any question at all in my mind, feminist hermeneutics is the most exciting to be found anywhere right now in biblical investigation. You don't have to turn far to find important things to read. In a footnote, we have already mentioned Christine Smith's 1989 book *Weaving the Sermon*, a book on homiletics, yes, but much more than that. It is a clear, forceful statement of how to challenge texts, how to practice interventionist hermeneutics, how to practice—remember?—the "hermeneutic of suspicion" with every text that one studies. This is not just for feminists, however. This is the kind of challenge to biblical text, an intervention between people and text, that every preacher is called to carry out regularly in sermon preparation. We stand outside the text to critique it and make it hear us, if you will, despite how strange that sounds.

Let us focus for just a moment on the problem of translation, the kind of matter that any preacher can undertake with an Interlinear Greek-English testament and a good lexicon. For several years, I have worked on the so-called "women texts" in the New Testament, texts that bear on the role of women in the church; among them are 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, 1 Timothy 2, and the bishop texts of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. These are all texts that must be challenged vigorously and that must be preached after those challenges have been followed through. If we take just one of those texts, 1 Timothy 2, our historic translations instruct women to remain silent. "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness" is the way the RSV renders it, and the way that it is usually taken, even by scholars who ought to know better. However, if one goes in to "challenge" this text, one discovers that the Greek term *silent* does not appear. The Greek word there is *síauxía*, and wherever it appears in the New Testament it always means "peaceful" or "tranquil," but never "silent." If one moves up to the second verse of chapter 2, the same word, *síauxía*, appears there, not referring to women and there it is translated correctly. In this context, women who are new to learning are being harassed by the men; that is the setup of the text and the men are given a sharp instruction that they are to leave the women alone so that they can carry on their learning, not in silence but in peace. Intervention is absolutely necessary between the people and this text; the text must be challenged and reclaimed.

A bit later in the same text, women are told, as our English translations put it, that they are to have no authority over men. But the
word translated “authority” there appears only once in the entire New Testament and it is here. It is the word ὄρθοτρεπτική, from ὄρθοτρεπτικός; and extrabiblical sources show us clearly that this word means “usurped control,” “damaging, almost violent control.” The Greek word for legitimate authority is well-known; it is the word ἐξουσία, as when Jesus is quoted as saying, “All authority is given unto me . . .” If the women were to have no actual or legitimate authority over men, the word here would have been ἐξουσία, which it is not. Male translators in this case and throughout the women texts have mistranslated and mishandled the texts so that they would read the way the men wanted them to read. These are only two examples of how and why texts have to be challenged, and here only at the bare translation level. That is to say nothing about the challenges to such things as power relations in the texts themselves or to matters of deep cultural and rhetorical bias in them.

We need to move to the third level in the use of our “hermeneutic of intervention.” It is the level of language, terms, words, concepts. In addition to being a theological act, preaching is also a profoundly communicative act, a linguistic act. It is done with symbols, primarily but not exclusively words. It is an act of language. As a result, what we know (and are steadily coming to know much better) about language throws important light on how the act of preaching works or does not work. It is not just that the biblical language or terminology is so removed from the worlds in which we live and talk or that the languages of our Bible reflect numerous translations. It is that; but it is also that language itself, whether then or now, is always elusive and ambiguous. The problem of language, of terminology, goes even deeper. It has to do with the relatively new understanding that we do not think first and then find language for our thoughts, as for centuries was assumed. The very opposite is true: It is our language, our way of speaking, that we learn first, and then our language shapes the nature of our thinking and acting. To take on an identity requires that we take on a language. For identity to change, for our perceptions to change, our language itself must change. Beyond that, we know that those who control the language, those who have the power to make and enforce the terminological structure of a culture, exercise the greatest control over others who live in that culture.

Few scholars have probed this insight more deeply than the American literary critic Kenneth Burke. As early as the 1930s, Burke called attention to the fact that “naming” is a way of acting, of controlling. Burke has taught us that our philosophers, poets, and
scientists—and we may add preachers—"act in the code of names by which they simplify and interpret reality. These names shape our relations" with each other. "They prepare us for some functions and against others, for or against the persons representing those functions. The names," he said, "go further: they suggest how you shall be for or against. Call a man a villain, and you have the choice of either attacking or cringing. Call him mistaken, and you invite yourself to attempt setting him right." Words, Burke insisted, are screens; he called them "terministic scenes." Words, by their nature, force us to see in one direction and act in that direction; at the same time, those same words blind us to other ways of seeing and acting. All language is loaded. Always loaded. Loaded with implicit viewpoint and emotional charge, whether positive or negative. Make a list of synonyms of any verb or adverb. Then, one by one, unpack the subtle ideological and emotional channeling of each term in your list and you will quickly become aware of this "loading" in all language. That is not just an aberration of language; it is the very nature of language itself.

As preachers, we become the challengers of old language and the shapers of the new, of new terminology and new meaning. Granted, this is being done in many places and in not a few pulpits today. Feminist homileticians are in the forefront of it. Language is being systematically challenged. "Father" language is gradually being given up in most liturgical and some homiletical work, replaced with other terminology of parental relationship. We are even starting to grasp the metaphorical nature of christological terminology, so that even the "anointed" designation for the divine can be reconceptualized. Culture-laden concepts such as savior and lord and king all need and, to a certain extent, are now receiving serious scrutiny and challenge. From both feminist and political/cultural liberationists, we are called to challenge other biblical terminology in our preaching. Words such as subjection and obedience and
repentance and salvation and slave and humility and evil and bondage are great examples of biblical language; but this language, from its biblical use and over time, has become filled up with a particular ideological and emotional point of view. The feminists and liberationists are right: as preachers, we have to be deeply involved in meditating on and challenging biblical language, in helping to devise what will amount to a “new theological naming” system, one devoid of sexism and racism and ageism, along with one of the most difficult “isms” of all in a multicultural world, of religionism, which is that sense of the superiority of my religion over yours and all others. The people of our congregations, by and large, are not in a position to do this, either by education and training or by dint of time and energy. But we are, or at least we should be.

One other point deserves mention. Sometimes, particularly in biblical and homiletical work, we try to create two classes of language: what we might call ordinary language and metaphorical language. The assumption is that ordinary language by and large is neutral while metaphorical language is “loaded,” or charged; it contains a viewpoint. But what Burke and the best of modern language theory teaches us is that this distinction simply doesn’t hold. All language, all terminology, no matter how unpicturesque, is loaded with viewpoint and emotional charge—and when words are learned, those implicit viewpoints and emotion are learned and become formative as well. What we think of as nonmetaphorical language is just as “loaded” as metaphorical language.23

Preachers have a responsibility to constantly examine and reconstruct the language of theological past and present. Sermons are not made up of just words. Sermons should be about words, about terms, about concepts. Explicitly so. Select a term, a word, a theological or biblical concept. Explore it, think about it, take it apart, look at the “baggage” it has come to carry with it. Massage it. Critique it. Examine its synonyms, its opposites. Redefine it, as best as you can, in terms of how we understand such things as equality, justice, transcendence, and inclusiveness. Propose new terms for old. Help people learn to think and talk in new ways, new theological ways. This is not as academic as it sounds, and it can be done in a positive, challenging way from the pulpit. The liberationists and the feminists are doing this and helping the rest of us to understand its urgency. The pulpit, remarkably, is one of the few places where this can actually be done—and where, I am urging, it should be done. It is part of

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“redeeming our time”; it is at the heart of learning to live in new ways, to accept with new hearts and to serve with new processes and movements of conscience and community.

Let me close by pointing out what you know very well—that there is a so-called “core theology” of the Christian faith that has come down to us. There are many theologians and homileticians today who are deeply afraid that we are losing that—Keck, of course, being one of them. Within the homiletical establishment itself, it is a deep fear. Elizabeth Achtemeier, an Old Testament scholar but also an active homiletician, wrote in her 1984 book, *Preaching as Theology and Art*, that the preacher is the “recipient of a biblical and theological tradition handed down across twenty centuries of Christian faith and practice.” That core, she said, includes a basic understanding of who Jesus is, of what his relation to the Father is, of what has taken place in “sacred, biblical history,” of what the goal of human history will be, and of how the Christian is incorporated into the purposes of God. Achtemeier’s insistence was that the preacher’s task is clear: in her words, it is to pass that “received” message along in the pulpit “unspoiled or undistorted by the fads and fancies of current sin and opinion.”

What is gradually becoming clear, though, is that those elements of “core theology” are not just under serious challenge. They are being deconstructed and profoundly reformulated and reconstructed. The Christian faith that is emerging here and throughout the world, framed by new theological, feminist, and liberationist orientations, is not the Christian faith of the creeds and traditions. The sense of connectedness with the past can still be detected; but the revolutionary shifts are already sweeping away some, if not much, of the church’s “received” theology. And all of these changes—despite Keck, despite Achtemeier and many others—are surely, subtly, but decisively finding their way into the thinking and practice of emerging ministry. And while views of the Bible, of texts, and even of ancient language are undergoing dramatic reconstruction, there is no throwing out of the Bible here.
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dramatic reconstruction, there is no throwing out of the Bible here.
The Bible is still, in Scroggs's words, the primary "conversation
partner" of the church's life and preaching. In fact, the degree to
which the Bible remains a vital and formative dimension of the
Christian community will depend, in large measure, on how well
preachers actively intervene to reshape it for modern minds and hearts.

Preaching is in the midst of profound and deeply controversial
change; some of us see it as change on a revolutionary scale. But it is
not the changing of sermon modes and formats, as important as those are.
The deepest change that is affecting the pulpit, our preaching, is
the way in which the Christian faith and its foundational document,
the Bible, are being perceived and handled. We preachers are part of
this profound change; in fact, we are standing smack in the middle of
it right now. We do not know where it is taking us, but some of us
believe that the new preaching that is emerging—despite efforts to
hold it back—will shape the nature of the renewed church, a
multicultural servant church, one that we can already make out faintly
on the horizon of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Nashville: Abingdon. During the 1980s, the book went through a number of
printings.

2. Keck: "Biblical preaching will be renewed when the two elements of the word
"biblical" are given their due—that is, preaching is truly biblical when (a) the Bible
governs the content of the sermon and when (b) the function of the sermon is
analogous to that of the text" (p. 106). And later, "one is faithful to the Bible not
simply when one imparts its message-content, but only when one does so in a manner
that repeats the Bible’s own way of using that normative tradition," (p. 115).

3. Again, Nashville: Abingdon Press. Originally, Keck says, these lectures were to
have been delivered in 1991, the year after he stepped down as dean, but they were
postponed for a year by an automobile accident.

4. Keck himself acknowledges this in a Foreword note: "Although the Beecher
Lectures, begun in 1871, have traditionally dealt with preaching, in recent years the
scope has been broadened to include other aspects of Christian ministry as well. Since
much of what I have to say about preaching is found in my Bible in the Pulpit, the
current flexibility of the Beecher Lectures permits me to address the state of
'mainline' Protestantism and aspects of its renewal," (p. 9).

6. One can turn a number of places to find the "hermeneutic of suspicion" defined in a dramatically different way than Keck views it. Christine Smith, speaking out of a feminist hermeneutical tradition, put it this way: "To begin biblical interpretation with suspicion rather than consent means that women and men must never unconditionally accept its (the Bible's) authority or its initial message without deeper, more thorough critique and investigation. This includes being suspicious about previous interpretations, most often exclusively proposed by male scholars. It means that we approach the biblical text with a critical lens through which we evaluate both the meaning it conveys and the purpose it serves. As women and men, we must acknowledge how historical and contemporary communities have used biblical texts to justify and sanctify every description and kind of human oppression. Robert W. Duke, in *The Sermon as God's Word*, says, 'One comes to the text and listens, setting aside, as far as humanly possible, all one's own questions and bracketing one's own assumptions.' This statement epitomizes an opposite approach from a hermeneutics of suspicion, for it is absolutely necessary that feminist women who preach and men committed to feminist biblical interpretation bring all (her emphasis) their deepest and best questions to the task of hermeneutics.... A hermeneutic of suspicion assumes that we often must look beneath the text, through the text, and behind the text to recover a faithful message of God's revelatory action in the world." *Weaving the Sermon*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 95–96.

7. The quotations of this paragraph thus far are from Keck, *The Church Confident*, 60.


9. Rosemary Radford Ruether has put it succinctly: "Human experience is both the starting point and the ending point of the circle of interpretation. Codified tradition both reaches back to its roots in experience and is constantly renewed through the test of experience. Experience includes experience of the divine and experience of oneself, in relationship to society and the world, in an interacting dialectic. Received symbols, formulas, and laws are either authenticated or not through their ability to illuminate and interpret existence in a way that is experienced as meaningful. Systems of authority try to reverse this relationship and make received tradition dictate both what may be experienced and how it may be interpreted. But the relationship is the opposite. If the symbol does not speak authentically to experience, it becomes dead and is discarded or altered to provide new meaning." "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation," in Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 111.

10. Keck, *The Church Confident*, 62, 63. 'The problem is, of course, the growing number of theologians who are arguing the opposite—that a so-called "unprejudiced examination of the issues" represents a veiled ideology of domination and that it is precisely what we must need to get rid of in our day.


13. "More and more, theology is being done from the perspective of the traditionally powerless as they experience the empowerment of the gospel, not only in an inner sense, but also in the sense that it compels and enables them to strive for justice. In rejecting the traditional interpretation of the Christian message, they refuse to leave the gospel in the hands of the powerful, to be used for their purposes, and insist that a proper interpretation of Scripture is freeing rather than oppressive. It is the entire gamut of theologies emerging from such circumstances—African-American, Latin American, Asian, feminist, womanist, mujerista, etc.—that we call 'liberation theology' (or, even better, 'liberation theologies')." This from a book on

14. The list of scholars here is a long and formidable one. Few have focused on the problem of myth itself, though, with more insight and integrity than my colleague Burton L. Mack, John Wesley Professor of New Testament at Claremont. Mack's most recent book which explores the mythic formation of biblical documents is Who Wrote the New Testament? (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995). Even a scholar like Mack, though, thinks deeply and creatively about the preaching process. Mack and I will soon publish a book together on the subject of preaching.

15. Again, the list of Christian feminist scholars who are deeply involved in preaching is a sizable one, and this is not the place to try to list them. Among the leaders of this group, though, is Chris Smith, whose work we cited earlier. It is not insignificant that Smith has been elected the president of the Academy of Homiletics for 1997, the first woman to hold that prestigious "preaching" position. Male homiletic scholars are beginning to pay attention.


17. For some time now my colleague in preaching at Claremont, Kathy Black, has been contending against the use of sensory metaphors to describe spiritual or homiletical activity. See her essay on the subject elsewhere in this journal.


19. See, in particular, Robert Funk et al, The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus (New York; Macmillan, 1993). It is inevitable that numerous books, even scholarly ones, will have away at the Jesus Seminar work; and preachers should not be oblivious to elements of vulnerability in the seminar's orientation and findings. Still, the work will hold up over time, and knowledgeable preaching must take it into account, both in an overall way and in the examination of particular Gospel texts.

20. One can see this "homiletical" struggle going on in several places, but none better than in David Buttrick's book, The Mystery and the Passion: A Homiletic Reading of the Gospel Traditions (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992). Buttrick knows historical critical theory and process and he knows the "traditions" literature, but he struggles with what to do with the resurrection as a literal originating event of Christianity. He wants it, but he knows it is a problem. For Buttrick, widespread belief in Jesus' resurrection produced a new social order, one that became the "church." And to preach today a firm and unrelenting message of that original resurrection is to produce again, in the present, that remarkable new social order all over again. Buttrick easily rhapsodizes over this: "When resurrection faith connects with the great myths of beginning and end, of creation, fall and consummation, the gospel message takes on universal significance and the story of the Christ-event becomes a cosmic drama." Moreover, to preach the resurrection narratives of the Gospels is to create, by that preaching, a "future suddenly present"; it is to create a "Christ not locked in time-past obituary, but present and, indeed, exalted," (p. 10).


wisely, in concert, we must use many words. If we use the wrong words, words that divide up the field inadequately, we obey false cues. We must name the friendly or unfriendly functions and relationships in such a way that we are able to do something about them. In naming them, we form our characters, since the names embody attitudes; and implicit in the attitudes there are the cues of behavior. If your naming is of such a sort, for instance, that you place your hope for salvation in a church, even a corrupt church, and if that church is on the side of great wealth in social issues, your very character is enlisted in the cause of wealth. You personally may never be called upon to “act,” in the brute sense of that word. You may act, a generation later, in the names and attitudes you bequeath to your children,” (p. 4).

23. There is, to be sure, a substantial body of theological thought that centers on metaphor. Sallie McFague’s work is a strong example; see, particularly, her *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). My experience, however, is that our understandings of metaphor and how they might impact the sermon have not reached very well to the pulpit yet. For all of our concerns about narrative and story for the pulpit and the orientations that have spun from them, we still have work to do on creating metaphor for the pulpit. That is one reason that I emphasize it here.

24. Achtemeier undoubtedly speaks for many who are watching changes in theological orientation with a sense of frustration and even dread. She writes: “This does not mean that the preacher is an antiquarian, interested only in the thought of the past. Nor does it mean that the preacher is a rigid dogmatist, refusing constantly to reformulate Christian theology in the language of his or her own time. Traditional Christian understandings must be continually rethought and rewritten, allowing the gospel to speak afresh to each new generation and society; hence the church has an ongoing history of creedal formulation and reformulation. But what these statements do recognize is that there is a ‘given’ to Christian theology—a core belief, grounded in a biblical history that has taken place, apart from which any theological formulation ceases to be Christian. . . . In order to claim that he or she stands in the long line of that great ‘cloud of witnesses’ who have passed down the Christian tradition from generation to generation, the preacher therefore has to absorb basic Christian theology into his or her own personal faith and experience, until it becomes automatically present. That Christian theology then forms the context, checks the content, and illuminates the exposition of every sermon preached” (pp. 11-12).

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The Gospel Lections for Advent: Some Unseasonal Thoughts

As Advent approaches, clergy and religious educators frequently look to the lectionary Gospel readings for material appropriate to the coming Christmas season. Four observations, however, suggest that the Advent Gospel lections in the Revised Common Lectionary are seasonally inappropriate and do not serve the church well at this time.

1. Societal Time? One rationale for using the lectionary is that it enables the church to reenact or to "remember" key stories of the Christian faith: Christmas, the Passion, Easter, Pentecost. Yet a glance at the lectionary's Advent selections reveals that readings from the Gospel birth (or better, conception) stories are simply absent. Matthew 1:1-17 is missing, as is most of Luke 1. In years A, B and C, the first passage selected from Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 does not appear until the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday before Christmas Day. More readings follow on the two Sundays after December 25.

This December silence needs reassessing in relation to what is happening at the same time in our wider society. Media reports indicate a significant proportion of "Christmas" shopping being done even before Thanksgiving. Christmas advertising and decorating are well under way through November and December. The rather odd situation arises, then, whereby the lectionary silences the church about Christmas at the very time when sectors of our society ensure that at
least one expression of Christmas is on most folks’ minds. In the midst of profit-driven commercialism and secularism, where is the prophetic voice reminding Christian communities that (in the words of that slogan) “Jesus is the reason for the season”? It would be ironic indeed if shopping bags and coffee mugs proclaim such a gospel while the commissioned representatives of the church (ordained clergy and educators) are silenced by their own lectionary.

Of course, the church is not to be a (religious) mirror image of society’s agenda. Doing something just because society does it cannot always be a sufficient justification for communities of faith. The notion that the church might be out of step with societal time forms an important part of our heritage. And there are good liturgical reasons for not confusing Advent with Christmas. But given the loss of identity and ignorance of Christian faith which is our current lot, I wonder if the church has the luxury of December silence in the name of liturgical purity while greater profits proclaim another Christmas story without challenge. Early January, when many of December’s attenders are no longer in church (for whatever reason), seems too late to be telling (parts of) our Christmas story.

2. Future Time? This situation of silence by default is exacerbated by another factor. In each year, the first Gospel Advent text is an eschatological one. Year A reads from Matthew 24, Year B from Mark 13 and Year C from Luke 21. The second Sunday assigns readings about the eschatological prophet John the Baptist. These two selections provide the textual basis for the familiar Advent emphasis on waiting for God’s future action.

But what is most strange is that reading such texts in the context of Christmas functions to confuse the Parousia with Christmas. It diverts attention from the latter to the former. This confusion and diversion are evident in the comments on these passages in the lectionary aids. One respected author urges the readers of his lectionary commentary to “disengage from thinking first coming or second coming” and announce that “our God is the one who comes to the world.” The latter statement is of course correct in general and demythologized terms. But the prior statement is inadequate because the biblical traditions maintain that the two comings are not the same. There is, as J. C. Beker among others has urged, a crucial temporal structure to biblical faith. God’s people live between the two, the already and the not yet, something which depends on maintaining, not collapsing, the temporal framework. Whatever our uncertainties and profound
discomfort in mainline denominations with eschatological material (yes, the fundamentalists have cornered that market), nothing is to be gained, and much is to be lost, by collapsing the Parousia into Christmas and confusing the two.

3. Story Time? Recent narrative approaches to Gospels have drawn attention to reading as a temporal process through which readers move. This insight has been linked with an understanding of the importance of where a scene is placed in a narrative. The meanings of scenes are significantly shaped by what a reader does or does not know from the preceding narrative.

From this perspective the inclusion of eschatological material and John the Baptist material in the Advent lections is most strange. In the canonical Gospel texts these passages follow the Christmas stories of Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2, not precede them. The John material, found in chapter 3 of both Matthew and Luke, urges preparation not for the birth of Jesus but for his adult ministry. The eschatological passages (from near the end of the gospels) warn about preparation for Jesus’ future return in glory. Their inclusion in the Advent lections violates the plot of these Gospel stories.

Moreover, both types of material seek repentance as the means of preparation for Jesus’ coming. They stress the recognition of his identity from his actions. These emphases secure the familiar Advent notion of being ready for God to act.

But in dealing with conception by the Spirit and with babies, Matthew’s and Luke’s birth stories attest neither repentance nor recognition. Repentance is not called for (though Joseph changes his plans in Matt 1:18–25), and the baby does nothing by which his identity can be discerned. Advent is not Lent come early or twice. Instead of human repentance, the stories speak of God’s mysterious presence and actions which surprise people and catch them unawares. These Christmas stories are peopled with folks who have not prepared and cannot prepare, who are not waiting for God to do something special (Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph). The characters continually need explanation and reassurance about the strange workings of God (angels explain [proclaim] to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, shepherds). The stories focus more on response than preparation, on surprise than planning, on what’s happened than waiting.

4. Advent: the Time of Waiting and God’s Absence? According to the numerous lectionary commentaries and periodical columns that
have sprung into existence to guide ministers in working with the lectionary (a veritable growth industry). Advent is the time of waiting expectantly for God to fulfil God’s promises and send the eagerly and widely awaited Messiah. Regularly these resources depict Advent as the time of God’s absence before the gift of God’s presence, the long-awaited Messiah (so Christmas and “Emmanuel”). Church newsletters and sermons play out the same fiction.

But there are at least two problems with this scenario which need to be addressed theologically and in our praxis. First, as several recent studies on “the Messiah” have demonstrated, there is little evidence for widespread messianic expectation in early Judaism. What evidence there is points to minority and diverse expectations. That is not to say, of course, that no one was waiting for a Messiah of some description, or that for some parts of the early Christian movement the designation of Jesus as Messiah was not important. Nor is it to deny the significance for contemporary Christians of the claim that Jesus is the Messiah (however that be understood). But the historical data do require us to recognize that there was nothing like a widespread, clearly defined, monolithic messianic expectation.

It is not too difficult to argue that one consequence of ignoring the historical data about the lack of widespread monolithic messianic expectation is that Advent has been, as much as Lent, a season that has regrettably fed Christian triumphalism and anti-Semitism. The failure to take the historical data into account in our seasonal and homiletical expression has led, for instance, to patently untrue claims (crassly expressed) that Jewish expectation (monolithic and widespread) looked for a warring messiah and so could not welcome but killed the peace-teaching Jesus.

Rather than have our Advent practices and proclamation reinforce such erroneous views, a more nuanced liturgical and homiletical

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expression would hold together Christian affirmations with a sensitive and informed restraint concerning claims about all Jewish traditions and people. The current dominant emphasis on Advent as a time of waiting contributes to profoundly unhelpful Christian attitudes and actions towards Jewish traditions and people.

A further difficulty arises from this posited Advent scenario of waiting for God to act. It assumes God's distance, if not absence, from a dead and legalistic Judaism that needs renewal. E. P. Sanders, among others, has devoted much ink to exposing the falsity of this understanding of Judaism which has been perpetrated by two centuries of scholarship.5

Significantly, the two birth narratives, which Advent is to reenact but which the lectionary essentially omits, do not set up this fiction of God's distance or absence. In fact, they undermine and challenge it by pointing the very opposite direction. Matthew's account begins with the genealogy, a narrative of God's lengthy and faithful dealings with God's people through all sorts of circumstances (including David's adultery and the punishment of exile). Continuous with this context, though a new chapter in it, comes Jesus. Luke's narrative begins in the Temple in the midst of worship where God is already encountered. Both Gospels embed the Christmas story in a much larger narrative. Both begin with God's presence, not absence. Both emphasize present encounter with God, not expectation for some future action. The conception (pun intended) that abounds in the lectionary commentaries of Advent as expectation again assumes and promotes unhelpful Christian attitudes toward our Jewish heritage, and by extension, to contemporary Jewish people and practices.

So What's a Preacher to Do?

Given the inappropriate Gospel lections for Advent, I see two options. (I recognize that a third option may involve the use of the other [non-Gospel] lectionary texts, but there is not space to consider that here.)

One option is to find a focus for Advent that is more faithful to the Gospel birth stories. Instead of the focus proposed almost without exception in the lectionary commentaries on expectation for God to act, the word Advent offers another possibility, that of "arrival." That is, the central question of Advent can be reconceived in terms other
than "How do we wait for and prepare for Jesus/God?" Rather, the question is, What does it mean to be a Christmas people, a community which chooses to celebrate God's arrival or presence through Jesus among us? With this question firmly in mind and set before a congregation each week, it may be possible to redeem the lectionary texts to provide some answers. The eschatological texts, for instance, may remind us that we await Jesus' return to complete God's purposes which his first coming, Christmas, enacted and which shape our daily living. I must admit it is a stretch. But a stretch is necessary if canonical texts which are not part of the birth narrative are to say something at Christmas to this Christmas people.

A second option is, in my view, preferable. We have little hope of answering that first question without a second: What does it mean to be a Christmas people who live by these stories of Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 in a world in which there are many other stories by which to live? Of course, after several decades of narrative theology, narrative preaching, and narrative Bible study, it's a cliche to say that telling stories provides vision. But the insight remains true and does not seem to have been connected to Christmas by the lectionary makers. Telling the Christmas stories shapes the identity and guides the lifestyles of God's people. They are vision-giving stories. When the stories are not told, there is no vision. And (it's been said before) where there is no vision, the people perish.

So what's a December preacher to do? Abandon the lectionary and dive into the birth stories. That is, if the lectionary makers have taken the birth narratives away from the church, clergy and educators have the option of restoring them. These stories are profoundly theological, ecclesial, and pastoral. There is plenty of preaching material in Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–2 to keep any preacher busy for many an Advent, and there are marvelous commentaries as resources. I can imagine a series of December sermons working through the major sections of Luke 1 (1:5–25, 26–38, 39–45, 46–56, 57–66, 67–80). Or a series of sermons on its characters: the women as disciples (Elizabeth, Mary, Anna), the pairings (Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Jesus and John, Anna and Simeon), the elderly and the young (Zechariah and Elizabeth, Anna and Simeon, Mary), the outsiders and the poor (Mary, the people of the Magnificat, the shepherds). Or in an age that is supposedly hungry for contact with the divine, a series on God's activity and presence in chapter 1 (the dreams and annunciations, the Spirit, the reliability of God's word [cf. 1:41]). Or a
series on the hymns and worship in chapters 1–2. Or a series on the places or settings of the story (the Temple, Nazareth, the hill country, the wilderness, Bethlehem, the manger, the field). Or a series on the connections between these events and God’s former dealings with Israel (the Benedictus, for example) and the place of Gentiles. And through it all the question What does it mean to be a Christmas people?

Matthew 1–2 offers similar rich possibilities and resources. I can imagine sermons on the names and titles of 1:1. The genealogy, crucial to the Gospel’s point of view, is omitted from the lectionary entirely. It offers immense possibilities, given that each name invokes a story which needs telling (just as the initials “OJ” evoke a multidimensional story in our society). Sermons might focus on the genealogy’s emphasized “high points” (Abraham, David, exile) or on its notorious members (Manasseh) or on the inclusion of the four women, which undercuts (as does the narrative of 1:18–25) its patriarchal formulation. The rest of Matthew’s story features divine presence (angels, the spirit, and dreams) and divine commissioning (the names of 1:21, 23), important sermon material. Joseph figures as a model disciple (1:18–25). The two chapters employ scripture explicitly five times (including 2:23). Sermons on these scripture citations, both in their original contexts (for example, Isa. 7:14 as a reference to Hezekiah?) and in their Matthean contexts, would offer the opportunity to reflect on the relation of the testaments and the workings of God in ways other than the supercessionist approach typical of many Christian congregations. Numerous echoes of the Moses story abound, for what significance? Matthew’s narrative names a host of places (Babylon, Jerusalem, “from the East,” Bethlehem, the house, Egypt, Ramah, Galilee) which invoke other stories of God’s actions. Making explicit some of these stories provides further sermon options.

The point of such proclamation is, of course, not to stuff people’s heads full of useless information. It is to hear these Christmas stories

If the lectionary selections don’t help us to tell our stories, we need to set those selections aside and use Christmas time to do so.
in some of their lifegiving richness so that the church might more faithfully understand and live its countercultural identity as a Christmas people. It is formational work. Such stories are by no means the only Christmas stories available to folks in this society. But they are our stories, and they say something vital about who we are, whose we are, and how we live. If the lectionary selections don't help us to tell them, we need to set those selections aside and use Christmas time to do so.

Each year I am regularly asked to lead “Advent studies” for congregations in December. Invariably I work through either Matthew 1–2 or Luke 1–2. Invariably we run out of time with vast amounts of material unexplored. And invariably a number of people say to me, “Thank God these studies have given us a chance to hear and think about the Christmas story because we hardly hear it in church services anymore.” Such lament and wisdom from the people of God can lead their leaders into new practices and the church into more faithful existence and mission.

Notes

The Disproportionate Cost of Being a Pastor

In 1 Samuel 17, we read of the young David, a shepherd, whose father sends him to a battle zone to get news of how his brothers are faring. When David arrives and finds his brothers, they assume that he is interested less in their welfare than in escaping the monotony of minding the sheep. His oldest brother angrily demands,

"Why have you come down? With whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart; for you have come down just to see the battle." (v. 28b)

David has apparently been the center of such fraternal conflict before ("What have I done now? It was only a question.") and simply turns from the censuring eye of his brothers. A minute later he volunteers to take on Goliath, the champion of the Philistines, in one-on-one combat. He declares before King Saul that his experience at shepherding has given him practice killing lions and bears in order to protect the flock from attack.

This bit of background to the Goliath story both shocks us and excites our admiration as we picture the adventuresome and...

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resourceful youth fending off wild animals who threaten the sheep in his care. This story can help us reflect on the implications of being a spiritual shepherd: 1) pastoral caretaking involves personal risk and cost disproportionate to remuneration; 2) this caretaking is placed in the larger framework of family responsibility; and 3) this self-giving should strengthen rather than destroy the caretaker.

Disproportionate Risk and Cost

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the David story is the disproportionate risk and cost involved in being shepherd. The very thought of a teenager routinely standing between wild animals and their prey seems wildly out of proportion to all reasonable expectations. Where were this boy’s parents? Adults should have enough sense to know that the boy’s life is worth a hundred of the sheep! This is in fact a fitting illustration for one of the great truths of ministry. The pastor is legitimately expected to welcome the opportunity to serve, even though the cost and risk are at times disproportionate to the apparent value of providing the ministry.

For example, recall the challenges of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. At that time there were many ministers who wanted to provide leadership forward from racial hatred, violence, and bigotry. Yet this kind of valuable and appropriate leadership was often rewarded with unkind reprisals. I remember one steamy July evening when the telephone rang during our supper time. My father, who was the local Methodist preacher, answered the phone, then left the house. The call had been from the local policeman who was having difficulty dispersing an angry racist crowd gathering at the firehouse. Daddy drove up to the firehouse. He looked out at familiar faces, now grown somehow unfamiliar, contorted with rage and fear. He told them to go home, and they did.

As a boy, that particular incident didn’t surprise me very much. It seemed rather natural for people to obey my father—after all, I usually did. But later I heard my friends’ parents talking about it as though there might be threatening repercussions. As I’ve grown older, I’ve realized that my father took a “David” risk that night. We were lucky; my father served a fairly progressive and supportive congregation.

But my best friend wasn’t so lucky; his family had to move away. His father, the minister at another local church in our town, wouldn’t keep quiet on the subject of racism. In fact, that church fired not only
my friend's father but three ministers in succession after him. It seems that none of them would remain silent on the race issue. All over the country, thousands of ministers were taking similar risks as a matter of course and as a matter of conscience. They stood to lose their jobs . . . or worse. Their risk seemed out of proportion to the amount of good they were likely to accomplish. But they took the risk. And I believe they made a difference.

This kind of legitimate self-abnegation is one of the authenticating marks of Christian ministry. Ministry during the race crisis of the 1960s is a good illustration of the kind of disproportionate risks ministers take in order to be faithful to Jesus Christ and his church. In other times and in other places, the issues have been, and will be, different; but the courage and grace which the Holy Spirit gives to the faithful are always challengingly present.

Low Salaries

Of course, there are other, more routine, ways in which the cost of ministry is disproportionate to reward. For example, the salaries are low, especially in relation to the educational investment required. My best friend in high school entered a two-year trade school to become an auto mechanic at roughly the same time I entered college. After he had graduated from trade school, I still had six years remaining to earn my bachelor's and master's degrees. For those remaining six years, he was earning every year roughly twice as much as I make currently. He still does. If you add the cost of college together with the income lost during those six years, then add a salary which will always be approximately one-half to two-thirds of what your auto mechanic makes, then the term "disproportionate financial remuneration" takes on new meaning.

Paul, a Presbyterian friend of mine, has an M.Div. from Princeton and a couple of years of graduate study in religion. He serves a rural parish that pays a cash salary of $17,000 per year. Paul's younger brother graduated from law school several months ago and just got a job as an associate partner in a law firm, making about four times Paul's salary. We may question the justice of this arrangement. But the fact is that most Americans see low salaries as appropriate for clergy. In Racing Toward 2001, Russell Chandler notes:
According to a 1990 Gallup Poll, Americans think the clergy should be paid less than plumbers. Less, in fact, than all the professions. Less than doctors and lawyers, engineers and mechanics, and a bunch of other people. Slightly more than one in three surveyed said the folks who fix your pipes should make at least $40,000 a year, while only one in four pegged $40,000 as an appropriate salary for those who try to save your soul.¹

Of course, low salaries are not the only factor in the high personal cost of ministry. There are many other hidden costs for both pastor and family: work weeks which are usually a pleasure, but which average between 55-70 hours; potluck parsonages that are sometimes wonderful, sometimes dreadful, but always someone else’s property; parishes that are sometimes in horrendous school districts which may put your children at risk in a variety of ways; people desperate for help banging on your door at 2:43 A.M. or cornering you in your study when you’re alone at the church.

As we accept the disproportionate risks and financial privations of ministry, we model an important ideal which our congregations expect us to share: we are in ministry not to serve ourselves but to serve God and our neighbor. Perhaps this is why laypeople sense that it is appropriate to set educational standards for ministers which are comparable to those for doctors and lawyers, while paying ministers less than plumbers. Ministers (and their spouses) are expected to be motivated by something higher and holier than big salaries, fancy houses, and luxury cars. We are expected to be motivated by love. When we are motivated by something other than love, we are in danger of betraying one of the most basic ideals of Christian ministry.

Isolation and Loneliness

Ministry, like shepherding, has its tense and exciting moments. It also has its long and wearing days of isolation. The young David was apparently glad to leave the pastoral monotony of his shepherding for a day or two to go to his brothers encamped in the battle against Philistia. It is amusing to read of David’s brothers harassing him for his obvious enjoyment of the military excitement after the endless ennui of bleating sheep. Tending the sheep had probably been their
Isolation of Place. Monotony and isolation are a price which most of us also pay for the privilege of bearing the shepherd's crook. First, there is the obvious isolation of place. No matter if we were raised in small towns or cultured cities, by the time we have completed seven years of university training, most of us have grown accustomed to living in an expanded world. We have at our disposal huge libraries, athletic centers, and an array of restaurants, theater, concerts, and international events. We may attend big churches and chapels with booming organs and glorious choirs. We make routine use of malls, museums, and parks.

And then you move to your first church. It is literally in a cornfield. For miles and miles there is nothing but corn, a few houses, and a country store. After a few months in your new parish, you get tired of television and Nutty Buddies on Saturday night, so you invite one of your key families to go out to dinner. He is the chairman of the County Commissioners, and she is chairwoman of your Council on Ministries. You ask if they like Chinese food, and to your astonishment they tell you they have never tried it. With innocent enthusiasm, you tell them about a Chinese restaurant that has recently opened in a neighboring county only twenty-five minutes away. Their amazing reply: "If we don't have it in this county, we don't need it."

Suddenly you understand. Some of your people are annoyed that you openly trespass the county line in search of better shopping, dining, and entertainment. This is cultural isolation. You make a mental note to praise and support local businesses and recreational facilities, and to keep quiet about your surreptitious excursions beyond the county line.

But there are more than cultural aspects to clergy isolation. Take, for example, the clergy work week. While many people have colleagues or associates at their work, most clergy do not; the majority of clergy serve small, rather than multistaff, churches. This means that you may very well go to your office and work all day without seeing or hearing from another soul. Of course, this can be a blessing, since it allows you to read and write and pray and plan without constant interruption. Nevertheless, it can be hauntingly lonely to work day after day in a study, in an echoing church, in an isolated field. Naturally, you will visit the sick and the elderly later in the afternoon,
and you will attend meetings at night, and this is a kind of companionship. But one cannot help but cast an envious glance at the busy, big-church pastor who presides over a hive of prosperous activity and who must hide to find the quiet to prepare Sunday’s sermon.

**Social Isolation.** Perhaps the most profound pastoral isolation is neither cultural nor professional but social. Pastors and their families can have a difficult time breaking through some very real social barriers which are often as much a part of pastoring as being called “Preacher.”

There can be a distinct sense of social anonymity among clergy. Most people have business relationships and personal relationships. And most people experience some blurring and overlap along these lines. That is, there may be some people whom one knows and relates to only professionally, only at work, such as the customer, client, or co-worker. And then there are those whom one knows both socially and professionally, such as the friend or neighbor who is also one’s client or customer. For clergy this blurring is nearly complete, for most of what we do socially is an extension of our role as pastor.

Perhaps the clearest witness to this extreme blurring of social and professional life is the fact that for ministers, as for doctors, the professional title is also carried over to social usage. Whether you are introduced at church, at the Rotary club, or at a neighbor’s dinner party, you are always introduced as a member of the clergy. Most of us have been to parishes where we were regularly addressed as though we had taken a vow of namelessness upon ordination. It seems that everyone calls us “Preacher” or “Pastor” or, in some denominations, “Father.” As genuinely wonderful as it is to have people claim you as their minister, it can be a lonely thing to lose your name.

I shall never forget the one person at a certain church who called me by my first name, “John.” Every time she spoke to me there was a small sense of healing and renewal that felt like a trickle of cool water to my inner being. She reminded me that I was not only a clergyman but also a person: a person who loved ministry but one who also had worth and dignity and meaningful relationships apart from my ordination.

**New in Town.** Not only are we isolated and overshadowed by our role as representatives of Christ and his church, we are also isolated by our
itineration. Ministers tend to move frequently, and newcomers to any community feel isolated and disconnected. And although frequent relocation neither is unique to clergy nor part of every pastor’s experience, it is a significant factor for many of us.

Sometimes we forget that many of our parishioners have lived in the same parish all their lives. Two senior citizens on your worship committee seem to have a gently strained relationship. You eventually discover that the one in her mid-eighties was the first-grade teacher to the one in her late sixties. It turns out that two others, who seem never to agree on anything, have been antagonizing one another since they were children. He thought she was “stuck-up,” and she thought he was coarse. Fifty years later, their opinions of each other have not changed.

As you slowly unravel years of interconnectedness among your people, you sense how comparatively tentative and superficial your own connectedness to this community really is. No one here knew you in grade school. No one here knows who your parents were. Your “history” with these people is close to zero, counted more accurately in months than in decades. Of course, the bonding power of shared pastoral and religious experiences greatly accelerates your incorporation into the community. And your very freshness can be a great advantage. But still, sometimes it gets lonely when no one’s memory of you reaches back more than a few years.

You visit your parishioners’ homes and learn about them, but your people rarely visit you. Those who do come may have to look hard to see an expression of “you” because you live in a prepackaged parsonage. This is the same living room, and indeed the same living room furniture, which they have associated with the last five or ten ministers. They will probably not ask to see your family photo albums, and they certainly will not be interested in reading about your family tree, even if it stretches back to Columbus! You know their cousins and uncles and aunts and grandchildren, but they do not know yours. Of course, that is because you have become a part of their community, but they have not become a part of your community. You have entered their world as an itinerant minister. But they have not necessarily entered your world.

“Set Apart for Ministry.” Another aspect of ministry which reinforces a sense of isolation is that you find yourself “set apart” for ministry in more ways than you expected. Age is certainly a factor. Unless you are nearing retirement age, there probably are not many
people your age in your church, and the younger you are the more pronounced is the disparity between your own age and the average age of your congregation. This is one of the realities of being a pastor in a “graying” denomination such as United Methodism. But even if you are fortunate enough to be in a congregation with many people in your age group, you may still feel isolated socially.

In some small communities, the church life is the social life. Baby showers and barbecues and birthday parties are all held at the church fellowship hall. The church roll and the social register are one, and membership in the Sunday school spells nearly automatic inclusion in whatever is planned socially for next Saturday night. In communities like these the minister tends to fare well socially. He or she is involved in everything and is likely to be quickly and thoroughly integrated into the rhythm of community life.

In larger communities this is less often the case. There is “church life” and there is “social life,” and the two are not collapsed into one. Often the minister who presides over the former would be an unwelcome intrusion into the latter. For example, I recently saw a friend who has pastored a large church in a county seat town for five years and who loves to give dinner parties. When he told me he was moving this year, I said, “I know that will be hard for you because you enjoyed Christ Church so much.” He said that he had indeed enjoyed Christ Church but that he had not been invited to a single private party in the five years of his tenure there. He was looking forward to the possibility of a more integrated and active social life at his new appointment.

This kind of social isolation may tend to be the case especially in denominations which are not on officially friendly terms with social drinking. Alcohol is an important part of many people’s social occasions, and in those frequent situations where a choice seems necessary, it is often far easier to do without the minister than the liquor. The result is that the minister is often left out of social gatherings of friends and parishioners, because he or she might “feel uncomfortable” or worse, might “dampen high spirits.”

Of course, some ministers and hostesses are real assets to each other. They move easily and comfortably at both church and social functions, and friends made at the country club this week are introduced at church next week. Social drinking is handled so that it is not an embarrassment. And both clergy and lay are interesting and substantial enough people that open immorality at these events is
unimaginable. When this happy combination is found, it is a real joy. More often, clergy seek the company of friends and family who allow us to shed our pastoral role for awhile. For although we are pastors we are also sons and daughters, husbands or wives, brothers and sisters, and fellow children of God. So the isolation is not complete. Just as David’s father, Jesse, occasionally relieved the tedium of his son’s duties by sending him on an errand or two, so do we find our own occasions for change and excitement. Nevertheless, we find that some degree of isolation is one of the facts of our ministry. Pastoral isolation is the introspective underside of ordination’s glory, the inescapable corollary of being “set apart” for ministry.

Bearing the Costs of Ministry: A Family Support System

David was not a lone agent working unto himself, for himself. He was a member of a family. As such, he took his turn at caring for the family herds. He stood in relationship to his brothers, who had probably preceded him in handling this family chore; and he stood under the authority of his father, whose sheep they were. David’s performance in his role as shepherd was a function of his relationship with his family. He had the responsibility of protecting and preserving the family resource of sheep. He was no doubt required to give an account to his father for any sheep lost to various perils, and his standing in the eyes of his brothers and of his father would have been significantly related to how he handled his responsibilities in caring for the family herds.

Peer support. As ordained clergy we are, like David, members of a family with family responsibilities. We certainly want to meet our own high standards, but these are not the only ones. Both formally and informally, the family standard measures our work. Along with self-respect, we need also to earn the approbation, respect, and gratitude of the rest of the family whose flocks we tend.

We recognize that we are not the first to have been entrusted with this care of the people of God. Others have gone before us, “older brothers and sisters” if you will, who have learned God’s ways and who pass along to us both the shepherd’s crook and its responsibilities. As we take the staff, we are aware that we belong to a great family with its own peculiar traditions, ethics, and values. We have
“ancestors” (the saints) to inspire and instruct us. We have older brothers and sisters around us to show us how they’ve done it, who teach us by their example and by their words what it means to shepherd God’s people. And we have younger ones coming along whom we shall guide as they take their first steps in ministry. We stand not on our own but in apostolic succession.

The accountability which we feel to those brothers and sisters in authority over us, and in ministry with us, gives us a certain kind of support. It helps create a kind of productive tension, an invigorating appraisal of whether we are performing up to code, of whether we are directing our attention and energies along broadly prescribed paths. This accountability provides an external standard against which to measure our ministry which can provide a corrective to the perils of pastoral isolation.

Support from Our Flock. Certainly a part of the support which clergy experience comes from loving and joyous relationships with the people we pastor. David’s motives for caring well for his sheep included a personal love and fondness which he felt for them. We certainly see this aspect of the good shepherd brought out in Luke 10. Jesus’ attention is both upon the sheep whom he lovingly cares for and upon his Father whose sheep they are. Jesus actually loves his sheep. He cares for them, not out of necessity as though he were merely a hired hand, but out of love directed personally and individually to each, so much so that he knows and calls each by name.

Likewise, we as pastors are significantly motivated to care lovingly and responsibly for our people because we have affection for them personally. We visit the sick and the elderly partly because we “ought” to but chiefly because we want to. We care for these people, even though the visits may sometimes be dull or depressing, because we feel deeply that they have intrinsic worth. They deserve to be valued and ministered to. We enjoy having church leaders in our homes for cake and coffee on Tuesday evening or for barbequed chicken on Friday night, because the relationships we share with these people are life-giving and joyful. And we like forging new friendships with the young people in our confirmation classes, feeling the new confidence they place in us, sensing the pleasant surprise they feel upon discovering that the minister is “pretty cool after all.” So we find motivation and empowerment within the complex and powerful
relationships that define, and give meaning to, our ministries. Love for our people gives us energy and joy in ministry.

**Partners in Ministry.** Of course, our people are not just “sheep” to be shepherded; they are also brothers and sisters in ministry together with us, empowered and led by the same Spirit who also equips our ministry. Because we are in ministry together with our people, we learn about doing ministry from our people. In significant ways, the ministry of our people informs and shapes our own understanding and practice of ministry. Outstanding layfolk have taught us a great deal about the heart of ministry. So not only do our relationships of love and affection with our people give us emotional support, these relationships form and inform our practice of ministry.

Our “sheep” are also our brothers and sisters in ministry. They are the ones who share ministry with us week in and week out. It is together with our layfolk that we plan worship, teach church school, administrate church business, visit prospective members, staff soup kitchens and food banks, mail newsletters, coordinate long-range planning, orchestrate youth retreats, and more. Our layfolk evaluate our ministry both informally, as our names come up at the dinner table and at the bridge table, and formally, as official committees of the local church meet to evaluate our ministry, recommend salary levels, and decide whether to seek a change in pastors. We listen to our laypeople. They shape and support us. Both through their praise and their criticism, through their cooperation and sometimes their recalcitrance, they hold us true to the family’s standards—or at least to this local church’s perception of the family’s standards.

But in many ways the local church’s perception of the family’s standard is colored by its own expediencies and local concerns. Valuable and basic as our congregation’s perceptions of authentic ministry are, they are still perceptions which are provincial, contextualized within the confines of a specific community. For this reason we need to find support not only among our layfolk but also among other clergy.

Fellowship with brothers and sisters in ordained ministry is well worth the time investment required. When I moved to my present appointment, I was fortunate to be invited to join a group of pastors who meet at Hardee’s for breakfast on Monday mornings. We eat cinnamon raisin biscuits and talk about everything: sports, district and conference events, the cemetery committee from hell, choir directors,
potty training, you name it. Then we go to a church close by, share prayer concerns, and pray for one another.

There is another reason to look beyond the parish for additional fellowship, friendship, and support. Parish friendships are often surprisingly brittle and are extremely susceptible to conflicts of interest. Very often the laypeople with whom we make friends have motivations similar to our own; just as we seek the friendship of key laypeople partly in order to facilitate the work of ministry, so they may want to develop good rapport with their pastor partly to get the work of ministry done—in the way they wish to see it done. So long as their desires are not totally frustrated, the friendship usually continues. But if the time comes when the pastor seems more of a hindrance than a help to the parishioner’s personal goals and vision, the friendship and support may wane. And if the pastor is perceived as a serious threat, the friendship may be terminated suddenly and decisively.

Fellow clergy do not have such conflicts of interest in their relationship with us. They can give us a swift kick when we need one and tell us with the candor of colleagues when we are in the wrong. Sometimes the problem is we’ve been kicked a few times too many. That is when our ordained brothers and sisters can listen to our story and say, “I’ve been there, too.” Somehow, there is healing just in knowing that our struggle and pain is legitimate, that others share the same kinds of difficulties we experience in ministry.

So an important part of the family support system is fellowship with other clergy brothers and sisters. Fellow clergy are highly trained in the traditions, theology, and practice of ministry and will have a valuable perspective which may be beyond the purview of our layfolk. In addition, since they stand outside the local church community, they can offer fresh insights and support with fewer conflicts of interest. Since these friendships are not parish-based, they offer a “safe place” when parish politics go awry.

Support from God. We serve partly because there is within us a God-given desire to care for the people whom we have learned to love. And we are sustained and strengthened in our service by both the laity whom we serve and by our brothers and sisters in ministry. But we do not serve merely from personal motives of love and affection, important though these are. We serve because we are called. God has called us through Christ Jesus, saying, “Feed my sheep.” And when our personal affection for the sheep wears a bit thin, we remember this
underlying fact: We are in the field not to please ourselves, and ultimately not to please our people, but to serve faithfully and lovingly the One who called us. Our service is a loving response to Jesus Christ; it is a faithful expression of his gracious presence and activity in our lives. And if we please and honor him, we are fulfilling the ultimate goal of our ministry.

One of the most powerful aspects of the David and Goliath story is young David’s straightforward faith. It mystified David that Goliath’s swaggering should go unchallenged: “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (1 Sam. 17:26). David was sure of God’s empowering presence as he walked confidently toward Goliath with his sling and stones. His courage was well-placed, and it won for David and his people an important victory.

David had faced terrors and challenges which we think abhorrently disproportional and inappropriately harsh for a youth to face. Yet God was with David in those challenges. And it was precisely in sensing God’s empowerment to meet those challenges that David gained confidence in himself and in the God whom he served. David believed he could defeat Goliath because he believed he could count on Israel’s God to work through him.

Like David, the challenges we encounter in ministry sometimes seem disproportional and harsh. It hurts us to see our children going to the “wrong” schools. It hurts us to be excluded from much of the social life in our town. It hurts us when people whose children we have confirmed, and whose parents we have buried, turn on us in anger over petty things. It hurts us when we preach prophetically in obedience to the Holy Spirit and our “lambs” become wolves ready to devour us because the immorality or injustice we have denounced is dearer to them than we are.

**Toward a Davidic Model of Ministry**

David the shepherd-boy has much to tell us. He tells us about loving and caring for the flock, even in the face of personal risk and privation; about how loneliness, isolation, and hard work are to be expected and accepted by those who are called “pastor.” He tells us about a relationship with God that gives him the strength and courage to keep facing the endless landscape and wild, powerful predators. We need to hear the shepherd boy tell us the importance of each of these things—not just about hardship borne out of love but about the source
of the grace to bear those hardships in a life-giving way. Without the sense of empowerment and grace which comes from close and regular communion with God, we begin to lose our edge, and the next predator may overpower us.

The shepherd boy’s story reminds us that God is with us as we quietly explore the echoing dimensions of pastoral solitude. God is with us as we gather our courage to face down insidious and evil attacks. God is with us as we carve out a fulfilling life for ourselves and our families in the wilderness of a demanding pastoral life. As God guides and strengthens us to faithful ministry, we find that these challenges draw upon our souls the lines of character, resilience, faith, and perseverance. As we open ourselves to God’s ministry, we will find the legitimate privations of our own ministry invigorating, and we will have the capacity to identify and reject as false and unworthy its illegitimate demands.

David’s challenges in the field brought him closer to God, made him a better servant, and made him more fully alive. We pastors must know that appropriate self-abnegation is an unavoidable factor of authentic Christian ministry but that we are free to approach the challenges of ministry in ways that are both life-giving for us and faithful to our calling. David was not defeated by the challenges and privations of his work, and neither need we be. Rather, David found ways of doing his work which helped him feel the empowering and loving presence of God.

We, too, are free to discover approaches to ministry that enlarge rather than diminish us. Authentic shepherding leads others into “rest and health, not some narrowing, overburdening or destruction of themselves.” This is true not only for our flock but also for ourselves. We ourselves are both shepherds and sheep; and as we follow the authentic shepherding of Christ, we are led into wholesome self-giving.

Notes


In an oft-discussed article published in the *Journal of Democracy* last year, Robert Putnam reported on the general decline of civic-mindedness in the U.S. Despite widespread agreement that greater civic engagement results in better crime control, better education, lowering of unemployment, and improved health care, communities were operating with a much lower level of involvement from the average citizen. What factors contributed to this? Not surprisingly, perhaps, Putnam found a general distaste for politicians. But he also discovered an overall decline in fraternal organizations as well as in churches. There was an overall decrease in neighborhood socializing and trust. But in Putnam’s portrait of privatizing forces, one statistic emerged as particularly telling: between 1980 and 1993 there was a 10 percent increase in the number of bowlers, but a 40 percent decline in league bowling.\(^1\) (Incidentally, the number of bowlers nationwide equals the number of churchgoers in this country, both groups over a third more than those who voted in the 1994 congressional elections.)

These statistics only point out a fact that we probably already sense: ours tends to be a socially isolated age. A general hesitation to get involved in civic or neighborly matters joins with privatizing

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phenomena such as VCRs and "home shopping," the decline of community social centers such as downtown business districts, the uncertainty of long-term employment at some companies, increasing litigiousness, the fear of crime, and so forth.

This phenomenon touches churches, too. Our era is one of lessening commitments to particular congregations and denominations, of "consumer-oriented" and "full-service" church structures and programs purposefully designed to meet people's specific needs. Many people judge the effectiveness of a church by how rewarding it is to them personally, instead of cultivating a deep consciousness of serving the Lord in and through a particular congregation. Some pundits see evangelistic challenges in such things; others see a selfishness on the part of churchgoers. Some models of ministry haven't helped this situation, but other models have allowed pastors to give over vital discipleship to churches' committed laity, creating vital and growing Christian sociality. Small-group ministries and Bible study programs, such as Disciple and Serendipity, have helped many churches develop more of the social cohesiveness which is part of discipleship.

In light of such fin de siècle trends and issues, what might the Scripture say to our contemporary situation? Our lessons from this Epiphany season are a varied lot, which seem at first glance to be unrelated. On closer inspection, however, our lessons speak to broad issues of Christian "togetherness," including God's plan to unify all things in him (Jan. 5); the early church's concern for ending sectarianism (Jan. 12); the importance of vital and blameless Christian witness to others (Jan. 19); the strong presence of Christ's redemption within our various present circumstances (Jan. 26); and the need to be sensitive to the Christian walk of other people (Feb. 2). Such texts, though by no means touching all issues of human community, may help us regain a vision of God's will for us in our comparatively lonely 1990s. As we begin the new year 1997, we may ask ourselves: In what ways is God calling us to unity and witness with Christians all around us?

January 5, 1997: The Second Sunday after Christmas
Ephesians 1:3–14
Isaiah 60:1–6
Psalm 72:1–7
Matthew 2:1–12
"The Fullness of God’s Promises"

I have often turned to Ephesians for guidance and confidence. The letter has a poetic, almost luxurious depiction of God’s blessings, especially in the letter’s first half. For instance, the author writes of “the riches of his grace that he lavished on us” (1:7–8); “the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (1:22–23); “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us” (2:4); “the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (2:7); “the boundless riches of Christ” (3:8); “the wisdom of God in its rich variety” (3:10); “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19). Such poetry quickly dispels any wavering confidence one may have in the sureness of God’s favor toward us!

Commentators have debated the authorship of the Epistle to the Ephesians, partly on the basis of such poetic language, which is infrequent in Paul’s other writings. (The history and destination of the letter are also debated due to the lack of any personal address in the oldest manuscripts, coupled with the letter’s general greeting and tone—also unusual among Paul’s other letters.) Commentators have tabulated over 80 words in the epistle that are not found in other Pauline writings. The typical sentence structure in Ephesians is lengthy and discursive, far from Paul’s restless and occasionally tangential style in, for example, the Corinthian correspondence. I refer the reader to several books which discuss these issues.

Our reading from Ephesians is an excellent example of the letter’s style. These twelve English sentences make only a single sentence of over 200 words in the original Greek, one that is filled with dependent clauses, repetitions, and new phrases alike. The sentence has a snowball effect. The initial outburst of praise accumulates more praise as it goes along. Other letters of Paul contain some personal praise in this opening epistolary section—or, in the case of Galatians, censure!—but not so Ephesians. Instead, this description of God’s salvation unfolds with astonishing breadth the greatness of the salvation which Christ has brought us. The magnitude of this gift overarches and encompasses the weal and woe of any particular church.

“Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,” writes Paul (v. 3). What are those spiritual blessings?
Certainly they are those which (in distinction to those worldly blessing which we also need, and for which we should also be thankful) provide forgiveness, redemption, holiness, and salvation, that we can be “holy and blameless before him in love” (v. 4). In our own time we have lost some of the eager expectation for God's gifts of sanctification, an expectation John Wesley hoped to inculcate through the Methodist bands and societies. One of the benefits of the early Methodist movement—one which Wesley himself thought was God's peculiar purpose for the Methodists—was the fresh emphasis upon that grace of God which leads us to holiness. Here (and in our Corinthian passages below) Paul emphasizes one of the purposes of God's election: that salvation is not merely a “one shot deal” after death but a working-out of God's holiness within our lives.

Clearly none of this is meant to indicate merit on our part. When I first read Ephesians, it came as a breath of fresh air and as a corrective against some of the “works-righteousness” oriented religion I encountered as a child. (How many of us had dear, now dead, relatives for whom the Christian faith was mostly the avoidance of sins such as card playing, swearing, mowing one's lawn on Sunday, etc.?) All spiritual and material blessings come from God's goodness and kindness toward us, not as our own doing but wholly as God's creative activity in our lives (Eph. 2:8-9).

There is a fine line to walk here. The magnification of God's righteousness need not entail a corresponding diminishment of human dignity. Karl Barth has been one of the few theologians over time who finds it unnecessary to denigrate created human nature in order to magnify God's grace. 6 We must affirm, in the words of a popular poster of a few years back, that “God don't make no junk,” even as we deny that our good deeds have any power to compel God's salvation. A proper humility toward the undeservedness of God's salvation is essential. Either error—a denial of human worth or a conceitedness toward God's gifts—is the first step toward an unchristian condescension toward another person and his or her religious experience. I'll return to this point in the discussion of 1 Corinthians 8.

We have been chosen by God (and not vice versa), says Paul, “before the foundation of the world” (v. 4) “as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (v. 10). The original issue for the author was the division between Jews and Gentiles, which has been eliminated in Christ; but the reconciling work of Christ may be broadly applied, too. I first
came to Ephesians with a background of small-town, small-church friction. Our church had a little "in-group," with membership by invitation only! The Ephesians vision of unity and reconciliation rather than hostility and division (Eph. 2:11–22) came as a wonderful shock to me. Christ already is our peace, reconciling us to God and eliminating dividing walls between us. This vision of a future Christian ideal—this is the reality which Christ has already established. Why then are there still walls between us?

Predestination was one of the defining theological issues during the first century of Methodism. John Wesley himself, plus other early Methodist theologians including John Fletcher, Nathan Bangs, and Wilbur Fisk, criticized the doctrine of predestination as a perversion of scripture. Eighteen- and nineteenth-century Methodists firmly stood their ground on this issue—and rightly so. Rather than teaching God's "preselection" of those saved, Methodists taught the unlimitedness of God's offer of salvation. Though not all people will be saved, God's grace extends to all persons according to God's great love for the world.

This kindness and grace begin before we are aware of it and extend through our earthly lives and beyond! These days, the strict Calvinist doctrine of predestination has ceased to be a theological hot potato. We are probably more interested in the question of when the plan will be fulfilled. While we do not know the time, we believe that God's eternal wisdom is behind it (v. 8b–9). We await this day in hope and grace.

Furthermore, God has made his will known in Christ. How do we know this? By the promised Holy Spirit, says Paul, "[which] is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory" (v. 14). The Greek word *arrabón* has its root meaning in an old Middle Eastern practice of making an advance payment on something—an order of goods, for instance—with a pledge to pay the rest later. The reality of the Holy Spirit is the absolutely trustworthy seal or guarantee—better than money in the bank—of God's grace to us, with the full glory of his promises to come later.

One may add that the wisdom and insight which God provides (v. 8b) is also a spiritual gift. Christian knowledge, like Christian sanctification, is not a matter of self-improvement, something we can attain for ourselves and then hold over other people's heads, as some of the Corinthian Christians did. Instead, it is grace-filled guidance.

Our text from Ephesians goes on to point out that this plan "to gather up all things in him" includes our own election to "live for the
praise of his glory" (v. 12). I sometimes feel uneasy concerning some aspects of Christian worship (certain hymns, for instance) which seem to dwell entirely on one's own experience of grace; i.e., "He saved me"; "He called me." I've known laity and clergy alike (and sometimes we clergy are the worst offenders) who seem so completely mesmerized by their own experiences of grace that they are unable to respect the different grace-filled experiences of others. Although the individual aspect of grace is very important, grace can never be a purely private matter. I wonder if that is why Paul's letters do not dwell on his own "road to Damascus" experience. One's own salvation or one's own call can be a source of wonder and a subject for praise. But it is also a sign of God's favorable plan to "unite all things in him," carrying with it certain responsibilities of faithfulness and, as Wesley put it, social holiness.

January 12, 1997: The Baptism of the Lord
Acts 19:1–7

Genesis 1:1–5
Psalm 29
Mark 1:4–11

"Baptism and Unity in Christ's Death and Resurrection"

The theme of God's Holy Spirit, as well as the unearned riches of God's salvation, may be found in our next scripture, a small and seemingly uncomplicated story of one of Paul's missionary encounters. It is a good scripture for this Sunday, the Baptism of the Lord.

In this section, Paul is on his mission to Asia. Acts 18:18 indicates that he had left Ephesus and had sailed for Syria, along with Priscilla and Aquila. An intriguing change into first person narration occurs in Acts 16:10 with the "we" passages, probably Luke's own stamp of autobiography. It recurs throughout the remainder of Acts (20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16). But this "we" is absent from the portion of Acts under consideration here, suggesting that the narrator did not accompany Paul on the trip recorded in Acts 18:18 through chapter 19.

Toward the end of chapter 18, Apollos, "a Jew" and "a native of Alexandria" who "was an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures," is encountered by Priscilla and Aquila in a synagogue and is taught by them. Verse 25 notes that Apollos "had been instructed in
the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John." He was subsequently taken aside by Priscilla and Aquila and given a kind of "continuing education" lesson. It is a strange passage in a way, since v. 25 asserts the accuracy of Apollos's teachings but v. 26 indicates the need for greater accuracy. The deficiency seems to be baptism, and the reference to Apollos's ignorance of Jesus' baptism links this account with the story following in 19:1-17. John baptized for repentance and amendment of life, and he pointed to Jesus who was to come (Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:2-3, 16). The author of Acts makes the point that the baptism of John is inadequate because it is not in Jesus' name and because it omits the key element: the gift of the Holy Spirit. As in the case of Apollos, who needed instruction because his experience was not complete, others, too, will have gaps and inconsistencies in their knowledge as Christians.

While Apollos taught in Corinth (Acts 19:1; 1 Cor. 1:12; 2:4-6, 22; 4:6) Paul passed through the "interior regions," or the lands of Asia Minor near his destination, Ephesus. Paul stayed in Ephesus longer than in any other city on his tours, between two and three years. Here he helped spread the gospel through the Asian province. He also wrote several of his letters there, including the Thessalonian and Corinthian letters, and Romans.

At the conclusion of v. 1, Paul met some disciples—Christian apparently, since Luke calls them mathetes, always a Christian term for him. Little context is provided. Where were the disciples when Paul met them? A former parishioner of mine once spoke of having inadvertently parachuted into "a mess of Germans" during the Second World War. In our unadorned text, Paul is going about his business when he suddenly encounters a "mess of disciples"!

Paul is skeptical of their spirituality, but the text does not indicate any reaction beyond this. He simply asks them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They reply that they never heard of such a thing. Once again, Paul's reaction is not indicated; he simply continues his line of questioning: "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." By this time John had been dead for well over twenty years. Considering the former pericope concerning Apollos, it is safe to say that these disciples were not actually followers of John the Baptist. They were followers of Jesus, apparently an independent group of Christians who recognized

DESTINED IN LOVE
John's baptism but were ignorant of or thought it unnecessary to be baptized in the name of Jesus.

Paul taught them that "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus" (v. 4). The group responded to this message and were baptized "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (v. 4). It might be noted that, for Luke, there was only one baptism, that done in the name of Jesus, so this was a matter not of "rebaptism" but of a true baptism. One might say that, for Luke, John's baptism was one of many various kinds of baptisms and might well be repeated as the individual desired. Baptism in Jesus' name, on the other hand, was "the" baptism which took place only once.

Paul laid hands on them and the Holy Spirit came on them, "and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—all together there were about twelve of them" (vv. 6b—7). Paul's laying-on of hands finished the ceremony; one may compare this incident with Acts 10:44—48, where the order of ceremony and spiritual bestowal was somewhat different. Tongues and prophecy are Luke's distinctive way of rendering the Spirit's presence.

John's preaching and baptism were necessary, of course; but John represented only one act, so to speak, in the larger drama of salvation. Those baptized with John knew the call to repentance to escape the coming condemnation, the demand to change due to the imminent threat of judgment. But the life and preaching of Jesus tells them that the condemnation, the threat, is taken away through God's grace. As William Barclay has noted, the text does not tell us whether the disciples of John knew the anguish of soul which Paul discusses in Romans 7—the striving to do better, only to find that one's will is divided and can find rest only in God's unearned grace. But they responded so readily to Paul's teaching that such might have been the case.

One commentator finds this story important for Luke's narrative because it indicates that Luke was concerned for the unity of the church as over against independent groups. Luke's desire for unity in the early church probably exceeded the reality of the situation he portrayed (especially if one recalls the numerous practical and theological problems which prompted Paul's letters). Nevertheless, in this section Luke shows how Paul successfully deals with one independent group. Paul, according to Luke, was the carrier of true teaching.\(^9\)
If one considers the baptism of Jesus, one is always led to this question: Why did he offer himself for baptism by John? Matthew's Gospel has John put the question to Jesus directly. Jesus responds, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). To fulfill all righteousness, Jesus took on our full humanity, uniting himself with our whole need. So even though John's baptism was one of repentance rather than grace, Jesus willingly joined himself with all of us who have that need. He took upon himself the full force of the judgment against sinners. Joining us in death, Christ draws us to himself in resurrection life.

January 19, 1997: The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
1 Cor. 6:12-20
I Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20)
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
John 1:43-51

"Who Is Most Truly Free?"

Through most of First Corinthians, Paul considers a range of topics and specific questions from the church. The difficulties of the Corinthian church, stemming from the profligate and pagan nature of the community, are biblical facts which many of us learned for the first time in junior high Sunday school. At that time we were probably more interested in the sins than in the solutions! Paul's censorious advice in this letter concerning marriage and the role of women in Christian communities still provides grist for lively discussion in our adult Sunday schools. Yet this is the letter we read for its glorious passages on the Lord’s Supper (chapter 11), on Christian love (chapter 13), and on the resurrection from the dead (chapter 15), and, in all, for illumination on the difficulties of putting our “Christian liberty” to practice.

The first of our Corinthian texts is part of a primary section of the letter (5:1-7:40) wherein Paul considers ethical questions within the context of Christian freedom and morality. Earlier—to recall once again Paul’s desire for unity—Paul warns against factions in the church (1:10-4:21). But the factionalism and spiritual arrogance of the Corinthians forms an ironic contrast with their own witness. The "disorders" recorded in chapters 5 and 6 have to do with unsavory family arrangements (a man living with his stepmother), lawsuits in
pagan courts, and sexual morality in general. In 1 Cor. 5:11 and 6:9 Paul enumerates, for the sake of very serious reminder, actions which are not allowed for believers. As in our Ephesians texts, holiness and blamelessness are signs of God's people—a creation of holiness which God does in the community.

These are indeed community issues and not just matters of private morality and action. The church's complacency with regard to these matters, their failure to make adequate distinctions between proper and improper behavior, bothers Paul just as much as the actions themselves. Thus in 6:9–20, Paul warns against both immoral actions and the lax attitude that tolerates them.

Gordon Fee notes that two words predominate in verses 12–20: forms of the word *porneia*, "sexual immorality" or "fornication," and the word *soma*, "body." Paul never deals with the spiritual condition of the prostitute (vv. 15–16), only that of the Christian who unites with that person. Whatever the term *soma* might mean, the personality, the whole person, etc., is widely discussed in Pauline studies as well as in theology. But the major point of Paul's argument here is that the physical body does have significance in spiritual matters.

In the matter of sexual immorality (6:12–20), Paul states, " 'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything" (v. 12). What does he mean by this? The slogan "all things are lawful for me" probably derives from Paul's Corinthian critics. It is right as far as it goes, but it does not go very far. It does not define freedom sufficiently, for there are some things which, as Paul says, are not beneficial or which can dominate. I am free to do anything but certain things detract from or destroy my freedom, and consequently I am no longer free. (Such an idea is expressed in a slightly different way earlier in the letter, in 1 Cor. 3:21–23, the text of a memorable sermon by Paul Tillich: "For all things are yours . . . all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.")

Such a point is underscored by the Greek wordplay between freedom (*exousia*) and being enslaved (*exousiasthesomai*) in 6:12. This ambiguity may imply two different meanings, as we will see: that "sexual freedom" is not really freedom, contrary to what the Corinthians may say, or that "freedom" itself may be that which masters us, enslaving us with spiritual arrogance.

Certain Christians in Corinth had apparently considered sexual relations with a prostitute to be a private matter which was not related
to Christian spirituality or community. "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," said the Corinthians, which is a different way of saying that anything having to do with the body, such as its hunger for nourishment (and, by the way, its hunger for sexual gratification) has nothing to do with spiritual matters. Thus sexual intercourse was merely a physical act without spiritual or moral consequences. (Worded so, the Corinthians' argument sounds sadly contemporary!)

The Greek-speaking world had various opinions concerning the body. Some at Corinth believed that the soul and the body were sufficiently separate that the actions of the body were irrelevant to the state of the soul. But Paul countered with a view of the unity of the self. The Corinthians argued that one simply has a body; Paul asserted, on the other hand, that one is a body. The soul and the body are inseparable aspects of one person, and if you give the body all it craves, you may hurt the soul. This is especially true in the matter of sexual intercourse with a prostitute. "Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself" (v. 18).

The integrity of the human personality is not the end of the story, of course. Although food and the stomach may be interrelated, "God will destroy both one and the other" (v. 13). If one separates the physical and spiritual, one does violence to one's own bodily nature and most importantly forgets that God is Lord and creator of both body and soul. One is not self-determinate simply because one is free from the demands of the law. Paul uses several metaphors and phrases: that "the body is not meant for fornication, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (v. 13); that "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you" (v. 14); that "we are members of Christ" as we are members of our spouses (v. 15); that "you are not your own; you were bought with a price" (v. 20). A slave in ancient society paid his ransom to the temple of the god and was therefore obligated to the god. In like manner, the Christian (who paid nothing for his or her ransom from sin) was obligated to devote himself or herself entirely to Christ.

But there is still another way of looking at this issue. In the Corinthians' antinomian theology personal morality was seen as having no consequence for social relations, either. As Paul will argue in chapters 8–10, this is totally incorrect; one needs a mature attitude in social relations as well as in one's sexual morality. "Freedom is not to be for self but for others."12

Freedom comes through entire service to Christ which is directed both toward God and others. God gives us freedom, but freedom can
be forfeited if one becomes a servant of something else. In this case, one directs service to Christ through avoidance of sexual immorality, and one directs Christ-like service to others by abstaining from that which might be unhelpful to another believer. By showing such consideration for others, we find ourselves truly liberated.

January 26, 1997: The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
1 Cor. 7:29–31
Jonah 3:1–15
Psalm 62:5–12
Mark 1:1–14

"The One Essential Relationship"

This short passage belongs to a larger train of thought found in 7:25–35, Paul’s advice to the unmarried (specifically to virgins), which in turn is part of a yet larger section, 7:12–40, which comprises Paul’s opinions ("I and not the Lord") concerning the preferred constancy of one’s singleness in light of the shortness of the times.

Here, Paul indicates that “the appointed time has grown short... the present form of this world is passing away.” Fee suggests that, although time could mean the limited duration of our lives, especially in anticipation of Christ’s imminent return, it could also mean the time of Christ and the Spirit, which has already begun and which hastens toward consummation (1 Cor. 4:1–5). Complete devotion to Christ, then, is necessary in this time when the hour of deliverance approaches. In this time “of impending crisis” (v. 26) Paul prefers that the unmarried stay unmarried.

Paul concedes that he has no command of the Lord, but he believes his own opinion to be trustworthy. His views, his convictions about the nearing end of the world were, of course, proven wrong in the light of history. But Paul’s ultimate point is that marriage is not the most significant relationship. No earthly relationship is—only one’s relationship with God. Thus, when the world appears to be so close to its end, one should concentrate all the more upon eternity rather than allow oneself to be distracted by other relationships.

It should be made clear that Paul’s opinions about marriage do not arise from a divisive spirit. He does not hate the world or reject it—as do his opponents who believe the body is irrelevant to the soul. His counsel on marriage is not based on a hatred of relationships which
entail the physical body, the emotions, etc. His point is that life in God's spirit has priority over all worldly relationships.

One might note, with chagrin, that Paul's thoughts on marriage seem lacking in any sense that mutual love, even in the distress of the age, might be a means for Christians to show greater devotion to God. In this passage, marriage seems to be reduced to a distraction only. Paul seems especially conscious that his opinion reflects the circumstances of his own life. But his point stands: relationship with God rather than earthly circumstances determines our existence.

Pastorally, Paul wants the people at Corinth, whether married or single, to have no anxieties (vv. 32-35). Whether one is anxious about the Lord or about one's spouse—one should not be anxious! Rather, one should live constantly before the Lord in joy and trust. If a Christian has his or her eyes set on things eternal, there may still be anxiety, but it is tempered by the hope for the consummation of God's plan in the fullness of time.

Paul writes that "from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it" (vv. 29-31a). Fee also suggests that the five "as if not" clauses are rhetorical (rather than worldly aloofness or escapism), because they contradict what he says about marriage in 7:2-6 and harmonious relations in Rom. 12:15. They are rhetorical to indicate that one lives in the world—in whatever manner one does live in the world—knowing that none of these things is determinative of one's existence. Christ is, instead of either marriage or celibacy.14

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February 2, 1997: The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
1 Cor. 8:1-13

Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
Mark 1:21-28

"The Christian Art of Self-Sacrifice"

Since Groundhog Day has no liturgical significance, we will only wish for spring's hasty arrival and press on to our final Epiphany scripture!

This passage is also part of a larger section, chapters 8 through 10, which considers the related problems of 1) whether to eat food offered...
to idols, and 2) whether to surrender for the sake of others the rights one has gained through the attainment of superior religious insight ("knowledge").

As to food offered to idols, cultic meals were certainly a widespread, accepted practice throughout the ancient world, including in Israel itself (Deut. 14:22-26). One commentator describes the Corinthian situation well:

*When a Christian bought meat at the marketplace, he did not know whether it had been sacrificed to some pagan god. Also people often gave banquets in their homes with some of the meat left over from their sacrifices. Weddings and family festivals were often the occasion for such meals in private homes. Sometimes, banquets were held in the local temples of the gods and were associated with the worship of the god in whose temple the banquet was being held. Christians in Corinth were invited to attend those banquets. They pose the question with Paul: Should we accept an invitation to dinner in private homes or in local temples when meat will be served which has been sacrificed to idols?*  

Another commentator puts the issue in slightly different words:

*In the Corinth of Paul's time, such meals were still the regular practice both at state festivals and private celebrations of various kinds... the gods were thought to be present since the meals were held in their honor and sacrifices were made; nonetheless, they were also intensely social occasions for the participants. For the most part the Gentiles who had become believers in Corinth had probably attended such meals all their lives; this was the basic "restaurant" in antiquity, and every kind of occasion was celebrated in this fashion.*

A Corinthian Christian who enjoys the social occasion of such a meal would maintain that there was no violation of Christian teachings, because idols (or more properly the gods they represent) do not exist (v. 4). A sophisticated, monotheistic Corinthian Christian knew "there is no God but one" (v. 4, from Deut. 6:4), and therefore he or she did not dishonor the God of our Lord Jesus Christ by eating idol food. Because the god had no spiritual value, the food devoted to that deity...
was likewise without any spiritual value. If some other Christian became upset at the eating of such food, he or she simply needed to work harder at understanding this truth—to "grow up," as it were. Paul worried, though, at the implicit arrogance of this practice of eating idol food in disregard of more sensitive Christians.

In v. 1, Paul quotes a Corinthian slogan, "All of us possess knowledge." (He quotes it with irony, since not all Corinthians do possess knowledge.) Earlier in the letter, in 4:6–13, he wrote fairly sarcastically to the Corinthians who, failing to temper their knowledge with love, were "puffed up in favor of one against another." As with other spiritual blessings, knowledge is a gift of God rather than an achievement: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge, but anyone who loves God is known by him (8:1b–3). To put it another way: "Knowledge dwells on what it possesses. Love dwells on what it has to give. Knowledge puffs up the one who possesses it; love serves others who need it. Knowledge is private; love is social. Knowledge inflates; love builds."17

The Corinthians who thought in a superior fashion believed it was their right to eat food which had been offered to idols, since they understood the situation correctly. Unlike the issue of sexual relationships, Paul agrees with the Corinthians who believe the cultic food has no spiritual value. It is spiritually irrelevant (v. 8). True, "there are many gods and many lords" (v. 5). By this Paul refers not to any objective reality to the Greek deities. (He does believe in the existence of demons, however, and does not want the Corinthians unwittingly to flirt with demon worship [10:19–22].) But in vv. 7–13 Paul argues that some people’s consciences are still sensitive about cultic food; for them the gods exist, at least subjectively. For such persons sensitivity is required, because their faith has not yet developed to the extent that they have put gods entirely aside. For them, eating food offered to idols is a detrimental thing, even though, to a mature Christian, eating or not eating such food is irrelevant.

The weak conscience of the Corinthians, therefore, arises not from moral latitude but from insufficient understanding. There is, of course, a difference between one’s conscience and the inner presence of the Holy Spirit. But sometimes it is difficult to discern between the prompting of the Spirit and the prompting of one’s conscience. Many of us have acted according to our inner “voice,” only to discover later that it was not the Spirit after all. Many of us have misunderstood the
Spirit’s “voice” within. Discernment is part of one’s growth as a Christian, learning to live in closer and closer touch with God’s guidance. Often we discover our own insufficient understanding via the difficult outcomes of our choices. But this knowledge, too, is (or can be seen to be) a wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit!

Because growth in discernment is an important aspect of Christian growth, insensitivity to someone else’s understanding of faith may be sinful. Insensitivity, sinful in itself, may also have a sinful outcome: the fall of the Christian with a weaker conscience. Paul tries to warn against this insensitivity vis-à-vis those Corinthians who believe that eating food offered to idols is of no consequence. A Christian has more social responsibility than that.

Several times Paul refers to the weaker Christians in familial terms—as “brethren” in the older translations. For all the certainty which we often ascribe to Paul, he clearly takes the side of the weaker folk, the less certain. He agrees with the stronger Christians on the irrelevance of idol food (vv. 7–8), but he disagrees that their superior knowledge gives them the freedom (their God-given exousia) to assert their rights over those whose faith is tender.

Interestingly, Paul does not cite the “apostolic decree” of Acts 15, that Gentiles converted to Christianity need not be circumcised but “abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (v. 21). “Is the decree without validity in Greece? Or does Paul prefer to answer the question by appealing to the inner constraint of love rather than the outward command of a decree?”

I struggle with this last passage from Corinthians. I agree with its basic principle, of course, but how does this apply to one’s theological perspective? For example, where does one draw the line between honoring another person’s scruples and acquiescing to their less mature view of things? Christians who have fully absorbed the gospel of justification by faith might find themselves unable to challenge a works-oriented model of salvation. (Again I think of my old relatives, who loved to bicker about modes of baptism and to define Christianity as the avoidance of certain “don’ts.”) I’m also thinking of weaker Christians who might exert passive social control in a situation or whose scruples are actually neuroses which simply grow more entrenched when others capitulate to them. (Such matters arise in pastoral counseling situations. But they also arise in everyday parish matters; for instance, when a parishioner feels her or his faith to be
seriously hurt by a change in altar furniture or in Sunday music. Deference to the weaker members can draw one into those “little” power struggles which vex congregations.)

I’m probably pushing the text beyond Paul’s original intention, which is to inspire stronger Christians not to do something which a weaker Christian would consider morally and spiritually problematic. But I’m also seeking to honor, through broad application, Paul’s desire for Christians to be sensitive to one another’s needs and growing faith. How can we be sensitive in this way? To answer this we must circle around to our starting point: churches can witness to a lonely world by striving to become communions of trust, discernment, accountability, growing faith, and a mature and loving responsibility for one another’s Christian walk. Such is not an easy task. But as our Ephesians lessons taught us, Christ has already accomplished all that is needed to make such communions possible!

Notes


5. Barth, Ephesians, 77.

6. Barth considers this topic in Church Dogmatics III/2; see Paul E. Stroble, The Social Ontology of Karl Barth (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1994).


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