In Harm’s Way: Theological Reflections on Disasters
Luis G. Pedraja

Going to Hell and Rising Up: Reflections on Being in the Church and Being Feminist
Melanie A. May

Constructing Powerful Images for Pastoral Practice
Nancy J. Ramsay
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Introduction

Some powerful images for your consideration: Obedient Daughter; Beautiful Girl; Dutiful Wife; Good Mother; Silent Spinster; Useless Old Woman. Both women and men are captured by these images and seek either to live them out or enforce them on others. Many women, on the other hand, have powerful experiences that put them at odds with these images. Their father is hateful or abusive; they are not pretty; they lose their husband; they can’t stand their children; they want to run their own business; they fall madly in love with someone outside the norm. They feel the chill that comes from being different. Often, the psychic tension created by being alienated from one’s community can become all but unbearable.

Why introduce this issue with the theme of women’s suffering? Because the scenario I have just described occurs frequently but is discussed and written about only rarely. In fact, this short description of pain is not just a story—it is an unstory, according to Riet Bons-Storm, author of *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women’s Silences in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Abingdon, 1996). An unstory is one that wants to be told, but which dies away into silence against the authoritative voices of others representing orthodoxies of one kind or another. Unstories are unacceptable, unimportant, and unbelievable. Bons-Storm, a Dutch theologian, takes aim particularly at pastors who have a hard time listening to women struggling to find their own voices and know their own minds. Many women, young and old, will choose not to talk to their pastors rather than feel misunderstood, trivialized, or undermined. This is the silence that emanates from the erstwhile dutiful daughters, good mothers, and pious widows. The other, more terrible silence comes from those who have simply given up and left the church.

But occasionally, the women who stay will speak up and give us new stories to consider. For women such as these, drifting along with...
the tide of church membership is not enough. Melanie May shows us that the price of staying in the church as a feminist is a radical, sanctified honesty. Why do I stay? becomes the stark, unavoidable question. Her answer leads her into the lived mystery of commitment, vocation, and quest. May evinces a powerful love for the church even as she reckons with its sins.

May poses an active stance toward the claiming of ministry. If you value ministry, you must seize it for yourself. But how? In addressing this question with seminary students, Nancy Ramsay points to the effectiveness of metaphors to express the deepest, most personal aspects of ministry. Metaphors, not one metaphor only. Ramsay speaks of metaphor clusters, and I suppose the right verb here is to gather. We gather clusters of metaphors that are rooted in the ideals in scripture, and we bind them to our core sense of self. It is a bold work that must be done with courage, honesty, and in conversation with others.

We open with a theological response to one of the most poignant tragedies experienced by our church in recent years: the death of several children from tornado damage during a Sunday worship service at Goshen United Methodist Church in Alabama. Luis Pedraja challenges the idea that theodicy must be done in private reflection after the event. No, he says, the problem of evil is something we address when we run to help someone in need. That God-given response is part of the answer we seek.

A minute ago I proposed that various orthodoxies had the power to silence women and their stories, especially when they did not fit the dominant paradigm. Mark Horst's article on the Confessing Movement has an important place in this dialogue, because it explores the question of core values and doctrines as a necessity in the church's life. As indeed they are. But doctrine is often unknown and undervalued, and it is therefore treated as a relic from the church's past. Hence, a mere orthodoxy—and a weapon that can be used against the weak. Horst gives us an important invitation to reinvigorate the church's kerygma and doctrine through the means of the Confessing Movement. Is it the best way, or the only way to do it? That, I think, is a point our readers will want to consider.

Carlyle Stewart adds to our understanding of the tasks of leadership with some potent biblical images from the Books of Samuel: the prophet Samuel, who understood the dangers of absolute authority and wished to spare his people; Saul, who tried so hard but seemed
destined to failure; and David, blessed with God’s favor and his people’s hero-worship, who learned about true leadership through private grief and regret. These are models well worth our contemplation and Dr. Stewart brings them to us in their full historical context.

Meanwhile, the rebellious women in our midst hold out a thoroughly Christian hope for abundant life: being heard, being believed, being respected, being accepted, and in Christ, being loved. Bons-Storm writes that it is the rebellious quality of women and men, who remain faithful to their own experiences and reactions, that gives them a chance to overcome the silencing and hurt experienced by the cast-offs of society. Pastors who recognize and commit themselves to honor their experiences—and the still, small voice of rebellion that resides in each of us— can find that liberating force at work to end the suffering in their own lives.

*When I speak of an end to suffering, I don’t mean anesthesia. I mean knowing the world, and my place in it, not in order to stare with bitterness and detachment, but as a powerful and womanly series of choices; and here I write the words, in their fullness: powerful; womanly.* (Adrienne Rich, *Sources*, Hyeck Press, 1983)

I wish you well in this season of our Lord’s Passion and Resurrection.

Sharon Hels
While he was still speaking, another [messenger] came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; and I alone escaped to tell you."—Job 1:18-19

On the morning of Sunday, March 27, 1994, a series of powerful thunderstorms stretched throughout the South. At Goshen United Methodist Church in Piedmont, Alabama, parishioners gathered to celebrate Palm Sunday. Many of the children, dressed in their Sunday best, waited anxiously to take part in a drama celebrating Palm Sunday. Outside, the storm clouds gathered strength. As the congregation celebrated Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, disaster struck. A deadly tornado generated by the storms hit the church, shattering windows and toppling a brick wall on top of the pew where the children waited to sing their songs. Amidst the rubble lay nineteen bodies, including those of six children.

Throughout the world disaster strikes without warning, shattering lives and dreams and giving rise to questions about the goodness of God and creation. As an active member of the American Red Cross

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disaster action team, I am often faced with the reality of disaster. As a theologian, I am faced with the questions left in their wake. And these questions become more difficult when children gathered to worship God become victims of a horrible disaster.

But why do disasters shake us so deeply? The answer lies in our construction of reality under ordinary circumstances. In order to function in our environment, we organize a cognitive structure that provides us with an ordered worldview. We connect events, objects, and contingencies to create patterns and paradigms that facilitate our understanding of our environment and our ability to negotiate it with more ease and security. Since we depend upon certain conditions, promises, and situations for our everyday existence, we rely upon the dependability of the structures that form our worldview. The onset of a disaster ruptures the structures of our worldview and the accustomed manner in which our community functions. It shatters the context, order, and security of our world. Whether we are directly or indirectly affected by the disaster, the frailty and finite nature of our world and of our lives forces itself upon us. We are left speechless as we try to respond to the calamity and restore order to our world. As a result, we reevaluate our worldview.

A community’s response to a disaster usually has four phases. In the first few moments after the disaster, there is a “heroic phase,” in which people act to help others to survive and recover. This phase overlaps the “honeymoon phase,” in which the community is drawn together. Eventually, there is a period of disappointment and disillusionment. As frustration builds with delays and failure to receive assistance, people begin to blame the community and to seek causes for the disaster. It is during this phase that people begin to raise questions as they grapple with the enormity of the disaster. Eventually, as the reconstruction phase begins, the community begins to rebuild and to recover.

In these four phases we see two different types of responses to a disaster: an active response that works toward the restoration of the community and the lives of those affected and a reflective response in which people look for blame, responsibility, and meaning. We usually encounter theological questions in the reflective phase but seldom in the active phase. If we neglect the active and practical questions raised by a disaster and postpone all questions until the reflective period, then our theological discussions on disasters tend only toward theoretical questions of theodicy. This creates an unhealthy dichotomy.
between theory and praxis. I intend to balance the two by examining both the active and the reflective responses to disasters from a theological standpoint.

Responding to Disasters: Responsibility and Response-ability

We derive the word response, from the Latin word respondeo, which is composed of the prefix re, meaning “again” or “back,” and spondeo, meaning “promise” or “covenant.” Literally translated, respondeo means “to promise something in return for something” but it can also mean “to answer,” “to reply,” and “to comply with obligations.” At the root of these meanings are the notions of promise and obligation. Etymologically, the Latin verb respondeo also gives us the word responsibility. Promises and covenants imply an obligation to fulfill the conditions of the promise. Thus, responsibility implies a covenant obligation to fulfill our promise or agreement. A broken promise or a breach of responsibility leaves us feeling betrayed.

Disasters disrupt community services and social structures that normally protect and comfort us. Access to services, utilities, roads, and emergency personnel is limited, adding to our feeling of betrayal. In the case of natural disasters, we also feel betrayed by nature. We trust and rely upon certain predictable structures and patterns in nature. Natural disasters raise questions about the predictability and benevolence of nature. One’s trust in God’s benevolence and providence also faces difficult questions after a disaster, leaving one feeling betrayed by God.

As a result of this sense of betrayal, people look for someone or something to hold responsible; they attempt to establish connections between the disaster and its perceived causes. They re-examine their trust in community agencies and try to determine responsibility in terms of causes for the “breaking of the promise.” To determine how the promise (God’s loving covenant with humanity) was broken, theological questions form around the areas of divine providence, theodicy, evil, and sin. However, most of these questions tend to focus on the causative agent and not on the nature of the promise. For a proper theodicy, both need to be examined.

Another way in which we respond to disasters is through active attempts at restoration and recovery. Community agencies and relief organizations rush to restore services and provide emergency
assistance. Volunteers donate goods, money, and services to aid the victims. Religious believers reaffirm their faith. Rather than seeking a cause for the disaster, they seek response-ability, emphasizing overcoming the destruction and restoring the covenant promise. Theological reflection in this case examines providence, human responsibility, and action. Here, questions regarding divine providence are not about preventing the disaster but about empowering people to overcome the disaster and restore the covenant promise.

Responsibility as Causes

According to the eighteenth-century British philosopher David Hume, one of the primary manners in which human understanding develops is through the causal connection of ideas and objects. When a disaster strikes a community, it is natural for people to seek connections between the disaster and some causal agent. Among these questions, theological questions arise. Those who believe in the omnipotence of God may perceive God as possessing the power to cause or prevent the disaster. As a result, they may look toward God as a possible causal agent who bears responsibility for the disaster. Insurance companies can contribute to this perception by referring to natural disasters as "acts of God." Similarly, those who claim that disasters occur as a punishment for human sinfulness also adhere to this view in asserting that God either allowed or caused the disaster because of human sin.

Theodicy is in the forefront when we consider how God bears responsibility in disasters. If we believe that God is all-powerful and all-loving, then why is there evil? This question is not easily resolved. David Hume, in his Dialogues concerning Natural Religion, presents this very argument by cunningly questioning each presupposition. If God is willing to prevent evil but unable, God cannot be omnipotent. If God is able but unwilling to prevent evil, then God is not a loving God. But if God is able and willing, then the reality of evil becomes problematic. Since we do experience evil, then it remains for us to question the two other presuppositions. It is to these that we now turn, since they bear relevance upon questions of responsibility in the wake of disasters.
Divine Omnipotence and Freedom

Most theological considerations qualify the first presupposition, divine omnipotence. These qualifications generally take the form of a self-limitation on God's part to allow for human freedom. In his early writings, Augustine offers a theodicy that places the responsibility for all evil upon the corruption of humanity's free will. According to him, God created humanity with a free will as a means for bringing forth righteous acts and goodness. However, humanity continually turns away from God and uses its will for evil. Because of this corruption of the will, evil enters the world. Although God foreknows what humanity will decide, including its eventual rebellion against God, Augustine argues that evil is still solely the responsibility and creation of the human will. Tempered by the Pelagian controversy, Augustine later adds that this freedom to choose good, originally given to Adam, was lost due to Adam's disobedience. As a result, humanity can only choose to do evil. However, Augustine does not advocate the existence of "natural evil." Although things may befall us as a punishment or as a consequence of our sin, there is nothing that is evil in nature. What might be called "natural disasters" are not evil in themselves, although we perceive them as evil. On the contrary, Augustine argues, these things that are perceived as evil are used by God to bring forth goodness by correcting and strengthening our character.

The recognition of human freedom and frailty allows one to shift the responsibility for disasters from God onto human agency and sin. For those who take this position, it is humanity that somehow breaks the promise and brings forth destruction upon itself. In its most radical form, this view holds that there are no "innocent victims" of disasters, since we are all under the curse of sin. In more temperate views, it points to our fallenness as humans. Both of these views need to be addressed. First, we must differentiate between the claim that disasters occur as a
punishment for sin and the claim that disasters are the result of sin. The first claim places part of the responsibility upon God as the one who allows or causes the disaster as a penalty for our sin. Although humanity deserves the punishment, it is still God who ultimately inflicts it. The second claim places the responsibility solely upon humanity. In the second view, the failings and sins of human agents bring forth disastrous conditions.

The first claim, that disasters are a punishment for sin, is a popular theme for some preachers and well-meaning pious individuals. It offers an explanation consistent with a worldview that envisions a corrupt world and a righteous God of wrath at odds with one another. This theme also gains support from biblical accounts such as the flood (Gen. 6:5-7) and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). It was also the explanation offered by Job’s friends for the calamities that befell him. Through the years this has been a recurrent theme in explaining disasters and epidemics.

However, claims arguing that disasters and calamities are God’s punishment for sin are difficult to maintain. While we may all be culpable to some extent, it is ludicrous to argue that victims of a disaster are somehow more sinful than others who are spared. When a deadly tornado struck the community of Grand Island, Nebraska, in 1980, some claimed that the destruction was God’s punishment upon that community. But as Ronald Allen, a minister in the community at that time, noted, neither was the sin of that community any greater than those of other communities nor was the damage limited to the unjust. Others might say that disasters occur as a warning for others to repent. However, this raises further questions. For instance, how does the death of children worshipping God at Goshen United Methodist Church serve as a warning for others to repent?

Second, it is a position countered by other equally valid biblical claims. According to the Bible, Job’s tribulations are not the result of God’s punishment. New Testament accounts also counter claims that calamities occur as punishment for sins. In John 9:1-2 the man born blind does not suffer as a punishment for sin. Nor are the victims of Pilate’s violence or those killed in the collapse of a tower in Siloam worse sinners than others (Luke 13:1-5). Although these passages present other difficulties for theodicy, they indicate that calamities are not necessarily God’s punishment for human sinfulness. On the contrary, the New Testament provides us with images of a loving God that offers forgiveness and grace. Finally, while the presupposition
that disasters are a punishment for sin safeguards God's omnipotence, it is problematic for assertions that maintain God's benevolence. For instance, why would a loving God cause or allow the death of children waiting to sing songs of praise to God? An omnipotent and loving God should be more selective in determining who incurs divine wrath.

On the other hand, we can say that disasters often are the result of human sin and failure. Traditionally, this interpretation attributes the cause of disasters to the disruption of God's intended natural harmony as a result of humanity's rebellion against God. But we need not look to an Adamic Fall to understand how sin leads to disaster. We need only to look at ourselves and our society. Disasters do happen as the result of our sin. We build faulty equipment out of laziness and greed. We ignore the forces of nature and stand in defiance of them. Our sin contributes to the conditions that bring forth both natural and human-made disasters. Yet exactly how our sin contributes to these calamities is a complex issue.

Certain types of disasters are easily attributed to human sin. The bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, is an example of a disaster attributable to human sin. We can point to human agents as the cause of the destruction and suffering that resulted from the bombing. However, even in these cases we cannot abstract the responsibility of those who perpetrated the bombing from the complex structure of fallenness and sin in society. While individual responsibility for these acts cannot be minimized, neither should we ignore the corporate nature of human fallenness as a contributing factor. Patterns of greed, destruction, oppression, and violence are perpetuated in the structure of a society, often influencing individual acts of violence. Within this framework we cannot isolate the individual act of terrorism or negligence as the sole cause of a disaster. The structures of our society and of our world are far more complicated and intertwined than such simple location of responsibility would indicate.

While human sin can be held accountable for disasters to some extent, the complex interrelation of creation and society precludes simplistic locations of responsibility upon individual agents or situations. In Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion, Wendy Farley notes that the consequences of our sinful actions do not limit themselves to those who perpetrate those actions. On the contrary, it often affects those who are the least capable of perpetrating these acts. Thus, we cannot readily claim that those affected by the
disaster are the ones to blame. Nor can we hold a single individual responsible for a disastrous act. Social injustices and violence become inherent in our social structures, leading to further violence and destruction, often beyond the scope intended by any particular individual. Our lack of vision, our unwillingness to cooperate with others, and our greed also contribute to many natural disasters, blurring the lines between natural and human-made disasters.

The recurrent theme of interrelatedness in recent theologies points to a different understanding of how sin contributes to disasters. When we understand nature and humanity as being interrelated, it becomes difficult to understand sin merely as a matter of individual behavior. Instead, it is our tendency towards isolation and dominance that emerges as sinfulness. Our refusal to recognize our limitations and accept our proper place in the world becomes the source of sin. This recognition is echoed by many feminist theologians who are pointing the way to a reconstruction of our understanding of sin and nature in light of the interrelated nature of creation and society. As a result of these theologies, there are new ways of interpreting the role played by human sin and “natural evil” in disasters.

According to Kathryn Tanner, human life is interrelated and dependent upon other life forms and environmental patterns. When we ignore these connections and stride beyond the limits of our biosystems for our own gain, we become susceptible to the same havoc we bring upon the environment.

If we ignore our limits and the interconnected nature of our world, we can bring disasters upon ourselves and others. For instance, as we contribute to global warming we alter weather patterns that often affect us in a disastrous manner. In other instances, our failure to consider our interrelation with others leads to disasters for them. Thus, many communities boasting improved drainage systems unwittingly contribute to flooding in communities downstream.

In some instances, socioeconomic factors are also to blame. Communities with better financial resources can provide more...
efficient drainage and flood control, while poorer communities are left to deal with the additional overflow. These affluent communities are also better equipped to respond to emergencies, minimizing loss of lives and property. Similarly, many devastating fires occur in impoverished houses and apartments that often have poor wiring, substandard construction, and a lack of safety features such as smoke detectors, extinguishers, and fire walls. In many Third World countries the destruction and loss of lives from earthquakes has been magnified due to poor construction and substandard impoverished housing.

Those who live in those conditions cannot afford to minimize the risk by improving the quality of their dwelling. These same socioeconomic conditions contribute to many instances of people taking risks by living in dangerous conditions such as trailer parks in the midst of "tornado alley." Often, these factors are aggravated by human greed. Faulty material, the desire to save money by compromising quality, and bribes given to inspectors who ignore violations contribute to the devastation of natural and technological disasters.

The interrelated nature of reality allows us to connect human freedom, moral evil, and natural evil in a more comprehensive manner. The dividing line between natural disasters and those caused by human acts is not as clear as it may appear. When we build in a flood plain or use substandard construction materials, we make ourselves more susceptible to the devastation of natural forces. As we impinge upon nature's domain, we place ourselves in the paths of disasters. The regenerative power of forest fires becomes disastrous for those building in wooded areas. The hurricanes that flush out bays also take boats and houses with them. The proliferation of homes and resorts on beaches reduces their power to buffer storms. Our failure to accept the limits imposed on us by natural cycles places us at a greater risk of being affected by a disaster. Although many of our actions contribute to disastrous circumstances, they are not always sinful actions in themselves. People who build homes in a flood plain might not do it out of outright sin. They might build their house in the flood plain out of ignorance or because they enjoy the view and are willing to take the risk. They might even take the risk because socioeconomic conditions prevent them from building or buying a house in a safer area.

Our recognition that both human freedom and sin bear responsibility as contributors to disasters does not take away divine responsibility. Although God may not be the causative agent of the
disaster, one may still wonder about God’s responsibility in preventing
disasters. This raises further questions regarding divine omnipotence,
providence, and benevolence. To resolve these questions, other
qualifications to divine omnipotence and providence can be made.
These qualifications can take at least two forms. One redefines divine
omnipotence. The other redefines the nature of creation. However,
they are related to each other.

Divine Responsibility and Omnipotence

According to Alfred North Whitehead, the doctrine of “an aboriginal,
eminently real, transcendent creator, at whose fiat the world came into
being, and whose imposed will it obeys, is the fallacy which has
infused tragedy into the histories of Christianity and
Mahometanism.”

Instead of a distant, unmoved, all-powerful God,
Whitehead envisions a God of love that moves
tenderly to change the world by gentle
persuasion.

In qualifying divine omnipotence,
Whitehead preserves a vision of a loving God
who never overrules the creature’s freedom
while seeking eternal harmony. In contrast to
this divine love, it is evil that occurs as an
overpowering force, seeking individual purposes
and disregarding the whole.

Charles Hartshorne and other process
theologians follow Whitehead’s lead in arguing
against an omnipotent God. The rejection of an
omnipotent God does not imply a powerless God.
Rather, it implies a necessary limitation for the
existence of an actual world in which freedom is a
reality. In a manner similar to “free will” theodicies, process
theologians argue that an omnipotent God would logically preclude
the existence of any free beings that have creative power for
self-determination.

Logically, for true freedom to exist, God’s power
and ability to override the freedom inherent in the world would be limited
by the past and present decisions of free beings. However, process
theodicies differ from traditional free-will theodicies in asserting that this
limitation of God’s power is a metaphysical necessity and not a
self-limitation. They are also different in that they do not limit freedom

The rejection of an omnipotent
God does not imply a powerless God.
to humanity. Process philosophy accords all beings some degree of self-determination. However, it does not deny that God's power and ability are the greatest power possible. Accordingly, God is still the principal source of new possibilities and the one who preserves the orderly structure of creation.20 

The recognition that freedom requires the imposition of limits upon divine omnipotence is not unique to process theology. Logically, anyone can arrive at a similar conclusion. Karl Barth, for instance, writes that "God's freedom is not merely unlimited possibility or formal majesty and omnipotence, that is to say empty, naked sovereignty."21 If we understand God to be free and self-determining, we must also recognize that there are limits to divine power. Freedom demands a decision and a determination. It implies a choice that actualizes certain possibilities while precluding others. These decisions that preclude contradictory possibilities from occurring simultaneously give the world structure, order, and intelligibility. They also create new limitations that cannot be overcome without disrupting the creative patterns that are already in place. As a result, even God's own freedom necessarily implies limitations, for a God of unconditioned power would be chaotic and demonic. True freedom demands an active choosing and determining that is applicable to the self as well as to others.

Envisioning God's omnipotence in this manner provides a new understanding of God's responsibility in relation to disasters. While God may desire to prevent disastrous occurrences, many contingencies may limit God's ability to prevent them. The same natural structures and patterns that give consistency to our world can preclude radical divine intervention. This does not mean that God does not act in our world, but it does mean that God's activity is constrained by the factors that give shape to creation. Natural patterns and human decisions may come together with disastrous consequences. The same natural forces that provide us with life-giving rain may generate tornadoes. Someone's free decision may place them in the path of the tornado, and the greed of an unscrupulous contractor may lead to the destruction of that person's house. All of these contingencies come together in an unique set of circumstances with disastrous results. This complex web of interrelated contingencies may preclude God from intervening in a dramatic fashion. Intervention at any level could compromise the integrity and nature of creation. Diverting the path of the storm might place others in danger.
Preventing a given decision would deny creaturely freedom. God might provide a possible means of escape for the person, but that would still be subject to that person’s decision to escape. As a result, the structure of creation limits divine omnipotence.

Life requires a certain degree of indeterminacy to grow and expand.22 Like the Genesis accounts that portray God as fashioning creation out of chaos and disorder, modern scientific thought no longer envisions a world ruled by rigid laws but an open-ended system governed by patterns and probabilities. This openness allows freedom, creativity, and growth to occur. But these random processes that allow for the richness of creation can lead to both beneficial and disastrous combinations. If God were to intervene at every instance that endangers some individuals, it would compromise the patterns and freedom of creation. God’s decision to make this type of world also precludes the disruption of these patterns for the benefits of a few.23

One can also argue that the indeterminations and struggles that bring forth both disasters and life can be beneficial to the development of humanity. For instance, the second-century Christian apologist Irenaeus believed that humanity was originally created in an immature state with the purpose of growing as part of the continual creation of God.24 This leads John Hick, a present-day theologian, to conclude that the type of environment needed for such an immature creature to grow both morally and spiritually requires a world with challenges, difficulties, and dangers. This environment also requires structures that are not readily altered by humanity, forcing humanity to contend with its limits and transcend them at their own risk.25 In ignoring and transcending the limitations imposed upon us by our environment, we place ourselves at risk. This does not mean that God’s purpose requires the massive destruction of specific disasters. Rather, it means that while the real dangers and contingencies that could lead to a disaster are necessary for humanity to grow, an actual disaster is not.26

If God were to intervene at every instance that endangers some individuals, it would compromise the patterns and freedom of creation.
Divine Responsibility and the Nature of God's Promise

As a result, we need to redefine the nature of the divine promise. In the biblical accounts, the rainbow stands as a symbol of God's covenant promise not to bring destruction upon the world by water (Gen. 9:11-17). Nevertheless, we still suffer destruction as the result of floods and other disasters. If we are not to hold God responsible for these disasters, then we need to reconsider the nature of the divine covenant with humanity. This entails a reconsideration of the structure of creation and the nature of divine providence.

First, we need to realize that the structure of the world is not that of an idyllic paradise devoid of dangers, destruction, and pain. The very structures that promote life and a loving relationship with God also result in suffering and death. For there to be genuine love between the world and its Creator, God would have to make a world that is distinct from God. However, a world that is distinct from God is also beyond God's control. Genuine love can occur only in freedom. It is in this freedom that we are able to respond out of love to our Creator and to our fellow creatures. But that which makes us distinct from one another, thus allowing us to love, also makes us finite.  

It is in the nature of finite existence that inconsistent possibilities cannot simultaneously occur. It is this very structure that provides the world with order, coherence, consistency, and meaning. Without these limitations, oppositions, and determinations, reality would be chaotic. It would also be devoid of meaning since definition implies a limitation that differentiates one thing from another. The continual perishing of reality opens the way for the emergence of new possibilities. Without this continual opening for growth, reality would be static and devoid of life. But this dynamic openness of life also brings forth polarities, conflicts, and death. The open nature of life and the limits of our finite existence also prevent us from foreseeing all the contingencies that may lead to a disaster. It is in this ebb and flow of life and death that we see the tragic nature of a world fashioned out of love.

Second, God's providence does not circumvent suffering and death. Rather, divine providence empowers us to endure and overcome both suffering and death. Christianity believes that God is the God of the cross: the One who endures human suffering and death. It is only through enduring death that the possibility of resurrection emerges. This does not mean that God desires that we suffer. It means that
God's love does not circumvent the structures and finite nature of our world. Instead, God endures pain and suffering with those whom God loves. In the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, Christianity transcends suffering by incorporating our suffering into the life of God. But God's creative power does respond to this suffering. There is a resurrection. In the face of death and destruction, God promises life.

God is the continual source of new and creative possibilities for life that ensure both our future and the continual creation of God. It is here that we encounter God's power and promise. God's power does not assert itself over and against creation. Rather, God's power continually creates a place for creation out of divine love. God is powerful because God is creative. Divine love continually creates new possibilities for life in spite of the continual perishing that confronts us.31 God's providence and promise is the assurance that suffering and death will not exhaust God's granting of new possibilities for life.

Divine providence does not entail the prevention of the suffering and destruction that occurs in disasters. God might provide us with possible means of avoiding disasters, but disasters may still occur due to our failure to recognize or accept those possibilities. However, God does not abandon us. The paradigm of the cross points to a God who is willing to suffer with us, not to an immutable and impassible deity. God suffers through our pain and anguish and provides us with the ability to overcome and transform the pain, destruction, and chaos of disaster into a renewed promise of life. Although pain and death take their toll, we find hope and assurance in the promise that death and destruction will continually give way to new life. But we must never forget that the knowledge of this promise and hope are not always enough to diminish the pain and anguish of those who suffer and grieve. We may offer answers to the question of responsibility, but they are not sufficient in themselves.

Divine love continually creates new possibilities for life in spite of the continual perishing that confronts us.
Response-ability

The ability to respond to disasters is different from the continual seeking of responsibility. Although it may have reflective dimensions, it is primarily concrete and active. Response-ability is the tangible affirmation of divine and human love. First, response-ability results from the divine promise of God’s loving providence. But it also has a human dimension. We, too, are empowered and enabled to respond to the plight of others. In recognizing our common struggle for life in the face of death and destruction, we feel a desire to help alleviate the suffering and restore hope. And because we have the ability to respond we also have a responsibility that holds us accountable for our response.

God’s loving providence assures us that we will be able to overcome the devastation wreaked by disasters. God’s providence traditionally defined as conservatio provides for the well-being of creation by providing and conserving the necessary conditions for the creature’s well-being. Although the destruction of a disaster seems insurmountable, God provides for our needs in unexpected ways that allow us to recover. While a disaster may shatter our lives and our community, it does not deprive us of possibilities. New possibilities emerge where none were envisioned. God is able to respond to disasters through God’s providence and empowerment.

The destructive forces of disasters are also part of the goodness of creation. They are the same forces that provide us with life-giving water and regenerate forests. In spite of the devastation, the totality of creation remains intact. The storms that generate tornadoes and hurricanes still provide us with life-giving water. The fires that devastate forests and homes do come to an end. The patterns and structures of our world do not completely disappear. God is still able to fashion order out of the chaos. But God’s fashioning of order does not override the structures and freedom of creation.

Death and suffering remain in the path of a disaster. They can be neither diminished or trivialized. They are a tragic consequence of finite existence. But we must never confuse them with evils to be avoided. The paradigm of the cross acknowledges that God does not circumvent suffering and death. Pain and suffering are a natural part of the world. Pain warns us of dangers that may otherwise go unrecognized. We suffer in the face of the limitations and loss that are part of our finite nature. But through challenges and suffering we
mature and grow. This does not mean that all suffering is a necessary and acceptable part of creation.\textsuperscript{32} Nor does it mean that we do not bear a responsibility for alleviating suffering. However, we are assured by the divine promise of loving providence that all suffering will end and that death will give way to life.

The most tangible affirmation of divine providence occurs in us as we encounter a renewed sense of hope and courage that affirms the goodness of creation. The most common and immediate responses after a disaster are acts of courage and compassion. These acts affirm God's providence in the courage and empowering that allows us to respond to the plight of others. These acts mediate God's active compassion in response to suffering.\textsuperscript{33} We may speak of these acts in terms of divine providence for several reasons. First, it fits with the traditional categories of divine providence as \textit{concursus}, in which divine and creaturely actions concur with one another. This does not necessarily mean that God's will overrides the human will. God empowers human freedom by providing possibilities for courage and selfless giving. Thus, divine providence does not violate human freedom. Rather, it empowers its activity.\textsuperscript{34} As a result, both divine and human will work jointly for the good of those affected by the disaster. Second, we can also speak of this activity as divine providence because it conserves and affirms the goodness of creation. The provision of new possibilities for life both empowers and affirms the goodness of creation. Acts of courage and mercy continually restore our hope in the goodness of creation.

These acts point to a double aspect of divine providence. On the one hand, they affirm that God provides for the continual goodness of creation by creating new possibilities for life, hope, and compassion. These possibilities enable us to respond in creative, compassionate, and life-affirming ways. But on the other hand they also point to a second way in which God provides for the well-being of creation. Humanity is able to respond. We are created with the ability and natural desire to respond to the suffering of other human beings. The biblical account of creation (Gen. 1:26-27) indicates that humanity

\begin{center}
We are created with the ability and natural desire to respond to the suffering of other human beings.
\end{center}
was created in the image of God. While interpretations of the image of God abound, we can speak of its intended role as representing God. As bearers of the image of God, humanity is responsible for enacting and mediating God’s work in creation. Our ability to respond and aid disaster victims manifests God’s provision for a loving response to those who have suffered loss in the wake of disasters. We are called to respond. Through our courage and giving as we respond to the plight of those affected by the disaster, we affirm the goodness of creation.

Acts of courage and compassion transform our despair into hope. The courage and selfless giving of volunteers and ordinary citizens who respond to disasters provide us with hope and affirm the goodness of creation in spite of the devastation of disasters. After a disaster, communities come together to assist one another. Agencies and churches respond in many ways that encourage hope and life. The Red Cross, religious groups, and community agencies respond with food, clothing, shelters, and other necessities. Even ordinary citizens, moved by compassion, offer assistance. Strangers become friends as they work side by side to repair houses and offer relief. Racial and economic barriers that separate people temporarily disappear as people join in the relief effort. In the hours and days after a disaster people are shocked and overwhelmed, but they are also driven to give and help. Through acts of compassion and giving, we affirm the goodness of creation and oppose the destruction. Our ability to respond to disasters is an affirmation of life that opposes the onslaught of destruction.

Although disasters bring out the best in many people, we must also recognize that it can bring out the worst. To affirm the good and ignore the bad would be naive. There are looters and swindlers. There are price gougers and opportunists. The greed, sin, and fallenness of humanity does not disappear after a disaster. This is the price of human freedom. Although God empowers humanity to act for the good of creation, no one is forced to act in any given manner. Our fallenness and sin can still lead to our rejection of the possibilities for goodness and compassion provided by God.

Since we are able to respond to disasters in a compassionate, life-affirming manner, we bear a responsibility. The looters and opportunists are not the only ones who sin. Our refusal to answer the call for help is also a sinful rejection of our responsibility. According to Wendy Farley, “sin replaces the spontaneous pity for those who suffer with indifference, with an apathy that cannot be moved by
another’s sorrow.” Sin can turn our concern and attention inward, causing us to ignore the plight of others. While it is natural for disaster victims to go through a period of frustration, disappointment, anger, and concern for their needs, if they concentrate solely upon these aspects they deny their own ability to respond. In ignoring active compassion as an aspect and demand of our responsibility, we add to the suffering involved in the disaster.

Theological reflection needs to move beyond the theoretical questions of responsibility as theodicy. Rather than seeking the causes of evil, we need to affirm its overcoming and our ability to respond. God’s provisions work towards the overcoming of the tragic structures of human existence. God responds to our plight in granting new possibilities for life that overcome the suffering and closure of our finite existence. God also empowers us to respond in a constructive manner to the many tragedies that confront us. The power of the Resurrection overcomes the power of death without circumventing it. As a result, we are empowered to respond and to overcome but not to avoid death and suffering. Although it is part of human nature to seek causes and responsibility, we also must affirm our response-ability. It is through our response-ability that we affirm both life and the goodness of creation. Through our affirmations of life in spite of death we remain faithful to the message of the gospel. But this affirmation is not expressed merely in words. Only in the life-giving and life-affirming action of the community do we find the true power of the Resurrection.

In the wake of the tornadoes that brought death and destruction to the community of Piedmont, Alabama, came an affirmation of life. People responded to the plight of those affected. The community was slowly rebuilt. The very following Sunday, the members of Goshen United Methodist Church once more gathered amidst the rubble to worship God. As they gathered on Easter morning, they once more affirmed the power of the Resurrection and the gift of life in spite of the agony of death.
Notes

1. This information is gathered from the American Red Cross, document ARC 3089-1 A (May 1993), 3–4.
5. Ibid., II.1: 35–36.
11. Ibid, 43–47.
12. See Sallie McFague, The Body of God: An Ecological Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 175. McFague identifies sin as our "inability to identify with others outside ourselves, the refusal to acknowledge that one is not the center of things."
15. Ibid, 343–344.
19. Ibid., 276. See also Whitehead, Adventure of Ideas (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 215.
23. Sallie McFague makes a similar argument in The Body of God, 175.
26. Ibid., 375–376.
27. See Farley, *Tragic Vision*, chapter four, for a more detailed development of this theme.
28. According to Whitehead, the finite involves certain limitations, definitions, and boundaries that allow for distinctions, thus constituting something as "this rather than that." *Modes of Thought* (New York: Free Press, 1938), 52–55.
29. See Farley's *Tragic Vision*, especially 60–61, on the tragic structure of nature.
32. Wendy Farley in *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion* offers a valuable distinction between pain and suffering as natural aspects of creation and what she calls "radical suffering" that is degrading and dehumanizing (51–55).
33. See Farley, *Tragic Vision*, 118.
34. Christopher Morse in *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), 219, discusses the problem of *concursus* and opts for a similar solution which states that creaturely freedom is not "abrogated but activated" by divine Providence. I go a step further by suggesting that providence activates this freedom by the provision of possibilities that empower and evoke responses of courage and benevolence.
35. Farley, 46.
Melanie A. May

As I have reflected on being in the church and being feminist recently, this title, "Going to Hell and Rising Up," presented itself. Like many women of the church today, I do not need to make a case for boldly saying that being in the church and being feminist is going to hell. So many of us have our tales to tell. We know about the ways language, imagery, methods of theology, and models of ministry all too often not only render us invisible and silent but run roughshod over the integrity of our God-given gifts and graces. We have wounds to be touched and healed.

And we know we are not alone with our wounds. We know that women in many early Christian communities heard the teaching that women must become male to be saved. We know that women, who initially exercised such formative leadership in early Christian communities, were sidelined and silenced as the church became an increasingly public institution. We know that women were tortured amid the witchcraze during late medieval and early modern centuries.

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And we know the ways in which this torture of some served to domesticate many women as keepers of the home so men could set out to conquer "new worlds," there to pillage and plunder the foreign Other as ruthlessly as they had the intimate Other. We know that we women have been ridiculed as we offered our service, rejected as we attempted to respond to God’s call to ordained ministry, refused places at decision-making tables.

Going to hell, indeed! Hell. This word most immediately conjures images of the place of the dead and, more particularly, the habitation of the devil, or Satan, the place of punishment for unrighteous and condemned spirits. But speaking of "Going to Hell and Rising Up," I am intrigued with another image, an image suggested by one of the later OED definitions of hell: "a place in a tailor’s shop into which shreds or offcuts of material are thrown." Precisely. This is the way it has been and continues too often to be with women, most especially with feminists, in the church. We are shredded. We are cut off. Our God-given gifts and graces are refused, rejected, ridiculed; we are thrown aside or thrown out.

Staying in the Church with Understanding

Being in the church and being feminist—This is the more confounding phrase in the title that came to me. Why do women, why especially do feminists, stay in the church? Many of us have left or are leaving. For example, Cynthia Eller, in Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America, submits that although many spiritual feminists resist the label "religion" because of its established and institutional ring, "spiritual feminists are creating a new religion, and doing so in the time-honored fashion of all religions—and particularly those religions in the United States that have surfaced as alternatives to the mainstream." This "time-honored fashion," says Eller, is to create a new religion "out of the usable shreds of whatever religions they could find." Shreds ourselves, thrown into living hell, and still—resounding Maya Angelou’s poem—we rise, we rise, we rise!

So, more urgently I ask, why stay? Many of us express enormous frustration, so much that the authors of Defecting in Place—Alison Stokes, Adair Lummis, Miriam Therese Winter—puzzle over the significant percentage of women who do not leave. I have a
hypothesis, which was confirmed as I read this book, which explores the ways in which women are assuming responsibility for their own spiritual lives. My hypothesis is my own profession of faith: I stay in the church because the troubled, tempestuous conjunction—church and feminist, church and woman—is not one of my own making but one born in me at my baptism. It is from within the church that I first heard the call to live the integrity of word made flesh and flesh become word. No coverup. No deception. Words not empty or evasive. Words not "become flesh as brutal and destructive deeds. But words bearing witness to our selves born of flesh in the image of God, whose Spirit is the Spirit of life and love, and of the truth that sets free." It is from within the church that I first heard that the people are the church. In the twentieth century, this declaration is at least as old as the Second Vatican Council. It is as new as each and every community that attests in its body to Jesus' words to the disciples: "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18).


Being a Protestant, a radical reformation Protestant no less, this is not a verse I have often cited! This verse has traditionally been interpreted in light of a preceding verse in Matthew 16, the verse taken by Roman Catholics to be the foundation of papal authority: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:18-19).

But in *A Body Knows*, I saw Matt. 18:18 with new eyes as I read it with Walbert Buhlmann, who believes:

This latter logion appears as part of the "community rule," in which Jesus apprises the community, or the communities, even small groups, indeed, families as domestic churches, of their full responsibility to decide their daily questions independently, in good conscience, and in the Holy Spirit. . . . All who believe
in Jesus, and who belong to his community, should be not simply passive beneficiaries, but active administrators, of the power of binding and loosing. 9

Active administrators of the power of binding and loosing. All who have been baptized into Christ are called to be active administrators of the power of binding and loosing. All of us, each of us is called to discern what is life-giving and what is death-dealing. In doing, we see that the church is Christ’s risen body, not a whitened sepulchre testifying to fear. So doing, we see the church as a communion of persons, not a bureaucratic institution or denomination or voluntary association. So doing, we see the church as “a communion of persons who participate, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, in the very life of God. And as participants in the very life of God, all are ‘changed into the same image from glory to glory’ (2 Cor. 3:18, KJV )”.

Indeed, in so doing, in so discerning what is life-giving and what is death-dealing, we see that the church as church is itself called to go to hell: “to be in the company of those cast out onto the edges of existence, in the company of those who totter on and over these edges. This is to say, the church is called to descend to the dead. Why else would Jesus have said to Peter, ‘the gates of Hades will not prevail against it’ (Matt. 16:18), when he spoke of the church? And where else will the God of reversals be able to meet us and raise us to new life?”

Going to hell, there surrounded by scraps, there in the company of those cast out, we women are hearing anew the stories of our foremothers. Thanks to feminist scholarship, we now claim that Mary Magdalene was the first to receive an apostolic commission (John 20). 12 I am therefore bold to proclaim that it is with Mary Magdalene that apostolic succession began. We now know of women who were householders and priests and perhaps, given the striking similarity of the role of the householder and of the bishop, even bishops in the earliest Christian communities. 13 In 1995 we celebrated the centennial of The Woman’s Bible, undertaken by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and

The church as church is itself called to go to hell: to be in the company of those cast out.
company in order to lay bare the biblical roots of women’s
disenfranchisement and bondage.

We now hear our own theological affirmations, in our own voices,
through the centuries. We are now creating spaces for and ways of
worship. We are saying “yes” to the *imago Dei* and to the full humanity
in each of us and paying attention to our experiences and, accordingly,
creating our theologies, convinced, as Elizabeth Johnson has so
elocutiously and courageously affirmed in *She Who Is*, that wherever any
one of us is diminished or violated, there the glory of God is dimmed.  
Going to hell, we are gathering those parts and pieces of ourselves too
long cut off and thrown out. We are retrieving and revaluing what have
heretofore been reckoned as scraps. We are stitching scraps into brightly
colored, multihued cloths. Going to hell, we are rising up!

Going to hell, stitching scraps, rising up. So speaking, the poem
“*Creatio ex Nihilo*,” by Kathleen O’Keefe Reed, comes to mind.
Reed is an ELCA pastor and assistant to the bishop in the New
England Synod. Her poem was proclaimed abroad by Elizabeth
Bettenhausen, who read it at in 1993:

_She is the ragrug woman_
Gatherer of good for nothing
Weaver of worth
Expert in *creatio ex nihilo*
*Her joy any ball of cloth not fit for dust*
*Whatever is worn out she receives*
*Just dump it right here on the kitchen table*
*Where her hands hover over the chaos*
*Where fingers dance with scissors, thread and needle*
*Making strands of life emerge.*

We women, we feminists who stay in the church, who stay committed
to the church, are ragrug women, gatherers of good for nothing,
weavers of worth. Going to hell, we are rising up!

I stay, and stay committed to the church, because I believe the
troubled and tumultuous conjunction—women and church, feminist
and church—is indeed not one of my own making but one born in me
at my baptism. My dedication to justice-making as to doxology, to
worship as to public witness, is the heartbeat of the body of Christ into
which I was received upon my confession of my sins, my renunciation
of the Satan, and my profession of faith in Christ Jesus. The church is,
in other words, my place.

GOING TO HELL AND RISING UP
Receiving Women into Christ

What do I mean when I speak of being received into Christ? What do I mean when I speak of confession, renunciation, profession? These questions come out of my choice to stay in the church, out of my commitment to be in the company of those committed to the living body of Christ, in the company of those courageously going out after the Risen One, who is always ahead of us calling us onward. So again, what do I mean when I speak of being received into Christ, when I speak of confession and renunciation and profession?

I pose these questions in response to the question why do I stay in the church because I believe that Paul's instruction to the Christians in Rome—"Receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7, KJV)—points us toward a portrait of women walking forth as pioneers in our time. Pioneers, in the history of this country and of many countries, have been invaders who fought their way into places, who annihilated the peoples of the land living in those places, who presumed to stake out claims to found a better city. This is not a portrait of the women walking forth as pioneers in our time. "Receive ye one another, as Christ has received us to the glory of God." Instead I see women who receive all people as Christ has received us, who sit around a table at which all are ingathered, who know who we are and whose we are, to the glory of God in whose image we are created to be co-creators. Pioneers who for honoring the integrity of peoples and places are honored. "Receive ye one another as Christ has received us to the glory of God."

How, then, does Christ receive us? What does it mean to be received by Christ into Christ upon the confession of sin, the renunciation of Satan, the profession of faith? I wrestle with these questions as a woman, a feminist in the church, as I take this Romans 15 text within its own wider textual setting. From this point of view, I find the first clue about how Christ received and receives us, about being received into Christ. This clue, found in the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, is as rigorous as it is ringing: "There is none righteous; no not one" (Rom. 3:10, KJV).

How does Christ receive us? As the great leveler. How are we received into Christ? By a great leveling. The one foretold by Mary's Magnificat as the one who would bring God's reign, in which valleys are raised and mountains brought low, is indeed the great leveler. No one is righteous. We are all called to confession of sin—whether our

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sin is hubris or, as is so often the case for women, self-loathing—and then we are brought to be seated at the same table. None lower; none higher. No one is righteous; regardless of what we do or do not do, say or do not say, are or are not. Political correctness will no more help us here than political coercion. “There is none righteous; not one.” Regardless.

I am, in all candor, not altogether certain what to make of Paul’s call to confession and to the common table. I am not sure what to make of it for myself as a feminist in the church or for our churches or for our world today. What am I to make of this call as one who is still inclined to think—nay, still convinced—it matters a great deal what I do or do not do, say or do not say, am or am not? What am I to make of this call for our churches, who are inclined amid changing times and attendant crises to draw boundaries and set limits that delineate precisely who is and is not righteous, boundaries and limits most often drawn on women’s bodies as battles over abortion and sexuality and ordination are waged? And what am I to make of this call in our world in which cleansing operations are not at all confined to Bosnia but are all around us creating unimportant people, unnecessary people, and as gaps between those who have and have not are widening? Again, disproportionate numbers of these throwaway people are women: women not making it economically; women being battered and violated by men at home and on streets and in pastors’ studies; women hitting ceilings and caught in revolving doors. What am I to make of this call in a wider world wherein we observed in 1995 the fiftieth anniversary of the annihilation of Hiroshima, an event, says Kosuke Koyama, that freed humanity from any illusion that one culture or religion or people is morally superior to any other. “There is none righteous; not one.”

Yet it is precisely as I hear Kosuke Koyama articulate annihilation as leveling, leveling as annihilation, that I overhear a second Pauline clue about how Christ receives us, about being received into Christ. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Rom 8:1-2). We are free!
“There is none righteous.” “There is therefore now no condemnation.” These tangled and thunderous words ring forth and back as call and response rhythms ring resoundingly in some of our ecclesial traditions of worship. Together they cry freedom. We women raging and grieving and going to hell in our churches and in our world, we are free from the weight of moral superiority and the burden of worthlessness. We women raging and grieving and going to hell in our churches and in our world, we are free to be who we are called to be in God’s image and in God’s sight. We women raging and grieving and going to hell in our churches and in our world, we are free to claim the ministry to which we were called by our baptism into Christ. We women raging and grieving and going to hell in our churches and in our world, we are free to be dwelling places of the Spirit, who raises us from the dead and makes us alive, truly alive!

We women who are in the church. It is precisely as we rage and grieve and go to hell that we are freed, for rage and grief are the roots of prophecy. “There is none righteous.” “There is therefore now no condemnation!” We are free, “the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus has set [us] free from the law of sin and of death.” Hell, once the place of punishment for the unrighteous and the condemned, is the place that holds the key to new creation. We who have been shredded and thrown away are stitching shreds and weaving new words and new worlds. We are rising up! “There is none righteous!” “There is therefore now no condemnation!” We are free!

The Necessary Naming of Evil

To be free as feminists in Christ is to be free from “the principles of sin and death.” Here I want to speak of Satan and of the renunciation of Satan that I made when I was received by Christ, received by baptism into Christ. I want to speak of Satan because I believe Andrew Delbanco appropriately puts American society on alert when he writes, “We live in the most brutal century in human history, but instead of stepping forward to take the credit, [the devil] has rendered himself invisible.”16 Delbanco is convinced that the loss of old words, images, and moral concepts—Satan, sin, evil, devil—leaves us vulnerable. He is convinced that if evil “escapes the reach of our imagination”—and, I would add, if palpable and personal images of evil elude us—evil “will have established dominion over us all.”17
And so I want to speak of Satan, a palpable and personal image of all too evasive, however pervasive, evil. The Hebrew word *satan* and the figure of Satan as such both have a history, as Elaine Pagels has demonstrated in *The Origin of Satan*. In Hebrew “the satan” has access to heaven and functions as a messenger of God or as an obstructor sent to test the constancy of human beings, as, for example, with Job. When the Hebrew Bible was rendered into Greek in the third century B.C.E., the Greek word *diabolos* was chosen to translate the Hebrew word *satan*. It is at this point that Satan, the tempter, emerges as the devil, the enemy of God. But by the time of the writing of the Book of Revelation in the first century C.E., the figures of devil and Satan, both the enemy of God, had become fluid.

The root of the Greek word *diabolos* is *dia-bollein*, “to tear apart.” To renounce the devil or Satan is precisely to refuse to do this: to refuse to cut one another off, to refuse to throw each other out. To renounce the devil or Satan is to lay down the burden of righteous or unrighteous and gather around a common table, free at last.

A serious reading of Elaine Pagels’s superb scholarship in *The Origin of Satan* complicates my clarity about this prophetic vision born of rage and grief. It does so by making it clear that the clarion call of freedom consists, precisely as Sara Maitland puts it in *A Big-Enough God: A Feminist’s Search for a Joyful Theology*, “of voices that have been broken and blood that has been shed; freedom [that] tastes of pain.” Pagels’s scholarship makes it clear that freedom “tastes of pain” as she points out that for many Christians in the early communities, however much Satan’s attacks from outside were dreaded, “even more dangerous were Satan’s forays among the most intimate enemies of all—other Christians, or, as most said of those with whom they disagreed, among heretics.” Indeed, Pagels presents Satan as the maker of intimate enemies. Amid the often apocalyptic drama of the Gospels, Satan sets Christians against one another, tears the fabric of Christian communities.

To renounce Satan is to refuse to perpetuate this impulse that, like it or not, is part and parcel of the Christian tradition from its inception.
So saying, I know my radical Reformation upbringing is showing!

Most Christians were taught to see in Christ and Christ’s church the power to overcome the forces of evil in the world. In contrast, I was taught Christ crucified by the forces of evil. I was taught to see Christ’s Risen Body made incarnate through the centuries among remnant communities on the margins, among remnant communities most often called heretical, among remnant communities often overpopulated by women. Here I refer back to Delbanco. Unless we acknowledge Satan’s presence in the Christian tradition and acknowledge, accordingly, this impulse to tear communities and cut off and cast out, we will, as Barbara Kingsolver writes, lose our empathy and therewith our humanity. Evil will indeed have established dominion in our midst.

I know it is as dangerous for women to speak of the image of Satan in our day as it was in earlier days. “You are the Devil’s doorway,” said Tertullian of Eve and, accordingly, of women. Consequently, through the centuries of Christian history, women have been accused of cavorting with Satan, have been cut off from the community, have been driven out as scapegoats, whether accused and accursed as witches or mystics or lesbians. The “need for the nameable enemy,” as Andrew Delbanco puts it, “is built into the very structure of Christianity itself, whose gospel of love and forgiveness is never fully detached from the excoriating story about an evil people . . .”. But the tangle of love and hate at the heart of Christianity will not be transformed by our being blind to it. Perhaps the “need for the nameable enemy” can yet be transformed as we name no one Satan. Rather, we name as Satan the absence that keeps us apart.

Knowing More Than We Are Known

“Receive ye one another, as Christ has received [you] to the glory of God.” “There is none righteous.” “There is therefore now no condemnation.” Our burden of being righteous or unrighteous is laid down. We are gathered around a common table. We renounce Satan as we weave presence amid absence. And so we come to the third moment of reception into Christ at our baptism: our profession of faith.

Not the profession of faith as the promise of things as yet unseen. No wonder Sarah laughed at the message brought to Abraham, father of that sort of faith! For we women know our bodies are the
generators of being. We women know baptism is about bodies being received by Christ and in Christ. We women know our bodies are the places wherein the Holy Spirit is pleased to dwell. We profess our faith knowing who we are and whose we are, in all the splendor of our specialness.

What eludes us, painfully and poignantly, is being known. What eludes us is being known in the churches into which we were received by birth or baptism, in churches to which we have committed ourselves in service and as leaders. What eludes us is being known.

This is what takes me to the threshold of leaving the church. It is as Nadine Gordimer, in Writing and Being, recalling Amos Oz's character, Fima, says: his place does not know him. It is that the place, the church, into which I have been received and which I have myself chosen as my place, does not know me. This is what takes me time and time again to the threshold of leaving the church, as a woman and a feminist.

I remember, painfully and poignantly, when I first became aware that I was not known by my place, my church. It was when I went from graduate school to become a member of the national staff of the Church of the Brethren, responsible for women's program and ecumenical relations and later to become associate general secretary for Human Resources. During my years in graduate school I had been less visibly involved in the Church of the Brethren than I had been as a youth in high school and in college. During my years in graduate school I had begun to know myself and my own mind. I read and wrote feminist theology, challenging inherited understandings of being Christian, being the church, and being a theologian. When I became a member of the national staff of the Church of the Brethren, I was received as a returnee. I was received as someone who had spent some time on the outside and had come home. I was assumed to be no different from the twenty-one-year-old college graduate who went away to Harvard. I knew myself, who I was and whose I was; and I knew my own mind. But my place did not know me. In many painful and poignant ways, it is still true that the Church of the Brethren, my place of birth, of baptism, and of ordination, does not know me. More painfully and poignantly still, my place—the Church of the Brethren, indeed the Christian churches—does not want to know me.

Why not? Why do our churches not know us, not want to know us? To know us women is to know us as we know ourselves to be known by the One in whose image we are created. To know us women is to
know us as co-creators of a new creation. We are rising up! But most of our churches, our places, are filled with fear and so choose death in life not life abundant.

So, yet again, why stay? Why do I as a woman, as a feminist, stay in the church, in my church, my place? I have already said I stay because the troubled, tempestuous conjunction—church and woman, church and feminist—is not one of my own making but one born in me at my baptism. I now say I stay because I believe the church into which I was born, baptized and ordained is itself in hell: absent from itself as we are absented. I stay because I believe I am called. I believe we are all called to be part of its freeing transformation. We women are stitching shreds and weaving new words and new worlds. We are thereby co-creating a new creation. We are rising up! It is our vocation to raise our churches, our places, up into life abundant.

I stay and say “yes” to this vocation. I say “yes” to this vocation because I believe Nadine Gordimer’s testimony, wrought out of her own vocation as writer. She says, “I had to be part of the transformation of my place in order for it to know me.” I stay in my church, my place, not because I believe my place as it is will ever know me or want to know me. I stay in my church saying “yes” to being part of the transformation of my place and of our places.

Going to hell, I am rising up! We women of the churches are rising up! And we will raise the churches! We will raise the churches so they may again choose life abundant, so they may again choose to go out after the Risen One, who receives us into an abundance of blessing, thereby making us a blessing. Going to hell, we are rising up! We rise up, anticipating the day the troubling, tumultuous conjunction—woman and church, feminist and church—will be healed. We rise up, gathering up the castoffs, the remnants, the scraps, weaving worthiness in new words and worlds, all the while anticipating the day we may proclaim our people in our places. We rise up, anticipating the day we may be known by our people and by our places as we are known by our creator. “Receive ye one another,
as Christ has received us to the glory of God." Thanks be to God. May we rise and walk on, all following the Risen One!

Notes

2. The contemporary literature in which women testify in our voices to these experiences and to our experiences of changing the church, is, thankfully, increasingly articulate and available. See, for example, Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis, and Allison Stokes, Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives (New York: Crossroad, 1994), and June Steffensen Hagen, ed., Rattling Those Dry Bones: Women Changing the Church (San Diego: LarnaMedia, 1995).
4. Ibid., 37.
6. See Winter, Lummis, and Stokes, Defecting in Place.
8. Ibid., 40.
9. Ibid., 40.
10. Ibid., 41.
11. Ibid., 41-42.
17. Ibid., 234.
24. Ibid., 130.
In this essay I wish to address a crisis of religious leadership in North American Christianity. It is a crisis in the exercise of power and authority in the practice of ministry.

Any conversation about religious leadership begins with a vision for congregational life and ministry. The vision guiding this essay is found in Isaiah 61 and Ephesians 4, two passages long recognized in Christian tradition for envisioning ministry both within and beyond the bounds of congregations. We are called to this ministry by virtue of our baptisms. According to Isaiah, ministry includes empowering those oppressed and in bondage, healing those broken in body and in spirit, and comforting those who mourn. This passage understands God's spirit at work in us to transform redemptively those structures, systems, and relationships that deform and destroy human life. The norm of such a vision is the joining of God's love and God's justice, and ministry guided by this mission witnesses to the hope that is in us. Ephesians 4 complements Isaiah's understanding of ministry as empowerment in behalf of others. In Ephesians we also find that we

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are authorized by the community in behalf of its ministry and witness. We are called to live in communities of mutuality and interdependence in which the love of Christ is the norm for our life together. I have come to appreciate the significance of identifying central images which function normatively in our lives. What I have described in reflecting on these passages are norms I believe scripture urges us toward for shaping who we are in ministry—or more realistically, who we hope to be in ministry. The way we practice ministry has to do with which norms in scripture we find most compelling. I acknowledge my reliance on these passages which reveal God as one who invites us to join in ministries of empowerment, service, and healing. In such passages justice and love are joined inseparably as norms for ministry. They frame most clearly the context in which I minister, and they influence those voices to whom I attend most closely. And they have helped me see what I would describe as a crisis in exercising authority and power in the practice of ministry.

The vision generated by these passages is not the reality. In my teaching and supervision of pastoral counseling students, I am especially confronted with their confusion or anxiety about how to deal responsibly with the power and authority that accompany the exercise of ministry. While it is important to critique clericalism’s domination of parishioners, when shared ministry is embraced uncritically without an appreciation for different gifts and tasks, chaos reigns. Some designated as religious leaders so elevate the value of authenticity that they think they need only be genuine and, therefore, disavow any claim to expertise or power in ministerial relationships. While this division of authenticity and authority is based on an unfortunate and limited understanding of power, it is a prominent and enticing theme in ministry today. Also troubling is the privatization of ethics spawned by our culture’s individualism and egalitarianism. Pastors who know of a colleague’s violation of professional ethics will turn away, feeling they have no right to judge. Or they might describe such violations as merely personal indiscretion, failing to recognize that such acts pose an issue of accountability for the entire profession...
of ministry. In our context I have encountered two extremes which illustrate our crisis: seminarians and pastors unwilling or too anxious to exercise appropriate power and authority for the exercise of religious leadership and pastors and pastoral counselors who abuse their power and authority to exploit those in their care.

Clearly, we are in a time when an appropriate understanding of power and authority in ministry must be recovered—or more realistically must be constructed, for such a task involves dismantling the patriarchal ideologies which have overlaid biblical insights about ministry and life in community. Our need for structures of authority and those who exercise authority is neither old-fashioned nor immature. Rather, as Jackson Carroll suggests:

_We cannot live together for long in any human community without submitting ourselves to the authority of the community's deepest values and norms and to the leadership of those charged with their articulation, interpretation, and realization._

The issue is not whether we should exercise power and authority in ministry but what kind of power and authority. Our passage in Ephesians suggests the clue for responding to such critical questions about the nature of power and authority in the church lies in the community itself. Here authority is conferred by the community on its members according to a person’s gifts and the community’s needs. Here legitimated power emerges from a web of relationships and is entrusted as authority to an individual for the well-being of the whole. This relational authority values the interdependence of life in community—the compassionate obligation to each other into which Christ invites us.

Redefining Power

But there is nothing easy about such authority. Moreover, it clearly requires new thoughts about power. Part of our current dilemma in church and culture lies in the predominance of what Bernard Loomer described as unilateral power, “the strength to exert a shaping and determining influence on another.”

Such power is the effort to control or dominate. While some may seek to use it benevolently, unilateral power is not benign. It
accompanies a worldview that is hierarchical, presumes inequality, and values autonomy at the expense of community. It assumes a finite amount of power. For one to have it, another has less with the goal that one gets as much of it as one can. Unilateral power exploits our expansive desire for autonomy and illusions of control. It divides power and love, for it seeks to acquire power for the self at the expense of the other.

What we need instead of this dominating power is to recognize and value the power it takes to be in relationship. Loomer aptly calls this "relational power." It is the ability to affect or influence others and to be affected. Relational power presumes that power expands as we invest ourselves in mutually enhancing relationships. This notion of power projects a vision of community in which we are equally dependent on our interrelatedness, so there is a strong motivation to exercise our power to stay in relationship. In communities of compassionate obligation, power is not exercised over another but in behalf of each other.

Anyone who is a pastor, who lives in a family, who has married, or who enjoys friendships knows this kind of sharing is difficult. We live in relationships and serve in congregations where such valuable resources as vision, energy, sensitivity, hope, and maturity are not equally divided. We have to cope with real and enduring differences and estrangement. Relational power and authority get messy and ambiguous because it is hard to sustain care when we are confronted with brokenness in persons' lives and relationships that seem not to yield. Unilateral power sometimes allows us the illusion of distance so we may avoid ambiguity or pain, but relational power is concretely present. It is messy, ambiguous, and difficult. It is also far more like the power suggested in Ephesians 4, which calls us to bear with one another in love.

Metaphorical Lens

I have come to believe a good way to assure that ministry embodies relational power and authority is to find metaphors that help us envision communities of compassionate obligation where the practice of ministry rejoins justice and love.

Metaphors, of course, are imaginative comparisons in which an idea or term usually applied in one context is applied to another. Metaphors
are very important in shaping who we are and how we live. Occasionally some experience so jars us that we begin to see ourselves and our world differently. Ordinarily, as ethicist Karen Lebacqz suggests, the values, ideals, and identity shaping our character will so determine what we see as true that it will predispose how we act. As ethicist Eric Mount puts it, "seeing is behaving." Both of these ethicists argue for the moral significance of metaphors in religious leadership. Metaphors act as imaginative lenses for perceiving the present and anticipating the future.

They can be disclosive, corrective, and constructive. The way we learn to see affects what we see and what we miss altogether. We are embedded in the stories and images of our families, cultures, and institutions. Certainly, our participation in the church as an institution involves a certain embeddedness in particular sets of stories. Presbyterians who belong to the Witherspoon Society and those who subscribe to The Layman may find different stories more compelling. It becomes very important to know which metaphors or images are operating in shaping our practice of religious leadership. Some will be more adequate than others for assuring that our practice of ministry has integrity as well as congruence, for example, with the vision of Isaiah and Ephesians.

Metaphor Clusters

Ministry is too complex for one metaphor to describe it adequately. In ministerial relationships dynamics of power, authority, responsibility, and identity can vary dramatically. The vulnerability of persons in crisis experiences such as abuse, grief, or illness colors our exercise of power and authority differently than sharing a committee assignment or playing softball together at a church picnic. The responsibility for preaching and liturgy colors our exercise of authority and our identity still differently. We find ourselves needing a cluster of metaphors which together assure the accountability we desire for ministry.

To do this, we start with a vision for ministry, which becomes an agenda that forms a cluster of metaphors. My concern for the exercise of relational power and authority in ministry yields four: Ministry as midwifery, service, friendship, and shepherding.

To help assure accountability and guidance as we select the images we want to shape our practice we need criteria for evaluation. In his
book *Professional Ethics in Context*, Eric Mount, Jr., proposes several criteria designed for such critical reflection. I have adapted some of those and added others. As I share these, I hope that you will be challenged by the fact that this remains a partial list requiring further correction, refinement, and elaboration.

First, we must determine that our metaphors for ministry assure both an understanding of the appropriate exercise of power for ministry and accountability for that power. For example, the metaphors of friend and shepherd imply quite different approaches to power. Later I will propose that, while ministry as friendship counters the hierarchy of clericalism, it may leave us vulnerable to this culture’s confusion of authority and authoritarianism. The shepherd metaphor, on the other hand, clearly invokes power as safekeeping and need not include the paternalism some have assumed. The servant metaphor reminds those of us with power of the need to define it relationally.

Second, our metaphors must be congruent with scriptural images of authority in ministry and will they guide our exercise of authority. Authority is the legitimate exercise of power. Our Ephesians passage includes the recognition of authority by virtue of the gifts one is given. Midwifery is a valuable metaphor because in its recognition of the expertise of the midwife, it does not diminish the one in labor as gifted and also responsible.

A third criterion for metaphors concerns whether they preserve the complexity and ambiguity of the other. Do they project consequences for our actions toward others that are congruent with the justice and love Isaiah and Ephesians envision? This criterion suggests the diversity of situations in ministry we noted earlier. While, for example, friend, shepherd, and trustee all project somewhat different consequences for our actions, in each case we can anticipate love that is respectful, gracious, and just.

A fourth criterion has to do with whether our metaphors may accommodate the storied, dynamic context of congregational life. Do they together include the variety of situations and corresponding approaches ministry requires?

A fifth criterion has to do with the aptness of the metaphor in one’s own experience. For example, in a conversation with students about these ideas, one with interests in farming and ecology indicated that the metaphor of gardener was a powerful one for his practice of ministry. While I will not explore the implications of that metaphor
here, I think that ministry as gardener does help capture the ramifications of relational power in response to ecological concerns.

Finally, our metaphors need to help us see what is truthful and important for ministry in this time and place. Once again, we are reminded that metaphors have the potential to disclose, correct, and construct our ways of seeing. Each alone also necessarily limits or even deflects our perspectives. A cluster of metaphors helps to assure that we recognize as many distortions in our seeing as possible and allow contrasting metaphors to offer correctives.

Isaiah's concern for justice toward those who are powerless and on the margins of culture and the concern expressed in Ephesians for those who are tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine help to focus the value of this corrective function in our cluster of metaphors. Clearly these criteria, however partial, suggest the importance of careful reflection on those metaphors that guide our practice. They also demonstrate the necessity for a cluster of metaphors which complement and correct the limits and distortions in each.

Midwifery

I will begin with midwifery. Surely, it is the least familiar of the biblical metaphors we are exploring, but it has much to commend it. Let us consider it in light of the criteria we have just noted.

Our first criterion has to do with the appropriate exercise of power for ministry and accountability for such power. Midwifery does provide real help in our efforts to move from unilateral to relational power. This is power that seeks to empower others while acknowledging one's own. Prenatal care brings to mind parallel tasks in ministry of tending to and encouraging others to claim their gifts and nurturing those gifts toward fruition. Labor suggests the careful interdependence of persons who share a common goal: the empowerment of the one in travail in behalf of new life and new possibilities that are uniquely theirs to offer. The midwife finds real gratification in the success of the other.

Hopefully images from your ministry come to mind. I find myself thinking about how midwifery parallels good teaching, especially if that means nurturing students to risk more of themselves and their particular gifts. It also means teaching so that one's expertise evokes the gifts and contributions of the other rather than imposing one's own
view. My success will lie in a student's creative ideas—perhaps sparked by mine or evoked with my help—but they are the student's ideas, not my own.

Midwifery also brings to mind the more ordinary but essential task of identifying and supporting parishioners whose gifts need nurturing and encouragement. One limitation with this metaphor of midwifery lies in the absence of clarity about accountability for one's power. That is a crucial issue, and we will need other metaphors to correct this limitation.

Midwifery is helpful in terms of its congruence with scriptural images of authority—our second criterion. It contradicts hierarchical notions of authority without compromising the real expertise midwifery represents. It suggests a collaborative style of shared and differentiated authority in which the gifts and responsibilities of each are respected, much as we find in the vision of Ephesians. The authority of a presence that is caring and attentive also includes the expertise of the one who is present. Authenticity and authority are not mutually contradictory. The authority of expertise is used here to assist the other in a highly interdependent process, not to subordinate the other or to elevate the midwife.

The exercise of authority in pastoral care also resembles midwifery. Here we find opportunities to honor the gifts and courage of another while we stand ready to assist through difficult occasions that are not pathological but require shared strength and skillful insight. Reciprocity is not the norm for such times; for example, we sit with those who seek meaning and hope in the face of the unyielding physical limits of a stroke. This metaphor helpfully focuses our energies in behalf of the other.

The metaphor of midwifery also helps address our third criterion of preserving the complexity and ambiguity of the other. In ministry each person brings her or his own history to the task of discipleship. The process of identifying, nurturing, and bringing gifts to fruition involves carefully listening to another's particular needs, fears, and hopes.

There is ambiguity woven throughout the process of pregnancy and labor, just as there is with Christian life. Childbirth can be complicated; it is never painless; and babies are not always healthy or wanted. Infertility is painfully common. If life in community and Christian maturity were simple, the writer of Ephesians would not have gone on at such length. Ministry, like labor, is hard, messy, and
too often fraught with the ambiguities of life this side of the promised land. Midwifery keeps us honest about the day-to-day work of ministry.

In a culture anxious about both power and authority, this metaphor offers us a way to join caring, authentic presence and expertise while recovering the collaborative, differentiated authority envisioned in Ephesians.

Servant

The metaphor of servant is as familiar as midwifery is novel. The appropriation of this metaphor to counter distortions of power and authority requires careful clarification. I include this metaphor among others because, properly understood, it represents an important countercultural dimension of the gospel regarding power and authority with deep roots in Hebrew scripture, especially prophets such as Isaiah. This metaphor satisfies several criteria guiding our practice of ministry: the appropriate exercise of power and accountability for it; congruence with a biblical vision for relational authority; and help in discerning what is truthful and important in this time and place.

Despite the potential value of this metaphor, servant has a troubled history in the tradition. Its authenticity lies in the freedom to choose to serve. Over time two distortions have arisen which complicate the usefulness of servant as a contemporary metaphor for religious leadership.

The first distortion arises from the fact that the call to service can be easily co-opted by patriarchal values so that those with power and its corresponding autonomy impose service as an obligation on those whose power and freedom is subordinate to theirs. In other words, those in leadership retain their privilege while urging others in subordinate positions to embrace this image for ministry as their own. In such cases, service becomes subservience.

The scriptural context for the servant metaphor has radical implications for sharing power and authority. But these are rationalized away, if addressed at all. Too often the purpose of service is to further not the ministry of the church and the love of God but the interests of those in power. In this culture, African-Americans and women have long been urged to accept subservience in the guise of service. If this metaphor is to
have any contemporary usefulness, we will need to bear in mind the
nature of our accountability to those we are to serve.

The second distortion is related to the first and also arises from the
importance of the freedom to choose service. Recent feminist
theological and biblical reflection notes that this metaphor presumes
that the one choosing to serve already has a sufficient sense of self to
experience the choice to serve as freeing. As Elizabeth
Schüssler-Fiorenza has shown, the New
Testament metaphor of service emerged in the
early Palestine Jesus movement and subsequent
Christian missionary movement. It reflects
their radical vision of a community of equals
where those with power chose to become like
servants to others, and those who had been
marginalized experienced the liberating
wholeness of the new creation. As Galatians
suggests, old structures of domination were to
be no more. In this context of mutual regard and
freedom, the call to service and altruism could
be authentically experienced by those once on
the margins.

But as we all know, Paul and post-Pauline
scriptures disclosed the gradual dominance of
patriarchy in Christian tradition, and this radical
vision of a community of equals gradually
accommodated to its patriarchal, societal
context. The Gospel writers of Mark and John
make clear that the early alternative vision was
not yielded easily, for they continue to
emphasize the centrality of service and love at
the same time the Pastoral and Colossians were
reflecting a patriarchal perspective. The force of the pervasive
patriarchal culture took its toll.

Now the question is understandably raised whether the
metaphor of servant is freeing for those who continue to
experience marginalization in church and culture and who have
internalized that subordinate status and worth. For these persons
this metaphor requires other metaphors to prevent its distortion
into subservience rather than the empowering mutuality of care
in which it originated.

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On the other hand, this metaphor of service has real potential for our vision of shared ministry where power and authority are exercised relationally. I include it mindful that, like many women in ministry in North America, I have experienced marginalization. But in other respects such as race and class, I am relatively privileged and do have authority and power. This metaphor helps keep me honest about the temptation to domesticate the scandal of the call to serve.

**Friendship**

The popularity of the metaphor of friendship lies particularly in the way it envisions the exercise of relational power and authority so that we enlarge each other through the reciprocity of care, encouragement, love, and support. The power operative in friendship relies on willing receptivity and trust. In fact, the only authority for the power of friendship is these bonds of trust and love.

This metaphor offers an important corrective in the way it joins love and power. Ministry as friendship represents what ethicist Beverly Harrison describes as

... the most basic of all the works of love—the work of human communication, of caring and nurturance, of tending the personal bonds of community. This activity has been seen as women’s work and discounted as too mundane and undramatic, too distracting from the serious business of world rule. Those who have been taught to imagine themselves as world builders have been too busy with master plans to see that love’s work is the deepening and extension of human relations. This urgent work of love is subtle but powerful. Through acts of love—what Nelle Morton has called “hearing each other to speech”—we literally build up the power of personhood in one another. It is within the power of human love to build up dignity and self-respect in each other or to tear each other down. We are better at the latter than the former. However, literally through acts of love directed to us, we become self-respecting and other-regarding persons, and we cannot be one without the other. If we lack self-respect, we also become the sorts of people who can neither see nor hear each other. We may wish, like children, that we did not have such
awesome power for good or evil. But the fact is that we do. The power to give and receive love, or to withhold it—that is, to withhold the gift of life—is less dramatic, but every bit as awesome, as our technological power. It is a tender power.\textsuperscript{11}

Harrison suggests that this power of love and to love are profoundly ethical and are rooted in our affections, for it is through our feelings that we are connected to the world. Cut off from our feelings, we lose the compass for our values and moral reflection.

Ministry as friendship, then, helps us recover the centrality of relationships for religious leadership that joins love and justice. Ministry as friendship, it turns out, is not some benign and sentimental image. Rather, it helps us recover an appreciation for the constructive power of love.

An illustration of the relational power of friendship and its value for ministry is the relationship of Evelyn and Mrs. Threadgoode, forty years her elder, in Fanny Flagg's novel Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistlestop Cafe. In the lounge of a nursing home these two strangers take time to listen and come to value each other, share their vulnerability, and extend their care to one another. Their practice of love is mutually empowering. In Evelyn's case, it is transforming. In this relationship she finds the courage to take her own life seriously, to speak in her own voice, and to embrace her life as a gift. In the relationship of Mrs. Threadgoode and Evelyn we see what Harrison described as the tender power of love in building up the power of personhood in another.

Clearly the metaphor of friendship is an important contribution to religious leadership in our context. It offers a way to confound unilateral power with the tender power of love. What may be problematic with this metaphor, requiring the corrective of another, is the difficulty friendship has in accommodating the lack of symmetry in power between religious leaders and those with whom we work. As we have noted, friendship relies on interpersonal power. The reciprocity of vulnerability serves as a safeguard in the relationship. But ordained ministry is also characterized by symbolic and representative power, which creates an asymmetrical power arrangement. In much of the daily work of ministry this imbalance can be minimized, but it is never absent. While we work collaboratively on a committee assignment and flip burgers at a picnic, the next day we may be with parishioners in the emergency room or coronary care as a priest on whom they rely, sharing utter vulnerability. Again, this difference need not be hierarchical in nature, but the difference is there.
This recognition of enduring asymmetry poses a helpful caution in our reading of Ephesians 4. It reminds us that while this passage describes a differentiated authority according to gifts and functions, some of these functions carry a different psychological weight or quality that is more apparent at particular times. That asymmetry does not diminish the interdependence of all—that is why I am struggling to talk about difference without distance.

As we look at the complexity of interrelatedness in this metaphor of friendship, we can begin to appreciate how helpful it is in honoring the complexity and ambiguity as well as the dynamic character of congregational life. Friendship honors the enduring character of relationships and the mystery of individuality. Surely in ministry there are numerous occasions when the needs or fears of one we care for surprise us, or their giftedness and strength emerge from someplace deep inside we had not known was there. We can never exhaust the depth of the other. There is always more to know and understand about one another.

Friendship opens us to ways of being with others in which our authority rests not the distance we put between ourselves and others but in our authenticity—our readiness not only to enter the other’s world but also to receive them into our own. This metaphor helps correct those patterns in our ministries which exclude, avoid, or condescend toward others. As Beverly Harrison reminds us, the work of love begins in tending the relational bonds of community.

**Friendship**

honors the enduring character of relationships and the mystery of individuality. Surely in ministry there are numerous occasions when the needs or fears of one we care for surprise us.

**Shepherd**

Though timely and useful, the metaphor of friendship does not help us to be accountable for the inequality of power and authority in ministerial practice. The metaphor of shepherd, on the other hand, envisions the trustworthy exercise of power as care and protection.
Ezekiel 34 is an excellent illustration of this metaphor in which responsible care and justice are joined by God as the shepherd. In this passage those with authority entrusted by God with power and oversight of the vulnerable abused this trust. They exploited those who required care and fed themselves generously.

Ethicist Karen Lebacqz uses the more contemporary term *trustee* to underscore the covenantal trust of ministry as shepherding described in Ezekiel. This metaphor insists that power is a primary issue for ministry, and it makes it clear that such power is fiduciary in nature. The metaphor of shepherd joins justice and love as the central norms for ministry. It requires accountability for power, especially when another is vulnerable and needs care. It also demonstrates that justice requires attention to the equitable distribution of power in behalf of enlarging the power of others.

The metaphor of shepherd is particularly apt for our accountability in areas of professional ethics. The reports of sexual misconduct by those entrusted with religious leadership are a powerful reminder of the profoundly destructive potential of our betrayal of the trust others offer us. This betrayal, of course, is not simply that of ourselves as religious leaders but of the church and the God we represent on whom this trust also rests. When surveys of pastors indicate that at least 23 percent report anonymously they have been sexually involved with parishioners, and 75 percent of these pastors indicate they know others who are also involved sexually within their congregations, and pastoral counselors are also being charged with misconduct at alarming rates, I find myself wondering: how resilient is the trust of congregations, on which ministry relies?

We need to recover the guidance provided by the metaphor of shepherd because it clearly names our accountability to those who entrust themselves to our care. This guidance is not only for the approximately 23 percent who have betrayed this trust but even more, perhaps, for those of us who have endangered it by our refusal to see Shepherding is not benign paternalism but a temporary protection that intends to enlarge the power and well-being of all.

Shepherding is not benign paternalism but a temporary protection that intends to enlarge the power and well-being of all.
or name what we know was happening. This metaphor repudiates such a privatization of ethics and helps us recover a sense of corporate responsibility.

The metaphor of shepherd is indeed helpful in regard to our criteria about power and authority. And if we hold on to the relational definition of power suggested by scripture, it also is capable of helping us preserve and honor the real differences among us. Otherwise, this image is easily compromised by the paternalism of unilateral power which seeks to help but not in ways that would empower the other or challenge existing systems and structures. People share their vulnerability more readily at times of crisis, and this is when we are asked to exercise more power and control for their safekeeping. Shepherding is not benign paternalism but a temporary protection that intends to enlarge the power and well-being of all. This requires careful listening to discern how we can participate in the empowerment of another.

The metaphor of shepherd does help us see what is truthful and important for ministry in this time and place. It requires us to acknowledge the reality of power that accompanies religious leadership. It also poses the centrality of justice and empowerment in defining the trustworthy exercise of power. It is important for our context because it discloses the dishonesty of a naive denial of power, the presumption of a condescending exercise of power, and the pretense of defining power as exercised individually apart from a web of relationships and responsibilities. This metaphor calls for accountability to the less powerful, to our colleagues, to the church, and to the larger culture.

In reflecting on these metaphors of midwife, servant, friend, and shepherd, we have recognized that congregational dynamics are a complex tapestry of the various needs and possibilities of believers. Moreover, congregations interact with a cultural context which significantly influences both their understanding of the gospel and their strategies for ministry. We focused particularly on the complex and dynamic character of power and authority in religious leadership. The vision of Ephesians 4 and Isaiah 61 has helped us see a strong biblical tradition that places the exercise of power and authority in the covenantal context of trust and joins love and justice as the norms for power. We have found that these metaphors help us talk about issues of power, authority, honesty, and trust. They also help us to understand ministry differently: these images have forced us to revise some
definitions and to recover the proper context of others. None of these metaphors is adequate by itself, but together they do offer a vision for religious leadership that is faithful to the relational authority and power of ministry in the body of Christ.

Notes

1. Even though there is this perspectival character to my analysis of our context, there is, in fact, some consensus about our crisis. Many agree that our context includes a crisis of belief; the disestablishment of religious institutions with a corresponding marginalization of clergy; and finally, a cultural fascination with individualism and an egalitarian ethos which has significantly privatized what is intended to be a corporate faith. These three factors make many very dubious that any exercise of power and authority in religious leadership could be appropriate.


5. Ibid., 15–18.

6. Ibid., 20.


9. Ibid., 102.


Mark Horst

Why United Methodism Needs the Confessing Movement

The Confessing Movement began as an attempt to build a broad coalition of United Methodists around the central teachings of the Christian tradition. Whether or not it will succeed, however, is difficult to say. This is, in part, because of the politically charged atmosphere in which the debate has been carried out, in particular our tendency to assume that theological positions simply follow from our social or political commitments. But another, more significant, reason for the difficulty in building a coalition is that the Confessing Movement calls United Methodism to evaluate the nature of Christian doctrine and its place in the life of the church. This process of evaluation will need to wend its way through the church; it will take time.

I believe that United Methodism will ultimately come to see the Confessing Movement as a much needed response to the contemporary social and intellectual climate. We will welcome it as an opportunity for the church to revitalize its mission and ministry to a world in which it is increasingly difficult to articulate the Christian evangel with clarity and effectiveness.

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The Challenge of the Day

The Confessing Movement has seen today’s challenge to Christian faith as substantially different from those challenges which confronted the church just a short while ago. We contend that contemporary culture is seething with religious belief. Religion and talk about spirituality are exceedingly popular in our day. Yet much of what passes for religious talk bears out the truth of G. K. Chesterton’s quip that once people stop believing in Christianity, they seem willing to believe just about anything.

Previous generations of Christian leaders have considered an unwillingness to believe, or an agnosticism toward Christian claims, a kind of creeping secularism, the greatest barrier to church involvement. From this perspective, the challenge for Christian leadership was to overcome the barriers to religious belief in general. The theological assault upon secularism is a response to a scientific or “rational” view of the world, and it makes a case for the possibility of religious faith in this context.

As we experience it, however, the threat to faith in our day is not “secularism” or the inability to believe but “hypercredulity,” the ability to believe anything and everything. One approach to this new situation is simply to welcome it. We might argue that the fertility of religious claims and beliefs in our day is something to celebrate. Folks have finally discovered the "ground of being" and are better for it. Yet, any attempt to affirm belief in general neglects the very specific claims which Christians make about God.

This brings us to the first and most significant claim which the Confessing Movement would press, namely, that not all belief directed toward a god is Christian belief. To put the argument positively: Christian faith is a very specific claim about a very specific God.

As we see it, the most significant question facing the United Methodist Church in our day is not whether we will be religious in some generic sense but what sort of religious identity we will have,
whether our identity will be shaped in any decisive way by the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. 

The Christian church is given this essential fact: that Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, has lived and died and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, will come again. The church of Jesus Christ exists by the grace of this God, revealed in Jesus Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit. In order to be the church, we must proclaim this truth. “The church is that community,” writes one theologian,

whose common life is a lively remembrance of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Spirit, to the glory of God the Father. And it is in this way the communion of the church in history becomes a living sign of the eschatological reconciliation of the world with God. This Trinitarian complex of remembrance of Christ, appeal to the Spirit, and thanksgiving to the Father is not simply one aspect of the church’s life; rather, it is the very act of the church’s life, the act in which the church’s koinonía is realized.1

Apart from our proclamation of this particular God, we might do many worthwhile things, but we will not be the church.

Christian leadership in the contemporary setting requires an ability to navigate carefully through a wide range of religious claims and to distinguish specifically Christian claims about God from other sorts of claims. We have no need to condemn others for their beliefs, but as Christian people we are obligated to understand what it means to call Jesus Lord and what it means to say that our God is trinitarian. We are obligated to be clear about the central claims of Christian faith and practice.

Herbert Fingarette observes the complexity of the contemporary religious situation and calls us to claim a religious home.

It is the special fate of modern man [sic] that he has a “choice” of spiritual visions. . . . We must not ignore the fact that in this last analysis, commitment to a specific orientation outweighs catholicity of imagery. One may be a sensitive and seasoned traveler, at ease in many places, but one must have a home. . . . ²

The Confessing Movement has no interest in returning the church to some remembered glory, but we do want the church to claim its home
in the rich doctrinal tradition of the orthodox Christian faith. We believe that the challenges facing the church today are far different from those which John Wesley, or any other religious reformer, has faced. Yet we believe that every generation of God’s people is tested in its faithfulness. Today we are called to proclaim clearly the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what we are attempting to do.

The Challenge within the Church

This plethora of religious claims and counterclaims which we can observe in the culture around us has had a significant impact on the life of the church. It is by no means “external” to the church as we experience it, nor is it outside the bounds of Christian people’s awareness. Instead, it has led to a troublesome confusion or uncertainty about what we can teach and preach and believe. Most troubling of all is that the present situation has left many of us uncertain about whether we can appropriately lift up this God, bow down before this God, submit our lives to this God, be shaped by the pattern of holiness delivered to us through this God.

Some of the evidence is anecdotal, but it would be a mistake to dismiss it: a pastor who can’t pray for a dead person with the words “Accept O Lord, a sinner of your own redeeming” because he considers it an insult to call someone a sinner (redeemed or otherwise); a lay person who says that Jesus Christ is a worn-out metaphor and that we should be looking for something more inclusive; church leaders who find nothing objectionable in a book which popularizes the idea that we should “reject the judgmental thinking of monotheism and return our psyches to the polytheism exemplified by ancient Greece.”

But more significantly, we see a church in which worship is essentially “popularized,” in which social outreach has become simple “do-goodism,” in which evangelism has become “church growth”; in
which oversight of the church has become a business proposition, in which God is "nice" and being Christian is primarily a matter of being "nice." We see a church in danger of losing its memory of the essential power of the gospel.

The church in our day has, we believe, faltered in its ability to shape us according to the awkward truths of Christianity. The Confessing Movement asserts that the general indifference toward theology and doctrine which United Methodism has indulged for much of this century has led to our inability to call and form faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

This assessment finds confirmation among a wide range of observers. In his essay *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit*, Albert Outler confirms this diagnosis, charging the church with a tragic ineptness in forming faithful disciples: "In more instances than we can bring ourselves to admit, the local congregation is simply not a healthy setting for a newborn Christian to be initiated into with any lively hope of growing up into Christ, 'in holiness and righteousness.'"4

George Lindbeck, theologian at Yale Divinity School, describes the present crisis of the church in quite pessimistic terms:

> Western culture is now at an intermediate stage . . . where socialization is ineffective, catechesis impossible, and translation a tempting alternative. . . . The impossibility of effective catechesis in the present situation is partly the result of the implicit assumption that knowledge of a few tag ends of religious language is knowledge of the religion (although no one would make this assumption about Latin). More important, however, is the character of churches during times of progressive dechristianization. In the present situation, unlike periods of missionary expansion, the churches primarily accommodate to the prevailing culture rather than shape it . . . They continue to embrace in one fashion or another the majority of the population and must cater willy-nilly to majority trends. This makes it difficult for them to attract assiduous catechumens even from among their own children, and when they do, they generally prove wholly incapable of providing effective instruction in distinctively Christian language and practice.5

This rather discouraging view of the church's ability to transmit the faith effectively also emerges from sociological analysis. Consider, for
example, a study done on the religious understanding of baby boomers which found a strong correlation between doctrinal clarity and church participation:

In our study the single best predictor of church participation turned out to be belief—orthodox Christian belief—and especially the teaching that a person can be saved only through Jesus Christ. Virtually all our baby boomers who believe this are active members of a church. Ninety five percent of the dropouts who describe themselves as religious do not believe it.

The underlying problem of the mainline churches cannot be solved by new programs of church development alone. The problem is the weakening of the spiritual conviction required to generate the enthusiasm and energy needed to sustain a vigorous communal life.

If the mainline churches want to regain their vitality...They must listen to the voices of lay liberals and provide compelling answers to the question, “What’s so special about Christianity?”

We also want an inclusive church, and we want to join hands with every sister and brother who wants to tell the story of Jesus Christ. 

The Confessing Movement asserts that doctrinal clarity is essential to answering the question, “What’s so special about Christianity?”

Even within the church, we cannot take the specific confession of Jesus Christ as Lord for granted. Our eagerness to embrace pluralism has led our church to a place where the theological claim of Christ’s saving plan seems to be nothing more than a matter of opinion or a description of my personal experience. Out of this has come the unyielding dogma that “you can believe whatever you want, just so long as you don’t question my beliefs”—the insistence that religion in our day and in our church is merely private and personal. Many sincere Christian people have decided that the only way to be loving is to love the religious convictions of everyone who sincerely holds these views.
But this is not the only way. The Confessing Movement offers another very different but no less loving response to the pluralism of doctrinal commitments within the church. We believe that true Christian inclusiveness, what Wesley called a “catholic spirit,” flows from a living faith in Jesus Christ and in the love that the power of the Holy Spirit can work in us.

We would therefore insist that real “inclusiveness” will be possible only to the extent that we claim the essential truths of Christian faith. We also want an inclusive church, and we want to join hands with every sister and brother who wants to tell the story of Jesus Christ. But we believe that the power which unites and unifies is nothing short of the love of Jesus Christ which has been born in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Many of our critics have felt that the Confessing Movement’s insistence on doctrinal standards represents a kind of arrogance. On the contrary, we intend to be humble in Christian love but stubborn in our insistence on Christian truth. In our view, there is nothing more arrogant than the assumption that Christian faith is something we can make up or alter in accordance with our own desires. One of the dangers for Christians in the present age is the temptation to be so humble about our confession, so generous, so careful not to offend, that we lose sight of these elemental truths.

A New Look at Christian Doctrine

The Confessing Movement’s call to doctrinal re-invigoration represents something new to this generation of United Methodists. We have in recent memory emphasized matters of practice, piety, and social improvement over matters of doctrine and theology. Yet in the current context the practice of Christianity is threatened precisely by our doctrinal amnesia. Far too many of us are simply unable to state clearly what makes Christian faith distinctive and decisive for our life and our relationships with one another. We do not believe that the church will be saved by right doctrine, but we do believe the church will be lost without it.

Before proceeding any further, I propose a clarification of terminology. Our tradition distinguishes doctrine from theology. Doctrine states basic convictions, first principles. Doctrine describes the consensus of the Christian church, across time, regarding what it
means to faithfully teach and practice Christianity. Theology, on the other hand, is reflection which takes place within this consensus but which reflects personal history and individual imagination and creativity.

Theological freedom depends upon doctrinal commitment. United Methodists are rightfully proud of our distinctive theological heritage, one which leads us back to John Wesley's Anglican renewal movement and through him to the rich traditions of the early church and the Eastern theologians. One thing we treasure in Wesley is the freedom to mine and explore and even pillage the traditions of the church in formulating theology for our own day.

Every generation has had to tell the story in its own words and in the context of particular issues and challenges. Yet at the same time every generation has had to learn the story—and every generation has had to discern what is not the gospel story. This process of theologizing will always reflect the setting in which it takes place and the personality of the one doing it. But our ability to theologize effectively and to evaluate our theological efforts depends on our understanding of and facility with doctrinal principles. Theological pluralism presumes doctrinal clarity.

The purpose of the Confessing Movement is to insist that our doctrinal standards keep us centered in Christ; to insist that it is our constitutionally established doctrinal standards which bind the church to its confession of Christ; to insist that the church is more than an umbrella for doctrinal experimentation; to insist that United Methodism has a doctrinal center.

We are part of a doctrinal tradition that has said yes to some things and no to others. We are part of a teaching tradition which has asserted the possibility of telling the story of Jesus and his saving love and has believed that this story could be told rightly or wrongly. We live as an indebted people to whom has been committed the "the old, old story of Jesus and his love." This story, when told rightly, can bring freedom and liberation, redemption and healing, happiness and rest, joy.

We do not believe that the church will be saved by right doctrine, but we do believe the church will be lost without it.
inexpressible and a peace which passes understanding. This story, when told rightly, communicates the saving grace of the triune God.

One recurrent theme among our critics is that human language can never capture or contain divine mystery, and therefore any attempt to regulate theological discourse by way of doctrinal formulae will invariably limit God.

We believe that Christian doctrine functions to protect, not limit, the mystery of God. Christian doctrine doesn’t explain mystery; it points to it. Wesley liked to say that doctrine designated the “fact” without explaining the “manner” in which the fact came about.

Doctrines are like a grammar that enable us to speak about God’s work in Jesus Christ as “good news.” Without this grammar, it is possible to tell the story and get it wrong. We all know how the story can get twisted and distorted. We have names for these twisted tellings of the truth: works-righteousness, antinomianism, gnosticism, Pelagianism, Arianism, do-good-ism, holier than thou-ism.

Without doctrine we invariably get the story confused. We turn Jesus into a nice person who taught us all how to be really nice inside so that we can be nice to each other.

Doctrines help keep the church strange; as Christians we are fools according to the world. Doctrinal standards are one way that Christ’s church resists conforming to the world. Doctrine is one of the ways that the church tethers its life and its language to the strange work of God, who we say lived and died and rose again.

The United Methodist Church is a doctrinal church. We are clearly committed to certain doctrinal standards. The frequent and unambiguous affirmation of these standards has been a part of our practice for much of our history. For example, the Book of Doctrine and Discipline throughout the 19th century included membership vows by which new members consented to uphold the “doctrines of the church.” The First Restrictive Rule of the Constitution clearly states this: “The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, or change our Articles of Religion, or establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine.” [See section III of constitution.] Another example of the ongoing significance of doctrine in the life of the church is the vows which ordained clergy take to “preach and maintain” the doctrines of the United Methodist Church [see The Book of Discipline, Par. 425].

The Confessing Movement calls the church to a new attitude of respect and humility toward our doctrinal tradition. We believe that

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our doctrinal standards help us tell the story right, that they help us tell the story of Jesus Christ and his wonderful love.

In a world which grows less and less clear about the nature and scope of the Christian faith, we are obliged to give clear and succinct definition to that faith and its bearing upon our lives. Our doctrinal standards provide such definition. They describe, delineate, and illustrate what identifies us as Christians. They can give structure and clarity to our understanding of our God, ourselves, and our church. The Confessing Movement would call the world home to the grace of the Triune God, revealed to us in Christ Jesus. And we would keep the heart and the mind of the church clearly fixed upon this same Lord.

Notes

What the church needs today is bold and courageous leadership: men and women who will articulate the gospel, unify the church and nation, and call the people back to God. The challenge of leadership today is not unlike that of Samuel, Saul, and David's time. Who will lead the people during the difficult times of transition? Who will stand against the enemies of God and bravely fight the good fight on behalf of God's kingdom? Who will address the tyrannies within and without the church which threaten its existence? The church today needs priests, prophets, judges, and warriors who love the people and follow God, men and women who can show people God's way and stay out of God's way.

Samuel, Saul, and David provide us with invaluable lessons for leadership in the twenty-first century. The challenge of leadership then is the challenge of leadership now. How will we lead? When will we lead? Where will we lead? How accountable will we be to the One who has chosen us to lead? The scriptures selected for this lectionary study represent a critical time in Israel's history and underscore the importance of selecting, nurturing, and sustaining strong spiritual leadership for Israel. From a theological standpoint, the nation

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itself is in a volatile, transitional period. The people have grown tired of their leaders and have experienced a moral and spiritual decline that has left them fragmented and virtually leaderless. Three gifted leaders in the charismatic tradition are thus called to play critical roles in helping the nation regain moral ascendancy and strengthen itself to do battle against its adversaries. They are Samuel, Saul, and David. Each represents a particular leadership style. Each experiences a crisis in leadership succession. Each is viewed as the answer to various problems facing Israel and is called to lead the people back to those Yahwistic values and traditions which will strengthen their moral and spiritual beliefs.

Samuel is the last of the judges who functioned at times as priest (1 Sam. 9:12-13; 13:8-13) but primarily as prophet. "In these capacities he filled a vital need at a crucial time in Israel's history," Samuel's work involved correcting religious malpractice, maintaining the national morale in a time of great crisis, exhorting a return to the Yahwist tradition of absolute faith in God as the source and center of all activity in Israel. "We may be sure that Samuel, more than any other, labored to keep the ancient tradition alive." Samuel is thus the bridge between the period of the judges and the new monarchy under the leadership of Saul. He is essentially the glue which holds the nation together during this turbulent period.

Saul was selected as king because the people needed someone who could lead them against their enemies. The various divisions and jealousies within the tribal league had weakened it, and now there was a need for a leader who could consolidate the tribes into a unified fighting confederacy. Saul was selected from the smaller tribe of Benjamin and not the two leading tribes of Judah and Ephraim, perhaps to provide nonpartisan leadership in order to eradicate the internecine infighting between these two rival entities. Israel knew the costs of division, had paid dearly for it, and now wanted to overcome it. A new centralized leadership might just unify the tribal leagues into a formidable nation-state.

Childs identifies two major Saul traditions in the Bible. The first places the initiative for establishing the monarchy with Yahweh; the second assigns the initiative to the disobedient people who disregard Samuel's warning about the evils of monarchy as a system.

Besieged by the Philistines, the Israelites needed a courageous leader who could vanquish their enemies. Saul was chosen because of his charismatic gifts and courage as well as his physical superiority; it was
noted that he stood “head and shoulders” above his peers. Equally important, as Paul Hanson has pointed out, was his willingness to vouchsafe the Yahwist tradition which emphasized the triad of righteousness, compassion and worship. The people wanted tribal solidarity and understood the necessity of retrieving the Yahwist traditions as a catalyst for intertribal consolidation. They knew that unity was integral to their liberation from Egypt and their passage through the wilderness. That unity would now strengthen them against their enemies.

Saul succeeded in unifying the tribes, and he was able to conquer certain enemies in battle. In the end, however, he was judged a failure. His demise emanated from the conflict between the Yahwist tradition of placing and keeping God at the center of national consciousness, which was essential to sustaining unity, and his own episodic, blasphemous, and disobedient self-glorification. The paradigm shift in leadership at this point in Israel’s history is symbolized by the transition from the Judge-Priest-Prophet model to a military-monarchy model—a shift that was based solely on the courage of one charismatic leader and his military prowess.

David symbolized yet another leadership paradigm in Israel. Again we have an axis shift from the short-lived military monarchy of Saul to leadership which is a confluence or synthesis of all the previous traditions. In David we find the Messianic visionary characteristics of Moses and Joshua combined with courageous military leadership emerging from the full power of God’s anointing. David is gifted, wise, cunning, brave, and obedient to God; but he also appeals to a broader constituency. He is both practical and spiritual. He is a fierce warrior but a compassionate and obedient servant. David blends the ancient spiritual traditions of the Yahwists with the power politics of a military monarchy. Thus, not only does Israel’s tribal league achieve some semblance of unity, but David himself embodies those spiritual traditions which were the cornerstones of Yahwistic faith. David is the man “after God’s own heart.” In him, we have the coalescence of Saul succeeded in unifying the tribes, and he was able to conquer certain enemies in battle. In the end, however, he was judged a failure.
these various leadership models which enables Israel to safely navigate through those problems which had previously thwarted its formation into a unified nation-state. Thus united, it could, for a time, hold its own against surrounding nations and empires.

The following lectionary studies provide one frame of analysis of the leadership crisis in Israel during this time period. It is by no means exhaustive. We must also caution against the generalizations and oversimplifications which often result in reading the Bible. The formation of Israel into a nation-state was a very gradual and complex process, as Norman Gottwald and others have affirmed. The process of leadership transition and change in Israel during this turbulent period is equally complex. However, we can still garner essential truths from these texts as we lead the people of God in the various congregations we serve.

June 8, 1997—The Third Sunday after Pentecost
1 Samuel 8:4-20 (11:14-15)
Ps. 138
2 Cor. 4:13-5:1
Mark 3:20-35

“The People Demand a New Leader”

In reading this text it is apparent that Israel is experiencing a crisis of confidence and leadership. The reign of the judges has ended, and Israel is poised to move from a theocracy, which upholds Yahweh as divine king, to an earthly monarchy. The people’s recollection of their turbulent history under the judges—framed by a theological pattern characterized by Paul Hanson as apostasy of the people, subjugation to the enemy, their cry to Yahweh and Yahweh’s sending a judge to deliver them a period of peace—may have influenced their need for a drastic change in leadership. This, along with continued intrusions, conquest, and humiliation by their Philistine neighbors; the confiscation and misplacement of the Ark of the Covenant after it had been captured in the battle of Aphek twenty years earlier; and Samuel’s selection of his two corrupt sons, Joel and Abiah, to serve as judges—all added to Israel’s irritation with the present forms of leadership.

The desire for a new leader would be fueled by the disasters experienced under the present governmental system, the abandonment
of those Yahwistic beliefs and practices which had consolidated the people into a unified religious community, and the recurrent failings and corruption of leaders who themselves had turned from Yahweh. If Israel would centralize leadership among the tribal confederation, it must select a king who could conquer its enemies “like all the nations” and finally win the respect of its adversaries.

The fragile nature of the tribal confederation was further tested by a series of post-Exodus oppressions by enemies who held relatively little territory. These local enemies included the Moabites, Canaanites, Midianites, Ammonites—and the far-stronger Philistines, who waged an incessant threat to Israelite stability and solidarity. In order to vanquish the Philistine menace once and for all, a new leader would need to orchestrate and oversee the institutional reconfiguration of the tribes into a preponderant show of force.

But the Canaanites were also a chronic affliction. According to one tradition, the danger of not completely annihilating the Canaanites haunted the Israelites, so they clamored for a leader who could finally do what should have been done ages ago.

The request for a new leader was particularly troublesome for Samuel, and he may have taken it as a personal affront. After all, he was the one who had held Israel together during this difficult period, functioning as judge, priest, and prophet. It was Samuel who had followed God’s instructions, restored the sanctity of the tabernacle and virtually singlehandedly transformed Israel from a tired and hapless people into a vigorous nation determined to break the Philistine yoke of oppression and establish a lasting peace. Although he pioneered new ideas of training schools for prophets (1 Sam. 10:5-12; 19:19-24), he was deeply troubled at what a new leadership model would represent.

Samuel clearly fathomed the paradox created by this new leadership model. He knew that the Hebrews had been liberated by Yahweh from the oppressions of the earthly king Pharaoh. He understood that much of the Yahwist spiritual tradition was grounded in and flourished in response to the iniquities and oppressions of the Egyptian tyranny. He

Samuel grasped the fundamental importance of clinging to religious ideals during times of turmoil and oppression.
grasped the fundamental importance of clinging to religious ideals during times of turmoil and oppression.

At stake, therefore, were not only issues of social and institutional reconfiguration of the tribal league but also the transvaluation of values in relation to Israel's national identity. Israel's identity was grounded in a unified faith whose practices had been solidified and undergirded by certain laws and codes. The new leadership paradigm would bring concomitant alterations in statehood. Charles Tilley cites them as following: "1) change or expansion in land armies; 2) new efforts to extract resources from the subject population; 3) the development of new bureaucracies and administrative innovations; 4) resistance from the subject population; 5) renewed coercion; 6) durable increases in the bulk or extractiveness of the state."

Although Samuel could not have anticipated the nature and implications of state changes cited by Tilley, his admonition to the people in 1 Sam. 8:16-20 portends the grievous nature of an earthly king's rulership which includes slavery, taxation, and other forms of familial and communal exploitation. Samuel understands the price that will be paid with such leadership, especially if it emulates those of other nations as the people insist.

Israel's leadership crisis thus revolves around several crucial concerns. First, in light of the tenuous and vulnerable state of the people and the history of previous defections from the Yahwist traditions which led to spiritual and political subjugation by their adversaries, it was vital that the people be committed to creating a system of checks and balances that would thwart the emergence of a despotism that could further polarize and fragment the confederacy. If the new rulership went unchecked, this might further weaken Israel and undermine the progress in spiritual restoration already achieved.

The second issue revolves around the practical economic constraints in a predominantly agrarian community which would come with the new leadership configuration. What would be the costs of such leadership economically, militarily, and humanly?

Third, in a community where leadership was covenantally established through divine initiatives, the people's demand for a leader inverted the leadership selection process. Could the very people who had turned from Yahweh and had repeatedly violated the central tenets of their religious beliefs be trusted to select a leader who would successfully lead them? If God had chosen their leaders in the past,
then it is God who should choose our leaders for the future. "The basic issue of Israel's faith has not been determined by the change of the political structure. Israel, along with its new king, must still decide for or against God."10

Yahwistic tradition placed a sovereign God at the center of all civil and spiritual decision-making in the nation. Samuel's willingness to consult God in all things made him a trusted and respected servant of the Lord. In fact, those leaders who had been successful in the past were those who loved, trusted, and consulted God before they acted. Samuel's concern may have been for leadership that conferred with God in all things and the restoration of a truly theocratic society which exalted God as supreme source and authority of its earthly endeavors.

Furthermore, the demand for new leadership may not have been inspired only by the past subjugation by enemies and the corruption of current leadership but may have emerged equally from a culture of freedom each tribal entity established while governing itself through the more turbulent periods of Israel's history. Because of the corruption of the judges and the volatility of Israel's political and spiritual condition, each tribe had to develop a system or subculture of rule which would link it umbilically to the confederacy but would also provide enough latitude to navigate independently through challenges by outside adversaries.

The demand for new leadership may also have been an outgrowth of relative tribal autonomy which further threatened Samuel. If the various tribes already possessed a certain home rule, the demand for a completely new form of leadership could be construed as a call for even more tribal sovereignty, thus further splintering the league. Although God later allayed Samuel's anxieties and exhorted him to give the people a king, we can understand his concern in granting a completely new form of leadership, particularly when this demand grew out of a desire of the Israelites to be "like other nations."

A new leader would then be chosen. His name was Saul, the son of Kish from the tribe of Benjamin. He would lead Israel into the next epoch as a Warrior-King and distinguish himself for the monarchy by defeating his enemies in conquest.
June 15, 1997—The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13
Ps. 20 or Ps. 72
2 Cor. 5:6-10 (11-13), 14-17
Mark 4:26-34
“A King Rejected and a King Selected”

Samuel’s worst fears about the new monarch were soon confirmed. While gifted with stature, bravery, and charisma, Saul ignored the sacred Yahwistic tradition of putting God first in critical decision-making for the volatile nation. He disobeyed God and Samuel. He failed to act decisively in attacking one of the Philistine garrisons (1 Sam. 13:5-7). He failed to inspire the people, who hid out in caves even after he had defeated a Philistine garrison (13:4). He lied and failed to wait on God (10:8). He built a monument to himself, consulted a medium of Endor after banishing all mediums from the land, and disobeyed God’s command to destroy all Amalekites (15:10-23). Saul’s disasters came one right after another, which further eroded the confidence of the Israelites.

Saul’s few promising victories over the Ammonites and Amalekites were soon dissipated by his disobedience and refusal to follow God’s commands. Much to the chagrin of Samuel, Saul had failed the test. He would not be the leader who could restore to the people a spiritual desire to place God first in all things and who maintained unequivocal trust and faith in God even under conditions of adversity.

We must remember that in their demand for a new leader the people had inadvertently set a new criterion for leadership. He would essentially be a warrior-king with military acumen, brave and bold enough to win victory while commanding the respect of his adversaries. That Saul did not completely destroy the Amalekites was his ultimate undoing, for too many of Israel’s problems were related to their incapacity to complete a divinely ordered task. The inability to consummate these divine initiatives is ascribed to the apostasy and insubordination of both people and leaders. They had wandered in the wilderness thirty-seven years and six months due to insubordination. They did not completely destroy the Canaanites after crossing the Jordan as commanded. The oppressions experienced under the leadership of various judges to the current Philistine fiasco were due in part to a failure of nerve and an refusal to obey God. Now Saul’s behavior, reminiscent of the failings of certain tyrannical and corrupt
leaders in Israel’s past, would tragically repeat a similar pattern of insolence and self-destruction.

Samuel’s scathing excoriation of Saul in 1 Sam. 15:17-19 is both a rebuke of Saul’s failing and a confirmation of his initial contempt of the people’s idea to select their own leader in the first place. Why was Saul chosen? What noble qualities and characteristics qualified him to lead Israel at the time? 1 Sam. 9:15-16 describes God’s revelation to Samuel that Saul would be the new leader. However, no criteria is specified by God for the essential qualities of leadership other than that God is responding to the cries and suffering of the people. Since the people have cried out, God will send them someone to relieve their suffering.

“In 1 Sam. 10:20-24, Saul was selected by lot at a popular assembly held at Mizpah under Samuel’s supervision.” Saul’s election was by prophetic designation and popular acclamation . . . Saul, like the judges before him, had risen in the old-fashioned way as a charismatic hero.” Although Samuel anointed Saul as leader over Israel, Saul’s selection was the result not of God’s initiatives but rather of the desperation of the people. They could not wait for God to send them someone who would fit God’s criteria for success. This leadership selection process, at the risk of oversimplifying, resulted in an interim appointment. It was done horizontally by communal acclamation; God was virtually left out of the process. This is what troubled Samuel, but he acceded to their wishes: “Although the establishment of a monarchy was not according to the original divine plan, God is still deeply involved. When Samuel anoints Saul, the divine blessing is given and the Spirit of God brings him victory.”

But there was nothing to indicate that the appointment would be anything other than a short-term solution to Israel’s woes. The monarchy itself would thus be limited for a prescribed period of time. The emphasis on Saul’s outward appearance (1 Sam. 9:1-2) may indicate the superficial and shallow nature of the new leadership criteria. Saul was a man of presence, but was he a man of substance? The focus on external characteristics may have been the means by which the writer of Samuel underscores the inadequate criteria established by the people.

The people demanded a leader who could crush their adversaries. Thus, he would have to be a person of intimidating presence or great stature to square off with the likes of the Philistines’ champion, Goliath. He must have a commanding presence, one that could be
favorably looked upon by other warriors and could command their respect. Rather than demand a leader because his heart is right with God, they wanted someone who looked the part, one who could inspire fear and awe in enemies, someone who could imbue them with confidence and heroism on the field of battle. They wanted the right man for the wrong reason.

Conversely, David’s anointing and selection as the new leader would occur as result of divine initiative. In exhorting Samuel God delineates a “new” criterion for leadership. 1 Sam. 16:6-7 describes this criteria as spiritual, moral, substantive.” “The LORD does not see as mortals see . . . the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” (1 Sam. 16:7 niv).

The new leader would not be chosen according to criteria developed by a demoralized and emotionally driven people but by God himself. Stature, height, size, or appearance, have nothing to do with qualified, bonafide leadership in God’s eyes.

At no other point in Israel’s history are such leadership criteria openly specified. We know that Abraham had great faith. God directly exhorted Moses into leadership, his reservations about his own abilities notwithstanding. Joshua was brave and optimistic and was able to overcome the constraints of leading and settling the people in a new land. However, with David we find God being more specific about the requirements needed for leadership of God’s people. This new king would not only have the concern of his people at heart but would be a man after God’s own heart.

Although David, like Saul, turns out to be a self-styled military leader, he also possesses an anointing, an inner strength, a humility and compassion which distinguishes him from his predecessor. The new leader must have the savvy of a worldly ruler but the humility and spirituality of prophet, priest, and sage. The new leader would bring together the best of both...
worlds. He would lead the people through the dangers and complications of the world but would not forsake God in the process.

In contrast to Saul's appointment, David was anointed to lead the people. The imperatives for the new leadership would be divinely inspired and vertically established. As Gerhard von Rad writes, "The King of Zion is thus the mandatory of Yahweh himself; he does not sit upon his own throne, but upon that of Yahweh." 14

Too often in church leadership today the appointment is emphasized over the anointment—which often leads to ecclesiastical failings. But when God calls and anoints, a special kind of leadership is established which possesses the acuity and sensitivity to build consensus and solidarity among the people. Although for some this leadership criterion is new, it really is not. Rooted in the best of the Yahwistic theocratic tradition, the new leadership would have to be divinely centered in order to establish order and stability in a disparate nation.

These spiritual requirements for leadership would be most salient in a nation which prided itself on being uniquely spiritual. Unlike other nations, Israel's evolution was made possible by a series of covenants with God. The beginning and ending point of Israel's faith was belief in the character and promises of God regardless of the foibles and failings of the people and their leaders.

It is further important to note that the new leader of Israel had to be someone who could symbolize and embody those characteristics and qualities which would be most emulated by the people in general. God chose the leaders of the new nation according to the same qualities needed by the people to sustain their nation against external and internal threats. The selection of David was the basis for the mantra and mandate of the new nation-state. The restoration and consolidation of Israel into a national power rested not only upon the mobilization of military and material resources but upon the reinforcement of a covenantal relationship with God which reaffirmed "I will be your God and you will be my people."

In 1 Samuel 16 a writer in the Deuteronomistic school has portrayed a pastoral setting which evokes tranquil, serene images of shepherding community. David as the new shepherd of Israel hails from a rural environment, which has important implications for the type of leadership Israel will need in the future. Unlike the selection of Saul, which appears whimsical if not downright quixotic, the nature of David's upbringing and selection is quite relevant. This suggests that God's selection is based not only on the inner criteria but also on
certain outer criteria. This has important ramifications for the expectations and climate of leadership cultivated in Israel under David's rulership.

Equally worth noting is that there is no presumption of qualification or megalomania on the part of David's family or David himself. Jesse and his sons are all unassuming. Because they lack previous predilections or aspirations for leadership, God can use them to the utmost to accomplish God's will. Although Saul, too, was quite unsuspecting when he was chosen to lead the nation, this was not attributed to humility. David's simplicity, on the other hand, has significant pastoral implications.

June 22, 1997—The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
1 Samuel 17:1A, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49
Ps. 90:9-20
2 Cor. 6:1-13
Mark 4:35-41
“God's Chosen Leader Emerges”

David is the one chosen to lead Israel, but chosenness does not mean frozenness. The true and anointed leader will be tested by many adversaries, and he is called to act decisively amid life's ambiguities and conflicts. By now, the people of Israel are thoroughly confused. What began as the promise of conquest and confidence has ended in crisis and fear. The resilience and fearlessness of the Philistines has compounded the problem of morale for the Israelites.

The various texts appear to indicate that the Philistines have a comedic contempt for the capacity of the fragile nation of Israel to achieve and sustain any kind of military victory. "The Philistines were a sort of foe with which Israel's loose organization could not cope... Unlike previous foes, the Philistines did not pose a limited threat that concerned only adjacent tribes, nor one that the tribal rally could deal with at a blow; aiming at conquest, they threatened Israel in her totality and with her life." What Israel experienced was a failure of nerve; David would be the answer to their problems.

Not only must David fend off a jealous King Saul but he is compelled to join temporary ranks with the Philistines to establish a stronghold against his own people. Fortunately, David did not kill his own people for the Philistines, but this dilemma dramatizes the numerous trials facing...
him. He was blessed to develop a friendship with Jonathan, but this did not eradicate the enormous problems he faced given the Philistine threat and the lack of assistance he could expect from his own people.

Beyond Co-Dependency

Like all great leaders, David would demonstrate resourcefulness in subduing his adversaries. He could not rely upon his own men to do battle without engaging in some monumental act that would inspire confidence in them. He could not depend upon Saul, who still commanded the largest garrisons that could fight the Philistines. David could rely upon Jonathan, but he, too, was beset with his own problems and challenges.

The challenge presented by the Philistines was based not only on their guerilla warfare tactics, and the fact that they had Goliath and other warrior giants of similar stature but also on their monopoly on the production of iron. This meant that the Philistines probably had control over the types of weapons made possible through the production of iron. The knowledge that their enemies were better equipped militarily further intimidated the Israelites.

In 1 Sam. 17:38-40 Saul offers to give David his armor for battle. Apart from the fact that the armor was too awkward for David, which is noted in the text, it was probably made from metal produced by the Philistines. The superiority of the Philistines as warriors could be attributed to their supremacy of weaponry. David’s rejection of Saul’s armor, then, is not only a renunciation of Saul’s makeshift sponsorship but a repudiation of the military invincibility of the Philistines as epitomized by their weapons of war. David’s refusal to wear Saul’s armor may be viewed symbolically as a repudiation of the perceived dominance of both Saul and the Philistines.

David would use his own resources to fight Goliath, not the weapons fashioned by his enemies or those adopted by his king. David’s choice of weapons may well have symbolized his desire to break with earthly authority and to rely solely upon the ingenuity and innovation of the God who called him to service. This was highly innovative. Who could imagine that a slingshot and a few smooth stones would suffice to kill Goliath? This took courage on David’s part but also an absolute confidence and trust that God was on his side and would ultimately give
him victory. David chose not to be co-dependent but to rely upon those resources entrusted to him by God to get the job done.

Against All Odds: Vanquishing a Formidable Opponent

If the Israelites were enamored of the stature of Saul as a man head and shoulders above his peers, then they would be thoroughly intimidated by a man like Goliath. A towering person with the warrior instinct and a fierce aptitude for battle, Goliath struck holy fear in his opponents. That the young man David was both innocent and undaunted in his desire to fight Goliath gives us glimpse into his raw and real courage. But since God had saved him from the paws of the lion and the bear, Goliath was simply another challenge to overcome (17:31-37).

The contrast between the fear of the Israelites and the courage of David in defeating Goliath emphasizes one important aspect of leadership: it takes upon itself the yoke of responsibility in leading the nation back to its higher ideals. What David did not only inspired confidence in other warriors but also set a standard of achievement for them to emulate.

David’s tenacity in facing and defeating Goliath can be imputed to several key factors: 1) he knew that God was on his side as an anointed leader; 2) he relied upon his own innovation and resourcefulness to fashion a weapon to vanquish his enemy; 3) he boldly took the challenge to his adversary and did not wait for his opponent to bring the fight to him; 4) his basic approach to Goliath undermined the Philistines’ basic presuppositions about Israel’s method of warfare. By courage and creative thinking, David subverted all previous Philistine notions of Israelite military capacity and moral strength, which resulted in the Philistines’ demise.

As an anointed leader chosen by God, David summoned the strength and courage to face and surmount a major stumbling block to Israelite progress. God was with him and he was with God: this is the primary factor which distinguished him from all his cohorts. David exemplifies the best of the Yahwistic tradition of consulting and placing God first in all things. Since David was a leader, this resulted in a victory that many believed unattainable. He was not elected by the people to lead but was anointed by God to provide leadership for Israel at a very critical time in its history. In the midst of conflict, he
remembered not who he was but whose he was. "The Israelites' attitude toward their king is most characteristically expressed in the term used of his [David's] relation to Yahweh, Yahweh's anointed."

God provides his anointed with the strength and courage to do the impossible. In confronting Goliath on the battlefield David invokes the name and presence of Yahweh for deliverance and victory. God is the ultimate shield and reference for triumph. The leader realizes that there is nothing he cannot do without God, so God is the focus of his greatest concentration and effort. David's entire being was centered in the Lord of Hosts, who would bring deliverance and victory over the great adversary. David succeeded because he kept God at the center of his consciousness and action. He would not forget the importance of maintaining and sustaining this vital connection.

June 29, 1997—The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27
Ps. 130
2 Cor. 8:7-15
Mark 5:21-43

"Leading through Personal Tragedy"

Even the anointed of God pay a heavy price for service. We can imagine the pain David, being pursued by Saul, must have experienced in being unjustly persecuted by a leader he once admired. But David sustains a far greater blow when he discovers that his best friend, Jonathan, and his father, Saul, have been slain in battle. David had established a close relationship with Jonathan, who was both a godsend and lifesaver. Jonathan could have easily sided with his father, whose throne he might inherit, but God's tender mercies prompted him to befriend David because he saw something in him that was honest, innocent, and pure. Their friendship was genuine, and by the news that Jonathan had been killed deeply hurt David.

One of the great challenges of leadership is to continue leading through personal pain, suffering, and loss. Henri Nouwen's image of the wounded healer is applicable even to David the warrior leader. In a time when he was called to heal the nation's wounds of consternation and strife, he experiences a tragedy which could have easily derailed him from his destiny. David's lament is his soul crying out in remembrance of his slain comrades; it is also his litany of consolation.
All leaders have their foibles and infirmities. The goal is to translate those infirmities into canticles of release, where souls experience the fullness of anguish and grief but can also take the wings of transcendence and relief. A great hazard of leadership is casualties of war. Close friends can be lost through death or differences of opinion. The anointed leader knows that God is the ultimate true friend, and while he or she may be deeply hurt at the loss of such friendship, he or she must find the strength to continue God’s work on earth.

As warrior, David had his brushes with death. A nameless, faceless enemy can be vanquished on the battlefield without compunctions. But when death hits home, the grieving and laments are deep and lasting. David might well have thought, if Jonathan had been with me, this would not have happened. If I had been there with him perhaps I could have saved him.

While evoking the pathos of the pain of a personal loss, David’s lament on a deeper level engenders a stark realization that an era in Israel’s history has ended. The reign of Saul has come to a tragic close, and the memories and nostalgia are bittersweet. What began in the bright hope of promise ended in the tragic debacle of a leader who had fallen from grace through his own vainglory and disobedience. David’s lament is a canticle for a time that once was, whose romantic excursions and heroic undertakings were the stuff of fairy tales.

It is important to see David’s capacity to translate grief into a meaningful path toward recovery. The true and anointed leader is forever challenged to transform the pain and discord of leadership into liturgies of praise and thanksgiving. The discord and tumult of personal pain must be transmuted into some incantational refrain which brings solace as well as serenity for both the slain and those who mourn them. The challenge of leadership is to sustain God’s work in the midst of those realities which wound and try us. Overcoming the devastation of personal loss would mean for David singing a new song and moving beyond the constraints and perils of personal pain.

David might well have thought, if Jonathan had been with me, this would not have happened.
July 6, 1997—The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10
Ps. 48
2 Cor. 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13

“Establishing a Leadership Stronghold”

The death of Saul and Jonathan now behind him, David must establish a stronghold for leadership in the nation. A command post from which to deploy troops for the battles ahead would be indispensable for the new kingdom. This new location—in Hebron and later Jerusalem, which became known as the City of David—would also be the central “shrine” from which David would issue directives to the tribal confederacy and confer with them on matters of critical concern. His private army began by pursuing the Jebusites, who were the indigenous inhabitants of the territory. Joshua had failed to drive them away, and they were now an obstacle to David’s establishment of Jerusalem as the permanent center of his kingdom.

Establishing a stronghold in Jerusalem would provide David with certain key advantages: 1) he would later centralize his leadership over the tribal league; 2) he would have a permanent domain in which to train and deploy his troops; 3) it would provide stability for the reconfiguration of those institutions which would be essential components of the new state; 4) it would provide a place in which national religious monuments and shrines to Yahweh could be erected; 5) it would both dramatize and symbolize the imperatives for unification of the tribal leagues; 6) it would allow him to better manage the conflicts between Judah and Israel; 7) it would provide Israel a center out of which to develop as a competing national power vis-à-vis other nations.

David did not have immediate command over the twelve tribes. “He was readily accepted as king by Judah, but not by the tribes of the north. They crowned Ishboseth, a remaining son of Saul. David ruled over Judah for seven and one-half years and later over Israel for thirty-three.” The conflict between Israel and Judah was inevitable, and it broke out in a minor skirmish at Gibeon. After Ishboseth’s assassination by two of his men, David increased in strength and was eventually made king over all of Israel. His stronghold in Jerusalem aided his ascension to the throne because Jerusalem was a strategic.
center in which he could readily interface with the northern tribes who were still outcast.

The people wanted David as king, but he understood that their acclaim was not enough. Regulation, centralization, and taxation would be essential to consolidating the new nation. Having learned the lessons of Saul, who failed to modify tribal policy or strengthen the confederacy, David was determined to use administrative acumen to solidify the new nation into a unified body. A stronghold would give him a command post from which to maneuver and would allow him to confront various groups on his own turf. The strategic value of Jerusalem as a stronghold for rulership cannot be overlooked. David knew the value of having a geographic location which was both accessible to citizens of the kingdom but impregnable against its enemies. For many years, it was effective. During the time of Israel’s united monarchy no Egyptian king invaded Palestine. The city as a stronghold would prove an invaluable asset against potential invaders.

Conclusions

The challenge of leadership during this period in Israel’s history is directly related to the problems which accompany changes in leadership in any age. In these various texts we have four critical junctures of leadership change in Israel. First is the transition from the rulership and arbitration of the judges to Samuel, who functioned as judge, priest, and prophet. The predominant leadership motif of the time of the judges can be called statutory-judicial. This period is characterized by various cycles of captivity and oppression by smaller adversaries, the peremptory administration of the law, the corruption of various judges, and a general subversion of Yahwistic traditions.

Second is the transition from Samuel to Saul. We now move from the statutory-judicial stage to limited military monarchy. Instead of God’s direct intervention in choosing both the person and form of leadership (as with Abraham, Moses, and Joshua), now the people chose their own leader. This popular initiative was particularly troublesome for Samuel, since the Israelites, by turning away from Yahweh in the past, had not demonstrated good judgment.

Third is the transition from Saul to David. This period may be characterized as the Messianic-Servant stage. "It has been observed that there must undoubtedly be a logical and historical connection
between the concept of the Messiah and the ancient Israelite idea of
the king as Yahweh’s anointed.” Here we have the complexities of
moving from a rather fragmented tribal confederacy to a nation-state.
The problems brought about by this transition were monumental. A
messianic form of leadership, requiring one who was both warrior and
priest, might sustain the nation through this turbulent period. But it
would not be an easy road. Unity must be
achieved between the nomadic, migratory
communities and others spread in various
geographical areas and dependent upon an
unstable agrarian economy.

In each of these instances we find radical
shifts in the axis of leadership in the Israelite
community. There is no centralized
government. These shifts also signify more
subtle radical alterations in consciousness in
the way the Israelites view themselves, want to
govern themselves, and see God’s role in their
political life. While a shared history of Israel
provided a uniform frame of consciousness, it
is precisely religious faith and belief that has
sustained their community through various
calamities and oppressions.

Despite this unified faith, each tribe would
nevertheless manage to establish a measure of
personal hegemony and autonomy which
invariably threatened the league’s sense of
cohesion. The challenge would thus be for God
to choose and anoint a leader who possessed the
courage and spirituality to unite Israel into a
nation-state by conquering her enemies, by
reestablishing the central tenets of their religious
faith, and by governance from a central locale
which would be the capital stronghold for the nation. The challenge of
leadership in Israel yesterday may be the challenge of leadership in
the church presently. God calls and anoints certain leaders to call the
people to repentance, to raise expectations of God and themselves, and
to engage in the challenges and difficulties of kingdom building in
times of crisis and transition. The difficulties are many and the

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Notes

7. Hanson, *The People Called* 34.
8. Ibid., 94–95.
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