And a Second is Like It: Christian Faith and the Claim of the Other
William Schweiker

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On Marriage and Homosexuality
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Contents

Articles

Introduction
Hendrik R. Pieterse .................................................. 231

And a Second Is Like It: Christian Faith and the Claim of the Other
William Schweiker .................................................. 233

A Revolution in Christian Preaching: From the “Old Testament” to
the “Hebrew Bible”
Joseph M. Webb .................................................... 248

Arguing “According to the Scriptures”: A Path toward Christian
Affirmation of God’s People Israel
Michael E. Lodahl .................................................... 265

The Christian-Jewish Encounter and the Practices of The United
Methodist Church: An Exploration
Grant S. White ....................................................... 281

Jewish-Christian Relations from the “Other Side”:
A Response to Webb, Lodahl, and White
Amy-Jill Levine ....................................................... 297

Eucharist as Promissorial Act: A Roman Catholic/Protestant
Reconciliation?
W. Paul Jones ......................................................... 305

Resisting Capitalism: On Marriage and Homosexuality
Stanley M. Hauerwas ............................................... 313

Searching for the Real Problem: A Response to Hauerwas
Thomas W. Ogletree ............................................... 319

Resisting Capitalism: A Response to Hauerwas
Richard B. Hayes .................................................. 324
QR Lectionary Study

Hope from Unexpected Places
Joel B. Green .................................................. 327

Don’t Miss Out!

Upcoming issues of Quarterly Review are filled with provocative and insightful articles about issues that lie close to the hearts of clergy and congregations. You can’t afford to miss out on these opportunities for theological reflection! The following are just a few examples of what you can expect.

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Introduction

Neighbors, Kin, and Christian Conversation

It seems everybody is into talking these days. Every day thousands of people vent their frustrations and fears, their joys and sorrows on talk-radio stations across the country. And talk-show hosts, competent or not, readily expectorate everything from platitudes to insults. Television serves up its own assortment of shows for talk-hungry consumers—from the respectable to the raunchy, the scholarly to the supercilious.

While many thoughtful people no doubt will dismiss this infatuation with talk as one more symptom of a decaying society, others will discern within it a deeper malaise. For them, this desire to talk and to be heard reflects the profound anxiety, fear, and resentment precipitated by a rapidly changing and mobile society and world. Long-established values and verities of culture are questioned and often dismissed precisely at a time when an information-deluged society yearns for sound moral judgment based on time-tested principles. The dynamics and nature of work and of the workplace are undergoing far-reaching change, stirring excitement in some people and insecurity in others. Neighborhoods, whether in big cities or in small towns, are fast becoming multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual communities. And in the midst of all this we seem to be losing a sense of civility and mutual trust; so often now litigation, not dialogue or arbitration, is the first (and often the only) response to settling disputes or conflicts between us.

Such shaking of the cultural foundations often provokes a new
search for individual and communal, even national, identity. And as the proliferation of talk shows may attest, most people sense that community and public discourse are essential to the formation of identity and selfhood. We want to talk and be heard, because we know that it is only through honest and unrestrained dialogue and from within communities of trust and love that we can come to know who we are, both as individuals and as societies.

Religious traditions have rich resources to offer for facilitating personal and communal identity through dialogue and for nurturing communities of trust, love, and freedom. Yet relations between faith communities are too often fractured, characterized by mutual suspicion, bigotry, and an unwillingness to talk. This issue of Quarterly Review examines the ambiguous legacy of the Christian church when it comes to nurturing mutual understanding and loving communities, both within the church family and between it and its neighbors.

William Schweiker locates the obligation to care for the “other,” the stranger, the enemy, in the Christian’s command to love God and neighbor. Joseph Webb, Michael Lodahl, and Grant White explore ways in which Christians can talk thoughtfully and meaningfully with their closest neighbors, the Jews. Amy-Jill Levine shows what such a conversation would require from a Jewish perspective.

W. Paul Jones reminds Protestant Christians that much remains to be said between them and their kinfolk in the faith, Roman Catholics. He suggests that thinking about the Eucharist as “promissorial act” may open up a fresh avenue for fruitful dialogue.

Arguably no other issue in recent years has threatened to cut off conversation within the United Methodist family and tear at the fabric of our identity more than homosexuality. In his always provocative yet insightful manner Stanley Hauerwas argues that for United Methodists to talk meaningfully about homosexuality requires shifting the entire framework of the conversation. And both Thomas Ogletree’s and Richard Hays’s responses to Hauerwas are models of Christian conversation, of “speaking the truth in love.”

Joel Green’s perspicacious reflections on Luke’s Gospel for Advent are a reminder that we Christians receive both our identity and our speech from the God who has come—and continues to come—in our midst. Our ability, and our responsibility, to talk with kin and neighbor are gifts of grace. May we be found faithful.

Hendrik R. Pieterse
William Schweiker

And a Second Is Like It: Christian Faith and the Claim of the Other

Great Commands and the Claim of the Other

The Christian life is often described in terms of the two great commandments: to love God and to love the neighbor (Matt. 22:37-39). From very early Christian writings to contemporary popular hymns, Christians identify themselves in terms of a life of love. A description of life rooted in the two great commandments answers the need of faith to have God as the supreme object of hope, devotion, and fulfillment. The second command has also been seen as the hallmark of justice. Christians are to love others as they love themselves. At the same time, the command protects the dignity of and love for oneself against all false forms of self-sacrifice; we are to love others as ourselves. At the core of Christian morality is an affirmation of dignity and justice culminating in a distinct form of love rooted in God's action.

The essential connection between the “first” and the “second” great commandments issued by Christ continues a long line of Jewish teaching. When asked by a non-Jew to teach the entire Torah while standing on one foot, Hillel replied, “What you dislike don’t do to others.”

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others; that is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn” (B. T. Shabbat 31a). The first command, the love of God, is violated if not accompanied by a life marked by the second. To be sure, the command of neighbor love is ambiguous. What is meant by “love”? Who is the “neighbor”? Just how far does the principle of reciprocity, signified by the little word as, reach? Am I really commanded to love a child in a distant land as much as I love my own son? Ambiguity abounds.

The ambiguity of the second command is not limited to its meaning and logic. Christians who claim it as a directive for their lives have been violent and tyrannous. Hatred too easily infects a people of love. Anti-Semitism, colonial domination, forced conversions, slavery, sexism, and racism must be acknowledged. There is much room for repentance! And yet, not only is the injustice of Christians exposed by the commands; many of the great liberation movements of the twentieth century rest on the commandments of love. Martin Luther King, Jr., and many in the civil-rights movement enacted in the struggle for social justice beliefs about the centrality of Christian love, agape. In many respects, the history of Christian ethics is the tale of the ongoing search for clarity about how to enact in actual life the two great commandments.

The importance of the great commands in the life of faith is especially true for those shaped by and dedicated to the legacy of Methodism. John Wesley made his homilies on the “Sermon on the Mount” basic to his conception of Christian faith. Others had seen the Christian life in terms of virtue and natural law (Thomas Aquinas); covenant and election through the Decalogue (John Calvin); Law and Gospel (Martin Luther); or communities supposedly living eschatologically now (Baptists). For Wesley, “Christian religion” is inscribed in the words of the Sermon on the Mount, the epitome of Jesus' teaching focused on the Lord's Prayer. Even Wesley's most distinctive theological claim about “perfection” centers on the two great commands. For what is perfection, that glorious mixture of happiness and holiness, but the full love of God and neighbor? The missionary zeal and also outreach to the poor that characterized the Wesleyan movement was driven by radical love.

Christians have always understood the command of neighbor love to be about how to treat and relate rightly to others. My task in this article is not to take up the various conceptual ambiguities found in the command of neighbor love or even the oft-noted oddity of
Christians being "commanded" to love. Instead, I want to respond to a more recent challenge. There are currently thinkers, religious and nonreligious, who believe that injunctions like the "second great command" actually miss the core of morality. Their argument is that in the demand to love others as themselves, Christians require that the "other" become like them in order to be worthy of moral respect and love. Neighbor love is a veiled imperialism of the self. Mindful of pluralism and difference, these thinkers demand a turning away from neighbor love and a turning toward claims about the moral priority of the "other." In the name of true moral respect and care, Christians ought to abandon their traditional ways of thinking about how to relate to others.

I will be arguing, rather ardently, that while the discourse of the "other" has important insights for our times, what is really needed is a robust sense of neighbor love, the second great command. By reclaiming the richness of their native moral language—the language of love of God and neighbor—Christians have a subtle and compelling way to think about life, acknowledging difference and otherness. In fact, the great commands provide a more complex way of addressing the demands of our age than the discourse of otherness. The essay is an interpretation and defense of the great commandments as the best way for thinking about how Christians ought to respond to the claim of the other.

The remainder of the article progresses through elements of the second command correlated to the theme of otherness. I turn first to the question of the neighbor and what I call the "problem of proximity." At stake here is how to think about life in a world of peoples scarred by legacies of suffering. Surprisingly, we will see that the command should be read in the direction of love of enemy as the imitation of God's action; thus, it provides guidance to meet the challenges of our world. Second, we turn to love of self and its relation to love of others. Here the problem is what philosophers call "totality": defining others only in relation to our own self-understanding. Yet the second great command rests not on the self but on an idea of the "image of God." Self-love is bound to another, to the love of God. The final step of the inquiry links the two great commands. It seeks to show how Christian beliefs about God's action, far from denying otherness, propel Christians to respect and enhance the integrity of all life. The purpose of the inquiry is to reclaim the full force of the command of neighbor love as the proper way to respond to the other.
The theme of the "other" dominated much early-twentieth-century Christian theology. In the face of tyrannous and idolatrous political machines, like National Socialism in Germany, as well as the failure of classical liberal Protestant theology to provide strong lines of demarcation between "Christ" and "culture," many theologians insisted that God is "totally other." Nowadays, if one asks "Who is the other?" answers tend immediately to focus on the human and not the divine other. The air is buzzing with debates about how best to acknowledge openly and honestly differences among people. Why is this the case?

The last century witnessed untold horror and violence (the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing, widespread and systemic conflict, nuclear warfare), even as there have been massive migrations of peoples due to the breakup of colonial powers and worldwide economic pressure. The conjunction of legacies of violence with migration means that multiculturalism is now a fact in most places. This fact carries with it new problems. Around the planet "enemies" are forced to live in proximity to each other. From the West Bank to Los Angeles, Tokyo to Bosnia, the shifts in political power and the movement of peoples have evoked renewed and bloody cycles of violence. Little wonder there is so much concern for the "other"! And in this is a paradox. We need an ethics fit for a world in which diverse and different peoples, usually former enemies, live side by side. And yet the very fact of moral diversity seems to disallow developing just that kind of global ethics, because shared moral values are difficult to discover. Much of the discourse of the "other" is meant to confront us with this twofold challenge of global politics and communities.

If we wish to understand the problem of the other, we need to be more precise in our analysis. More than ever, our age is characterized by global dynamics. Sociologists speak of the present "compression of the world." The world seems smaller, and increasingly we imagine it as one world. There is sociocultural density of life brought on by the migration of peoples and by economic developments. It is no longer the case that societies are in any obvious sense homogeneous entities. Globalized cities are filled with diverse peoples, a multitude of languages and cultural styles, and new experiments in identity formation. Our children know more about the diversity of their world; courses in history are thankfully no
The world is compressed because of social density. Yet the very same compression of the world means that human consciousness is expanding to see the world as a whole. There is a long history to this expansion of consciousness. In the West, ancient Greek historians tried writing "world histories" even as early Christian thinkers and Roman Stoic philosophers spoke about the ecumene, or the whole civilized "world." Yet pictures of the earth as a blue-green orb floating in space have been available to the human imagination only during the so-called "space age." It is not simply that we now have access to information about other parts of the world via TV, radio, and the Internet—although that is important. The compression of the world in terms of the range of consciousness means a new moment within the imaginative project of world-making.

That is not all. The compression of the world is also characterized by what is called "global reflexivity." The very texture of a culture or society is shaped and transformed by the complex internalization of relations to other cultures and societies. Reflexivity is the many ways social entities (economies, ethnic groups, institutions) act back upon themselves to adjust to information about their internal and external working. How we see the world and others, and even the perceptions of us by others, bends back to shape our actions, relations, and identities. Fashion, forms of music, and new patterns of social interaction are ways that the lives of others enter and change our own existence. Thus, globalization is a twofold compression of the world: (1) the proximity of peoples and the expansion of consciousness, and (2) the intense reflexive relations between peoples. When social density becomes reflexive, that is, when we begin to understand ourselves in and through our relations to those who are really different or other than ourselves, then we have the problem of what I will call "proximity."  

Proximity does not mean simply that people who were at a distance are now close at hand, by the media or by migration. Proximity is a moral challenge: how to live with others amid powerful forces shaping society and identity. Not surprisingly, the growing interdependence of peoples is also marked by increased violence, for instance, the horror of ethnic cleansing. The Balkans, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, racial conflict in the United States—all manifest the ways in which the remembrance of injustice continues to permeate human time. With the increase of communicative power working through the global media, hatred is becoming
globalized; and so is access to the weapons that will continue the suffering. At issue is not only justice or respect for the other but forgiveness. We must escape histories of suffering and break cycles of violence if human life is to have a future. The actual or imagina­tive presence of enemies in one’s own life means that the logic of retributive justice must be curtailed by mercy.

It is at this level that the radical nature of the second great command begins to appear. We must recall that Jesus’ interpretation of this commandment is given parabolic and also imperative forms. Immediately after Jesus uttered the double love command and in response to a question about how to inherit eternal life, someone asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:25-29). Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). In the parable the question of the neighbor is reversed. The Samaritan, someone despised by the Jews of Jesus’ day after years of conflict between the two groups, had compassion on a man beset by robbers. There is absolutely no suggestion that Jesus thinks the Samaritan must become Jewish in order to act as a neighbor; the loving act of the Samaritan is what constitutes him as a neighbor. This rests upon Jewish beliefs about the relation between righteous action and the human being as the image of God. “Since human beings are created in the image of God, it is obvious that one achieves the highest possible level of perfection or self-realization by becoming as similar to God as humanly possible. This is the basis for what may be the single most important ethical doctrine of the Hebrew Bible, that of the imitatio Dei, the imitation of God.” The Imago Dei is hardly an attribute of the mind or soul; it is manifest in actions that imitate God. Neighbor is defined not by likeness but by compassion.

The second great command shatters any constriction on who the neighbor is—any limitation of compassion, respect, and justice to members of one’s own clan, race, gender, community, or religion. Just how far this destruction of limitation on compassion goes is seen in that Jesus offers two further injunctions that interpret the second command: the demand to love others as Jesus loved and the injunction to love the enemy. In Matt. 5:43-48, amid the Sermon on the Mount, Christ links perfection (Wesleyans take note!) and “sonship” to God in heaven with the demand to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (v. 44). Just as in the parable, what is meant by neighbor is shattered. But it is explained not in the direction of an abstract “other” but with respect to the actual, concrete
problem of how to live with others beyond the cycle of violence and conflict. Neighbor is not someone near and dear to us but anyone who acts righteously and, more radically, loves as Christ loves—loves even the enemy.

Of course, it may be the case that given Christ's interpretation no one is really able to be a neighbor! All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. And it may also be the case, as I believe it is, that love of enemy requires that demands for justice remain in order to protect the innocent. Be that as it may, it seems clear that the second great command is not about trying to make others like ourselves. It is to guide action in response to those radically other than self. The command should be interpreted in the direction of the Good Samaritan and the love of Christ rather than toward our self-identity. This is vitally important in an age of globalization and the problem of proximity. In order to have a viable future, societies riddled by the reality of multiculturalism must find resources for breaking seemingly unending cycles of revenge and violence. Even in cases of justifiable warfare (I believe there are such cases), one must still develop ways beyond retribution. A grasp of this fact is hardly unique to Christians. In the Hebrew Bible, the so-called lex talionis—an "eye for an eye" (Exod. 21:23-25)—was meant originally to place strict limits on retributive violence. The world's religions, in their praise of compassion, mercy, and justice, make the same point.

The second great command is directed to the problem of proximity. It institutes forgiveness rather than cycles of retribution as the necessary condition for the continuation of human life together. So radical is this insight about the human power of forgiveness that the philosopher Hannah Arendt once noted that the "discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth."4 This is a reason why civil-rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., looked to the love command. And it suggests that we ought not forego the command of neighbor love in favor of abstract claims about the demand of "the other." The command of neighbor love hardly endorses any belief that others must become like us to be loved. The commentaries on the command given in Jesus' actions and parables introduce forgiveness into human affairs in a way that seems required by the reality of what we have called proximity—that is, the problem of enemies having to live together. Without some notion of forgiveness conjoined to the demands of justice, it is hard to imagine how societies composed of diverse
peoples scarred by suffering will long endure. But this is precisely what the second great command does: it links justice and forgiveness, forging a life imitative of God's good action.

"As Yourself": Self, Totality, and Other

Part of the concern for otherness arises from the deep problem of how to orient life in a world of pluralism and multiculturalism. More pointedly, the challenge is to develop ways to link justice and forgiveness in the face of long legacies of suffering and the increasing globalization of hatred. The second great command interpreted through Jesus' action and parables provides a way to bind justice and forgiveness together. It is particularly at this point, though, that claims about otherness seem to gain poignancy; for the second command insists that love of others can and must reflect love of self. Does this mean that the other is reduced to a reflection of myself?

What is under attack by advocates of otherness seems to be a distinctly modern, Western conception of selfhood and its attendant moral aspirations. Early modern thinkers (Kant, no less than Hume; Rousseau, just as Voltaire) argued that in virtue of simple and basic humanity, persons command respect, sympathy, and the rights of liberty, happiness, and "fraternity." Persons have worth irrespective of religious commitment, nationality, race, or gender. There are, as Thomas Paine put it, "rights of man." In the face of a long legacy of religious and political conflict (the Thirty Years War) and uncertainty about how to ground political rights, these theorists ventured a host of different, completely political theories. The whole edifice of modern democracy, no less than beliefs about human rights, owes much to the passionate and yet rational vision of these prophets of humanity. We deny these moral aspirations at our peril. And in fact human rights have roots in Jewish and Christian faith.

It must also be admitted that the "humanity" that commends respect and demands these rights is a thin creature. The suspicion of critics is that it conceals deep religious, racial, and gendered biases. After all, Paine did speak of the rights of man. More pointedly, for Immanuel Kant humanity is defined in terms of the idea of rational freedom (i.e., will) that commands our respect. But this idea of will is deeply Western in character. Jean-Jacques Rousseau championed the "noble savage," a kind of presocial being somehow free of the corrupting force of cultural life. But as feminist ethicists enjoy
noting, we are embodied, social creatures whose freedom is deeply entangled and also empowered by our several relations. While celebrating freedom and rights, the picture of human existence found in these early modern thinkers is one stripped of the relations, characteristics, and social aspirations that make any person an actual person. What we encounter in life is not "humanity" or "noble savages" but, in the apt words of Seyla Benhabib, "concrete others." Our lives are saturated with relations and affections that give us meaning and particularity—ethnic ties, sexuality, pieties, political relations, and so forth. The discourse of otherness rivets attention on the uniqueness of persons rather than on an abstract—but important—shared humanity.

It is not only modern ideas about humanity that are under criticism. More profound is the criticism by the advocates of otherness when they take aim at a long tradition of thought about the self. This is the tradition of a reflexive philosophy of consciousness. In the West this tradition runs from Plato to Kierkegaard, from Augustine to Tillich, and from Descartes to Murdoch. Thinkers in this tradition insist that within our self-awareness, within the chaos and confusion of human inwardness, there exists some relation, no matter how tenuous, to the sacred, the ultimate good—God. In virtue of our conscious self-relations, each and every human being has unique dignity and worth. To love others as myself means that I acknowledge in the other the uniquely human fact of self-relation as the source of dignity and worth. Precisely this "philosophy" and its manifestations in Christian thought are what are now most ardently under critique. At issue is how we account for our sense of self in relation to the claims of others on and in us.

While fantastically complex, the basic claim of any philosophy of consciousness is simple and seemingly undeniable. It is this: In all of our actions, feelings, and moods (acts of thinking or willing, feelings of joy or sorrow, moods of anxiety or confidence) there is, implicitly, an undeniable sense of self at one with itself. Further, there is a recursive nature to human conscious activity: we are able to "act back upon" ourselves and to adjust to valuations and information about our acting and living. Without reflexivity learning would be impossible, as would self-criticism and intentional moral change. In fact, the global, cultural reflexivity mentioned above is rooted in this all-too-human capacity. These two facts of consciousness (self-relation and reflexivity) commend our respect and testify to human worth and dignity. Thus, St. Augustine claimed that reflection on consciousness (the
"soul," as he would call it) directs us through the self and toward God. He reasoned that we cannot deny the fact that when we think, we ourselves are thinking; but the self so understood is found to be restless for another, for a desiring God. René Descartes, making much the same point about the activity of thinking, denied the longing for God.7 "I think, therefore I am," he insisted. On this ground, he argued, we learn not of our desire for goodness or God but rather of a sure and necessary philosophical foundation for claims to truth. Others focused not on thinking but on willing (Kant, Kierkegaard), feeling (Schleiermacher), concern (Tillich), or valuing (H. Richard Niebuhr). Reflexive thinking, a philosophy of consciousness, aims at critical self-knowledge. Mindful of the wild ways we can be deceived about ourselves, these thinkers claimed as their banner line the ancient dictum "Know thyself."

Does reflection on self mean a reduction of the other to self? Does it make God into a fact of our consciousness? Christian thinkers have never believed that self-knowledge alone is enough or that it can redeem us from alienation with God. Only God in Christ saves us. Yet theologians from Augustine to Tillich and beyond insist that God reveals Godself and saves us respectful of the complexity of our existence. In fact, that complexity is a reflection of God. The image of God that defines our humanity is a trace within a person's existence of the very being of God. For a Christian interpretation of the second great command, the phrase "as yourself" does not mean that we love others as we naturally care for ourselves. The command does not warrant some kind of extended egoism or benevolent self-interest! Rather, we are to love as we have first been loved by God—a love manifest in creation, in Christ, and in the reign of God. Christian self-love, as thinkers from Augustine to Luther and Wesley understood, is actually grounded not in the self but in God. One's being as a Christian is in Christ. There is an "otherness" at the very core of any Christian conception of consciousness and the self.

The most ardent critic of a reflexive philosophy of consciousness in the name of the "other" was the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). His work is an intensification of dialogical philosophy, the account of the I-Thou relation, developed in the last century by Martin Buber and widely influential for Christian thinkers.8 Levinas stresses even more than Buber the priority of the other, the Thou, over the self. He argues that depictions of consciousness in Western thought, far from opening the self to the other, actu-
ally trap the self within its acting, feeling, and moods. Consciousness aspires to what Levinas calls “totality”; that is, an integrated system that subordinates everything to a common principle expressive of the self. Ironically, this drive to totality can be seen even in universalizable moral maxims. The command to love others as oneself means that the other is totalized within self-conception. The other is simply an object within my self-understanding, something that exists in some odd analogy to myself. Levinas sought a way beyond totality in and through the encounter with the face of the other. This encounter, marked by the imperative “thou shalt not murder me,” is definitive of the self. We exist before the infinite, inescapable demand of the other. The other is heteronomous to the self; the other stands in relation of height and lordship over me. Levinas speaks of this encounter with the other as a virtual Sinai experience. Coming to self-awareness is always consciousness of being on trial, of being accused.

One must admire and commend the moral passion of Levinas’s critique of consciousness. Yet it is not without its difficulties. Oddly, Levinas must present a rather abstract conception of the other for his argument to hold. The other is simply a “face” void of all historical, social, sexual, and cultural particularity and commanding me not to “murder.” As soon as one considers concrete, specific persons—that is, human beings in all their maddening complexity—it is doubtful that we would want to say that the other unquestionably commands me. What if the other is actually a violent, abusive parent? Must we then accept as unquestioned the command of the other? Moreover, the image of the self as existing in a relation of obedience and subjugation has rightly been criticized by feminist thinkers. For too long self-determination and self-realization have been denied women precisely through demands to tend to the other. Right self-love is a bulwark against dehumanization on the part of those without power. To answer these questions about the concrete other, Levinas turns to an idea of justice built on equality and fairness. Yet his idea of justice misses the link to forgiveness we have already found in the command of neighbor love. Levinas rightly insists that we must curtail the projection of the ego on the other and hence delimit the destructive drive of totality. Yet it is not clear that we ought to abandon concern for self in obedience to the other.

Our inquiry has led to some surprising insights. We have seen that the second great command has been expressed by Christian thinkers through some version of a philosophy of consciousness. Insofar as
that is true, it would seem open to the charge of totality, the denial of
otherness, by Levinas and like-minded thinkers. And yet Christian
ideas about the image of God mean that who one is, the very nature of
selfhood, is constituted in relation to what is other than the self, that
is, God. To love the neighbor as oneself requires, as St. Augustine first
noted, to love others in God. That kind of love hardly reduces others
to pale reflections of ourselves. Furthermore, the second great
command guards against a naïve obedience to the other; it warrants
proper self-love. Not only does the second command avoid the charge
of totality, it also enables us to think about moral relations in a more
subtle way than the demand of the other. The discourse of otherness
signals a proper concern for the problems of totality and proximity.
But it is hardly obvious that Christians, and especially Methodists,
should abandon their native moral language, the language of great
commands, and adopt the discourse of otherness.

God and the Claim of the Other

We have seen that two elements of the second great command are
intrinsically related to faith in the living God, the God of Jesus
Christ. Self-love rests on an idea of the *Imago Dei*: every human
being is created with intrinsic worth by God. *Love of neighbor* articu-
lates at the level of a directive for action beliefs about the *Imitatio
Dei* basic to Jewish and Christian ethics. The imitation of God as
interpreted by Jesus’ actions and parables links justice and forgive-
ness (God is righteous) in a way sorely needed in a world scarred
with violence. *Unfolding* the meaning of the second command in
response to interest in and concern for the other has helped us to
grasp its theological meaning. The second command gives a vision of
a way of life that is the practical interpretation of loving God.

The second great command conjoins beliefs about human dignity
(the image of God) with a directive for action in relation even to the
enemy (the imitation of God). These two concerns are demanded of
us in an age of globalization and concern for the other. But this also
means that the command of neighbor love is essentially related to the
love of God. The two great commands are interlocking perspectives
on the same vision of life and faith. If faith in God fails or ideas
about the divine are tyrannous, then the very meaning of the second
command becomes unintelligible. Sadly, some ideas about God have
fostered intolerance, hatred, oppression, and violence. It is hardly
surprising that so much contemporary Christian theology, mindful of these manifold legacies of suffering, is seeking new images and models of God: God as triune and relation; God as liberator; God the Mother and Father; God the soul of the world. The theological imagination is alive in the face of the challenges of our day. This is a sign of the vitality of faith.

The explosion of new ideas about the divine rests upon an insight deeply embedded in Christian faith. We can call it the prophetic insight: advances in moral understanding and sensibility necessarily exert pressure on religious ideas—ideas about faith and God—even as beliefs about the divine are at heart convictions of ultimate goodness. In a world in which the major religions must contribute to social flourishing and stability rather than fuel ongoing hatred, suspicion, and violence, some ideas about the divine are no longer morally plausible. But I suggest that Jews and Christians have always insisted in their religious thinking on just such a principle of moral plausibility rooted in their prophetic heritage. Hillel believed that Torah is found in a negative version of the Golden Rule. All the rest is commentary. Christ places neighbor love on a par with the love of God. No conception or idea of God or any form of piety and worship can rightly be held or practiced if it does not undergird and serve a life that reflects righteousness. The current concern for the other (that is, the demand to escape totality and the imperative to meet the challenge of proximity) is nothing less than an advance in moral sensibility which, in principle, ought to generate revisions in our conceptions of the divine.

How then ought we to think of the God whom we are commanded to love? I believe that piety requires many images and ideas about God to better nourish and challenge the life of faith. Yet our analysis of the second great command has shown that it presents a criterion of moral plausibility that is prophetic to the core. The God whom Christians worship is none other than the power that endows each and every living thing with worth and human beings with intrinsic dignity, the image of Godself. The moral meaning of faith in God as creator is that what is other than God—nondivine, fleeting, fragile, finite—bears immeasurable worth. So radical is this gift of life that God treats God’s own enemies as still bearing worth. The God of Christ and Israel seeks to convert and not destroy the enemy; God sends the sustenance of life—sun and rain—on the just and the unjust (see Matt. 5:43-48). The imitation of this God is precisely a life dedicated to respecting and enhancing the integrity of life in all its
forms. It is to live amid a world of diversity and otherness, not in vengeance or tyranny or anxiety but in gratitude for the wild and rich diversity of life. It is to oppose the destruction and demeaning of existence, not with cycles of violence but through creative strategies of resistance. In these acts of imitation, faith enacts the meaning of our lives in the image of God.

Christians now living in the age of globalization and shouldering the painful legacy of the wars and violence of the last century and an even longer history of conflict, imperialism, and anti-Semitism are in the midst of a revolution in ideas about God. Yet, surprisingly, that revolution may be just the working out in existence of the full meaning of Jesus’ word and deed. For the God of Christian faith is the one who draws near like the Samaritan and who loves as Christ loves. In God’s being and action is found the bond of justice and forgiveness that is goodness. These are the theological contours for a compassionate and generous Christian community.

Nothing Less than the Gospel

In this article I have defended the second great command as a neat summary of Christian attitudes and directions for responding to the claim of others. The command is exceedingly rich and complex. It interrelates care for self with what is owed to others. It defines the neighbor in terms of loving actions. It provides a principle of forgiveness within the demands of justice, a principle necessary to break cycles of retribution. The command presupposes and provides a practical interpretation of God’s loving action to a good creation. Concern for the other requires that in our conceptions of self and neighbor we do not unwittingly efface genuine human differences, thereby reducing them to the same. Of course, much more needs to be said; Christian moral reflection must continually engage in exploring and explaining the meaning of faith for life. Nonetheless, the second great command and its complex connection to beliefs about the “image of God” and the “imitation of God” outline a distinctly Christian kind of life.

The age of globalization marked by the compression of the world and global reflexivity places pressure on all of the religions, including Christianity, to clarify the moral meaning of their most central beliefs—like faith in the living God. Yet Christians have little reason to abandon their native moral discourse. The challenge is to
live within the vision of life opened by the second great command and its interpretation in the life and teaching of Christ. And this is just good Methodism. In his fifth homily on the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley notes that the teachings of Christ considered as commandments are law, whereas seen as promises they are the gospel. The second great command and the vision of life and faith it presents are nothing less than the gospel. It is the promise of happiness and holiness bound through love.

Notes

2. For “proximity” as the challenge of the “other,” yet without attention to globalization, see Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being: or, Beyond Essence, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).
6. For a defense of this tradition see William Schweiker, Power, Value, and Conviction: Theological Ethics in the Postmodern Age (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1998).
Those who work in the Old Testament, whether as scholar or preacher, are aware of a move to call it the “Hebrew Bible” instead of the “Old Testament.” This change in terminology at first appears to be minor—just a semantic thing, some will say. Let the fussy ones call it the Hebrew Bible; those of us who are less fussy will stick with the tried-and-true term. However, underneath this shift in name—in designation—lies one of the most profound and potentially shattering revolutions imaginable, not just in Christian theology but even more so in Christian preaching. And we are now only in its beginning stages.

What is emerging, slowly but unmistakably, is not a revolution in Old Testament studies per se (even though its impact is already being felt there). It is a revolution in Christian perception—but not just of the Old Testament or even of the Jewish people. More precisely, it is a revolution in Christian awareness of the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments, as well as of the relationship between those who consider themselves Christians and those who are Jews. While the reasons for the revolution are complex far beyond the scope of this article, they are at one level rooted in the growing

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Christian-Jewish dialogue of the past few decades. At a deeper level, though, the revolution is rooted in the larger global demographics of sociocultural, ideological, and religious pluralism—a development that, in this instance, is increasingly forcing us to take seriously the integrity and autonomy that every religion of the world has a right to claim for itself.2

Only a few short years ago, a remarkable unanimity existed among Christian biblical and theological scholars, of both Old and New Testaments, about the relationship between the two testaments. No one at the time summed up that unanimity better than the Old Testament scholar and homiletician Elizabeth Achtemeier in her 1973 book *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel*. Lest anyone miss what she wanted to say, Achtemeier opened her last chapter with this paragraph:

> Let us summarize the thesis of this book. The valid use of the Old Testament in the Christian pulpit is built upon the historical fact that Jesus Christ, as proclaimed in the New Testament, is the completion and fulfillment of the word of God witnessed to in the Old Testament. On this basis, the Old Testament is given to the Christian as the promise of Jesus Christ, not just in its prophetic portions but as a whole. Jesus Christ is the final reinterpretation of every major tradition in the Old Testament, and Jesus Christ is therefore fully proclaimed only when the Old Testament portion of his story is also proclaimed.3

No matter where one searches in the Christian literature of the Old Testament and its preaching through the past century or more, one finds the same theology. The Old Testament is an incomplete book, one in which promises are made and foreshadowings cast—but none is realized, since every word of the Old Testament (and we must call it that in this context) was designed to point only to the coming of Christ, "in whom its hopes are fulfilled and its promises realized," as Lawrence Toombs, another prominent Old Testament scholar and homiletician put it, also back then. He added: "The preacher must not fall into the error of treating the Old and New Testaments as if they were on the same level of inspiration and insight. Between Malachi and Matthew something transformingly new took place, and in that new thing the old passed away." The revolution in which we now find ourselves amounts to a challenging, and ultimately an undermining, of
these very ideas about the relation between the two testaments. These ideas cluster around two main assumptions. First, the Old Testament is nothing if it is not christological. This meant (by its very nature) that it should be interpreted from beginning to end from a christological standpoint. Second, the Old Testament somehow was made to “pass away” with the coming of the New, as Toombs put it. What we have had over the past ten or fifteen years—no more than that, as far as I can tell—is a growing repudiation of these two ideas among at least some biblical scholars, of both Old and New Testaments. There are two primary issues that form the parameters around what we have called a revolution in Christian theology and biblical studies. The first has to do with the original appropriation of the Jewish Scriptures by Christians from the late-first century well into the fourth century. The second has to do with the overt and often hostile anti-Judaism that emerged during the same period to become the orthodox theology of the Christian church’s entire subsequent history, even through the twentieth century, now behind us. Each of these matters requires a closer look.

From Hebrew Scriptures to Old Testament

First, we turn briefly to the Christian appropriation of the Hebrew Scriptures, a subject that is only now, in the study of Christian origins, beginning to be fully appreciated. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 C.E. and the months following, the Jews were decimated. They had lost their temple and with it the Divine Presence in their midst; they had lost what remained of their sacrificial system of worship and with that their most fundamental means for the atonement of sin. From the Jewish perspective, it was a near-fatal catastrophe. However, a group of rabbis from the Pharisaic tradition, led by Yochanan ben Zakkai, managed to set up an academy at Yavneh on the coast, ironically with Roman permission. There, Jewish survival began, albeit slowly. It turned into a fully lay movement, synagogue based; and it focused primarily on Torah study rather than on sacrifice. Atonement could come through repentance and good deeds before God; and a new term for that repentance, giving it high and holy form, came into use; the term is teshuva. Out of that same Jewish movement, with its Pharisaic roots, also came a full-blown effort to fend off the aggressive proselytizing by Christians. Sometime between 75 and 85 C.E. this small band of...
Jewish leaders adopted the so-called "19th Blessing," added to the 18 Blessings of the Great Synagogue Prayer, said three times a day. That 19th Blessing was important because it was, in fact, a bitter curse against what were called the "Jewish heretics"—the Christians.

This tended, however, to inflame late-first-century Christians, particularly gentile Christians, against the Jews and their leaders. It prompted many influential Christians, in fact, to argue that the Roman sacking of Jerusalem and the Temple was nothing more or less than God's ultimate denunciation of the Jews for what they had done to Jesus. At the same time, Christians delighted in announcing God's sending of this new religion attributed to Jesus—now presented as Son of God—as the religion to replace Judaism. This required the Gospel writers, though, to set the Jews, in particular their Pharisaic leaders, into sharp relief as the murderers of Jesus. Battle lines on both sides—both the Christian and that remnant of Pharisaic rabbis—were drawn and, as far as New Testament writers were concerned, were crystalized. So as we read our Gospel accounts, it was Christians versus Pharisees; the latter became the crucifiers of Jesus rather than the Romans, who carried out the deed. And Christianity, as the new religion, began to gain a toehold throughout the Roman Empire.

By the middle of the second century, though, Christianity was having to "explain itself," having to legitimize itself, as it were, within the religious framework of the Empire. It needed a unanimous voice, or at least something close to that, which it did not have. Its churches were widely scattered, and their bishops were functioning pretty much on their own. So the focus shifted to Rome, where over the next hundred years a host of new leaders—many of them young—began to converge for "discussion." Marcion was one of those voices, arguing (as all homileticians know) that Christianity would work only if it cut all its ties to the Jews, to their Scriptures, to anything remotely connected to that God of vengeance and sword. Valentinus, a Christian leader from Alexandria in Egypt, also made his way to Rome; with him came a complex set of Greek gnostic ideas that were being used to construct a very different Christian theology. Over time they were "joined" by Tatian of Syria, Athenagoras of Athens, Theophilus of Antioch, and Mileo of Sardis. They were followed by Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. What a theological ferment that must have been!

One of the things that became clear, however, was that for both the
Roman and the Greek mind, “new” religion was not something that was valued; in fact, it was looked on with enormous suspicion. Religion needed to be old; it needed to have roots in the past, preferably the ancient past, if it were going to be widely respected and embraced. In a sense, that became the touchstone for the Christian drive to “create” a past for itself, a past that was not just historical—which the Jewish Scriptures and legends provided—but a past that stretched all the way back into the very mind of God. The scholar/theologian who emerged to give form to this central theological notion was Justin Martyr. He is the one who, as Burton Mack has put it, worked through the question of “how the history of Israel could possibly be read as the story of the Christians’ God and thus count as the Christian epic, not the epic of Israel that obviously pointed toward the establishment of a Jewish theocracy in Jerusalem.”

For Justin, the key to this was found in the idea of the logos, the Greek notion that was slipped, almost incidentally, into the Gospel of John very early in the second century. The logos of John revealed the “mind of God,” that Gospel argued; moreover, words similar to logos—God’s mind—were scattered throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, all the way back to the various creation myths of Genesis. Jesus was there all the time—or so the argument emerged. And it caught fire. The Hebrew Scriptures were about Jesus after all. All that was necessary was to find all the references to Jesus—hidden or veiled though they were—and follow them out. The Hebrew prophecies, and there were many of them, were not about what they appeared to be about; they were about the coming of Jesus. God’s “word” that was heard all the way back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was, in fact, the voice of Jesus. Marcion, with his rejection of the Hebrew Scriptures, never had a chance. All that was necessary was to revise Jewish history so that it would lead to Jesus rather than to the establishment of a Jewish state based in Jerusalem—which was not to be, of course. This meant rearranging the Hebrew Scriptures so that they would end with Malachi and not with Chronicles. It also meant creating a theology that contended that the God and Father of Jesus Christ was the same God who had tried—unsuccessfully—to lead the Jewish people for centuries.

The idea that the Jews “never got it” became the cornerstone of Christian theology. God could never get through to them; and even when God sent “his only begotten Son,” the Jews proceeded to kill
him. For that, the Jews would have to pay, and pay dearly. They would forever be branded as the killers of Christ, whether such a theological statement is made delicately or indelicately. This became a part of the dominant (what Mack calls “centrist”) theology of the church by the late-third or early-fourth century; it had emerged from the cauldron of debate, attack, and counterattack in Rome. Viewpoints that did not fall into place around this tight theological core were shunted aside as heresies. The Christians had their Scriptures—not only their new “Christ-as-the-Son-of-God” Gospels but also, just as important, their mythic past. From creation God had Christians in mind, and Jewish history became the history of the Christ. In his discussion of the history of the papacy from the fourth and fifth centuries through the medieval era, even to the present, William Nicholls put it like this: The popes, he said, fully believed the Christian myth of the Christ-killing Jews, and the theology of supersession, based on it. The Jewish law had been abolished and replaced by the new spiritual law of the Church, which they administered. In particular, the popes inherited the theology of Augustine, according to which the Jews were destined to survive until the second coming of Christ as a witness to their crimes. They were to be preserved, but in misery.

Here are the roots of what Rosemary Radford Ruether was first to call a “theology of supersession.” It is the theology that the Old Testament was (or is) inferior to the New, that it was merely a “preparation” for the New, from which the Lordship of Christ would be proclaimed. The Old has been trumped, superseded, by the New. When the New finally came, the Old was done away.

From Anti-Judaism to Anti-Semitism

There is a second primary issue, though, that sets the parameter for the revolution in Christian biblical studies vis-à-vis the “Old” Testament. It has to do with the anti-Jewish attitudes that Christianity has fostered over the centuries. It is not just that Christianity believed itself superior to Judaism religiously or that Christianity believed it had “superseded” Judaism. It is that Christianity has actually taught and practiced anti-Judaism, giving it a theological legitimacy and making violence against the Jews a virtually unending activity. It still
goes on. Anti-Judaism is preachable because so much of the New Testament contains anti-Judaic language, innuendo, and narrative. To preach many New Testament texts is to preach anti-Jewish ideas, imagery, or thinking. And to preach from many Old Testament—or, rather, Hebrew—texts when one infers Christian theological meaning from those texts is to preach in an anti-Jewish mode, whether that is intended or not. Williamson and Allen have written that anti-Judaism “is a systematic hermeneutical strategy which Christians have too often and too long used in interpreting for each other the meaning of the Christian faith,” and not just as a specific theme in itself but as the filter through which virtually all other themes in Christian theology are interpreted.10

In the New Testament, and in the first few centuries of Christianity’s formation, it was anti-Judaism that was the problem. By the third or fourth centuries, though, when Jewish peoples began to create highly visible communities throughout the world, the hatreds and the animosities became anti-Semitic—based not just in religion but also firmly and clearly in race. Over the centuries, down to the present, the two have become so intertwined that what is often expressed now is a mixture of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. To come to terms with both the prevalence and the bitter ugliness of it, though, it is necessary to read a book like Nicholls’s Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate, to which reference was made earlier. Ironically, for all of its horror (as most of us know) the German Holocaust, which saw the murder of more than six million Jews, was only one of numerous holocausts directed against the Jews over the centuries. From a contemporary Jewish perspective, Jews have been mistreated and murdered over the centuries in large part because of the Christian claim that they have been cursed by God for what they did to Jesus, God’s Son. As Nicholls put it, “The (Christian) myth continues to tell millions of Christians all over the world deadly things about the Jews. Weekly and daily, it still reinforces the belief that Jews were the Christ-killers, and breeds in the Christian people a natural suspicion of the Jews of today.”11

From Old Testament to Hebrew Bible, Again

With this background, then, it is possible to return to the nature of the theological revolution we noted at the outset, a revolution signaled by the shift of terminology from “Old Testament” to “Hebrew Bible.”
For a growing number of Christian theologians today, several important ideas are taking hold. Among these are:

1. The "theology of supersession" is wrong and must be repudiated. Christianity did not supersede, and thus does not make void in any way, the premises of Torah Judaism, despite what certain texts within the New Testament along with the history of Christian theology may suggest.

2. The so-called "Old Testament" is not a christological document, and it cannot legitimately be interpreted as one. It is the ancient history of a people, told in their way; and, to be understood correctly, it must be read through their eyes, from their point of view.

3. Christianity and Judaism are both legitimate forms of religious expression and share some theological and ethical ideas, but they are profoundly different in numerous bedrock assumptions and practices. Each has its own Scriptures, and each deserves to have its Scriptures treated with respect, nonjudgment, and nonappropriation by the other.

These are, to be sure, revolutionary ideas, at least as far as the history of Christian theology is concerned. These are the ideas that are in the process of being embraced, however, by those who want the Old Testament to be known explicitly as the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible is not "old"; that is, in the sense that it has been replaced by something "new" and therefore improved—which is the implication of calling Christian Scriptures "new testament." The Hebrew Bible, in other words, is still the Hebrew Bible—old, yes, but not chronologically superseded by any later writing. To call the Old Testament the Hebrew Bible is, therefore, clearly intended to give it what amounts to equal footing with the Christian Testament, with each great religious document testifying to the faith of a particular group of people over time. This is what is meant by Allen and Holbert when they say that "an increasing number of Christians seek to respect the particularity of the First Testament [the Hebrew Bible] and its people. The minister can regard Judaism as a valid religion whose adherents have full standing before God." But if one thinks back to the statements by Achtemeier and Toombs that we noted earlier, these emergent notions of the Jews and the "Old" Testament are revolutionary indeed. Beyond that, they undercut the very tenets of what has, until now, been the dominant—if not the only—Christian perspective on those people and those texts.

In a religiously pluralistic world, however, this new view of the
The relationship between Jews and Christians, between the “Old”
Testament and the “New,” is one whose time is long overdue. It is a
view, though, that makes severe demands on us who consider
ourselves Christian. It requires that we think differently and do things
differently. In the remainder of this article, I want to outline three of
those demands that I believe this revolutionary change makes on us
who teach the Christian pastors and ministers of the twenty-first
century.

The Demands of the Revolution

Preaching from the Hebrew Bible Again for the First Time

First, I believe it requires that we preach—and teach others to
preach—in strikingly new ways from the Hebrew Bible. I do not
believe we have to give up the Hebrew Bible in our preaching,
though something in me clearly wants to give it back to the Jewish
people and keep our Christian noses out of it. Yet, with Allen and
Holbert, I don’t think we have to cower before the “ghost of
Marcion” either. But some specific and deliberate changes are called
for. Foremost among these must be a refusal to interpret Hebrew
texts through christological eyes, as utterly difficult and reactionary
as that will be to many preachers, homileticians, and Christian
thecologians. The question for many will be this: If the Hebrew Bible
cannot be interpreted christologically, then why should we want it at
all? Because it is, as David Tracy would put it, a “religious classic.”
It is the Holy Scripture of a great historic religion, the religion out of
which—or, rather, against which—our own Christian religion
emerged. But Christianity did not do away with Judaism. From the
Jewish point of view, then and now, what we Christians have consid­
ered the “new covenant” in the crucifixion of Jesus did not, under
any stretch of imagination, negate the classic, ancient covenants
between God and the Hebrew people.

What do we have, then, in the Hebrew Bible? We have a classic
story of a people hammering out an identity for themselves and their
families and clans—an identity that was fundamentally religious and
ethical, an identity that changed as their definitions of their God
changed. So the questions for Christian preaching are not primarily
these: What did God do to these people? What claims did God make
on them? What rewards and punishments did God mete out to them?
The questions center, instead, on such things as these: How did these
historic religious people, at various times in their history and by their own telling, come to understand themselves as “children” of a supreme being for whom they had many names? How did they come to frame such odd ethical notions and define God as overlooking, if not blessing, those notions—as in the stories of Abraham and Pharaoh, or Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob and Esau, or even in the stories of David and Solomon? How did they come to draft, and progressively refine, such a remarkable religious document as the Decalogue? Yes, of course, we can say that it came from God, was “given” to them by God; but that begs the question. These remarkable people created legends and stories to frame where those “laws” came from. They devised—someone in their past devised—vibrant myths to account for the origins of those priceless laws, but vibrant myths nevertheless. Even they recognize that. What remarkable religious imagination and ethical sensibility combined to create these great stories, these profoundly insightful stories of human and divine meeting in mortal flesh and flawed community?

In Christian preaching, then, there is so much to draw on in the Hebrew Bible, much to meditate on in speaking to people today from our pulpits. But it is not because the Hebrew Bible is about Christ—which it isn’t; nor is it even because it is about God and what we can “learn about God.” It is because it is about the human condition, about richly textured mythic stories of naming “God,” of naming one another, of coping with good and evil, and of struggling to live together and embrace one another. All of these things are still the fabric of our contemporary milieu. Thus, the stories of those ancient peoples resound over and over again—and we can meditate on those stories, not to make them something that they are not but to learn from them together, whether we are Christian or Jew or Muslim. Those stories still have power. But they are stories that we borrow from the Jews, from their history, from their epic struggle—not to make them our own, which would be a violation of them, but to learn from them, something that God-fearing Jews, by and large, would probably not mind that we do.

Respecting Differences, Not Similarities
The second demand that the revolution makes on us Christians is that we come to terms and help others come to terms not with our similarities but with our differences. This is important for two very distinct reasons. First, Jews today—as few in number as they are in today’s
world\textsuperscript{14}—need their distinctive identity without its being muddied still further by Christians.\textsuperscript{15} The problem is that over many centuries Jews have been largely defined for the world by Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. So the distinctions that prevail are that Christians are for love and Jews are for law; Christians are all about grace and Jews are all about revenge and greed. Such distinctions (and definitions of Jews) could not be farther from the Jewish truth. One should read the concluding essay of a remarkable little book entitled \textit{Preaching Biblical Texts: Expositions by Jewish and Christian Scholars}. The essay is by a Jewish writer named Blu Greenberg, who clearly is distressed at the way that Christians (and Christian scholars) have treated both Jews and Jewish beliefs over the centuries. She is writing about Deuteronomy. She describes Judaism this way:

Judaism is a religion of redemption that promises the physical and spiritual perfection of the world. The earth will be made into a paradise, and the fullness of knowledge and of love between God and humanity will be achieved. The vehicle for this achievement is the covenant, a special partnership motivated by love between God and humanity, in which the pacesetter and teacher is God's chosen people. The most extended and nuanced statement of the centrality of the covenant in Judaism is found in the book of Deuteronomy. Its distinctive thrust is particularly expressed in two ways: (1) it is a covenant of love and of law, not of political fidelities; (2) the sacred covenant between human beings and God incorporates within itself civil laws and societal ethics. Thus, the law of the stranger (Deut. 10:19-20) or the law of weights and measures (Deut. 25:13-16) is intimately connected to the belief in one God; in fact, observing these laws becomes a measure, a corollary, a tangible expression of belief in one God.\textsuperscript{16}

Moreover, she adds:

The covenant is not to be rescinded or replaced or forfeited. It never becomes an old testament but an ongoing one. Even when the people sin, the covenant is not over. Not sacrifice but repentance and confession will restore the relationship (Deut. 30:1-6).\textsuperscript{17}
Finally,

To follow the commandments [of the covenant], ethical and moral as well as ritual and sacral, is felt not as an onerous duty but as an expression of love. There are still some who hold a stereotypic view of Judaism with regard to the salvific function of the law. This view maintains that love and law are dichotomous and that love is the fulfillment of law and can, therefore, replace it. However, a careful reading of Deuteronomy shows how inextricably linked are law and love. For a Jew to say, "I will" or "I do" is as powerful a statement of love as it is to say the words, "I love" or "I believe."\(^8\)

We Christians are obligated, it is fair to say, to come to terms with Judaism—not as we see it, or have historically defined it, but as Jews themselves understand it, something that is not nearly as difficult as some would have us believe. Greenberg's statement is a door into that Jewish understanding; she obviously wants to talk to us Christians. This is, in large part, what has prompted a few Christian seminaries to hire Hebrew Bible faculty who are Jewish—not Jews who were "converted" to Christianity but Jews who are good, practicing Jews for whom the Scriptures that they teach are their Scriptures.\(^19\)

The second reason that the differences between Christians and Jews must be taken account of today is because the Jewish faith and the Christian faith are not, at their core, compatible. Christians by and large would like for this not to be true, but Jews know very well that it is. While some liberal, even radical, Christian theologians struggle for a new theology that spans them both in some dialogical fashion, the fact is that both religions are based, if in slightly different ways, on the idea of covenant. For Christians, the Jewish covenants with first Abraham and then Moses were broken by the Jews and thus were replaced (or superseded) by the covenant that God gave through Christ. For devout Jews, on the other hand, the Mosaic covenant is still in force, as it has been from its institution; and nothing whatsoever has come along either to nullify or to replace it. They argue that even Jesus, reforming Jew that he was, understood that completely and that he himself lived fully within the Mosaic covenant and Torah. For Jews, no new covenant was instituted by Jesus, who was only later hailed as Messiah by renegade Jews.
Neither side, Christian or Jew, accepts the fundamental premise of the other, and the result is a theological stalemate—something that honesty and integrity require that we Christians acknowledge.

*Removing Anti-Judaism from the Pulpit*

There is a third demand that this revolution makes upon us. It has to do not with the Hebrew Bible or with letting the Jewish people, both past and present, be the Jewish people. It has to do, instead, with the New Testament, the Christian Scriptures. It is fully time, as a few have courageously said in recent years, to systematically and thoroughly remove the anti-Judaism from New Testament texts when we preach and teach them. How to do this, of course, is the problem; and the preacher must learn (or be taught) to look closely at every New Testament text and ask whether it has within it some element that is negative toward the Jews. So many texts do. The next question, then, is what to do with a text that does, in fact, have anti-Judaic ideology or theology in it.

One can ignore the text, of course, and simply refuse to preach it. Another option—taken much too often—is to assume that if the “Word of God” has anti-Jewish elements in it, then it must be because God wants them there and wants them preached for what they are. Hopefully, most preachers are beyond that tragic option. The best approach is the direct one. One preaches in a way that teaches the congregants about the anti-Jewishness of the text, that exposes the text for what it is; and then one uses the sermon, at least in part, to help congregants work through to some meaning beyond or beneath the text’s surface. The fact is that here is an area in serious need of the most creative work that homileticians and preachers can do. New preaching strategies must be developed for ridding the New Testament of its anti-Judaism.

It can be done. Let me suggest one such strategy. The parables of Jesus in the Gospels represent one of the true bastions of anti-Jewish thinking and theology, an area that has troubled me for a long time. It is possible, though, to make creative and very effective use of the Nag Hammadi documents, particularly the so-called Gospel of Thomas, which was a startling find in that literature uncovered in 1947. The Gospel of Thomas has remarkable parallels with much in the Synoptic Gospels. However, Thomas is a “sayings” gospel rather than a narrative one, and scholars now generally agree that the sayings gospels—Q is considered to be one as well—predate by
many years even Mark, which was most likely written after Jerusalem and the Temple fell in 70 C.E. What is remarkable is that if we compare the same parable from, say, Matthew (ca. 80-85) and Thomas (pre-70), a strange thing happens. While Matthew’s telling of the parable has a strong, biting anti-Jewish point to it, the same parable in Thomas is devoid of any anti-Jewish elements whatsoever.

Let me illustrate. Matthew 21:33-46 carries the parable of the landlord who planted a vineyard and put it in the hands of tenant farmers. He then sent servants to collect the crops for him from the tenants. But the tenant farmers abused the servants, beating one, killing another, all the while refusing to turn over the crops that belonged to the landowner. Finally, the landlord sent his son and heir to the land to collect the crops. The tenants reasoned that if they killed the heir to the land, they had a chance to take over the land for themselves and the crops would finally all be theirs. In Matthew, God is then identified as the landlord, the Jews as the evil tenant farmers, the iconoclastic prophets as the servants of God, and Jesus the “heir” whom the tenants killed when he arrived to claim the crops. Matthew actually has Jesus telling the story about himself, and the Jewish leaders recognize clearly (we are told) that Jesus is castigating them. Like so many parables that surround this one, it is a harshly anti-Jewish story; and, try as we may to develop some non-Jewish analogy for today from it, the anti-Jewishness just does not go away easily.

Thomas, though, contains this same parable, but—remarkably—without the anti-Jewish allegorization. In Thomas, the story is sparse but clear. A landlord owned a vineyard and rented it out to some tenant farmers. When the owner of the vineyard sent servants to collect the crops from them, the tenants beat them and sent them away. Then the landlord sent his son, the heir, believing that the tenants would at least respect him. Since the tenants knew the son to be the heir to the land, Thomas has Jesus saying that they grabbed him and killed him. That is the end of the story. Thomas concludes, “Let one who has ears to hear, hear.” The story ends with the crime committed. There is, in fact, no “moral” in it.

In Thomas’s Gospel, the story that Jesus told was not about the Jews at all; it was, instead, about the problem of inequity, poverty, and suffering, about the potentially violent relationship between wealthy landowners—wealthy absentee landowners—and tenant, or peasant, farmers who worked the land. The story reflects a profound
concern about the plight of those tenants, including a strong sense of empathy that their condition could, in fact, lead them to react violently to the landowner’s demands. They could even be driven by their bitterness and hatred of the landowner to kill his son, should that son show up to take from them what they had worked so hard to produce. What is particularly striking about the Thomas story is that it contains no mention of punishment whatever for the tenant farmers when they murder the owner’s son. There is only a clear call to pay attention to what drives the farmers to such a horrific deed.

Isn’t it possible for the preacher to explain in a sermon the two versions of the story, just as I have here, drawing on both Matthew and Thomas? The anti-Jewishness of the Matthean version can be emphasized, allowing the story to be seen in a different light. As Jesus probably told it originally, it is not about the Jews, not about condemning them for killing “the son”—a reference to himself that he surely would not have made. The story—and the sermon—evolves into thinking about one of the unrelenting problems of human living, then and now: the landlord-tenant relationship, a veritable paradigm for issues of power, justice, human self-worth, and the motivations of much violence. Can we, with insight, research, and even restraint, still bring this to the pulpit—from this parable? Of course we can. At the same time, we can get rid of the anti-Jewishness of the Matthean story—and still preach powerfully. The point is that there are ways to do this; other ways even than this one. But we must work at them creatively and energetically.

A Revolution Worth the Struggle

Going through the suggestions I have made will shake us all in how we deal with preaching the Hebrew Bible as well as our own Christian Bible, our New Testament. It will shake us, too, in forming new relationships—and actively helping lay people form them—with the Jewish people and Jewish leaders of our world, our communities. Such a revolution as this, however, is exciting and deeply engaging. It is already upon us, whether we like it or not. We can struggle against it, or we can move with it—even though I know many preachers who are more than ready right now to move ahead into this new world of Jewish-Christian pluralism.
Notes

1. Some brief notes about this terminology are made by Ronald J. Allen and John C. Holbert in the preface to their book *Holy Root, Holy Branches: Christian Preaching from the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995). They note the emergence of the use of the designation “First Testament,” a sign, they say, that the language of the church is “unsettled.” They add that “[n]one of these patterns of speaking is quite satisfactory.” They then make this statement: “We continue to use the term Old Testament. After all, these words have been in the church’s vocabulary for eighteen centuries. A part of the church’s theological task is to come to a critical understanding of its speech. But we also use the new terms as a way of helping the church explore their adequacy” (13). In my view, much more is at stake here than the church’s “speech.”

2. This orientation to the demographics of contemporary pluralism is a matter that I discuss at some length in the introduction to my book *Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998).


5. It is a good omen, too, that the Academy of Homiletics has turned its attention to this matter. And a few homileticians have begun to probe in earnest in this area, foremost among them Ron Allen and John Holbert. Allen and Clark M. Williamson teamed up earlier to explore this issue in their book, *Interpreting Difficult Texts* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), and have followed it up with articles since then. See their excellent essay, “Interpreting Difficult Texts,” in *Removing Anti-Judaism from the Pulpit*, ed. by Howard Clark Kee and Irvin J. Borowsky (New York: Continuum, 1996).


7. Ibid., 268.

8. As far as I am concerned, William Nicholls’s nearly 500-page study titled *Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate* (Notrevaile, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1993) is one of the most remarkable books on this subject to appear in the past few years. This quotation is from p. 221. Nicholls is neither a theologian nor a Jew; and, as a result, his book will probably not be widely read among theologians.

9. Ironically, this viewpoint was given a remarkable shot in the arm in late-nineteenth-century theology, particularly in the work of Wellhausen. Working in the evolutionary climate of that era—following Darwin, Marx, and the social evolutionists—he interpreted the Old Testament as an evolutionary document, culminating finally in the New Testament. It meant that Judaism began as a very primitive religion and evolved gradually from a crude to a more sophisticated monotheism, from a
fearful "out there" sense of God to a refined, anthropomorphic God who could, ultimately, arrive in flesh and even embody the flesh of others (i.e., "Christ in you, the hope of glory"). The bottom line was that, however one interpreted this evolutionary theology, it meant that now one had "scientific" evidence for the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, for the assertion that Christianity "superseded" the religion of the Jews. For a full discussion of this idea, see Achtemeier's The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel, particularly the chapter "How the Old Testament Was Lost," 22-34.

10. See Williamson and Allen, in Kee and Borowsky, 36. This is the opening statement of their essay.


14. Martin Marty has pointed out that there are fewer Jews in the whole world today than there are members of the Southern Baptist Convention. See his essay "Removing Anti-Judaism from the Christian Pulpit," in Kee and Borowsky.

15. There is a significant body of relatively new material that laments the continuing loss of Jewish identity in the contemporary world. Alan Dershowitz's The Vanishing American Jew (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1997) argues persuasively that Jewish identity, both ethnically and religiously, could well disappear before the end of the next century, if not before. Thomas Cahill's The Gifts of the Jews (New York: Doubleday, 1998) argues—with passionate overstatement—that the momentous "gifts" of the Jews to human civilization are so underappreciated that Jewishness itself is in danger of extinction. And a few years ago, a striking book by Ellen Jaffe McClain titled Embracing the Stranger (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) explored the decline of Jews marrying Jews and its impact on "the future of the American Jewish Community" (as the subtitle of her book put it).

16. Blu Greenberg, "Hear, O Israel: Law and Love in Deuteronomy," in Preaching Biblical Texts: Expositions by Jewish and Christian Scholars, ed. by Fredrick C. Holmgren and Herman E. Schaalman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 149-50. It is a smart but very uneven group of essays, split between Christian and Jewish theologians. What I found missing was some kind of explanatory framework set up by the editors, indicating the book's evolution and rationale: why were these authors selected, what guidelines were they given, and so forth. Significantly, one of my favorite Brueggemann pieces is in this book; it is titled "A Night for Crying/Weeping."

17. Ibid., 151.

18. Ibid., 153.

19. The Claremont School of Theology is one of these, though there are others.

20. In most translations, this is treated as saying number 65. In James Robinson's revised edition of The Nag Hammadi Library in English (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), it is found on p. 134.
I was in the final stages of writing this article. I was, in fact, looking for a good, catchy introduction. Sunday morning worship provided me one.

The guest preacher for the morning, commenting on Romans 10:2-3, alluded during his sermon to "the stubborn Jews" who had "missed the point because they had made their own formula for salvation." The preacher further suggested that the Jews had created this religious formula according to the general criterion of "what appealed to them" and then made a homiletical connection between these "Jews" and our own culture's tendencies toward a religious-smorgasbord mentality that celebrates the self and its individual desires.

I do not fault this preacher per se, nor do I suspect him of slanderous intentions. To do so would be to blur the fact that his reading of Romans is not untypical of the traditional Christian exegesis of
Paul. According to this reading, the Jews have forfeited any claim to divine favor, blessing, or salvation by their rejection of the gospel of Christ. They are legalists seeking to justify themselves by works, to earn their salvation, when all the while God’s salvation through Christ is a gracious gift. The Jews, then, stand condemned and bereft of their place as the people of God—a place from which they have been displaced by the church of Jesus Christ. The irony is that such a reading of Paul could arise from the passage of his writings in which he is most concerned to circumvent any such notion of the rejection or displacement of the people Israel: the tangly, thorny chapters 9–11 of his letter to the Romans.

What shall we say about the Jewish people, about their history, about their religious traditions and practices? As we Christian ministers and theologians struggle through tangles and thorns reminiscent of Paul’s own wrestlings in Romans, it seems that we often find ourselves snagged on a dilemma: on the one hand, our faith is predicated on the conviction that “God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19) and so also that Jesus is uniquely Lord and Savior of God’s creation; on the other hand, we know that there is more than a little truth, historically speaking, to Rosemary Radford Ruether’s infamous dictum that “anti-Judaism developed theologically in Christianity as the left hand of Christology,” that “anti-Judaism was the negative side of the Christian claim that Jesus was the Christ.”

When we add to the mix the unbearable yet unavoidable fact that the history of Christian anti-Judaism was an important cultural factor in the events leading up to and including the Nazi Holocaust of nearly six million Jews, it becomes clear that, indeed, *lives may well be at stake* in our very act of confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. If Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God”—as Peter confessed in Caesarea Philippi and as countless Christian believers have chorused around the world for twenty centuries—what are the implications of this confession for how we think about and how we behave toward our Jewish neighbors and their religious practices?

Of course, for the most part the Jewish people have refused to join in the Christian chorus, providing a kind of “loyal opposition” to the church. They have often, though not inevitably, done so in the name of faithfulness to the Sinai covenant, as I shall argue later. The question with which we wrestle, then, is this: Can the Christian confession and the Jewish “refusal” regarding Christ—a “refusal” that is more properly and positively understood not as refusal but as affir-
formation of Sinai—coexist, perhaps even on biblical terms? And beyond coexistence, can they somehow even perhaps thrive together? How ought Christians to think responsibly about and act responsibly toward Jews? Perhaps even more importantly, how ought Christians to think about Jesus in the light of Jewish validity and vitality? And in the darkness of the Holocaust’s shadows?

So many questions! In our attempts to answer them, I propose that we must begin by giving careful and critical attention to the apostle Paul for guidance, especially to the aforementioned passage in which he most explicitly and at greatest length wrestles with these issues: Romans 9-11, read within the context of the entire letter. My rationale for this strategy is that any “solution” to the “problem” that Jews and Judaism present to Christians and Christianity, if it is to gain a respectful and deserved hearing in the church, must be grounded in the church’s Holy Writ. No other solution, however well motivated or ingenious or humanitarian, will in the long run be persuasive to the bulk of Christian believers—nor should it be. One of the very important things we can learn from the Jewish tradition is that responsible theological reflection for the sake of one’s religious community, even at its most daring and creative, must by definition be grounded in and responsive to the canonical texts of that community. Our first move must be back to the text (particularly the writings of Paul), even as that move is made with an appreciable awareness of the sordid history of Christian violence, both ideological and literal, toward Jews—much of which has been grounded precisely in the interpretation of New Testament texts.

To be sure, when we move back to the texts of Paul, we encounter writing that is itself already a movement “back to the text.” As Richard B. Hays demonstrates decisively in his important 1989 book Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul, the apostle’s attempt to wrestle with the questions of the relation between an increasingly Gentile church and his own Jewish people is an exercise in complex intertextuality, that is, “an intricately woven argument from Scripture”—which for Paul could only be “the body of writings that constituted Israel’s sacred text, . . . the Scripture that he had known as a Pharisee.” We could say, therefore, that Paul provides us both the content (in what he writes, especially in Romans 9-11) and the method (in his intertextual manner of argument) necessary to develop a contemporary, yet responsible, christology in the presence of the Jewish “other.” This is what I intend to do in what follows.
Before attempting a careful theological reading of Paul’s intertextual argument in Romans 9–11, I propose that we first consider a passage in Romans that actually appears later in the letter, near its conclusion. My hope is that we may get a sense from this passage, 15:7-13, regarding “the place where Paul ends up” with his sometimes complicated reasoning of chapters 9–11. Presumably, what Paul writes in chapter 15 about the relations between Jews and Gentile Christians may provide us with a lens through which to read his earlier, sometimes tortured argument.

An Eschatological Community in the Making
(Rom. 15:7-13)

In Romans 15:7 Paul appeals to his readers to be welcoming toward each other, “just as Christ has welcomed us to the glory of God,” summing up an appeal to congregational unity that is being threatened—as far as the most immediate context is concerned—by disagreements over clean and unclean foods (14:1–15:6). It appears that the category of “us” whom Christ has welcomed, while in one sense inclusive and universal, is nonetheless distinguishable into two groups: “the circumcision” (cf. Rom. 4:12) to whom Christ “has become a servant... for the sake of the truth of God to confirm [God’s] promises to the fathers” (15:8) and “the Gentiles,” who because of Christ can now “praise God because of God’s mercy” (v. 9).

It is precisely this distinction between Jews and Gentiles that Paul refuses to relinquish, despite his proclamation that God’s mercy is equally and richly extended to all people (11:32). One may even argue that the single verse, 15:8, summarizes Paul’s dual concern throughout this letter: to underscore God’s continuing faithfulness to the people of Israel and God’s impartial mercy offered to all people.

Paul now strings together several citations from the Hebrew Scriptures to demonstrate that, in fact, this inclusion of the Gentiles is occurring just as God had promised all along (cf. Rom. 1:2). By quoting from the Psalms (vv. 9, 11), Deuteronomy (v. 10), and Isaiah (v. 12), it may even be that Paul is intentionally drawing from each of the three major divisions of Hebrew Scripture—the Writings, the Torah, and the Prophets—to seal his argument that this divine outreaching toward the Gentile peoples should come as no surprise to the attentive reader of the Tanakh. It is, in that respect, an apologetic for Paul’s own calling and mission as apostle to the Gentiles. And
while all of the citations help to make this point, the last one, from Isaiah 11, helps us to begin to appreciate that Paul understood this work of God to be radically eschatological. Isaiah had written of “a shoot... from the stem of Jesse” upon whom Yahweh’s Spirit would rest, one who would “slay the wicked with the breath of his lips” (11:1, 4). This decisive act of God would make possible the “peaceable kingdom” of wolf and lamb, lion and calf, bear and cow, child and cobra (vv. 6-8). “They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (v. 9). It is precisely at this point in the Isaian passage that Paul begins quoting: “Then it will come about in that day that the nations will resort to the root of Jesse, who will stand as a signal for the peoples” (Isa. 11:10; Rom. 15:12).

The particularly crucial point here is that Paul clearly understood the gospel’s attraction of non-Jewish people as taking place “according to the Scriptures,” to use his phrase from another letter (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Further, Paul argues “according to the Scriptures” that this Gentile phenomenon is an eschatological ingathering of “the peoples” to the God of Israel. While on the one hand his string of quotations supports his appeal for peaceful relations between Jewish and Gentile believers within the church, on the other hand it describes for Paul an eschatological community that he undoubtedly believed was about to be fully consummated. This eschatological confidence, in turn, freed Paul to employ what Hays calls “hermeneutics at the turn of the ages”; to wit, “If the gospel’s gathering of such communities is the manifestation of the righteousness of God, then Scripture cannot have meant exactly what Israel had supposed.” Thus, Paul could write to the Corinthians that the experiences of the people of Israel in the wilderness “were written [down] for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). If the world was at the turning of the ages, then even a modicum of Jewish-Gentile fellowship and cooperation would be but a foretaste of the glorious family of God about to be revealed (Rom. 8:18-21).

One of the important considerations for us who live two millennia after Paul is this: How shall we now interpret his apparently failed millennial hope, particularly in terms of Jewish-Christian relations? There is no question that Paul expected the imminent fulfillment of God’s redemptive activity in Christ, including an inclusive community of Jews and Gentiles—that is, all people. Was he jumping the gun? And if so, does the passage of twenty centuries make any differ-
ence in the way we today interpret Paul's eschatologically tinged interpretation of Jewish existence, Jewish faith and practice? Hays suggests that if we were to learn "from Paul how to read Scripture, we would read as participants in the eschatological drama of redemption." In a sense, of course, he is absolutely correct. On the other hand, the church's self-confidence precisely as God's eschatological community has tended strongly to foster a sense of finality and superiority that has not boded well for Jews and Judaism. We who are responsible for the formation of Christian faith and practice must come to terms with the deadly combination of (1) the considerable passage of time beyond Paul and his eschatological expectation; and (2) the church's generally deaf ear to Paul's warnings against anti-Jewish attitudes (Rom. 11:17-24).

Is it possible that Paul's eschatological reading of history, even if intended to contribute to peaceful and respectful relations between Gentile Christians and the Jewish people during what he presumably expected to be a brief interim, has not served us well for the long haul? We will return to this question a little later. This much, though, is clear for now: Paul in no way erased the distinction between the people of Israel ("the circumcision" of v. 8) and the Gentile peoples. By no means, then, did he ever suggest that those Gentiles, by believing in Jesus Christ, would or could replace Israel as God's beloved people.

Has the Word of God Failed? (Romans 9)

Paul, of course, assures his readers that the answer to this question is not—even if Paul himself feels "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" (v. 2) for his Jewish kinfolk. The utterly faithful "love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39) is the ground of Paul's "hope against hope" that God's saving purposes shall be accomplished: not at all because of human striving or works but because of "God who has mercy" (v. 16). It is thoroughly on the basis of divine mercy that Israel is elected of God; hence, Paul can describe his fellow "Israelites"—itself, to be sure, a term of election—as those to whom belong "the adoption [cf. 8:15-16] and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the law and the worship and the promises, of whom are the fathers and from whom is the Messiah according to the flesh" (vv. 4-5).
It is important for us, pastorally, to communicate to our congregations and students that, even in the midst of his agonizing over his fellow Jews, Paul employs the present tense to describe these privileges afforded the Jewish people by God. Paul writes after the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus, but drops not even a hint that Christ's coming relegates the Judaism of his day to "past tense." To employ a Pauline and rabbinic strategy of argument, "how much more" significant, then, is the fact that Judaism has flourished for two millennia past Paul's era—undoubtedly a fact that Paul had not even dreamed of—"in the present tense"? Despite persistent efforts by the church and many societies to be rid of the Jews in one way or another—whether spiritually, ideologically, or physically—Jewish people and Jewish religious practices endure. Unless I miss my guess, Paul would find this fact to be theologically significant. Indeed, the Word of God has not failed.

Even so, Paul continues to wrestle, Jacob-like, with this simple question (as framed by contemporary interpreter E. Elizabeth Johnson): "[I]f God deals with all impartially yet remains faithful to Israel, why is the Church full of Gentiles and Jews are staying away in droves?" There is a new tendency today among exegetes to argue persuasively that Paul's own reply to his question is that this paradoxical situation is utterly God's doing—including Israel's stumbling over the "stone of stumbling" (v. 32). Though Christian interpreters traditionally have taken the "stone of stumbling" and "rock of offense" (v. 33) to be Christ himself, there is no good textual reason for that reading. According to Paul W. Meyer:

The line of thought Paul has been pursuing and the race-course imagery with which he has been working—in short, the context read on its own terms—suggests that the Torah is the rock placed by God in Zion. There is nothing in the antecedent context, in the whole of chapter 9 or all of Romans before it, to suggest anything else. Yet all seem to have missed Paul's intent; no commentary on Romans known to me departs from the unanimous opinion that for Paul this stone is Christ. There is no more striking example in the Pauline letters of a crucial exegetical decision made on grounds extrinsic to the text itself.

The critical importance of this reading becomes evident when we examine Paul's use of the book of Isaiah as he continues to argue
"according to the Scriptures" in v. 33. Paul's primary source is Isa. 28:16: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. The one who trusts will not be disturbed." But Paul conflates this bright promise with Isaiah 8:14, where "to both the houses of Israel" God is described as "a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over." In short, Paul finds in his conjoining of Isaiahic passages a clue to the strange work of God: the Torah, God's stone of great value given to Israel and a cornerstone on which to rely, has in fact become a barrier, a stumbling stone, in the Jewish pursuit of righteousness before God. Meanwhile, Gentiles who were not even chasing after righteousness have indeed attained a righteousness rooted in divine faithfulness (v. 30). "Just as 9:16 explicitly precludes running as a means to attain God's mercy," writes Johnson, "so at 9:30 the image of a foot race functions to underscore divine sovereignty. Astonishingly, it is those who do not run who are the winners in this race."10 This race has been rigged—by God! Meyer writes that "v. 33 must count as the most remarkable of Paul's OT quotations because of what it attributes to God: placing in the midst of his people a base of security that is at the same time an obstacle over which they will stumble."11

We must appreciate this point. The importance of reading the "rock of offense" as the Torah is that, even when it is considered (from the perspective of Paul's gospel) to be "a stone of stumbling," it is also—and no less!—"a costly cornerstone" (from the perspective of Judaism). The Torah is God's good gift of a stable foundation to the people of Israel, as we will see further in the following section. Paul will later suggest a divine rationale for Israel's "stumbling" (11:1ff.) over this stone, but for now it is important to recall the two points already established: the Gentile believers have not displaced Israel as God's chosen and beloved people (15:8); and Israel continues in the present to be the recipient of divine adoption, covenants, glory, worship, law, and promises—"a tested stone . . . firmly placed." God's word has not failed (v. 6).

"It Is Not in the Heavens."
(Romans 10)

I believe Richard Hays is correct to argue that Paul's conviction about living in the "turn of the ages"—and, for that matter, about his own eschatological role as apostle to the Gentiles—provided
him a generous sense of hermeneutical freedom in reading the Hebrew Scriptures. That argument is probably best illustrated in vv. 4-9. As Hays rightly indicates, in this passage Paul so "misreads" Deuteronomy 30 that he "takes possession of Moses' exhortation and transforms its sense so that Moses is made to bear witness to the gospel."12

It is ironic that the Deuteronomy passage that Paul reads eschatologically, and thus christologically, is in its original context a profound affirmation of the validity and viability of the Torah. Let us engage in a little intertextual analysis that we might more effectively argue "according to the Scriptures":

Deuteronomy 30:11-19
“For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach.”

“It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’”

“Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?”’

“But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it.”

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways and keep his commandments and statutes and his judgments, . . . So choose life in order that you may live . . . .”

Romans 10:6-9
“But the righteousness which is by faith speaks thus, ‘Do not say in your heart,”

“‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down)

“or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

“But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’—that is, the word of faith that we are preaching:

“That if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Such a dramatic juxtaposition! The text from Deuteronomy is right­fully understood by religious Jews to be of central importance to their understanding of the value, function, and continuing life-bestowing benefits of the Torah. Further, its promises are accompanied by threats of punishment or even death for disobedience. It is near, in their hearts and mouths, and eminently do-able—"that you may
observe it." Paul, meanwhile, interpolates the Deuteronomy text with the voice of "the righteousness which speaks by faith"—the righteousness which Gentiles have attained without having tried (v. 30)! Incredibly, if we read 9:30-10:10 as composing one argument, it is clear that indeed the gift of Torah is the "stone of stumbling" Paul describes in 9:32-33. Yet there is no question that Deuteronomy describes the Torah as a via salutis, a graciously bestowed, life-giving path in which to walk as God's people Israel.

As Hays points out, the irony is further heightened by the fact that this passage from Deuteronomy was to gain great significance (if it did not already possess it) in the rabbinic tradition of Judaism. In Baba Mezia 59b of the Talmud we encounter a famous story of a disagreement between Rabbi Eliezer and other sages regarding certain ritual laws. As the story goes, Eliezer tried to convince his peers of the rightness of his position by performing all sorts of wonders, including finally a heavenly voice that sanctions Eliezer's position in the debate. "But Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed, 'It is not in heaven.'" Perhaps surprisingly, God is described as accepting Joshua's argument (from Deut. 30:12) against the heavenly declaration in good humor: "My sons have defeated me; my sons have defeated me!" The rabbinic interpretation of Deuteronomy 30, in other words, is that God, having entrusted the Torah into Jewish hands and hearts, is more than willing to allow them to pursue the task of interpreting and applying the Torah to new sociohistorical situations.

For rabbinic Judaism, then, Deuteronomy 30 celebrates not only the graciousness of God's gift of the Torah to Israel but also the profoundly human responsibility of Jewish rabbis to keep the Torah relevant and attractive through the ongoing processes of communal interpretation, or arguing "according to the Scriptures." "It is not in the heavens" precisely because "it is written in this book of the law" (30:10), given over to the Jewish community to study, debate, interpret, and obey. Hays properly observes that "for the rabbis the Word of God is the Mosaic Torah as mediated through generations of oral explication; for Paul the Word of God is Jesus Christ as experienced in the Spirit-filled Christian community... Both sides... presuppose the legitimacy of innovative readings that disclose truth previously latent in Scripture."14

Hays does hint that the rabbinic reading of Deuteronomy 30 "may appear to be closer than Paul's to the original sense of the words in Deuteronomy" but then discourages leaning in that direction by
arguing that "both readings execute major hermeneutical shifts." That is no doubt true; nonetheless, it is undeniable that his hesitant hint must be enlarged into a significant claim: the rabbinic and contemporary Jewish traditions are utterly correct, on the basis of the Deuteronomy text, to assume an ongoing validity and vitality in the gift of Torah. It is a gift of life by which God has drawn near to God's covenant partner Israel, a people called to love God "by obeying his voice; and by holding fast to him; for this is your life and the length of your days ..." (Deut. 30:20). This need not at all imply that Paul's christological reading of Deuteronomy 30 is mistaken; it does imply that Christians, who for centuries have read Deuteronomy only through Paul's eschatological lens, ought now also to listen closely to the rabbinic reading—and within the context of two millennia's passage.

On the grounds of the history of effects of traditional Christian interpretation during these two millennia, it seems to me that we cannot now simply point out the interpretive liberties that both Paul and the rabbis took with Deuteronomy. If Hays can write that his "purpose in thus comparing Paul to the rabbis is neither to vindicate nor to castigate either party," my purpose is to argue that we cannot afford to take so neutral or cavalier a position. The subsequent Christian use of the Hebrew Scriptures, following what it took to be Paul's example, has had disastrous political, religious, and physical consequences for Jewish people. That is a practical argument grounded in particular historical effects. But there is also a theological argument grounded in the reliability of scriptural promises (or arguing "according to the Scriptures"): if we who are Christian make the assumption that Israel's covenantal conditions are no longer effectual, then we are also implying that the God of Israel (our God) is not faithful—which certainly would place us, too, in a less than envious position!

Has God Rejected Israel?
(Rom. 11:1-32)

The good news for Jews and Christians, of course, is that God is faithful—and thus Paul adamantly insists that God has not, and will not, reject God's people Israel. If they have "stumbled," it is over the Torah that they have done so. They have not stumbled "so as to fall," for after all this was God's doing in order to bring "salvation to the Gentiles" (v. 11).
How has God done this? To be sure, God's ways in the world are unfathomable (v. 33), but we may hazard a guess where Paul did not. We know that Jesus was a faithful, if radical, Jew who seems to have understood his ministry as having to do primarily with "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:6). Indeed, the overwhelming majority of the earliest Christians were Jews, and the story in Acts 10 of Peter's preaching to Cornelius and his household indicates just how slowly and hesitantly this Jewish movement considered the inclusion of Gentiles. Paul clearly understood himself to be the resurrected Christ's emissary to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:18; Rom. 1:5; 15:16) and thus a decisive figure in the eschatological turning of the ages. Consequently, as Paul's mission gained success, the Jewish-flavored Jesus movement had to wrestle with the question of what to do with these Gentile converts (Acts 15).

We undoubtedly should be grateful that the Jerusalem Council decided against submitting Gentiles to the full range of the Torah's commands; otherwise it is highly unlikely that faith in Jesus Christ would have spread so rapidly and dramatically among non-Jews. However, it is not difficult to anticipate the sociological consequences of such a decision. The less attention and honor given to the Torah and Jewish custom in this growing Jesus movement, the less likely that the movement would attract traditional Jews. As early Christianity became increasingly dominated by Gentile people and customs, it would inevitably draw less and less from the Jewish people. Almost by default, the Christian movement was (divinely?) fated to become largely non-Jewish.

Paul is entirely correct to insist that this is all God's doing—if in fact the God "who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Rom. 4:24) is also the God who through Moses commanded Israel to "observe carefully all the words of this law," insisting that it "is not an idle word" but is "life indeed" (Deut. 32:46-47). For if the Torah actually is the divine gift to the people of Israel that it presents itself to be, then any competing religious movement that dismisses or even undervalues the Torah as God's gift of life will inevitably be looked upon with suspicion, if not outrage.\(^{17}\) While this is not necessarily what Paul meant when he wrote that "a partial hardening has happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (v. 25), I maintain that this is the best way to understand what has occurred in the history of interaction between evangelizing Christians and observant Jews.
I have made much of the fact that this "fullness of the Gentiles" has undoubtedly turned out to be a much longer stretch of time than Paul would have anticipated. He did, of course, believe that when that period comes to a close, "all Israel will be saved" (v. 26). As with the rest of his argument in chapters 9–11, on this point of eschatological expectation Paul once again argues "according to the Scriptures," this time from Isa. 59:20-21: "Out from Zion will come the one who delivers, who will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins" (Rom. 11:26-27). However, the last phrase—"when I take away their sins"—is spliced onto the Isaiah 59 citation from another Isaian text (27:9). Certainly the splice fits Paul's purposes well. If, though, we employ again Paul's own intertextual method and continue reading Isaiah 59 where Paul left off his quotation, we read a promise to Israel that was not nearly so conducive to Paul's purposes. Not surprisingly, it is also a promise that largely has been ignored in subsequent Christian thought and practice in relation to the Jewish people: "And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says Yahweh: 'My Spirit which is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring's offspring,' says Yahweh, 'from now and forever'" (Isa. 59:21). Unlike Paul's reading of history, this divine promise does not hinge on an impending eschatological consummation; rather, it is testimony to God's enduring faithfulness through all time and circumstance. Ironically, in a sense Paul himself makes a similar point when he proceeds to write that "the gifts and call of God are irrevocable" (v. 29).

We know that Paul's warnings against already incipient attitudes of Christian superiority and displacement of the Jews went largely unheeded. Tragically, whereas Paul wrote that "with respect to the gospel they are enemies for your sake" (v. 28), Christian interpreters have taken it upon themselves repeatedly to make Paul say "enemies of God" (as do many translations, including the New Revised Standard Version) or even "enemies of Christ" (as, for example, Aquinas felt constrained to read it). Paul kept the sense of tension muted and reminded his readers that it was precisely from the gospel standpoint that the Jewish people were so-called "enemies." Equally important, he then insisted that a different standpoint existed, the election standpoint: "with respect to election they are loved for the sake of the fathers" (v. 28). The history of church-synagogue rela-
tions betrays our decided preference for the image of “Jews as enemy people” over “Jews as loved people.” It is well past time to change our preference—and to do so aggressively in our Christian preaching and teaching.

Benediction: Do We Comprehend God’s Ways?
(Rom. 11:33-36)

We surely do not. The mysteries of God’s labors in this world are “unsearchable” and “unfathomable” (v. 33). It is almost as though Paul finally reminds himself and assures his readers that our attempt to trace God’s saving ways—especially our attempt to interpret God’s gift of life in the Torah and God’s gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:21) in the light of each other—will always fall short. Perhaps the most we can say for the time being is that both Christ and the Torah are good gifts of God, intended for the creation of a people of God and for the salvation of the world. “For who has known the mind of the Lord?” (v. 34).

That question—yet another citation of the prophet Isaiah—should, above all else, keep us humble. Finally, neither do we know the mind of God nor can we trace God’s mysterious ways in the world. Even as we preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ, confessing that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to God’s own self (2 Cor. 5:19), our continuing challenge will be to appreciate the mystery of that very God’s unique election and love for the people Israel. We Gentiles, who were at one time “without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12), now can, through Christ, “glorify God for God’s mercy” (Rom. 15:9); at the same time, we can acknowledge with Paul that “Christ has become a servant to the [Jewish people] on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises to the fathers” (15:8).

If Christ has become a servant to the Jewish people, can there really be any question but that the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5-21) should also be such a servant? The repentance of the church to “become a servant to the Jewish people” admittedly will not afford us a clear and obvious christology vis-à-vis Jews and Judaism—“who has known the mind of the Lord?”—but it certainly will imply a clear and obvious Christopraxis. In other words, we may not have quick and easy answers to the question, for example, of the relationship between the Torah and Christ; however, Paul’s claim that “Christ has become a servant” to the Jewish people undoubtedly suggests a
certain trajectory or directionality for the church’s relations with Jews and Judaism—a trajectory of humility and servanthood. Perhaps a new Christian theology of Judaism could emerge from such praxis, perhaps not. In any case, it is clearly time for Christians to place a priority upon action (becoming a servant) over theory (creating a theology) in regard to Jews.

Finally, as I have suggested earlier in this essay, I believe we should ask ourselves again about whether Paul’s mistaken convictions about the imminent arrival of the eschaton should have any bearing on our understanding of his, and of the rabbinc, rendering of the Torah. If Paul’s license to interpret Deuteronomy 30 so freely was rooted in his expectation regarding “the turn of the ages,” it may be all the more important to take the rabbinc-Jewish interpretation no less seriously than Paul’s. In the past two millennia we Christians have lived, religiously speaking, at “the ends of the ages” (1 Cor. 10:11), but during that same (end-)time period we have fostered anti-Jewish sentiments that have developed into forced baptisms, libel, pogroms, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and mass murder. Meanwhile, the more sober rabbinc strategy for reading history is that “the world pursues its normal course.” As long as the world so turns to pursue its normal course, may we who name the name of Christ also turn to pursue a new course: may we, turning in repentance, seek now to pursue love, peace, and respect toward Israel, a people beloved and elected of God. “For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be the glory forever. Amen!” (v. 36).

Notes

4. The term TaNaK is a widely employed acronym among religious Jews, referring to the Torah, the Nevi’im (Prophets) and the Ketuvim (Writings). The acronym encompasses the Hebrew biblical canon.
6. Ibid., 185.

8. See both Johnson's essay (note 7) and Paul W. Meyer's "Romans 10:4 and the 'End' of the Law," in Fowl, ed., *Theological Interpretation*.


11. Quoted in ibid., 362.


15. Ibid., 3.

16. Ibid., 5.

17. A similar phenomenon occurred several centuries after Paul when the prophet Muhammad claimed to have received a series of revelations from God that, while not utterly doing away with Judaism and Christianity, interpreted both traditions as inadequate and deviant. Not surprisingly, the prophet did not get many takers from among either Christians or Jews. Similarly, and much more recently, the Rev. Sun Myung Moon has preached that Jesus was a "failed Messiah" whose vocation is now being fulfilled in Moon's own ministry—a message that has met with relatively little success among Christian people.

The Christian-Jewish Encounter and the Practices of The United Methodist Church: An Exploration

The Christian-Jewish encounter raises profound theological questions for which churches to date have not articulated clear answers. For United Methodists, the document Building New Bridges in Hope has begun a search for answers. Accordingly, this essay is divided into two parts. The first part discusses Building New Bridges in Hope, focusing on an ambiguity in the text concerning the notion of covenant. Part two examines how the Christian-Jewish encounter impacts the practices of Baptism and Eucharist in United Methodist churches.

Examining Building New Bridges in Hope

Approved by the 1996 General Conference, Building New Bridges in Hope (hereafter Building) is The United Methodist Church’s second statement on Christian-Jewish relations, the first being Bridge in Hope (approved at the 1972 General Conference).

The heart of Building New Bridges in Hope is nine foundational principles for United Methodist-Jewish relations:

1. There is one living God in whom both Jews and Christians believe.

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2. Jesus was a devout Jew, as were many of his first followers.
3. Judaism and Christianity are living and dynamic religious movements that have continued to evolve since the time of Jesus, often in interaction with each other and with God’s continual self-disclosure in the world.
4. Christians and Jews are bound to God through biblical covenants that are eternally valid.
5. As Christians, we are clearly called to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in every age and place. At the same time, we believe that God has continued, and continues today, to work through Judaism and the Jewish people.
6. As Christians, we are called into dialogue with our Jewish neighbors.
7. As followers of Jesus Christ we deeply repent of the complicity of the Church and the participation of many Christians in the long history of persecution of the Jewish people. The Christian Church has a profound obligation to correct historical and theological teachings that have led to false and pejorative perceptions of Judaism and contributed to persecution and hatred of Jews. It is our responsibility as Christians to oppose anti-Semitism whenever and wherever it occurs.
8. As Christians, we share a call with Jews to work for justice, compassion and peace in the world in anticipation of the fulfillment of God’s reign.
9. As United Methodist Christians, we are deeply affected by the anguish and suffering that continue for many people who live in the Middle East region which includes modern Israel. We commit ourselves through prayer and advocacy to bring about justice and peace for those of every faith. (191-6)

The discussion that follows limits itself to an examination of the tension in the text between an affirmation of God’s covenant with Israel, on the one hand, and the responsibility of the church to witness to all people about the saving love of God in Christ, on the other.¹

Is Mission a Proper Post-Shoah Christian Response to Jews?

Building New Bridges in Hope contains a tension engendered by the clash between post-Holocaust Christian reflection on the eternal
validity of the divine covenant with Israel and the classical Christian self-definition in terms of mission to all people. It is worth quoting at length the discussion of point 4 of the text:

As Christians, we stand firm in our belief that Jesus was sent by God as the Christ to redeem all people, and that in Christ the biblical covenant has been made radically new. While church tradition has taught that Judaism has been superseded by Christianity as the "new Israel," we do not believe that earlier covenantal relationships have been invalidated or that God has abandoned Jewish partners in covenant.

We believe that just as God is steadfastly faithful to the biblical covenant in Jesus Christ, likewise God is steadfastly faithful to the biblical covenant with the Jewish people. The covenant God established with the Jewish people through Abraham, Moses, and others continues because it is an eternal covenant. Paul proclaims that the gift and call of God to the Jews is irrevocable (Romans 11:29). Thus we believe that the Jewish people continue in covenantal relationship with God.

Both Jews and Christians are bound to God in covenant, with no covenantal relationship invalidated by any other. Though Christians and Jews have different understandings of the covenant of faith, we are mysteriously bound to one another through our covenantal relationships with the one God and creator of us all. (193)

In themselves these paragraphs go far toward a renunciation of classical Christian supersessionism. However, they also exhibit some ambiguities that deserve elaboration. The chief ambiguity has to do with the question of whether, when speaking of Jews and Christians, the text envisions one or two covenants with God. The heading of section 4 suggests that there is more than one covenant: "Christians and Jews are bound to God through biblical covenants that are eternally valid." At the same time, the text proceeds to talk of Christ's making "the biblical covenant" (emphasis mine) "radically new."

The precise meaning of "the biblical covenant" is (perhaps purposefully) left unclear. Does the phrase refer to the covenant with Abraham, the covenant made at Sinai, or the Davidic covenant? It may well refer to all three, given the second paragraph's evocation of the covenants established through Abraham, Moses, "and others." However, the text also envisions a "biblical covenant" in Jesus Christ.
This ambiguity with regard to the identity of the covenant(s) made with Israel may reflect the contemporary discussion among theologians of the Christian-Jewish encounter concerning the relationship of the covenant in Christ to the covenants with Israel. There is no consensus on this issue. Some suggest that there is but one covenant into which those who come to the God of Israel are united, through Christ. Others argue that there are two covenants, one with Israel and another in and through Christ. As we shall see below, this question is immediately relevant to sacramental theology.

At the same time that *Building* affirms the eternal validity of the covenants God makes with Israel, it also affirms the "clear calling" of the church to witness to all people:

> Through the announcement of the gospel in word and work comes the opportunity for others to glimpse the glory of God, which we have found through Jesus Christ. Yet we also understand that the issues of the evangelization of persons of other faiths, and of Jews in particular, are often sensitive and difficult. These issues call for continuing serious and respectful reflection and dialogue among Christians and with Jews. (193)

This portion of the text most clearly reflects the ambiguity and ambivalence in the church today about the issue of Christian mission to Jews. The above paragraph begs the question of precisely how Christians are to think of Jews. Are Jews to be considered simply as persons of another faith (that is, non-Christian)? Or is there, in fact, a unique relationship between Christianity and Judaism, one that precludes Christian mission efforts toward Jews?

A related perspective appears in the discussion of point 6 of *Building* titled, “As Christians, we are called into dialogue with our Jewish neighbors.” It states, “While for Christians, dialogue will always include testimony to God’s saving acts in Jesus Christ, it will include in equal measure listening to and respecting the understanding of Jews as they strive to live in obedience and faithfulness to God and as they understand the conditions of their faith” (194). Here and elsewhere *Building* bases its discussion on a definition of the church for which the missionary task is central to Christian self-identity. For example, in the discussion of point 5 the text states, “Essential to the Christian faith is the call to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to all people” (193). The words in question in the above quotations are
"always" and "essential"; these terms qualify the church’s exercise of mission to others, even in the context of dialogue.

It is this imperative to witness in the context of dialogue that raises questions. *Building* suggests, "Fruitful and respectful dialogue is centered in a mutual spirit of humility, trust, openness to new understanding, and commitment to reconciliation and the healing of the painful wounds of our history" (194). However, it is difficult to see how witness to Christ can have a place in the Christian-Jewish conversation. A strong call to repentance for Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism and an imperative to work to correct misunderstandings of Judaism and Jews runs throughout the document. Indeed, "building bridges of understanding" between Christians and Jews is a central metaphor of the entire document. Thus it baffles the mind to think how United Methodist Christians can contribute to the called-for “spirit of humility, trust, [and] openness to new understanding” without first relinquishing their self-imposed imperative to witness in the context of dialogue. Otherwise, how can they possibly hear their Jewish interlocutors speak of "the evil done by Christians to Jews . . . carried out in the name of Jesus Christ" (195)? At the very least, given the widespread recognition of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism among United Methodists, *Building* ought to have nuanced the dynamic of Christian-Jewish dialogue to make clear the Christian’s obligation to first listen to her Jewish dialogue partner before offering her own witness. The historical experience of Jews requires at least that much from Christians today.

Of course, a New Testament text that is key to this discussion is Matt. 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . . ." The exegetical center of this passage is the phrase "all nations" (*panta ta ethni*). If one accepts the identity of Matthew’s Gospel as a fundamentally Jewish work emanating from a Christian community comprising Jews and Gentiles, then it is possible to read this passage as reflecting a classical Israelite distinction between Israel as “the nation” and the Gentiles as “the nations.” Thus Jesus’ command can be read as a call to go to the Gentiles to make them members of the *ekklesia*, the heart of a renewed Israel created by God through Christ. Thus one can argue that mission to the Jews is not included in the tradition related in this passage.

On the other hand, some would argue that because Christianity and Judaism are two distinct religions Christians are obligated to preach
the gospel to Jews. To be sure, Christianity and Judaism have indeed developed into two separate and distinct religions (a point emphasized by Jacob Neusner and others). However, that historical reality in no way negates the positive theological relationship of Christianity to Judaism. Without a positive theological relationship to Judaism Christianity is distorted beyond recognition, something recognized by the leaders of the Confessing Church in the Nazi Germany of the 1930s. A variety of metaphors has been employed by theologians and philosophers to describe this relationship: cultivated olive tree and wild olive branch; siblings; parent and child; star and its rays of light, a favorite of mine (in spite of its problems) articulated by the eminent Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig. While no metaphor is quite adequate, I believe it is incumbent upon Christians to continue the task of framing such metaphors. To its credit, Building does employ the sibling-parent metaphor in its conclusion: "We dare to believe that such conversations and acts will build new bridges in hope between Christians and Jews, and that they will be among the signs and first fruits of our sibling relationship under our parent God" (197). However, the egalitarianism implied in the metaphor stands in tension with the implicit supersessionism of other parts of the document.

In sum, it seems possible to read Building in two quite different ways with regard to supersession and mission to Jews. This dual reading is possible because of the text's ambiguity about how to interpret the covenants God has made with Jews and Christians. The document's ambiguity prompts one to surmise that there may have been sharp theological divisions within the team that wrote the document. The ambiguity may also reflect the contemporary struggles within The United Methodist Church between self-styled evangelicals and moderates over the missionary identity of the church in today's world. It is possible to find in Building an articulation of classic Christian supersessionism in references such as "in Christ the biblical covenant has been made radically new" and in its affirmation of the clear call of the church to proclaim "the good news of Jesus Christ to all people" (193, emphases added). Since there is only one biblical covenant, God has indeed done something new in Christ. Consequently, the church's mission includes converting Jews (as it does all people) to following God in this new covenant.

As we noted, another reading of the intent of Building also suggests itself. According to this view, taken as a whole the document argues for the existence of two covenants, both of which are
A Positive Relationship to Judaism in the Liturgical Practices of the Church

I turn now to a discussion of ways in which The United Methodist Church today can articulate in its worship a positive relationship to Judaism—a relationship free from anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Pursuing such a positive relationship aims to fulfill a key objective expressed in Building, namely, that the church "has an obligation to correct erroneous and harmful past teachings and to ensure that the use of Scripture, as well as the preparation, selection, and use of liturgical and educational resources, ... not perpetuate misleading interpretations and misunderstanding of Judaism" (195-6).

Ecclesiology: The Practicing Church and Israel

Ecclesiology stands at the heart of any discussion of Christian-Jewish relations. Exactly who is the church that worships, preaches, and teaches? What is the church’s relationship to Israel, the recipient of the covenant with God given at Sinai? The answer that emerged in the early Christian communities of the second century was that the church was the “new Israel,” chosen by God to replace the Israel who had been faithless, the ultimate example of which was the role of Jews in Jesus’ death. Historians and others scholars have noted the exegetical strategy accompanying this theological position: all the promises to and blessings of Israel in their Scriptures are now inherited by the church, while the denunciations of Israel and judgments made upon the nation have fallen on the heads of contemporary Jews. The reason for this reversal is that God has rejected Israel.
because of her ultimate faithlessness in rejecting Christ.

This supersessionist view of the church has been dominant in Christian theology to the present day. As I have suggested above, this view can be found in *Building*; in its definition of the church in which mission to the Jewish people is essential; and in its susceptibility to a reading that articulates a covenant theology that culminates in Jesus Christ. With regard to the practice of the church, the theological difficulty with supersessionism has to do with the question of God's faithfulness. Put baldly, if (as a supersessionist ecclesiology claims) God can break the covenant God made with Israel, what is to prevent God from doing the same with the church, whose sins are far more numerous than those of Israel of old?

The discussion that follows proceeds from an ecclesiology more consonant with the second reading of *Building* that I proposed above. This ecclesiology builds on a “two-covenant” reading of God's saving actions among Jews and Christians. In this view, both God's covenants with the Jews and the covenant with Christians through Christ are eternally valid. They are different covenants; yet they are related in that the covenant in Jesus Christ springs from the covenant with Israel. Indeed, without the covenant with Israel it would be impossible to understand Jesus at all. Thus there is a fundamental relationship between Christians and Jews, grounded in God's faithfulness and in the prior covenants God has made with Israel. In Baptism and Eucharist Christians are united in the body of Jesus Christ, the same Jesus who was a member of Israel and a participant in the covenant God has made with Israel. Precisely as the body of Christ, then, Christians find their relationship to Jews and Judaism. At the same time, it is their communion in the body of Christ that makes Christians' persecution of Jews and hatred of Jews particularly heinous.

*Respecting History and Difference*

In their post-Shoah search for a usable common heritage between Christians and Jews, Christians, including United Methodists, have failed to recognize that Christianity and Judaism are indeed two separate religions. To be sure, as *Building* notes, there are common roots in biblical revelation shared by Jews and Christians, including “faith in the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; knowledge of the name of God and of the commandments; the prophetic proclamation of judgment and grace; the Hebrew Scriptures; and the hope of the coming Kingdom” (192). At the same time, today both religions are
the products of nearly two millennia of historical development. In reality, they are two separate and distinct religions. Unfortunately, Christians have little knowledge of the history of Judaism after the first century C.E., and this ignorance has contributed to Christian misunderstanding and inaccurate portrayal of Jews. In its discussion of point 3, Building suggests:

As Christians, it is important for us to recognize that Judaism went on to develop vital new traditions of its own after the time of Jesus, including the Rabbinic Judaism that is still vibrant today in shaping Jewish religious life. This evolving tradition has given the Jewish people profound spiritual resources for creative life through the centuries. We increase our understanding when we learn about the rich variety of contemporary Jewish faith practice, theological interpretation, and worship, and discover directly through dialogue how Jews understand their own history, tradition, and faithful living. (192-3)

Thus the beginning point for any Christian practice honoring Judaism must be respect for that history and for the difference between Christianity and Judaism.

A classic example of Christian misuse of a presumed common heritage is the frequent celebration of a so-called "Seder meal" on Maundy Thursday. The origins of this practice appear to lie in the Christian desire to explicate the meaning of the Eucharist through reference to what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper. The practice rests on the dubious historical presupposition that the Last Supper was a Passover meal. Also questionable is the historical presupposition that the Seder celebrated by Jews today is the same meal celebrated by Jews in the first century C.E. Thus, even if Christians could theologically defend their celebration of a Seder meal, there are serious obstacles to knowing for certain what shape and content such a meal would have had in Jesus' time; and such obstacles have a negative impact on the content of Christian liturgical practice.

It is difficult to view Christian Seder meals as anything but the illicit Christian cooptation of another religion's liturgical practice. As it is celebrated today, the Seder belongs to the Judaism that developed in the post-Second Temple period. The structure and content of the Passover meal in Jesus' day is not accessible to us. Thus it is not historically or theologically defensible for Christians to claim the
Passover haggada as part of their liturgical heritage. *The United Methodist Book of Worship* puts the matter this way:

United Methodists are encouraged to celebrate the Seder as invited guests in a Jewish home or in consultation with representatives of the Jewish community, thus respecting the integrity of what is a Jewish tradition and continuing the worthy practice of Jews and Christians sharing at table together. Celebrating the modern meal without a Jewish family as host is an affront to Jewish tradition and sometimes creates misunderstanding about the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

Some people may take the phrase "or in consultation with representatives of the Jewish community" to mean that it is possible for a Christian congregation to celebrate the Seder. However, when taken in context this phrase makes clear that United Methodists are not to host the Seder. The acceptable, theologically defensible practice is to attend a Seder meal hosted by a Jewish family.

Respecting history and difference with regard to worship practices extends far beyond the Seder. The same principle applies to any attempt to use Jewish prayer texts, music, and ritual in a Christian service of worship. Thus the Christian use of Jewish prayers, music, and ritual (such as the huppah at a Christian wedding) must be rejected. The question of what texts, music, and ritual are appropriate for use in a service in which both Jews and Christians are present is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, I believe it is better to err on the side of caution by avoiding such Christian use of Jewish liturgical resources. The paragraph from the *Book of Worship* cited above provides a good working principle in this instance, too: At the very least there should be "consultation with members of the Jewish community" before any use.

There is here a larger liturgical question. I wonder if the motivation to appropriate the liturgical texts, music, and practices of Judaism is strongest in those Protestant liturgical traditions which have little, if any, text, musical, and ceremonial tradition of their own—or at least a tradition that current practitioners are willing to claim. I am thinking specifically of contemporary United Methodism, for which there is no normative tradition in text, music, or ceremonial. It is possible to argue that United Methodism does indeed possess such a normative tradition (an argument supported, in my view, by the *United Methodist*...
Hymnal [1989] and the Book of Worship [1992]). In actual practice, however, the presuppositions of the American “frontier tradition” still exercise a normative function in the denomination. For this tradition, and in its liberal theological interpretation, all traditions are to some extent fair game for liturgical plundering. The perceived absence of a normative tradition of text, music, and ceremonial makes it necessary to construct a tradition from scratch and opens the door for misappropriation of Jewish practices.

Someone may object that to prohibit the use of Jewish liturgical resources leaves the church with little or no room to explain and reflect upon the Jewish parallels or even the roots of Easter/Pascha, Pentecost, the seven-day week, Baptism, and Eucharist. After all, Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew, and his earliest disciples were Jews. Christianity began as one of several groups in Second Temple Judaism. Is there, then, no defensible way to discuss and reflect on those roots? I think this question is more difficult to answer than it may appear at first. With regard to the historical roots of Christian liturgical practices in Jewish worship, it seems increasingly difficult to assert with certainty the precise origins of specific Christian worship practices in Jewish worship. That Christian worship practices have roots in Jewish worship is clear. Saying precisely what those roots are is much more difficult.

When it comes to pedagogical strategies, the only sound strategy is to introduce Christians to what can be said about Jewish worship based on the Scriptures of Israel (in Hebrew and Aramaic, and in Greek translation) and their interpretation in Second Temple Jewish and early rabbinic literature. This is a task that has yet to be accomplished at the congregational level. Yet it is all the more imperative that this work be done, because Christians need to be introduced to the idea that Judaism cannot be identified with what is commonly called “Old Testament religion.”

Unfortunately, Christian liturgy has been and remains one of the central locations of ongoing, unexamined Christian anti-Judaism and even anti-Semitism. The passion narratives read on Palm/Passion Sunday and the “reproaches” read on Good Friday are two well-known instances of liturgical practices that contain blatant anti-Jewish overtures. Both practices have been addressed in recent years by a variety of Christian communions, including The United Methodist Church, whose Book of Worship features a rewritten form of the reproaches. This revised form originated in American Lutheran
circles in the 1970s and contains a reproach of the church for its persecution and murder of Jews. Blatant examples of liturgical anti-Judaism like these are fairly easy to identify. It is more difficult to name and address the myriad subtle ways in which liturgical practices inculcate and perpetuate anti-Judaism.

Misinterpretation and misunderstanding of historical and contemporary Judaism continue, including the mistaken belief that Judaism is a religion solely of law and judgment, while Christianity is a religion of love and grace. In reality, the characterizations of God in the Hebrew Bible are rich and diverse; strong images of a caring, compassionate, and loving deity are dominant for Jews as well as for Christians. Further, there are parallels between New Testament Christian understandings of the "spirit of the law" and contemporaneous theological developments in first-century Jewish theology.

As interpretation of Scripture, Christian liturgy has the potential to bear anti-Jewish interpretations of Israel and Judaism. Not only in sermons but also in prayer, hymnody, and ritual practice Christians can perpetuate such misunderstandings. On the other hand, these same liturgical acts can become vehicles for a new understanding of Judaism (proposed by Building itself). Below I suggest some ways for interpreting and practicing the two sacraments of the gospel in light of an ecclesiology that is neither anti-Jewish nor supersessionist.

**Baptism and Eucharist**

A supersessionist church theology questions the very notion of God's faithfulness to the covenants God makes. Thus the entire foundation of sacramental theology is threatened. As By Water and the Spirit, the 1996 General Conference teaching document on baptism, states, "The faithful grace of God initiates the covenant relationship and enables the community and the person to respond with faith." God's eternal faithfulness underlies the church's trust in God's faithful action in and through the sacraments. Even when we are unfaithful (or, pace the Donatists, when the minister is unfaithful) God remains faithful.

United Methodists, along with other Christians, believe that the celebration of the sacraments must be accompanied by the proclamation of the Word of God. This proclamation takes place not only in the sermon but also in the reading of Scripture. In the parlance of narrative theology, as the locus of the larger story within which our individual stories are interpreted and find their proper place, both
canons of the Christian Bible—the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament—occupy a central place in the practice of the church. Over the course of Christian history, however, readings from the Hebrew Bible in public worship have gradually diminished to the point of virtual elimination. Thus Western Christians came to preach from a truncated canon. While it would be unfair to call this development a resurgence of Marcionism, the effect was and still is the same: the church is cut off from the story and stories of Israel.

The merit of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) and the Roman Lectionary (RL) is that both restore a reading from the Hebrew Bible for each Sunday of the year. But both lectionaries are criticized for continuing to apply typology in their use of the Hebrew Bible. Although the RCL adopts the option of an in-course reading of selected major narratives of the Hebrew Bible (Moses, David, Elijah, and Elisha), for the major feasts of the liturgical year it maintains a typological criterion for the selection of readings from the Hebrew Bible. Of course, the mere fact that the RCL and the RL mandate the reading from the Hebrew Bible during public worship is itself a positive development. But the question remains regarding the ways in which the church will feed upon the bread of the Word in the Hebrew Bible. Typology as a sole approach to the Hebrew Bible has been discredited in many circles. The rise of other ways of reading both canons has certainly deepened the church’s ability to be nourished from the Scriptures. Yet, typology may still have a legitimate role to play in Scripture interpretation today. Whether or not a typological approach to the Hebrew Bible can be defended revolves around the question of supersessionism. More precisely, the question is: must a typological reading always imply supersessionism? After all, Paul Van Buren suggested in his final book, According to the Scriptures, that it is possible for a type to have more than one antitype.6

The fullness of the story proclaimed in the sacraments may well not be revealed unless the church were to return to the practice of reading each Sunday from the three divisions of the Tanakh: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. I realize that this proposal might well be laughed out of court in a culture in which the one-hour Sunday service reigns supreme and in which not all congregations follow even the prescriptions of the Revised Common Lectionary. Yet, especially for congregations like these it may be important to encounter each facet of the first canon every Sunday. Multiple readings from the Hebrew Bible continue to exist in some Christian traditions (e.g.,

THE CHRISTIAN-JEWISH ENCOUNTER 293
the Church of the East), and there is no a priori reason why such a practice could not find a place again in other Christian communities—even if it is on an experimental basis.

**Baptism**

The concept of covenant is central to a United Methodist understanding of baptism. As the Introduction to the Services of the Baptismal Covenant states:

The Baptismal Covenant is God's word to us, proclaiming our adoption by grace, and our word to God, promising our response of faith and love . . . . The basic service of the Baptismal Covenant is Holy Baptism, by which we are incorporated into the Church, which is the body of Christ, and made one in Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27-28).

For Christian-Jewish encounter, this emphasis on covenant raises the question of the precise identity of the covenant into which a person is baptized. In turn, the issue of covenant leads to the question of what "body of Christ" means from the perspective of Christian-Jewish relations. Are people baptized into the one covenant made by God with Israel and made new or renewed or confirmed in Christ? Or are they baptized into a second covenant, one made in and through Christ? United Methodists can find support in both views; but I believe the preponderance of support supports a two-covenant view. The prayer over the font in the United Methodist baptismal service nicely evokes the gracious acts of God in creation, in saving Noah from the Flood, in delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt, and "in the fullness of time," in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. "Fullness of time" here need not be interpreted in a supersessionist manner.

Early Christian writers were aware of circumcision as the sign of the covenant between God and Israel and viewed baptism as the Christian correlate to circumcision. By viewing the covenant through Christ as a second but not superior covenant, it is possible to claim baptism as the Christian sign of the covenant without asserting that it is the fulfillment or completion of circumcision.

**Eucharist**

Recent scholarship suggests that the Eucharist may be rooted in ancient Jewish meal practices. Although there are not many early
witnesses to Jewish table blessings (Birkat ha-mazon), what is available suggests that early Christians adopted that blessing's structure of thanksgiving/blessing-supplication. Early Christian eucharistic prayers also incorporated the foci on creation, revelation, and redemption inherent in the Jewish prayer. It would be very good if Christian teaching on the Eucharist highlighted these dimensions of prayer at the eucharistic table; however, such reflection will still be incomplete without preliminary consideration of the ecclesiological questions raised earlier.

Along with other Christian eucharistic prayers of the past thirty years, the “Great Thanksgiving” of the United Methodist Services of Word and Table (I-III) adopt a version of the West Syrian form of eucharistic prayer. This pattern of eucharistic praying is notable for its inclusion of an extended narrative of salvation history. Unfortunately, contemporary eucharistic prayers often show little interest in including the history of Israel in the recitation of that narrative. Once again, as with so many of the questions we have considered here, the matter of euchological practice revolves around a clear ecclesiological position with respect to the church and Israel. To be sure, it is possible to include a supersessionist narrative in the Great Thanksgiving. But it is also possible to include a narrative that articulates a different, more faithful ecclesiology and understanding of God’s loving acts of salvation.

The notion of the body of Christ stands at the heart of the Eucharist. It is also at the center of much theological controversy over the Eucharist in Western Christianity, going as far back as the ninth century. This controversy often focused on the relationship between the body of Christ as gift from God and the eucharistic elements of bread and wine. But for the most part the controversy involved daunting metaphysical issues, chief among them the matter of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. Perhaps the Christian-Jewish encounter can move the church’s debate over the Eucharist in a new, less metaphysical, direction. If we take seriously Building’s assertion that “Jesus was a devout Jew,” then what would that belief mean for how we view eucharistic communion? If communion in the body of Christ (ecclesially and personally) is communion in a person, then to suggest that Christians are members together of a particular body, the body of Christ—a Jewish body—might raise provocative questions for how the church relates to Jews and Judaism today. And once that step has been taken,
the church will be compelled to consider in utmost repentance its actions toward Jews in the past.

Conclusion

We do not need services that are somehow "more Jewish," which appropriate another religion's practices. What the church needs is an ecclesiology that can replace the supersessionism that stands at the heart of so much Christian theology and practice. Until such an ecclesiology is in place, I fear that lasting change in the church's practices will be difficult, if not impossible. Building New Bridges in Hope and other church statements like it give the church a foundation for constructing this kind of new ecclesiology. The only question is, will the church have the courage to embrace it?

Notes

1. Space prevents a discussion of the confusion in Building between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Clearing up this confusion is important. For, ironically, while United Methodists reject classical theological and liturgical traditions bearing anti-Judaism, many of them have no difficulty singing the popular hymn "Lord of the Dance," which claims with regard to "the holy people" that "they whipped and they stripped and they hung me high / and they left me there on a cross to die."

2. Shoah is a Hebrew word which means "desolation." Many Jewish scholars prefer this term to the more common designation "Holocaust," arguing that the latter word has lost much of its significance due to overuse.


7. Note that the title of the baptismal services in The United Methodist Hymnal and The United Methodist Book of Worship is "Services of the Baptismal Covenant."


10. See Bradshaw, 141-2.
I begin with deep gratitude to editor Hendrik Pieterse and to professors Webb, Lodahl, and White for their invitation to participate in this conversation on Jewish-Christian relations. I applaud these papers on their sensitivity to the problems of ecclesial anti-Judaism, even as I have concerns with several of their premises and suggestions; it is these concerns that I shall highlight. Perhaps then Pieterse’s invitation to me may be extended by the journal’s readers to their Jewish neighbors, especially since I do not and indeed cannot speak for all Jews. Each article offers valuable points for discussion, and through extending that discussion Jews and Christians may come to know one another better and come to appreciate their differences as well as their similarities.

Webb: From “Old Testament” to “Hebrew Bible”

Webb points to a paradigm shift: the term Old Testament has in some settings become anathema—a designation smacking of supersessionism, elitism, and even Marcionism. For me this presents the following problem: I believe that, at least for Christian seminaries and churches, the term Old Testament is not only appropriate but also

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desirable. I further contend that terms like Hebrew Bible and Jewish Scriptures serve ultimately either to erase Judaism (since “Jews” are not “Hebrews” and the synagogue reads not the “Hebrew Bible” but the Tanakh [Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim]) or to deny Christians part of their own canon. Nor do I find the term Christian Testament helpful: it suggests that the “Hebrew Bible” is not part of “Christian” Scripture. Moreover, for Orthodox communions, the “Old Testament” is the Greek, not the Hebrew (cf. the irony of essays that speak of Paul’s interpretation of the “Hebrew” Bible). The so-called “neutral” term is actually one of Protestant hegemony.

As Webb notes, the canon of the church is not the same thing as the canon of the synagogue: the books are in different orders, with different conclusions (the “Old Testament,” ending with Malachi, points forward to the New; the Tanakh, ending with Second Chronicles, calls Jews home) and with different interpretive lenses (christological and rabbinic). Thus no one—at least in churches or in synagogues—is reading some neutral “Hebrew Bible.” Nor should we seek to connect the “First Testament” (is the “Book of Mormon” the “third”?) with “Judaism as a valid religion”: as White correctly observes, “Judaism cannot be identified with what is commonly called ‘Old Testament religion.’”

Given such distinctions, I find myself also disagreeing with Webb’s call for a “refusal to interpret Hebrew texts through christological eyes.” Rather than strip the Old Testament of christological proclamation, why not reorient that proclamation? Christological interpretation need not lead to the message that the “Old Testament” has passed away. History, psalms, prophecy, and so forth can all be appreciated through christological lenses even as they can reground those lenses to see different, nonsupersessionist interpretations. The church preserved the Old Testament neither because it is a “religious classic” (a banal argument) nor because it contains “vibrant myths” (as opposed to what? divine truths? Surely it teaches both the “human condition” and about “G-d.”), and not even because it is a story of “a people hammering out an identity.” The church preserved the Old Testament because it establishes the terms by which the New Testament can be—must be—understood.

I find equally problematic Webb’s comments on “the original appropriation of the Jewish Scriptures by Christians.” Those Christians did what the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Talmudic rabbis did: they interpreted texts in light of their current
experiences. To insist that this literature “to be understood correctly . . . must be read through their [i.e., ancient Israel’s] eyes, from their point of view” undermines the validity of church and synagogue even as it requires a historical insight we cannot access (neither contemporary Jews nor Christians are ancient Israelites).

Regarding Webb’s conventional comments on “rabbis from the Pharisaic tradition,” the development of the Yavnian canon, the idea that T’shuvah (“repentance,” literally, “return”) is a post-70 C.E. innovation, that a benediction formulated ca. 85 C.E. cursed “Christians,” and so on—the fact is, history is much more complex. While Webb celebrates Christian seminaries hiring Jews to teach their own Scripture, perhaps what is more needful is the hiring of Jews to teach Christian origins, or at least a required course on Second Temple and early post-70 C.E. Judaism!

While it is true that the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E., I doubt that most Jews felt that they had “lost the Divine Presence.” For most Jews the divine presence was accessed in worship, study, and practice of Mitzvot (commandments/good deeds). Nor did they lose “their most fundamental means for the atonement of sin”: atonement most fundamentally was made by T’shuvah. Although the notion was developed in rabbinic thought, the groundwork was secured much earlier (cf. Amos 4:6-11). Only with a concept of T’shuvah, for example, can one understand either the preaching of the Baptist or Jesus’ “Repent and believe in the gospel.”

As for the “benediction against heretics,” later versions alone include the term Notzrim—best translated “Nazarenes” and most likely referring to the “Jewish Christians” also condemned by Jerome. For Jews in Israel ca. 85 C.E., Christians were not a major problem, and “heresy” came in various forms. Webb proposes that this benediction prompted Christians to argue that the debacle of 70 C.E. was a divine punishment. A hypothetical reference to Christians in a prayer whose own recitation is made problematic by the sources that mention it (for example, the prayer’s composer, when asked to lead it, cannot remember the words) prompts anti-Judaism? More likely explanations, and those which do not require blaming the Jewish victim, include the refusal of the majority of Jews to accept the Christian proclamation; Christian self-definition as the true heir of the promises to Abraham; the pressure placed on both church and synagogue by Rome, and so forth.

Webb’s survey of patristic sources is correct but unnecessary. It is
not with Justin that Jews are first branded as "Christ-killers" but with 1 Thessalonians 2; the point is echoed by the Johannine passion. Galatians describes the Law as a pedagogue, given by angels and the intermediary Moses rather than as a direct gift from G-d. Hebrews delineates the superiority of Christ to Abraham, the priesthood, and Jewish sacrifice. The problem is the canon, as Webb recognizes by his statement that "much of the New Testament contains anti-Judaic language, innuendo, and narrative."

I appreciate Webb's practical suggestions on eradicating anti-Judaism from the pulpit, although I am less convinced by his move to Nag Hammadi. First, not all scholars agree that Thomas predates 70 C.E. Second, even if the parable is redacted, the church is based not on reconstructions of the "historical Jesus" but on the New Testament texts. Third, and most disturbing, it is Webb, not Matthew, who concludes that Matthew's tenants (21:33-46) are "Jews." The anti-Jewish reading is not necessary, and Matthew's Gospel itself offers a call for social justice. The parable is addressed to the "chief priests and elders" (21:23) and interpreted by "the chief priests and Pharisees" (21:45), not "the Jews." The problem is evil leaders, and the "deserving nation" is, for Matthew, not those who say "Lord, Lord" but those who act righteously (7:21-23; 22:37-40; 25:31-46).

How best, then, might pastors avoid anti-Judaism? Christians may well preach their christologically interpreted Old Testament, and if a pastor wishes to use a reading from the Old Testament to help interpret one from the New (intertextuality works in both directions), so much the better. New Testament passages need not be interpreted in an anti-Jewish manner. As for a potentially more practical point, let me share with you what I share with my own classes. My nine-year-old son, Alexander, attends Nashville's Orthodox Jewish day school. When I teach the Divinity School's New Testament survey, I bring this child, in kippah and tzitziot, to the lecture; and I tell my students, "When you speak about Jews, picture this boy. Do not say anything that will hurt him or will cause others to hurt him." It's theatrical, it's manipulative... and it's more effective than any exegetical or homiletical tool.

Lodahl: "Arguing 'According to the Scriptures'"

I am struck by Lodahl's opening paragraph: there he was, sitting in a pew while a preacher rattled on about "stubborn Jews" who had
“missed the point” and whose religion was not one of revelation but of solipsism. I was not struck by the oddity of the homily—I’ve heard such sermons myself. Nor do I think that the preacher intended “slander,” which is not intended by most who speak of “stubborn Jews”—or for that matter by most who refer to “dumb blondes,” “cheap Scots,” “lazy Mexicans,” and so forth. Intention is not, however, the issue; response is. Does one tolerate anti-Jewish stereotypes because the “intention” was harmless? To further Jewish-Christian relations, the first step may be simply that: take a step. Refuse to sit when invectives against Jews spew from the pulpit. We can write all we want in academic journals about the dangers of anti-Judaism, but not one word will matter if we do not stop it where it really counts: in sermons from pastors in churches. Stand up, silently, and protest. At the very least, speak to the pastor and write a note to the church bulletin.

Turning to the substance of the article: Lodahl is surely correct that Paul does not have gentile Christianity “replace Israel.” Indeed, Rom. 11:26 notes, as Lodahl points out, “all Israel will be saved.” For improving interfaith relationships, however, this is not helpful language. Christians in the pew think of themselves also as Israel: new Israel, true Israel. And Paul may do the same, since here his language changes from “Jews” to “Israel.” Would Paul conclude that “all Jews will be saved?” This is less sure.

More problematic is this: Jews who do not accept the Christian proclamation are, according to Paul, temporarily “lopped off” and therefore “enemies” (11:28). True, Jews retain glory, worship, law, and covenants. True, they are not (ultimately) “replaced.” But for Paul nothing they possess is comparable to accepting the Christian message. Nor is it encouraging to be told that we Jews “are loved for the sake of [our] fathers” (11:28). The statement redounds, at least in contemporary ears, of racism: there is nothing worthy in Jews or Judaism per se—they were just lucky enough to have ancestors who had a contract with G-d. Worse yet: to be seen as lopped off—especially since the pruning has now lasted two millennia—is not good news. And although Paul does not explicitly note that the redemption of his fellow Jews comes from their eventual acceptance of the Christ, not only is this implicit in his theology it is also a sine qua non of much of the rest of the New Testament. Romans 9–11 may be considered progressive on the topic of Jewish-Christian dialogue, but only when compared to documents such as Galatians and Hebrews.
Regarding Lodahl's thesis that the stone of stumbling (Rom. 9:32) is not the Christ but the Torah: this is plausible, but how is it ultimately helpful for interfaith relations? Has Lodahl recovered another variant on the "works-righteousness" theme: the Jews are in "pursuit of righteousness," but they don't understand their own Torah? Christians may choose to listen to the rabbinic interpretation, but it is Paul's reading that remains proper for the church.

Finally, on the church as the "servant" to the Jews: although this too is a legitimate reading, it is not one I would proclaim. Legitimacy is not the same thing as necessity. I do not want Christians approaching Jews (or at least this Jew) in terms of "humility and servanthood"; I do not seek abjection. Rather, I, and I suspect most "Jewish rabbin" (a common tautology), want safety and hope for respect—the only terms by which Jews and Christians can exist in shalom.

White: United Methodist Worship and Practice

White's observation on "Lord of the Dance" is truer than he may realize (see White, endnote 1). A few years ago I led a ten-week study session for high-school students at my synagogue on "Jewish-Christian relations." We concluded with a Sunday visit to the nearest church. The associate minister had arranged seating for us, gave us a tour of the altar, and explained the order of service. My students found beauty in the liturgy, marveled at Communion, and marveled even more at the collection. ("They bring money to church on their Sabbath!" one said, astounded.) Everything was fine until the last hymn, "Lord of the Dance."

The following morning, I received a call from the same associate pastor: "Had the music minister known you were coming, we never would have sung that hymn." "So it's okay to excoriate Jews as long as no Jew is listening?" I responded. "That's not what I meant," he insisted. "What then did you mean?" I asked.

White sensitively notes both the intellectual problem of the notion of covenant and the pastoral problem of Christian witness to Jews. Religion is a messy business, and biblical authors are not systematic theologians. While churches emphasize covenantal grants to individuals (Noah, Abraham, David, and through Abraham's "offspring"—so Gal. 3:16—Jesus), synagogues highlight the Mosaic corporate model. And church and synagogue have their own interpretations of
how those covenants function. Given these differences in emphasis and interpretation, any sort of harmonization may not only be impossible it may also be unwarranted.

Matt. 28:19 should, I believe, read: “make disciples of all the gentiles.” But the Great Commission is the continuation of Matthew’s mission discourse, with its command to “go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6). The mission to the Jews is never abrogated, and so the Christian should witness to the Jew. The issue is not one of should but of how. Both Christians and Jews can agree that the premise of the Christian claim is that it is superior to others: the Jew need not agree with the premise in order to understand it. Judaism and Christianity are, as White avers, different religions; and in some cases they will necessarily disagree. Christians should witness, however, not by insisting that Jews are lost but through the demonstration of their own works of sanctification. Grace in and through Christ need not be proclaimed with anti-Jewish accompaniment.

How then to remove anti-Jewish language and praxis from a system which sees itself as the fulfillment of the promises to Israel? First, amen to White’s discomfort with churches who celebrate Seders! It is not clear that Jesus’ Last Supper was a Passover meal, and today’s Seder is a post-70 C.E. development. Moreover, for the Christian to celebrate a Seder is theologically indefensible. For the church, Eucharist replaces the Seder, and Jesus—not the remembrance of the Paschal offering—is the sacrifice.

Regarding White’s other suggestions, I have some qualms. For example, I’m not comfortable with the emphasis on “the body of Christ” as a Jewish body through which in Baptism and Eucharist Christians “find their relationship to Jews and Judaism.” First, the institution of both sacraments developed prior to the foundation of what is currently Judaism. Second, it’s enough that Christians be the body of Christ; they do not need to be part of Jews or Judaism. Third, given that The United Methodist Book of Worship premises its baptismal covenant upon Gal. 3:27-28—in which there “is no longer Jew or Greek”—it seems odd to stress Jesus’ Jewish particularity. Fourth, if one emphasizes the Jewish particularity of the body of Christ, then one should also stress its male particularity, and this may cause even more problems.

Nor am I convinced that additional readings from the Tanakh in worship will do much for Jewish-Christian relations, especially since, as White notes, Judaism is not these Scriptures. It may be better to
have fewer texts and longer expositions. Rather than employ
typology, pastors may use the earlier material as checks against the
latter’s supersessionist tendencies.

Before churches can think of being proactive in bridge building,
they might first raze those structures that continue to prop up anti-
Judaism. When this is done, although I’ll not join you in Baptism or
Eucharist, I’ll be happy to dance beside you, and perhaps G-d will
dance with us.
Eucharist as Promissorial Act: A Roman Catholic/Protestant Reconciliation?

Ironically, nothing has divided the Christian church more than efforts to understand the Eucharist. I am a Trappist monk, recently ordained a Roman Catholic priest, who attempted unsuccessfully to retain my longstanding ordination in The United Methodist Church. At the heart of my pilgrimage has been an attempt so to understand the Eucharist ecumenically that it would be possible to take a theological step forward in bridging our painful differences. The most viable possibility that I have found appears in the work of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the beloved twelfth-century theologian of the Trappist Order who was a favorite of such Protestant figures as Luther, Calvin, and Wesley.

Sacraments, Promise, and Trust

Key is Bernard’s belief that the sacraments cause grace on the basis of an ascribed rather than an inherent power. That is, sacraments are mysteries that bestow a hidden benefit by using ordinary things in designated ceremonies according to which God has promised to attach a unique significance. Rooted covenantally, God promises special
significance through special use in particular acts. This understanding rests upon Bernard’s conception of God, one that he shared with the Reformers. God is so active and freely unrestricted that the divine mystery is edged with unpredictability. Thus God is truly knowable only in terms of God’s promises—revealed as gifts, calling us to trust that God is trustworthy. Put distinctly, sacraments are covenantal acts whose grace is made available through God’s promise that it will be so. The value of these visible signs, then, is neither intrinsic to the elements nor subjective to the believer; it is inseparably both. The objective value is resident within an ongoing divine promise, subjectively appropriated by faith as trust in God’s trustworthiness.

This understanding of the Eucharist provides a creative point of contact with such Protestant Reformers as Luther and Calvin, whereby the Catholic intent can be affirmed while guarding against the potential misuses evident in the sixteenth century. The medieval term transubstantiation made these Protestant Reformers uneasy, but not because they questioned the Eucharist as “Real Presence.” Rather, their apprehensiveness was twofold. First, transubstantiation, by interpreting the eucharistic elements as having an intrinsic power, invited their misuse as means for effecting results never intended for the sacrament. Second, by emphasizing priestly power transubstantiation tended to shift focus from God’s free, gracious, and undeserved gift to a human act capable of laying claim to divine favors.

Thus the Reformers found the nominalist philosophy of their time helpful—entailing a shift from the Aristotelian emphasis on substantia (intrinsic nature) to voluntas (effecting will). For both Bernard and the Reformers, will as intent is primary. God is best understood in terms of intentional promise, with faith being our willed intent (obedience) to trust the divine promises.1 This approach is so important that Bernard called intention the “bone of the soul.”2 Luther could well have used Bernard’s own words for circumscribing the meaning of a sacrament—as “applicable only when their signs or symbols are used properly in a particular ceremony.”3

This promissorial emphasis that is characteristic of the major Reformers is rooted in their passion for spiritual renewal. Spirituality for them means reclaiming faith not so much as belief (that is, intellectus or assensus) but as a promissorial relationship with God rooted in faith as trust (that is, as fiducia). Essentially, then, Christian life is promise based on Promise. This emphasis accounts for the shift in Luther’s hermeneutic from allegory to event.4 And event, in turn,
characterizes the renewal insisted upon by both Bernard and the Protestant Reformers. This common emphasis is threefold. First, they share a deep respect for experience, resisting the tendency to substitute theory or ideas for it. Thus one of Bernard’s central missions was to teach “his readers how to leap . . . from what they knew to what they lived.” Second, they stress the graciousness of God. Even “human merits,” Bernard insists, “are God’s gifts.” Third, they stress the spirit rather than the letter of the law. Consequently, Bernard is able to handle the issue of a wrong command by an abbot this way: “Thus runs the formula of profession: ‘I promise,’ not the Rule, but, ‘obedience according to the Rule of St. Benedict.’” According to the Rule, “and therefore not according to the will of the superior . . . I can be obliged to perform only that which I have promised.”

After Bernard’s death there was a shift in emphasis from clarity about the “what” of the Eucharist to a preoccupation with understanding the “how” of Real Presence. As a result, disagreement grew. William Courtenay brings some order to this diversity by identifying three major positions: 1. The physical-dispositive theory (William of Auxerre, Alexander of Hales, Albert the Great); 2. The physical-instrumental theory (Stephen Langton, Hugh of St. Cler); 3. The covenantal or promissorial theory (Bernard, Bonaventure). In time, all three of these positions were regarded as viable interpretations of Real Presence.

The third of these possibilities, while acceptable, tended to be neglected. Yet because it is an interpretation shared by Luther, Calvin, and Bernard it has promise in effecting a reconciliation between Roman Catholic and Protestant understandings of the Eucharist. Likewise, it can make clear that the major Reformers had no intention of being eucharistically heretical. On the contrary, they were continuing a faithful tradition which long antedated the Reformation.

This tradition, reaffirmed as a corrective by the Reformers, is rooted in Paul’s concept of “the children of promise” and amplified by Augustine’s insistence on the Word as divine promise (Rom. 9:8). The Reformers and Bernard alike understood faith as rooted not in knowledge of who God is but in the disclosure of God’s promised intentions for us and for the whole of creation. By emphasizing God’s will rather than God’s being, revelation becomes essential. God is truly known only when God discloses God’s promises. This renders faith profoundly personal—as trusting with one’s whole life that the God who makes promises keeps them—in the concrete particularities of space and time. Rooting Eucharist as central within
these divine promises, Luther is able to recognize Real Presence within both preaching and Eucharist. The two are rendered interdependent, much as "promise declared" relates to "promise kept."

This understanding of the Eucharist is best called "promissorial"—to be placed alongside other contemporary efforts to grasp the root meaning of "transubstantiation" in alternative ways. Most of these efforts, however, such as "transignification," tend to render the sacraments too subjective, interpreting the functions of sacraments more as evocative than causative. The promissorial view, on the other hand, combines the subjective (as trust) with the objective (as divine promise performed). The Eucharistic Prayer is in reality an anamnesis of promise—acting forth Jesus' promise that whenever the eucharistic act is carried out, Communion becomes an epiclesis of Spirit. As a result, the Eucharist becomes an event of ongoing incarnation. The being of God is born anew within the trusting recipients of promise.

Moving toward Unity: From How to That

What we are proposing is that ecumenism is best served by quarreling no longer over the how of the eucharistic event. Unity is best served by a renewed and persistent insistence upon the that of the eucharistic event—as Real Presence. When the host is raised before the eyes of the communicant, the celebrant's words as affirmation are objective: "The body of Christ!") But as heard by the believer, they are subjective as question: "The body of Christ?"
The proper response of "Amen" ("So be it") consummates the promissorial transaction through trust. So understood, Eucharist becomes that primordial event in which God's incarnated promise disclosed as Jesus Christ becomes ongoing as Real Presence now in the breaking of bread. "[T]he bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51).

Thus, the objective dimension characterizing the Roman Catholic tradition can join forces with Luther's so-called "subjective" witness. Luther insists that while we do not know how it is so, we must believe Jesus' covenant promise that it is so—for Jesus declared, "This is my body." One can thus say of Bernard what has been said of Luther: the eucharistic understanding is a total way of life—an incarnational sacramental piety. The center of Luther's eucharistic theology is likewise central for Bernard: "I do not know of any God except Him who was made flesh, nor do I want to have another." This emphasis shows why both Bernard and Luther have such a
strong attachment to Christmas—as the event of incarnated promise. Luther’s stress on the experience of grace as gift and on the Spirit as act undercuts attempts at eucharistic speculation. Rather, he joined Real Presence with divine action through a flood of prepositions: “Christ is mysteriously joined with the bread and wine by his Word in order to feed us with his very body broken and blood spilled on the cross for our forgiveness and reconciliation with God.” Similarly, for Bernard, sacraments are “visible signs that call forth the gift of grace on the basis of a value attributed to them by God.” For both theologians, faith rests not on philosophical conclusions or even on understandings but on trust—which is itself a divine gift. The eucharistic declaration “This is my body” is true because Christ himself promised that it would be so. Faith means confessing that the Christ who promised is now in fact present “under the bread, with the bread, in the bread,” and thus “truly and essentially present.” Rooted in the Word of God, trust renders the Eucharist “an enacted reaffirmation of trust in God’s promises.” However one may choose to express this, Luther’s lifelong insistence is that in experiencing the Eucharist “one has immediate fellowship with Jesus Christ... with the Lord himself.”

Setting aside the harsh, defensive language of both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, one can hear an intent which characterizes both. The Protestant proclamation of “Christ for us” and the Catholic experience of “Christ in us” imply each other. For Calvin “preaching is the audible form of the Word, the eucharist is the visible form.” Regrettably, after Luther Protestant orthodoxy came to stress almost exclusively what Christ does for us, forcing the Protestant Pietists to an extreme emphasis on Christ’s work in us. In contrast, Bernard keeps the two dimensions in a healthy balance, befitting the intention of the Protestant Reformation at its best.

Linking “promise” and “fact” in this way, we can gain a more kindly perspective on the Council of Trent. The underlying intent was not to declare heretical all eucharistic views except transubstantiation. Their insistence on transubstantiation was their way of preserving the centrality of Real Presence against perceived dilutions. Once we can agree upon the Trentine insistence on Real Presence as the eucharistic sine qua non, then Vatican II can be recognized as reopening the alternative traditions for expressing Real Presence that antedate the Reformation. By linking the intentions of the Protestant Reformation with the options encouraged by Vatican II, the promissorial view of the Eucharist can emerge as a basis for ecumenical agreement.
Calvin's eucharistic liturgy expresses well this possible agreement:

Let us believe those promises which Jesus Christ, who is the unfailing truth, has spoken with His own lips. He is truly willing to make us partakers of His body and blood, in order that we may possess Him wholly and in such wise that He may live in us and we in Him.¹⁵

So understood, even as conservative a defender of Roman Catholicism as the novelist François Mauriac can make common cause. The Eucharist, he insists, rests on "a promise made at a definite time in history, in a certain place in the world."¹⁶

Since the undergirding side of Eucharist is christology, this promissorial understanding of the Eucharist helps to restore the New Testament eschatological tension between "now" and "not yet." The eucharistic Christ must parallel the Christ of history. This historical Christ, in turn, by fulfilling God's promise to Israel, becomes a foretaste of the Christ who promised yet to come. Correlatively, the Promised Presence in the eucharistic event is an action of both "here" and "yet to be." This is why Real Presence for Bernard is best understood as doubly promissory—as "invitation, a foretaste, a transitory table at which one dare not linger." People eat and drink to their judgment who "consider these gifts the feast rather than the invitation," for the Eucharist is "preliminary, partial, anticipatory."¹⁷ Since this understanding by Bernard and the Reformers rests not in philosophical subtlety but in concrete experience, their final witness remains paradoxical. "[T]he union with God in the sacrament, while real and substantial enough, is incomplete." We know him eucharistically as "he wills to be known," which, as Jesus the God-man, "is both a promise of things to come and complete in itself."¹⁸ As fallen creatures, we eat this bread "in the sweat of our face," so that the more real the eucharistic presence the more profound our longing for "the joy of beatitude and eternal sweetness."

Luther's insistence on the provisional nature of all things human and the promissorial nature of our redemption makes common contact with Bernard and the Cistercians in general:

The Cistercians agree... that the Christian must wait in darkness, loneliness, and hunger for that day when he will come to "the sight, the knowledge and the love of the Creator," when "that
lovable face, so longed for, upon which the angels yearn to gaze, will be seen.”

God’s incarnation as the Christ was with the same body that feeds us eucharistically now. And this Real Presence, ingested in our present bodies, awakens in us the promised culmination as the “spiritual marriage” fit for our resurrected bodies.

Luther’s methodology parallels that of the Cistercians: “faith reformed through experience.” It is no surprise, then, that Luther said of Bernard, “I regard him as the most pious of all the monks and prefer him to all the others.” Likewise, it is no surprise that Calvin found Bernard to be “a theological soul brother.”

**Real Presence: Real Hope for Reconciliation?**

The ecumenical hope we are proposing rests on the insistence that Real Presence is the eucharistic *what*, rendering any *how* as secondary. Such a freeing opens us to a rich diversity of viable *hows*. This is Bernard’s own vision:

Therefore let us all work together to form a single robe, and let this robe include us all. . . . Why wonder at this variety during the time of exile, while the Church is on pilgrimage? Why wonder that its unity is also plurality? . . . Let them [us all] be sure that by following the path they are on, they will eventually arrive at one of the dwelling places, and so will not be left outside the Father’s house.

Central for the ecumenical church must be that which is as steadfastly clear to Luther as it is to Bernard—the “what” as Real Presence. Then we can rest more tolerantly with the diversity of “hows.” Going to the Marburg Colloquy in an effort to achieve doctrinal unity, Luther listened patiently to the varied understandings of “how.” Then, lest he be led astray from the “that,” which is what truly mattered, he wrote with large letters in chalk on his desk the promise on which all else depends: *Hoc est corpus meum.*

**Notes**


8. Courtenay, 118.


10. Ibid., 23, emphasis added.

11. Courtenay, 117.


18. Ibid., 22, 26.

19. Ibid., 28.


I need to be clear: I am not part of the loyal opposition that would protest The United Methodist Church's stated position on homosexuality. I do not think the United Methodist position can be opposed, because I think the church is simply too confused on the issue to be able to mount a clear counter position. I write this article only because I am a United Methodist and I feel duty bound to say why we United Methodists cannot even get up a good argument about homosexuality.

Homosexuality and Christian Discourse

No process more clearly exemplifies our confusion about homosexuality than the deliberations of the Committee to Study Homosexuality established by the General Conference and directed by the General Council on Ministries. I was a member of the Committee, but I resigned about halfway through our deliberations. There were many reasons for my resignation, but at least one of them was my frustration that no argument was possible in the Committee because no one could agree on the appropriate framework for argument. The only

authority that was acknowledged was something called "science"; and since science is inconclusive about whether homosexuality is or is not "innate," no general position was possible.

Early in our deliberations I observed that it was unclear exactly why the church had a stake in the description homosexuality. Under the influence of both Wittgenstein and Foucault I hoped to remind my fellow Committee members that descriptions do not come "given" but rather are determined by practices that require articulation in whole ways of life. I thought that if we could talk about those practices, we might then discover what was at stake in arguments about same-sex sexual relations.

So I suggested that rather than begin by talking about homosexuality, we should begin by considering a description used by Christians that at least suggests we know what we are talking about; that is, promiscuity. I focused on promiscuity because I thought any account of promiscuity required a display of the commitment of the church to singleness and marriage as practices that shape how we are called to live as Christians. By focusing on promiscuity we may avoid the unhappy assumption that there is something in general called "sexuality" that is just "there" but must find expression in one way or another. I assumed that just as promiscuity is a description produced by the church's practices, sexuality is a description produced by the practices of modernity that separates something called "the individual" from any thick communal practices. I reasoned that by focusing on promiscuity we may be able to rediscover and reclaim Christian discourse from the cultural formations that were misleading us.

Needless to say, my strategy got no support from my fellow Committee members. I suspect the "liberals" thought this might be a very clever way to bring through the back door a condemnation of gays. I suspect the "conservatives" assumed that we so clearly know what promiscuity is and why it is wrong that there is no reason to discuss such a matter. As a result, the Committee's attention remained fixed on the question of whether homosexuality is a good or a bad thing. My worries concerning the practices that may make such a question intelligible were not the worries of my colleagues. I had the feeling that Committee members already had their minds made up before we began our deliberations. The only question that remained was whether you were for or against. Since I was neither, I had no place on the Committee.
Homosexuality, Marriage, and Divorce

In truth, I think The United Methodist Church, as well as most mainstream Protestant churches in the United States, does not know how to think about homosexuality. They do not know how to think about homosexuality because they do not know how to think about marriage and divorce. The churches have generally underwritten romantic accounts of marriage; that is, you fall in love and get married so that sex is an expression of your love. Such accounts not only destroy any understanding of marriage as lifelong monogamous fidelity; they also make unintelligible the prohibition against same-sex relations. After all, the latter are often exemplifications of a loving relation.

For example, I think it would be quite interesting to ask those in United Methodism who oppose homosexuality what their views are on divorce and remarriage. Do they think that a marriage is no longer a marriage simply because the people in the marriage no longer love each other? Do they think people who have been divorced can remarry after they have found someone else to love? How should people be examined to discern whether they are capable of making the promises we still ask people to make when the church witnesses their marriage? Should people who have been divorced bear a greater burden of proof if they wish to be remarried?

Let the United Methodist people, if they are determined to take a position on homosexuality, first discuss the above questions. I think if we did so, we would discover skills of discrimination and discernment that may reveal why questions about whether we are for or against homosexuality are simplistic. In particular, I think we may discover that love is far too vague a term to work in helping us to discover the disciplines necessary to sustain a marriage, particularly in our cultural context. We may even discover that Christians do not believe that love legitimates sex or even that sex is an expression of love; rather, we believe that marriage names that practice among Christians wherein the telos of sex finds material embodiment.

One of those purposes of marriage that the church has named is the having of children. That marriage has a procreative end does not entail that every marriage must in fact produce biological heirs, but it does mean that marriage as an institution of the church is procreative. Accordingly, it would be appropriate as part of the examination of couples desiring to have the church witness their marriages to have
their intentions to have children declared. I would think it quite possible to deny marriage to people who refuse to have their marriages open to children. Again if United Methodists would discuss such a claim, I think the debate about homosexuality would appear quite different.

I am aware that such suggestions appear "conservative" for many people who are supporters of the rights of gays. But that is not necessarily the case. For example, if the church had some understanding of when exceptions can be made for marriages that will not or cannot be biologically procreative, we may have the basis for an analogous understanding of some gay relations. Indeed, such discussions may help us better understand in what manner all parenting is a form of adoption and how even "childless marriages" in the Christian community must provide space for children. In the absence of such practices, we are simply left with claims and counterclaims about what is and is not loving and/or scriptural.

Sexuality, the Church, and Capitalism

If the above suggestions represent an "opposition," they do so only as an alternative to the incoherence in the way this matter is being debated by both sides in The United Methodist Church. Indeed, my deepest problem with the current debate among United Methodists is that we become one another's enemies and as a result fail to notice who the enemy is—that is, capitalism. We fail to see that the debate about "sexual identities" but reflects the construction of our bodies by economic forces that make us willing consumers capable of producing nothing.

For example, Nicholas Boyle observes in his extraordinary book *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney* that he doubts that the gay movement will furnish any deep insights into our modern problems of identity. He credits the gay movement with helping us to abandon the Puritan pretense that social affections can be anything other than erotic in origin and with reminding us that much of any human being's affective life has a homoerotic character. Yet he notes that identity is not a matter of our own affective preferences but of the necessities, constructed by choices of others, that build and transform global systems.
He continues:

Sexual preference, once detached from the process of bodily reproduction, loses touch with the necessities and enters the realm of play—it becomes part of the entertainment industry, a choice to be catered for, but not a constraint on producers. Indeed, worldwide consumerism makes use of homosexuality as a means of eliminating the political constraints which regulate our role as producers: if marriage is redefined as a long-term affective partnership, so that it may be either homosexual or heterosexual, the essentially reproductive nature of male and female bodies is no longer given institutional (and therefore political) expression. Bodies are seen as the locus only of consumption, not of production; production is thereby repressed further into our collective unconscious; and producers, particularly women, are deprived of the political means of protest against exploitation. (It becomes more difficult to maintain, for example, that certain working practices are destructive of the family, for "having" a family is treated as the "choice" of a particular mode of consumption.)

Capitalism thrives on short-term commitments. The ceaseless drive for innovation is but the way to undercut labor's power by making the skills of the past irrelevant for tomorrow. Indeed, capitalism is the ultimate form of deconstruction, because how better to keep labor under control than through the scarcity produced through innovation? All the better that human relationships be ephemeral, because lasting commitments prove to be inefficient in ever-expanding markets. Against such a background the church's commitment to maintain marriage as lifelong, monogamous fidelity may well prove to be one of the most powerful tactics we have to resist capitalism.

Again I am aware that these remarks may appear to underwrite the "conservative" side of the debate about homosexuality. That may be the case, except that the conservative side often wants to have marriage and capitalism, too. I am suggesting that you cannot have them both. At least you cannot have marriage as lifelong, monogamous fidelity in which children are desired and capitalism, too. Of course, conservatives say they want the former; but in fact they live and expect the church to practice the kind of romantic conception of marriage I indicated above.
Conclusion

I do not pretend that what I have said here will please those who want the church to acknowledge gay relationships as marriage. I confess my own bewilderment about what can or should be said as a policy.

In the meantime I know my life and my church’s life are enriched by members of the church who tell me they are gay. I care deeply that their lives may find the support from the church they need and I need. I am not sure if that makes me pro- or anti-homosexual. I hope it just makes me loyal to the church that has produced us both.

Notes

1. I do not intend in this article to explore the scriptural issue. Suffice it to say that while there is no question that some scriptural passages condemn something like same-sex relations, I am not convinced that the church’s position on these matters can turn on those passages. I am also sure that attempts to historicize those passages in the interest of liberalization are mistaken. Rather, I assume that obscure passages of Scripture should be interpreted in the light of the less obscure. That is why I assume the debate must be framed by the practices of singleness and marriage, because they are the practices that clearly are shaped by the scriptural witness and thus can better help us read Scripture.


3. Ibid., 59.
Searching for the Real Problem: A Response to Hauerwas

When church leaders find themselves embroiled in a divisive theological or ethical dispute, two conditions are usually present. First, adversaries on both sides of the debate are fully convinced of the soundness of their own views, and, correspondingly, that options contrary to their own are seriously flawed. Second, the bases for disagreement rest upon fundamental matters of faith; for example, conflicting views of how biblical texts are to be read as sources of Christian teaching. Current disputes within United Methodism over the moral status of homosexuality clearly fit these conditions, leaving few prospects for early resolution. The most we can hope for are practical compromises that will enable us to remain united as we continue our struggle for moral consensus.

While serving as a member of the United Methodist Committee to Study Homosexuality, Stanley Hauerwas attempted to recast discussions of "same-sex relations" by placing them within a larger framework of understanding, one determined by church practices that bear upon whole ways of life. His intent was to open up fresh lines of inquiry that might reinvigorate what had become a fruitless exercise. He resigned from the Committee when he sensed its resistance to his efforts. Many United Methodists share Hauerwas's unwillingness to take a definitive stand on the current debate. I believe we are obliged, therefore, to consider his proposals carefully.

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Is Promiscuity the Problem?

Hauerwas initially suggested that we treat promiscuity as the central issue. This idea does open up possibilities for an interim solution. In his thoughtful work *Sex for Christians,* Lewis Smedes develops views that are congenial to the official United Methodist position on homosexuality; namely, sexual acts between persons of the same gender are incompatible with Christian teaching. At the same time, he reminds us that the church is summoned to offer promises of divine healing to all people, though without awakening expectations of instant transformation. Persons who claim a homosexual identity, Smedes believes, are finally embraced within God’s all-encompassing love. He recommends that we initially encourage them to consider the celibacy option, at least while they probe possibilities for a change in sexual orientation. If neither celibacy nor a change in sexual orientation proves manageable, Smedes then calls for an “optimal homosexual morality,” one that approximates yet falls short of the divine will. This morality would mandate monogamous, lifelong commitments between homosexual partners, accompanied by efforts to eliminate all practices that might bear special enticements to sexual misconduct. Smedes’s idea builds upon Paul’s advice to the Corinthians, “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (1 Cor. 7:8-9; see also vv. 25-40). None of us measures up to God’s holy will; it is only by God’s grace that we are saved. Recognizing human frailties, the church’s disciplinary procedures frequently make use of “optimal” rather than “ideal” standards for church order.

Smedes states further that the church should honor mature relational development in the monogamous commitments of homosexual persons. Such recognition would include calls to leadership in key roles within the churches, perhaps ordination itself. If promiscuity is the problem, then Smedes’s ideas deserve serious consideration, at least as an interim solution. Even if monogamous heterosexual marriage should continue to define the church’s normative standard, the practice of consecrating faithful gay and lesbian partnerships would seem preferable to the presumption that homosexual activity is blatantly promiscuous. As we know well, widely shared social expectations strongly influence actual human behavior.
Procreation as the *Telos* of Sex within Marriage

Hauerwas soon moves to more fundamental issues: the church's practices regarding marriage and divorce. Is a marriage no longer a marriage, he asks, when the "people in the marriage no longer love each other?" The Pharisees asked Jesus whether divorce is legal. Though Jesus acknowledged that the Mosaic law permits divorce, he portrayed such permission as a concession to the "hardness" of human hearts. In effect, any tolerance of divorce amounts at best to an optimal morality; what God wills is lifelong fidelity (Mark 10:9). Jesus declared further that second marriages by divorced persons constitute acts of adultery against the former spouse (Mark 10:11-12). The Gospel of Matthew softens Mark's version: cases of "unchastity" present an exception which allows for divorce and remarriage (Matt. 19:9). Does this latter concession represent an "optimal" qualification of the divine will? Would the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* be more consistent if it stated clearly that divorce and remarriage are themselves incompatible with Christian teaching?

Hauerwas asks whether divorced persons who wish to remarry should bear a greater burden of proof in demonstrating their ability to sustain a lifelong commitment. Such a burden is reasonable. But would it be prudent? Might it imply tacit acceptance of sexual activity apart from marriage? Would it not be better for the divorced to remarry than to be "aflame with passion"? On the other hand, we appear to have quietly accepted a widespread practice among a new generation of young adults who postpone marriage and "live together" as sexually active lovers. The official United Methodist standard for clergy continues to be celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage. Yet where divorce and remarriage are concerned, it would appear that church practices employ optimal rather than divinely revealed standards.

Hauerwas pushes his questioning one step further. What, he asks, is the point of sex, even within marriage? Is it an expression of love? Is it, we might add, a form of bonding, uniting two lovers as one flesh? Hauerwas responds that love is too vague a term to help us discover the disciplines necessary to sustain a marriage. He directs attention to the "procreative end" of marriage—not that every marriage must produce biological heirs, but that marriage as an institution is by nature procreative. Could we say that it would be "against nature" to marry without openness to having children?
Hauerwas asks whether marital vows should be denied couples who are resolved not to have children. Still, such a practice might simply abandon to the "ways of the flesh" those who are already "aflame with passion." Yet if the telos of sex is not about procreation but merely about love, then there is no longer any logical ground for denying to gays and lesbians the church's blessing for faithful and monogamous covenantal commitments. If they love each other, why should they not express that love in sexual acts? Indeed, a homosexual union does not by itself preclude a desire to have children—not just adoptive children, but children who are biological offspring of at least one of the partners. To be sure, children sired or borne by one partner could not embody the "procreative end" of a homosexual relationship. Sexual activity would, therefore, have to have a different telos.

Hauerwas raises the bar on what can be required for consistent Christian sexual practices, assuming homosexual activity is incompatible with Christian teaching. Prohibited are the following: (1) all sexual activity apart from marriage; (2) divorce—except for the "unchastity" of a spouse; (3) remarriage for the divorced, unless divorce stems from a spouse's adultery; (4) marriage for couples not open to having children. To condemn homosexuality without upholding these more stringent standards could be a mark of inconsistency. It may also reflect a deep-seated prejudice against fellow human beings who are gay or lesbian. If we accept compromises on basic marital standards, thereby adopting an optimal sexual morality for a fallen world, should we not also be willing to bless homosexual unions where there is a mutual commitment to monogamy and lifelong fidelity?

What about Capitalism?

The real enemy, Hauerwas asserts, is capitalism. It disposes us to let economic forces "construct" our sexual identities. He quotes Nicolas Boyle's contention that sexual preferences within capitalism enter the "realm of play," becoming part of the "entertainment" industry. There is a measure of truth in Hauerwas's claim. Capitalism is a "turbulent" social force, one that destabilizes established social practices. It tends to individualize us, encouraging us to advance our own interests without regard for others. What counts is what satisfies, and we are always free to walk away from agreements that fail to meet
our expectations. At the least, capitalism presses us to become mobile, rendering family bonds more difficult to sustain. This grim picture holds, of course, only if established social processes prove incapable of constraining economic activities within their proper sphere.

Precisely because capitalism is destabilizing, however, it also takes on liberating power. In loosening the bonds of traditional cultures, capitalism has opened up qualitatively new life chances for many classes of peoples who endured severe oppression in pre-capitalist systems. In the United States, capitalist development played a role in the emancipation of African slaves, in the achievement of universal suffrage for all adult citizens, and in the incremental advances toward full equality of opportunity for all persons without regard for gender, race, ethnicity, or religion. It has unquestionably been a factor in movements for gay and lesbian rights as well—not merely in Boyle’s trivializing sense of “sex as play” but in the more fundamental sense of a freedom to claim basic human dignity without regard for sexual orientation. Does a program to constrain homosexuality require us to seal off liberating possibilities opened up by a free-market economy?

As we enter the third millennium, our most promising course is to promote the common good by constructing public policies that constrain capitalist excesses while maintaining the social conditions requisite for a flourishing economy. This strategy will permit us to enjoy the benefits of a free market while placing limits upon its destructive tendencies. As United Methodists, we must determine for ourselves the forms of sexual expression that are appropriate to our practices as the people of God, taking account of the social forces that impinge upon our common life. May the Spirit of Christ be with us all, teaching us patience and forbearance and grounding us in God’s self-giving love.

Notes

1. Lewis B. Smedes, Sex for Christians: The Limits and Liberties of Sexual Living (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976).
2. Ibid., 72-75.
As usual, my colleague Stanley Hauerwas is thinking a couple of moves ahead of the rest of us. He offers valuable insights that have the potential of reshaping the debate that now threatens to rend the church. I have long been convinced that our ceaseless obsession with "sexuality" is a sign of pathology in the body of Christ; and Stanley's essay helps diagnose the illness. (A healthy church would be focusing its energies on urgent issues—such as sharing our wealth with the poor—and not be wallowing in the media-driven talkfest about sex.)

First, Hauerwas is right to suggest that we need to place the debate about homosexuality within the wider framework of a conversation about the meaning of marriage. (For that reason, the recent refooding of the argument on the question of same-sex unions is far more helpful in clarifying the issues than the earlier muddled debate about ordination.) We rightly understand our identity as male and female creatures only within the biblical portrayal of marriage and singleness.

Second, Hauerwas is on target both in his critique of essentialist accounts of sexuality and in his critique of romantic ideas of marriage. Sexual identity is not merely a given fact of nature; it is shaped by the language and symbols of the culture within which we

live and move. Our particular culture has distorted the traditional Christian understanding of marriage by making it into a vehicle for the expression of feelings rather than a structure for the life of discipleship.

Third, Hauerwas is right again to suggest that prevailing ideas of sex and marriage have been constructed by capitalism. The principalities and powers that pull the strings of popular culture have a vested interest in teaching us to see ourselves as individual consumers who have not only a right but also an obligation to get everything we can out of life, including the satisfaction of all our desires, sexual and otherwise. Wherever this consumerist self-understanding corrupts the church, it makes the traditional Christian understanding of eschatologically oriented fidelity almost unintelligible. To get clear about our sexual practices, we will have to get clear about our resistance to the culture of consumerism.

Despite my agreement with these central points of Hauerwas’s argument, I also have three criticisms.

First, Hauerwas does not follow through the logical consequences of his argument against using “homosexuality” as a category in theological discourse. Almost all appeals for acceptance of same-sex unions in the church rest on the claim that same-sex preference is a “natural,” or inborn, trait that is analogous to race or gender. Hauerwas’s position, if accepted, would demolish all such arguments. In my view, Stanley is right: the terms homosexual and gay are modern categories invented in the nineteenth century and proliferating in the twentieth. We ought to stop using these labels, and focus instead on the practices that characterize faithful and unfaithful response to God. The Bible speaks of sexual practices of individuals but never constructs classes of persons based on sexual preference. Never within Scripture does sexual preference become the ground for defining a person’s identity. Our identity is grounded in our creation in the image of God and our redemption through union with Christ.

Second, Hauerwas accepts the traditional Catholic account of procreation as the telos of marriage. Why should we adopt this Aristotelian/Thomist model, which has little or no basis in Scripture? This interpretation at least needs to be supplemented by biblical models that highlight the control of desire (1 Corinthians 7), mutual sensual pleasure (Song of Songs), self-sacrificial service (Eph. 5:25-33), and the mirroring of God’s unbreakable covenant fidelity (Hosea; Mal. 2:10-16).
Third, Hauerwas underplays the importance of the scriptural passages that condemn same-sex intercourse. As I have long insisted, these passages are few but unambiguous; and they are not counterbalanced by any positive teaching in the Bible about same-sex relations. Further, the negative texts are fully complementary to Scripture's constructive account of God's purpose in creating man and woman for each other. For the church to overrule the teaching of these passages would be an extraordinary act of revisionism. On this point—as generally in his theology—Hauerwas underestimates the force of Scripture as a word that stands over the church and governs our life together.

Despite these criticisms, I think that Hauerwas has offered us a helpful contribution that should be taken into account in all future discussion. If anything, it seems to me that he is too cautious about drawing the conclusions that follow from his own proposals. If the church is confused, it is the office of our theologians to help us think straight about our practices. As a theologian of the church, Hauerwas owes us clearer guidance about where his reframing of the questions would lead us. My own view is that it would lead us back to a reaffirmation of what the church has taught for two millennia: we can find wholeness either in heterosexual marriage or in sexually abstinent singleness.

Notes
2. For a discussion of the relevant passages, see Hays, ibid., 381-89.
Advent preaching is perhaps the most difficult of the year, but also the most invigorating. It is difficult because, year after year, we return to the same story, the same small pool of relevant Gospel texts. What fresh points of challenge and encouragement can we advance? It is invigorating because here we face again the profound, urgent, and holy task of learning again ourselves and calling upon others to indwell the expansive story of God’s redeeming purpose for all humanity and, indeed, for the cosmos. With Advent, this grand story intersects with and impinges on human affairs in startling, unexpected ways; and no one articulates this astonishing reality more deeply than Luke, the Third Evangelist.

Though written in the last third of the first century C.E., and though locating the events leading up to and surrounding the coming of Christ fully within the longings and faithful practices of Second Temple Jewish piety, Luke’s narrative is no alien intrusion into our lives. We are invited not so much to learn about the world of this Gospel so that we can transform its message into our diverse contexts as we are invited to live within this narrative and to be transformed by it. Can we enter into these ancient texts so deeply as to have our preconceptions altered, our allegiances challenged, our commitments redirected? And can we invite those of our congregations into such a transformative encounter?

Annas and Tiberius, Ituraea and Trachonitis—these are people and places unknown to us personally. How can stories in which they figure prominently intrude helpfully on us who live in this information-cum-cyber era? Perhaps this possibility is no more surprising than the startling turns of Luke’s narrative, in which hope comes in the wrong places, at the wrong time, and through the wrong people. Whatever else he teaches us, then, the Third Evangelist encourages us to anticipate the unexpected when it comes to the realization of God’s redemptive design for humanity.

In the end, most of the surprises of Luke’s narrative have to do with God—that is, with folks’ expectations and images of God. People, especially religious people, are stunned by good news. They even reject it, because they have already sorted out what God can and will not do and therefore do not anticipate this chain of events and cannot recognize these words and deeds as the handiwork of the living God. In his attempt to realign people’s perceptions and dispositions, Luke deploys an array of instruments—including Israel’s Scriptures, angels, Spirit-inspired witnesses, and especially the Messiah Jesus. The haunting question remains whether God’s people have eyes to see the long-awaited, gracious visitation of God.

3 December 2000—First Sunday of Advent
Jer. 33:14-16
Ps. 25:1-10
1 Thess. 3:9-13

Eschatological fever has run high in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, with the blockbuster sales of Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* in the 1970s only lately rivaled by preparations for widely anticipated Y2K-related apocalyptic disasters and the enormously popular *Left Behind* series. Despite the prominence of these phenomena and others like them that have dotted the landscape of Christian history, established churches have always looked askance at such moments. This is not surprising, since those whose identity and status are most interwoven with the present world-system are least likely to nurture hope for a messianic reign that will transform and renew everything. The excesses of such movements aside, this Lukan text provides a powerful reminder that “this is not all there is” and that God is bringing history to its
consummation according to God's purpose. And we had better sit up and take notice.

With Luke 21:25, we catch Jesus in mid-speech; so a brief overview of the wider narrative is crucial. Luke 20:1–21:38 has Jesus teaching the people of Israel in the Temple precincts and attracting the hostility of the Jerusalem leadership. Jesus had entered Jerusalem seeking to reclaim the Temple for its proper use according to the ancient plan of God, but in Luke 20:1–21:4 his ministry and message are rebuffed by the Jerusalem elite. The unrelenting antagonism of the Temple leadership toward Jesus cannot but raise the question of the status of the Temple itself; and this leads to Jesus' predictions of the Temple's destruction and the coming of the End (21:5–36). Theologically, the message of Jesus to his disciples in Luke 21:5–36 highlights (1) the priority of God's faithfulness over against the tyrannical and oppressive machinations of those religious leaders who refuse to hold themselves accountable to God (see, for example, 20:45–21:4); (2) the certainty that God's purpose will move forward to its culmination irrespective of the role the Temple might play in supporting or hindering that purpose; and (3) the faithfulness of God, bringing with it a concomitant call for human faithfulness.

With Luke 21:25–36, Jesus turns from signs that anticipate the impending destruction of the Temple to those portending the coming of the End itself. He outlines cosmic signs leading to the advent of the Son of Man and the coming of redemption. Do we find here the raw material for engaging in calendar-making as we mark off the days before the End? It is true that, in Jesus' speech as a whole, we find temporal stages; for example, in v. 12 Jesus says, "[B]efore all this occurs . . . ." The timetable Jesus sketches, however, is concerned with locating the razing of the Temple—and little else—now looming on the horizon within the category of events that mark the coming of the End, while at the same distinguishing Temple destruction from the End itself. Interpreters have sometimes taken v. 32 ("[T]his generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.") as proof that Jesus anticipated an immediate end of the world. But we find no ticking clock here, since the phrase "this generation" is used in the Lukan narrative without temporal meaning. Instead Luke employs it to describe persons who are recalcitrant in their hostility to the work of God (see Luke 7:31; 9:41; 11:29–32, 50–51; 16:8; 17:25). In effect, Jesus portends here that antagonism toward God's handiwork will continue right up until the
time of its actualization in the eschaton. Within the Lukan narrative, then, the End will come unexpectedly and universally (21:34-35), but neither according to any known chain of events on a calendar nor necessarily soon.

Instead, this final section of Jesus' address on "The Coming of the End" is designed to press home the need for a transformation on the part of all who hear these words. In an important sense, the pivotal question is, whose side are you on? And the answers to this question are self-evident in people's conceptions of God and God's ways. These conceptions, in turn, are demonstrated in people's ability (or lack of ability) to understand "the times" and in the behaviors that flow from those conceptions. Jesus calls on his hearers to be good hermeneuts—good interpreters of the world around them—and insists that even this is possible only for those who understand and, indeed, find their home in God's ancient purpose in the world.

Again, it is important to remember that Jesus' speech is set in a context of hostility and especially of competing interpretations. The Jerusalem elite are those whose positions of advanced social and political status are grounded religiously in their relationship to the Temple and their capacity to broadcast a particular vision of God's character and purpose. Jesus has entered their sphere of immediate influence in order to propagate a competing view. They have rejected his way of construing the grand story of God's purpose. But the jury is still out on the rank and file who daily fill the courts of the Temple; how will they respond?

What alternative does Jesus put before those gathered? He draws on the Scriptures of Israel for his imagery in 21:25-26: astral phenomena (e.g., Isa. 13:11, 13; Ezek. 32:7-8; Joel 2:10, 30-31), distress and confusion among the nations (Isa. 8:22; 13:4), roaring of the sea (Isa. 5:30; 17:12), and fear of the people (Isa. 13:6-11). Jesus does not simply allude to these scriptural texts but interprets them, actually reconfiguring them. Such phenomena portend the coming of the Day of the Lord in Israel's Scriptures but now anticipate the coming of the Son of Man. Borrowing explicitly the language of Dan. 7:13, this Lukan text depicts the return of Jesus in the most exalted terms possible, as a theophany. And this means that the only faithful, authentic reading of the ancient story and hopes of Israel is one that sees Jesus as their culmination.

The Scriptures are capable of many readings—the diversity of Judaism in the first century C.E. is evidence of this, with each expres-
sion of Judaism standing behind (and on) its own rendering of the biblical story. With Jesus we find yet another reading, one that does not lead inevitably to reverence and honor for the Jerusalem Temple and, by extension, for the leadership who draw their legitimation from the Temple. Jesus inscribes himself into the story of Israel as its culmination; and in doing so undermines all other interpretations and, thus, the power of the Temple elite. It is no wonder that the close of this speech leads immediately—indeed, inevitably—to a conspiracy on the part of the Temple leadership to have Jesus put to death (22:1-2).

Before leaving this final segment of Jesus’ Temple discourse, however, it is useful to notice that the battle over how one conceives God and God’s purpose has immediate repercussions for one’s behavior and comportment in the face of coming events. Notice the juxtaposition of images: distress, confusion, fear, and foreboding on the one hand; alertness and prayer, together with calm assurance, on the other. Why these two sets of responses? Some belong to “this generation,” a cipher for those who stubbornly turn their backs on the reign of God and thus experience buildup to the End as calamity and judgment. For others, however, the events signaling the End demonstrate that “your redemption is drawing near” (21:28), that “the kingdom of God is near” (v. 31). Even in the face of hostility, those who follow Jesus in his articulation of God’s work may hold with conviction to the certainty of Jesus’ word and respond with faithful vigilance in anticipation of God’s final act of salvation.

10 December 2000—Second Sunday of Advent
Luke 3:1-6
Luke 1:68-79
Mal. 3:1-4
Phil. 1:3-11

Luke has never given much room for doubt regarding John’s job description. Both before and immediately after his birth, we are informed that he would have the prophetic task of going before the Lord in order to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:17, 76). In this way, John would prepare for the Christian movement in two ways: (1) by calling persons to repentance in anticipation of the messianic era (e.g., Luke 3:7-14); and (2) by prefiguring the nature of the community of Jesus’ followers as a prophetic people, a prophetic community (e.g., Acts 2:17-21). Holding these
two points in tandem is important for Christian congregations preparing for Christmas, since it reminds us of our own need for self-reflection in light of the revelation of God's purpose in the birth of Jesus. It also reminds us of our Christian vocation to proclaim the coming of the Lord among people often unresponsive to such words. Read within the larger narrative of Luke-Acts, this textual unit reminds us both of the necessity of making such preparations and of the hazards in doing so.

Luke 3:1-6 forms a compact summary of John's ministry (v. 3), framed by twin efforts at situating his ministry in space and time (vv. 1-2, 4-6). His task is one of proclamation, a term used in Israel's Scriptures, as here, to signify the announcement of imminent, eschatological judgment (e.g., Isa. 61:1-2; Joel 2:1). Luke summarizes the content of John's proclamation in three interrelated ways. (1) John's baptism is a "baptism of repentance," in which cleansing and moral uprightness are tied together. Submitting to baptism, persons symbolized their surrender to God's will—thus redirecting their lives toward the divine aim and professing their renewed, fundamental allegiance to God's purpose. For John, repentance is a thoroughgoing realignment with God's purpose that blossoms in repentance-appropriate behavior ("fruits worthy of repentance") and demonstrates one's genuine kinship with Abraham (3:7-9). In the examples of response that Luke provides, repentance manifests itself especially in one's socioeconomic relations (3:10-14).

(2) John's message had a prophetic edge, according to which he challenged persons to put aside competing loyalties and align themselves fully with the divine purpose. But he also held out the promise of deliverance and restoration in the forgiveness of sins. Inasmuch as forgiveness was the means by which persons who had excluded themselves or had been excluded from the community of God's people might (re)gain entry into the community, the promise of forgiveness has an obvious social dimension.

(3) This means that John's baptismal ministry was very much about the character and reformation of the people of God. Indeed, by addressing the Jewish crowds as he does (3:7-9), John clarifies his understanding that the definition of God's people would not be worked out along ethnic lines. That category of people known as "children of Abraham" comprised those who demonstrated their full embrace of God's project through "fruits worthy of repentance."

John's message may seem impressive enough, seen in this way;
but Luke’s staging of John’s proclamation with reference to the geopolitical markers found in Luke 3:1-2 raises the stakes significantly. At a superficial level, we may note that Luke’s list of contemporary rulers is reminiscent of those found in Greek and Roman historiography (e.g., Thucydides and Polybius) and in prophetic texts in Israel’s Scriptures (e.g., Isaiah and Zephaniah). This strongly suggests that the story Luke is unfolding has significance for the whole world and not only for ancient Palestine; it also helps to portray John in prophetic garb. This list of names has further significance, however. Running through the names of Roman leaders and their domains, we understand that John appeared on the scene in the context of a particularly tension-filled, top-heavy, sociopolitical realm. With the mention of Annas (who was no longer high priest but had near-dynastic control of the Temple leadership) and his son-in-law Caiaphas (who was high priest during this time), the picture is completed with reference to those who headed Temple and cult and, thus, exercised almost unrivaled power and privilege among the Jewish people. To call for repentance in this context would have been to raise a serious challenge against the status quo proffered by these powerful figures. It would have been at least potentially to threaten the uneasy equilibrium that existed under Roman rule. It would have been to urge that life in God’s dominion must have a different texture than life under the rule of these Roman and Jerusalem authorities. And to call for repentance in the wilderness could not help but energize memories of the formation of God’s people in the Exodus, and so raise expectations of a new exodus, which would entail deliverance from and judgment against those authorities and rulers Luke has enumerated in vv. 1-2.

We are reminded, then, that prophets have played the role of “troublers of the people” precisely because they call into question a social or political equilibrium held together by any rule other than that of justice and mercy. This is true for John as prophet; it is also true for those for whom John would serve a prototypical role—namely, the communities of Jesus’ followers who received the Spirit of prophecy and of whom it would be said that they “have been turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

Such expectations may well be stirred up by the citation of Isa. 40:3-5 in Luke 3:4-6, as Luke absorbs into his account Israel’s hopes for restoration. John, according to this reading of Isaiah, is the prophetic voice calling persons to renew their allegiance to God and
God's rule—and, thus, calling into question all rules and rulers whose claims run counter to the ways of God.

17 December 2000—Third Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:7-18
Zeph. 3:14-20
Isa. 12:2-6
Phil. 4:4-7

Verse 18 is particularly puzzling: "So, with many other exhortations, [John] proclaimed the good news to the people." Coming as it does after blistering words of judgment and stark images of doom, this characterization of John's proclamation as "good news" seems ill placed. Who would hear such words as these as good news? But this is precisely the point. According to the calculus of the gospel, salvation is not a warm and fuzzy ideal, but requires genuine and far-reaching transformation of social practices and relations of all kinds. This is good news for those who find themselves the immediate beneficiaries of such transformation, including those who receive the clothing or food they so desperately need (Luke 3:10-11). It is also good news for those who see themselves clearly in the mirror of judgment provided by John's preaching and who respond with repentance.

Though left untranslated in the New Revised Standard Version, v. 7 begins with the word, "therefore," so that what John says to the crowds beginning in v. 7 must be seen as a particularization of the proclamation Luke summarizes in v. 3. Luke's narrative thus presents baptism as an initiatory rite of passage as people (1) depart their day-to-day lives in order to participate in John's baptismal ministry; (2) submit to a baptism that demonstrates their (re)new(ed) allegiance to the divine purpose manifest in John's preaching; and (3) then return to their everyday lives, though now reflecting in those lives the transformative practices befitting authentic children of Abraham. In other words, baptism, in John's perspective, can be nothing less than an assault on "life as usual"; for it assumes and calls for human behaviors consistent with a radical realignment of one's life in relation to God.

Luke 3:7-18 can be understood in three parts, with the first giving rise to the latter two. John's announcement of impending judgment (vv. 7-9) leads to two sets of questions on the part of his audience: what form should life take, in view of the coming judg-
ment (vv. 10-14)? And who is (are you) the Messiah (vv. 15-18)?

Three qualities characterize John's word of judgment. (1) The basis for judgment is astonishing. Dismissing popularly held beliefs, John avers that membership within the people of God cannot be determined by a paternity test, as though proving one's physical descent from Abraham were sufficient. To be "a child of something" is to share its character; so genuine children of Abraham are those who share his character, and, as Luke goes on to show, participate especially in acts of faithfulness expressed in hospitable behavior on behalf of the world's outcasts. John's audience, on the other hand, consists of a "brood of vipers"; that is, they are possessed by the qualities normally associated with poisonous snakes.

(2) John warns his audience that they are not indispensable to God's plans but can be replaced by stones. Read against a collage of images borrowed from the Scriptures (e.g., Gen. 18:14; Isa. 51:1-2), this bespeaks God's capacity to arouse life from the lifeless and thus to form a new people. (3) His message is punctuated with urgency: "even now the ax is lying at the root. . . ." (Luke 3:9). Unfruitful trees will be cut down and burned in the fires of judgment. With such images (also borrowed from the Scriptures of Israel; e.g., Isa. 10:33-34; 66:24; Mal. 4:1), John provokes a crisis and demands immediate response.

The first response is a request for clarification. If unfruitful trees are destined for judgment, what would fruitful ones look like? What behaviors are demonstrative of Abraham's children? To understand this, we must first grasp the portrait of the human person at work in Luke's narrative. According to Charles Taylor, contemporary, Western understandings of the human person emphasize affirmations like the following: (1) Human dignity lies in self-sufficiency and self-determination; (2) human identity can be understood atomistically—that is, I am who I am apart from considerations of kinship or community; and (4) human maturity is characterized by autonomy and self-legislation. Luke's perspective is somewhat different. Here we have an account of humanity that (1) regards the self as deeply embedded in social relationships; (2) underscores the significance of the integrity of the community; and (3) assumes that a person is her or his behavior—that is, that one's dispositions are genuinely manifest in one's behavior. Accordingly, the human restoration that is grounded in repentance cannot be reduced to individual commitments or to mere
practices; yet repentance is necessarily personal and demonstrated in our practices. For John, then, extra food and clothing, possessions that lift one beyond subsistence—these are to be deployed on behalf of those in need, as though they were members of one's extended family. Performing such acts does not make one a child of Abraham, but it would be unimaginable that children of Abraham would not involve themselves in such practices. Even toll collectors and soldiers demonstrate their alignment with God's aim by reflecting God's justice in their refusal to participate in economic misappropriation or to use their positions of power to manipulate others.

What is remarkable about these attempts to spell out the structure of repentance is their attachment to the stuff of everyday life. John leaves no possibility for imagining that repentance can be understood abstractly as "turning around." Repentance prioritizes life in relation to God and reconfigures all other commitments, attitudes, and relationships. The demands of the good news reach into the nooks and crannies of daily life. And to be even more specific, it is obvious within the Lukan narrative that the gospel cannot be segregated from sharing with those who lack the basic necessities of life.

John's pronouncement of imminent judgment led to a second response. They ask John, "Are you the Messiah?" Judaism in the time of Jesus is noted for its diversity; and the diversity within Judaism extended to messianic expectations. Many persons had no particular expectation at all, and among those who did nurture hope for a deliverer, such hopes were variously defined. Those whom Luke portrays anticipate a messiah, but they have little apparent certainty or agreement regarding the profile this agent of salvation might have. They recognize John as a holy man, perhaps, or a prophet; but is he, in fact, the Messiah? John clarifies things, first by replying in the negative and second by contrasting the Messiah with himself. As much honor as they may be ready to bestow on this prophet, he is only the messenger who prepares for the One to come. John may be "prophet of the Most High" (Luke 1:76), but Jesus is "Son of the Most High" (1:32). As much as the honor of a master surpasses that of a slave, so much more does the honor of the Messiah surpass that of John. He is more powerful as well, just as his baptism is of greater consequence than that practiced by John. Later in the Lukan narrative, in Acts 2, Peter will insist that Jesus' exaltation is his enthronement, on the basis of which Jesus is co-regent with God and, in this role, pours out the Holy Spirit.
This does not mean, however, that John understands clearly the nature of the Messiah either. He sees some things well, but in other matters his vision is blurred. Thus, in Luke 7:18-20 he wonders whether Jesus is indeed the “one to come.” If so, where is the fiery judgment that was to accompany the advent of the Messiah? In order to grasp the mission and character of the Messiah, we need the whole narrative of Luke’s Gospel and of Acts.

24 December 2000—Fourth Sunday of Advent

All is topsy-turvy here, at least according to ancient standards. A young girl should not be traveling alone in her own hometown, much less across country—but here is Mary doing so. Young girls do not receive blessings from old women, but Mary is honored by Elizabeth. Men are generally not privy to prenatal women-speak, but this private exchange is now broadcast to Luke’s readers. News of this magnitude should come from Jerusalem, the holy city, and the Temple, the divine abode—but this newsworthy episode is situated in the Judean hill country. And men should be the first to know and speak of the work of God and to confirm the angelic message—but in Luke’s narrative this deed falls to an old, secluded, pregnant woman. Surprises like these dot the opening chapters of Luke’s Gospel.

For the full effect, one cannot overlook the material that immediately precedes Mary’s journey, the angelic message to Mary regarding the birth of a son (Luke 1:26-38). What is astounding is how little we are told of Mary. Zechariah and Elizabeth are introduced earlier, with reference to their ancestral heritage and righteousness before God; their high status is beyond question (1:5-7). Simeon and Anna are introduced in ways that underscore their honorable social positions and religious piety (2:25-26, 36-37). Even Joseph, who plays almost no role at all in the Lukan narrative, is introduced in relation to his royal parentage (1:27). At this juncture in the narrative, however, Luke does not even hint at Mary’s piety or family heritage. He provides us with nothing to suggest that she is a person who might somehow be regarded as worthy of divine attention. She is in Nazareth, far from the holy city of Jerusalem, where Gabriel first appeared in the birth narrative. She is a young girl of marriage-
able age—by Roman standards, perhaps twelve to fourteen years old—and a virgin (1:27, 34). She is betrothed to Joseph but has not yet joined his household and therefore has no claim to his inherited status. We learn that she is Elizabeth's relative, but the term Luke uses, *suggenēs*, is sufficiently vague to imply nothing about her own family background. In short, Mary is not introduced in any way that would recommend her to us as noteworthy or as deserving of either social honor or divine consideration. Luke prepares us in no way at all for the visit of an archangel or for his announcement, "[Y]ou have found favor with God" (1:30).

In his Gospel, Luke attends with great care to social positions and to concerns with honor in his narrative of the births of John and Jesus. It is, therefore, extraordinary that Mary—for whom he provides no basis for our attributing honor, whether in terms of age or family or gender or piety—turns out to be the one favored by God and, thus, who finds her identity ultimately in her identification with God's will. But this is the point. If God's grace is so freely given without recourse to social conventions governing who is worthy (or not), then God's grace is scandalous indeed. This also means that the labels we use for ourselves and for others are irrelevant to the presence and activity of the gracious God. Our concerns with just desserts are just that—our concerns—and they restrict God in no way whatsoever.

The sharing of greetings between Elizabeth and Mary in 1:39-45 only heightens our astonishment. Through the literary device of redundancy, Luke underscores the importance of this exchange. Three times he mentions Mary's greeting Elizabeth (1:40, 41, 44); apparently, this is to draw attention to Elizabeth's response—that is, the response of Elizabeth's unborn child, which is mentioned twice (1:41, 44). Earlier, Gabriel had promised that John would be filled with the Spirit even before birth (1:15-17), and now we learn the purpose of this prenatal experience of the Spirit. Even from the womb he prophesies in anticipation of the coming of the Lord. This sort of leaping is elsewhere associated with the eschatological experience of God's salvation (cf. 1:14, 47; Mal. 4:2). Elizabeth, filled with the same Spirit, adds words to his joyful response. Adopting the role of the prophet, her speech is inspired speech, and she interprets the significance of John's movements within her.

Elizabeth's first words may remind us of the greetings typically due a person of very high status, one whom God has greatly blessed.
She recognizes the superiority of her young relative, adding her words to those of Gabriel, acknowledging God's hand at work in Mary's life. This alone will be seen to be remarkable, given the number of persons (including many men!) in the larger Lukan narrative who are simply incapable of recognizing the work of God as his handiwork (e.g., Luke 24:1-12; Acts 1:1-13). What is more, acknowledging Mary as the mother of "my Lord," Elizabeth announces her own allegiance to the as-yet-unborn child and portends Jesus' exalted status as Lord at the right hand of God (e.g., Acts 2:34-36).

Elizabeth's second response (v. 45) has the form of a beatitude, spoken over those persons who are the recipients of God's gift of redemption. Elizabeth blessed her young relative, first, in light of Mary's maternal relation to the Lord Jesus. This second blessing has a different focus, for here she is declared fortunate on account of her faith. The contrast with Zechariah is profound: though a male, an elder, and a priest, Zechariah did not believe (1:20), but Mary did. On account of this, Mary becomes the model of those whom Jesus says are truly blessed (11:27-28), who truly belong to Jesus' family (8:19-20).

Underscored again and again, then, is the importance of proper perception and appropriate response. The days of Christmas pass by like any other. They leave ample opportunity for business as usual, another dinner with family, an extra worship service or two—but nothing changes, really. Perhaps at no time of the year do we need proclamation more. We must recall names and refresh memories. After all, God entered history here. This day is the day of blessing. The divine promises are not forgotten but fulfilled. So stir up the faith.

In our text, Elizabeth should have held out for the honor due her. Who would fault her for doing so? This would have been the appropriate response in normal circumstances. She is a woman of advanced position and age, a woman to be treated with respect. And yet, had she done so she would have mistaken the leaping of John in her womb for the ordinary kick of any growing child. Elizabeth has waited long for God's blessing of a baby. Why should she celebrate the child of her youthful relative instead of pointing to the miracle of her own? Who would fault her had she invited joy at her own advanced state of pregnancy, or jealousy on account of Mary's condition? And yet, Elizabeth proves herself to be attentive to the workings of the Holy One through such an ordinary phenomenon as the movement of a baby in a mother's womb. What is more, she shares the heart of God enough to recognize the amazing happenstance of
God's choosing a young girl, unmarried, ordinary in every way known to us, to bring healing to the world.

Conventional patterns and values leave little room for the unexpected to shine through the mundane. But Christmas reminds us that God is at work where we might least anticipate it, that the coming of God into the world demands senses freshly tuned, and that joy and celebration belong to those who see and really see, who feel and really feel the presence of Christ.

For Further Reading


Notes

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