The Resurrection of a Congregation
Joseph T. Reiff

Guns, Violence, and the Church
Dwight N. Hopkins

Welfare Reform in the 90s
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Introduction

Last June, President Clinton signed a bill that overhauls the current federal welfare system. HR 3734 gives much more control over the system to the states; it calls for "workfare"; and it sets a time limit on benefits. Although the plan had majority support in Congress, it was deeply influenced by conservative lawmakers. The opposition, though limited, was passionate. The day of the senate vote, about ten protesters blew whistles and called out, "Shame! Shame!" Senator Moynihan declared that basis for the bill was the "fearsome assumption" that the behavior of adults could be changed by making their children wretched. Even the legendary friendship between Hillary Rodham Clinton and Children's Defense Fund director Marion Wright Edelman has cooled over the issue. With the stroke of a pen, it seems that sixty years of welfare "as we know it" has ended.

Now the question is, can we really stand it? Do we have the stomach to witness more children going hungry? Can we feed the children but not their mothers? How much assistance is enough, and for how long? Are we right to be offended by the notion of entitlement? Should the safety net be removed in order to change, motivate or punish people? Should we deny services to noncitizen residents of this country? The current welfare overhaul actually raises these question; it does not resolve them.

So there is one more question: where we are? Too often clergy who find the courage to speak up on public policy issues find themselves labeled as hopeless idealists. It happened again not too long ago when the Catholic Archbishop of Milwaukee, Rembert Weakland, had the nerve to criticize Wisconsin's "W-2" or Wisconsin Works welfare plan as "morally unjustifiable." The governor of the state rose up to call the bishop an impractical meddler. So maybe we should just let this one slide. Who wants to be called names in public? We have problems of
our own. We do not have the years, we think, to devote to a losing battle on behalf of strangers.

And yet we preach and believe that in Christ our work toward the good is the sacrifice of our own lives; and that because of Christ resurrections do occur. The central contents of this issue revolve around social questions of poverty. Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore opens the discussion with a look at the historical situation in Wesley’s time, and the spiritual locus of our response to the poor. Dwight Hopkins sketches the chilling economic realities of most African Americans, and the role of Christian congregations in offering hope and new life. Jess Hale invites our participation in the welfare debate directly by providing a background document for our use. These three papers would make an outstanding foundation for a discussion group on Christian ethics.

The core is framed by three carefully chosen articles. The first is a story of congregational resurrection by Joseph Reiff, which will inspire and encourage those of us in ministry in the city. The second is Robert Kysar’s intellectual biography of an outstanding scholar of the Gospel of John and, subtly, the testimony of a life of faithful service to the Gospel deserving our greatest respect and gratitude. Richard Frazier writes on the symbols of these two paths to service—action and intellect—in a seasonal reflection on shepherd and wise men. We conclude with Joseph Webb’s challenging scripture study on John, which has the power to launch our preaching on familiar texts into the unknown world of the twenty-first century.

Have a blessed Advent. May you find the space, like Mary, to ponder these things in your heart!

Sharon Hels
In 1990, St. Paul United Methodist Church in Atlanta received twelve members by profession of faith (including eight young adolescent confirmands), marking the first year since 1969 that the congregation had received anywhere near that many professions of faith and the first year since 1968 that professions of faith had outnumbered deaths. Older St. Paul members say that in 1984, a good crowd at Sunday worship (in a 600-seat sanctuary) was 35 people, with only a handful under the age of 60. Between 1985 and 1990, average worship attendance grew to 115, due to the influx of 120 baby boomers and 70 children, and the congregation was transformed from a dying, all-white senior citizens' church to a much younger interracial church.

The story of this remarkable change begins in the nineteenth century and contains many similarities to the stories of hundreds of urban mainline Protestant congregations: rapid initial growth followed by a long and inexorable membership decline, societal upheaval beginning in the Depression and accelerated by postwar suburban proliferation, racial and economic transition in the neighborhood, civil rights ferment in the 1960s, and the coming-of-age of the Baby Boom generation with its tenuous relationship to the institutional church.
The St. Paul story has some fascinating “plot twists”—some characteristically Southern, some characteristically United Methodist, and others that could occur in any Christian congregation.3

Beginnings: Siege, Fire, Resurrection

In 1858, Lemuel Pratt Grant built a two-story house one mile southeast of the center of Atlanta on the 600 acres of land he had acquired. He was commissioned in 1863 by the Confederate Army to fortify Atlanta against the inevitable attack of General Sherman, and the completed fortification included his estate. In 1864, Sherman burned the city after a siege. The Cyclorama painting housed in present-day Grant Park depicts this battle.4

The city of Atlanta rebuilt out of the ashes after the war, adopting the phoenix as its symbol and Resurgens (“rising again”) as its motto. On Easter Sunday, 1867, Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, South, sponsored a mission Sunday school, which resulted in the formation of a new Sunday school and eventually a new congregation called St. Paul. This congregation built its first building in 1870 on Hunter Street (now Martin Luther King Drive), just west of Hill Street. The congregation grew to 802 members by 1901 and sought another location in the new residential area just to the southeast. L. P. Grant donated land east of his home for Grant Park in 1883, and after his 1893 death his estate became the Grant Park neighborhood. St. Paul Church bought property directly across the street from the Grant home on the western edge of the neighborhood. After a “great protracted meeting” under a tent in April 1906, ground was broken for the stone sanctuary building in August, and the first service was held in October 1907.5 One of the central features of the sanctuary then and now is the “Resurrection window,” a large stained-glass work that dominates the south wall, depicting the three women at the empty tomb on Easter morning.

The new location spurred remarkable membership growth at St. Paul. Already at 1,200 members in 1907, by the time the 1909 North Georgia Annual Conference met at St. Paul the congregation’s membership of 1,776 made it the largest in the Conference. In 1911 and 1912, St. Paul was the largest congregation in the entire M. E. Church, South, with 2,103 and 2,276 members. The membership reached its numerical peak of 2,345 in 1921.6 Because of this rapid
growth, space was a problem, and in the late 1920s a three-story brick Sunday school building was erected directly behind the sanctuary and connected to it by a hall passageway. At the Homecoming Service in 1989, a former member recalled:

*The Sunday school building was completed two or three years before the Stock Market crash, and before long we had trouble meeting the mortgage payments. In desperation, my father, who was the Sunday school superintendent, made an appointment with the loan officer at the bank. The banker didn’t want to renegotiate the mortgage, so my daddy tossed a big bundle of brass keys on his desk and said, “Well, here, you’ve got yourself a stone church with a new Sunday school building.” The banker renegotiated the loan.*

At its peak St. Paul was a white middle- and upper-middle-class congregation, with most of the members coming from the western half of the Grant Park neighborhood. It remained the largest church in the Conference until 1927. Prominent Atlantans were among its members, including a superintendent of the Atlanta schools, a bank president, and a longtime state commissioner of labor, who remained a member until his death in 1987.

**Besieged Again**

Beginning in the 1930s, several societal and global changes affected the Grant Park neighborhood and St. Paul. During the Depression many of the large houses were divided into apartments or served as boarding houses. Grant Park had gradually slipped from the position it held as one of Atlanta’s choice neighborhoods. Some of the older St. Paul members interviewed in 1990 had moved into Grant Park with their families in the 1930s and 1940s from surrounding rural areas, living first in apartments or with relatives. After World War II, suburbs sprang up around Atlanta, and many St. Paul members moved and eventually joined new suburban churches.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Interstate 20 cut the neighborhood in two just two blocks north of St. Paul; Interstate 75/85 was built less than a mile west of St. Paul; and Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium was built just east of I-75/85. African-Americans who had
lived west of Capitol Avenue (a north-south thoroughfare next to the stadium—the former racial residential dividing line) were pushed east into Grant Park. One St. Paul member recalls that “the first black family moved [east] across Capitol Avenue on Labor Day, 1960.”

White exodus from the neighborhood continued. The housing stock deteriorated, and a few years later there were rumors of massive redevelopment in the area. St. Paul members recall the word being spread that houses bought for such redevelopment (high rises, etc.) would bring a flat rate per square foot, regardless of the house’s condition. To many it seemed pointless to spend money and energy maintaining their property. By 1970 Grant Park had hit bottom. “This was a neighborhood of sinking ships,” one church member says.

The demise of the neighborhood took an emotional toll and generated a great deal of conflict, some of which, in the view of one St. Paul member, centered on Grant Park as a symbol of the Confederate “Lost Cause,” since L. P. Grant had lived there and the Cyclorama was housed in the park. In his view, by the late 1960s “this was a decrepit old Confederate memorial neighborhood that had been abandoned.”

Many whites who stayed in the neighborhood felt besieged. A climate of suspicion and fear was reinforced by reports of city housing inspectors indiscriminately citing homeowners for violations. One of the newer baby boomer St. Paul members says that when she moved into the neighborhood in 1975, she found terrified older white residents: “In many cases there was a siege mentality. Our next door neighbor was a perfect example. She would spend the whole night with a gun next to her, sitting up the whole night watching, listening. And I don’t think she was atypical.”

By 1977, the L. P. Grant home across the street from St. Paul was dilapidated and roofless as the result of vandalism and two fires. The owner, Mr. Boyd Taylor, hoped to restore the house and had waged a 37-year battle with the city over a property tax exemption he desired. A news article describes the battle between the city, which sought to force the owner to make the house weathertight or see it condemned, and Taylor, who sued in federal court, claiming the city and banks were engaged in a “malicious scheme to victimize poor homeowners of the neighborhood by using threats and blackmail.” Taylor had moved into the house in 1968 to protect it from intruders and guarded it with “a chain-link fence, a sliding gate with several locks, five German shepherds,” and his own nightly patrols with a shotgun.
St. Paul Church was naturally affected by the changes and mood in Grant Park, and its membership growth and decline mirrors the rise and fall of the neighborhood. Both were at their peak in the early 1920s. By 1932, church membership had fallen below 2,000; by 1940, it was down to 1,400. During the war there was a slight growth spurt, reaching almost 1,600 again by 1945. But steady decline then resumed: 1,200 members in 1950, fewer than 800 in 1960, 500 in 1970, 350 in 1980, and 176 in 1985. In the 1950s and 1960s, though total membership declined, new members continued to join the church (e.g., 51 in 1957 and 46 in 1965). But in the 15 years between 1970 and 1984, only an average of 5 persons joined per year, and in four of those years none joined.

Membership losses were phenomenal. Between 1945 and 1985, transfers to other churches totaled just under 1,000, over 1,000 names of members long inactive were removed from the rolls, and there were 542 deaths. During a four-year period in the late 1950s, viewed by many of the older members as the last gasp of the "old St. Paul," just over 100 members died. St. Paul had become an aged congregation. A choir photograph taken in the mid-1960s shows 11 youth and 17 children. But in another ten years there were virtually none.

According to older St. Paul members, conflict surrounded the tenure of the two pastors who served between 1960 and 1965, including arguments in Official Board meetings and at least one public confrontation over racial issues. In early 1964, St. Paul's pastor took out an advertisement four times larger than the church's usual entry on the Saturday newspaper church page to inform the public of his Sunday morning sermon title, "What Jesus Did Not Say about the Race Question." The ad read, in part:

This pastor's position is the same as was his Church's position when he became one of her Ministers, and the same as the Constitutional Law of the Methodist Church in February, 1964. America, Georgia and ATLANTA better wake up lest we go down the same road that India, Egypt and other countries whose amalgamation of the white and black races led to a decadent society. [sic] If your blood is red and your skin is white, YOU had better begin to think about your child of the fourth generation. Don't fail to hear this timely message.

THE RESURRECTION OF A CONGREGATION
Part of the sermon’s “timeliness” was the impending showdown at the 1964 General Conference over racial segregation in the denomination, along with various attempts to integrate all-white worship services around the South.

It is unclear whether this ad represented the views of most St. Paul members at the time, but it did draw a response in front of the church on that Sunday morning from about a half-dozen people (mostly Emory University students) who carried placards and handed out copies of the Methodist Social Creed and a recent statement from the Council of Bishops in an effort to refute the ad’s implication that segregation was the official Methodist position. One participant says the pastor and some ushers tried to take the placards away, resulting in heated exchanges of words. A Korean theology student took photographs of the incident, and after someone unsuccessfully tried to get the camera away from him, the demonstration broke up.

It was becoming clear by the late 1960s that the church was declining. When a new pastor arrived in 1965, one member says, “If we didn’t have 175 in church, he would have a meeting and tell us we had to go out and beat the bushes and get people back to church.” But by then St. Paul was no longer a neighborhood congregation. A study of old membership directories shows that almost all members had lived in the neighborhood up till 1945, but that soon changed. By 1973, 64 percent (242) of the 377 listed on the membership roll lived outside the Grant Park area.

By the early 1970s the neighborhood had become an alien entity to St. Paul Church, which also felt besieged by a changed neighborhood and world. In 1990, one older member who had not lived in Grant Park for years said this about the situation in the early 1970s:

I’ll tell you one thing about St. Paul—it just got to where it was so dirty and mean over in that part of the country till nobody would go visit. You’ve got to visit if you want people in the church. They couldn’t do it because they didn’t have nobody to go, and you’d have to have two or three guards to go with you if you did go. That’s what [a former member] told me. He said you’d get killed if you’d go visit.

The “Urban Pioneer Spirit”

A younger St. Paul member describes 1970s Grant Park:
Slowly, new immigrants began moving into the neighborhood. It started in 1973. The folks who moved in were potentially upwardly mobile yuppies; no, not really yuppies—more social service-oriented, artistic kind of folks who really liked the architecture or else were really caught up in the group dream of Dr. King and were willing to live in a neighborhood surrounded by a black population. And that was a pretty sparing crowd; there weren't an awful lot of young folks who wanted to be in that crowd.

Most of the baby boomers who joined St. Paul in the late 1980s were among these “new immigrants” and had moved to Grant Park in the 1970s or 1980s. When asked in 1990 why they had done so, many common themes emerged. Money was crucial. They wanted to buy a house, couldn't afford much, and were willing to live in an inner-city neighborhood. Some disavowed any high ideals; others spoke of community and diversity. Some landed in Grant Park by process of elimination; others deliberately chose the neighborhood because it fit who they perceived themselves to be. The houses needed lots of work, and most of these “urban pioneers did their own renovations. There were hints of rebellion and a rejection of the suburban life most of their parents had chosen.

These newcomers had the “urban pioneer spirit,” pithily defined by one St. Paul member as, “Come live in it and eat dust.” Though life in 1970s Grant Park had its problems, the neighborhood began a slow renewal process. These idealistic baby boomers believed they were creating something unusual. A few were involved in a church group that met in the basement of a dying neighborhood Presbyterian congregation’s building in the late 1970s, but most had no interest in church and perceived the neighborhood churches to be out of touch with and unresponsive to the new community they were fashioning.

**Little Children Shall Lead Them**

By the late 1970s these urban pioneers began having children, and their needs expanded from concerns with housing rehab money and neighborhood quality of life to child care. Some parents started a child-care cooperative in 1980, and they approached St. Paul about using space for their group, the Grant Park Cooperative Learning
Center, since the church had a huge plant with many unused rooms. Learning Center parents renovated a large room in the basement of the sanctuary building and began using it in October 1980. They soon outgrew that space and proposed using the entire ground floor of the education building, entailing the displacement of the Wesleyan Sunday school class, the most active remaining class, which had met on that floor for 40 years. This caused conflict in the church. Wesleyan class members felt that the pastor and some church leaders ignored their feelings and failed to explain clearly the reasons for the move. Finally, the idea was approved, and the Wesleyan Class moved to the basement of the sanctuary building in 1982.

A Learning Center parent who eventually joined the church remembers the conflict this way:

I think people in the Wesleyan Class were very bitter at the time. That had been their home. The pictures of Jesus on the wall, etc., had really become icons. And having gone through the education building burning [in 1985], I think I can tap into that emotion now, having a space that you feel very attached to and losing it. Having to lose it for a political reason must have been a bitter experience. The Learning Center was consumed with the demand for growth and deaf to the Wesleyan Class's concerns. Built in all that is probably a generational conflict: people from my generation have serious problems with our parents' generation.

During the controversy there was a meeting between class members and a pro-Learning Center group consisting of the pastor and four other church members. A class leader who originally opposed the Learning Center recalls it:

I said, "Now listen, I know that you don't want to give up the room. I don't want to give up the room. But let's stop and think about what is the Christian thing to do. Is the Christian thing to do to have a squabble here? If they want to turn this into a Learning Center, and if they've got to have this room," and because of the fire code, they did. I said, "the Christian thing to do is to let 'em have the room, and we'll see about this room over here." Now I think our class is wholeheartedly in favor of the Learning Center, because it has helped the church.
A few Learning Center parents visited worship at St. Paul, but only one joined before 1985. They did not feel unwelcome, but the pastor was near retirement, and to the young adults the gap between their own worldview and values and those of the pastor and church members seemed too great.

"Shepherd Boy David"

In June 1985, Lee Ramsey and Mary Leslie Dawson-Ramsey arrived at St. Paul. He was appointed as pastor, moving from an Hispanic congregation in midtown Atlanta. A diaconal minister with experience in the inner city, she had bought a house in Grant Park in 1983 in which they both had lived since their 1984 marriage. On their first Sunday Lee was presented in the worship service by Ben Tillman Huet, Sr. "Mr. Ben," named for the 19th-century southern politician "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, had retired from a long career of public service as Atlanta alderman and Georgia Commissioner of Labor. At age 90, Huet remained a dynamic orator. When he introduced Lee, who is about five feet, seven inches tall and was nearing his 29th birthday, Mr. Ben called him "Shepherd Boy David" and said, "He's gonna lead us."

Ramsey made immediate changes in worship at St. Paul, radically altering the order of the service, using inclusive language, and discontinuing the weekly congregational tradition of turning toward the American flag and singing a stanza of "America" after the Doxology during the presentation of the offering. The changes caused some friction (one important lay leader left the church); but the transition was fairly smooth, because church members, though surprised they had been assigned such a young pastor, were inspired by his (and his wife's) enthusiasm and energy. For Lee, the reason for the changes was simple. Believing St. Paul had the potential to reach Learning Center members and other baby boomers in Grant Park, he wanted the worship to be in language that potential newcomers could understand.

Young adults did begin attending (and some joining) the church. Most were Learning Center parents and friends, along with a few new folks from outside the neighborhood who knew Lee and Mary Leslie and had been looking for a church to which they could commit themselves. The church had a Vacation Bible School in August 1985,
though there were few children in the church and there had been no VBS for years. Some parents who eventually joined recall getting a phone call from a Learning Center parent who had already joined the church, inviting them to bring their children to VBS and giving an added push: "Remember, you said if they got a young minister, you'd give it a try."

The Bible school drew 20 to 25 children. The next Sunday the children presented a program during worship. While they rehearsed during Sunday school, parents were invited to meet for discussion. The next Sunday, three new Sunday school classes began—children's classes for readers and nonreaders (the oldest child was 8) and the young adult Discussion Class, led by Lee and Mary Leslie. The surprised older members welcomed the newcomers. One parent remembers that on the first Sunday her family attended, her small child cried during part of the service. An older member told her afterwards, "It's wonderful to hear a baby crying in this church again. It's been so long."

Fire Again

Early Saturday, October 19, 1985, the three-story education building burned down. The fire department fought the blaze for hours, successfully preventing its spread to the sanctuary building. The next morning at worship, a large contingent of Learning Center parents was present. In announcing that the building would be rebuilt, Lee Ramsey said, "I hope that comes as a word of promise and challenge to each of you who are involved with the Learning Center and to those of you who are involved with the church, that we pull together, work together, and rebuild the kind of building we need to serve this community and to be actively involved with ministry in the Grant Park neighborhood." In a television news interview, Ramsey stated the hope that the fire would "bring some of the people together who have been interested in the church but haven't yet been able to express that interest concretely."

Cleanup began that afternoon, with Learning Center parents helping. The Learning Center was housed at another church for the next two years until the new building opened. Mary Leslie Dawson-Ramsey remembers the aftermath of the fire:
The next day we had worship, and most of the Learning Center was there. At Children's Time we sang “We Are the Church,” you know, “we are not a building.” I was in tears all day. There was never any thought that we wouldn't build back. The next weekend we cleaned out [the burned building], and the older members brought food, and all the younger people were there. It was really a community-building project. It solidified people.

For more than a year after the fire, St. Paul members went through a process of grieving, adjusting, planning, discussing the congregation's future, and fund-raising. Between the insurance settlement and contributions from present and former members, the church had to borrow only 15 percent of the $1.1 million cost of the new three-story education building.

Resurrection Again: Urban Pioneer Spirit Meets Holy Spirit

After the fire, more young adults trickled into the church. Of the 76 persons (43 adults, 33 children) who became involved at St. Paul during the first year of Lee Ramsey's tenure, 80 percent lived in the neighborhood, and almost two-thirds were involved with the Learning Center. Almost two-thirds of the newcomers had not been actively involved in any church for at least two years (usually much longer). About 25 percent of the new adults were either seminary trained or children of ordained ministers. This made an interesting combination: a large group of previously unchurched people, sprinkled with some persons for whom the church and ministry had been a central part of life and joined with a core of older adults who had been at St. Paul for years. There was a wide range of religious experience (or lack thereof) and belief; many were anti-institutional types, not “joiners.” A few claimed to be agnostic.

For the new members, it was like starting a new church but with a distinct advantage: a church already in place with a sanctuary, a rich history and tradition, and members who not only remembered and represented that past but also were hopeful for the future, even though they knew that St. Paul's future was less and less in their control. The church had declined to the point that most of the older members had
lost any illusions of recovering the “old St. Paul.” One younger member says:

The fire was heaven sent, no question about it. It was good for the church. Before the fire I got the sense from the older people that a new pastor meant excitement, hope for change, yet anxiety, too. The fire swept away the fear of change. There was no longer anything to fear. After the fire, they didn’t have the energy to rebuild by themselves, and they were glad to see others willing to do it.

In 1990, I asked older members for opinions on the changes that had taken place since 1985. Some had nothing negative to say at all; others were unhappy about a few things. But one clear message came through: St. Paul was their church, and they were there until death. They were willing to change when change had to come. When asked about the older members’ attitude, a younger member said, “You recognize that the premium concern you have is that ‘I love this, and if I have to change to continue to express that love, I’m going to struggle, but I’m going to do what I have to because I love it.’ It’s that kind of commitment that you find at St. Paul.”

What attracted these mostly unchurched, urban pioneer baby boomers to St. Paul, and why did they stay? The most common reasons were ties with the Learning Center; the charisma and leadership abilities of Lee and Mary Leslie and Lee’s preaching; the desire to involve their children in a faith community and the church’s location in Grant Park; the perceived atmosphere of inclusiveness and acceptance; and the presence of many persons of similar worldview, values, and experience; the feeling that this church was different, unusual, informal, and relaxed; and for several, a more direct sense of vocation, a call to be part of this community of faith. One urban pioneer offers this explanation:

When we came in, [the older members] let us take leadership roles. We are leaders. We are people who put ourselves on the line to buy old houses and fix them up, to change schools, to prevent the widening of expressways, to open preschool cooperatives, to open food cooperatives. We can’t in and have somebody tell us how it’s gonna be. because that’s not
gonna meet our needs. We need to be part of the decision-making process.

Many new members had worked together for years in the neighborhood and the Learning Center. St. Paul's willingness to house the Learning Center in 1980 meant that when those parents began attending and joining five or six years later, a pre-existing network of friends found a more established institutional form in which to relate, a church they saw as contributing to their vision of a new community in Grant Park by offering hospitality to the world around it. This is best symbolized by worship in the sanctuary during warm weather. To cool the huge un-air-conditioned room, windows are opened on the north and south walls, and window fans on the north side are turned on. Worship is punctuated by neighborhood sounds: a MARTA bus stopping at the corner, other light traffic noises, the brief report of a car alarm, or the whine of a power saw as a neighbor works on some Sunday renovation project.

Catechesis had to take place. The newcomers were dedicated and well-educated with a broad range of talents, but most were unschooled in the faith and "churchpersonship." Lee and Mary Leslie led some evening gatherings to allow newcomers to ask questions and air concerns about the Christian faith and church membership. Some took a year or more to join the church.

When we first talked to Lee about joining, it was a major decision for us, one we did not take lightly, and one we were not comfortable with. Lee kept using the word Christian, and I said, "That's a negative word to me. I don't understand what it means. People who are Christians, why are they different?"

As more newcomers joined, the mantle of leadership gradually passed from the older members to the younger. This was symbolized most directly when the man who had chaired the administrative board for many years insisted at an early 1987 meeting that a vice-chair be elected. A younger member was elected and then presided at the next meeting, because the chairman had died.

After the new education building opened in October 1987, Lee Ramsey wrote in a letter to the congregation:
While we at St. Paul have spent the better part of the last two years constructing a building, God has been among us in Spirit building a church. "We," as one of my favorite children's songs joyfully proclaims, "are the church together." As the church, a unified body of believers, we are much more than a building. We are music and prayers, children's laughter and warm meals delivered to each other's homes, hospital visits, Sunday school classes, Easter egg hunts, food for the hungry, hope for the broken-spirited. We are "the dwelling of God in the Spirit."

Approximately 60 new adults had joined the church, including the first African-American member, the husband and father of an interracial family who lived across the street from three older women who were longtime St. Paul members. When this family moved in, their St. Paul neighbors came over to welcome them to the neighborhood and invite them to church. They began visiting in 1986, and the husband designed the logo for the new building fund-raising campaign. When this couple joined the church and their daughter was baptized, the three women who first invited them to church proudly stood at the altar as sponsors. St. Paul is still predominately a white church, but several other interracial families and African-Americans have joined. Since 1988 a senior citizens' center organized by the church and housed in the new building has brought together an average of 30 people (half of them African-American, and several others longtime St. Paul members) two days a week.

The development of St. Paul Church since 1985 can be understood as a process of institutionalization. In 1986-87, the temporary arrangements; a still forming community of mostly Grant Park urban pioneers supported by the dwindling nucleus of older members; a strong sense of shared rebuilding tasks (and the new building as symbol of Grant Park revitalization); and the novelty for many newcomers of commitment to a congregation that was different from their stereotypical images of "church"—all combined to create an experience of charismatic intensity that began to fade once the new building opened. A few who were active at first withdrew as institutionalization—a completed building, expanding committee structure, larger budgets, and more new members—became a reality. As time has passed, the church has attracted more persons who are a bit more traditionally "churched" and take less time to join.
St. Paul has continued to change. As the children grew older, a youth group formed, and the oldest youth were off to college in 1995. Lee Ramsey and Mary Leslie Dawson-Ramsey (hired by the church as part-time program minister in 1986) took a six-month study leave in 1991. A complete renovation of the sanctuary, needed yet delayed for years, was finished in 1994, just before Lee and Mary Leslie left and a new pastor arrived.16

Conclusion

The St. Paul story seems cyclical, with its pattern of birth out of ashes, growth, decline, and rebirth out of ashes. It parallels the Grant Park story in uncanny ways, lending insight into questions of the relationship of church to world that are as old as Christianity. Themes of fear, change, alienation, racism, death, and loss are tempered by courage, rebirth and growth, heroism, racial reconciliation, and faith. Most importantly, it responds to a current question: Does the United Methodist Church have anything to offer-baby-boomer and subsequent generations who are suspicious of traditional institutional expressions of Christian faith and community?

One of the biggest problems the new education building contractor faced was connecting the new building to the old. The architect designed an enclosed archway between the two to house the staircase and the elevator, with an entrance and glass all the way up, so the stairway is visible from the street. One church member describes the problem:

*It was a real mess, because there was nothing square about the old building. All of the steel columns in the staircase had to be cut off and fitted on site, compared to what had been designed in advance. When the staircase came in, nothing fit. They got the welders out there with blowtorches and started cutting off chunks and trying to slide it into place, putting chunks back in.*

Grant Park and St. Paul are both communities of contrast, fitful and complex marriages of old and new, both attempting to find new life. Somehow a community of faith that has viewed the Resurrection window each Sunday in worship since 1907 learned that realizing
Christ’s vision of God’s reign means being willing to die in order to live.

In 1989, Dr. Thomas Frank, a professor at Candler School of Theology and affiliate member at St. Paul, spoke in a sermon of Jesus pushing his disciples to see the vision of God’s future. He told a story about a naturalist telling his son in 1910 as they viewed Halley’s Comet, “If you live to be an old man, you’ll see it again. Remember. I will be gone, but you will see it. Promise to remember.” Then Dr. Frank said to the St. Paul congregation:

Sometimes when I’m here my mind wanders. What was this room like in 1907, 1920, 1940? I’ve seen pictures. I don’t know the people, but I know what their vision left behind. The Resurrection window, for instance—I’m not an art critic, I can’t draw, but I can still appreciate its beauty. The whole room, the arch details, the dogwood windows—it has a classical feel to it. It’s a nineteenth-century public room in the best sense of the word, where people could come together for music, readings, oratory. Now, pieces of plaster may fall on me, but that’s good—it wakes me up. If I just come here to give an hour to God out of my busy schedule, I need the plaster to fall on me.

The visions of past St. Paul members are saying to us, “I won’t be here, but you will see it.” What is our vision for the future, for the turn of the century? We wouldn’t do it the same way as our ancestors, but will we find the vision?

During a quiet moment in the Communion liturgy that followed, a door creaked somewhere in the sanctuary, and a younger member sitting near me whispered, “That’s the souls of old St. Paul members coming in for Communion.”

Notes


2. Among the 200 people who attended on Easter 1990 were 24 older adult members (over age 65), 82 young adult members (age 25–45), and 66 children (age 14


4. The information summarized here is drawn from the Atlanta Historical Society's personality file on L. P. Grant, which contains various documents.

5. The information on founding and early years comes from Brief History of St. Paul Methodist Church (mimeo, 1957) by Florence Little.

6. All membership statistics come from Journals of the North Georgia Conference, M. E. Church, South, for the appropriate years. Verification of the claim to the largest membership in the denomination comes from the Minutes of Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, John L. Kirby, ed. (Nashville: Publishing House of the M. E. Church, South) for the years 1911 and 1912 and preceding/succeeding years. St. Paul briefly eclipsed St. Louis's Centenary Church, but Centenary recovered its lead in 1913.


8. According to some older members, in the early 1960s the wife of an Official Board leader slapped the current pastor in the face during a hallway confrontation over a comment that she perceived as an insult to her husband.

9. Atlanta Constitution, 8 February, 1964, 7-A.

10. Two older members interviewed in 1990 claimed the pastor ran the ad without the knowledge or approval of church members, and several also claimed that St. Paul never had an official "closed door" policy and never had anyone arrested for trying to integrate the worship service.

11. This account is based on the recollections of the Reverend Robert N. Lynn, a participant, with some corroboration from Dr. Theodore Runyon, an Emory professor. In 1990, older St. Paul members had vague memories of the event. One said there was newspaper and TV coverage, but Reverend Lynn claims the media was not informed. I found no mention of the incident in Atlanta papers.

12. St. Paul Church is one mile south of Ebenezer Baptist Church.

13. I have traced this practice back as far as bulletins from the late 1960s, but it may have started earlier. As is often the case with congregational traditions, church members are not certain when it started.

14. "We Are the Church," Richard Avery and Donald Marsh (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1972): "The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people."

15. One person who has been consistently active since 1985, including service as Sunday school superintendent, did not officially join St. Paul until 1994, on the Sunday Lee Ramsey's impending departure was announced.

16. In order to preserve the public character of warm weather worship (and of St. Paul), the renovated sanctuary is still not air-conditioned.
How naive you were, Mr. Wesley! You deplored poverty and proclaimed the personal worth of every being before God. But what connection did you ever draw between the social conditions of poverty and the theology of God’s love for individual souls? What prevented you from seeing God’s preventing grace at work most profoundly through the poor, for the sake of the poor, and for the redemption of the whole world?

How naive you were, Mr. Wesley! You preached grace—prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying—but you preached depravity—total depravity—as if you thought grace could be sweet only if people were deplete of virtue.

What kind of world was yours, Mr. Wesley? What kind of world is ours? If grace goes behind us and before us, then how are we to understand poverty of body and depravity of soul?

We within the Methodist traditions claim with pride the concern of John and Charles Wesley for the poor, and we celebrate the popularity and significance of the early Methodist ministry among the poor. But the Wesleys’ sensitivity was not theirs alone, and their mission among the poor was shared by countless poets and activists. As a way of crossing the chasm into the Wesleys’ world of eighteenth-century England,

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we will ponder its poetry and literature, which is filled with the contrasts that so impressed the Wesleys.

A World of Evil and Ideals

The world of John and Charles Wesley was one in which the consciousness of evil sat alongside a confident and hopeful idealism. The Church of England retained its Article IX on original sin, but the doctrine did not receive abundant attention. The social ills of the poor in England and the reality of slavery and slave trade were visible to anyone who chose to see. These realities coexisted with a buoyant confidence in human abilities to resolve human problems. The colonial expansion was full of promise for the colonizing nations, such as Britain, and the opportunities for colonialists in the colonized nations seemed unlimited. At the same time, those same colonized nations were rebelling; the American colonies were building toward revolution, and the protests against slave trade were building in Africa.

Writing at the close of the seventeenth century was an author of plays and novels, Aphra Behn (1640-1689). John Wesley read Behn’s *Oronooko*, which was considered her best novel. Some have called it the first emancipation novel. Written in 1688 and read for well over a century, *Oronooko* centered on the “noble savage” theme that was common in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British literature. Aphra Behn glorified natural humanity in the person of Oronooko, a royal leader in Africa who was captured as a slave and sent to Surinam. For Behn, Oronooko (later called Caesar) represented “the truth and purity of the savage uncontaminated with the vices of Christian Europe.” 1 Oronooko himself pointed to the mockery of Christian virtues when asked by a white man in Surinam to surrender (after escaping and being found). Oronooko’s answer was that “there was no faith in the white men, or the gods they adored; who instructed them in principles so false, that honest men could not live amongst them; though no people professed so much, none performed so little ...” 2

Aphra Behn’s commentary in the book lauds the native people of Surinam as well:

*And these people represented to me an absolute idea of innocence, before man knew how to sin: And ’tis most evident*
and plain, that simple Nature is the most harmless, inoffensive
and virtuous mistress. It is she alone, if she were permitted,
that better instructs the world, than all the inventions of man:
religion would here but destroy that tranquillity they possess by
ignorance; and the laws would but teach them to know
offences, of which now they have no notion. 3

We can see in Aphra Behn's work a sharp contrast between nature and
culture, especially natural human life and Christian Europe's culture.
We can also see a sharp contrast between evil (especially the evil of
slavery) and ideals (especially the ideals represented in natural, native
peoples). The ideals of Christian Europe are themselves held suspect.

We can only guess the influence that the work of Behn and others
had on John Wesley, although the common ideal of the "noble savage"
in Wesley's world may have raised his own expectations of purity in
the native peoples of Georgia. A more profound influence on Wesley's
theology, however, may have been the mode of thinking in radical
contrasts. In Aphra Behn the most evident contrast is between the
purity of native peoples and the dissolve culture of Christian Europe.

A World of Social Critique and Hope

John Wesley was born into a world that was giving birth to the novel
as a form of literature. One early novelist was Daniel Defoe
(1660–1731), a later contemporary of Aphra Behn whose most
extensive writing began after Behn died. The overriding characteristic
of the novel as a literary form is its realism, its way of portraying the
details of life, including its seamy side and not just idealized and
universalized pictures. 4

Daniel Defoe used this artistic form to explore the plight of poverty
and the alternative to poverty in economic individualism. We see in
the main character in Moll Flanders, for example, a poor woman who
was very enterprising, seeking to make every bad situation (of which
there are many in her life) into an economic advantage. Moll's own
plight was the result of being at the bottom of the social scale, but her
mercantilism gave her the ability to adjust and survive. The book
reveals a world where social standards were tight and violations of
those standards were punished severely, where moral standards varied
with social class, where economic achievement was a value and

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indigence was a shame, and where economic individualism and colonialism were linked. According to the economic values of the day, Moll Flanders was better off stealing than begging. And because of the value given to economic individualism and colonialism, the "New World" became the way for Moll and many others to escape their plight and achieve economically.

A thorough analysis of early English novels would yield more fullness and complexity, but this glance at Moll Flanders reveals a world in which the problems of social stratification are felt, where novelists are beginning to describe some of the realities of oppression, and where the ideal of economic individualism is emerging as a value and solution to the problem of oppression. Again, we see a world where contrast is a mark of thinking, but one in which social critique is more complex and the poles of contrast more nuanced.

A World of Poverty and Affluence

One indisputable reality in John and Charles Wesley's world was poverty. Listen to the words of Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), poet, critic, moral essayist, and dictionary maker. He himself was born in poverty, and he was always sympathetic with the plight of the poor. His Tory political and religious beliefs were generally regarded as conservative, but he was strongly opposed to the Whig laissez faire beliefs. The following excerpt's drawn from Johnson's "London":

Has heaven reserv'd, in pity to the poor
No pathless waste, or undiscover'd shore;
No secret island in the boundless main?
No peaceful desert yet unclim'd by Spain?
Quick let us rise, the happy seats explore,
And bear oppression's insolence no more.

This mournful truth is ev'ry where confess'd,
SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESS'D:
But here more slow, where all are slaves to gold.
Where looks are merchandise, and smiles are sold. . .

Within the lines of this poem, Johnson conveys both the reality of poverty and the consequences of poverty in minimizing the personal worth of the poor. Further, he links greed and commercial practices
with the causes of poverty. He even alludes to slavery, making reference to "slaves to gold" and "smiles are sold," thus implying that the abusive practices of slavery (much critiqued in eighteenth-century Britain) were linked with other abuses. This social critique was aimed at the very world into which John and Charles Wesley were born and in which they lived.

The capacity to see beyond the superficial facade into realities of life for the poor was shared by George Crabbe (1754–1832), writing somewhat later than Johnson. Crabbe was an Anglican priest who was known for his realistic descriptions of the poor in East Anglia. He opened "Village Life—As It Is" with these words:

> grant indeed that fields and flocks have charms
> For him that grazes or for him that farms;
> But when amid such pleasing scenes I trace
> The poor laborious natives of the place,
> And see the mid-day sun, with fervid ray,
> On their bare heads and dewy temples play;
> While some, with feebler heads and fainter hearts,
> Deplore their fortune, yet sustain their parts;
> Then shall I dare these real ills to hide
> In tinsel trappings of poetic pride?

Again, readers are shown a stark contrast between the lives of the rich and the poor, the landowners and the laborers. And again, we are reminded that the "pleasing scenes" described "in tinsel trappings of poetic pride" were experienced differently by those who worked the land in "mid-day sun, with fervid ray." Crabbe was able to describe the world through two pairs of eyes at the same time, recognizing that the realities of the rich and the poor co-existed. And Crabbe would have known very well that they co-existed between the church as well as agriculture and commerce. Was such thinking in contrasts a hallmark of Wesleyan theology as well?

**A World Oppressive to Women and Privileging to Men**

More could be said of all the contrasts mentioned above, but other contrasts also rested uneasily on the eighteenth-century English consciousness. Women, too, were among those whose oppression...
came slowly to consciousness, represented in literature by such figures as Imoinda, the woman who pledged her love to Oronooko but lived with the double vulnerability of being a slave and a woman in Surinam, and Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders, who lived with economic, sexual, and social exploitation. At the same time, women with opportunity for education were beginning to speak with their own voices. Even this was an act of courage, however, for the social repercussions for women speaking were sometimes strong. For Aphra Behn, for example, life as an early woman playwright and novelist was a life on the margins of her society.

One such strong voice of the eighteenth century was Eliza Haywood, writer of romantic tales and primary originator and contributor to the *The Female Spectator*, a magazine written by and for women. For a few years, Haywood was married to a clergyman. When their marriage ended in separation, the following notice appeared in *The Post-Boy* in 1720:

*Whereas Elizabeth Haywood, Wife of the Reverend Mr. Valentine Haywood, eloped from him her Husband on Saturday the 26th of November last past, and went away without his Knowledge and Consent. This is to give Notice to all Persons in general, That if anyone shall trust her with Money or Goods, or if she shall contract Debts of any kind whatsoever, the said Mr. Haywood will not pay the same.*

Eliza Haywood was to become an outspoken voice for women, particularly through *The Female Spectator*, which was published between 1722 and 1746. The following selection was published in 1746, addressed to “Ladies”:

*The Mahometans, indeed, enslave their Women, but then they teach them to believe their Inferiority will extend to Eternity; but our Case is even worse than this, for while we live in a free Country, and are assured from our excellent Christian Principles that we are capable of those refined Pleasures which last to Immortality, our Minds, our better Parts, are wholly left uncultivated, and, like a rich Soil neglected, bring forth nothing but noxious Weeds. There is, undoubtedly, no Sexes in Souls, and we are as able to receive and practise the Impressions, not only of Virtue and Religion,*
but also of those Sciences which the Men engross to themselves, as they can be: -Surely our Bodies were not form'd by the great Creator out of the finest Mould, that our Souls might be neglected like the coarsest of the Clay.

As other authors quoted in this essay, Haywood critiqued Christianity for its failure to women, especially the failure of her Christian culture to encourage the full development of women. On the other hand, she saw Christianity as a potential source for another view—a view grounded in the Creator's care in forming our bodies of "the finest Mould" and the corresponding importance of cultivating the minds and souls of women to the fullest. This argument creates an additional allusion to slavery, paralleling a common eighteenth-century argument in regard to the treatment of slaves; that is, slaves have souls also.

In another vein, the author Fanny Burney (1752–1840) portrayed the way women were objectified in her world. Burney was an author of diaries, letters, and novels at a period of transition in women's literature from letters to novels. She is credited with influencing Jane Austen and other later women novelists. Her first novel was Evelina, and the selection below is Evelina's description of a ball she attended with her wealthy friends; it reflects a recurring theme in the book:

"The gentlemen, as they passed and repassed, looked as if they thought we were quite at their disposal, and only waiting for the honour of their commands; and they sauntered about, in a careless indolent manner, as if with a view to keep us in suspense."

This mocking of the arrogant, objectifying approach of men to women carries through the novel and is especially evident in the aggressive flirtations that Sir Clement makes to Evelina, against which she has no socially acceptable defense. Clearly a wider range of behavior was permitted to the gentlemen than to the ladies within this high-class society.

But the character who epitomizes the denigration of women is Captain Mirvan, who, among other things, considers women incapable of thought. In one encounter, someone else has asked the women what they think of opera. Evelina describes the interchange:

"We both, and with eagerness, declared that we had received as much, if not more pleasure, at the opera than any where: but"
we had better have been silent; for the Captain [Mirvan], quite displeased, said, “What signifies asking them girls? Do you think they know their own minds yet? .. As to them operas, I desire I may hear no more of their liking such nonsense; and for you, Moll,” to his daughter, “I charge you, as you value my favour, that you’ll never again be so impertinent as to have a taste of your own before my face. There are fools enough in the world, without your adding to their number.”

Throughout *Evelina* only Lord Orville is an exception to the perpetual belittling of the women, and even Orville was going to check into Evelina’s lineage and lower-class associates before requesting her hand in marriage. Where the gender discrimination was more quiet in his character, the social-class discrimination was still active.

And so we see a glimpse into the world of John and Charles Wesley, a world of contrasts: contrasts between evil and ideals, between social critique and hope, between the poor and the affluent, and between women and men. Not only were the contrasts real, but also the way of thinking about the contrasts was stark. In some literature, the contrasts were described so sharply that little ambiguity existed; therefore, the evil was fully evil and the good was fully good. In others, more ambiguity was portrayed, but alongside the social critique was the contrasting word of hope. What is particularly startling is the tendency to call attention to contrasts rather than to ignore them or to emphasize only one side of them. With this cultural world in the background, we now turn to John Wesley.

**John Wesley: A Theologian of Contrast**

One of the troubling features of Wesleyan theology for many women and people concerned with oppression is the way in which both John and Charles Wesley posed contrasts. Some of the issues are raised in the opening paragraphs of this essay, and some will be developed here; a fuller development is left for a longer work. The attention here is directed primarily to John Wesley, though some reference will be made to Charles because his work was also replete with contrast; and the work of the two brothers certainly intertwined. Three particular contrasts will be developed here: the contrast between the social critique of poverty and the emphasis on individual salvation, the
contrast between human depravity and prevenient grace, and the contrast between human dependence on God and human responsibility.

Social Critique and Individual Salvation. John and Charles Wesley were activists on behalf of the poor from their early days at Oxford. At the same time, also beginning at Oxford, the Wesleys emphasized personal piety and God's salvific work in the lives of individuals. Their distinctive way of uniting the two emphases was to proclaim the salvation of individuals as the work of God—God's affirmation of the personal worth of every being. This salvific work in individual lives not only transcended the boundaries of social class and spoke to the equal worth of every person but it also motivated people to engage in significant acts of service in their world. In other words, individual salvation was the source of social mission.

WHAT was not spoken in this Wesleyan view was the possibility of God's salvific work in the community and the society and the mission of Christians to act for the reform of the social structures themselves. To avoid being simplistic, we can note that John Wesley was courageous in writing tracts against slavery and letters to politicians on behalf of persons who had been mistreated by the structures, but he did not enter into full critique of those structures. In fact, as Richard Heitzenrater points out:

Wesley was an educated upper-class Oxford don who spent most of his life working among the poor and disadvantaged. This paradoxical life-style left its mark on the character of many of his activities. He was a champion of the poor, yet a defender of the political establishment that had caused many of their problems.12

Stephen Gunter has also reflected on the "paradoxical nature of many of Wesley's practices and teachings," noting that inconsistencies in Wesley can sometimes be attributed to context, but sometimes they "were at best dialectic" and other times they "were without question inconsistent."13

Many Wesleyan scholars have observed this Wesleyan characteristic of holding together contrasts, and no one has summarized it better than Heitzenrater:

Wesley embodied ideals and qualities not always easily held together or reconciled. Part of the enigma of Wesley is
characterized by the frequent portrayal of him in such guises as a "radical conservative," a "romantic realist," or a "quiet revolutionary." 14

What we see in the work of both John and Charles Wesley is a tendency to hold together contrasts but not necessarily to resolve all of the tensions that are present in those contrasts.

Because the tensions were not fully resolved regarding social critique and individual salvation, the early Methodists accent ed differing dimensions of that contrast. Elsa Tamez has pointed out that John Wesley can be, and has been, read from the point of view of the oppressed and, also, from a view that critiques such readings. 15

Tamez cites the work of E. P. Thompson and E. J. Hobsbawm, who uncovered much political awareness and activity among working-class Methodists before and after the founding of Primitive Methodism. 16 In fact, she finds that Primitive Methodists focused on preaching by the poor rather than seeing the poor only as recipients of the gospel, and she finds that for many of the working-class Methodists, the experience of personal conversion (the stark awareness of sin and grace) was accompanied by political awareness and action. In contrast, Tamez cites the orthodox writing of Jabez Bunting in which he opposed the radicality and contempt of government that was emerging in some quarters of the early Methodist movement. 17 The contrasts were visible not only in the theologies of early Methodists but also in the conflict across theologies. Clearly we can read Wesleyan theology diversely regarding social critique and individual salvation.

**Human depravity and prevenient grace.** John Wesley rarely wrote doctrinal treatises, but he wrote "The Doctrine of Original Sin" in 1757. 18 He lived at the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, in a century when many considered original sin laughable. Like Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, John Wesley affirmed the doctrine of original sin, but he spoke of the work of Christ and prevenient grace in a way that deviated from them. 19 He believed that the work of Christ actually changes God’s relation to the world, making possible prevenient grace that is a supernatural gift to every human being.

This unique combination of beliefs also deviated somewhat from the eighteenth-century Anglican Church. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Church of England had been more Calvinistic in its stress on original sin; Wesley appealed back to this
earlier era. For example, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, from which he drew the Twenty-Five Articles, were formulated in 1563 and given final form in 1571. Wesley was critical of the Church of England for deviating too much from the Articles and, in doing so, moving more toward Roman Catholicism. Certainly in his preaching, John Wesley was clear in his condemnation of the present generation.

Wesley’s strong view of original sin led him to the idea of a totally depraved human and physical world. He saw the natural self as set over against God so that coming to God requires the rejection of self:

\[\text{He that cometh unto God by this faith must fix his eye singly on his own wickedness, on his guilt and helplessness, without having the least regard to any supposed good in himself, to any virtue or righteousness whatsoever. He must come as a mere sinner, inwardly and outwardly, self-destroyed and self-condemned, bringing nothing to God but ungodliness only, pleading nothing of his own but sin and misery.}\]

Although Wesley did not preface all of his proclamations of salvation with original sin, he did not flinch from announcing the reality of sin in all of those proclamations. Likewise, he persisted in warning people of the possibility of falling into sin, even in the experience of sanctification:

\[\text{How naturally do those who experience such a change imagine that all sin is gone. . . But it is seldom long before they are undeceived, finding sin was only suspended, not destroyed. Temptations return and sin revives; showing it was but stunned before, not dead.}\]

We also see warnings throughout Wesley’s work against sliding back into sins that are destructive of the gifts of God. Among others, he cautions the “greatest professors in the Methodist societies” against pride, enthusiasm (“the daughter of pride”), antinomianism, sins of omission, and schism.

All of these warnings stand side by side with the contrasting affirmation by John Wesley that God is present always in the midst of human life, even at the beginning of life to awaken conscience. In his view, Christians can equally affirm, “Ye are saved” and “Ye have been
Salvation refers “to the entire work of God, from the first dawning of grace in the soul till it is consummated in glory.”

Prevenient, or preventing, grace was sometimes described as the work of the natural conscience in the soul, or “the desires after God which, if we yield to them, increase more and more.” Wesley identified prevenient grace with the light by which the Son of God enlightens us and the convictions which the Spirit works in every child. In reality, however, people usually stifle these convictions and finally forget them. For this reason, the law can be seen as important to the work of prevenient grace, for the law arouses an awareness of sin, turns persons to Christ, and guides persons in grace. We see in John Wesley, then, a confidence in the prevenient grace of God, who faithfully works in our lives against all of the obstacles that we human beings put in the way through our sinfulness.

Likewise, Charles Wesley emphasized both the lowliness of human beings and the magnificence of God’s grace. Rupert Davies describes the pattern: “Charles has an unfortunate tendency to refer to members of the human race as ‘worms’...” Davies cites some characteristic expressions of Charles: “And lift poor dying worms to heaven” and “And worms attempt to chant thy praise.” Much of this language was removed from Charles’s hymns by later generations, perhaps because of changing social conventions of language but perhaps also because of the unpopular imagery of human depravity. Davies’s description does not end with the depravity theme, however, because he turns immediately to the contrasting tendency in Charles Wesley to speak the reverse: “But though Charles occasionally sinks to the depths, he more often rises to the heights, and having risen to them, he is capable of staying on them for a remarkably long time.” Again the contrast speaks boldly.

Human Dependence on God and Responsibility. The very contrast between human depravity and prevenient grace establishes another contrast between human dependence on God and human responsibility. In describing this pattern, Robert Burtner and Robert Chiles conclude:

Because of the conjunction of the ideas of natural man and prevenient grace, many of Wesley's sermons follow a common pattern, affirming first man's incapacity and then his capacity for salvation. Wesley can say without theological...
contradiction, "You can do nothing to save yourself," and "You must work out your own salvation."  

In short, the salvific work is God's work, but we can participate in the work of God as we receive and respond to the gracious stirrings in our souls.

In one sense, the work has been done through Jesus Christ; hence, John Wesley can speak of the work of prevenient grace made possible through the work of Christ. He can also speak of justification as "what God does for us" through Jesus Christ. In another sense, however, the work is being done in us at this very moment, and we can participate in that work by receiving, repenting, and participating in the means of grace. We have already seen how Wesley described the work of prevenient grace in terms of the natural conscience, the light of the Son of God that enlightens us, and the convictions that the Spirit works in every child. He also described sanctification as what God "works in us" by the Spirit.

One very explicit joining of the contrast between dependence on God and human responsibility is Wesley's frequent exhortation for people to participate in the means of grace. The means of grace are the outward signs, words, or actions, ordained and appointed by God as the ordinary channels by which God might convey preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace. The primary means of grace are prayer, searching the Scriptures, and receiving the Lord's Supper; but Wesley sometimes identified other means as well.

The efficacy of the means of grace is the work of God, not human effort. Wesley insisted that "the use of all means whatever will never atone for one sin." But the empty practice of the means of grace is an abuse that can even contribute to the destruction of our souls. Even so, participation in the means of grace is a way of opening ourselves to the salvific work of God. This is quite different from seeking salvation by works; it is "waiting in the way God has ordained, and expecting that [God] will meet me there, because [God] has promised so to do." Thus, in encouraging participation in the means of grace, Wesley held together the double affirmation that salvation is the work of God and that people can participate in that work by waiting as God has ordained.

This section on John Wesley's theology began and now ends with contrast—a significant legacy of the people called Methodists. Wesley's theology of contrasts probably owed much to the vivid sense
of contrast in his culture, and it probably owed much also to his personal history of preaching, teaching, guiding, writing, and addressing the troublesome issues of his church and country. Further, his theological method of practical divinity probably prevented him from avoiding contrasts because the very complexities of living called forth the urgency of social critique and individual salvation, as well as the wisdom of human depravity and prevenient grace and human dependence and responsibility. We turn now to immediate questions. What is the legacy of Wesleyan theological contrasts and what choices face the inheritors of the Wesleyan tradition?

Legacy of Contrasts

The primary legacy we inherit from John Wesley's theology of contrasts is the reality that contrasts exist. We have had vivid reminders of these realities in recent years.

On April 29, 1992, Los Angeles, California, burned in an uprising that testified to the depth of economic oppression, the limited access to jobs and services by large segments of the population, and racial hatred within individuals, communities, and social structures. In October 1995, as the O. J. Simpson trial drew to a close and as the nation reflected on the verdict, people again awakened to persistent racial divisions and tensions.

Every day children are beaten and psychologically abused by parents who are not able to deal with their own reactions to their children. These parents often think they are acting in the best interest of their children, and they are often dealing with their own childhood experiences as victims of abuse.

In April 1996, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church voted to maintain the present language of the Discipline defining homosexuality as "incompatible with Christian teaching," thus communicating to a large segment of Christian people that the way of life that is natural to them is not Christian. Though Christians have honest differences in their understanding of homosexuality, many people continue to hurt while the church wrestles with these questions.

Every day, the number of women and children in poverty grows. Every day women in poverty experience the incredible burden of physical and psychological responsibility for themselves and their families, and they experience closed doors to new economic
opportunities alongside harsh judgments by the U.S. society who blame them for their plight.39

These stories can be multiplied, and, of course, different people will choose different stories to tell. But each of the stories mentioned here contains within it the seeds of hope: the resurrection in Los Angeles that comes from a more realistic view of the violence in our social structures and communities; the more intentional efforts to eliminate racism that come from experiences of seeing the stark presence of racial strife; the continued efforts of gay and lesbian persons to communicate their experience of exclusion and discrimination and the continued effort of others to understand; the growing awareness of child abuse in U.S. society, as well as growing awareness of rape and other violent crimes against persons' bodies; and the fresh analysis of women's poverty and attempts to reform family policies. Might we see in these movements of hope the movement of God's prevenient grace?

John Wesley was indeed naive in his failure to draw more thorough connections between the social conditions of poverty and oppression and the love of God for individual souls, but underneath his theology was a passion to speak to both. Likewise, he was naive in his theological construction of human depravity and prevenient grace and of human dependence on God and human responsibility, but he refused to address only one pole of these contrasts. His willingness to hold together contrasts is exceedingly promising for late-twentieth-century people who live in a world as full of concrete contrasts as his.

Wesley's theology of contrasts is more promising to our own reformulation of theology than some of the particulars of his theological constructs. In fact, one of the dangers we face as we carry the legacy of John Wesley's theology is that we will deny one end or the other of the contrasts—ignoring the realities of human poverty and oppression, human sin, or God's grace abounding in the world. Much of Wesleyan studies is occupied in such debates among persons who want to emphasize different ends of a contrast. Such theological discourse represents a tendency to harden and argue doctrines rather than to live in the dynamic of contrast.

Such theological reflection contributes more to death than to life. Much in human life and relationships is actually destroyed by eliminating or dichotomizing contrasts so that we choose to believe that the world is all good or all evil or that some people are all good or
all evil or that some social structures are all good and others evil or that God is working for good so we can ignore evil.

The future of a theology of contrasts lies in our ability to imagine a world that is fully permeated with the evil of human sin and a world that is, at the same time, filled through and through with the grace of God. In imagining this world, we need to see within the world and within ourselves both evil and ideals; we need to participate in both social critique and hope; we need to assess honestly the effects of both poverty and affluence (and the relation between them); and we need to face depravity alongside the fullness of God's grace in the world.

Oppressed people cannot afford the luxuries of naive optimism or of pessimism; the depths of racial hatred, class conflict, and gender oppression in our culture are left unchanged when we acquiesce to such escapes from reality. John Wesley knew that hasty optimism or pessimism could not changes lives and life situations. He offered a theology of contrasts that put people face to face with the realities of life, including the terrible realities of oppression (the ones that he did understand) and the overwhelming reality of God's grace. How can we do less than face the realities of the late twentieth century and construct a theology of contrasts that engages us fully with the desolation of our world and with the fullness of God's love.

Notes


3. Ibid., 3-4. Due to Behn’s abundant use of the term man to refer to humanity, and mistress to refer to nature, the quote has not been revised or filled with sic. Some analysis of Behn’s work would be worthwhile in regard to language, however. Because though she follows the social conventions of her day, she lavishly describes the virtues of the female-identified nature. Further, she is touching a theme very similar to the contemporary feminist work of Susan Griffin, who deplors the destructiveness of elevating human-made culture over nature, which is the path for elevating the male-dominated culture over the female-identified natural world. See particularly Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982).

5. Ibid., 95-96.
9. Ibid., 227.
11. Ibid., 102.
15. Elsa Tamez, “Wesley as Read by the Poor,” in M. Douglas Meeks, ed., The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 67-84. The dual ways of reading Wesleyan theology are also discussed in E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Vintage Books, 1966, 1965), 350-400. Considerable suspicion is raised by Thompson regarding the role of early Methodism in relation to the working class. Thompson sees Methodist theology and practices as encouraging the poor to acquiesce to their social conditions rather than to transform them, this in a movement that attracted and was peopled largely by the poor and working class. Thompson says, “Methodism may have inhibited revolution; but we can affirm with certainty that its rapid growth during the Wars was a component of the psychic processes of counter-revolution,” (381).
17. Tamez, 72-73.
19. Albert Outler distinguishes Wesley’s view of total depravity from the “tree-total depravity” of the Reformers, and he describes Wesley’s view as more catholic, viewing sin “as a malignant disease rather than an obliteration of the image Dei in fallen human nature.” See Outler, Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), 34.
20. One of the best-known examples of this theme in Wesley’s writing is his famous “Scriptural Christianity” sermon preached at St. Mary’s, Oxford, in 1744. See John Wesley, “Scriptural Christianity,” in The Works of John Wesley, Vol. I, Albert C. Outler, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 159-180, esp. 172-180. The condemnatory tone is greatly softened in Wesley’s later preaching and writing, but the reality and persistence of human sin is a persisting theme. See, for example, his pivotal essay of
23. John Wesley, "Cautions and Directions Given to the Greatest Professors in the Methodist Societies," *John Wesley,* 298-305.  
25. Ibid.  
26. Ibid.  
27. Ibid.  
30. Ibid.  
31. Ibid.  
33. Wesley, "Justification by Faith," 201.  
34. Ibid.  
36. Ibid., 382.  
37. Ibid., 383.  
38. Ibid., 391.  
Dwight N. Hopkins

Guns, Violence, and the Church

I would like to approach the question of violence in our cities from a structural perspective. From this vantage point, we must ask: What are some of the larger forces responsible for the escalating use of violence, guns, and illegal drugs? What has caused the breakdown of family relationships and the decline in spirituality and healthy values in urban North America?

Though these trends affect most of the poor in our inner cities, I will focus primarily on the African American community. Why is it that the use of guns and violence is increasing and spirituality is weakening? What systemic factors are aiding such trends? In order to answer these questions, the church is called to witness on several different levels. On a pastoral level, the church is called to minister to the pain and brokenness of a people who are being wounded and are wounding themselves. On an ecclesiological level, the church is called to institutionalize concrete ways to help the poor “to make a way out of no way.” On a theological level, the church is called to manifest by its way of life the hope in a righteous God who is revealed through the love, hope, and liberation of Jesus the Christ. On a prophetic level, the church is called to speak truth to power so that those who are put down by the mighty of society will know that there is a balm in Gilead that binds the broken hearts and battered bodies of the poor.

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Because the church is called to witness amidst the turmoil of guns and violence, a larger perspective is crucial. We Christians need to know the forces that are operating inside inner city communities. We also need to be aware of the forces outside the city which lead to destruction and death on city streets. Finally we need to see the positive steps that the church has already taken to fight the twin evils of guns and violence.

Guns, Violence, and Demonic Structures

A church response to guns and violence in urban America requires an understanding of the economic dimensions and profound racial dislocations of black life, both of which generate havoc in the African American community. Despite this bleak landscape, we need indicators of seeds of hope, a positive ethic, and a theological vision. One sign of the times is the demonic use of guns and violence, but we must also recognize where God is involved with God’s people today.

African American class reality flows out of the larger context of U.S. economic factors, especially the concentration of wealth. In the U.S. today 1 percent of the population owns 37 percent of the wealth, and 10 percent of the population owns 86 percent of the nation’s wealth. The economic data point to a persistent redistribution of wealth to the top elite strata. The crucial distinction here is between wealth and income. Income is usually produced by one’s individual ability to work for someone else or some other institution. In contrast, control of wealth denotes personal possession, either by an individual or a family, of capital and/or the interest and dividends generated by capital. Ninety percent of the U.S. population owns only 14 percent of the country’s wealth, and a little under half of all U.S. citizens (45 percent) own a mere 2 percent of the wealth. Indeed, the economic pie has shrunk for the overwhelming majority while it has increased and continues to increase for an extremely small few. Of all the industrial nations, the U.S. has by far the greatest inequality of wealth and resources distribution. Wealth, resources, and human services for urban living are disappearing not because of some accident or some natural law of economics or nature or divine will. No. The upward redistribution of the pie means that poor people are going to stay poor and, if anything, get poorer. It also means that they will use whatever
means necessary (whether positive or negative) to get what they need to survive and/or to vent their anger, hatred, and frustration.

Furthermore, to understand why guns and violence are increasing at this particular moment, we who are Christians must be aware of a historic trend which has permanently altered the economic landscape: the larger, radical restructuring of the North American economy. The early 1970s began to manifest the subterranean crumbling of U.S. economic pillars, a disintegration process which continues today. By the 1970s, the U.S. dollar no longer enjoyed hegemony in the international market, a clear signal of domestic weakening as well. The productive boom of the 1960s began to recede due to the shrinking income and resulting weakened buying power of the nonwealth-owning sectors of society: the poor, working people, the middle class, and professionals. The inability to buy led directly to a percentage decline of rates of profit return. When nonrich people in society could not buy as much as they had in the past, the rich began to lose profits.

Furthermore, the U.S. corporate sector began to feel the effects of growing international competition. The strength of West Germany and Japan in the areas of technology and automobiles became very evident in the U.S. domestic economy. In 1973, industrial nations decided to give up the U.S. dollar as the standard for the international monetary rate of exchange. And in the mid-1970s OPEC created a united front to regulate oil prices as a leverage against the U.S. monopolization of monetary and capital resources.

During the 1980s, the U.S. economy masked this permanent and unique structural dislocation by borrowing heavily from other countries, as well as from domestic entities such as pension funds. Thus, this new influx of real and paper money gave the appearance of an upswing in the domestic economy. Consequently, the 1980s was the decade of spending, building, and accumulation of massive debt primarily based on credit.

But now in the 1990s, the chickens are coming home to roost. Today, the U.S. national debt is growing every minute. It is now approaching $5 trillion. To get rid of this amount of debt, every U.S. citizen would have to pay over $50,000. Moreover, the loans and debt and credit obligations of the 1980s are now becoming due. Corporations are responding by attempting to restructure financial commitments, borrowing money to repay already borrowed money, and downsizing their businesses. Actually, the corporate sector prefers...
to call this latter move “right-sizing.” Right-sizing means permanently laying off and taking back existing rights of employees, such as the reduction of health and benefits and paid vacation time. Common sense wisdom as well as statistical studies show that blacks and browns and the urban workers are the first to be “right-sized.”

It is often said that the U.S. economy is shifting from the production of goods to the production of information and services. But this too has become a chicken-coming-home-to-roost economic feature. The corporate drive to cut costs and, from their perspective, the need to re-equip themselves for the demands of a service-driven economy instead of a smokestack-dominant one has increased the urge to downsize or right-size. The majority of inner city black and brown youth, young adults, and older workers are not being trained or retrained to meet this shift from industrial production to information and service production.

From the beginning of this unprecedented structural realignment in the U.S. economy until today—and for the first time in U.S. history—the upturn from regular economic crises did not produce a rehiring of previously laid-off workers. A new phenomenon has been created: a so-called national underclass, hordes of never-to-be-employed workers begging outside of the factory gates, metaphorically speaking. A large percentage of this permanent underclass is made up of black and brown people. This new dimension of permanent layoffs, among others, has led to a decrease in wages—a decrease of 15 percent in the last 20 years. An additional spinoff from the shift from the industrial to the information- and service-driven market is the new demand for a work force with more education and increased language, computer, and math skills.

The economic state of the majority of black people could be characterized as a semi-holocaust experience. African Americans’ relative standard of living and quality of life are worse than they were before the 1950s and 1960s civil rights and black power movements. Why? Because the fundamental rearrangement in corporate economic policies just described has made a disproportionate impact on black people. Disproportionately, blacks make up the first to be laid off. Disproportionately, the black community has the biggest manifestation of this new phenomenon of a permanent underclass. Disproportionately, the African American community has felt the extreme tensions, absurdities of life, despair, and pressures from basic questions of economic survival. This translates into daily trauma: where will black
children get their next meal, let alone educational opportunities and a meaningful, stable family life?

Guns, violence, and drugs are on the increase because today's pressures toward survival and money-making are on the increase. In the early 1990s in the U.S., firearms killed at least 39,000 people per year. But this does not include those wounded or permanently scarred physically and emotionally by gun violence. Similarly, inner city people are choosing drugs which they become addicted to more quickly, which are far more deadly and much harder to kick. I am not aware of a documented study of who is profiting from the drug and gun trade. But it is not black people who own the airplanes or fleets of ships to bring drugs into the United States; nor do black people own the factories that make or sell guns. The sale of guns and drugs is a multibillion dollar industry. Someone or some organization has to have the means and the wealth (as well as the mean spirit) to supply wholesale drugs and provide access to lethal weapons in black urban America. The church is called to minister to so-called black-on-black crime, but outside structural factors make urban living even worse and more deadly.

A Portrait of the Urban Black Community

To talk today of guns, violence, the church, and the black community requires a more specific class analysis. This is important not only to understand the structure of the economic crisis but to understand the diverse pains among black folk. Because my topic is the inner city, I will not discuss the issues of the small group of black capitalists in the U.S.; instead, I will address the situation of the majority of African Americans, especially those who are caught up directly in the reality of guns and violence.

Nearly half of all African Americans—44 percent—are working class and working poor wage earners. These are the people whose financial stability is slowly being eaten away due to the rapid rise in the cost of living. Some in this stratum are close to belonging to the ranks of the permanently unemployed, particularly as the economy shifts to service production. Their children are more and more being priced out of a college education. They might be homeowners or longtime, stable apartment renters who are more and more feeling that
they are prisoners in their own homes. They are the ones who are frequently victims of crime in the black community.

Another significant part of the black community is the unemployed. Here we find discarded workers, welfare recipients, and the underclass, who represent 25 percent of the total African American community. To repeat, one-quarter of all black Americans are permanently without legal jobs. Some are barely surviving on welfare payments, a below minimum approach to human dignity. Some are living on soon-to-be-terminated unemployment benefits. Others are barely treading water with deflated retirement packages. And still others prey on the vulnerable through drug and various other illicit industries.

Yet an economic analysis of those suffering most in black America would be incomplete without some mention of other structural realities. We could begin on the family level, where we find that 56 percent of all African American households are headed by women; and 56 percent of these are below the poverty level. Of the children born to young women between the ages of 15 to 24, 68 percent are born out of wedlock, and 41 percent of all African American female teenagers become pregnant by the age of 18. Nearly half of all black children live below the poverty level.

When we turn to the criminal justice system or law enforcement, we discover that African Americans comprise over 40 percent of the inmates in state and federal prisons. And 40 percent of death row inmates are black. Homicide is the number one killer of young black men in the urban areas of America. Black males have a 33 percent higher death rate than their female counterparts. Of those who survive, 1 in 3 will not finish high school; that is to say, over 33 percent of black youth drop out of school.

But still the picture would not be complete without two additional scourges ravaging black potentiality: the twin demons of crack and AIDS. Black men are over three times more likely to die of AIDS than the national population. Black women endure an even more tragic fate: they are over eight times more likely to die of AIDS. In fact, the number one killer of African American women 25 and under in the New York and New Jersey areas is AIDS. AIDS and crack are not simply physical evils which kill bodies. They also tear down families and neighborhoods, friendships and loyalties. They distort priorities to the point that drug users neglect their children and infect them with
negative values. They wipe away self-esteem and erode spiritual foundations.

If these statistics applied to the U.S. as a whole, the federal government would declare a state of emergency. And herein lies a profound instance of racial discrimination which allows, by purpose or design, black America to languish in desolation, lack of dignity, and humanity. An entire generation of black youth is withering away due to drug addiction, AIDS, homicide, unemployment, inadequate formal education, neglect, and lack of love.

**Pockets of Hope**

In order for us to be faithful Christians and truly the church of Christ, we are called by God to confront and transform all demonic forces working to harm the least in our society. The resources are there for us to take such a risk. The legacy of standing up for justice is there. And the biblical example of Christ is there. What resources does the African American community have to turn the tide against guns and violence on the structural level?

On a national and aggregate scale, black people have a wealth of uncoordinated resources. African Americans embody a purchasing power of $300 billion, a figure greater than some Third World countries' GNP. And there is political clout: both historically and recently, black and brown voters have provided the margin of victory which has put presidents in the White House (for example, the 1992 election of President Bill Clinton). The potential power of black leadership is reflected in 99 black colleges and universities; scores of African American sororities and fraternities and professional institutions; several civil rights organizations; nearly 7,000 elected officials, including 40 congresspersons; a few black newspapers, journals and magazines; radio stations and cable television programs; and prominent international cultural and sports figures.

But the most immediate proactive work is taking place on the local levels all across the U.S., particularly in the urban areas. Several neighborhoods have set up “take back our community” projects. This bold and risky theme reflects courageous attempts at recapturing safe space from drug dealers; they are seeking to offer an oasis-like room for children to play and households to gather and live safely. Other communities have engaged in local economic development projects.
which combine training skills in cooperative economic improvement for local neighborhoods. Within these efforts, some specifically focus on the economic empowerment of black women.

Because of the insufficiency of public schools, Saturday afternoon Afrocentric house educational groups have cropped up. They seek to stem the massive self-hatred, ignorance, and historical amnesia that have plagued black youth about themselves as Africans in America. Despite the recent commotion about cultural awareness (especially when Spike Lee's movie *Malcolm X* came out), many black youth do not know the traditions, communities, and historical values which allowed poor and working African Americans to get over. In other words, faith and a positive self-worth have usually gone hand in hand. But in these black-culture-centered household schools that I've mentioned, youth are discovering that a sense of black beauty and worth, a sense of loving one's black self, means more than wearing a Malcolm X hat.

Due to the overwhelming at-risk status of black male youths in the inner city, African American male mentoring programs have emerged to teach, educate, train, empower, and provide a feeling of positive self to young black men. These neighborhood-based projects have names such as Simba (i.e., the Swahili word for lion). And on the family level, the statistics of single-parent households does not reflect the fact that African Americans still practice the positive African belief in extended families.

The Role of the Urban Church

But the most promising pockets of hope on the local level are prophetic groups of the faithful—those very few black churches and church-related institutions that preach and practice a holistic spiritual approach to theology and Christian witness. These churches have carved out a prophetic ministry while impacting both the margins and the mainstreams.

One example would be the Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, California. Pastored by J. Alfred Smith, Sr., this church has organized itself on several levels. Economically, it has built an expanding credit union for church and community members in the heart of the black ghetto in Oakland. It hopes to inspire the African American community to realize the potential of its purchasing power when black people and other inner city churches pool their resources.
Black churches in America have millions of dollars which could be utilized for the poor if monies were coordinated and institutionalized as a unit. Denominational affiliations should not segregate but join together to witness for Christ.

To address basic survival needs in the black community, Allen Temple owns several safe and clean apartment buildings which house seniors and low-income people. Politically, the church mobilizes its constituency for local and national elections; it also engages in public discussions about various political and national elections, as well as various local politicians and city ordinances that would affect African American neighborhoods. Culturally, the clergy and membership embrace a strong connection between African Americans and Africa. Here identity, culture, extended family, respect for elders, pride, worth, history, race consciousness, and related values of serving the least in society are fostered. Here, too, we find examples of struggle against U.S. imperial policies toward Africa, as well as harmful national policies and practices that affect the inner city adversely.

Educationally, a regular series of Bible courses takes place at Allen Temple Baptist Church. These classes interpret the Bible as it relates to the contemporary spiritual, cultural, and political survival and liberation of African American people and all poor and working communities. In addition, occasional Saturday black theology and other liberation-accented programs occur with guest speakers. Spiritually, we find a strong revivalistic and Pentecostal thrust. This is reflected in prayers and sermons that are both reasoned and well prepared but are delivered in the old-time Southern emotional fashion. Especially in the music, the Spirit comes in a mighty big way. One could describe the spiritual music as a combination of gospel, slave spirituals, jazz, blues, funk, R & B, soul, and choral. All are delivered by various choirs and instruments.

Diverse ministries are the day-to-day backbone of the church witnessing. A staff of ministers in training prepares a new generation of black pastors; women are welcomed to enter the ordained ministry, and all are encouraged to obtain seminary degrees. These soon-to-be-ordained ministers and the regular paid clergy staff head various outreach activities: the women’s cancer support group, the black men’s group, a black male mentoring program, the traditional Boy and Girl Scouts, and street evangelistic praying and outreach.

The example of Allen Temple does not imply that each inner city church should do all of these things. Rather, it calls churches of all...
denominations to come together and, given specific strengths and weaknesses, work in a coordinated coalition to provide Christian alternatives to guns and violence.

One model of directly fighting guns and violence and gang warfare is found among a group of Christians in Boston. These followers of Christ have devised a ten-point program which, among other things, offers churches as sanctuaries and neutral ground for gang meetings; provides job opportunities by linking churches with the business communities; has different churches adopt gangs; and provides a healthy Christian spirituality as a positive alternative to the violent culture and demonic spirituality of the gang-banging and criminal activity, all of which hurt mainly the communities of the inner city.

Allen Temple Baptist Church and the coalition of Boston Christians are just two pockets of hope amidst the plague of guns and violence wreaking havoc in urban America. They point to the possibility of social and personal transformation for all victims of violence, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual.

In addition to these and other seeds of hope, the church needs a national coordinated theological vision, a sober analysis, a vivifying spiritual presence, and a loose national network which could help situate the least of these (as Jesus called them) at the center of the country's top priorities. This would entail both self-help endeavors internal to the inner cities as well as pressure against governments, corporate entities, and other forces in civil society charged with the well-being of those at the bottom of the nation.

Prophetic churches and church-related institutions, those who are struggling to offer leadership in black and brown communities, and all those who take seriously a vocational calling to empower poor and other victims of dehumanizing structures need to come together. For example, the black church remains the oldest, most organized (at least on the local level), and resource-abundant establishment controlled by African Americans in the United States.

Church leaders and both lay and formally trained religious professionals could help provide a visionary framework to aid national conversation and grassroots mobilization. At minimum, such a broad coming together could serve to challenge all national political, cultural, spiritual, and economic discussions and practices to be grounded in systemic and individual transformation. This would exhibit the profound ethical dimension of servanthood and prophecy embodied in the birth, life, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
A Call to Witness

Finally, as we come together to mobilize for Christ, we need to be mindful of several important things.

First is that the ethical dimension of our faith should be grounded in the well-being of the poor in urban America. We can no longer judge the success of a people by the fact that a small percentage has been allowed into the power structure of white America. The so-called rise of the black and brown middle and professional classes is not an indication that the majority of God’s children are better off. As the church works against guns and violence and all the damning things that go with them, our ethical yardstick should be whether or not the poor have moved out of their poverty at all levels.

The second ethical standard deals with African American female-male connections because both share equal original creation and both embody resources for liberation. Moreover, black women comprise at least half of the African American community and over two-thirds of the black church. From the perspective of both divine justice and mutually interdependent humanity, the faith experiences of black women and men must share in and act equally as sources for theological witnessing.

Third, we must see our vocation as a vision of a full humanity toward which God has called us to struggle. It is a vision of both a new heaven and a new earth, a place of free spaces and peaceful times.

To realize this vision economically means that as individuals and as churches we must function on communalism. All of creation is a gift from God to all of humanity. In the beginning it was that way, but the sin of human political economy and the seduction of individual selfishness allowed a small group of families on earth to monopolize the wealth—including control, distribution, and induced commodity consumption—at the expense of the overwhelming majority of the domestic population. The fact that monopolization of wealth exists does not testify to a God-given status or even a natural ability. Monopolization of monies, capital, and resources is a human-created phenomenon; therefore, human beings can bring about communalism. Communalism asks us to see how individual desires serve to benefit the well-being of the overall community. Individualism breeds a me-first mentality and capitalism, whereas love of community is Christian.

Politically, the new vision signifies democracy—a new democracy in contrast to the old style. In other words, decision-making begins
with the voices and priorities of the majority of the earth, the poor and working people. Similarly, the ideal is to have the representatives and the voices of the majority elected into positions of leadership and decision-making as we work to provide alternatives to guns and violence and their demonic spirituality. Fundamentally, politics is the unleashing of the constructive wisdom given by God to poor and working-class people.

In addition to economics and politics, equality is another piece of our vision for a new heaven and a new earth. To be equal is to be self-critical and self-judging based on what others—those different from ourselves—have or do not have. Equality is essential because the nature of our humanity hinges upon defining and creating a society where all have opportunities to share in abundant natural resources and accumulated technologies. No one is fully human if another’s access is blocked or one person is considered less than another in a community. Basically, to be equal is to appreciate the realization of the other’s God-given gifts.

Culturally, we need an ethic which affirms God’s gift of “black as beautiful” for America, especially for our youth. We cannot work with the Holy Spirit toward God’s new heaven and new earth without also openly embracing, acknowledging, affirming, and promoting the sacred fact that the phenotype, aesthetics, rhythm, body language, English, history, music, textures, and spirituality of black Americans are all part of the norm of what it means to be an American and a human being. A positive or negative racial identity matters for the present and future of America.

Finally, if we are to make a dent in the spiraling incidence of violence in our communities, we must realize that what we do in the present will determine the quality of our future. Our unborn children of the twenty-first century beckon to us to prepare a vision and a reality of a new heaven and a new earth so that they may reach their full humanity in their lifetime to come. Ours is a lifelong vocation for the living presence of Jesus the Christ, our ancestors, and the generations to come.
Testing the Bonds of Community: Welfare Reform in the 1990s

"Welfare"—this catchword ignites strong responses from AFDC recipients, ideologues of the right and the left, bureaucrats, scholars, and everyday Americans outside the system. Almost everyone agrees that the current system is broken, but that consensus does not extend to what to do about it. Not unexpectedly, Christians and churches have spoken out on the issue. The Catholic bishops have drawn significant media attention for their stance defending continued support for the needs of children in the current debate, just as the Christian Coalition has rallied around the Congressional legislative proposal.

In early 1996, no one can clearly determine what the political fate of welfare reform will be. While there has been a significant amount of debate, the flavor of much of it disturbs thoughtful observers, since it is frequently harsh and ideological even as it is infrequently enlightening. As someone who has worked in public service for ten years, I have felt a particular sadness over debate in churches, among both clergy and laity. All too often in churches the discussion seldom moves beyond strident rehashing of the secular political options. The resources of the Christian faith and the issues that it can bring to public debate, perhaps more than the answers it provides, are infrequently brought to the table.

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This essay attempts to stimulate Christian reflection on a policy question that touches the lives of millions of children, women, and men. I provide an overview of the current policy context, and a description of two significant proposals in this recent round of welfare policy wars. I will analyze these proposals in terms of certain theological and policy criteria. My analysis certainly is not the only way of engaging in Christian reflection on welfare policy in the United States, but it does seek to be reflection that earnestly engages tradition with policy.

The Policy Context

When people say the word welfare, most often the government program that they think of is Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Sometimes welfare broadens to include all forms of government assistance to poor people. This definition would include food stamps, housing assistance, medical assistance, nutrition, Head Start, and a variety of other programs. The current debate focuses on AFDC, though programs such as food stamps, school lunches, and Medicaid have also been drawn into the public fray.

It is remarkable that the AFDC program draws such significant attention when it accounts for only about 1 percent of the federal budget (about $13 billion, to provide assistance to approximately 4.7 million families per month in 1992). In 1993, all levels of government (federal, state, and local) spent about $23 billion on AFDC and served about 9.5 million children (approximately 14 percent of all children). While aspects of the AFDC population are extraordinarily diverse, one pair of scholars has aptly summarized the program as follows:

Most AFDC recipients are single mothers with children. The typical welfare family in the early 1990s was made up of a never-married mother in her twenties or thirties with one or two children. . . . In 1973 the typical recipient was divorced or separated from the father of her children. By 1990, 54 percent of the children on AFDC had mothers who had never been married to their father.

In 1990 about 40 percent of welfare recipients were non-Hispanic white, 40 percent were black, and 17 percent
were Hispanic. Most lived in metropolitan areas, though typically not in inner-city ghettos. The average size for AFDC cases was 2.9 persons, down from 3.6 in 1973. About half of all AFDC recipients lived in six large, highly urbanized states: California, New York, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania.

History

While the treatment of the poor in the United States has a long and checkered history that has been chronicled elsewhere, a few words about the development of AFDC are appropriate in order to have a feel for how we arrived at the present quagmire. AFDC is only about sixty years old, beginning during Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal as a small program for providing very modest assistance to widows and children, neither of whom were expected to work.

AFDC remained a rather small and ignored program until the 1960s, when two developments occurred: poverty caught the policy attention of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and the demographics of the program changed from widows with children to single mothers (divorced and never married). While AFDC was never a focus of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, rising AFDC rolls did provoke part of the political maelstrom in the late 1960s relating to poor people’s programs, work, and race. The poor began to organize. Courts found some minimal due process and other rights for poor people. President Nixon’s proposal for a guaranteed national income policy foundered in a bitter crossfire between the left and the right. Jimmy Carter campaigned on welfare reform in 1976, but his complex proposal also floundered in Congress. Ronald Reagan campaigned with anecdotes about welfare queens and as president did obtain a reduction in the rolls in the early 1980s.

Through the mid-1980s something of a consensus about welfare reform did develop between the left and the right as states experimented with reforms. They focused on moving targeted AFDC populations into work, education, and training programs with support services such as child care and Medicaid. The programs showed modest results. Under the leadership of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and the National Governors Association (with an active role played by then Governor Bill Clinton), this consensus led to the
enactment of the Family Support Act of 1988 (FSA). While FSA was a very modestly funded program, through JOBS (its principal program) it did somewhat change the focus of the program from payment of benefits to transitioning single mothers into the work force. This hurried survey brings us to the 1990s.

Social Policy Literature Underpinnings of Current Reform Efforts

In examining the welfare debate in the 1990s we should realize that a wealth of social science research underlies the current reform efforts. In order to provide a description of some of the more significant voices in the current debate, I have selected the work of the following scholars for brief review here: David Ellwood and Mary Jo Bane, William Julius Wilson, Charles Murray, and Marvin Olasky.

David Ellwood and Mary Jo Bane. For more than a decade these two Harvard University academics have significantly contributed to the welfare reform policy literature. The last round of welfare reform in 1988 drew on their work. As Clinton administration officials in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, they contributed to Clinton’s 1994 proposal. The most readily accessible works by these two scholars are Ellwood’s Poor Support and Bane and Ellwood’s Welfare Realities. While their most-noted research has dealt with the dynamics of recipients’ spells on welfare in a diverse AFDC population, they also attend to problems of the culture of the welfare bureaucracy and the dissonance between our values and our policies about work and welfare. They call for targeting reforms toward those programs at risk of fostering long-term dependency and clearly orienting them to serve as transitional programs with work as the goal. Starting from the base of reinforcing U.S. cultural values of work, independence, families, and responsibility, they call for reform policies that assure that people who play by the rules won’t lose the game. Since working people should not end up in poverty, their reform agenda goes beyond turning AFDC into a transition-to-work program to include child support, health care, and the earned-income tax credit (EITC).

William Julius Wilson. Wilson’s research on the economic prospects of the urban underclass and of males in that system in his book The
Truly Disadvantaged has gained a significant hearing in the current debate. Violent crime, welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock births, and high rates of formation of female-headed families are not unrelated phenomena; and the relationships among them are not the naively simplistic ones of racism or lack of virtue alone. Together with his earlier work, The Declining Significance of Race, Wilson has argued for viewing the plight of the developing urban underclass as going beyond simple racism to extend to a web of interrelated factors—for example, declining job prospects for males in urban economies are related to the formation of female-headed families. Seeking to move beyond traditional civil rights and War on Poverty approaches, he views urban minority poverty as linked to economic organization. He therefore calls for a variety of policy responses that are not race specific.10

Charles Murray. While the conservative American Enterprise Institute fellow Charles Murray has recently gained notoriety for his controversial book The Bell Curve, his views on illegitimacy and the role of the safety net of social programs have made him a critical underpinning of conservative welfare reform proposals. But much of his approach is clearly articulated in his 1984 cause célèbre, Losing Ground. In Losing Ground, Murray argues that government social programs to aid the poor have in fact harmed the poor and inadvertently created incentives for bad behavior by poor people who above all are still rational economic actors. In the face of government’s failure Murray contends for a proposal involving

scraping the entire federal welfare and income-support structure for working-aged persons, including AFDC, Medicaid, Food Stamps, Unemployment Insurance, Worker’s Compensation, subsidized housing, disability insurance, and the rest. It would leave the working-aged person with no recourse whatsoever except the job market, family members, friends, and public or private locally funded services. It is the Alexandrian solution: cut the knot, for there is no way to untie it.11

While Murray believes that such a proposal would involve substantial hardships for many, including children who would fall through the cracks of his approach, he contends that it is “no less
urgent that children be allowed to grow up in a system free of the forces that encourage them to remain poor and dependent." While the specifics of Murray's draconian proposal go far beyond even current Republican proposals, his arguments about the failure of recent government social programs have been exceedingly influential among conservatives.

Marvin Olasky. This evangelical Christian journalism professor's primary work, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, was fairly unknown until House Speaker Newt Gingrich began promoting it as a significant contribution to the 1995 welfare reform debate. Olasky argues that the hallmark of nineteenth-century U.S. poverty policy was compassion in the form of personal involvement from the evangelical Christian middle class that aided only the deserving poor. Thus, government welfare programs not only waste money but also cause harm to the poor by not expecting anything from either the poor themselves or their middle-class benefactors. The poor are treated like animals, not human beings. While Olasky engages in a certain amount of romanticism concerning nineteenth-century social policy, the point he raises about personal involvement has communitarian, if not tribal or village-like, roots. This point is worth hearing in a bureaucratic society. However, while caring only for the deserving poor has long and somewhat Calvinist roots in this nation, it is neither very like the Sermon on the Mount nor to many eyes very humane.

A Place to Stand: The Kingdom of God as a Symbolic Vision of the Good Society

In evaluating any policy proposal, one needs a vantage point from which to make assessments and recommendations. This essay evaluates welfare policy beginning with an appropriation of the kingdom of God as a symbolic vision of the good society. As a Christian symbol, this vision normatively anchors itself in a reading of the Christian tradition. It can be held accountable as either adequate or not to the richly varied Christian tradition by other voices in that tradition. As a symbol of the good society it can enter into the debate about the appropriate form for U.S. society in terms of cultural tradition (how does this tradition resonate with the New Deal or the Great Society?) and with political philosophy (how does it relate to a Rawlsian liberalism or Nozick's night watchman state?). The integrity
of the symbol will also permit it to engage certain traditional moral philosophies without committing wholeheartedly to any one of utilitarianism, communitarianism, Aristotelian virtues, or right/duty-based theories. While some may view this commitment to symbolic visions as insufficiently rational, that commitment may be viewed as a strength to those who realize that in politics and in the practice of religion (as many practitioners of both do) our deepest commitments are basically symbolic rather than rigidly logical and objective. At least in the realm of political activity, the use of symbol and symbolic vision is as commonplace as the use of Willie Horton in a campaign or the use of stories to define national problems and purpose.\(^\text{15}\)

Drawing on notions of the kingdom of God in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament,\(^\text{16}\) I select four themes as critical elements of a symbolic picture of the good society brought by the God of Jesus of Nazareth. I use these themes to evaluate welfare reform proposals. From the essential commitments represented by these themes one may move to derived moral principles and to their application in public policy decisions with “modesty and courage.”\(^\text{17}\)

In four words the themes are justice, community, virtue, and fruit. But those words only represent the thrust of themes in a symbolic story or picture of the kingdom of God—as brought to us in the words of Isaiah or the preaching of Jesus.\(^\text{18}\) By selecting four themes rather than just one for emphasis, the analysis communicates something of the fullness and the diversity of, as well as tensions within, the underlying symbol of the kingdom.

These themes also play a significant role in the moral and political discourse of this nation. As part of our cultural heritage, just like the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, speech, “I Have a Dream,” they have roles to play in shaping this society’s debate about welfare without requiring someone who does not share their sectarian underpinnings to confess them as personal dogma. They can represent a form of “civil religion” that even unbelievers may respond to without violating scruples about the state establishing a religion.

**Justice.** This theme focuses on whether the policy is fair, especially to the least advantaged, poor, and vulnerable.\(^\text{19}\) The God of the Bible is a God who works justice for the poor, and God’s kingdom brings justice. In biblical traditions, not only does God bring justice but kings and governments also have the responsibility to do justice.\(^\text{20}\)

Theologically, the economic pastoral from the U.S. Catholic bishops
shares much of this approach and to a lesser extent so does the Center for Public Justice's *A New Vision for Welfare Reform*. A natural point of contact for further secular discussion is with John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. As its presence in the Pledge of Allegiance gives testimony, justice remains a powerful element in U.S. cultural identity.

**Community.** This theme focuses on whether the policy permits all members of society, but particularly the poor and vulnerable, to responsibly participate as fully as they are able in our society's social and economic life. The God of the Bible watches over the poor and calls for justice so that the poor may participate in the vision of Isaiah 65:17-25, in which God creates a new earth where the wolf and the lamb feed together, along with every other member of God's community. Yet going beyond mere inclusion in economic life, a community-based theme reminds us that the poor and welfare recipients are part of our community and that we must see them as real parts of our communities. A natural point of contact for further discussion is with the communitarian movement which emphasizes community building through mutually supportive rights and responsibilities. At the cultural level in U.S. society, there is still an almost nostalgic longing for community and neighborhood.

**Virtue.** This theme focuses on whether the policy encourages the development of persons of a particular character. Does the policy encourage the formation of honest, nurturing, families that can rear children apart from violence? Here is a point of contact with those who believe that personal character still needs some attending to in policy debates (William Bennett) and with those who look to communities for Christian character formation (Stanley Hauerwas). Character debates continue to run through our society in discussions ranging from welfare mothers to candidates for President.

**Fruit.** This theme looks at what the policy produces. Like the proverbial fig tree, will it produce good fruit? Will the policy reduce the number of illegitimate births in the welfare population or reduce "dependency" or move people from welfare to work at a living wage? This theme looks at results and has a natural point of contact with the quantitative utilitarian bent of much current policy analysis. Similarly there is a powerful pragmatic element to U.S. culture.

Before moving on, two observations are appropriate. First, justice, community, virtue, and fruit are not completely separate notions. They
do relate to and even overlap one another, yet for analytical purposes they may be distinguished with some profit. Second, when examining a policy in light of these four themes, the potential reformer should employ charity and prudence in coming to applications and recommendations for the current debate.

Policy Issues in the 1995 Debate

Work and Responsibility. The obligation of the community to care for those in need is finding itself increasingly balanced by a call for individuals to take responsibility for their lives to move to some form of relative self-sufficiency. The current form of this debate relates to time limits for receiving welfare. The community will provide welfare benefits for a certain amount of time (2 to 5 years) together with varying amounts of supports and skills training. The welfare recipient will be expected to take advantage of those resources to move permanently off welfare. If the recipient fails to move off welfare at the end of the period, either public service employment or some sanction is contemplated—such as termination of welfare benefits. Some proposals see this issue’s being worked out in the form of a written contract between the welfare agency and the welfare recipient.

Theologically, this issue can bring to light the play between the communal and individual roles for labor. Communally, do we empower labor that enables persons to participate in the broader community with dignity and fairness, thus glorifying God in a witness to God’s kingdom? Or individually, does labor that builds virtuous character glorify God? Moving welfare mothers into the work force may encourage certain kinds of character; but if the work does not pay a “living wage,” does it enable one to participate with dignity in our society? We also need to exercise care about how this emphasis on work affects the character of caring for children.

Current research indicates much that is disturbing concerning the dynamics of welfare populations and attachment to the work force, particularly concerns about the length and frequency of spells of welfare receipt, as these dynamics relate to the issue of dependency. While almost half of new spells of AFDC receipt will last no longer than two years, about 10 percent of new spells will last at least 10 years. When taking account of recidivism over a 25-year span, about one-fourth of new recipients will spend at least 10 years on welfare.
Such numbers will trouble us if the “issue of welfare is the issue of dependency.” 25 And in contrast with the current emphasis on entry into the work force, more welfare mothers leave the rolls due to a change in family status (often marriage) than to joining the work force. 26 Without using numbers, Bane and Ellwood summarize the dynamics of the welfare population in these terms:

Many recipients stay on welfare only a short time. Most of the dollars go to people who do stay a long time. Some people go off quickly, some people go on and off repeatedly, some stay on almost continuously. 27

Family. Since the Moynihan Report of the 1960s, the support or undermining of families by the welfare system has received a great deal of attention (although work incentives as they relate to public support for the poor and rhetoric about the family have always been with us). This concern runs the gamut between the Christian Coalition’s passion for the traditional family to liberals’ worries about the relationship of welfare to families among the working poor. The current debate revolves around the family issues of care for children, child support, illegitimacy, and the family cap.

Currently one child in five in the United States lives in poverty. While common U.S. wisdom calls for parents to support their children, about two-thirds of single women with children receive little or no child support. Consequently, these children lose out on an estimated $34 billion in unpaid child support. 28 With the current uncertainties facing families and the ideologies about them, “family” touches a lightning rod between the left and the right. While the extreme right divinizes one form of family, the extreme left demonizes traditional forms of family as agents of patriarchy and economic domination. Perhaps by focusing on the fruit of how we care for the children of welfare families we can find some common ground for policy. Maybe we can even move the important debates about justice and virtue implicated in normative views about family forward.

Teen births and illegitimate births are problems for welfare policy because of the dangers that such young mothers are disproportionately at risk for living in poverty and for spending long periods of time on welfare. 29 Yet comparisons among states show that larger welfare payments do not mean more welfare babies or illegitimacy. While there has been some recent moderation in illegitimate births, it should
be noted that birth rates for women in general have been declining over the past three decades so that the proportion of out-of-wedlock births is increasing. This increase indicates that "it is not fertility behavior that has changed but rather marital behavior; marriage is simply less likely to take place prior to a birth."\textsuperscript{30}

While a variety of demonstration projects are tested, no magic approach has appeared which will end the problems of teen and illegitimate births. The most common responses require teen mothers to stay in school or with their parents and cap welfare benefits so that payments do not increase for additional children. This approach has generated considerable controversy, and no definitive data is available.\textsuperscript{31} Apart from the difficult question of whether such policies can change childbearing behavior, there remains the issue of compassion for children left without support contrasted with the lack of assistance for working non-welfare families that have additional children.

\textbf{Supports.} As persons with families who lack many resources move into the job market, what sort of support services, if any, will be available to meet child care, transportation, housing, nutrition, and health care needs? Looking at supports for welfare families highlights the limits of images of self-sufficiency in a modern economy, even as it brings to mind again the need to locate families within a web of supportive institutions. This issue has the potential for articulating a positive role for the notion of community between the ideological extremes of individualism and collectivism. The issue of supports drives home in a concrete way the proverb that "it takes a village to raise a child."\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Skills.} For welfare recipients that lack the basic education and skills needed to participate in the job market, what sort of resources will be available to address their education and training deficits? A significant aspect of the current debate focuses on centering reform efforts on a broad range of welfare mothers with relatively low intensity interventions (job search and résumé classes) or targeting efforts on those most at risk of long-term dependency with more intensive programs (education and supported work).

The issue of skills engages the themes of justice, virtue, and fruit. Is it fair to force a single parent without skills into the job market without help? What dignity is encouraged by shuffling people into minimum wage jobs that they may not even be ready for if they
cannot read? What good is done by relatively cheap interventions that produce modest results for many recipients as opposed to more expensive intensive policy interventions that reach relatively few recipients yet produce more lasting benefits?  

**Federalism and the Role of Government.** The most significant questions raised by the issue of the role of government are: Should welfare constitute an entitlement for the poor and what level of community should direct welfare programs? These questions require us to decide what kind of support our society owes the poor. In biblical terms the issue becomes one of justice. The early Christian community set up mechanisms to care for their own poor and perhaps served as benefactors or responsible citizens in some cities of the Roman empire. In the Hebrew Bible a variety of mechanisms are provided for assuring support to the poor, and prophets savaged the rich and kings who did not provide such support. Clearly in a vision of biblical community one may find ample support for seeking a community that makes affirmative, and in some cases coercive, provisions for caring for the poor that go beyond private charity.

Asking what level of government should direct welfare programs raises a variety of questions concerning relationships between the federal, state, and local governments and religious and other nonprofit groups. Many believe on theological grounds, as well as that of political philosophy, that the level closest to the people should direct welfare programs. Those who do so have a preference for giving these programs to state and local governments, with significant involvement from the not-for-profit sector rather than the federal government.

Theologically, this issue raises the theme of community and thus it often evokes the principle of subsidiarity from Catholic thought, but not in every case. As a corrective to the excesses of collectivism and as a limit to state interventions, the “teaching of the Church has elaborated the principle of subsidiarity, according to which ‘a community of a higher order should not interfere with the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.’” While this Catholic view primarily seeks to prevent domination of church, family, and other communities by the state, even left-wing evangelical organizer Jim Wallis of Sojourners...
calls for welfare reform where solutions are "preferably at the local level." However, the legitimate concern to prevent unjust domination should not lead to a knee-jerk reaction always in favor of control by the smallest or most local unit, since "factions" or interests can sometimes control these units more easily than higher or larger ones. Instead, the discussion could focus on the appropriate role of each level of government or institution with a view to avoiding domination by moneyed or other improper interests and permitting optimal representation of the poor and relevant institutions.

Two Proposals

President Clinton's 1994 Proposal. In 1992 as Bill Clinton was running for the presidency, his pledge to "end welfare as we know it" became a powerful theme throughout that campaign. It was a theme that had roots in his active role in the National Governors Association in the 1988 welfare reform effort that led to the FSA and in his emerging role as a New Democrat associated with the Democratic Leadership Council (and its think tank, the Progressive Policy Institute). As health care reform lay dying in the summer of 1994, President Clinton came forward with a specific legislative proposal to give form to his commitment to reform within the context of his budgetary realities. That proposal came to the 103rd Congress as the "Work and Responsibility Act of 1994" [S. 2224, 103rd Congress]. It died with the 1994 elections. After these elections, the Congressional Republicans moved forward their own proposal, and the President's role changed.

S. 2224 sought to continue the reform road begun by the FSA by phasing in attempts to make welfare a time-limited transitional program of training, education, child care and other supports that would move welfare recipients (beginning with the very youngest ones) off welfare and into a private or public sector job within two years. Child-support enforcement efforts would be enhanced. Efforts would be made to address the problems of illegitimacy and teenage pregnancy. The expansion of access to the health-care system by the President's health-care reform proposal was assumed as was the expansion of the now embattled earned income tax credit (EITC). The 1994 Clinton proposal was in essence a transitional entitlement with a variety of support services attached. It sought to reward people who
played by the rules; that is, if you work and care for your kids, you
should not live in vulnerable poverty.\textsuperscript{42}

In developing S. 2224, the Clinton Administration relied heavily on
the framework that Bane and Ellwood's analysis represents. Yet their
approach was hamstrung by extremely modest funding. The
Administration proposed funding of $9.3 billion in new spending over
five years. But true reform is expensive, unless Murray and Olasky or
just plain budget-cutting represents one's organizing paradigm.

Work and Responsibility. S. 2224 terminates cash assistance after
two years and requires adults to work in a quasi-public jobs program
(WORK) if they do not have a private sector job. The program targets
younger recipients (those born after 1971). The goal of moving
recipients to work is a laudable one. However, the provision for some
form of quasi-public job if private employment is unavailable seems
more just than merely cutting recipients off after two years. It affirms
both work and the duty of the community to support those in need
with supported work if the market cannot supply employment at a
living wage.

Family. The Clinton proposal calls for enhanced child-support
efforts which include development of automated databases,
suspending the professional and other licenses of noncustodial parents
who are delinquent in child support, and child support assurance
demonstrations. The enhanced child-support provisions affirm both
the virtue and the justice of obligations of parents to support their
children. With a nod toward William Julius Wilson, this proposal
makes an effort to provide noncustodial parents (fathers) with some
education and training services. Young teen mothers would be
required to stay at home and stay in school. Otherwise, S. 2224 funds
a variety of teen pregnancy demonstration projects.

Supports. In addition to the earned income tax credit and health
coverage under the Administration's health-care reform proposal, the
Clinton Administration would also guarantee child care to participants
in the JOBS and WORK programs. Providing more adequate supports
for working people and welfare recipients permits them to participate
more adequately in our community.

Skills. S. 2224 seeks to integrate job training and education
programs with both the JOBS and WORK programs. The effort to
enhance the skills of welfare mothers and noncustodial parents would
seem to enhance the fruit of increased earnings and also enable them
to participate more adequately in our economy.
Federalism. The Administration's proposal maintains welfare as an entitlement. It retains a federal role of setting minimum standards while making some strides to enhance state flexibility with its waiver policy. Unless one is irrevocably committed to the view "the localer, the better," then this approach appears to heed concerns about the appropriate role of levels of government. More to the point about the Clinton proposal are the subsidiarity-based concerns with the role, or lack of one, of nonprofits and churches as service providers.43

The 1995 Congressional Proposals. The House Republicans' Contract with America put welfare reform on Congress's 1995 agenda. Welfare reform represented a critical element of House Speaker Newt Gingrich's conservative revolution against the welfare state.44 Reform was prominently seconded by the Christian Coalition with its concerns that religious organizations receive funding for providing social services joining their standard conservative attack on big government.45

The 104th Congress has passed welfare reform in a variety of forms. The House of Representatives passed H.R. 4 ("The Parental Responsibility Act of 1995") in March 1995 by a vote of 234-199, while Speaker Gingrich provoked a minor maelstrom with his comment that some children ought to be sent to orphanages with invocations of the motion picture Boys Town. House Republicans focused on reducing federal bureaucracy while invoking Murray's argument that government was the problem in welfare policy. Opponents publicly focused on the treatment of children, particularly on provisions relating to the block granting of nutrition programs. Abortion also entered the picture with a rancorous debate over whether family cap provisions included in the House bill encouraged abortions.46

The Senate passed its version of H.R. 4 ("The Work Opportunity Act of 1995") in September 1995 by a vote of 87-12. While the Senate vote was bipartisan, it occurred only after extensive negotiations. Senator Dole crafted an agreement that balanced concerns from Senators Gramm and Faircloth about Senator Packwood's Finance Committee bill, which lacked certain sanctions against illegitimacy, with moderating concerns by Senate Democrats. Even then some Senate liberals refused to vote for the new consensus bill. Most notably Senator Moynihan lamented the specter of homeless children forced into the streets as he opposed the bill.47 By some estimates, the
Congressional legislation could put one million children at risk of deeper poverty.

President Clinton initially indicated that he could sign a final bill if it did not depart significantly from the Senate bill, but the final conference report did move toward the House bill in several areas. Congress passed a Conference Report on H.R. 4 (House Report 104-430) in December 1995 which President Clinton vetoed in January 1996.

Welfare reform measures have also been the subject of considerable debate in the ongoing budget negotiations between the President and Congress. At various times, legislative leaders discussed attaching the welfare reform legislation to budget legislation, in part to avoid a filibuster under Senate rules; but Democrats invoked a Senate Rule for budget procedure known as the Byrd Rule to frustrate those attempts.

In the context of the budget wars, the overall structure of H.R. 4 as passed by the House was expected to provide savings to the federal government of $102 billion over seven years. The Senate bill was believed to save $70 billion over seven years. The Conference Report was estimated to save $60 billion over seven years by House estimates. The current debate often looks for budget savings from welfare reform. However, it may be impossible to introduce reform that trains and educates those without skills while providing necessary supports, like child care, without spending more money rather than less. For governments to reap savings in the long run, effective or fruitful reform could cost money in the short run. Otherwise we may well see a repeat of the tragedy associated with deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, where people desperately needed community programs that were never funded.

Work. States are required to implement two time limits: after two years of benefits recipients must participate in some work activity and after five years of benefits recipients are barred from further cash assistance. States are allowed to exempt up to 15 percent of their caseloads from the five-year limit, and child-only cases are exempt. By 2002, 50 percent of AFDC recipients would have to participate in a work activity for 35 hours a week or the state would face sanctions.

Without the backstop of either public service jobs or traditional relief, reform will fail with particular cruelty toward welfare's children if the economy does not provide adequate job opportunities for welfare mothers. In large part, the success of reform depends on the health of the economy. Work needs to be available, and it needs to
pay a living wage—simple justice seems to require that much—or continued assistance is in order.

**Family.** Concerning illegitimacy, a state would have the option to deny benefits to unwed teen mothers and their children and, unless a state passes legislation to opt out, a state would have to enact a family cap. While denying benefits sends a message about the undesirability of out-of-wedlock births, the danger remains that the children will be the ones who suffer. If the mother is cut off, who will care for the children—an overburdened foster care system, religious groups, or nobody?

Concerning child care, the conference agreement eliminated current requirements that states provide child care to recipients in welfare-related work programs, while exempting a parent from sanctions if she can prove that lack of child care prevented her from working. The guarantee of child care is gone.

Child support was aggressively addressed by Congress. All parties to the debate agree on the obligation of parents to care for their children—this is good as a matter of justice and virtue. Among the changes, states must establish an automated central state registry of child-support orders and new hires and must establish a unit to collect and disburse support funds. The rate of paternity determinations must reach 90 percent, and deadbeat parents are ineligible for certain federal programs. States are mandated to withhold driver, occupational, recreational, and professional licenses from delinquent parents.

**Skills.** Education and training activities are merely options for states to consider when designing their programs. The bill has no requirement to provide recipients with needed skills. Unskilled workers will find only unskilled jobs—if that much. The intended fruit of reform, employed welfare families, may not materialize unless states substantially invest in such training. To do that states will need to have the money to fund training and needed income support.

**Supports.** A variety of mandatory and discretionary child-care programs have been consolidated into one $18 billion (over seven years) block grant for child care. States are authorized to transfer up to 30 percent of their federal funds to child-care and child-protection programs. The House approach of block granting a variety of child-nutrition programs (including school lunch and breakfast) would have eliminated the individual entitlement for such support, but in response to the fierce controversy it provoked, the conference
agreement merely provided a demonstration block grant program for nutrition programs in seven states. With respect to Food Stamps, the conference report caps program costs, while preserving entitlements to states and individuals and imposing a work requirement on adult recipients (ages 18-50) without dependents. Foster care and adoption assistance retained their entitlement status, but two child protection block grants were created for several child- and family-service programs. Discussions about block granting health care for the poor in the Medicaid program continue, but they are primarily a budget issue.

Justice asks us to provide the poor with adequate supports, such as enough food. The conference report's recognition of child care is important. However, the funding level for child care will have a significant impact on the level of services provided; and many, including the President, believe H.R. 4 is inadequately funded.

**Federalism.** The conference report had six block grant programs (Cash Assistance, Child Care Development, State-option Food Stamps, Child Protection, Child and Family Services, and for seven states a Child Nutrition block grant). The cash assistance block grant ends the individual entitlement to support under AFDC, and the grant to states is capped at $16.3 billion per year for the next five years. With respect to funding, states on longer have to match federal expenditures to receive a block grant but are required to maintain 75 percent of their previous fiscal effort for these programs and are subject to sanction for failure to meet H.R. 4's standards (e.g., work participation rates). Rules concerning the cash assistance block grant are left to the states. States would have substantial discretion to design their own programs. The legislation provides an opportunity for nonprofit organizations to play a larger role in service delivery.

The question of entitlement or block grant is critical. Justice requires that the poor be cared for, and commitment to community (and justice) should prevent us from trying to separate the poor from our sense of communal identity. Block granting in combination with the repeal of federal standards raises the real possibility that many of the poor will not be cared for adequately even as they are quietly removed from our community. Our nation need no longer directly concern itself with the fate of the poor.

**Other issues.** The House and Senate bills, but not the conference report, included a variety of restrictions on legal immigrants. In order to provide states with some minimal protection from recession,
H. R. 4 creates a $1.7 billion loan fund from which states in fiscal distress may borrow. States may also save unused portions of their block grants for a rainy day.

Comparisons of the Clinton and Congressional Proposals

The following tables summarize some of this essay's discussion of the two principal proposals in terms of both critical policy issues and the selected evaluative themes.

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The Road from Here

Beginning with a concern for fruit, poor children and mothers would probably be marginally better off in economic terms under the President's 1994 proposal than under the status quo and possibly distinctly better off than under 1995's terms of debate. While the Administration's 1994 focus on transitional entitlement is more
pronounced, this proposal does not end welfare as we know it. In terms of the other kingdom themes of justice, virtue, and community, the Clinton 1994 proposal for a transitional entitlement with support services represents an improvement over the status quo. Unfortunately, political realities have caused the President to abandon much that was praiseworthy in the limited effort represented by his 1994 proposal.

The 1995 Congressional proposal represents a few steps forward and several steps backward. The retreat from entitlement is not a positive development. The danger of abandoning the unskilled poor to employment markets that may not be there is quite real. The commitment to moving recipients to work is a positive commitment as is its broad approach. It recognizes the limits of targeting when there are severe system problems. Finally, the emphasis on the role of nonprofits also represents an improvement to current policy.

For me perhaps the critical issue is commitment to caring by a just community that lies behind the notion of entitlement in a communitarian framework. The desire to encourage virtue or character is important, and I believe that it can be compassionately and fairly managed in a framework that maintains the underlying commitment not to abandon members of the community: you do not abandon family. I fear that the fruit of the current reform efforts could be the further rending of our community.

As Christian preachers and teachers seek to address responsibly the issue of welfare and the shape of its reform, this essay would contend that the Christian tradition presents a force which can enter into the current debate, both in terms of value commitments and questions to ask of policy. The reader will by now have some idea of how I address certain issues, but that is not the essay’s purpose. If the reader has found a sketch of an intelligible framework for discussing welfare policy in the context of Christian faith and for thinking about questions raised by that framework and that tradition, then some small amount of good may have been accomplished. However, any such understanding is dwarfed by the enormity of the tragedy of poor children in a system that does not work. That enormity cries out like Abel’s blood and reminds us that we are our brother’s and sister’s keeper—we are in a community together. The debate about welfare reform is a test of that community.
Notes

The author wishes to thank Ron Wheeler and Rita Currey for their comments on an early draft of this article.

1. President Clinton has vetoed two Congressional welfare reform proposals. On July 31, 1996, the President announced that despite some significant misgivings he would sign the third version of welfare reform that the 104th Congress had passed. The Clinton Administration objected to certain cuts in Food Stamp spending, cuts in benefits for legal immigrants, the prohibition of vouchers for items like diapers and clothing for children in families that exhaust the five-year benefit limit. The Administration obtained changes from Congress relative to increased child care and the retention of federal guarantees of Food Stamps and Medicaid coverage. While there were significant changes in the Congressional proposals over 1995 and 1996, it appears the President signed a final version that still significantly resembles the proposal analyzed here. See *New York Times*, 1 August, 1996, A1, A8-11. This analysis works from the earlier 1995 version.


3. Most people tend to forget that there is a variety of public assistance such as tax breaks and subsidies from which corporations, the rich, and the middle class benefit. This is so even though these policies also adversely impact the same vital symbols of family and work ethic that welfare for the poor ignites.


10. See William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), and The


12. Ibid., 233.

13. Murray's arguments about the efficacy of poverty programs have been vigorously contested, and dispute over the legacy of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society runs strong in the current debate. For a spirited and current defense of the Great Society that contends that spending on the poor actually works and that AFDC was not a focus of the Great Society, see Susan Mayer and Christopher Jencks, "War on Poverty: No Apologies, Please" New York Times, 9 November, 1995, A-13 (National Edition).


15. See Robert B. Reich, Tales of a New America: The Anxious Liberal's Guide to the Future (New York: Vintage, 1987). This book sketches out morality tales or mythologies that Americans and their leaders have used to explain the world to themselves, such as the tale of the mob at the gate as it explains or fails to explain the new international economic environment.

16. I particularly rely on Stephen Charles Mott, Biblical Ethics and Social Change (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1-106. Mott also makes the important point that God's kingdom and justice are expressions of God's love and grace.

17. This approach bears some resemblance to the one expressed in Arthur Simon, Christian Faith and Public Policy: No Grounds for Divorce (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 49-57.

18. For two recent treatments of Jesus' message that highlight justice and kingdom themes and are oriented toward lay people see James D. G. Dunn, Jesus' Call to Discipleship (Cambridge, 1992) and Thorne Perkins, Jesus as Teacher (Cambridge, 1993).

19. Stephen Mott aptly summarizes that "biblical justice is more than an attitude favoring the weak; it implies that each member of the community will in fact be strong enough to maintain his or her position in relation to other members (Lev. 25:35-36). The special needs to be equalized are thus not only those things necessary for existence (food, clothing, shelter, e.g., Deut. 10:18; Isa. 58:7) but also the resources which are preconditions for meeting those needs: land (e.g., 1 Kings 21; Isa. 65:21-22), due process of law (Exod. 23:1-3, 6-8), independence from subjugation either as a nation or as individuals (Lev. 25:39; 42; Deut. 22:15-16; 1 Sam. 8:11-17), and participation in legal decisions." Biblical Ethics 67 (footnotes omitted). This notion of justice also has close ties to the theme of community.


32. To borrow the proverb which Hillary Rodham Clinton borrows for her book *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).


34. See Acts 2 and 6, 2 Corinthians 8-9, as well as texts relating to the collection for Jerusalem and care for widows.


36. For instance, Lev. 19:9-10 (leaving the harvest gleanings), Leviticus 25 and 27 (Jubilee), and Deut. 14:28-29 (the third-year tithe)—all represent mandatory obligations in society’s structures instead of exhortations to generosity, as in Deut. 15:7-11.

37. See, e.g., Isaiah 58; Jer. 22:13-17; and Amos 5:10-24.

38. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), par. 1883; also see paras. 1885 and 2209.


41. Bill Clinton and Al Gore, *Putting People First: How We Can All Change America* (1993), 165, 228. In his acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination, Clinton said:

   An America where we end welfare as we know it. We will say to those on welfare: you will have and you deserve the opportunity through training and education, through child care and medical coverage, to liberate yourself. But
then, when you can, you must work, because welfare should be a second chance, not a way of life. That's what the New Covenant is all about.

42. While Bane and Ellwood in Welfare Realities, 65, and S. 2224 both contend for a targeted approach, the underlying rationale of "playing by the rules" calls instead for a broad approach.

43. While many in the religious community would welcome the influx of federal financial resources, there is still the troublesome matter of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment and its Establishment Clause to be resolved.

44. See Newt Gingrich, To Renew America (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 71-86, 131-134.

45. See Christian Coalition, Contract with the American Family (Scranton, Penn.: Moorings, 1995), 85-96. The Coalition contends for "enactment of legislation to enhance contributions to private charities as a first step toward transforming the bureaucratic welfare state into a system of private and faith-based compassion" (p. 85).

46. This portion of the debate brought together some Right-to-Life Groups and the nation's Catholic bishops to oppose the family cap while the normally ferociously anti-abortion Christian Coalition supported the family cap. For another view, see, Gingrich, To Renew America, 132-133.

47. Senator Moynihan said the Senate welfare bill is "an obscene act of social regression" and "Just how many infants we will put to the sword is not yet clear. There is dickering to do. . . . Those involved will take this disgrace to their graves. The children alone are innocent," cited in George Will, "A Weird Sincerity," Washington Post National Weekly Edition, 7-13 August, 1995, 28.


49. The following summary focuses on the Conference Agreement.


53. It seems ironic that a nation of immigrants could turn a harsh eye toward legal immigrants even as Christians conveniently forget the biblical exhortations to care for the sojourner and the stranger.
Robert Kysar

The Portrait of a Scholar: The Contribution of D. Moody Smith to Johannine Scholarship

In 1965 a young Ph.D. candidate struggled through Rudolf Bultmann's seminal commentary on the Gospel of John. At the time, Bultmann's influence in North American New Testament scholarship was at its peak. No one could claim credentials in New Testament interpretation—let alone Johannine Studies—without understanding his work. Bultmann's publications on the Fourth Gospel had shocked the scholarly world with a number of radical proposals: that the fourth evangelist had composed the Gospel on the basis of a number of earlier written sources; that the evangelist's work had been edited by an "orthodox Christian" to make it more palatable to the church; and finally that the evangelist's work was further altered when the work was broken into pieces and its papyrus pages rearranged.

In spite of his careful reading, the budding researcher could make little sense of Bultmann's appeal to the sources employed by the fourth evangelist and was mystified by the commentator's rearrangement of large segments of the Gospel. He tried rereading the section devoted to

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the Gospel of John in Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* but found that the author simply footnoted his own commentary!

Then the student discovered a new volume entitled *The Composition and Order of the Fourth Gospel: Bultmann's Literary Theory*, authored by one Dwight Moody Smith, Jr. To the student's delight this work described and analyzed both Bultmann's theory of the evangelist's sources and his proposal for the displacement and rearrangement of the Gospel text. The description was remarkably detailed; the critical insights, probing. After reading it, the young scholar was able to understand the succinct comments of *Das Evangelium des Johannes*.

I was that young student, and this was my own introduction to the work of Moody Smith. Smith's early work on Bultmann prefigures his later contribution to Johannine studies in several ways. First of all, this book signaled the role he would play as a key interpreter of Bultmann. As important as this was, Smith's interpretation of Bultmann also influenced a broader trend in scholarship. Throughout nearly three-quarters of the twentieth century, American biblical scholarship was done in the shadow of European giants. American scholars followed the lead of those in the grand European tradition of biblical criticism. Smith helped develop a distinctively American biblical scholarship, beginning in the late seventies and continuing to the present.

Third, in *Composition and Order* Smith began to develop his unique contribution to the issue of the sources for the composition of the Fourth Gospel. In succeeding years he concentrated on the possibility that the Synoptic Gospels figured in the composition of the Gospel of John. In a sense, Bultmann's proposal for the sources used by the evangelist in writing the Gospel of John brought the question of sources front stage. The Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—appeared to have their sources, i.e., "Q" and special synoptic material; and efforts had been made to identify the sources of some of Paul's letters. What about the Gospel of John—was it, too, a composite of earlier Christian literature? In retrospect we see the timeliness of Smith's first major work and how it set the magnetic north of his scholarly compass.

A brief survey of Smith's work will demonstrate that his scholarship spans the whole range of the major themes of Johannine studies over the past forty years. But this essay intends something more. I hope to paint a portrait of a scholar whose major work happens to have been
in Johannine studies. From a summary of what Smith has written about the Gospel of John there emerges a sketch of a Christian scholar committed to the quest for truth for the sake of the church.

**The History and Character of the Johannine Community**

North American Johannine scholarship was irreversibly transformed at the turn of the decade of the seventies by Raymond E. Brown and J. Louis Martyn. At the time of their groundbreaking studies, the background for the writing of the Gospel of John and its setting in the history of first-century Christianity had been extensively studied. Theories of various kinds were abundant; some, for example, held that John reflected the influence of Greek philosophy, while others argued that the teachings of the late-first-century rabbis were more influential. No theory, however, had succeeded in winning widespread endorsement.

Each in his distinctive way, Martyn and Brown argued for a foundational Jewish setting for the Gospel. More specifically, they proposed that the Gospel was written soon after the Johannine Christians had been expelled as heretics from their synagogue. After this event the Johannine community and members of the synagogue contended back and forth over their respective views. This was the situation out of which the Fourth Gospel was written. Together with Wayne A. Meeks, Brown and Martyn also sparked a new concern for the Johannine community. North American scholarship began the painstaking but exciting task of exploring this innovative hypothesis.

Smith soon became a significant figure in that movement, clarifying Brown's and Martyn's work and sometimes extending it. Through the years he has tended to work from the assumption of "a polemic situation within the synagogue and later between the Johannine community and the synagogue" for the setting of the Gospel (Johannine Christianity, 23). The Jewish character of John is inescapable, and the Johannine community, Smith contends, arose from a context within or on the margins of the Judaism of the first century, c.e., the contours of which are suggested by the Qumran scrolls, Samaritanism, and wisdom speculation (John, 17-18; Johannine Christianity, 26-30; also Anatomy of the New Testament, 200-201). Thus, Smith helped us imagine the Gospel's setting as a multifaceted Judaism before the dominance of the rabbis, as distinct
from earlier proposals for a rabbinical Jewish background for the Gospel.9

While Smith endorsed the polemical setting for the origin of the Fourth Gospel, he has also qualified this position in several ways. First, he contends that there might have been a Gnostic feature to the Johannine community, since the Gospel pays such close attention to knowledge (and the Gnostics' whole belief system assumed that the saved possessed a secret knowledge). Indeed, that Gospel may reflect "an early stage in the emergence of motifs that had a later flowering in Gnosticism" (Johannine Christianity, 25; see also Theology of the Gospel of John, 12-16). The Christology of the Gospel, for instance, cannot be explained on the basis of the controversy with the synagogue alone but emerged gradually, perhaps influenced by Gnostic modes of thought. Hellenistic and Gnostic as well as Jewish elements are found in the thought of the Fourth Gospel (Theology of the Gospel of John, 20; Johannine Christianity, 34; and John, 17).

Second, following Brown, Smith is careful to detect hints of different settings in portions of the Gospel. The farewell discourses of chapters 13-17 imply an inner-community controversy, which doubtless arose in a period after the conflict with the synagogue had begun to subside (Johannine Christianity, 35). This suggests that the Gospel betrays a history of composition conditioned by later stages in the life of the community. "Thus, the present Gospel embodies and sets before the reader the history of the preaching, experience, theological questions, and conflicts of what we now call the Johannine Christian community" (Interpreting the Gospels for Preaching, 81).

This community understood itself, Smith contends, as standing in direct continuity with the Jesus of history. That is indicated by the role of the "disciple whom Jesus loved"10 and by the use of the first person plural pronoun in 1:14 ("And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory ... "). But the community had a distinct sense of identity apart from other Christian bodies. Most likely, it originated in a remote and isolated area. (Smith hints a preference for Syria [Johannine Christianity, 20-22].)11

The history of the Johannine community, however, can never be imagined only in terms of the evidence of the Gospel, Smith argues; it must also include inferences drawn from the Johannine Epistles and the Revelation to John. An analysis of the role or roles assigned to the Spirit in this body of literature may permit one to reconstruct a plausible history of the community. Revelation, in which apocalyptic
eschatology figures prominently, must be considered first because it is earliest chronologically. The work of the Spirit in conveying Christ’s words in Revelation has what Smith calls a “primitive character.” The Gospel itself reflects a later period in the community’s life. Apocalyptic eschatology is absent or at least subdued, and speeches are attributed to Jesus which clearly originated with Christian prophets inspired by the Spirit. Finally, 1 John urges the testing of the spirits (4:1), suggesting the need to control those who claim the inspiration of the Spirit (John, 9:1-9:2).  

Smith saw the wisdom of setting the Fourth Gospel and the life of the Johannine community amid the rupture between the nascent church and the synagogue. By both defending and refining it in his scholarship, he has contributed to the usefulness of this proposition.

The Sources of the Fourth Gospel

The influence of Brown’s and Martyn’s understandings of the Gospel’s setting aroused a new interest in the history of the Johannine community. That interest quickly spread to the question of the community’s specifically Christian traditions as sources employed by the fourth evangelist. Working from the hypothesis of a Jewish Christian community expelled from the synagogue, Robert T. Fortna (one of Martyn’s students) postulated a basic source within the Gospel text. (This proposal of such a hypothetical source is somewhat comparable to a hypothetical early Christian sayings source, commonly called “Q,” behind some of the similarities between Matthew and Luke.) The results were what Fortna called a “Signs Gospel,” a lengthy narrative source of “signs” (semeia) or wonder stories and a passion story. Fortna’s courageous work evoked a firestorm of controversy, into whose draft Smith was drawn.

One of the issues surrounding Fortna’s theory of a Signs Gospel was his unusual assertion that it contained both wonder stories and a passion narrative. (Bultmann, for instance, had proposed that the Gospel’s wonder stories and its passion narrative had come from separate sources.) Smith tempered Fortna’s view with some crucial analysis. As early as 1976 Smith made a case for a Jewish milieu for the proposed (signs) source. Following Bultmann’s suggestion, Smith demonstrated the plausibility of a collection of wonder stories without a passion narrative. Such a collection would have arisen, Smith
contends, out of expectations of a miracle-working prophet (Johannine Christianity, 80-93). Its function would have been to invite followers of John the Baptist into the Christian community and to differentiate Jesus’ ministry from that of the Baptist (cf. John 10:41). By the very nature of his careful scholarship Smith is less optimistic than Fortna that it is possible to reconstruct the precise text of the source. But with Fortna he acknowledges that the miracle tradition constituted the formative beginnings of the composition of the Gospel. The semeia source could have originally had a passion narrative or had one added to it later. In either case, it is likely that the story of Jesus’ passion was meant to justify Jesus’ messiahship in the face of his execution as a common criminal (Theology of the Gospel of John, 48, n. 28).

Beyond these proposed sources for its composition, there is considerable evidence that the Gospel has undergone editorial changes (i.e., redaction) in at least two stages. First, the sources themselves were edited in the process of their inclusion in the Gospel. Second, in all likelihood the original Gospel was edited after its composition. The use of sources did not diminish the creativity of the evangelist. Indeed, “. . . ‘John’ is after all, an original thinker, whose genius shines through his writings, especially the Gospel” (Theology of the Gospel of John, 74). Smith proposes that the Gospel was composed near the turn of the first century in response to a variety of issues, including the delay of the parousia, the historical Jesus tradition in relation to the activity of the Spirit, and the hostility of the world. The purpose of the composition was not essentially evangelistic, since the bulk of its message is addressed to a Christian community or communities. Literary analysis of the Gospel demonstrates that the evangelist assumes readers who are acquainted with the essential features of the Jesus story (John, 67-68, 76, 83-86, 115). Smith locates the most obvious evidence for later redaction of the Gospel in chapter 21, the farewell discourses, and possibly 6:51-58. Such redactional work on the Gospel took place, Smith contends, within the Johannine community itself (Johannine Christianity, 19).

Nevertheless, Smith’s greatest contribution to the quest for the sources behind the Fourth Gospel was made in another arena: the relationship of the Fourth Gospel to the Synoptics. While the question of other sources did not escape his view, he correctly saw that the first question on the agenda of source analysis of the Fourth Gospel had to be the question of “John among the Gospels.”
In the early 1960s C. H. Dodd persuaded many that the fourth evangelist did not use or know any of the Synoptic Gospels but instead reflected the influence of the oral tradition commonly held to stand behind the Synoptics. Where there were similarities between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel, he argued, they could be best explained by their mutual use of a common oral tradition.

Smith's attention to the issue as early as the mid-1960s positioned him to become the most valuable of the interpreters of the discussion that was soon to ensue. In his monumental survey of investigations of the relationship between John and the Synoptics, *John among the Gospels*, he creates the definitive conceptual and chronological map that leads us skillfully through the maze of different perspectives on the question. Laying a foundation in the early church's interpretation, he then moves to the nineteenth century and the emergence of a theory of independence, expressed in the strongest terms by Percival Gardner-Smith. Finally he analyses the "dissolution of a consensus" that John was composed without use of the Synoptics.

Smith's careful modulation of his own point of view over the years is interesting to chronicle. In 1963 he penned the memorable pronouncement that the burden of proof is on the scholar who would argue that the fourth evangelist knew and used one or more of the Synoptics (*Johannine Christianity*, 105). In 1980 he affirmed, on the basis of redaction criticism, that it is "less difficult" to explain similarities between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics from a theory of literary independence than from an assumption of literary dependence. Here, however, he raised the question of indirect ("at best secondary and perhaps in some cases even second-hand") knowledge of the Synoptics on the part of the fourth evangelist (*Johannine Christianity*, 105, 169-172). In 1982 in his review of continental scholarship on this point, Smith admitted that it is not possible to prove that the fourth evangelist did not know and use the Synoptics. Then he observed, "John presupposes more than he narrates," whatever that "more" might have been, and concluded that the relationship is a mysterious one (*Johannine Christianity*, 143-144).

Finally, in 1992 he repositioned the whole question.

*The Gospel of John, whether or not it was written with the others in view, now inevitably colors the way they are received and read and in turn is colored by them. Their coexistence in the Christian canon of Scripture modifies and mollifies the*
sharpness of their juxtaposition, a sharpness that has been
established and perhaps accentuated by historical-critical
readings. At the level of such reading and exegesis, the
questions of John's knowledge and use of the Synoptics
remains a vexing, critical one. At the same time, the whole
question of their points of contact and the tensions between
them, if it has not been resolved by their inclusion in the same
New Testament, has been moved to the level of theological
discussion and intertextual relationships. (John among the
Gospels, 193; see also "John, the Synoptics and the Canonical
Approach to Exegesis")

Johannine scholarship will for some time stand in Smith's debt for
his careful attention to the question of the sources involved in the
composition of the Fourth Gospel and, most especially, for his study
of the relationship between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics.
Clearly, one of his contributions is in the manner in which he
participates in the discussion. One could argue that Smith's own
position has changed only slightly since his 1963 article, but that has
not prevented him from listening carefully to the views of others.
Progress in scholarship is sometimes retarded by the dogmatism with
which individuals defend their own positions. Smith is remarkably
free of such defensiveness. Instead, he closely studies those with
whom he may not agree, being sensitive to new data or new
perspectives on old data which might be decisive. That kind of
genuine openness to the truth and respect for the work of others
characterizes both the man and his scholarship. This is evident
throughout his scholarship but clearest in his interest in the source
analysis of the Fourth Gospel.

Literary Aspects of the Fourth Gospel

Smith's willingness to learn and to grow from others' work shows
itself again in his appreciation of the newer literary methods in
Johannine interpretation. His commitment to the literary aspects of the
Fourth Gospel is already evident in his attention to the literary
relationship of that Gospel and the Synoptics. Moreover, he has
pondered the question of the literary genre of John in new ways,
teasing us, for instance, with the question, "Was John the first
Apocryphal Gospel?" He suggests the answer might be yes. Like the Apocryphal Gospels (e.g., the Gospel of Thomas), the Fourth Gospel diverged from the Markan order that Matthew and Luke so carefully honored. Insofar as Mark’s patterning of the story of Jesus was treated as canonical by the first and third evangelists, the fourth evangelist refused to be equally constrained (see "The Problem of John and the Synoptics in Light of the Relation between Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels").

Smith’s own interpretative approach is primarily that of historical criticism, using literary analysis as it was formulated in that tradition. Yet in recent years he has revised his work on the Gospel to reflect some of the new methods. Moreover, he has mentored students who have gone on to work with those methods.

In turn, Smith has welcomed his former students as his teachers. Hence, his understanding of the literary features of the Fourth Gospel is expressly dependent on the work of R. Alan Culpepper. Following Culpepper, he affirms that the Fourth Gospel can be read as a kind of "mirror," without appeal to its historical origin and setting. The chapter "The Gospel of John as Literature" in John is essentially a summary of the substance of Culpepper’s book augmented by Smith’s own flair for communication. He observes, for instance, that "because John gives a fuller narration of [Jesus'] opposition's plotting, he has a more satisfactory and satisfying plot" (John, 100).

The four Gospels, Smith thinks, lend themselves particularly to a literary interpretation, as opposed, for instance, to the Pauline letters. Methodologically, Smith seems to value the study of the literary features of the Gospel as a supplement to the more traditional or historical critical approach and acknowledges that the document may be read both as a mirror and as a window into the Gospel’s and its community’s origin. He seems to view the newer literary emphasis as a natural evolution of redaction criticism, concerned as it is with attention to the whole composition. Moreover, he cannot resist comparisons of the literary qualities of the Synoptics with those of the Fourth Gospel, pointing out, for instance, that characterization in the Synoptics is far less developed than in the Gospel of John (John, 94-96, 100-101).

The Theology of the Fourth Gospel

Smith’s interest in the Gospel of John is not for historical and literary reasons alone; he considers the fourth evangelist to have dealt with
theological issues in a more perceptive and subtle way than did the other Gospel writers. Smith has persistently articulated the theological themes of the Gospel, using a distinctive methodology, that is, to express the gospel's thought by means of its own categories. By doing so, he avoids the dangers of imposing modern and systematic categories on it. So, for instance, he discusses "the themes of Johannine theology" in two major parts, which are divisions he finds in the Gospel's own structure: "The Revelation of the Glory to the World" and "The Revelation of the Glory to the Community." Another feature of his theological method is always to put Johannine thought in dialogue with other New Testament literature, most especially with the Synoptics and Paul but also with Hebrews. An example of this feature is his analysis of the Gospel's soteriology, which entails examination of 1 John and Revelation. Indeed, for Smith the theology of the Fourth Gospel needs to be understood canonically, because it stands in a "pivotal position" in the canon where it "guides and deeply influences the reading of the New Testament" (Theology of the Gospel of John, 182).

Not surprisingly, Smith finds the heart of Johannine theology in its Christology. Such a christological Gospel cannot easily be explained solely by appeal to the community's polemical relationship with Judaism. It is more likely the result of a longer period of time during which the community dealt with various questions, in response to which the claims for Christ were heightened (John, 43, 49). While the Gospel writer achieves a delicate balance of the human and divine in the portrayal of Christ, John's unique contribution is in identifying Jesus with God's very being. For the evangelist, Jesus reveals God's glory—"the quality of God as God"—and is the monogenes ("only begotten") son by nature of his unique relationship with God (Theology of the Gospel of John, 121). The way in which the evangelist speaks of Christ's nature is not to describe some metaphysical "essence." But it would be a mistake to reduce Johannine language about Christ simply to ways of naming the function he plays in believers' lives and experience. "John obviously intends to make far-reaching, extravagant, and extreme claims about who Jesus is, and the interpreter must let him" (Theology of the Gospel of John, 130; see further 91, 103, 129).

In an astute article published in 1977, Smith characterizes the Gospel's representation of Jesus as "metahistorical." Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is at the same time both the historical figure of the past and a living spiritual reality in the church (made present through the
Spirit, or Paraclete). The Gospel's presentation of Jesus is unique in that these temporal periods are coalesced (Johannine Christianity, 184-187).  

Christology is the hub from which other themes in Johannine thought emerge. Christology is inseparably linked with soteriology. The fourth evangelist presupposes a "primitive view of the vicarious sacrificial effect of Jesus' death" but stresses the salvific results of revelation itself (Theology of the Gospel of John, 116-120). Johannine pneumatology is likewise shaped by Christocentrism, according to Smith. The Fourth Gospel suggests that Christ's resurrection is already his glorious return to the disciples. Yet unlike the Synoptics, the fourth evangelist does not require visions of the risen Lord to maintain the connection with Jesus' historical reality. The Spirit, and not the risen Jesus, is the medium of Christ's continuing presence in the community. The Johannine community experienced the reality of Christ's presence in the words of Spirit-inspired prophets. The Paraclete sayings (John 14:15-17, 25-26; 15:26-27; 16:12-15) show that the Spirit's role is that of witness to God's historical revelation in Jesus. But the Spirit also represents the words and person of Jesus for the community in its own day and for its own struggles (Interpreting the Gospels for Preaching, 88-89, and John, 55-59, 89-90; see also Theology of the Gospel of John, 141-144).

Eschatology figures prominently in Smith's understanding of the theology of the Fourth Gospel, where "the meaning of eschatology is redefined in light of the coming of Jesus" (Theology of the Gospel of John, 106). This redefinition is to be seen in the context of what has often been called the problem of the delay of the parousia. While fragments of an older apocalyptic perspective (e.g., Mark 13 and 1 Corinthians 15) are present in the Gospel (e.g., 6:40b), Johannine eschatology emphasizes that the final salvation has already taken place. The fourth evangelist's reinterpretation of the traditional eschatology addressed the problem of Christ's bodily absence from the community, as well as the unfulfilled expectation of his glorious appearing. Again, this theology must be placed in canonical perspective. To speak of the Johannine view of eschatology as a development of the older Synoptic and Pauline views would be a mistake; yet the Johannine, Synoptic, and Pauline views must be understood together (John, 86-89).

We can understand Johannine Christology only if we can determine how accurately the Gospel reports historical tradition concerning Jesus and his ministry. The evangelist's use of the gospel genre is also
important to that question. Smith argues that John's story of Jesus should not be dismissed as purely theological or symbolic, for there are features of the Johannine narrative that have an historical appeal, even when they contradict the Synoptic witness. Therefore, the Gospel's "statements or narratives deserve serious consideration as quite possibly historically superior to the Synoptics" ("Historical Issues and the Problem of John and the Synoptics," 267; see also "John and the Synoptics in Light of the Problem of Faith and History").

Interpreting and Proclaiming the Fourth Gospel

Smith's scholarly work is never done for the sake of historical inquiry alone or solely in the interest of literary esthetics. The goal of all such inquiry is a better, more perceptive reading of the document. Furthermore, Smith is a devout Christian, dedicated to the ministry of the church. Hence, his scholarship is rooted in his commitment to the Bible as the church's book.

This commitment is exemplified in his article "Theology and Ministry in John" (1981). The Fourth Gospel is Christian preaching. In the midst of the waning hope for the imminent parousia, the Johannine church focused on the presence of salvation in the proclaimed Christ. This christological understanding gives rise to the community self-understanding, i.e., distinctively Christian belief and preaching. The faith of the church manifests itself in a unique lifestyle, in which Christians reenact Jesus' love of his disciples in their love for one another. "Ministry in John is self-giving sacrifice" (Johannine Christianity, 220; see also 197-220).

The preacher's task in proclaiming the Fourth Gospel is complicated, since, as Smith puts it, "we interpret an interpretation." The interpretative dimension of the primitive tradition is "deeper" in the Johannine story. Granted, the Synoptics embody a tradition that is distant from their own time; but the Fourth Gospel adopts a perspective that is "entirely Christian," whose characters are not always early first-century Jews in Palestine. Still, he advises his readers to avoid a simplistic historicism, on the one hand, and the reduction of the narratives and discourses to purely symbolism or theological meditation, on the other (John, 107; see also 40-41 and Interpreting the Gospels for Preaching, 81-82).
Smith proposes that readers of the Gospel of John keep three interpretative frames in mind. The first includes the "preexistent, eternal" expressions of the validity and ultimate significance of the Christian message. The second interpretative frame is "past, historical," which has to do with the continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christian community. The final structure for interpretation is the "present, Christian." In the Fourth Gospel Christ is the present Lord, alive and active within the church (John, 107-113 and Theology of the Gospel of John, 101-102). Smith urges preachers to note that, in the hands of the fourth evangelist, Jesus himself has become a postresurrection preacher. Preachers should bear in mind that the literary context of any passage in the Gospel of John may be larger than it is in the Synoptic Gospels and that the historical context for the whole of the Gospel is especially important. We cannot easily equate Johannine passages with Synoptic parallels, but neither can we isolate the Fourth Gospel from its canonical companions (Interpreting the Gospels for Preaching, 91-94, 101).

There is a danger in allowing the Johannine Gospel to become a kind of canon within the canon. Smith argues that we need instead to interpret the Fourth Gospel in the context of the Synoptics and the rest of the New Testament as well ("A Canonical Reading of the Fourth Gospel," an unpublished paper). The student of Smith's work can detect here a convergence of his thought. He urges preachers not to interpret the Fourth Gospel in isolation from the Synoptics. He concludes his study of John among the Gospels with an appeal to the canonical relationship among them. His interpretation of Johannine theology is accomplished by means of a dialogue between the views of the fourth evangelist and other New Testament writers. And now he counsels the general value of a canonical reading of the Fourth Gospel. For all of his special interest in the Gospel of John, Smith refuses to allow it to be viewed apart from the whole body of the church's scriptures.

There is an exegetical reason for the canonical positioning of John in relationship with the Synoptics, namely, the wisdom of reading the Fourth Gospel as an interpretation of the first three (John, 113-114). How fascinating that this agile mind, convinced as it may be of at least a modified independence of the Fourth Gospel from the Synoptics, leads the interpreter back to a classical view of that relationship! But his emphasis on the canonical reading of John further reflects his Christian perspective. The canon is the church's book.
In the introduction to his book on preaching the Gospels, Smith paraphrases James T. Cleland's view of preaching this way: "preaching from where the church was to where the church is" (Interpreting the Gospels for Preaching, ix). That description of the homiletical task also well summarizes a cherished value in Smith's whole interpretative method. His vocation has been to illuminate "where the church was" for the sake of "where the church is."

Conclusion

Such a brief survey as this cannot do justice to the rich work Smith has done for our benefit. Yet out of this discussion there emerges a consistent portrait. One striking feature is Smith's openness to new ideas and movements, which can be seen most clearly in his attentiveness to all of the theories of the possible relationship between the Synoptics and the Gospel of John. But it is evident, too, in his use of the newer literary methods for interpretation and in his movement toward a canonical criticism. He has allowed himself to be taught by the work of others, including that of those whom he has formerly taught. I propose that in this way Smith is a model for the community of biblical studies for the way in which we might all better listen to and learn from one another.

Yet the portrait has another feature. Let me call it a "modest caution." What we see in any of Smith's writings is a careful expression of views, insights, and proposals that avoids radical claims—a crafted, deliberate, nuanced care not to claim too much and not to pretend certainty when none can be had. Sometimes in reading Smith we might become impatient for stronger assertions. But Smith is too aware of the clay feet on which we all walk our scholarly paths. He is content to make modest and qualified suggestions rather than to try to overpower us with his rhetoric. He is cautious in his proposals, for he believes that something serious is at stake, namely, the quest for truth. And his commitment to that quest is too deep for him ever to lead another way from the truth.

Works by Smith Cited Above

**Books:**

- **First, Second, and Third John, Interpretation** (Louisville: John Knox, 1991).

**Articles:**


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7. Smith’s most detailed discussion of Martyn’s work is found in his article “The Contribution of J. Louis Martyn to the Understanding of the Gospel of John.” Also helpful is “Judaism and the Gospel of John,” where he expresses the value of Martyn’s original linking of the expulsion from the synagogue and the Twelfth Benediction, although he carefully distances himself from any necessary connection between the two (especially 85 and 98). See also Theology of the Gospel of John, 54-56, and John, 76. His commitment to this understanding of the setting for the Gospel is exemplified in his discussion of chapter 16 in Interpreting the Gospels for Preaching, 83-94, as well as in the recent edition of the introduction to the New Testament authored with Robert A. Spivey, Anatomy of the New Testament, 165-166.

8. He writes, “We are hardly justified in looking elsewhere for the Gospel’s setting, especially in view of the evidence of the Gospel itself and our knowledge of the Judaism contemporary with it . . . [T]he closer one gets to Judaism, as well as early Christianity, the closer one is to John” (Theology of the Gospel of John, 56 and 72).

10. Smith says simply that the beloved disciple "defies the historical investigator," so that we can never know if this figure is to be identified with a historical or purely literary character (John, 50). See also Anatomy of the New Testament, 501, and "Beloved Disciple," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supp. vol., Keith Brim, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 95.

11. In Anatomy of the New Testament (166) he declares that a "Palestinian origin of the Johannine tradition no longer appears out of the question."

12. Smith believes that there is probably "an actual historical relationship of some sort underlying the traditional linking of the Apocalypse to the other Johannine writings. What that relationship is we may never know precisely" (John, 15). See also Johannine Christianity, 15-18. He contends that the Gospel, the Johannine Epistles, and Revelation "are related by content and perspective as well as by tradition" (Anatomy of the New Testament, 436). For his discussion of "the Johannine Circle or School" see John, 74-81. On 1 John, see especially, First, Second, and Third John and John, 59-64. Smith has been persistent in keeping the Book of Revelation in view when speaking of the Johannine literature, while other scholars have often tended to dismiss it. Still, he has exercised caution in how we conceive a relationship between the work of John of Patmos and the other canonical Johannine documents (e.g., Theology of the Gospel of John, 60-62).


15. See also Smith's discussion of eschatology in John, 89: "John moves boldly in reformulating Christian eschatology."


Testament, 201. In First, Second, and Third John Smith concludes, "The authorship of the Johannine Gospel and letters remains an enigma shrouded in mystery" (18).

18. Here Smith agrees with Brown's proposal of a "friendly redactor" (The Gospel of John i-xii, 29, xxxvi), as opposed to Bultmann's "ecclesiastical redactor" (e.g., Theology of the New Testament 2:9).


22. See also John, ix (as well as 10-11), where Smith writes, "The work of Frans Neirynck and others on the relation of John to the Synoptics has certainly demonstrated that any facile assertion of John's independence of the Synoptics is no longer possible."

23. For example, see my John, the Maverick Gospel, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 12-13.


30. Smith's participation in the scholarly community and the respect others have for him are witnessed in the number of articles he has contributed to *festschriften* for his senior colleagues. See "Works by Smith Cited Above," "Articles."

Richard T. Frazier

Shepherds and Wise Persons

Angels from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o'er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation's story
Now proclaim Messiah's birth.
—"Angels from the Realms of Glory," James Montgomery

Shepherds and wise men: those nameless people of faith who were invited to the birth of the Messiah and then responded so magnificently. We have no reason to believe that they ever met or mingled, for their stories come from separate traditions, each illustrating a different aspect of revelation and of faith. Yet in our minds they blend into a single audience, reverently assembled before the Holy Family.

Wise men and shepherds.

In teaching church classes at Advent and Christmas I sometimes ask people what they remember of the two stories and where each is found. The answers begin confidently but become vague with further questioning. Was a star present in each narrative? How about the angel—or did several angels appear? And how many shepherds? Most of us confuse the stories, lumping and juxtaposing the two groups much as we arrange the figures in our creches, pairing them off for the sake of aesthetics.

I also ask people to identify themselves with one set of visitors: "Considering their characteristics (as you imagine them), whom do

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you most resemble, a shepherd or a wise person?” We then divide into the two groups for a discussion around these questions:

What does this birth mean to you (as a shepherd or wise person)?
Where are you going?
  What do you hope will come of your visit?
Why these particular gifts?
What will it be like as you return home?
What do you know about the _________ (other group)?
What do you think of them?

In processing the experience we usually find that each group feels animosity toward the other visitors: shepherds are considered common and filthy, while wise persons are viewed as rich snobs. None can imagine their getting together. No, they do not even want to be together.

I recently heard of a preschool Christian pageant that the audience will never forget. All was going well until the shepherds got carried away with their roles and began poking the “sheep” with their staffs. That was such fun that they launched a surprise attack on the wise men standing next to them. After besting their adversaries from the East they moved on to the angels, eliminating any “heavenly peace” that existed on the small stage.

Wise men and shepherds. Who were these ancient people that an infant has coupled for eternity?

Sages, leave your contemplations;
Brighter visions beam afar. . . .

In writing his Gospel, Matthew was concerned with the kingship of the Messiah. His account starts with establishing the royal lineage from Abraham and David and continues with the recognition of Christ by astrologers from the East. While such documentation may seem unnecessary, it sets the stage for all that follows. Matthew wants to be clear from the start about the identity of this baby, the King of the Jews, the fulfillment of prophecy.

Given this purpose, the wise men were the natural choice as an audience for the Messiah’s birth, presumably because of their authority and respectability. (Think of the importance of political
recognition in the modern world, and you will understand the significance of these men for Matthew.) Very likely they were astrologers from the East, scholars well-versed in the best of pagan lore and religious sensitivity. Later legend made them kings, named them, and even assigned meaning to their gifts: gold signified a king; frankincense, the herb of temple sacrifices, was for a priest; and myrrh, used for embalming, was given to one about to die.

Shepherds, in the field abiding, Watching o'er your flocks by night...

Luke, in his Gospel and the companion volume Acts, used different images, for he was more concerned with showing the direction of the ministry of Jesus than establishing his royal and Jewish identity. Christianity sprang from Jewish roots but quickly moved from the domain of God's chosen people to those outside traditional bounds, especially Gentiles and the outcasts of society. Women, the poor, and foreigners, previously rejected as "impure," now found themselves favored by God. Luke's later reporting of the parables and narratives of Jesus underscores this theme in rich detail. Luke's first parable, however, may have been just this: the enacted parable of the watchful shepherds.

Keepers of sheep are invited to Bethlehem in Luke's Gospel, for they, though faithful, were outside the bounds of respectability. Shepherds were typically looked down upon by the orthodox religious for several reasons: they were common, and their dirty hands kept them from observing the ceremonial law. They may have been considered dishonest as well. Even in its beginning the invitation of the Gospel defied expectation and conventional logic.

Though totally different, the two groups did share a common characteristic. Both were excluded, shepherds because they were unclean, and wise men for being foreigners. The purity system of the day defined both groups as unworthy, for different reasons. They were outcasts. But here, at the time of divine birth, all found themselves favored, in a way they could never have imagined.

How often we see this dynamic! Those who represent the mainstream of respectability cannot see past their hierarchies and rigid social structures to what is happening in God's creation, while those on the fringe may have sensitivity to perceive and an openness to wonder. Women and men who are marginal may not be blinded by the
world's definition of success. The characteristics that leave them overlooked are the very qualities that let them hear God's invitation and accept it.

Matthew and Luke underscore this irony in their Gospels. Matthew, for example, records the Beatitudes, in which Jesus raises the ultimate paradox of God's blessing those who are ordinarily rejected—"the poor in spirit . . . , those who mourn . . ., the meek . . ." 7

And Luke presents many situations in which Jesus involves himself with women or children or outcasts. Each time Jesus responds with respect, care, and gentleness 8 in spite of, or perhaps because of, the warnings of men that such involvement is improper. 9

Feminist theologians would applaud this emphasis but caution us not to use it to rationalize discrimination and suffering. 10 While those who are marginal may be blessed by God and have special sensitivity because of their struggles, in no way does this justify or minimize their suffering. Neglect and abuse are always wrong.

We do not need to romanticize marginal status—just remember that power and respectability have ways of blinding us to what is happening in God's world.

To understand these dynamics more clearly you might ask a small boy what it was like to play a shepherd (or wise man) in a recent Christmas pageant. The obvious questions are: What was it like? How did you feel about being a ______? What did you feel toward the (other group)? And how were you treated by the adults who directed the play?

But then, after the boy has tried to answer the questions put to him, you might observe—How well did he fit the part? Does he seem changed by his portrayal? Is there any way in which the role has grabbed him, for good or bad? Or did he grab the role?

You might ask similar questions of a girl who has played Mary, a young woman suddenly and mysteriously becoming the mother of Jesus. An adolescent or preadolescent girl stepping into that role can be deeply moved, especially as she deals with her own emerging sense of femininity and with what it means to be a woman.

Stories are powerful—so powerful that they invite us both to identify with another person and to be ourselves. And so often we do not even know what has happened.

Remember the small shepherds and their surprise attack on sheep, wise men, and angels. Those young actors did just what little boys usually do when given long sticks and asked to be still in a group.
setting. They also did what renegade shepherds might do when empowered and placed in the proximity of more educated people. They were antagonistic toward those who were different.

I have wondered how the adults in charge handled that chaotic Christmas pageant. Did they find a way both to set limits and to accept the boys? Did they appreciate the new, impromptu nature of the performance? Could they respond with grace to the little shepherds who made themselves outcast? Did they comfort the wise men? Did they take time to talk about it all? Were they changed? Did they understand that all were participating in a dynamic, contemporary parable that might illustrate what the kingdom of heaven is like? The play within the play was the real nativity for those children and for the adults who were with them.

If you have a child who is appearing in a Christmas pageant this year, know that the drama is a role play that is extremely powerful. Your child is participating in the story of God’s involvement with women and men and may respond in unexpected ways. While the theological implications will escape him or her, the experience may not. Take time to process the performance. Don’t lecture—just listen, wonder, and respond in a caring way. And allow the story to continue its slow, steady work with you and your child.

If we understand this matter of shepherds and wise men, we will work to establish a more just society guided by God’s vision of women and men and community. We will be inclusive: of today’s shepherds and wise persons, not only because justice demands it but also because we need them. We all need each other.

If we understand the journeys of shepherds and wise men, we will also allow ourselves and others the time to change and adjust to a new vision of God’s world. We will accept ourselves as we are while trying to become that which we can be.

_Saints, before the altar bending,_
_Watching long in hope and fear._

The birth narratives offer two possibilities for approaching God. One is the way of the wise men, the way of wisdom and reflection, of intentionally seeking God’s truth and following whatever clues are offered. When we catch a glimpse of God’s activity, we follow and give greatly out of love and gratitude. Wise men model the disciplined life of prayer and meditation.
The way of shepherds is the way of openness and humility as we go about our day-to-day tasks, open to God's unfolding work. We let ourselves be surprised by unexpected revelations and filled with delight. Our response is one of awe and wonder as we return to ordinary life, touched by our experience of the sacred.

We should note that in both nativity stories wise men and shepherds leave the scene completely after they have paid homage to Jesus. Not only are these visitors not mentioned again in the Gospels but there is no further mention of the marvels that attended the Messiah's birth. When Jesus begins his public ministry some thirty years later, he will do so with a blank slate, with no crowd of admirers and no public memory of his miraculous beginnings. How could this be, given the apparent eyewitness accounts of the earlier drama at Bethlehem?

The work of faith is not so dependent on testimony and miracles as we would sometimes believe. Faith, we read, "...is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). The journeys of shepherds and wise men suggest that faith takes place at the depths of a person's life and involves quiet reflection more than dramatic change and enthusiastic witness.

These marginal people, shepherds and wise men, present us with a good working model for spiritual life. In seeking to approach God we look to those most often overlooked by society. In doing so we ask God to transform us so that we too might recognize the invitation to come and be filled.

Wise men and shepherds do belong on the same stage.

Notes


7. Matthew 5:3-5.


Those who try to keep abreast of thinking about preaching and the Bible know that over the last two or three decades a profound change has been taking place in the art of biblical interpretation. Historical critical method, grounded in the Enlightenment's positivist ethos, has served biblical scholarship well for more than a century and a half. But for many in the emerging generation of biblical scholars and preachers, it has become, at best, suspect and, at worst, insidious—a bitter pill for many seasoned biblical theologians to swallow. The handwriting, however, is clearly on the wall: a new era in biblical inquiry is taking shape, something that is not by any means lost on a host of thinking preachers who work on the cutting edges of a struggling new world.

For preachers, the question is this: If the orientation to biblical texts is changing, or has already changed, then how are we to deal with texts as a basis for our sermons? It is a deeply important question, one that is still not addressed well in homiletical circles. In this essay, we are concerned with specific texts, lectionary texts—familiar lectionary texts. What we shall propose here is an alternative way to think about these texts, one that not only arises from the new "postmodern" orientations to text but that carries its own unique challenges for

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dealing with and acting upon biblical textual materials. Before we get to the texts themselves, however, it would be useful to sketch the background out of which this approach to biblical text has arisen, as well as to provide some notes about procedure for the “exegetical” studies that follow here.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, three “movements” in literary criticism can be identified. From then until about the first third of the twentieth century what was called “source criticism” dominated the scene. It maintained that the “source” of any written material exercised control over the entire literary process; so the task of the critic was to study “sources” in order to understand the meaning or outcome of a particular work.

That changed, however, during the middle decades of the twentieth century, when the focus shifted to the text itself. This “movement” came to be known by several names, most commonly New Criticism or Formalism or, somewhat later, Structuralism. The emphasis fell on the text as an autonomous entity, something having a life of its own, quite apart from its “source” or “creator.” The text, in other words, did not necessarily mean what its “author” said it meant or even intended for it to mean. It had its own “structure,” its own terministic relations and its own depth components; and good, objective “structural methodology” could take it apart and put it back together. The end result would be, then, an “objective” identification and description of the text’s “meaning,” or what in much structuralism came to be called its “meaning effect.”

This orientation to textual study was, in many ways, tailor-made for the historical-critical ethos, with its desire for “scientific” textual analysis and its positivistic view of meaning and “truth.”

In the late 1960s, another shift began to take place in literary analysis and criticism, and we are now in the midst of this third “movement.” It is characterized above all by a focus on neither source nor text but on the “reader” of the text and what the “reader” does with the text. In the United States, this movement has generally been called “Reader Response” criticism, and its roots have been overwhelmingly pragmatic; that is, based in the pedagogy of reading and interpreting literature. In Europe, where its roots were largely philosophical (and more political), the term Reception Theory has often been used to designate it, even though, as we shall see, other more radical notions have pushed it far beyond the concept of “reception.” Since at least the late 1970s, the American version of
Reader Response criticism has been finding its way into contemporary biblical studies, to the point where for many young biblical scholars this is, without question, the "cutting edge" of textual work. It is not coincidental that of the seven "new" orientations to biblical study and interpretation discussed in The Postmodern Bible, written by "the Bible and Culture Collective"—a group of those young biblical scholars—chapter 1 is on "Reader Response Criticism."

For all of its diversity, Reader Response criticism has a single unifying theme. It is that "meaning" is not a product or construct of the text, as in New Criticism or Structuralism; it is "supplied," instead, by the reader of the text. There is no "active text," laden with meaning, and "passive reader" whose task it is to discover or discern that meaning. Instead, meaning is the result of what the reader brings to and then does with the text. The question (vis-à-vis "meaning") for Reader Response criticism is not what the text says but what the reader says that the text says—and why the reader says the text says that. The question is not what the text signifies or what is its "effect", but what does this particular interpreter say that the text signifies or designates as its effect—and why does he or she give it that particular significance. The focus, in short, is not on studying the text itself, since meaning does not "reside" there; the focus, instead, is on the person reading the text and how that "reading" takes shape and form. What the text "actually says" is not only irrelevant but it is unknowable—unknowable, that is, apart from someone who is seeking to "know" it. The reader controls the "reading" situation and shapes the nature of what the text is and does. Most of the lively debate over the past 15 or so years within Reader Response criticism concerns how the reader does this.

With the text subordinate to the reader, however, an issue is raised—no, an affirmation is made—that presents extraordinary difficulty when it is brought into the theological, biblical, and homiletical academies. The issue is the sheer relativity of the reading/interpreting process, a matter that, when made explicit, offends every sensibility of the classic historical critical search for truth. Along with the relativity of reading and interpretation comes the even more fundamental affirmation of the "authority" of the reader over the "authority" of the text. There are lively debates within the Reader Response literature about the existence of accepted reading "conventions" or norms; but one never gets away from the fact that the words ultimately mean what the reader "creates" from them.
whether that meaning is held idiosyncratically or within a community that happens to share that meaning. Those “communities” or traditions are important, to be sure, and are often the measuring sticks for the “orthodoxy” of an interpreter or interpretation. But communities themselves can be seen as “relative” interpreters as well; and it is the subjectivity premise of Reader Response theory that has, in large part, made possible what has come to be called “contextualization” within biblical understanding. That is, different “communities” of origin, concern, or interest can find “their own” meanings in biblical texts, meanings that they use to embody “faith perspectives” unique to their own outlooks.

When we switch gears and turn to the European version of the 1960s/70s change in literary criticism, we find Reader Response theory carried to its conclusion. Again, there are several variants of it, but for our purposes we will utilize Jacques Derrida’s well-known concept of “deconstruction” to designate it. Its assumption is that whether deliberate and conscious or not, language is fundamentally disorienting, even deceptive. It is not just that the reader must “construct” meaning from words on a page. It is also that even the words on the page are themselves always slippery and suspect, bent largely on trying to “hide” something from the reader and always deeply resistant to being “found out.” They not only do not “contain” meaning, but by their very nature they tend to subvert any meaning that the “reader” actually brings to them. So the problem for the “reader” is always how to “subvert” the “subversion” of the text.

This process is not, though, as usually assumed (or as it sounds) a negative one. On the contrary, it is essentially positive. What is positive, in fact—despite its widespread misunderstanding—is “deconstruction” itself. Deconstruction, Derrida said, is a “normal” process; it “takes place”; it is an “event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness or organization of a subject, or even of modernity. (Everything) deconstructs itself.” Deconstruction is not destruction, even though it must involve destruction. Deconstruction is, in other words, an active and necessary (albeit an often frightening) step in the process of reconstructing. As Derrida put it at one point, to deconstruct is to participate in the process of “disengaging the past,” not as a way of getting rid of it but as a way of constantly re-energizing and restructuring it.

This is the process of criticism itself, taken to its limit, the process of insistent questioning, of constantly devising and implementing
ways to see old things in new ways. For Derrida, this is the essence of "invention" and how it works. Deconstruction is "inventive," he says, "or it is nothing at all." Invention always builds on what preceded it, but it does not duplicate it. It tears down the old in order to reconfigure the new in its place. To create a new invention, moreover, always produces a "disordering mechanism that, when it makes its appearance (opens) up a space of unrest or turbulence to every status assignable to it." Deconstruction's dissembling inventiveness "opens up a passageway" into new ways of thinking and seeing; it alone "marks a trail" into a constantly emergent future. It is no longer that the meaning of a text is comprised by the "reader's response" to it; with deconstruction/reconstruction, it is that the reader has a responsibility to upset and cut through the text, not only enabling it to undergo a metamorphosis but also allowing it to be an agent for the reader's own transformation.

One should not, of course, expect to find or even be given a new set of "rules" by which to analyze a text. This involves question-asking in its most no-holds-barred, most open-ended form. It is intellectual skepticism (not cynicism) turned loose on a text, not to destroy it but to give it "new life" so that it might be of "use" again in a new time and place. Neither Derrida nor any other postmodern theorist gives us a neat methodology for the deconstruction/reconstruction of a text. We get some hints, to be sure, from their work. But it remains for us to devise our own ways of going about the process. Derrida would be the first to tell us, however, that this cannot be a haphazard matter, though it is, at every level, both disruptive and creative. We will turn to our texts momentarily, but first let me sketch my own sense of the analytical (exegetical) process in its broad outline. I break it down into five "tasks" even though they are not necessarily chronological. They are, for me, guidelines for thinking and working.

First, one wants to describe the text's "center," its "core," its "traditional meaning." With most texts, this is not difficult. It is the meaning that we have "learned" over time, growing up in the church, being in Sunday school classes, later studying in seminary and then having preached on or taught about the "major texts" of the New Testament. One describes the text's traditional "center" not to embrace or affirm it but to hold it in abeyance, to back away from it, to circle around it, querying it from many sides, particularly its "blind" ones.

Second, one wants to get the text clearly lodged into all of its natural "contexts," whether they are social, historical, cultural, literary,
metaphorical, theological or mythical. The text cannot be allowed to
"float." This involves, it should be said, some good old-fashioned
historical critical work, but it goes well beyond that. It involves seeing
the text as arising from a particular time and place (as difficult as that
might be to pin down); it involves seeing the biblical text (as every
text) as a "strategic" response to a particular social or cultural milieu,
a milieu that sets the political and ideological agenda for symbolic and
mythic construction.15

Third, one spades the text's language and structure for its own
unique "tricks," its plays, or games. Often these will be serious
"word" or literary "games," but often they will have a sly frivolity
about them. Every text, thought, has its own linguistic gimmicks and
effects; it is the nature of text itself. One must look carefully for them,
whether they are embedded in tropes or figures of speech, in rhetorical
digs or plays, in verbal sleights of hand, in mythic turns of language,
in poetic arrangements or in structural movements. One must explore
what these are and how they work, or how they have worked, and
might still work, as many of them do. These, too, must be turned over
and over again, one might say subverted or undermined, despite their
aesthetic or ideological attraction.

Fourth, one "recontextualizes" the text into new, even unexpected,
settings. We try to put the text, in other words, where it does not
belong, or even want to go. We want to make a peripheral part of the
text its "new center," so that its surroundings change, knowing full
well that the new center will probably not hold its position very long
either. The text must be made to "interact" with various kinds of
contemporary "contexts" or settings as well. For example, when we
set the text into our pluralistic or multicultural milieus, what is
actually left of it? Its incongruities will be exposed in the process of
recontextualization. What can it say in this or that new context? What
can it not say? What limitations are built into the text and how can
they be discarded or superceded? And what will replace them? These
can be very important questions.

Fifth, one then draws on any or all of these elements in order to make
the dissected or dismantled text reconstitute itself, not as a new
affirmation, since even its old power of affirming will usually be broken,
but as a new configuration of issues and questions. The reader/interpreter
will invariably draw things from the text that were not anticipated, that
could not necessarily have even been foreseen. The text itself will have
been reinvented, to return to Derrida's phrase; and its own inquisitive
reconfiguration will be part of a still-emergent, still-being-invented future. Just as the text will have been radically decentered by the reader, it will now press the reader toward a decentering as well. Just as its games and tricks will now have been exposed, it will question in provocative, sometimes disturbing, new ways its “reader’s” game-playing and trick-making. Just as its mythic underpinnings will have been knocked awry or even destroyed, now it will “insist” that the preacher radically rethink his or her own mythic/ theological underpinnings. What emerges, even in what follows here, will not by any means be the only possible reconstruction for preaching. It will be one possibility, and it will reflect the unique perceptions and sensibilities of the one doing the work. At best, we present our “readings” to each other for stimulation and dialogue. Having said all that, then, it is time to turn to our lectionary texts.

April 13, 1997, the 3rd Sunday after Easter
Ps. 4
Acts 3:12-19
1 John 3:1-7

“On Our Collective Ego”

Even though this text concludes Luke’s Gospel, it is not so much an ending as it is the transition to Part II of Luke’s piece, The Acts of the Apostles. The very themes of the opening chapters of Acts are conjured up here: Jesus as fulfillment of the “law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms,” the so-called kerygma that “Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,” and the push to preach “repentance and forgiveness of sins ... in his name.” This summary, in fact, is the “center” of this text, its time-honored “meaning.” It is the “Go ye” of Matthew 28, but the disciples are not to go, this text says, “until I tell you.” Here is their “commissioning,” and it comes with the full blessing of God at the disappearance of Jesus. This commissioning provided the basis for the myth of the church’s growth and expansion, however it actually took place.

But what happens if we set aside that central thematic summary and begin to dissect the actual claims made in these verses? Are the statements of this text a report of what Jesus said and did in his last hours with the disciples? Are they to be considered a record of what
happened? Like virtually all of the biblical narratives, they are set up to create that impression, and in fact most of our study and preaching of such texts treat them as though they are historical accounts. Yet we know very well that that is not the case. We know that Luke/Acts was written toward the end of the first century, some two generations at least—no fewer than 50 to 60 years—after Jesus. That is a very long time. We know, too, that Paul’s letters have long since preceded these materials and that Mark’s Gospel predates this one by as much as a generation. Christian myths were not only developing; they were already well-developed. And the appearance of Luke/Acts came as one more major contribution to that myth-building process within the far-flung communities. Moreover, in all likelihood, these words at the very end of Luke were added after the document itself was completed, an interpolation made by someone who divided the piece in half.

But if this text is not a report of a historical event, then how are we to describe it? It is more realistic to see it as a reflection of a particular faction somewhere within the church at the turn of the century; and what this group produced is what it wanted others, both within the church and outside of it, to think about it. What was composed and came to be designated as Luke/Acts was, in effect, a picture of those who wrote it, even though they constructed a Jesus-story, at least in this text, as a way of constructing that.

Jesus is said to be talking in our Lukan text, is even quoted directly—see the emphatic line, “These are my words that I spoke to you.” And, “everything” written “about me” in Moses and the prophets and the Psalms “must be fulfilled.” Jesus is said, then, to have “opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” Bold claims were placed in the mouth of Jesus throughout the Gospels, but here all the stops are pulled out. The pointed self-reference Jesus is said to make about “the Christ” suffering, dying, and rising has him referring to himself in the dramatic, almost arrogant, third person. There is his heightened direction about repentance and forgiveness of sins, not “in my name” (even though it still takes the form of a quotation) but “in his name,” third person again. And, “I am sending upon you what my Father promised,” you who are about to be “clothed with power from on high”—the grandeur of the picture is bathed in hypobole.

How do we decompose their picture so that we can understand something of what is going on here? We must do so in a circular manner, actually. The Lukan Christians wrote for the church at the end of the century the story of an encounter that is set in the first third of
the century. They did so in order to create a particular impression of who they were and how they got to be that way. Those behind this text considered themselves to be the inheritors of a unique once-and-for-all mission and blessing given by Jesus decades before, so they had to devise a story about the origin of their roles, which they did. They considered the church of their time, along with their role in it, as arising from the very mind and hand of God, via Jesus, so they had to construct a story to account for that origin and rise, which they did in Acts and this text. As leaders of that church at the end of the century, they considered themselves the heirs of the church’s early heroes; so they not only had to create those heroes but they also had to set themselves “in their track,” which they did.

It all had to begin, though, with Jesus, so here at the end of Luke’s very human story, this ending appears. It makes an abrupt shift: Jesus is suddenly taken “off the ground,” so to speak, and set into a cosmic perspective. “I fulfilled everything, and everything on heaven and earth must now come through me” is a fair paraphrase of it. It is the cosmic perspective of Acts as well as Paul’s activity and theology. Here Jesus is pictured not in human terms at all but as the end-all salvific umbrella that now spreads over everything, past, present, and future. Jesus is made to claim his own exaltation, and the “myth” of the church’s opening days, given to us in Acts, is consciously summarized. The effect, at one level, is to place the stamp, the imprimatur, of Jesus’ new cosmic identity and power upon the dazzling picture to be drawn in Acts.

That, however, is not even the deepest element of this text. It is that this mythically cosmic Christ is claimed here as the originator of the “mythic” community, i.e., the church, itself. This text, in fact, is not ultimately about Jesus or Christ; it is about giving form and voice to a community’s perception of itself. It is about a collective ego that had taken shape around the myth of Jesus. We are the ones, the text is contending, who know the secret of the ancient writings, the writings of Moses and the prophets and even the psalms. We are the ones who have seen those writings in their entirety “fulfilled.” We are the ones—and this is a key phrase in such an intense assertion—who have had our “minds opened” to “understand the Scriptures.” We are the ones whose lives are now blessed in such a way that we can call others to repentance and can mete out forgiveness. We are the only ones who are now sent to all nations. We are the chosen witnesses. We are the ones that Jesus, the Ultimate of God, chose to bless. We are the ones...
who have been “clothed with power from on high.” What more need be said about our standing on religious or church matters?

The exclusiveness of it all now begins to come into focus. The sense of “we are the ones” also contains the full countersense of “you are not the ones,” whoever you are and whoever you might think that you are. The “missionizing impulse,” along with its militancy, here begins to emerge. Go and proclaim, “we” have been told; urge repentance, and administer forgiveness to all nations, to the “ends of the earth.” What “we” have is what everyone is waiting for. What “we” have experienced must become the experience of every individual. The rubber band is pulled taut. This text is a deliberate exercise in mythic self-definition, couched in the bold language of quotation and assertion. The claims of the church/community are veiled. They are hidden under kerygmatic debris. But when we get under it, what we find is a community seeking to justify itself and its “mission” with as much verbal gunpowder as it can load.

Earlier, it was suggested that, in the end, a text like this one should be pressed to “reformulate” itself into something other than what its “center” would want. So what would the outcome be here? The text, in my reading of it, can reframe itself into a question about the nature of “collective ego,” collective religious ego, collective Christian ego. And that collective Christian ego has over time and space cut a wide swath of resentment, even destruction. We all know the history of the church’s dark and plunderous side. What is not often said, however, is that that this history has not been an aberration; its roots, instead, are here in “we” texts like this one. Its roots are here where the church’s “founders” claim for themselves religious priority and superiority. This text both represents and is a part of the creation of that persistent ego.

So, then, what are we to preach here? And how? True, all of this can be cast aside; and we can just “preach Christ” as one who suffered, died, and rose from the dead. But for many who would like to come to terms with this text, that will not suffice. Can we preach this text? The answer is: not as long as we think we are preaching this text. What we can do, instead, to use this text as a way to reflect on self-definition, on our own Christian self-definition, as mythic as it was and still is. What is our self-definition now, who are we as a congregation or a denomination or a “faith”? What is the nature of our “collective ego”? How exclusive is our mythos? How superior to others, even other religions, does our theology make us out to be? And how much of that superiority, as implicit as it often is these days, is
shaped by our adherence to texts like this one? Can we be honest about this kind of text without losing our faith?

We have, for the most part, shaped our religious lives and institutions around our Christian mythos. It gives us our high sense of calling and service in the world. Still, the nature of what we know about the historical, mythic basis for our Christian faith, as well as our understandings of human pluralism, require that we turn loose of—and help others turn loose of—religious chauvinism. We can, instead, preach a gospel of Christian self-effacement and even uncertainty, one that can articulate the temptations toward universalizing and making ultimate our own religious myth. We can preach a gospel that repudiates all forms of collective superiority, whether on the basis of race, culture, or religion. We can preach a Christian gospel of authenticity and dignity, one that seeks to instill respect for those who have found their “power from on high” in different ways than we have; and in doing so, we can thoughtfully explore in the pulpit the difference between “Christianizing” the world and “humanizing” it.

May 11, 1997, the Seventh Sunday of Easter
John 17:6-19
Ps. 1
Acts 1:15-7, 21-26
1 John 5:9-13

“On the Problem of Authority”

This text is an excerpt from what is presented as Jesus’ extended prayer, largely on behalf of his disciples, that takes up all of chapter 17. The prayer, on its surface, is disarmingly intimate. It has a “closet” feel to it, and the reader is made to feel something like an eavesdropper or an interloper. At another level, the impression is created of overhearing something that is meant to be overheard. This is probably because the pray-er seems to want the overhearers to know that they are, in fact, being prayed for. Moreover, the mood of the “prayer” is not adulatory or even supplicatory, despite its petitions; it is instead very matter-of-fact, Jesus and God, Son and Father, talking. It is a heart-to-heart family chat.

Jesus does assume something of a defensive posture in it. “I did keep them in my care,” he is made to say, “those that you committed
to me. I do not want you (God) to take them out of the world, since I have prepared them fairly well (one might paraphrase) to take up their places there and not be taken in by what the world might do to them. What I am (he says) will now be displayed in and through them, and they are ready to be sent into the world; and, after all, I only lost one in the process of their preparation." This is that kind of defensiveness that comes through.

The "center" of the text is in this line of thinking: "Those that you have given me, Holy Father, have kept your word. They know about you, God, and now about me. They have believed in me, and I am praying for them that I may be glorified in them. Now it is time for me to return to you, and now everything on earth is up to them. They are now not of the world, even as I am not. I pray for their consecration in the truth as I leave them behind." That is the gist of the text itself, its "core." That is what we usually try to embody in some way in our sermons.

If we move from the center to the edges of this text, however, in order to refocus it, we become aware that chapter 17, and this excerpt from it, is not actually a "prayer" at all. This is not Jesus' prayer. We have already noted about Luke's Gospel what every good preacher also knows about John's—that this Gospel was written from the midst of a particular Christian community decades after Jesus lived. This writing, whether based on some fragment of legend or not, is at best an imaginative construct, a literary device, and a very strange and remarkable one at that. The text represents someone conjuring up what Jesus might have said in a hypothetical situation if he were going to pray in a highly intimate way to his Heavenly Father.

So what do we have in this text? We have a very important piece in the church's making of its Christ-myth. If the Synoptics represent a high level of christological myth-making, which they do, they pale when compared with the mythological flight of John's Gospel. But the deliberate literary creation of imaginative myth is virtually always done in response to a specific social or cultural crisis. The creation of the mythic, in fact, can be described as a full-blown, passionate attempt to deal with some crisis, a kind of synergistic means for explaining, in ultimate terms, how and why those things should be understood. We have two choices when confronted with the kind of myth we find in John 17. We can accept it, even embrace it, as our own, quite apart from its origins. Or we can "take it apart" (deconstruct it) in an effort to get some sense of the cultural crisis that
might have given rise to it. The wiser choice, in my view, is the latter one.

The text asks us to listen: "They know, these ones that you have
given to me, that everything I have has come from you," Jesus says to
God. "The words I have given them are the words that you, Father,
gave to me; and they know it. They know that I came from you, God.
They know that. The ones that you gave me, they are yours: all mine
are thine, and thine are mine. I am coming home now, Father; keep
these in your name, the ones that you have given me—that they may
be one, even as we are one." It is a strange monologue, to say the
least. But what prompted it? What were people saying to which these
words were a response? They appear to be questioning the authority,
first, of Jesus, and then, secondly, the authority of the leaders of the
Johannine community itself.

So the words here are designed to provide an answer: Jesus came
from God, directly from the bosom of God; Father sent Son and now
Son is going home to God from whence he came. Keep them one with
each other, God, as you and I are one. Some were saying that Jesus,
whoever he was, was not really from God—and here the writer was
replying in no uncertain terms that Jesus was from God; he was God's
Son, sent by God to earth to do a particular work. But the skeptics are
saying more than that. They are also saying that these leaders of the
Johannine community are not really the ones whom God wants to be
in charge of things. So the text picks that up, too. The ones on earth
that you gave me, God—Jesus is talking again—they have kept your
word, the very word that I gave them. And they know—they do
know—that I came from you, God, and that you gave "them" to me,
and that since they were mine they were also thine. Keep those who
lead in your name, O God, the ones that I have guarded and still guard.
They are the true ones, since they have received the words that I gave
them; and they continue to hold them. Most of all, they are the ones
who believed that you sent me.

Set in the form of an "overheard" heavenly conversation, it has a
very beguiling quality to it. The devising of the prayer motif, however,
is an unmistakable authority-building ploy; one could almost call it,
because of its design, a cynical ploy. Jesus and God have an intimate
talk, a visit, in which Jesus gives a kind of progress report on his
mission, pronouncing it successful and near its end. Jesus had to have
"come from God" in order for this encounter to take place as it does.
Can anyone doubt the authority of Jesus and the Johannine traditions
of Jesus, given such an exchange between Jesus and God? There is no “arguing” for here, even though that is implicitly done in the text; there is, instead, only a simple story of a prayer, a conversation of a family nature. If Jesus’ identity was being questioned, as it clearly was, this should counteract it.

The authority of the leaders themselves within this community was also asserted by this text: I am glorified in them, Jesus says, keep them in thy name. I have guarded them. The world hates them just as it hated me. Keep them in thy truth, the truth which I have given them. Thy word (through them) is truth. These leaders are my chosen ones. They are the ones I left behind to exert leadership as though I were with the people still. This is a potent effort by the leaders of this community years after Jesus to “put down” challenges to their own authority and leadership. It is all ingeniously done. The writing is brilliant; the rhetorical ploy fits perfectly within its larger framework; and it is all set up in celestial proportions—eavesdropping on Jesus talking man-to-man with God—that no one could argue with.

How, then, to preach? What to preach? One of the dominant issues that operates behind this text is still a lively and urgent one. It is the issue of authority itself. It has several dimensions, all of which need, somehow, to be addressed. The matter of biblical “authority” does not go away, and those to whom we preach need much help with it. The issue is not so much one of “preaching the Bible” as it is one of preaching “about” the Bible, of helping contemporary people come to terms—in a positive way—with the historical, ideological and myth-making dynamics of biblical writing. So much contemporary pop faith, even in the mainstream of Protestantism, is still faith “in the Bible,” and as that is increasingly eroded by the tides of legitimate understanding, many find that they have little in the way of preparation for anything deeper.

Is the “book” our authority? Most of us would say, of course not. What is the relation, then, between the “book” and what we “believe?” Others would say at this point that our authority rests in the “events;” instead, it represents an artful construction of mythic, theologically-reworked stories devised from a multitude of motives long after the purported “events” were said to have taken place. Many lay people already know this, so we would do well to find a way to handle it in our preaching. But since those “events” were created to account for Jesus as “God’s Son on earth,” what authority, if any, can we attribute to them? There are “lessons” throughout the stories, of
course; and we can certainly preach them as meditations about God, ourselves and each other. But if we do not address in thoughtful, serious ways the sources and histories of our own faith, we will not assist people in putting Christianity into its context of one of the world’s religions; nor will we provide help with the ongoing search within all of us for why we can believe what we do and how our beliefs can mesh in constructive ways with religious beliefs that are profoundly different from our own.

One other issue of “authority” cannot be avoided here. It concerns our own authority, those of us who presume to speak and act as religious or theological authorities. If we take this reconstructed text seriously, we must ask ourselves whether, and how, we still construct ideologies and myths to both verify and enhance the very authority structures in which we live and move. Many of our most forceful assertions about biblical meaning and perspective are themselves efforts to keep in place our “positions” of religious and ecclesiastical leadership—and in ways only slightly more or less sophisticated than those employed by biblical writers themselves. We are, fortunately, starting to see through these processes as we confront each other out of our very different traditions of Christian and religious experience. Yet these are matters that, in a reflective and honest way, can become part of our preaching in a new and richly pluralistic world.

May 18, 1997, Pentecost
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15
Ps. 104
Acts 2:1-21
Romans 8:22-27

“On Spirits, Human and Holy”

Like virtually everything that one tries to preach from the Gospel of John, these texts, too, are an excerpt of a much larger framework, one that extends as far back as chapter 14. Again, we are dealing with the familiar. The text’s center can be readily tracked. Jesus had announced his departure, much to the dismay of his immediate circle of disciples. To allay their concerns, he told them that when he was gone—and not until then—he would send them a “counselor” or a “comforter,” the Paraclete. This was the one he called the “spirit of truth” who “proceeded from the Father.” While “he” was not so named in this
text, this was the one who would, for Christians, become the "Holy Spirit." This was the one, this "spirit of truth," who would "guide you into all the truth," not with things of "himself" but with the things of Jesus "himself." It was this spirit that would "declare to you the things that are to come."

At one level, all of this is very easy, since the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, drawn from texts like this one, is thoroughly embedded in the classic teachings of the church. At another level, though, this is intensely difficult, since it is all so elusive and, if we may put it this way, so "religious." It is made more difficult by the fact that throughout contemporary Christianity, in its multitude of denominations and expressions, the doctrine of the "Holy Spirit" has probably never been stronger or more normative theologically than it is today. So, for many, to even contemplate in a critical way the biblical texts that "give" us the Holy Spirit is a risky enterprise.

As we have noted, these words were written long after the fact. And the various strands of the Jesus myth were all becoming fairly well developed by this time of this Johannine writing. One of the prominent elements of that myth was that Jesus foresaw and predicted everything about his own fate: his persecution, death, resurrection, and return to God. Here, in John’s latter-day Gospel that myth is polished and refined and set into a fantastic dialogue with the disciples. Their fear of losing him is imagined and described: What were they going to do? And the answer? The words were placed in Jesus’ mouth that another form of his "presence" would enter their midst and continue to do for them whatever Jesus "in the flesh" had done while he was with them. No need to be concerned. One would simply have to adjust to his new form.

It is not difficult to reconstruct the problem that seems to have given rise to this text at the turn of the first into the second century. Jesus was, in fact, gone from the earth; and those in the church were by then second- or third-generation Christians, none of whom had met or seen Jesus. They had the stories of the community, many of them stories that had been formed into "beliefs," and they had at least a shaky sense of togetherness around those beliefs. But if Jesus had not returned yet, as the tradition said that he would, where was he? And how were they to know where he was? What assurances were available, they wanted to know, that could keep them hanging on? He was gone and had been gone for a long time, so what did they have, really? The story of this text took shape to respond to such queries. He had to go away. What we have is his "spirit," the spirit that still speaks of him and for him in our midst, the spirit that still speaks to us his
truth. It is that spirit, the leaders say through this text, that still directs our preaching, our teaching, and our practice. It is Jesus’ own spirit that, through us, speaks of sin and of righteousness and judgment.

But can we ask the hard questions here that press upon us in a multicultural, multireligious world? The spirit doctrine that emerged as part of the Christian myth was not unusual or particularly distinctive. Isn’t it true that every religion has its “spirit” or “spirits”? Native American religions for centuries have been profoundly “spirit” religions. Many, if not most, Eastern religions have had “spirit” elements at their very heart. African religions, even in their modern expressions, are saturated with “spirit.” They all take different forms and are conceived of in deeply different ways. But they are still “spirits.” In fact, the presence of a spirit world, and the interaction between the material and the spirit worlds, is one of the seminal marks of that which humans for eons have called religion. Christianity also has its evil spirits, as even this Johannine text acknowledges, its “evil one,” its “ruler of this world.” Perhaps the singularity of its “holy spirit” and its counter “evil spirit” give it a somewhat unusual cast; yet the Christian spirit world, itself conceived of in a variety of theological formulae over the centuries, connects the Christian religion to the religions of the world, past and present.

It is assumed in Christian tradition that to be a Christian one possesses the “holy spirit,” the protector and guide for life in all of its configurations; so this text suggests. But the creation of the holy spirit was and is every bit as mythic as the other dimensions of our Christian faith, as difficult as that may be for some to confront. And texts like this were crucial to the formation of that spirit myth. But we are put into an odd position here—odd because there is something about the human species that we readily know to be “spirit.” In fact, the notion of spirit has historically taken a lot of forms. If we begin with the Christian view of it, spirit is anthropomorphized, and apparently was from its beginning. It is a person or a thing that comes in to inhabit a human being, something, presumably, that can be chased out if one is not careful. Nevertheless, that spirit is separate from the human being—it is something that God places within one; and because God places it there, it is a holy spirit. The biblical texts know it primarily as the “spirit of Jesus.”

But there are other meanings of spirit as well. It is generally understood that there is a human spirit, something that is in us by virtue of our being human. This spirit can be debased or cultivated; it
can work on what we call conscience; it is captured in some remarkably communicative way—some would say "holy" way—in great art, in music or literature or performance. Down through history, out of every culture and corner of the globe there have emerged the great human spirits that have left a shining mark upon the world. The biblical texts certainly know of these, too.

Another form of spirit is one that we might designate as collective, as when a spirit or movement (or whatever one might call it) sweeps a people together, either physically or culturally, or both. Students of sociology have long been fascinated by the nature of these powerful, communal "spirits," which can work for good or ill. There are other spirit forms as well, but these are mentioned only to put the notion of our holy spirit into context.

So we are to preach about "spirit." For some of us, however, the Christian view of spirit as an entity that someone is actually given as a result of ritual act or supernatural transformation leaves much to be desired. It is too anthropomorphic and too other-worldly and at the same time too literal, since this spirit is supposed to lead the one who has it "into all truth." Is it possible for us to think about the reality of spirit but to do so without the textual baggage of its being somebody who inhabits us or who mystically teaches us what the truth is? Can we acknowledge that there is something within us that we can call spirit, something that can actually become holy, depending on the kinds of lives we live? Could it be that we are pulled so strongly to the figure of Jesus, however dimly we grasp who or what he was, because he seems to have possessed "a spirit worth emulating," a spirit that we might want to keep alive in the world by cultivating it, too?

In thinking about the moral lessons of the Holocaust more than thirty years ago, Hannah Arendt urged that human beings be capable of telling right from wrong even when all they have to guide them is their own judgment which, moreover, happens to be at odds with what they must regard as the unanimous opinion of all these around them. These few who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgments, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by because no rules existed for the unprecedented.

This is an example of the spirit made holy. Our times are desperately in need of such spirits. In preaching, can't we rethink and
reformulate the myth of the "holy spirit"? What we know is that the great spirits of our time, of all time, call us to rise above what we are or think we can be. We also know that neither are they always designated as "holy," nor do they always go by the name "Christian."

May 25, 1997, Trinity Sunday
John 3:1-17
Ps. 29
Isaiah 6:1-8
Romans 8:12-17

"On a Pluralistic Gospel"

Finally, we turn to John 3 and the narrative of Nicodemus and Jesus, which, in typical Johannine fashion, turns seamlessly into a theological statement. The "center" of the text can be easily seen. You must be born again, Jesus tells Nicodemus. How can that be? Nicodemus asks. By water and spirit, Jesus answers, at least if one wishes to enter the Kingdom of God. Their conversation continues briefly, then, before it gradually returns to the narrator or the preacher who is behind the Johannine text. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." And then comes one of the most memorized verses in the entire New Testament, which sets both theme and tone for the verses that follow. John 3:16 is at the core: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

The familiarity and lyricism is both haunting and soothing—or so most of us have learned it. But when we try to get out of this textual center to stand in the margins and look at this text carefully, it takes on an odd and troubling cast, one that is not easy to respond to.

For Christians of that late first and early second century, the Jewish connection was a continuing, and apparently very frustrating, problem. Christians were determined to chart their own religious course, but the break was not easy to make, or to make cleanly. And their frustration was beginning to show. One can see it in many places, but few more clearly than here in the Nicodemus story and its "theological" aftermath. As always, we have to remember that this story is an "imaginary" one, written long after Jesus, whether based on
some bit of tradition or not. What Jesus says here is not "Jesus talking" but is, instead, the writer’s reflection of how the community believed that Jesus would have talked and what he would have said in such a situation.

What the text gives us is a man named Nicodemus, set up as a kind of Jewish representative, an "ideal" Jew. He is then—quickly and summarily—subjected to a sarcastic put-down, even though that is not the way we are used to characterizing what takes place here. But if one comes at this brief story naively, that is what one finds. Nicodemus is given a simple question to ask and then is hit with a set of biting responses. For example: "Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these simple things?" and "If we talk about simple (earthly) things and you do not understand, surely you—a teacher of the Jews—do not expect to understand if we should talk about heavenly things." This is not a discussion, not even a brief one. Those statements reflect a decidedly arrogant attitude—and not on the part of Nicodemus, not even on the part of Jesus, but on the part of whoever wrote these words on behalf of the community years later. More accurately, this is a kind of impudence, the impudence of the young making light of the old and the venerable.

Why do we have this story? This is not the Jesus of the gentle myth. This is not even a Jesus of whom one can, or should, be particularly proud. Do we have this story so that Jesus, the leader of the "new," can be seen to mock and otherwise put down a leader of the old? There is no religious dialogue here across generational lines, even though that is what one might actually hope for. Nor is there any sense here of the young trying to understand the old; in fact, in the picture that the text draws, the old is actually seen (unwittingly, perhaps) as trying to comprehend the emergence of the new, the reformer. But instead of being welcomed as such an inquirer, he is treated with disrespect. The Jews early on in this Gospel must, it seems, be set up as stupid and insensitive people, with Jesus himself said to have made that judgment.

True, the Nicodemus "event" is used to make a point about the Christian desire for "newness," for "being born from above," for a new sort of spirituality which many, it seems, did not believe Judaism any longer possessed. But such treatment of the Jewish religion in print? All of the explanations one might give for it do not do away with the questions it raises. We usually preach the newness part of this story, but can we see the text in larger terms for the pulpit? Can we see
in it a way to think self-critically about our attitudes toward other religions in a deeply diverse religious world?

It should come as no surprise that the teaching that emerges from this text (verses 14-17) carries the same attitude and demeanor of "us" verses "them." It is not that the verses are not aesthetically pleasing and reassuring. They are—if one is a Christian or is inclined toward Christianity. But they are deeply offensive, even divisive, words as far as those who are not Christians are concerned. It is polarizing language, and in the starkest terms possible, "Whoever believes in Jesus/Christ has eternal life; and whoever does not, will forever perish." It is not the modern fundamentalists who created this rigid formula. It is people like these behind John's Gospel, "God sent Jesus into the world that, through him—and through no other—it might be saved." For those who reject Jesus as Christ, as God's Son, it is not God who condemns them to eternal punishment; it is they who do it to themselves by their rejection. Such is the edict.

Where is the gospel here? There is very little of what we might call gospel here, despite the assertion about God's loving the world. There is only what sounds like a terrified little community someplace in that late first-century world that felt itself threatened from both without and within and that was trying verbally (and mythically) to protect itself. And drawing lines—hard, fast, bold lines—was the only way it knew how to do that. It is just too bad that what they wrote down survived to become a normative picture of early Christian paranoia. This is, it must be said, a text of religious terror; and it has been since it was first penned. Verse 16 is not the one that we should have been teaching children for generations as their induction into Christian thinking and theology.

If we ask the most difficult question of all—What are we to preach here?—we can easily find ourselves at a loss. Some will simply ignore the text's polarization or try to theologize it in some way to minimize its force. But for many of us those are not acceptable alternatives. Even though the text cannot be taken as normative, it can be used as a backdrop for reflecting on what the gospel does mean in a world such as ours; and for drawing a useful contrast between the "gospel" in one particular community of the late first century and the gospel for our "world community" at the start of the third millennium.

We are the ones who must preach that the days of "believe or be damned" are over. Forever over. Yes, we have our beliefs and our faith in God; and despite our own differences of theology and
interpretation, we all find in our shared churches both challenge and meaning for our relationship with God and with each other. But we occupy a very small planet, one which we share shoulder to shoulder with multitudes of people whose belief and faith systems are dramatically different from ours. And those people, whatever their color, ethnicity, economic situation—or religion—are our brothers and sisters. Their faiths, too, have integrity and authenticity, and, under God, we must all live with honor and respect for each other. In some way, this must constitute the gist of the gospel we preach and practice.

Yes, there is such a thing as an “old Christianity,” one that saw itself as alone expressing the mind and “person” of God. Its servants and missionaries for generations not only condemned “unbelievers” on behalf of God, but often appointed themselves as the executioners of God’s judgment. It is time for Christians to find, or even create, a new gospel of pluralistic “otherness,” one that can rise above narrow and perplexing biblical texts like this one. Somehow, somewhere, our preaching has to be part of “reframing” that gospel. We live in a complex and exciting world of multiple religions and beliefs, and the gospel must, if Christianity itself is to survive, come to terms with that in the pulpit.

Notes

1. In the previous issue of this journal (Quarterly Review, Fall 1996), I tried to sketch the nature of this change. See “The Preacher and the Bible: In the Midst of a Revolution.”

2. In my essay, “The Preacher and the Bible: In the Midst of a Revolution,” I discussed Leander Keck’s repudiation in his Lyman Beecher lectures of those who have turned their backs on historical criticism as an “objective” method of study. Ironically, Keck provides another such statement—an “updated” one, however—as a lead article in the 50th anniversary issue of the journal Interpretation (Vol. 50, April 1996). This time, he merely scolds those “postmoderns” who have turned from historical criticism, admonishing them to “stop,” as he says, “worrying about the Bible and start worrying about themselves.” With keen cynicism, he acknowledges that we might be able to “learn something” from the new postmoderns; he adds, though, that “to acknowledge the postmodern mindset need not entail delivering ourselves to the newest form of Babylonian captivity. Rather, learning what we can learn from it is like plundering the Egyptians as part of our exodus from the past.” (“The Premodern Bible in the Postmodern World,” 135.)

3. In Formalism or Structuralism, the concept of meaning was (is) never a simplistic one. While meaning is based in the text itself—meaning was not “imposed” on a text
by an author but was created by the text’s terminological relationships—it was invariably a "layered" meaning, arising not only from the arrangements of "surface structures" but also from so-called "deep structures," a concept borrowed from Chomskian linguistics. For the Formalists, meaning was not a simple matter of "adding things up" within a particular text. What a study of the internal relations of a work was said to reveal was what was called a "meaning effect," or the sum total of how the language structure worked together at every level to create a certain kind of "reaction" to the work itself. This "meaning effect" was more than cognitive; it was a complex, linguistically based reaction that the text was said to produce.

4. At this stage, there are numerous readers and introductions available for Reader Response theory. One could begin, for example, with Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Cronman, eds., *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). Every "introduction," moreover, divides the field in a different way. In my judgment, at least three different orientations to "Reader Response" theory have emerged. One can distinguish, first, those who tried in a sense to find the fence separating Formalist theory and Reader Response ideas. These are the ones who have talked about an "interaction" between text and reader, most notably, Wolfgang Iser. A second category of "Reader Response" theorists includes those who are most highly "subjective," without any fear of that term at all. The most influential of this group has been David Biale, who equates the "perception of the text" with the "subjective reconstruction" of the text. A third orientation to "Reader Response" that has been deeply influential is one usually characterized as "social." In a sense, Stanley Fish gave rise to this notion in 1976 when he began the process of locating the "reader" within what he called an "interpretive community."

In recent years, as we have said, Reader Response criticism has been applied to theological and biblical hermeneutics. Three excellent short summaries that have appeared recently put the orientation into biblical perspective. One is the opening chapter (collectively written) in *The Postmodern Bible* by a group calling themselves "The Bible and Culture Collective" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); another is Edgar V. McKnight's "Reader-Response Criticism," in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticism and Their Application* by Joel B. Green, ed. (Louisville/John Knox Press, 1993); and another is Kevin J. Vanhoozer's excellent essay, "The Reader in New Testament Interpretation," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* by Joel B. Green, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). In addition to these, one must note the prolific work in Reader Response criticism by Robert Fowler, whose most recent short piece is "Mapping the Varieties of Reader-Response Criticism," in *Biblical Interpretation* (1:1-28, 1994). An excellent bibliography, including both literary and theological work on Reader Response, is found in *The Postmodern Bible."

5. One can see this clearly, for example, in Anthony C. Thiselton's essay "Reader-Response Hermeneutics, Action Models and the Parables of Jesus" (in *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* by Thiselton, Roger Londis and Clarence Walhout (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985). Thiselton's essay expresses a deep fear of Reader Response theory, while acknowledging that it is not easy to argue against. His even deeper fear is of what he calls the "hermeneutical radicalism and theoretical skepticism that characterize the work of Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty" (p. 103), work which, as we shall suggest, carries Reader Response thinking to its logical conclusion. At one point he says that "an interpretative community that regards the words of Jesus of Nazareth as privileged or authoritative cannot but feel ill at ease"
here (p. 106); and a few paragraphs later: "The Reader-oriented models of Rorty and Fish, while rightly rejecting a falsely optimistic textual objectivism, leave us in an entirely relativistic world where we can do no more than live out our interpretative activities without even asking questions about validity, norms, or truth in any ultimately serious sense" (p. 110). What Thiselton proposes as an alternative is what he calls an "action" model based loosely on the "speech act" theories of scholars like J. L. Austin and others. For Thiselton, it is still the "text" that performs, that controls the "situation," but it does so not with "meanings" but with its "actions," actions which take place "on the reader." Thiselton, like many other biblical theologians, is caught in an uncomfortable dilemma. He is faced with grasping the nature and depth of the change that is taking place in hermeneutics and yet struggling with the "cost" of "giving up" the old "authoritative" position of the text.

6. While it is very difficult for anyone to admit, there is, remarkably, an "anything goes" quality to Reader Response theory, even though many Reader Response theorists—particularly in biblical studies—are clearly stymied at the idea. This is largely because every human being, regardless of cultural or "community" base, is unique informative symbolic makeup; in fact, we value our differences. It is those differences, though, that cause us to find and/or create different readings of text, any text. And even while norms may exist for how we are to see something, we prize our ability (and right) to veer from the norm. Ironically, it is a compelling idea that cannot be brushed aside. It is not an aberration of the reading/text process; it is the very nature of the process itself. What is also possible, then, is to challenge the norm itself; and the "subjectivity/relativity" is taken an additional step.

Not surprisingly, there is very little discussion of this in the biblical literature of reader response, since it is here that the "theory" flies most directly in the face of traditional biblical studies and traditional biblical studies scholars. By and large, those biblical theologians who are working with Reader Response theory know this, even though it is not a particularly popular thing to say, since the "academy" is so keyed to the text having a "life" and "meaning" in itself. By and large, those biblical theologians who are working with Reader Response theory know this, even though it is not a particularly popular thing to say, since the "academy" is so keyed to the text having a "life" and "meaning" in itself.

Robert Fowler wrote an article a few years ago in which he raised this issue about as delicately as anyone could. Commenting on the nature of such study, he said: "On occasion it will be appropriate to allow and even to encourage the critical distance between the critic and the object of criticism to narrow and even to collapse. This means giving up the Cartesian fantasy of the subject/object split and learning to recognize that the observer is always implicated in the observed and vice versa. The so-called human sciences need to learn lessons analogous to the lessons already learned in the so-called hard sciences, e.g., the sobering lesson of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in subatomic physics or of Gödel's principles of incompleteness and inconsistency in mathematics. Criticism needs to make its peace with the inevitability of subjectivity and ideological commitment (my emphasis). In fact, our colleagues in other disciplines have long since faced up to subjectivity and are now wrestling with the tangles of intersubjectivity (his emphasis). See Fowler, "Postmodern Biblical Criticism," in Foundations and Facets Forum 5 (September 1989): 23.

One cannot but note that Fowler is not only very delicate about the problem of "subjectivity" but must still defend it from the principles of physics and mathematics, the "hard sciences," supposedly the secure bastion of the "objective." It is not just subjectivity that is at issue here; however, it is also the matter of how human beings imbue words and texts with their own meanings and "ideas." Nor is it just criticism and even theology that must make "peace" with "subjectivity" and "commitment," since not a few critical (and process) theologians have already made their "peace" with them. Preachers, too, those who live intimately with the Bible, must also make their "peace" with how one
reads and interprets texts and with what that understanding does to traditional notions of the sacred "authority" of the Scriptures.

7. The obscurity of Derrida's voluminous writing, is, by now, legendary. His books are numerous, and no two are alike in either content or style. For someone beginning in Derrida, a useful and widely available "collection" is Peggy Kamuf's *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). Her notes are easy to follow, and major sections of most of Derrida's works are included in this 600-page anthology. The notes that follow here will be identified as from the Reader.

8. See Reader, p. 41, from *Of Grammatology*.

9. It is significant that throughout his writing Derrida uses the word *deconstruction* to talk about numerous things. At one point, he wants to "deconstruct" modern "transcendence" in order to bring about a kind of immanence (Reader, 20-21, from *Speech and Phenomena*); at another point, he wants to deconstruct human "presence" in order to subvert ideas such as *proximity* and *immediacy*, the words by which we designate the things closest to us (Reader, 42, from *Of Grammatology*); at other points, he wants to deconstruct "consciousness" itself, a task that would allow the emergence of a whole new sensibility (Reader, 50-51, from *Of Grammatology*).

10. See Reader, 209-218, from *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*.

11. A number of young biblical scholars have already become noted "practitioners" of "postmodern" approaches to biblical text, but their work varies widely, as should not be surprising. One who has attracted considerable attention is Stephen D. Moore, whose book *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) has been widely discussed as an example. One must be very careful, however, since Moore, in particular, tends to treat the text as overwhelmingly a stylistic and linguistic problem. My contention is that the true genius of reconstruction is in the underlying disruption of the text's assumption by radical question-asking and issue-tilting, more than in the twists and turns of linguistic formulation, as important as these are to Derrida, Moore, and others. Everyone, in the final analysis, cannot pull off the intriguing word and pun games that Moore does, but everyone can learn the process of "decentering" a text that enables it to emerge in a new configuration. And the language play of Moore cannot be adapted to preaching the way a deconstructed/reconstructed view of the text can.

12. Throughout Derrida's massive work are statements of how to do this—often as asides or encased in his own comments on a particular text. Derrida goes at a text as an uncertain thing, with a kind of primal question: Why? Why this? Why here? If one starts with a text, the context of the text is intensely questioned. The context is always elusive, almost impossible to pin down; the right questions can always bounce it loose, however.

13. While I have noted Reader Response and "deconstruction" as methodological guides here, most will be aware of other methodological influences that I, too, am very conscious of in what follows. I am aware of being influenced in part by "rhetorical criticism." See Hurton L. Mack's *Rhetoric and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), and what is now called "ideological criticism." (See, in particular, the chapter by that title in *The Postmodern Bible*.)

14. One wants (from this perspective) to push the center out of its "privileged" position. One turns the text upside down and "on its sides" in order to desanctify its "center." This is what Derrida and others mean by "decentering" the text. It does not work merely to confront the text's "core" and ask it "investigative" questions, since the text has already heard all of the questions before and has a set of packaged answers, as it were, waiting for the inquirer. The "decentering" process is an effort to "sneak up on the text," to catch it with its "guard down."

DECONSTRUCTION/RECONSTRUCTION
15. No one in this century has explored the nature of this literary process more than Kenneth Burke. Beginning in 1931 with *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968 [originally 1931]), Burke discussed at length the way in which any work of art—and his concern was primarily literary—represents a means for "coping with" a problematic social or cultural situation. Throughout later works, he devised a unique vocabulary for this understanding of literature, one that is now virtually taken for granted. His concepts of "entitlement," of "literature as strategies for situations" and "logology" all provide different descriptions of this process.

16. I am very aware that one of the most important "authority" issues of today (more than then) concerns the authority of the Bible. I have bypassed the issue here since it is dealt with earlier in this essay and in my earlier *Quarterly Review* piece, "The Preacher and the Bible. . . ."

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