GOD in the Twenty-first Century
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Thinking God

HENDRIK R. PIETERSE

Preaching a sermon on September 16, the Sunday following the devastating events in New York and Washington on September 11, must have been agonizing. How does the preacher—how does anyone—find words of consolation and healing in the face of such destruction and pain? As Lee Ramsey points out in this issue, devastating events such as these reveal the "undeniable link between preaching and pastoral care." The pastor gives "voice to the congregation's laments" and assures them of God's presence. But the pastor also guides the congregation in articulating the excruciating theological questions raised by this tragic event for their daily lives—and for their faith. As resident theologian, Ramsey says, the pastor "grapples from the pulpit with the questions that hound the congregation." With theological honesty and moral integrity, the "caring preacher will guide the troubled congregation through these deep waters of theological meaning making so that they can learn to pass through the floods."

While not written to address the tragedy that befell the nation, the five theme articles constitute a rich reservoir for preachers, congregations, and others to draw on in these traumatic times. They do so by inviting critical reflection on the fundamental "object" of theology: God. By offering fresh perspectives on how to construe the nature, being, and agency of God, these essays present a viable theological frame of reference for making theological meaning in the context of tragedy—both national and personal—and in the other myriad challenges, struggles, and opportunities that confront us in the opening decade of the twenty-first century.

Delwin Brown uses the provocative question "What is the location of God?" to provide an interpretive landscape of Christian ideas of God in the twentieth century. The "location" of God "is the domain or dimension of reality to which . . . we attribute ultimate importance." Brown goes on to offer
four ways of locating God in twentieth-century theology: God as Source, as Agent, as Incarnate, and as Goal. Each of these ways gives rise to different forms of Christian theology, spirituality, and practice—all resources we can draw on as we attempt the task of "locating" God in the twenty-first century.

David Cunningham sees in the recent renaissance in trinitarian theology a profound resource both for theological reflection and for the practice of Christian ministry in the new century. The emphasis in trinitarian theology on relationality and mutual participation, difference and polyphony, and particularity without individualism can infuse church practices like worship, preaching, and church order with new vigor and profound meaning. Indeed, trinitarian theology can help us recognize the Trinity as the very heart of Christian ministry.

Millicent Feske perceptively chronicles the issues, problems, and solutions articulated by feminist theologians about Christian God-language in the late twentieth century. Feminist theologies, says Feske, "speak freshly, creatively, and productively of the divine by embodying an awareness of ultimate mystery and a commitment to justice and planetary flourishing, both of which are required to speak meaningfully in the twenty-first century."

In different ways, both Cynthia Rigby and Luis Pedraja focus on the intractable question of how to understand God's agency—God's saving presence—in the world. How can Christians feasibly affirm the redemptive reality of God's kingdom in the world without compromising on either divine or human agency? In a fascinating way, Rigby argues that "reflection on the ascension of Christ... both enriches our understanding of how God is sovereign and explains how we participate in the shaping of the future."

Pedraja considers the question of divine agency in light of the reality of evil and suffering in our violent world. We must understand the difference between evil as actual and evil as possible to have a proper view of the nature and extent of divine and human agency, power, freedom, and responsibility. But, he opines provocatively, in the final analysis the problem of theodicy finds its roots in God's abundant love.

In a post-September 11 world, we Christians must wrestle anew to understand the One in whom we "live and move and have our being." May these essays be a rich resource for that most important of struggles.

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A discussion of Christian ideas of God could proceed in a number of ways, and each would have value. It may trace the "schools" of Western theological thought in the twentieth century—from early modernism and fundamentalism, through neoorthodoxy, process theology, secular theology, death of God theology, theology of hope, liberation theology, feminist theology, and African American and other racial and/or ethnic theologies to current free-will theism, poststructuralism, postliberalism, historicism, and radical orthodoxy. Each of these developments has its own integrity and insight and each has a continuing influence, in some cases a quite vital one. Their distinctive features, however, do not always have to do directly with ideas of God.

Christian ideas of God may therefore be better approached in other ways. First, we could examine various positions on the sources of our ideas of deity. How is God known most reliably—through the Bible, reason, religious experience, communal reflection, empirical analysis? Second, we could consider the continuing debate, begun in the nineteenth century, about the status of our ideas of God. Are God-concepts human constructions or objective readings of reality or some combination of "givenness" and imagination? Finally, we may consider various positions on the rationality of the idea of God. Is belief in God required by a rational interpretation of the world; or, if not required, is it at least permissible within a reasonable interpretation of things? Or is belief in God contrary to forms of inquiry such as those of the physical sciences? These are all fruitful paths of inquiry, but they are already well traveled.

This essay begins with a different organizing question: What is the loca-
tion of God? Or—as a child might put it—where is God? This may be an odd way to discuss recent concepts of God; but I do not think it is naive or, as I hope to show, without important practical implications. Thinking about views of God in this way is useful because, whatever else the term God is or does, it denotes that which we believe to be most important—that which is, as Paul Tillich said, of ultimate concern to us. Thus, wherever it is that we locate God, that is the domain or dimension of reality to which, if we are consistent, we attribute ultimate importance. On this dimension, all other things of importance depend. For this reason, the various ways of locating God tend to give rise to different types of Christian theology, spirituality, and practice.

In what follows, I examine four ways of (or four emphases in) locating God—God as Source, God as Agent, God as Incarnate, and God as Goal. Further, I offer suggestions about the somewhat different forms of Christian life toward which each of these views inclines the believer. We should recognize at the outset, however, that these different ways of locating God can and usually do have major similarities. Each position, for example, can construe God as personal, as powerful, as revealed, and as saving. In addition, in most of their formulations, each position affirms elements of the others, at least as subordinate themes. Those who speak of God as Agent (Lord or Guide) will also insist that God is the source of creation and, further, is incarnate in it. Likewise, those who emphasize God as Goal will affirm that this eschatological reality is incarnate and is somehow an agent in the cosmos and human life. The differences between the positions are usually matters of degree or emphasis.

The differences are important, however, because contained within each of these perspectives on God are particular vectors—inclinations toward particular ways of being as a Christian. We find, moreover, that each perspective has certain strengths and (though not discussed here) deficiencies, even dangers. Our purpose is to be more keenly aware of the practical implications of, or tendencies within, these different ways of locating God. And, finally, we ask how we should view these differences.

God the Source

We begin with the point of view that locates God at the beginning, as the source or grounding of all that is. In a sense, this is simply to speak of God as "creator," but creator in a very special sense. Here God is creator, not as
the one who starts things off or as the cosmic first cause. Rather, God is the immediate basis of everything in every moment. God is always anew the creator, ground, or source.

What this means can perhaps be clarified if we were to imagine that there has always been a world of some sort. In this case, God is not the source or grounding of things in terms of their chronological beginning, because, if the world is infinite, then it would have had no beginning. Instead, God is the source in the sense of being the underlying reality out of which this world continuously lives—the grounding of all things and each thing anew in every moment.

One may clarify this perspective further by considering a philosophical question: Why is there something rather than nothing? Those who ask this question say that the question is valid even if the "something" that is had no beginning. Even if the world in its most comprehensive sense ("reality") is eternal, one can still ask. Why is there an eternal world and not no world at all?

Critics respond that this is a foolish question. We cannot even imagine "nothing" or "no world at all," they say, so the question is simply a succession of words without meaning. The question makes no sense. Defenders reply that, on the contrary, it makes the most basic kind of sense because it is a way of naming the ultimate wonder of things. God, in this view, is the Mystery in whom we—now, immediately, and directly—live and move and have our being. In speaking of God, we are talking about the mysterious "givenness" of things.

If talk about God is indeed talk about what is ultimately important, then viewing God as source or ground would appear to have certain implications for Christian practice. First, it would surely engender a sense of gratitude. To be is to come forth from and continue to be in that which is of ultimate worth. Thus, life itself is of value—a value that transcends considerations of how life is best lived, how things ought to be, or where things are going. These considerations are not eliminated, but they are subordinated to a more important reality, namely, that life is a mysterious given of intrinsic value. Hence, to be is to be grateful.

Gratitude does not eliminate other questions, such as how we ought to live; but it makes these questions somewhat secondary. Further, the mysteriousness from which the gift of life comes makes answers to such questions always more than a bit tentative. After all, who can be dogmatic about
the "will of God" if God is ultimately a mystery? We may hope to have the best indication possible in our human, fallible state about what is right and true; but, in the final analysis, the ways of God are not our ways and the truths of God are not ours. Not surprisingly, then, Christian piety based on this view of God emphasizes experience, not intellection, and typically the experience is said to be mystical in character.

This understanding of God has a long Christian heritage. In theology, it is called the "apophatic" tradition, a term derived from a Greek word meaning "negation" or "denial." The positive point of the apophatic impulse is to recognize the mystery of God. Though usually not the dominant view, this approach has always been present in Christian history, especially in the traditions of Eastern Christianity. There are, however, Western exemplars of this viewpoint to one degree or another, even in the twentieth century. Paul Tillich’s "God above Gods" has sometimes been interpreted in this way. A more recent example is found in the work of Robert C. Neville. Neville’s view is built on the assumption of God as Creator: God is the creator of all “determinate” things (i.e., things, we might say, that are this and not that). But if God is the source of all that is determinate, then God must be indeterminate. And whatever is indeterminate cannot be known in human categories, because all of our thinking is predicated upon determinate distinctions.

Neville goes on to say some quite specific things about God, but more commonly the apophatic tradition expresses its "knowledge" of God in mystical terms. It has usually been a quiet and generous mysticism, one that makes few claims to knowledge in any conventional sense. Christ, in this view, is usually said to mediate awareness of the Mystery and, conceptually, to teach us the vast difference between our ways and God’s. Thus, the revelation in Christ underscores rather than overcomes our blessed ignorance. What is sufficient for salvation is not a set of conceptual claims but rather a sense of immediate connection with the ground of all things and gratitude for this gift.

God the Agent

A second way of locating deity is to think of God not as source of the world but as an agent within the world. This view does not deny that God is creator, but it chooses to emphasize God’s agency as lord or guide in relation to the processes of nature and history. This is no doubt the most
common way of locating God in Christianity and it takes many forms. Usually God is viewed as personal agent, a person who acts. But this view, too, has variations. For example, there is the historic debate about the efficacy of the divine will. Does God will everything that transpires in nature and history, or, instead, does God permit some things but not will them? In the modern period, differences about the relationship of divine agency and the natural process have become prominent. Is the natural system of causes and effects the way in which God's agency is manifest; or is God's agency to be found alongside, and sometimes in contradiction to, the natural process?

Most recently, the discussion of God's agency has focused on God's power. Can God do anything God wants to do anytime God wants to do it, or are there limits on God's power? And if there are limits, are they voluntarily self-imposed by God; or are they for some reason necessary and unavoidable, even for God? Today's "free-will theists," such as Clark Pinnock, contend that God freely chooses to limit God's power in order that humans, too, may have free choice. Process theologians like John Cobb, on the other hand, argue that there are, in addition to divine self-limitations, some limits to God's power about which even God has no choice. Those who believe God's power is to some degree limited tend to speak of God as "guide." Those who believe God's power to be absolute speak of God as "lord."

While there are indeed differences within this view of God as agent, there are also commonalities. All agree that God is the fundamental agency that makes for right in the cosmic process. Here, the intuitive focus is on divine action. God is efficacious by willing, not simply by being; and the divine volition issues forth in specific worldly activities that make a difference. These activities, moreover, are interactive; what happens in the world is thought somehow to affect God's activity. So the focus, too, is on the "present," broadly conceived, not on inscrutable beginnings or endings—not on creation or eschatology but on God's will for life here and now. How is God acting in the world and what does this tell us about God's will?

In this way of locating God, therefore, God is experienced as direction. That the nature of divinity is ultimately mysterious is not denied, but it is assumed that we do know enough about God and God's will to know what we should be doing to support the divine purposes. Divine actions are guides for human action. Views vary on the clarity of these guides. For
example, if the words of Scripture are held to be God's "speaking," then the
guidance is as clear as the words themselves. If, instead, Scripture is taken to
be the key, or a key, to finding divine guidance in personal experience,
current events, and so on, then the clarity of the divine direction will corre­
late with the specificity of these. But whether the focus is on the words of
the Bible, the Word proclaimed through the Bible, the wisdom of the church,
the divine "lure" in nature and history, or personal experience, God is doing
something here and now, and what God is doing gives direction to our lives.

Knowing God's will, however, is not passive; it is active and, in fact,
quite analytical. Indeed, locating God as the agent at work in the present
generally leads to an emphasis on the importance of the intellect in the
Christian life. Even for the serious biblical literalist, knowing God's will
requires careful thought, a consideration of hermeneutical alternatives, and
a weighing of the textual evidence. Likewise, those who discern God's will
through consensus in the Christian community depend in part on discus­
ion, analysis, and mutual criticism within the church. Christians who look
for guidance in broader "signs of the times" often place their theological
readings in the context of secular systems of thought—sociological, philo­
sophical, or scientific—in order to critique, transform, and support their
judgments about God's will.

It should not be surprising, then, that this approach promotes a consid­
erable degree of confidence about our knowledge of the will of God. And
why not? In the Christian vision, the human mind is one of God's many
gifts. It may be limited and fallible, even fallen, but so is every other human
capability. If these other "all too human" capabilities—emotion, experience,
intuition, volition, discernment—may be relied upon despite their imperfec­
tions, then we are no less entitled to rely on our intellect, confident that it
can and will lead us to an understanding of truth.

This way of locating God, therefore, is commonly associated with
extensive theological systems: "systematic theologies." God is an active
agent, a force in the cosmos—in nature, history, and individual experience.
That action is important, because it is a reasonably specific guide to how
we ought to live our lives. And it is discernable. The process of discern­
ment, however, is an arduous endeavor, involving careful, self-critical, disci­
plined reflection. The theological systems of the fundamentalists, the
Barthians, the process theologians, and the liberation theologians—as
different as they are in other ways—all illustrate this perspective.
God the Incarnate

Every form of Christian reflection about God assumes that God is incarnate. After all, Christians regularly speak of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, and this is to claim that God is incarnate in some sense. But sending a message is not the same as "being there." In the early church, there arose the conviction not only that God speaks to us in Christ but also that Christ means "God is with us"—God is present. Even that claim, however, is not quite sufficient to capture the radical character of the "incarnationism" that developed in the first few centuries of Christian history. Certainly, God speaks and God is present, but there is more: The meaning of Christ is that God, in some very real sense, "is" us. The patristic theologians made this extraordinary claim for soteriological reasons. "What has not been assumed," they said, "cannot be healed." In this most radical sense, to speak of God the Incarnate is to say that in some way God the savior is God the creature.

In the twentieth century, this idea was articulated in ways that depart from anything remotely envisioned by theologians of the ancient church. The most radical version of Christian incarnationism was expressed by the so-called "God is dead" theologies. Of course, even its critics recognized that this label was not to be taken at face value. The God who died, according to this view, is the transcendent deity of the classical tradition. God is incarnate—fully incarnate, not only in the classical sense of being fully with us but also in the still more radical sense of being only with us. Thomas J. J. Altizer spoke of God as the Divine Word who is one with human flesh. William Hamilton focused more on the particularity of Jesus as the model of the divine in this world. In either case, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is taken to mean more than that God "came down" at a particular point in history; it means that God is always at one, fully at one, with humanity and with the creation.3

The focus on divine presence in these "liberal" theologies parallels more pietistic forms of popular Christianity. In the latter, we often find the practical equation of God with Christ and an understanding of Christ as present to and with the believer in ways that effectively jettison divine transcendence. Artistic depictions central to popular Protestant piety in the first half of the twentieth century illustrate this. Although sentimental and aesthetically problematic, a painting such as Warner Sallman's Christ at Heart's Door can hardly be construed as anything other than radical incar-
nationalism. The importance of the Virgin Mary in popular Catholicism and of icons in Eastern Orthodoxy are other examples.

As different as they may be in other ways, these views share an emphasis on divine presence over divine power. The incarnate God has power; but this power is what happens when the oneness of the divine and the human, or the divine and the natural, are both felt and reflected upon. Wherever God is present, there is divinity. This presence is above all an affirmation of the value of the mundane. But it is also a comfort. The incarnate God not only elevates life but also assumes our suffering. The God who is emptied of transcendence is like us denied protection against the pain of the world. If God is with us in our humanness, then God is with us in our suffering. To be incarnate in one is to be incarnate in the other. Theologians of the ancient church struggled with the paradoxical idea that the transcendent, omnipotent God could truly suffer and die. They resolved the paradox by saying that God does not truly suffer. Radical incarnationism resolves the paradox the other way: The God who does not suffer is not truly God.

The incarnate God shares in all dimensions of human pain. But human agony also emerges as the pain of not knowing—of not having good solutions, clear answers, suitable alternatives. God is with us, too, in these struggles, not as the provider of ready-made solutions but as the companion who validates our uncertainties and empowers our search. Jesus does not offer answers, prescriptions, or blueprints. Jesus models an adventurous searching that enters life in its concreteness, accepts its ambiguities, and trusts its potential for good. Theologies growing out of this way of locating God are not comprehensive systems; they are fragments—tentative, limited, even modest explorations into the gentle workings of a worldly God.

**God the Goal**

Early in the twentieth century, Albert Schweitzer contended that Jesus was an itinerant preacher whose apocalyptic message was fixed on the end, or consummation, of history. Schweitzer's claim was an offense to the theological establishment of the day. As the century progressed, however, Schweitzer's general contention was increasingly accepted as a portrayal of Jesus and, by some, even as a way of locating God. If Jesus is the agent of the eschaton, then Christianity is an eschatological religion and God is an eschatological reality.

In different ways, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann locate
God in the future. For Moltmann, God will become who God is with the realization of the kingdom of God. For Pannenberg, there is an important sense in which God does not yet exist. In neither case is the point to deny God's reality but rather to insist on the fundamental and determinative character of the future—the power of the future over the present. American theologians as different as Carl Braaten, Douglas Meeks, and Ted Peters have echoed this theme.

The biblical basis for this way of understanding God is the centrality of the message of the kingdom of God in the New Testament, at least as the implications of this message are worked out in terms that we can understand today. The Kingdom is the point at which God will be "all in all," and that alone is the true being of God. The resurrection of Jesus is the key—the proleptic disclosure—of the reality of this coming Kingdom. The revelation in Christ is not the realization of the Kingdom but rather the promise of its coming. Christian life now is lived in anticipation of the fulfillment of this promise.

Pannenberg supplements his explication of the biblical message with philosophical considerations. He points out, for example, that human experience is always driven by an anticipation of the future. In fact, he says, the behavior of every living organism is oriented toward what it may become in the future. The future thus is a power that draws all things toward and eventually into it. The eschatological future, we might say, is the realization of the value inherent in all things—past, present, and future—and thus the realization of the God who alone is all value.

While the exegetical and philosophical arguments undergirding this view may be complex, the practical perspective to which it gives rise is quite obvious: life is lived in active hope. That hope is rooted in an anticipation of movement toward the kingdom of God and its ultimate realization beyond or at the end of history. This means, first, that the historical status quo is never satisfactory, never sufficient unto itself. From the future, God calls all things forward into the fullness of the divine reality. We can appreciate the goodness of the present but never ratify it as being adequate to the redemptive completeness toward which we are being called. Living in anticipation means, second, that the past and present are never binding and never fixed. The power of the future in the present frees us from enslavement to present conditions and opens us to the newness of the future. The binding power of the past is never final. The ultimate power is the emancipating power that comes from the God
of the future, freeing us for the future. But, third, the anticipation of this way of life is this-worldly. To contradict an old gospel song (but with a twist!), the world is our home ... in its future. The kingdom of God, according to the New Testament, is the fulfillment of this world, not its abrogation. So living in expectation of the future is living in expectation of the future of this world.

The life of anticipation is never simply an attitude; it is an active way of life. Anticipation is a working toward God's future. But precisely because that future is the future of this empirical world, anticipation produces an analytical theology, one that pays careful attention to the current state of things in order to know better how to serve its coming future. Theological reflection is more than biblical interpretation and philosophical reflection. To serve the world's future we must be aware of the concrete state of things. This means theology must also be informed by political, economic, social, and historical data. Given such an anticipatory, activist, and analytical framework, it is not surprising that this way of locating God has sometimes been expressed as a political theology, a theology of hope, and a theology of liberation. Even if the coming of the Kingdom is in the final analysis God's doing, humans live in the expectation of that future and work to serve God's transforming aims for the world.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has identified four ways of locating God characteristic of twentieth-century theology. It is apparent that these are really four ways of understanding God's relationship to the creation. It is also clear that these are not simply abstract ideas. They tend to give rise to distinctive forms of Christian life. If by spirituality we mean a disciplined form of life embracing the whole person, individual and social, we may say that these ways of locating God tend to produce distinctive types of spirituality, with their own styles of theological reflection.

Views of God that focus on God as Source move the Christian toward a spirituality of gratitude, a mode of life rooted in joyous celebration of the mysterious givenness of life itself. Theology undertaken within this perspective will be mystically inclined. Its most important task will be to witness to the mystery of God. Views of God that emphasize God as Agent lend themselves to a spirituality of guidance. God's will as guide, and obedience to that will, are primary. Theology is an explication of God's will as it pertains to all of life; thus, theology is likely to be comprehensive in character.
Where primacy is given to God as Incarnate, the form of Christian life that follows may be called a spirituality of presence. And since that with which God is at one is the concrete world in all of its complexity, the theology that accompanies this way of life is likely to be a fragmentary one. Theology will be a tentative exploration of the presence of a deity who is at one with the manifold creation. Locating God as Goal of all things provides a different way of orienting life. It gives rise to a spirituality of hope. The focus is on the future of things, and thus theology will try to be attentive to every discernible movement toward that future. Theology, in other words, will be empirical, an analysis of the dynamics and structures of social and historical life.

The careful reader will already have been arguing with many of the connections and tendencies alleged in the foregoing discussion. All views of God as Source, the reader will say, do not result in a mystical spirituality; all views of God as Goal are not accompanied by theologies of history and society, and so on. These objections are well taken. The actual connections between our ways of locating God in relation to the creation, on the one hand, and our styles of Christian life and thought, on the other, are not rigid and mechanical. An unfathomable number of variables undermines any simplistic analysis of these relationships. The most important point, however, is that these connections between views of God and forms of spirituality do exist! How we locate God does make a difference in how we are inclined to live, even if other factors are also at work. Conversely, our ways of living and thinking as Christians reflect our conceptions of God. Generalizations about these relationships will be most useful if they prompt us to think for ourselves about these connections in our own communities.

There is one other point worth considering. Each way of locating God tends to give rise to a distinctive way of being Christian. And each such way, each form of spirituality, has its strengths and, though we haven’t the space to explore them here, its dangers and weaknesses. We might hope that one way of Christian thought and action embraces all of the strengths important to Christian life. Christian history, however, demonstrates quite conclusively that this hope is a chimera. Therefore, to suppose that our own way—our way of locating God, our spirituality, our theological style—is or might become the dominate way of Christian life in the twenty-first century would be appalling arrogance. The better conclusion is that each of these various ways makes its own fallible witness to the nature of God, that
we need to honor each of them even if we cannot espouse them all, and that in the future as in the past we should listen to each of these ways of locating God, trying to hear what they may teach us.

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Endnotes


The Holy Trinity: The Very Heart of Christian Ministry

DAVID S. CUNNINGHAM

My title may lead some readers to balk. They will say, “I always think of the Trinity as a complex, esoteric, and largely outdated way of talking about God. In fact, it would be hard to imagine a Christian belief that was less relevant to my day-to-day work as a pastor. How could it possibly be at the ‘very heart’ of Christian ministry?”

Such sentiments are common; and, given the ways that the impulses of the modern age have formed (one may well say: deformed) Christian theology, these sentiments are also quite understandable. Most of today’s church leaders received their formal theological education at a time when only minimal attention was being paid to trinitarian theology. The many causes of this inattention need not detain us here; in short, it was a difficult time for any theological claim that was not biblically obvious, practically useful, eminently rational, and thoroughly up-to-date. Such conditions were hardly propitious for the deployment of a full-bodied trinitarian theology.

Certainly, there were some rumblings in the German-speaking world—the trinitarian retrievals undertaken by Protestants such as Moltmann and Jüngel and by Roman Catholics such as Kasper and Rahner. Occasionally, a seminarian may be shepherded through some texts of Barth or von Balthasar; but the massive output of these deeply trinitarian thinkers makes it difficult to get a clear sense of their perspective. Much closer at hand were the many theologians writing in the North American context for whom the doctrine of the Trinity was clearly not central: the Niebuhrs, Tillich, Cobb, Farley, Gilkey, McFague, Ruether, and many others.

Consider a standard theology textbook used at many seminaries: It dismisses, in fewer than three pages, what it is pleased to call “the symbol of the Trinity”—tossing it onto the scrap heap of beliefs that have “revealed themselves in almost every aspect to have anachronistic elements and to be unintelligible in the light of modern knowledge and modern attitudes toward reality.” The word Trinity does not appear in the book’s index.1 How
quickly things change—and how silly that curt dismissal now sounds! During the past decade, by my unofficial count, over a hundred significant books have appeared that either are entirely devoted to the doctrine of the Trinity or make the doctrine central to their theological approach.2

What are we to make of this sudden resurgence of interest in ancient Christian claims about the nature of God? Is it simply a trend that will quickly pass? Is it a new conservatism, grasping hold of ancient ideas in an attempt to find some stability in a world that seems to be falling apart? Or is it perhaps a sign of the transition to postmodernity, when bold claims about "modern attitudes toward reality" have begun to lose their appeal?

Perhaps theologians are simply rediscovering a truth that has been known through most of Christian history: The Trinity is at the very center of the day-to-day practice of the Christian life. Because human beings are created in the image of the triune God, we are called to live into God's triune life, insofar as it is possible. Of course, if we have confined our understanding of God's triune life to abstract formulas such as "one nature in three persons," then we will have difficulty imagining what it may mean to live into the Trinity. On closer examination, however, trinitarian theology is not just an esoteric abstraction; it is the origin and goal of the Christian life.

In this essay, I describe some of the important themes that have been raised by the recent renaissance of trinitarian theology and offer some hints as to the difference they may make in our lives. Then, after a brief segue on our language for God, I consider a few specific implications of these trinitarian themes for Christian ministry.

**Trinitarian Themes**

I begin with a discussion of three themes that have consistently advanced to the fore during the past decade of conversation on trinitarian theology. All three have some obvious implications for the day-to-day practices of those who seek to live into God's triune life.

**Relationality and Mutual Participation**

English-speaking theology has referred to three "persons" of the Trinity. But in modern usage, the word *person* has an individualistic connotation; the phrase *three persons* leads us to imagine three *individuals*, three *people*. As a result, Father, Son, and Spirit tend to be assigned differing "personalities" that can be set over against one another, with certain characteristics (or
actions) of God being assigned to one or another of the persons. All too often, these differences harden into hierarchies, with one of the Three named as the only really important one. Does trinitarian theology create inappropriate distinctions and divisions in God? Worse still, does it justify earthly hierarchies by appealing to a hierarchy within the very being of God?

Such internal divine hierarchies and divisions are precisely what trinitarian theology repudiates. Whether or not we choose to speak of human persons as "autonomous individuals" (and I will shortly suggest that we may want to avoid doing so), God's triune life is certainly not a mere collection of such individuals. What we have labeled as the three "persons" of the triune God are better understood as relations. To speak of "Father" or "Son" is not to speak of an individual who may have chosen a life in isolation from other individuals; rather, such terms specify relations that depend, absolutely, on each other for their meaning. There can be no child without a parent, but neither can there be a parent without a child: The two terms are tied together into a knot of mutual causation and interdependence.

This also calls into question the assumed hierarchy of, for example, Father over Son. As descriptions of human beings, the one called "father" must precede the one called "son"; but here again, we are misled by thinking of them as individuals—people who take on the role of parent or child. If instead we think of them as pure relations, the terms father and son become fully mutual and reciprocal. Neither one "comes first": The parent does not become a parent until the child is born. As relations, the parent is as much caused by the child as the child by the parent.

This suggests a nonhierarchical understanding of the Trinity and is of ancient origin. It underlies the Nicene Creed's claim that the Son is "eternally begotten of the Father," ruling out any notion that one of the Three existed prior to or independently of the others. The upshot is a theology of coequality and mutual reciprocity that was part of the original Christian conception of God's nature—and that entails important claims about equality and mutual reciprocity in the everyday practice of Christian life. We, too, are called to this life of mutuality, equality, and "giving place to the other" that marks the life of the triune God.

Difference and Polyphony
Far from being the wild-eyed metaphysical speculations that some have thought them to be, the ancient insights of trinitarian theology were an
attempt to come to grips with the concrete narratives of the Christian faith, which describe a God who "became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14) and who was poured out upon the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2). These concrete experiences of God were taken to be sufficiently different from that of the One who "dwells in light inaccessible" that they could not be considered mere modes or manifestations of God; they marked a real multiplicity in God (yet without denying God’s unity). So we can meaningfully speak of one of the Three being "sent" by another (Jesus "breathes" the Holy Spirit upon the apostles in John 20:22) or of any two having a conversation (as in the Garden of Gethsemane, Matthew 26 and parallels). We are once again learning to see such multiplicity and difference as something for which human beings can rejoice and be thankful, rather than something that needs to be suppressed by our desire for homogeneity and uniformity.

One of the analogies that can help us think through God’s internal difference is that of polyphonic music. In music, more than one thing happens at a time; multiple notes can be played or sung, even at the same time, whether by one person or by a group. In fact, entire melodies can be played in differing and overlapping sequences. When we hear more than one note or line being played at once, we do not usually consider this to be contradictory or confused. Harmonious difference is not only accepted; it is encouraged and rewarded. By analogy, Christianity proclaims a polyphonic understanding of God, in whom there is difference rather than a monotonous homogeneity. Yet this difference is not a source of exclusion; attention to any one of the divine Three does not imply a diminished role for the others. All have their distinctive melodies and all are "played" and "heard" simultaneously, without damage to God’s unity.

Furthermore, we can understand creation as marked by the polyphonic character of its Maker. We can set aside uniformity and homogeneity and learn to appreciate difference. This is not identical to a commitment to "pluralism"; it encourages coherent and harmonious difference—difference-in-unity—rather than unlimited multiplicity. Christians should be committed to diversity and difference; but this ought to flow not from a vague faith in pluralism or democracy but from our participation in God—who is difference-in-unity.

Particularity without Individualism
Our cultural context leads us to think first and foremost of individuals, who may choose to enter into voluntary relationships with other individuals.
When these relationships are no longer useful or expedient, we simply end them, exchanging them for other relationships. This way of thinking makes the individual the cornerstone of human culture; the concept of freedom becomes nothing more than the absence of constraint. We have begun, of course, to discover the downside of our enthusiasm for autonomy. We feel isolated and alone—trapped in a world of strangers, with whom we neither expect to experience nor can even imagine long-lasting relationships.

The church understands itself as an alternative to this culture of isolation; but it has often done so in the wrong way. It imagines that Christian congregations are one of the many ways that we voluntarily gather in groups in order to be less lonely. Unfortunately, this leads the church to think of itself in the same way that businesses, clubs, and other groups think of themselves: they seek to make themselves and their "product" attractive to the individual consumer. Individualism still reigns supreme; the customer makes the choice, based on the appeal of the goods and services offered. By thinking in these terms, our churches have done nothing at all to overcome our culture's individualism; indeed, they have reinforced it.

But if we think in trinitarian terms, we may be able to imagine an alternative. For the Trinity is not a loose association or voluntary club; it is not three isolated individuals who happened to join together for a common purpose. In describing God's triune life—God's internal communion—we employ relational terms rather than individualistic ones in an effort to negate the idea that God is somehow "composed" of autonomous individuals. Admittedly, we use specific names to designate each of the Three; this allows us to particularize them, temporarily and provisionally, in order to be able to say something about God's internal multiplicity. But these particularizing terms are always in motion, always flowing into one another and giving place to one another, such that it really makes no sense to speak of "individuals" within God.

This aspect of trinitarian theology, and its application to the Christian life, is nicely illustrated by Paul's discussion of the interdependence of the body in 1 Corinthians 12-14. We can certainly speak of the body's hands or feet or eyes; but there is a certain sense in which such terminology is artificial. The body's members cannot venture out on their own, cannot sever their relationship with the other members of the body, without ceasing to become what they most truly are. Paul is trying to help us see that "individualism" is fatal. It leads only to a lot of detached and useless
body parts—or, to use another biblical image, to a valley of dry bones. Whether these bones can live will depend upon whether they are willing to allow God to attach them to one another, to bind them to one another with sinews and flesh, so that they become what they are meant to be: a fully articulated, interdependent whole.

To live into God's triune life is to stop thinking of ourselves as autonomous individuals who can enter into and leave relationships at will and instead, to recognize that interdependence is primary; we separate ourselves out from the rest of the body at our peril. Attention to our particularity does not require postulating an individualism that would, in the end, isolate us from one another—and from the divine communion in whose image we are created and into which we are called. We need not describe ourselves as individuals in order to honor the particularity of each human being and to recognize the intrinsic worth of each person, created in God’s image.

**Trinitarian Language**

Before turning to the specific ways in which these trinitarian themes might influence the practice of Christian ministry, I need to address the neuralgic question of whether the patriarchal structures of the premodern world are somehow “built into” the very core of trinitarian language. If trinitarian categories are to receive the degree of attention that they deserve, we will need to overcome the perception of a necessary collusion between the Trinity and patriarchy.

Because the words *Father* and *Son* have played a central role in traditional trinitarian theology, they are sometimes thought to be hopelessly masculine. Of course, Christian theologians have, from very early on, argued that these words are functioning analogically and that they do not imply that God has biological sex. And today, most Christians would deny that this language “makes” God male. But it can be difficult, when we speak a language in which all other uses of the words *father* and *son* imply a male referent, to remove their masculine connotations for many worshipers. And we may never fully understand the subconscious effects of the overwhelming usage of masculine language, masculine metaphors, and masculine personal pronouns to refer to God—not to mention art, architecture, and other historical collusions between Christianity and patriarchy. Those who are bombarded with such language and imagery, consistently and exclusively, both in theory and in practice, may be forgiven for assuming
that biological sex, or at least gender, apparently must be predicated of God—and that God's gender must be masculine.

The problem has only been made worse by self-proclaimed "defenders" of the traditional trinitarian formula, who, while denying its patriarchal implications, have rather woodenly claimed it as the only possible name for God—assuming that mere linguistic agreement on particular words ensures some kind of conceptual continuity through time. This misguided response has often provoked another, equally troublesome, one: the simplistic claim that, since God has many names, our language for God is irrelevant—in other words, that one description of God is as good as another. Neither perspective does justice to the fact that the traditional trinitarian formula was attempting to articulate a particular point about the complex internal relationality, difference, and mutual coinherence of God.

To make that point persuasively, one cannot simply repeat old formulas. Language and its meanings are in constant flux; words are heard differently in different contexts. But neither can one simply make up new formulas on the theory that one word is as good as another. Instead, we must attend to the particular features of a language as it is currently being used, such that the point of the traditional formula can be expressed within the current cultural-linguistic context.  

Unfortunately, some of the alternative formulas that are currently in use fail to make the trinitarian "point." For example, they may imply that, in certain circumstances, only one of the divine Three acts upon the world, with the other two standing by as helpers or mere observers—whereas Christians have traditionally claimed that it is always God who acts, undividedly. God's triunity implies not that there is a division among God's various actions (with, for example, the Father creating and the Son redeeming) but rather that all of God's actions can be spoken of in terms of their source, their means, and their goal. (As some writers have put the matter: all of God's acts originate in the Father, are accomplished through the Son, and are perfected in the Spirit.) This helps to explain why the phrase Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, while certainly descriptive of the work of the Christian God, is not strictly a trinitarian formula: God's threeness is located not in a division of labor, but in a complex structure of internal relations.

In an effort to preserve the relational claims of trinitarian theology, to draw on the imagery of Bible and tradition, and to evoke new analogical resonances. I have regularly advocated the formula "Source, Wellspring,
and Living Water.\textsuperscript{5} I propose this neither as a replacement for the traditional formula nor as the only possible alternative but rather as one of many possible alternatives that attempts to make the point about God’s unity, multiplicity, and internal relationality. A formula such as this, accompanied by adequate explanation and catechesis, can help keep the Trinity at the very heart of Christian ministry—even while it undermines the claim that trinitarian theology is “necessarily” patriarchal or sexist.

\textbf{Trinitarian Practices}

I now want to examine several practices of Christian ministry that should be informed by the trinitarian themes that I have described. I do not mean to suggest that every challenge and problem associated with these aspects of ministry can be addressed simply by imbuing them with a trinitarian perspective. Even less would I claim to have exhausted all the pastoral implications of trinitarian doctrine! I simply want to suggest, by way of a few examples, that a more consciously trinitarian approach to the work of Christian ministry would help to make our work more effective, more fulfilling, and in greater conformity with the gospel.

\textbf{Worship}

Christian worship is necessarily trinitarian in that it offers praise to the triune God. And so it is altogether fitting that trinitarian categories should pervade worship life; God’s triune being should be reflected in its language, structure, and disposition. With respect to the language of worship, the foregoing comments about trinitarian language may suffice; for those interested in additional liturgical resources, an excellent guide is Ruth Duck and Patricia Wilson-Kastner’s book \textit{Praising God: The Trinity in Christian Worship}.\textsuperscript{6}

But beyond the question of liturgical language, Christian worship also needs to be trinitarian in its structure and disposition. By this I mean that our worship life should reflect both God’s unity and multiplicity: a complex internal relationality in which internally coherent forms of difference are accepted but do not lead to separation or division. This means that Christian worship does not need to be identical, in all times and places—a good thing, too, since it never has been! On the other hand, there needs to be enough family resemblance among the varying forms of Christian worship to enable us to identify different events of worship as all oriented toward the same God.

Both within and among Christian congregations, this means that we
do not need to limit ourselves to being trendsetters (or trend followers) with respect to the structure and style of worship. If the church down the street has dismantled the organ and installed all the equipment for a rock band, do we need to do the same? No. If some worshipers feel compelled to substitute the pronoun she for he in hymns and prayers, does that imply that everyone has to do so? No. But should they be dissuaded from making such changes? Again, the answer is no. God's internal difference opens our hearts and minds to differences among us, allowing them to coexist without the need for absolute uniformity. On the other hand, when we do change the style and structure of our worship, we need to provide enough lines of continuity so that our worship is still recognizably Christian (which also mean: trinitarian, christological, and Spirit-filled). Precisely what this will look like, in a particular case, is of course a matter of discernment for the community. It may mean that a community will adopt a variety of worship patterns within its own congregational life; but if so, it will need to work to maintain unity in the midst of such diversity. This might be accomplished by making sure that the liturgical leadership of various services rotates from time to time so that leaders are able to experience a variety of forms of worship; by cross-fertilizing the services with one another's regular participants; and by meeting regularly for a discussion of the theological motives that are driving particular worship practices.

In any case, we will be better disposed to negotiate these difficult questions if we recognize that God's simultaneous multiplicity and unity allows for other possibilities besides the two extremes of "never change" and "change for change's sake." If Christian congregations are able to embody a variety of worship styles without allowing these to drive wedges among various parts of the body of Christ, then they will more truly reflect both God's unity and God's diversity.

Preaching
Karl Barth famously urged preachers to hold "the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." An effort to follow this advice would certainly improve a great many of the sermons that I have heard but I would want to extend the metaphor. We ought not let the image of "the two hands" prevent us from introducing a yet wider variety of source material into our sermons. The Bible must always be our primary source; but we also should be attending to the biblical interpretation of Christians through the ages.
(This has been made much easier through the wide availability of collections oriented to precisely this use, such as the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture.) Similarly, alongside the daily newspaper, we ought to draw much more heavily on non-mainstream news sources (such as public radio and the alternative press). Even more important, in my estimation, we should seek to draw on literature (including narrative, drama, and poetry)—particularly those forms of (implicitly or explicitly) Christian literature that have shaped the theological imagination over time. And so much of popular culture (film, music, sports, and other entertainment) cries out for attention in sermons—not so much as a source of insight or as an object of criticism, but as a foil through which the gospel message can come to be more clearly discerned, articulated, and practiced.

With all these sources before us, perhaps the best metaphor is not that of Barth’s two-fisted preacher but that of the juggler—someone who can keep a good number of balls in the air at one time. The ability to attend simultaneously to several different sources is itself a trinitarian practice; it asks us to reflect the themes of relationality, difference, and interdependence in the construction of the sermon. Ideally, preaching is an integrative practice, in which a diverse range of source material is understood to be united in the service of a common gospel theme. In this sense, making a sermon “trinitarian” is not so much about making sure we mention all three persons: it is about weaving together the biblical, historical, intellectual, and experiential sources of the Christian faith into a recognizable whole.

Church Order
Some of the most vexing questions facing church leaders today are questions about the proper ordering of congregational life. Under this heading, I include such matters as who is considered eligible for baptism, Eucharist, ordination, or marriage. The discussion of such matters is largely dominated by two sets of responses. One group proposes a very narrow interpretation of biblical texts, traditional assumptions, and/or preparatory requirements for participation in a particular church practice, thereby limiting such participation. Another group, reacting against what it perceives to be an overly restrictive approach, counters with a policy of maximal openness, in which there are virtually no restrictions or requirements for such participation.

I want to suggest that neither of these approaches to questions of
church order is particularly trinitarian in its perspective. To demand that all participation take exactly the same form is to ignore the difference and interdependence that marks the triune life of God and our lives formed in God's image. On the other hand, to abolish all restrictions and requirements is to misunderstand God's threeness as a kind of unlimited plurality, in which divine identity loses its shape and texture. A more trinitarian approach to these difficult questions would involve mutual recognition among all parties to the debate of the need for both identity and difference. Again, the example of polyphonic music may be helpful: we certainly ought to be able to recognize the beauty of hearing more than one melody at a time; and yet, not just any combination of tunes will do. Moreover, we cannot just continue to add in more melodies, one on top of the other; before long, the whole thing will begin to sound like nothing but noise.

Somewhere between the extremes of "the one and only way" and "any way will do" is the possibility of a limited range of options, in which the boundaries are negotiated on the basis of theological judgments. If a variety of perspectives is possible, it will be because each of them meets certain theological criteria; and these same criteria will necessarily exclude some options. We should be equally suspicious of criteria that are set so narrowly that they eliminate all diversity, as we should be of criteria that set no boundaries whatsoever. This does not mean (as it is all too often taken to mean) that the correct position is always and necessarily a compromise at the midpoint between two extremes. Instead, it is an attempt to encourage those who might gravitate toward the extremes to test their positions against the supposedly "opposite" position according to explicitly theological criteria.

For example, on the much contested question of the marriage or ordination of gay and lesbian Christians, we ought to be wary of both the response that says "absolutely not" and of the claim that a person's sexual orientation is "none of the church's business." The former response tends to eliminate a certain kind of diversity from certain central Christian practices, whereas the latter seems to assume that any attempt to maintain a specific, ongoing identity of these practices is clearly intolerable. Given the trinitarian imperative to listen for a variety (but not an unlimited variety) of musically differentiated themes, we would be wise to eschew both these approaches in favor of the development of theologically justifiable criteria for evaluating particular cases.

Space is short, so I offer only one example. Good arguments can be
made that a marriage should be marked by constancy and monogamy and (perhaps) by an openness to children, either by biological birth or by adoption. These are the criteria according to which a certain kind of unity or identity can be legitimately demanded. Sexual orientation, by itself, cannot function as a basis for such judgment—unless it can be demonstrated that every person of a particular orientation is incapable of meeting these theological criteria. (Evidence suggests that the disciplines of constancy and monogamy are just as difficult for heterosexual as for homosexual persons, despite the official sanction and support offered to the former and denied to the latter throughout most of Christian history.) Needless to say, this "trinitarian" approach to debates on matters of church order cannot claim to adjudicate every difference. Nevertheless, I am convinced that, if conducted along these lines, such debates would be much more productive.

The Very Heart of Christian Ministry

In this essay, I have only scratched the surface with respect to the relevance of trinitarian theology for the ongoing work of Christian ministry. But I hope that, at the very least, these reflections can help us reorder some of our debates along more theological lines. As we continue to discuss the future of Christian language, worship, preaching, and church order, let us not allow ourselves to be blown about by the winds of popular opinion and market trends. But, on the other hand, let us recognize that some of the breezes that blow us to new places may possibly be the breath of the Spirit of God. Let us look to the triune life of God as our archetype, origin, and goal—allowing ourselves to be taken up into a participation in God, such that our own lives come more and more to resemble the life of the One—the Three—in whose image we were created.

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Endnotes

1. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, eds., Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks, 2nd. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). The quotation is from page 88; the three pages on the Trinity are 93–96; the (absence of) an index entry is on 400.
2. The cast of characters is long and diverse. It includes Leonardo Boff, David

3. For an excellent analysis of this phenomenon, see Philip D. Kenneson and James L. Street, *Selling Out the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).

4. I have outlined a concise form that this sort of contextual work may take in “Developing Alternative Trinitarian Formulas,” *Anglican Theological Review* 80/1 (Winter 1998): 8–29.

5. For a complete argument in favor of this formula, see Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, ch. 2.


8. For some careful reflections on this question, see above all Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999).
There is a God. There is no God. What is the problem? I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am sure that my love is no illusion. I am quite sure that there is no God in the sense that I am sure that there is nothing which resembles what I can conceive when I say that word. —Simone Weil

"Dear God, are boys better than girls? I know you are one (a boy), but try to be fair." In David Heller’s *The Children’s God*, a little girl named Sylvia reveals in unsettling fashion the assumptions and problems of the dominance of the metaphor *God the Father* and of God as the antecedent to the pronoun *he* in ancient and contemporary Christian God-talk. Sylvia knows that the God who is “all male, all the time” impugns the worth of her own female humanity. And with a child’s instinct for fairness, she confronts theology, in her direct challenge to God, to recognize the primacy of the criterion of justice in its ways of speaking, judging, and acting. Sylvia’s question lucidly and disarmingly names the issues inherent in speaking theologically (*theos + logos*, literally, words about God) that have been identified and challenged by feminist theologies since the late 1960s. From the late nineteenth-century work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her colleagues on *The Woman's Bible* to the sophisticated literary, psychoanalytical, linguistic, sociohistorical tools employed by contemporary feminist scholars, theology written by many women and a few men has consistently offered confirmation of and possible solutions to Sylvia’s dilemma. In this essay, I offer an overview of the issues, problems, and solutions articulated by feminist theologians about Christian God-language in the late twentieth century. I also show that feminist theologies speak freshly, creatively, and productively of the divine by embodying an awareness of ultimate mystery and a commitment to justice and planetary flourishing, both of which are required for Christianity to speak meaningfully in the twenty-first century.
A significant strand in the history of Western Christianity has maintained that all human speech for God is necessarily analogical or metaphorical—it uses language that normally applies to one thing in order to describe another; yet, it implies some relationship between them. As Thomas Aquinas writes in the thirteenth century, "We cannot speak of God at all except on the basis of creatures, and so whatever is said both of God and creatures is said in virtue of a certain order that creatures have in relation to God (ordo creaturarum ad Deum) as their source and cause in which all their perfections pre-exist." For example, says Thomas, when we say that God is a "lion," we do not mean he is an animal; rather, we are referring to his "mighty deeds." God is and is not a lion. In order to understand human language for God, Thomas stresses, we must look to the ordinary human use of the term applied to God for its meaning. The same logic applies whether one is making nonanthropocentric analogies (God is [and is not] a rock) or drawing on human characteristics and experiences to express an attribute of the divine. Thus, feminist theologian Regina Coll writes, "Following Thomas Aquinas's lead, perhaps the best we can say is, 'God is Father; God is not Father. God is not not Father... God is Mother; God is not Mother; God is not not Mother.'" Likewise, while God-as-male and God-as-Father have been used almost exclusively in Western Christian discourse, disparate but persistent elements of mainstream Christian tradition have offered images that awaken and surprise, like Julian of Norwich's fourteenth-century Revelation of Divine Love, in which God is both Father and Mother, and Henry M. Turner's nineteenth-century claim that God Is a Negro:

Every race of people since time began who have attempted to describe their God by words, or by painting, or by carvings or by any other form or figure, have conveyed the idea that the God who made them and shaped their destinies was symbolized in themselves. . . . We do not believe that there is any hope for a race of people who do not believe that they look like God.5

The inscription on the tomb of Cardinal John Henry Newman articulates the dilemma: "The name that can be named is not the name."6 That is, it is both impossible and essential for human beings to express the nature of the being of God in the world.

The precarious nature of human talk about who God is and what God is like is belied, however, by the ferocity with which feminist theologians'
challenges to the dominant image of God as Father, King, and most assuredly, male, are met. Rejection by the mainstream church of language for God that is other than "male" is a practice as old as the church itself. In her groundbreaking work on texts of the extracanonical Nag Hammadi gospels, discovered in 1945, Elaine Pagels unearths the diverse theos-logos of early gnostic Christians: God the Dyad: Primal Father and Mother of all things; God as Father, Mother, Son; God as Sophia-Wisdom. Her work also suggests that the wholesale expulsion of these metaphors from the ancient orthodox tradition places Sylvia's question about the value judgments implied in the exclusive reference to God as male in a larger historical-social context: the acceptance by the end of the second century in the early church of the dominance of man over woman as God's intended ordering of creation. But the success of this early rejection and the paucity of opportunities available for women's education and leadership in the West left the question dormant until the emergence of the feminist critique by Elizabeth Cady Stanton of women's assigned role during the nineteenth-century suffrage movement. The enormous difficulties facing our grandmothers and great-grandmothers in this first wave of feminism as a politics and a formal discourse eventually reduced what was originally a broad social, political, cultural, and religious agenda for reform and rights to the drive for the ballot. But Cady Stanton's editing of The Woman's Bible and her own progressively more radical writings on the role of Western Christianity in the domination of man over woman also foreshadowed the explosion of feminist theologies as they entered their second wave in the late 1960s in the United States, and then internationally. Sylvia's question about who God is and the learned androcentricism (literally, "male-centeredness") that accompanies it were the central organizing questions for early feminist explorations of Christian language for God.

**Feminist Theology in the Second Wave**

Feminism reemerged as a broad social, political, and religious force in the late 1960s as women in the United States rejected their continued relegation to second-class status in certain segments of movements arguing for social justice and change: the Civil Rights and anti-war movements, as well as the sexual independence afforded by the introduction of the birth control pill. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* spoke powerfully to white, middle-class North American homemakers. And the "women's liber-
tion movement," along with the hopes raised by Vatican II, was embraced by North American churchwomen and religious scholars in their own search for equality and voice in the Christian community. Like the critique of long-accepted androcentric and patriarchal (literally, "the rule of the fathers") norms, assumptions, and practices made by the broader women's movement, feminist Christians were faced with the difficult and necessary task of asking whether their most fundamental allegiance was to an institution—and a deity—that, at its heart, supported and justified their lower-class status. Was Christianity fundamentally a discourse of equality, historically misinterpreted? Was it simply in need of reformation through the addition of female metaphors, history, and leadership? Or was Christianity irredeemably sexist, a patriarchal institution that must be abandoned in favor of old and new women-centered, earth-based, religious practices? Such questions shaped the debate about God-talk that emerged during this second phase of feminist theology, as articulated in the work of feminists such as Mary Daly, whose groundbreaking book *The Church and the Second Sex* draws on the hopes for transformation generated by the Second Vatican Council. Daly—who later repudiated her own work as a Christian theologian in the remarkably, yet in retrospect, unsurprisingly hostile reaction to her "modest proposals"—anticipates and frames the debate about Christian feminist language for God for the next two decades. She begins and ends her work with appeals to French feminist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir, whom she cites as saying, "Christian ideology has contributed no little to the oppression of woman." Yet, in her earlier work, Daly rejects de Beauvoir's conclusion that women must reject Christianity, arguing instead that it is not a "false" but rather "an incomplete and partial vision." And she makes the claim that her argument for an expanded vision of God rests in the fundamental knowledge that "God is present, yet always hidden, and the summons from that Presence gives a dimension of transcendence to our activity, by which we are propelled forward." However, it is Daly's 1972 article "After the Death of God the Father" that has been most influential in the second-wave debate over exclusively male symbols for deity. In it, she makes the straightforward claim:

[T]he image of Father God, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and
fitting. If God in "his" heaven is a father ruling "his" people, then it is in the "nature" of things and according to the divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male dominated. . . . The various theologies that hypostasize transcendence invariably use this "God" to legitimate oppression, particularly that of women.\textsuperscript{11}

In this seminal essay, Daly not only shows the inextricable relationship between human social relationships and human language for the divine, exposing the way particular theological symbols produce and reinforce tangible results in the lives of real women and men, but also anticipates the women's movement as a catalyst for the opening up of the entire Christian symbol system to a "remythologization" that recognizes "revelation [as] an ongoing experience."\textsuperscript{12} Second-wave feminist theorists argued that the seemingly personal disaffections of individual women really reflect the experiences of the vast majority of women regarding basic social and political contradictions in male–female relations in the world. Similarly, Daly shows us that what looks to be a simple theological question from feminists to the few dominant metaphors of the divine is really a fundamental challenge to the structural oppression of women that is reinforced by the very symbols at the heart of Christian faith. That such a critique should have met (and still meets) with vehement denial and rejection, therefore, is no surprise.

Second-wave feminist theologies offered two basic responses to the critique summarized above via the work of Daly. First, they called for an expansion of anthropomorphic metaphors for God to retrieve a lost history of female deities and to include female images and traits associated with woman. Second, they argued for images that explore nongendered analogies to the divine. Representative approaches, drawing on the idea of "goddess," include Rosemary Radford Ruether's correlation of the "male, warrior God" with a shift in human consciousness during which prehistoric agrarian societies held a more holistic view of the relation between nature and history and worshiped both female and male deities. Another approach is Carol P. Christ's psychologically-based argument for women's need for a goddess-figure in order to recognize and affirm female power, bodies, will, and relationships—all of which are devalued or delegitimized by the exclusive appeal to a male deity.\textsuperscript{13} While such explorations have found little support among more mainstream American and European churchwomen, they anticipate political and ecological themes that will be explored further by these and
Other feminist theologians in the two decades to follow and function to further decenter claims to the literal reality of a patriarchal deity. More acceptable, at least in the academy, have been the later experiments in metaphor directed by Sallie McFague on God as Mother and Elizabeth Johnson’s retrieval of the Sophia-Wisdom tradition of Hebrew Scripture and of early Christianity. While each, through the addition of female images for God, directly challenges the idea that a single name can express the infinity of divine-human relations, McFague attempts to reconstruct the idea of “motherhood” while avoiding the pitfalls of gender-role stereotyping. Her God-as-Mother is a figure associated with justice, creativity, and unconditional love. She employs distinct elements of the female experience but attempts to develop new analogies for human-divine relationships that draw more broadly on the parent-child relationship as something known by and available to both women and men. Her approach is based in arguments reminiscent of Aquinas regarding the differences between speech used for objects of direct human experience and the same speech when used for the divine. Coupled with a strong appeal to the base claim of the unknowability of God, McFague attempts to unseat the “root metaphor” of God-the-Father through the addition of new anthropomorphic ways of imagining what we mean when we say “God”: God as Mother, Lover, and Friend.  

If McFague’s images of God surprise and open us to new depths of the divine through the juxtaposition of the unexpected, Elizabeth Johnson’s images draw upon the lost tradition of Sophia-Wisdom to argue that the Christian tradition itself contains the elements for broadened and transformed speech about God. Other feminist theologians have explored nongendered and nonanthropomorphic God-language: Daly’s God as “Being . . . the Verb within which we participate”; Anne Carr’s identification of “the relational God,” “the liberating God,” “the suffering God,” “the God who is future,” and “the unknown, hidden God”; Rebecca Chopp’s reconstruction of “Word” as the “perfectly open sign that funds multiplicity and otherness”; Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s exploration of the hospitality and relationship implicit in the trinitarian God; and Carter Heyward’s claim for conceiving God as the “power of relation” between human beings themselves and between them and the divine. Because feminist theologians’ starting point for the retrieval of older images and the construction of new images of the divine is always the limits inherent in any human speech and the inexhaustible mystery of God, they are quick to point to the limitations of their
own individual approaches to theology. They are fully aware of the dangers of reinforcing rather than dismantling gender-role stereotypes through the association of a Mother-God with those activities traditionally assigned to women: nurturing, relationality, gentleness, kindness, and the implication that motherhood is a prerequisite for a fully realized woman’s existence. Feminist scholars have pointed out that simply adding female metaphors to the already-existing male paradigm does nothing to challenge the structural inequities grounded in such language. And they recognize that reliance on parental metaphors can reinforce an unhealthy sense of dependency and unquestioning obedience in human beings who desperately need to take responsibility for the welfare of their fellow beings and the whole of the fragile planet we inhabit. Likewise, feminist scholars have challenged the viability of goddess-language on both historical and social-psychological grounds. Emily Culpepper, while sympathetic to the goddess movement, argues that many contemporary constructions are open to criticism of anti-Semitism, racism, and gender-role stereotyping. Even more problematic for the appeal to a prepatriarchal “goddess” tradition is Cynthia Eller’s critique of the claim to a matriarchal prehistory, in which she argues that such a basis for women’s claims to a female divine figure are both historically unsupported and mythically nonfunctional. Likewise, feminist theologians recognize that any reliance on the more neutral, nonanthropocentric metaphors belies the fundamental Christian claims to a personal deity in whose image human beings are made. In criticizing their own attempts to find ways to speak meaningfully and truthfully of God, some feminist theologians have ceased to call the divine name at all, offering instead unpronounceable terms: God/dess, G’d. Again, such formulations recognize both the tentative nature of all human God-talk and the almost inevitable connection of “God” with “male” after millennia of patriarchal theological dominance. And to compound the difficulties of credible God-talk that feminist theologians bring to our attention, they must contend with the devaluation of women in our society, which renders any naming of God-she as somehow mildly amusing, if not thoroughly objectionable.

God-Talk in the Third Wave of Feminist Theology

“Dear God, are boys better than girls? I know you are one, but try to be fair.” As they enter the twenty-first-century, mainstream feminist theologians are compelled to recognize the significant but relatively small gains made in the
inclusion of new images for God in contemporary church language and practice. They must recognize the failure of reason to convince the broader church of the importance of their claims, regardless of the retrieval of ancient traditions of female imagery and women’s leadership in the early churches and despite appeals to justice and egalitarianism at the heart of Christian teaching. And they confront an impasse represented by their own unpronounceable names—G*d and God/dess—that in their silence announce with utter clarity the complexity of the web of spiritual, historical, social, political, and personal relationships of freedom and oppression that are embedded in human attempts to speak of the divine in Christian tradition. At the end of 150 years of noteworthy feminist scholarship on gender and God-talk, feminist theologians find themselves asking: Are we crazy to keep talking about God in a church that is almost wholly resistant to change and thoroughly patriarchal? Are we blind and in denial about the possibility of real and lasting transformation? Or, as feminists like Daphne Hampson and Daly have argued since the early 1970s, are women so oppressed that they embrace their own submission to an inherently patriarchal Christian God and his church? These are disturbing questions. Yet millions of women worldwide continue to speak of God. And they continue to call themselves Christian. If feminist theologians are not to dismiss them—and ourselves—as either blind or benighted, we must learn to ask the question of theos–logos in new and different ways. In her study of the state of theological education in North America’s mainline seminaries, Rebecca Chopp argues that we must begin by asking a simple but neglected question: What are ordinary women in the church doing? In what ways do they experience the divine? In what ways do they transform the symbols and practices of Christian traditions and create new ones to name “the sufferings and distortions but also the dreams and desires of the day”?

It is in the irruption of the voices of women of color and international feminists and in the recognition of the key role in church language and practice played by women in their ordinary spiritual prayers and practices in the third wave of feminist theologies that Sylvia’s plea for justice is pushed significantly beyond the confines of gender relations. If the focus of First World feminist theologians has been upon the experience of sexual oppression in relationship to Christian language for God, third-wave feminist theologians bring both those and other questions to theological discourse; and their answers offer rich, tangible, and challenging images of the divine. Third-wave feminist theologies negotiate the impasse reached at the end of
the second wave via an explosion of First and Third World voices of women of color, who experience God-talk as a statement of hope and empowerment in worlds of inordinate human suffering. And these theologies demonstrate ways in which academic feminist theologians can and do draw upon the experiences and practices of day-to-day Christian women to develop rich interpretations of old names—including God the Father—and create vibrant new images of the divine. In her reconstruction of Christian theology from a variety of Asian perspectives, Chung Hyun Kyung makes use of the biblical affirmation of the human being as imago Dei to argue for God as male and female and also as “community” rather than as an individual. She cites Elizabeth Dominquez: “To be in the image of God is to be in community. It is not simply a man or a woman who can reflect god, but it is the community in relationship.” Chung continues, “In a genuine community everyone is a ‘steward’ to one another.”

Chung cites Lee Sun Ai, who writes of God as “movement . . . [as] the angry surf” and Astrid Lobo of India, who writes, “No longer do I see God as a rescuer. I see her more as power and strength within me.” The primary image underlying all the metaphors from which Chung draws is “[t]he power that fosters life rather than death” in a part of the world where death comes in the forms of starvation, political repression, and sexual slavery, as well as the experience of patriarchal oppression. “The greatest love of God for the starving people is food,” Chung writes. She gives new meaning to the phrase “bread of the world.” And Chung’s appeal to the God of physical life in a world that knows an inordinate share of death is a theme that runs through the work of other Third World feminist theologians from Africa, other parts of Asia, and Latin America. The shift away from the identity of God’s essence to the identification of God in an unjust world is articulated by María Pilar Aquino: “Here the central questions are not about God’s existence, but about how to discover God in a reality of suffering and
inhumanity. How can we uncover God's true face in a context where women are reduced to insignificance?... What does it mean to speak about the God of life to people whose daily experience is being despised because they are poor women of oppressed races?" Like other liberation theologians, Aquino shows that to know God as the God of life claims that the suffering of the poor is "against God's plan for fullness of life for humanity ... [F]aith in God means a commitment to transform this situation, which is not accidental but has perceivable causes ... From this experience God emerges as the one who truly protects and defends those who have the least life."^25

Feminist Contributions to God-Talk

Like all liberation theologies, feminist theologies argue that the central question for Christianity in our time is how to speak of God in a world of massive public suffering and injustice. This question is most fundamentally a question of the credibility of speech that claims the existence of a God who is benevolence and righteousness among peoples who experience too little of either. Feminist theologies in all phases challenge the post-Enlightenment preoccupations of the unbeliever worried over the speculative nature of all theological speech and concerned with preserving the distinctiveness of Christian discourse in an increasingly pluralistic world. And in their many forms and patterns, feminist theologies face squarely the challenges to the credibility of any claims to the existence of divine being raised by the massive public suffering of the twentieth century. Feminist theologians recognize that all claims for or against the possibility of God are questions not so much of the proof of divine existence or Christian theological superiority but rather of the manifestations of human knowledge and power in the world. Therefore, feminist theologians—Sylvia and her compatriots—base their own critiques, explorations, and claims about God upon two simple, yet furiously debated, presuppositions: (1) All theological speech is creative human construction (the formal norm of feminist theology), attempting to describe that which human beings cannot directly experience, namely, the whole, the totality, the all of existence. (2) No theological speech, however imaginative or traditional, bears fundamental credibility without its concurrence with simple goodness in the real, human world (the material norm of feminist theology).

Can we speak of God in an environment where "real" truth is identified with empirical evidence? May we speak of God in a world whose daily
headlines express the groaning of creation for a release from endless pain? How might we speak of God without further exacerbating the open wounds of sexism, racism, colonialism, dehumanizing poverty, and environmental destruction whose inexorable history haunts us each: victim, bystander, perpetrator? Does it matter what we say or if theologians—professional and lay—have anything to say at all? Feminist theologies have not answered all these questions. Rather, they have engaged vigorously in the practice of hope. Similar to Karl Rahner's understanding that the mystery of God is not what we cannot prove or understand but what we cannot exhaust, feminist theologies have taken more seriously than any other contemporary God-talk both the necessity and the impossibility of human speech for God. I conclude, then, by identifying five contributions of feminist theologies to the possibility of God-talk in our time:

- Feminist theologies insist on the dictum that limiting speech about theos-logos to any one name, metaphor, image, analogy, convention, or tradition is idolatry—a raising of the partiality of human experience to the level of the whole. As Aquino writes, "[D]ivine revelation cannot be imprisoned, much less manipulated, to prevent or resist the intrinsic transforming power of the Spirit."

- Feminist theologies recognize the fundamental Christian claim that talk of God is inextricably tied to the image of self. To speak of human being in all its multiplicity is to speak of the imago Dei. And to speak of God claims the incarnation of the divine in the world. Thus, feminist God-talk requires that we recognize the inherent worth of all human beings. And it holds that knowledge of God is embedded in the material world.

- Feminist theologies argue that justice and reason in theological speech cannot be separated. The real divide in postmodern discourse about God is not between the known and the unknown but rather between the fed and the hungry, the hopeful and the hopeless, the empowered and the disenfranchised. Questions about God are questions about human knowledge and power. Metaphors both emerge from and produce knowledge. Thus, feminist theologies continually ask how particular manifestations of God-language function—what our constructions of the divine produce in the real world for real people, especially for "the least of these."

- Feminist theologies practice theology as a fundamental task of the church. In exploring and engaging new images for God, feminist
theologies participate in the creation of the new and the transformation of the old by bringing together historical investigation and human experiences in a never-ending practice of imaginative construction of the divine. Through such use of the imagination, they express the human desire to experience the whole, goodness, and peace that begets flourishing. Christian traditions know this desire as God, for "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee" (Augustine).

- Feminist theologies know that seeking and naming God in our lives is like unto air and water: we need them to live—and to live fully. Like poetry, feminist theologies comprehend that the practice of theos–logos is not a luxury but a necessity; not optional but requisite in all its manifold forms for the claiming and enacting of palpable hope in tenuous world.

Conclusion

This essay began with two young women, each asking about the relationship between her experience and the possibility of God-talk. For Weil, the impossibility of language for the divine existence belies the truth of the divine love within her, even while death surrounds her. And Sylvia wonders whether it is possible that the face of God itself undergirds her experience of devaluation by an androcentric world. Feminist theologies in their 150-year formal history have explored a vast array of possibilities for expanding the boundaries of the human imagination about the divine character. And they have done it in an atmosphere where post-Enlightenment and postmodern thinkers scramble to deny the possibility of the existence of any thing, being, or power outside the realm of human experience, declaring all God-talk to be merely speculative "play." The key contribution of feminist theologies to this discussion is that investigation into the possibility of God-talk is not so much a question of whether it is possible to speak of God or even how one may properly speak. Rather, the question is about what possibilities our differing speech for God engenders in us and for ourselves and others. Christian feminists know that speaking of God has always been possible and that it continues to be. People will speak of God, in the church, through formal discourse, spontaneous prayer, and in popular culture. And feminist theologians know that such speech produces real effects in the lives of real people. The true task of theos–logos, then, is not to ask whether to speak of God. Rather, it is to try over and over the Christian's task of the "necessary/impossible" human language for the wholeness, the goodness, the kind of love and the kind of power that
will produce a world that moves closer to our desires for all that the word God means when we speak it. That is the real challenge for all Christian God-talk, wherein rests the possibility for our most basic Christian hope.

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Endnotes

4. See Coll, 42.
5. These words appeared in an 1898 newspaper editorial by Henry Turner defending his public remark "God is a Negro." See Mark G. Toulouse and James O. Duke, eds., *Sources of Christian Theology in America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 328-29.
10. Ibid., 223.
12. Ibid., 59-60.


23. Ibid., 49.

24. Ibid., 50.


27. Aquino, 10.
Divine Sovereignty, Human Agency, and the Ascension of Christ

CYNTHIA L. RIGBY

Every time Christians join with the communion of saints in praying the Lord's Prayer, we ask with eager longing, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Packed into this short phrase are both the conviction that God will complete the redemption of all creation and the belief that we can participate in this work by doing the will of God. But how do we reconcile our demand that the Kingdom be sent by God with our insistence that we facilitate the establishment of God's kingdom on earth by way of our actions? This is one of the central questions of the doctrine of eschatology, also known as the doctrine of Christian hope.

In this essay, I argue that God's kingdom comes in a way that compromises on neither divine nor human agency. Reflection on the ascension of Christ, I suggest, both enriches our understanding of how God is sovereign and explains how we participate in the shaping of the future. In short, because Christ is in heaven as he was on earth, human agents are included in bringing God's kingdom "to earth as it is in heaven."

Divine Transcendence Meets Christian Hope

Like many contemporary theologians, feminist theologians are wary of eschatologies that are centered in maximally theistic conceptualities. When eschatologies emphasize the inevitable inbreaking into creaturely history of a transcendent, "fixer-upper" God, feminists note, human beings too often think that they cannot influence the future—so why bother trying? Such eschatologies, many feminist theologians argue, privilege divine transcendence over divine immanence, God's agency over human agency, the next world over this one. Rather than fostering re-membering and hope, they support forgetfulness and disempowerment.

Sharon Welch, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Rosemary Radford Ruether are among those feminist theologians who have developed approaches to hope that do not rely on a transcendent, sovereign God to do our work for us, thereby disempowering us. Following a diversity of figures, including
Johann Baptist Metz, Alice Miller, and Paul Tillich, these feminist thinkers have helped to concretize our understanding of Christian hope by connecting it with re-membering, recovering a sense of self, and embracing our mortality.2

Believing that we have no hope apart from God's providential care, many traditional theologians are wary of reconstructive efforts in eschatology that begin by rejecting all notions of divine transcendence and sovereignty. While some dismiss feminists' critiques of theism as being more a matter of their misunderstanding than any real challenge, others recognize the incisiveness of these insights and—not willing to accept rejection of theism as an option—engage in alternative reconstructive efforts. Sharing the concern that eschatologies not foster escapism, some have argued that, while belief in a sovereign God can support escape hatch eschatologies, such belief does not have to do so.3 South African theologian John De Gruchy, for example, recognizes that appeals to the will and ordering of a transcendent God have been used by Christians to justify the abuses of apartheid. Looking back to the theology of the Reformation, De Gruchy argues that the Word of God, though transcendent, is not static; rather, it can and does speak to us ever new in relation to our daily lives, urging us to particular works of social justice. With Barth, De Gruchy considers the Word of God "a Word against human pretension and oppressive power" that enables Christians to say "no!" to the heinous crimes of apartheid.4

Jürgen Moltmann has, similarly, spent his career defying escapist eschatologies while still confessing belief in a transcendent God. To a large degree he has made his case through rethinking the doctrine of the Trinity. Insisting that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, Moltmann reminds us that what God does is precisely who God is because God is utterly free. We know that divine sovereignty does not work against human agency precisely because the sovereign God is, in Jesus Christ, also "the Crucified God." In the event of the cross, creaturely integrity is not compromised by a divine rescue because Father, Son, and Spirit do not invade creaturely existence from an external point. Instead, they participate fully in creaturely existence through real suffering with us. The transcendent God does not intervene for us or refuse to intervene for us but enters into creaturely existence with us.5

Moltmann's reconceiving of the character of the triune God challenges hierarchal systems modeled after the theological misconception that those
who are most able to act productively are those who are distant, self-sufficient, and unaffected. Embracing “the political theology of the cross,” human agents take concrete action toward social liberation not because “God says to do it” (a “maximal” approach to the divine transcendence) or because they reject the idea that God acts as a volitional agent (a “minimalist” approach), but because the crucified God calls us to enter into the suffering of the Godhead even as God has entered into suffering with us. Where we recognize God’s entry into our suffering in such a way that we enter also into the suffering of the marginalized, there is the kingdom of God.

Divine Agency Meets Human Agency

In her watershed work, *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson concedes that Moltmann’s reworking of eschatology in light of the doctrine of the Trinity has “burst with vigor upon the theological imagination.” And yet, Johnson thinks, Moltmann is both “far too sanguine” about the political implications the doctrine has had and overly optimistic about the positive impact it can have in transforming oppressive political structures. Johnson wants Moltmann to acknowledge “how easily patriarchy in church and society has coexisted with trinitarian belief.” Despite Moltmann’s sensitivity to the concern that transcendent gods are often tyrannical, his emphasis on the suffering of the trinitarian God does not adequately address the problem of abuse in the being of God or the abuse perpetrated by humans against God. Johnson thinks the character of Moltmann’s God would be far less ambiguous if he recognized that human agents have a real impact on God—understanding the event of the Crucifixion (for example) to be a consequence of human sin and injustice. She puts it simply: We are responsible for the Son’s death—the Father is not.

Moltmann is overly concerned about protecting traditional conceptions of the sovereign God’s power, Johnson suggests. He therefore makes unfortunate compromises in understanding both God’s agency and ours. Johnson offers two salient critiques in this regard. First, she suggests that Moltmann’s resistance to saying that Jesus Christ died due to unjust human actions hints that Moltmann does not believe his own assertion, namely, that God is, in the event of the cross, truly vulnerable to us. While Moltmann says he understands the character of God by way of the economic Trinity (God’s acts in relationship to us), his discussion of the Trinity in relation to the Crucifixion is more concerned to protect the
immanent Trinity: the character of God in Godself. In other words, Moltmann first tries to describe how the Father, Son, and Spirit relate to each other in the event of the cross and only then tries to explain how the triune God’s interrelationship affects us. To be consistent with his own stated methodology, Johnson asks, shouldn’t Moltmann have begun by considering what the cross communicates about how God is relating to us and we to God? Moltmann’s theology of the cross convincingly conveys that God chose to suffer with us and that such action reveals something about the character of God; but does it reveal that God is really affected by us or only that God chooses to enter into our affectedness? If God limits Godself in relationship to us but could do otherwise, both divine vulnerability and human agency are mere chimeras.

In contrast to Moltmann, Johnson believes that God is really affected by creaturely existence. Jesus Christ’s death was not God’s will but a consequence of sinful human actions. Johnson believes such a position honors the character of God, revealed to us in God’s vulnerable acts in relation to the world. It supports a doctrine of Christian hope that is not escapist, because it relies on the real contribution of human agents in relationship to God. If God is affected by us, then what we do in relationship to God matters. We may glorify God or crucify God, but we are responsible for our actions and have been blessed with the opportunity to change the world.

Johnson’s second criticism of Moltmann is that he tends to understand God’s self-determined kenosis to entail the taking on of weakness and suffering that is not power-full. According to Moltmann, Johnson explains, God entered into creaturely existence with us in order to rescue us from it through Christ’s resurrection. While Johnson shares in Moltmann’s resurrection hope that suffering be replaced by abundant life, she is concerned with what she identifies as a current trend among theologians to reflect on God’s “powerless suffering.”10 Johnson does not want to say that to enter into solidarity with others is to lose power, with power still understood as a commodity that we can accrue, give away, or have taken from us. Rather, to enter into solidarity with the marginalized is to experience a different sort of power: the power of the cross, the “power of relation.”11 Johnson is concerned with “assertions that God was never so great as in humiliation, never so glorious as in self-surrender, and never so powerful as when impotent,”12 because she believes they ultimately compromise on human agency, providing a way to justify not working toward “setting the captives
free." In addition, emphasis on Christ's overcoming the confines of creaturely limitation in the Resurrection entails a belittling of the value of finitude—the beauty and preciousness of the creature's frail, vulnerable, interdependent, relational existence.

Moltmann would be concerned by Johnson's critiques, desiring as he does to incite his readers to the work of social justice. But as a Reformed theologian, he would not be willing to abdicate his conviction that God limits Godself in entering the creaturely world in favor of conceding that God is limited by the creature. To consider that sinful human action precipitated an event that was not part of God's sovereign rule, is, for Moltmann, to leave open the un-hope-full possibilities of dualism or henotheism: that there are rivals to God that are at work in the world. For Moltmann, to say that the triune God did not self-determine the Crucifixion but was instead victimized by sinful human beings is to lay aside our Christian confession that the Crucifixion is a volitional act of love that reveals God's steadfast presence with us.

From a Reformed perspective, then, Johnson's efforts to buttress human agency by insisting on our culpability in relation to injustice could quickly backfire. While there is no question that Moltmann, DeGruchy, and Barth would agree with Johnson that human beings are guilty of sin and need to repent and change their behavior, they would be wary of saying that (for example) the Crucifixion is not God's will but is instead a result of human sinfulness. They would be reticent because it compromises on both divine and human freedom. The burden on us, if we were able to crucify God without God's consent, would be stymying, even disempowering. In some sense, it is precisely because our actions are not finally determinative of the shape of reality that we are free to act in ways that do shape the future. God's self-sufficiency frees us from the pressure of entering into relationship with God because "God needs us." God's sovereign lordship reminds us that, though we act as partners with God in the God-world relationship, neither we nor those who are trying to lord over us are God. As Jacquelyn Grant puts it, "If Jesus is 'Lord,' it means the white slaveholder isn't."13

The question is this: Is there an eschatology that talks concretely about what human beings actually contribute to the coming Kingdom without losing sight of the totaliter aliter (the otherness of the sovereign God)? I turn now to a constructive proposal that offers one such imagining.
Divine Agent Meets Human Agent: The Ascended Christ

Reflection on the implications of the confession that Jesus Christ "ascended into heaven" inspires an understanding of Christian hope that neglects neither the divine nor the human agent. According to theologians of the Reformation, the Ascension is inextricably linked with the bodily resurrection of Christ; and the bodily resurrection with the Incarnation. Believing that the Incarnation is no "thirty-three-year experiment," but a revelation of Godself, Calvin and Barth understood the bodily resurrection and ascension to reaffirm the "miracle of Christmas"—the mystery of the Word made flesh. Similarly, they held that the "Second Coming"—whatever it looks like, literally—will certainly stand in continuity with the first. To think of Jesus as anything like a "lone ranger" who comes into town just in time to straighten everyone out or as a "superman" who finally sheds his false (i.e., human) identity to reveal his true divine colors is to doubt that God is who God has already revealed Godself to be in the person of Jesus Christ.

The church has always existed in the time between the Ascension and the Second Coming. What does Christian hope "look like" for Christians who confess that the same Christ who walked among us now sits at "the right hand of the Father" and will "come again"? How do we understand God's acts—and ours—in the world in relation to this symbol? In an attempt to answer these questions, I consider the ascended Christ as he is absent from our midst still fully human as well as fully divine and coming again.

The Absence of the Ascended Christ

According to Karl Barth, to be a Christian in relationship to the ascended Christ is to be filled with yearning. While Christ sent the Comforter to be with us until he comes again, there is nonetheless a void left by him of which we are painfully conscious. Barth writes:

> The ascension means . . . the departure of the actual, primary holder of that power. It means that the eschatological limit set for the Church becomes visible. The exaltation of the Head really means for the body a lowering, its demotion to a position of humility and waiting; and a definite limitation of the miracle of Pentecost.

The symbol of the Ascension pushes us to acknowledge the sover-
eighty of God, because it reminds us that our language, insights, and experiences of God, however true, are also decidedly partial and fragmentary.

Here, we see how reflection on the Ascension addresses head on the concern that appeals to a transcendent God can perpetuate social inequalities in the here and now. Reflection on the transcendent Christ who is absent from our midst reminds us that we are not Christ and therefore are not to lord over others in the name of having privileged access to the truth. What crimes do we commit against one another that are founded in our ill-gotten certainty? Remembering that Christ is not here may be a crucial step for developing a twenty-first-century eschatology that respects human agency without replacing God with our ill-begotten ideologies.

It may seem rather strange to advocate for reflection on Christ's absence. After all, is it not a fundamental Christian confession that Christ is here with us at all times and everywhere we go? Christian believers are called boldly to proclaim Christ's presence despite his more obvious absence. But lately we have so overemphasized Christ's presence with us, so rarely mentioning the poignancy of the absence, that we have done eschatology a disservice. When we neglect reflection on the Ascension and the Second Coming, it is easy to forget that we are called to watch, hope, pray, and work for the coming of the Kingdom that is not yet on earth as it is in heaven.

Recently, some theological scholars have challenged such a dialectical approach to theology, arguing that the weakness of Barth's conviction that there is an "empty space" left by Christ's absence is that it lacks an adequate pneumatology. In his important work, *Suffering Divine Things*, for example, Reinhold Hütter explains that the Holy Spirit has, in fact, entered into the space left by the ascended Christ. Because this is the case, we need not be limited by the ambiguity of a dialectical approach. Rather, the church can have "unequivocal faith," speaking words about God—in relation to the practices of the church—with certainty. "Christ's place is never really empty."17

Such a view neglects the implications of the ascended Christ, who is, as the Apostles' Creed notes, "seated at the right hand of the Father." It neglects to emphasize that, as those yearning for Christ's presence and waiting for his return, we who are the church are charged to spend a lot of time on our knees, striving to stay awake in the Garden, watching and praying to discern the Kingdom at hand. It casts doubt on the need for the Second Coming, suggesting that we can make do with the way things are and that we—the church—can take charge of making things better. It forgets that the Holy
Spirit is not automatically where we are but that the church is where the Holy Spirit is, blowing where it will, working to establish the coming Kingdom that is here only in glimpses. Finally, it is neither a Reformed nor a feminist approach to eschatology, for it provides a context for the ecclesiastical smugness that the Reformers worked to correct and that feminists and liberationists are currently critiquing.

This raises a key question for our discussion: How does the symbol of the ascended Christ help us reflect on the way in which Christ is present with us and the way in which we do act in the world?

The Person of the Ascended Christ: Fully Human, Fully Divine

One of the most serious theological errors that we make in reflecting on eschatology is to shape it in relation to a docetic Christology. Our scientific resistance to accepting the possibility of a resurrected body, our philosophical resistance to thinking of God as an embodied being, and the now-widespread concern not to present God as male have led us to steer away from considering what it might mean to say that Jesus is human now.

The symbol of the ascended Christ challenges docetic tendencies that stand in the way of both our recognition of God's participation in our existence and our awareness of our participation in the life and work of God. “The ascended Christ” does this, in one sense, by insisting on the radical implications of the Incarnation for valuing embodied existence. If the Incarnation argues that the omniscient God was not satisfied to understand creaturely existence from a distance, the Ascension insists it is not adequate to think of the coming of Immanuel as a divine rescue operation. “Not adequate, for what?” one may ask. Certainly, if we are measuring the adequacy of our understanding of the Incarnation in terms of salvation, and if our understanding of salvation amounts to being forgiven of our sins in order to spend eternity with God, then the belief that the Word became flesh in order to rescue us would seem to be enough. If Christ is only our rescuer and hero, then it is unclear why his humanity is important, except as a disguise he wore along the way.

Theologians, of course, have always challenged such narrow understandings of salvation. According to the biblical witness, salvation is not just “fire insurance”; it is also living in relationship to God through abiding in Jesus Christ (John 15). This participation is not theoretical but is grounded in the reality that our humanity is the humanity of the One who
is also God. According to Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, it is a huge problem that we ignore the implications of the ongoing incarnation of God, evident in the symbol of the ascended Christ. It is impossible for us to grow in our spirituality, Rahner holds, if we do not "continuously [pass] ... through the humanity of Christ." With this concern in mind, he poses the following question:

Have you a theology in which the Word—by the fact that he is man and in so far as he is this—is the necessary and permanent mediator of all salvation, not merely at some time in the past but now and for all eternity? Does your theology really see him in this way, so that by being this God-Man he also is so bound up by his humanity with the religious act that this act goes (consciously or unconsciously) through this humanity to God, and so that this humanity is essentially and always the mediating object of the one act of \textit{latria} which has God for its goal?

This question offers a profound challenge to us today, given either our docetism or our skepticism in relation to the ideas of ascended bodies and God's humanity. Think of the implications for addressing the concerns raised by feminist and Reformed theologians, respectively. Surely, here, we relate to a transcendent God who does not "trump" our humanity; for it is precisely in entering into spiritual union with this God that our humanity is affirmed. Christ—as the ascended, eternal Mediator who is still fully human and fully divine—joins us in fellowship with God by bringing humanity into the triune life. In the context of this fellowship, our creatureliness is not divinized, healed, or conquered but affirmed and actualized.

Like Rahner, Barth holds that the Ascension is the central symbol for understanding how it is that God and human beings can exist in real relationship. "When the Son of God became [Jesus of Nazareth]," writes Barth, he ceased to all eternity to be God only, receiving and having and maintaining to all eternity human essence as well. . . . He is God in the flesh . . . to the extent that according to this will and decree, and in this act, God is with us in this way, we too in the same way—in the human essence of this One from among us—are with God.

In the symbol of the ascended Christ, according to Barth, the One who
is fully human as well as fully divine "exists in the manner of a [human being] . . . in the freedom and power of such a being as divinely determined and limited. in the relative dependence of a single member in the natural and historical nexus of the created world." Because Christ, in his divine transcendence, “finds it . . . supremely congruous to exist . . . in the limited manner of the human creature,” so we, through him, are able to live in "the sovereign manner of God." This means not that we are God but that we—in and through our brother, Jesus Christ—contribute to the life of God as human creatures who are valued by God. How do we do this? Not by seeking to escape embodied existence, by hoping, striving, yearning to get beyond it to that transcendent place where it will be no more. Rather, we contribute to the coming of the Kingdom precisely as we live out of the creaturely exaltation that has taken place in the ascended Christ. Knowing that embodied existence participates, through Christ, in the life of God, we seek Christ here, in embodied existence. Barth, with liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, believes that the ascended Christ directs us to exercise our agency by reaching out to those who are suffering in their bodily existence. For Barth, "no one can know [Christ] in his majesty, or honour and love him as the Son of God, unless he [or she] shows concern for these least of [Christ’s] brethren." Because humanity has been raised to the right hand of the Father, we are able and called to engage in the work of social justice. Here, clearly, transcendence serves not to justify complacency but to foster empowerment, incentive, and hope.

The Ascended Christ Who Is Coming Again
According to Barth, the symbol of the ascended Christ reminds us not only of the eternal reality of the Incarnation but also of the Second Coming. We may think that the judgment of God, if it comes at all, should vindicate the church who will "stand triumphant[ly] at his right hand." Barth holds, however, that the ascension of Christ should remind us that we will be judged. Such a reminder is, in fact, the "true and divine safeguard against the real threat of Christian arrogance and pride and sloth and obstinacy." A concern may be raised at this point: Though divine judgment guards against a triumphalistic eschatology, it could well impair human agents—particularly human agents who are “guilty” of the sin of self-deprecation. If we are worried that we are going to be judged by Christ, may we not become immobilized, ceasing to act productively? Feminist theologians see this as a
real danger, particularly for those who are socialized to think poorly of themselves. Reflecting on the Second Coming can guard us against triumphalism, but what good is that if it impedes human agency?

Here, a dialectical approach may again be helpful. While the awaited return of the ascended Christ challenges us not to be smugly self-righteous, it simultaneously relieves us of our self-judgment precisely so we can act in the present. On the one hand, the absent, ascended Christ reminds us that Christ is not here, and that we, therefore, do not have the final word on the shape of the coming Kingdom. On the other hand, the fully human, fully divine ascended Christ reminds us that God shares in our creatureliness and in this sense is here. And so we can share in the life of God, contributing to the Kingdom by engaging in works of love.

As the absent one who returns in the Second Coming, Christ our Judge stands at a distance from us and evaluates whether or not we have attended to embodied existence in ways that bespeak our participation in God through him (cf. Matthew 25). But this one who will judge is also the one who came before; our Judge is the one who was judged in our place. Taking our sin upon himself in the event of the cross, Christ frees us from our self-judgment precisely so we can be free to act as finite, creaturely, brothers and sisters of Christ in the world. Because our Judge is the Crucified One, Barth writes, we are free to engage in "other more important and more happy and more fruitful activities" than being caught up in our own "guiltiness." Human agency is preserved—not inhibited—by the agency of God, who took our place in Christ not to replace us but to make a place for us. Because, in the judgment, the suffering of Christ is connected with sin and condemnation, it should not be romanticized or held up as being the paradigmatic way of life for the Christian. Johnson's critique of Moltmann in this regard is addressed: it is creaturely creativity, and not suffering, that is exalted in the ascended Christ. It is suffering, and not embodied existence, that will someday be conquered.

**Conclusion**

In the final analysis, we who are creatures are not able—in and of ourselves—to usher in the eschaton, just as we are not able to speak univocally about God. Even with our best efforts we "see through a mirror dimly," yearning for the return of Christ—the incarnate, transcendent One who is not here in body, for he sits at the right hand of the Father.
And yet, the bodily resurrection and the Ascension convey not only that we need to continue looking beyond ourselves and our own efforts to the work of the transcendent, embodied Mediator. The confession that Christ is resurrected and ascended also clearly argues that Christ's work was not to "conquer" humanity and human agency. Rather, the ascended Christ exalts us, via our shared humanity with him, to participation in the very life of the triune God.

Divine transcendence, then, does not inevitably support an escapist eschatology. Because the one in whom we participate is both absent from our midst and coming again as our judge, we are reminded not only that we are called to active participation in the work of the Kingdom but also that we can engage this work freely, because our coming judge is also the one who was "judged in our place, freeing us from our own guiltiness." This world is not our home; for we are joined, through the humanity of Christ, to the very life of the triune God. But this world is also not something we wish to cast aside; for it is included in the life of the God who loves it, who in Christ has not only entered into it but has also exalted it to Godself. Such an eschatological vision refuses to choose between an inevitable "not yet" and an all-important "now." Instead it insists that the embodied, creaturely existence of this world neither is replaced by disembodied otherworldliness nor is the sum quota of what can be expected.

Finally, the symbol of the ascended Christ reminds us that we still need to pray and work for the kingdom of God to come "to earth as it is in heaven." But our waiting for the Second Coming need not be triumphalistic. Remembering the current absence of Christ, the fragmentary character of our knowledge of God, the pain suffered by bodies in this world that makes a mockery of their exaltation in the ascended one makes our waiting an active waiting that joins in the activity of Christ. We—brothers and sisters of the ascended Christ, participants in the life of the triune God through our shared humanity with him, precious human creatures who seek Christ in the existence of this world—are compelled freely to exercise our agency in moving toward this coming of God's reign for all people, joining "as partners of God" in "the great event of reconciliation."
Endnotes

6. Ibid., 327.
7. Ibid., 55.
10. Ibid., 253.
11. This theological phrase is used by many feminist theologians, including Carter Heyward and Rita Nakashima Brock.
15. Barth’s phrase, used in *Church Dogmatics*, I/2.
19. Ibid., 45.
22. Ibid., III/2:508.
23. Ibid., 511.
24. Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV/1:234.
25. Ibid., IV/1:243.
26. Ibid., IV/2:4, 10.
I stood dazed before my television on September 11, 2001, watching the morning news, watching the events unfold like a movie, my mind unable—perhaps not wanting—to comprehend what was happening. Minutes before, I had turned on the news to see a live picture of one of the towers of the World Trade Center burning after an airplane had crashed into it. Then, in horror, I watched the second tower explode as another jetliner crashed into it. In the hours that passed, I would see first one tower, then another collapse, killing thousands, including those who rushed to aid the injured. I would see the aftermath of another plane crashing into the Pentagon and hear of a fourth plane crashing in Pennsylvania, killing all aboard.

Observing the horrific events of that day and pondering the great loss of life caused by these tragic events and their magnitude leave us speechless. Questions abound and answers seem to escape us. Yet, in the aftermath of these tragic events, we feel compelled to find answers. Particularly, we are compelled to try to understand how such evil could exist in our world and how a loving God could allow it. Inevitably, we are drawn to questions of theodicy, divine omnipotence, and the goodness of God. These questions are among the hardest for us to answer at the dawn of the twenty-first century, because our illusions of peace and hopes for the future were shattered in a dramatic act of violence. As images of wars and violence fill and touch our lives in drastic ways while the media and politicians continually speak of evil, it is difficult for us to understand the persistence of evil in our world.

While our attention has focused on the September 11 tragedy, we should not limit our inquiry to it or presume that this tragedy is far worse than the many tragedies and evils that afflict and have afflicted our world. Our history is plagued with great and horrendous evils—many, like the Crusades, committed in the name of God. Others were justified in the name of Christendom, as was often the case in the European conquest of
the North American continent. From the horrors of world wars to the holocausts, famines, and genocides of the twentieth century, there is much with which we must contend. It is in the midst of such evils, violence, death, and suffering that we must begin our theodicy in the opening decade of the twenty-first century.

Evil, destruction, and suffering in our world inevitably lead us to questions regarding the benevolence and power of God. The problem of evil and its related problem of theodicy are classic arguments with which theologians and ministers have wrestled for many centuries. Theologically, the fundamental question of the problem of evil and theodicy takes shape around three presuppositions. First, it is difficult for us to deny the reality of evil in our world. Things happen that cause unbearable suffering. Atrocities are committed. Violence plagues us. Evil is indeed very real in our experience. At the same time, as Christians, we believe in a loving and powerful God. Hence, the question emerges: If God loves us and is all-powerful, why does evil persist? As David Hume craftily raises the question in his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, if God is willing to prevent evil but is unable to do so, then God cannot be omnipotent. If God is able but unwilling to prevent evil, then God cannot be a loving God. As a result, we must be willing to deny the reality of evil or qualify one of the other presuppositions.

While we may find it necessary to wrestle with these questions, attempting to write a theodicy is a presumptuous task in itself and one that we must question before engaging the issue. After all, are we not presuming to speak in God's behalf and defense? If so, some may question if we should even engage in such an act of presumption. John Calvin, for instance, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, states that our attempts to question how God can use the wicked or even permit evil without somehow incurring blame come from the limited ability of our carnal minds to grasp the fullness of God's work and nature. After all, who are we, flawed and limited beings that we are, to question the machinations of God? Maybe we should be satisfied with combating evil rather than trying to understand the complexities of the divine being.

However, I find it difficult to simply accept the preponderance of evil in the world without struggling to understand its implications for our faith in a loving God. After all, we need to address the inevitable effect this problem has on our faith, particularly if we are to answer the objections.
placed before us by those who do not believe. Also, I do not believe that we can afford to remain silent in the face of evil. As Paul Tillich writes:

This very natural question, which, for many of us, is the stumbling block of our faith, points to the riddle of evil in the world of God. You will have to deal with this question more often than with any other. And you must not avoid the question by retiring behind the term “mystery.” Of course there is mystery—divine mystery—and, in contrast to it, the mystery of evil. But it belongs to the insights demanded of you that you put the mystery in its right place, and explain what can and must be explained.

With this in mind, in what follows I attempt to put the mystery in its proper context and to “explain what can and must be explained.” Primarily, I look at the three ways in which we can approach the question: in terms of the existence of evil, God’s omnipotence, and God’s love.

**Discerning Evil**

In an article written in 1926 for *Theologische Blätter* with the ominous title, “The Concept of the Demonic: Its Significance for Systematic Theology,” Paul Tillich addresses the problem of evil in terms of the demonic—as both an individual and a social reality, which we are called to recognize as evil in order to combat it. In another essay written that same year entitled “The Demonic,” Tillich also argues for the necessity of recognizing the demonic as such in order to combat it. The difficulty we face in recognizing evil in our midst is that evil manifests the same creativity and destructive power we find in God; for to create something new, we must destroy the old. Evil often bears the same structures, depths of meaning, mystery, and creativity, as well as the same sense of awe we experience before the creative power of God, except that in the demonic it is “infused both with horror and the frenzy and ecstasy of the destructive impulse.” Thus, the most difficult question in understanding the nature of evil comes in our inability to recognize it as such. But it is a question we must be ready to address before doing a theodicy. Likewise, before we can even begin to confront evil in our world, we must be able to discern evil.

The first step in doing a theodicy comes in discerning that which is not evil but is merely part of the nature of creation. Basically, we must determine if everything we call evil, such as natural evil, is actually evil per se.
While we cannot deny that disease and disasters cause great suffering, we must be careful in referring to them too quickly as evils. At the same time, we must be cognizant that speaking of natural events as evil does affect theodicy and how we understand God's benevolence and power, since ultimately God is also the creator of nature. In order to safeguard the forces of nature, Augustine, for instance, argues that natural evil is simply a matter of human perception; for God can use these forces to correct and strengthen our character. Thus, in such instances, what we may call "evil" is actually not evil per se; it is merely a matter of perception. Thus, instead of qualifying God's benevolence or omnipotence, we qualify the nature of evil. While this may not solve all the problems of theodicy, it does point to the necessity in theodicy of clarifying the meaning of evil and discerning what truly is evil.

Perceiving something, or someone, as being evil does not necessarily mean that it is evil; yet, if we are not careful, our perception can lead to evil. At times, our social mores, values, and moral sensibilities provide the framework through which we interpret what is and what is not evil. Often, this affects how we perceive evil and whom we perceive as evil. People who look different or adhere to different norms than ours can easily be misconstrued as being evil. Throughout history we have looked at the grotesque and monstrous as evil, identifying those who look different as evil, inferior, or inhuman not because of what they do or what they are but merely because of how they look. Similarly, those who share a different value system than our own can also be misconstrued as adhering to evil practices.

Perceiving those who are different as evil often leads to evils such as racism, enslavement, and violence. By painting those who are different with the broad brush of our rhetoric of evil, we disfigure their humanity and justify their eradication, as well as our mistreatment and violence against them. For instance, in times of war, our enemies are demonized as the evil ones, justifying our actions toward them. By voiding them of humanity and circumscribing them with evil it becomes easier for us to wage war upon them, for they are no longer fully human in our eyes. In some cases, we may even project our value judgments and perceptions of others as evil on them as a way of enhancing our own perception of ourselves as good.

By the same token, we may just as easily miss the evil that exists in our
own lives and that may be inherent in our society. We may easily miss destructive social structures that dehumanize us, violate human beings, and deprive humanity of freedom, basic dignity, and value.\footnote{We may also justify our inaction in combating these forces by portraying those who suffer under their oppressive power as responsible for their circumstances. Just as we may portray someone as evil in order to justify our enslavement of and violence against them, so we can see those who suffer due to poverty and oppressive structures as deserving of their treatment, due to their inherent sinfulness or evil. Hence, we justify the barbaric situation in which they live as just desert for their indolence, vice, or wickedness, thus lulling us into inaction.\footnote{}}

\textbf{The Actuality of Evil}

Augustine writes in \textit{The City of God}, "[T]hings solely good, therefore, can in some circumstances exist; things solely evil, never, for even those natures which are vitiates by an evil will, so far indeed as they are vitiates, are evil, but in so far as they are natures they are good." Augustine is saying that evil does not exist apart from its embodiment in the will of a creature. A creature that does evil is, by virtue of being created by God, not evil in nature but rather is evil in its perversion and action. Ultimately, what Augustine argues is that evil has no ontological reality in itself and does not exist apart from something that embodies it through its actions.

When we speak of evil, we tend to speak of it as an abstract, disembodied force pervading the universe or as a localized force in a spiritual being such as the devil, who personifies and instigates evil. However, in my native tongue, Spanish, the word \textit{evil} does not exist. Words such as \textit{mal} (badness), \textit{malo} (bad one), \textit{maldado} (wicked one), and \textit{maladad} (wickedness or mischief) tend to speak to a sense of maliciousness that locates "evil" in a person or act. These words also tend to interpret evil in terms of its consequences. Something or someone is evil because the consequences of the actions are bad for us. Thus, the definition of evil shifts from that of a disembodied force or abstract reality to a reality embodied in concrete beings and acts that have very real consequences deemed detrimental to humanity. Those who toil under the burden of injustice, poverty, and discrimination can attest to the actuality of evil. When we face death, poverty, disease, and violence, it becomes difficult to deny the existence of evil. We may try to qualify evil, but we can never dismiss it.
Evil is not a thing in itself but an act and a disposition of the will. It exists embodied in the will and actions of beings, as well as in the structures of society. Evil exists, only insofar as evil is done. But evil also breeds more evil; it thus becomes systemic in nature and scope, often with consequences far beyond the original intent of its perpetrator, affecting all of creation. Given such a definition of evil as embodied in concrete beings and acts that afflict humanity, it may benefit us to talk of evils in the particular—in relation to human suffering and human agency. But we must not forget that in the interrelated nature of creation, evil becomes inherent and embodied within the very fabric of society and life, affecting all of creation.

Given such a definition of evil as embodied in concrete beings and acts that afflict humanity, it may benefit us to talk of evils in the particular—in relation to human suffering and human agency. But we must not forget that in the interrelated nature of creation, evil becomes inherent and embodied within the very fabric of society and life, affecting all of creation.

Talking about evil as particular and concrete is actually easy, assuming we are pretty good at discerning it. Our world is fraught with examples of evils that afflict us. Television brings the reality of wars, violence, and destruction into our homes every day. Poverty and injustices abound in Third World nations and at home. Racism, sexism, and many other forms of discrimination touch our lives daily. Diseases, plagues, and death afflict many throughout our world. Thus, both the particularity and reality of evil, as well as the consequences of evil in the world, are easy to see. What is more difficult is trying to discern how easily evil becomes entrenched in the social, economic, and power structures of our world. In the same manner, it is also quite difficult for us to understand the roots of evil and how we can eradicate them from the world. This leads us to examine the role of divine and human agency in the genesis of evil in our world.

Qualifying God: Divine Omnipotence and Benevolence

Even if we were able to become adept at discerning evil and, to some extent, to qualify and particularize it, we are still left with the pesky problems of theodicy. First, even if we concur with Augustine in saying that evil is merely a matter of perception and that natural evil can actually be God’s instrument for developing our character, we are still left with this question: Is there not a better way to develop human character than through suffering? Even if we grant that natural evils are not truly evil, we must still contend with the reality of human suffering that ensues from such calamities as disasters and disease. Why does a loving and powerful God allow natural evils to afflict us? Is it not possible for God to ameliorate to some extent the evil that exists in the world?

Natural evil impacts theodicy because we perceive such evil as
inherent in the structure of creation. Thus, it affects our understanding of divine providence and love as we try to understand why things that are clearly in God’s domain bring suffering upon us. Here, we can take two possible approaches to understanding natural evil. One approach would lead us to say that natural evil is brought upon us either as punishment for our sins or as the result of our sins, thus placing the onus for such tragedies upon human freedom and sin. The second approach would lead us to say that these tragedies are the result of the structure of creation.

To say, with the first approach, that natural evils afflict us as punishment for sin is problematic in several respects. Victims of disasters and disease are not always worse sinners than those who are spared, including young children who often bear the brunt of these “evils.” An epidemic such as AIDS does not limit itself to promiscuous individuals; it afflicts hemophiliacs and newborn children, too. Even if we all share a certain degree of culpability, given that we are all sinners, one would hope that God would be a bit more selective in inflicting divine wrath. In addition, we must contend with biblical texts (the book of Job, for example) that argue against understanding the calamities that befall us as punishment for sin.

However, saying that calamities befall us as the result of our sin is different. Human sin and ignorance often place us in harm’s way as we overstep our boundaries and impinge upon the domain of nature, thus wreaking havoc on the environment. We build on flood plains, destroy ecosystems, and pollute our environment—actions that eventually have repercussions. Sin, permeating socioeconomic conditions and structures, also affects us. Greed often leads to poor construction and disregard for the safety of others. Those who live in poverty frequently place their lives in peril by living in poorly constructed homes or in places where their homes cannot withstand the forces of nature. They are also more susceptible to disease, malnutrition, and epidemics as the result of their economic plight. Further, pride and ignorance lead us to impinge upon the domain of nature, with disastrous consequences. In such instances, we can say that the events are a result of our sin—not as punishment for sin but rather as sin’s inevitable consequences.

The second approach understands natural evil as merely the consequence of natural design. This approach does not exonerate God entirely, especially if we understand God to be the creator. What is at fault, the argument goes, is the structure of the world. However, as its architect, God
remains either culpable for the circumstances or unable to design a different world. In other words, if we take this approach to understanding natural evil, then we must be willing to qualify either God's benevolence or God's omnipotence. If we assume that God indeed loves us and that this world is the best of all possible worlds, then it seems we need to qualify God's ability to create a world without tragic consequences. Of course, this need not be the case.

In looking at creation and divine omnipotence, we must be careful not to assume too much. For instance, we must not assume that God's concern with creation is limited to humanity. God's love and care extend to the whole of creation. Storms that produce tornados and floods also bring us life-giving rain and nurture the whole of creation.20 In addition, in understanding divine design, we must take into account the nature of creation as finite. Limits define things, provide them with identity, and prevent them from encroaching upon the domains of others. We may understand disease or death as evil for its ability to cause human suffering, but it may simply be a tragic consequence of our nature as finite creatures. Being finite means we will die. It also means there are limits imposed upon us, and some of these may indeed contribute to our suffering.

Omnipotence itself is also a misnomer, if we mean by it "anything goes." For instance, contradictory things could not exist simultaneously in a finite universe; and, without limitations, possibilities would remain just possibilities. Without limits and self-determination, there would be chaos and true freedom would not exist. As Karl Barth puts it:

God's freedom is not merely unlimited possibility or formal majesty and omnipotence. that is to say empty, naked sovereignty. . . . God Himself, if conceived of as unconditioned power, would be a demon and as such His own prisoner.21

God's freedom and omnipotence do not mean that all things are possible at the same time in the same way. In determining something to be the case also means that something else is not the case. Choosing this means rejecting that. Divine omnipotence, then, does not mean that anything goes. Rather, it means that God can do all that is possible at a given time and place.

Freedom allows for choice, and making a choice means that we must
determine between different possibilities. While all things may be possible as far as possibilities go, mutually contradictory things cannot be actual simultaneously. Hence, questions typical of classic scholasticism, such as whether God could create a square circle or a boulder so large that not even God could move it, are senseless—mere devices of metaphysical speculation. Understood in terms of actuality and potentiality, it is conceivable that the structure of the world can allow only certain possibilities to exist simultaneously, thus making this the best of all possible worlds. But why is this world not better? Why does God continue to allow our inhuman treatment of one another?

The most common approach to theodicy is by way of the question of freedom. In this view, either God limits Godself to allow freedom to exist or freedom exists because God's power and nature are limited, which implies that God is not actually omnipotent. Either way, according to this view, for us to be truly free means that God's omnipotence cannot interfere with our choices and the world we create. In other words, for freedom to truly exist God must allow all creatures the freedom to make their own choices and determine their own destiny, without any imposition of the divine will. Thus, for freedom to exist, God must risk the possibility of evil. Given this logic, the question of whether God's omnipotence is self-limited or necessarily limited becomes moot. It doesn't matter whether God chooses to limit the divine omnipotence or is actually not all-powerful; as far as our experience is concerned, the results are identical.

God may allow for the possibility of evil in the world for the sake of freedom, but we cannot hold God accountable for the actuality of evil. Thus, we must look elsewhere for the origins of evil, primarily by looking at our creaturely freedom. There is no question that evil, to a large extent, exists as the result of human agency. Evil exists in our world because we make it so. It is embedded in the social and economic structures of our world because we choose to do evil. As the mythologies of many religions claim, humanity let evil loose on the world. We commit evil deeds, enslave one another, and afflict one another with horrendous acts. Yet, how is it that beings created in God's image can perpetrate such evil? Why would God create us with a predisposition toward evil?

Naturally, the question becomes less problematic when we take into consideration the possibility that freedom may be at the very root of the imago Dei that exists in us. Freedom can lead us either toward actualizing
the possibility of bearing the divine image in the world or toward becoming demonic in nature. When we survey the extent of the evil in our world, it is not difficult to see how evil has seduced us or to what extent we have contributed to the presence of evil in our midst through our actions. Thus, the question of theodicy must also be directed at us: we must ask not only why God allows evil to exist but also why we allow it.

Defining the problem of evil in terms of possibility and actuality helps us clarify the problem. Simply because evil is possible does not mean that it must be part of our experience or that it is God's will. And divine omnipotence is not absolute power to override the freedom inherent in creation but rather the ability to create new possibilities for creation. God's providence does not preclude the occurrence of suffering and evil in the world. But God does provide us with the possibility of overcoming evil. Thus, the hope that endures for Christianity in light of the Crucifixion and Resurrection is that in God there is the assurance that goodness, love, and life will prevail in spite of suffering, death, and evil.

The Abundance of Love

After considering the problem of theodicy from the perspective of possibility and actuality and after addressing the issues raised by the omnipotence of God, I now look at theodicy in light of God's love. Generally, we do not find too many who are willing to qualify divine goodness or divine love in developing a theodicy, although people both inside and outside our churches raise this question.

However, I will venture to argue that the problem of theodicy and even the qualification of divine omnipotence by creaturely freedom find their roots in God's love. The problem of theodicy lies not in a deficiency in God's love but rather in the abundance of God's love. In Process and Reality, Alfred North Whitehead provides us with an understanding of God as working through creation, moving tenderly to change the world by gentle persuasion rather than by coercion. A God of love suffers with creation, is quick to forgive, and never coerces. True power is not coercive but giving, persuasive, and empowering.

This does not mean that God does not act upon the world—God does. But several things must be clarified about this relationship. First, a God who loves us risks the possibility of rejection by allowing all creatures to respond to God's will freely, out of love. Hence, for love to exist and for us
to be capable of truly loving God and one another, there must be the possibility of freely responding to one another out of love and compassion. Yet, this also implies that a possibility exists for hatred and violence to occur.

Second, God does not overpower creation in order to assert God's will. Instead, God works through the persuasion and the provision of new possibilities to rectify the destructiveness of evil. Hence, being a God of love inevitably limits God's omnipotence and dominion over creation. Through love, God becomes vulnerable before us. Ultimately, then, the presence of evil in this world is the result of the abundance of God’s love and forgiveness for all creatures, including those who commit evil.

However, we must not mistake God's loving vulnerability for divine impotence. God does act in the world and God does suffer with the world. But, as liberation theology has taught us, God's preferential option for the poor shows that God's love does not tolerate the injustices perpetrated against those loved by God. It is God's love that calls us to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and the poor—those who suffer under the burden of evil and the social structures in which evil becomes entrenched through our actions. God's love empowers us to act with compassion on behalf of those who suffer, and God's love suffers along with us as we bear the brunt of evil. While God loves all creation, all creatures do not experience God's love in the same way. God's preferential option for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the weak manifested throughout the Scriptures already gives us a glimmer into God's judgment upon those who perpetrate evil. By providing us with new possibilities for life, God stands against evil, not by taking away freedom but by transforming the world and empowering us to find new possibilities for overcoming evil through goodness, love, and justice. God works in us and through us, empowering us to discern and confront evil.

In constructing a theodicy, we may qualify omnipotence or try to discern the nature of evil, even to the extent of denying divine omnipotence or the reality of evil. But, ultimately, it is God's love that provides the answer to why evil exists and why divine omnipotence is qualified, as well as to how evil can be overcome. Theodicy in the twenty-first century must look not only at God but also at us who bear God's image and defile it through our actions. But it also calls us to respond out of love and to confront evil in all its manifestations, wherever it may rob human beings of their dignity and life.
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Endnotes

7. Ibid., VI: 67-68.
9. For a more detailed account of different forms of evil, see my essay “In the Face of Evil: Understanding Evil in the Aftermath of 9-11,” in *Strike Terror No More: Theology, Ethics, and the New War*, ed. by Jon L. Berquist (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002).
11. Portraying the indigenous inhabitants of Latin America as servants of the devil, as less human, and as perpetrators of evil often served to justify the enslavement and violence committed by the Spanish against them. See Rivera-Pagan, *A Violent Evangelism*, 98-103, 137-41.
14. Clodovis Boff provides an example of this in referring to the empiricist explanation for poverty as a vice. See his “Epistemology and Method of the


18. According to Kathryn Tanner, when we ignore the interconnected nature of our world and transcend our limits, we become susceptible to the same havoc we wreak upon the environment. "Creation, Environmental Crisis, and Ecological Justice." in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. by Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 100.


20. See ibid., 15–16, for a more detailed argument.


23. In "In the Face of Evil," I also address the question of evil in terms of human agency.


Few occasions have challenged preachers more than the devastation of the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Those who preached in the ensuing days need no reminders. The horror of such events, with the rippling effects of grief, fear, and moral confusion, summon all the pastoral skills of the Christian minister. The demands of the situation come into sharp focus in the pulpit, where for fifteen to thirty minutes each week the preacher shoulders the awesome pastoral burden of speaking a sustaining word among the ruins. Challenging pastoral theological questions, such as the nature of God and the problem of evil, shout for attention. Any preacher and congregation worth their salt cannot avoid the pastoral weight of such moments. If ever preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ matters, these are such times.

Such enormous events point the preacher toward the undeniable link between preaching and pastoral care. From the pulpit, the preacher gives pastoral voice to the congregation’s laments. By standing with others in such frightful times, the pastor proclaims the enduring truth of Emmanuel: God with us. Even if we could, who would want to separate pastoral care from preaching? The two are mutually related, like twin branches upon the tree of Christian ministry. Nothing brings such clarity to the intertwining of preaching and pastoral care as crisis.

Yet, the links between preaching and pastoral care that may seem obvious in the middle of global tragedy or congregational trauma fade away as a crisis recedes. Peak demands, such as those brought about by the specter of terrorism, give way, thankfully, to seasons of ordinary time. Routine pastoral care goes on, as does weekly preaching. The pastor who
preached after the tragedy is still the one who preaches two years hence, when life takes on the comfort of the familiar. Surely preaching and pastoral care are still related through the ordinary seasons of Christian life. But how?

In this article, I explore the connections between preaching and pastoral care over the long haul of congregational ministry. What makes preaching a pastoral endeavor? How does the proclamation of the gospel also extend pastoral care among the congregation and community? What is the role of psychology and theology with respect to pastoral preaching, and what is the overall intent of pastoral preaching? We begin with pastoral preaching in times of crisis, since tragedy does puncture the routines of congregational life. But the larger question of the relationship between pastoral care and preaching gives greater direction to our reflections, since both are ongoing expressions of Christian ministry, regardless of the changing circumstances within church and culture.

Pastoral Preaching in Times of Crisis

When crisis erupts within the life of a congregation or community, the caring preacher attunes the sermon to the spiritual confusion and emotional trauma at hand. Events such as the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York are too horrific to ignore. Naturally, persons come closer to the church during such times to seek solace from God, companionship with others, and some kind of meaning amid the chaos. The wise pastor understands both the spiritual hunger and the emotional vulnerability of persons during such times; so she bends towards the congregation in sermon content and tone.

The primary pastoral aim of crisis-oriented preaching is to sustain the congregation as its members are buffeted by the blows of shock, fear, and loss. Scripture readings, prayers, hymn selections, and the words of the sermon, all affirm the bedrock Christian belief that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39) and the founding Jewish affirmation that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). The greatest human need during a crisis is assurance of God’s steadfastness. Persons will seldom remember the words of such pastoral sermons, but the pastoral strength conveyed will carry them safely through fire and terror.

Early on, the pastoral preacher will remind the congregation of the biblical tradition of lament. He will help them give voice to sorrow and anger.
at others—even at God. Reminding the congregation of how to express the anguish of abandonment (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” —Ps. 22:1) opens the door to proclaiming God's tender care (“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want” —Ps. 23:1). Our human pain rises up like acrid smoke in such sermons, and the corresponding love of God comes down like the promise of gentle rains upon green pastures. A good pastoral sermon in times of crisis can both express human outrage and offer divine security. The two are not contradictory but reciprocal, as the preacher hurls human heartache towards heaven and extends Godly love towards earth.

A secondary pastoral intent of preaching in crisis is to guide the congregation toward initial theological consideration of the meaning of the event. Such guidance would be ill-advised immediately after the crisis occurs, because persons are still in shock. But within the next several weeks, the preacher can and should begin to explore the question Why? This does not mean that the preacher attempts a full-blown explanation of the absurd loss of innocent lives in a terrorist attack. It does mean that the preacher as resident pastoral theologian grapples from the pulpit with the questions that hound the congregation. This requires theological honesty from the pulpit. The caring pastor refuses to offer cheap answers to profound questions. While persons in pain may want easy answers (“You will be stronger because of this”; “God picks the best flowers for God's garden”), such shortcuts, however well-intentioned, bypass the biblical witness that knowledge of God is often shrouded in mystery (as in the case of Job). Theological understanding often entails wandering in the wilderness. It sometimes comes after all hope is lost, such as the disciple community experienced after the death of Jesus. The caring preacher will guide a troubled congregation through these deep waters of theological meaning-making so that they can learn to pass through the floods.

Two cautions are worth heeding as the pastoral preacher turns from consolation to interpretation after a crisis. First, less is usually more. Too much theological wrestling with the complex reality of good and evil either compounds the confusion of the distraught congregation or sounds like a defense of God. Neither is desirable at a time when people are spiritually alert and emotionally unsteady. God does not need our defense and the people do not need complex rationalizations of human suffering. If we are going to struggle with theological meanings in times of crisis, then we should gently invite the congregation to struggle with us over the long haul. That
leads to the second caution. We should give the congregation a break. Even in a protracted crisis, such as wartime, persons need to hear something else from the pulpit than an inexorable drumming of the crisis. Sermons that lead persons in praise of God or encourage them in the life of Christian discipleship may do just as much to ameliorate the uncertainty provoked by the crisis as unrelenting thrashing through the thickets of meaning.

Clearly, pastoral care and preaching rub shoulders in times of crisis; indeed, during such times, the lines between pastoral care and preaching blur. Some preachers feel most alive when called upon to preach timely sermons following a tragic death or the furious arrival of a hurricane. Emotions run high, worship life quickens, and theological stakes are raised for the preacher and congregation. But the fact is that the lion's share of congregational life occurs during more routine times. Thank God, crisis does not come crashing into church or culture every day. Normal pastoral care and weekly preaching go on as the needs of the congregation wax and wane. Preaching still bears significant pastoral freight even when the congregation and community are on track. But how? What binds together preaching and pastoral care during the seasons of ordinary time within the Christian congregation?

Therapeutic Preaching

Some preachers try to forge a therapeutic link between preaching and pastoral care. Therapeutic preaching bears some resemblance to crisis-oriented preaching, because the sermon addresses perceived needs within the listeners. But, whereas crisis preaching responds to particular disruptive events for the congregation and then moves on, therapeutic preaching continues to see the congregation and sermon through the lens of sickness and health. Furthermore, the sickness that the sermon addresses is usually inward, psychological sickness borne by the individual listener. Such sermons construe the congregation as a gathering of hurting individuals in need of medicine—often of a psychological variety (more optimism, less anxiety, release of compulsions)—which the preacher dispenses as a good pharmacist.

This approach to pastoral preaching gained a full head of steam during the middle decades of the twentieth century under the widespread influence of Harry Emerson Fosdick. He once claimed that preaching is “counseling on a group scale.” For all his contributions to pulpit and pew, Fosdick’s focus upon the needs of hurting individuals severely narrows the
scope of pastoral preaching. Such preachers deem a sermon pastoral if it speaks to the individual needs of the listener. Their sermons peer deeper and deeper into the inward psyche of the hearers and dwell less and less on the fullness of the gospel alive in church and world.

What drops away in this therapeutic homiletic is the way in which pastoral preaching fashions a body of believers who do exist not alone but with and for one another in the name of Jesus Christ. Granted, through preaching God does speak a healing word to persons in all sorts of sinful distress, from addictions to neglect of stewardship. Nevertheless, the most pastoral element of preaching is not individually therapeutic at all—certainly not in the psychological sense that many preachers promote today. Pastoral preaching names God’s grace in the world and by the power of the Holy Spirit gathers a people together who seek to live faithfully by that grace. Pastoral preaching attempts to build up a people, a corporate body, whose identity is marked by Christian care.

The Pastoral Relationship

Recognizing that preaching is not personal counseling, some preachers turn to the pastoral relationship as the key to pastoral preaching. The relationship between the preacher and congregation becomes the crucial element for pastoral preaching. If the pastor and congregational members share an open and authentic relationship, then the sermon will be more pastoral. Persons will hear more willingly on Sunday morning the words from a pastor who spent Thursday afternoon with them in the emergency room. As Phillips Brooks stated years ago, “The preacher who is not a pastor grows remote. The pastor who is not a preacher grows petty.” When it comes to gaining congregational attentiveness to the sermon, there is no substitute for a carefully cultivated pastoral relationship. Who could argue?

Well, here’s the problem. If pushed too far, this emphasis upon the pastoral relationship can crowd out gospel proclamation. First the relationship, then the personality of the preacher begin to hog the spotlight in the pulpit as the preacher strives to communicate his own authenticity for the sake of pastoral communication. Stories, allusions, and anecdotes, all begin to point toward the preacher rather than toward Jesus Christ or the mission of the church. The danger is real: with a preacher who is too focused upon maintaining intimate pastoral relationships, the awesome size of God with us can shrink down to the miniature size of the preacher’s personality.
Rather than allowing a biblical text, a theological theme, or cultural concern to govern the sermon, the preacher's voice begs for all the attention. Stories from the preacher's life, his or her family, a recent vacation, or a putt-putt golf game, all come rushing onto the podium and drown out the mysterious sounds of God and the genuine cries of the world. William Willimon's caustic observation is correct: "Thank God, we preachers have something to preach other than ourselves."4

Preachers who emphasize relationship as the basis for pastoral preaching should proceed with caution. The relational does indeed influence pastoral communication from the pulpit—how could it not? But relationship is a backdrop when the preacher steps into the pulpit; it does not belong front and center. God may have a pastoral word for the people whether the pastoral relationship is positive or indifferent. And God certainly does not depend upon the unblemished nature of the preacher to convey mercy and truth. If this were so, why in the world would God have chosen the likes of Jacob and Zaccheus to speak to Israel and the early church? We should carefully screen the presentation of self and our pastoral relationships before including them in the sermon.5 Because of the danger of subverting the gospel, we should hold the use of the personal to high standards of discipline. We should ask ourselves who is being served when we begin or conclude a sermon by saying, "The other day, I was . . ." Surely, there are some occasions in which the personal anecdote is an appropriate pointer towards Christian faithfulness; but as David Buttrick points out, "All in all, we are a poor substitute for the Gospel."6 Just because the material is personal does not make the sermon pastoral. Just because a story is interesting or funny or tragic doesn't mean it will illuminate God among us. We have to ask if the personal or relational in the sermon reveals or obscures sin and grace, judgment and forgiveness, the present and absent God. In the end, the pastoral relationship and the personal life of the pastor are unreliable footings for pastoral preaching. To find solid ground, we turn to theology.

Pastoral Theology in Preaching

Pastoral preaching is primarily a theological endeavor. The claim sounds odd, given all the assumptions that we make about pastoral care and preaching in the light of modern psychology. But sermons constructed upon the piers of therapy and relationship will not support the weight of pastoral concerns in
church and world. Sermons best convey pastoral concern through the theology of the sermons themselves. As the theology of the sermons goes, so goes the long-term pastoral effectiveness of preaching. What finally makes a sermon pastoral is not whether the preacher has spoken to the hearer's personal need or has communicated intimacy from the pulpit. What matters is whether the theology of the sermons preached in a congregation can engender a people (a λαός) who are confident of God's care for them and the world and who, by faithfulness to Jesus Christ, become a caring community in the world.

We sell far too short the pastoral importance of theology in preaching. The theological commitments of the preacher regularly crop up in the sermon. Pastorally speaking, such commitments will determine whether the Word will sustain the congregation when the floods begin to rise. Like fresh bread, the pastoral theology of the sermon can satisfy hungry hearts and unite strangers around a common table. Like a compass, the pastoral theology of the sermon may guide the faithful when they careen through the high-speed maze of technological society. We need not insist that for a sermon to be pastoral it must be personal or therapeutically oriented. When it comes down to conveying care, the theology of the sermon will do just fine.

I am not saying that the preacher is always conscious of such pastoral theological beliefs. To the contrary, these theological convictions are often tacit. They work through sermons preached over time like the bass notes of a continuo. They are really the working doctrines of the busy preacher that recur in a variety of ways through the seasons of congregational life. Like streams slowly carving channels through the forest floor, the implicit pastoral theology of the preacher can mold the congregation. As Buttrick points out, "Though assuredly frightening, it is nonetheless true to say that congregational theology is largely a product of preaching." Sunday by Sunday, the preacher's pastoral theology steadily shapes the people. This is particularly significant in the areas of theological anthropology and ecclesiology.

**Theological Anthropology**

How the preacher understands the human condition in relationship to God has direct bearing on the pastoral nature of the sermon. For example, if the preacher understands persons as individual sinners in need of personal salvation, then the pastoral intent of the sermon will be to bring about reconciliation between God and the hearer. On the other hand, if
the preacher sees human beings as passive participants in systemic sin, then the pastoral intent of the sermon may be to rouse the moral will of the hearers and guide them toward social responsibility. Personal salvation or social action, each, grows out of the pastoral intent of the sermon, and each is directed by the anthropological assumptions of the preacher.

Such a crisis as occurred on September 11, 2001, suggests numerous questions with respect to anthropology. Are we evil? Or are the evil ones out there and the good ones in here? Is there residual goodness within us, waiting to be activated by opposition? If so, why does it take such catastrophes to summon our goodness? Are we basically hospitable to the stranger, or are we frozen by self-protection and fear of others? Are we creatures of a loving God whose ways are radically hopeful and unpredictably graceful, or do we demand from God the measured justice that we give out to one another? These are just some of the anthropological questions that arise after such a disaster. Pastoral care comes through in the ways that we answer these questions week in and week out in our preaching. For pastoral preachers, it matters who we think humans are in relationship to God.

Ecclesiology
Next, the preacher’s working theology of the church is a key element in pastoral preaching. Who does the pastor see when she stands in the pulpit and faces the congregation? Is this an aggregate of fearful individuals who have come together for a brief while to find respite from today’s anxieties? Or is this a holy people whom God calls out through Christ to bear witness to God’s marvelous deeds (1 Peter 2)? Does the pastoral preacher believe that she speaks to a voluntary human organization or that she preaches among a baptized body of followers of Jesus Christ? If the preacher imagines that the church is a filling station on the highway of life, then his sermons will attempt to pump new energy into exhausted drivers. There may be something pastoral about such a strategy, but it will probably wreck the pastor in the long run. If he sees the church as a place where an infinite variety of individuals come to get their needs met, then he preaches sermons oriented over and again to personal need. In this scenario, the church is like a shopping mall and the sermon is a product for consumption. Individual healing may emerge from such preaching, but it will be limited in scope. The underlying consumer model works against the core values of Christian faith, given that we profess belief in a savior who says that those who would find themselves must give themselves away.
On the other hand, the pastoral intent of the sermon moves in fresh directions if the preacher sees the church as the body of Christ in the world, or as a covenantal people, or as a servant fellowship. The pastoral aim then becomes to build up the Body in order for the church to give itself away for the sake of God's world. The preacher doesn't have to lug pastoral care into the pulpit and heave it out into the congregation. The preacher points toward the care of Christ that is already present within the fellowship. She portrays a hospitable, mutually edifying, and compassionate people at work in the community and world and suggests the many ways that the church can continue to extend God's care outward.

The crucial question is this: Do we help our congregations see themselves in the light of Christ among us? Does the church within our sermons evoke new images of witness and mission, or do we draw drab sketches of a moribund congregation? Can people see themselves caring in the sermon, or is the care always happening somewhere else? For example, following the events of September 11, many preachers referred to the heroic work of firefighters, policemen, and other helpers as evidence of the presence of God. But a further step in pastoral preaching is to name how what went on “out there” affected the pastoral care within the specific congregation where we are preaching. How is the care going on out there refracted through the community at home? We want to point to the pastoral care that occurs within our own communities in order to reinforce the congregation's pastoral identity and action.

Such preaching builds up a pastoral community that is care-full. Supported by a theologically sturdy understanding of the church, pastoral care becomes the responsibility of the entire congregation, not just of the ordained leaders. Care within the pastoral community flows among the gathered fellowship but also outward into the world, where God walks among the neighbor and the stranger, the friend and the foe. It is the pastoral theology of the sermon that can help nurture such a community.

**Strategies for Care-full Preaching**

Those who wish to increase the pastoral nature of their preaching may begin by looking back at several months of sermons. Conduct a get-tough theological inquiry into your own sermons. You may be surprised at what you'll find when you begin to cross-examine the theology of your sermons. In image, story, allusion, and biblical interpretation, how do you portray...
the human condition? How do you understand the fundamental predicaments of humanity and what responses do you believe the gospel offers? Is the problem sickness, for which we need a cure; or is it confusion, for which we need moral guidance? Are persons basically alone in the world, or are we all wrapped up in one another? Are we gasping for air on a regular basis, or do we run the long-distance race with assurance of the final outcome? This review may evoke a shift in your theological anthropology as you discover elements that need weeding so that new pastoral growth can occur. To be sure, your anthropology will have diverse elements within it. But, if you can successfully name those elements—theological, psychological, biological—that make up your working anthropology, then you can begin to think constructively about the implications for future sermons.

Similarly, take a close look at how your sermons portray the church. How do your sermons depict the theological nature and the purpose of the church? When you have come to some clarity on these questions, ask yourself if the caring church that you want to form actually shows up in the sermon. Preachers sometimes use pastoral examples from everywhere else except home. If that is the case in your own sermons, then it would be important to shine the spotlight on the care that is already occurring in your own congregation. If you expect the sermon to shape the congregation to become care-full, then pastoral sermons need to give concrete examples of the kind of care that you want to encourage within the pastoral community. For example, congregations engage in routine acts of pastoral care all the time—phone calls to homebound members; youth groups involved with home repair projects; Sunday school class support of bereaved members; vigils with persons with AIDS; prayers for members who are away from home. Without divulging pastoral confidences, these acts of pastoral care can be brought out in the sermon. This gently suggests that pastoral communities care for one another and our neighbors in these specific ways. Reminded of such pastoral actions in the sermon, the congregation will further take on the character of a care-full community.

**Pastoral Preaching at Weddings and Funerals**

We can gauge the content of wedding and funeral sermons by the same theological criteria as weekly pastoral preaching. Weddings invite heightened awareness of theological anthropology as two persons and families come
together to form new covenantal relationships. If the marriage partners have not yet discovered it, they soon will find that the promise of loving, redemptive relationships is difficult to realize. The joy of new union gives way to the routines of daily living. The deeper and sometimes destructive motivations of the marriage partners begin to surface as persons encounter one another in the crucible of commitment.

Wedding sermons place the covenant of the couple within the larger covenant among God, humanity, and the church. This theological motif can be briefly but helpfully explored in the wedding sermon. How radically new is a covenantal understanding of human relationships in contrast to the ceaseless cultural worship of individual freedom. How potentially liberating is the promise of faithfulness that lasting covenants make. More than anything else, a marriage will bring out the choice between living alone for self and living with others before God. The church is the larger covenantal body that gives meaning to the covenant between husband and wife. The church as God's people guides the married couple towards fulfillment of the marriage through worship of God and service of others. When the marriage covenant undergoes stress and change (infidelity, birth, illness, confusion), the church will be present to carry the partners into the future promises of God. If we can place these anthropological and ecclesiological themes in the foreground, then we will heighten the pastoral significance of the wedding sermon.

Similarly, the funeral sermon deserves our pastoral theological attention. To a large extent, the events surrounding the death will orient the sermon. A funeral following the tragic death of a child is quite different in tone and content than a funeral for a ninety-year-old beloved saint of the church. Nevertheless, in both instances we should stop to ask ourselves just what we intend to communicate theologically about the nature of humanity and the purpose of the church. If we think that human beings are simply spirits who inhabit fleshy bodies for a season and who then return to the true world of the spirit, then death is finally our friend, freeing us from bodily captivity. If we wish to preach such Gnostic notions during funerals, we may offer persons temporary comfort when they struggle with the pain of grief, but in the long run we wind up with vacuous portraits of human beings. The church spotted this problem early on and attempted to put it to rest with the doctrine of the Resurrection. When it comes to human creation, spirit is in the matter; bodies count. A funeral sermon will be much more pastorally sustaining if it conveys a firm
theological understanding of the earthly significance of the one who has
died and leaves the eternal significance in the hands of God.

Finally, the church takes a front row pew in the funeral sermon.
Scripturally speaking, the church is the body of Christ within creation. While
the deceased has changed at death, he or she remains a part of the Body as a
transformed member. The sermon attests that the witness of the deceased
reverberates throughout the Body. The faithful dead call the church on to
fulfillment of its mission to care for others in the name of Christ; therefore,
even death has not been in vain.

One of the most pastoral things that we can do during the funeral
sermon is to point to the ongoing reality of the church and remind the
bereaved that through the church they will find the comfort of fellow
sufferers and the hopeful presence of the risen Christ. We can do this by
keeping the funeral sermon close to the ground. There is no need for
soaring theological excurses into the abstractions of heaven or eternal salva-
tion. We can point to a Sunday school class that will grieve and will honor
the deceased member. We may mention a favorite project or mission that
will take on additional importance after the loved one’s death. We may
name the person’s favorite food, often shared at fellowship dinners, as a
reminder of the gifts of bread and wine that sustain the church and
proclaim our identity in Christ. In each of these ways, the funeral sermon
points not only to the individual who has died but also to his or her place
within the Body where Christ is resurrected. The Christian funeral sermon
will end on the sound of resurrection, however muted the occasion may
make it. But the church, as surely as the sound of the piano playing “Christ
the Lord Is Risen Today,” is the Body that sings the resurrection song.

Practicing pastors will need to sift these brief suggestions about pastoral
preaching through their own theological grids. It is challenging labor to comb
through a sermon and tease out its various strands of theological anthropology
and ecclesiology. But the end is worth the labor, especially for a busy and caring
preacher. For by carefully thinking through the pastoral theology of the sermon,
preachers can help build up a Christian body of people who are care-full.

In closing, it should be noted that despite our very best efforts the pastoral
importance of the sermon is not finally within the preacher’s control. The Word
preached and heard is only authentic when guided by the Holy Spirit. God,
through Jesus Christ and by the presence of the Holy Spirit, determines the
truth and effect of all Christian preaching. God authorizes whether our words
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Endnotes

7. For a discussion of preaching, pastoral theology, and congregational identity, see Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).
9. For a discussion of the characteristics of the pastoral community and how preaching contributes to such formation see my Care-full Preaching: From Sermon to Caring Community (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000).
10. For a compelling discussion of Christology and its implications for the church's witness, see Susan L. Bond, Trouble with Jesus: Women, Christology, and Preaching (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999). Her exposition of a "christology of salvage" seems timely in light of the recent mass destructions around the globe.
11. "Preaching, then, has to do with the formation and transformation of Christian identity—not only of individuals but of congregations," Tisdale, Preaching as Local Theology, 57.
When persons are ordained as elders in The United Methodist Church, they pledge to accept, among other things, the church’s liturgy. Among other things, this commits the candidate to the ritual and official worship resources of the church in planning and leading. This prompts this question: By accepting the official liturgy of the church, are elders not bound in covenant to consult and use the official and related worship resources in planning and presiding in weekly worship?

It is often stated that The United Methodist Church is not a credal church or, for that matter, a liturgical church. Implied in this statement is the claim that the church’s official liturgical resources have no normative status in the worship practices of United Methodist congregations; they are “merely” resources to be consulted or ignored at the pastor’s discretion. This view raises serious moral and ethical issues about the

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I recall a lecture during my college days in which the professor spoke about the nature of permanence and change. He reminded us that the human body replaces its cells completely over the course of eighteen months. He then talked of the change in roles we would experience—from student to professional and from child to parent. He spoke about changed surroundings and demands. While my body, experiences, roles, surroundings, responsibilities, and daily activities change continually, he said, I remain the same person. There is a thread of spirit, memory, purpose, and identity that keeps me the same through time, locations, and experiences. This analogy applies to the liturgical life of the church. The church, too, is a living body. Its cells (people) are replaced every so many years. The church’s surroundings and concerns change and so do its forms, liturgies, and practices.

Over time, the shape and style of the church’s liturgical expression

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meaning and integrity of ministry in covenant. It also highlights the hermeneutical and ecclesial question of how to articulate the tension between tradition and context, between heritage and innovation. United Methodists are part of a tradition that has always had and accepted in varying degrees a ritual for our general services. At the same time, they have inherited a practical and pastoral attentiveness to the worship needs of the Methodist people. In the opening decade of the twenty-first century, many United Methodist leaders are tempted to relax this tension in favor of innovation and cultural savvy, thus viewing the church’s authorized ritual as largely irrelevant to perceived worship needs.

The temptation to go it alone flatly contravenes Article XXII of our denomination’s Articles of Religion. While the Article acknowledges the need to adapt “rites and ceremonies” to specific contexts, it includes this stern admonition:

> Whosoever, through his private judgement, willingly and purposely doth openly break the rites and ceremonies of the church to which he belongs . . . and are ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly . . . as one that offendeth against the common order of the church . . .

Let me be clear. I am not advocating for a crackdown by judicial processes. I am urging that we take seriously what we promise in the covenant of ordination and what the General Conference of the church has “by common authority” ordained and approved. The authorized ritual resources of the church are the “stuff” of our common life in worship and something around which bishops, elders, deacons, and members must creatively and faithfully struggle, study, and debate for the health and sake of the church—local, global, and ecumenical.

Clearly, we need to avoid a sharp polarity that pits faithful use of our ritual and liturgy against a rightful concern for relevance in worship and a vision of vital evangelization. Surely Article XXII aims to balance faithfulness with relevance and edification. Holding one another hostage to the church’s liturgy or to charges of irrelevance and failed evangelization are fruitless and demeaning to the fullness of God’s mission and our discipleship. What we need to do is search for a common pathway that moves us to a dynamic and faithful acceptance of the church’s liturgy. The question is
not about obligation so much as it is about gift. It is about perceiving and receiving the gift the churches have to give to each other, whether they come from the historic denominations or new denominations, from churches meeting in a storefront or churches meeting in gothic or Byzantine edifices.

How does the church, through its bishops, elders, deacons, and all of the baptized and professing members, hear and receive its liturgy as gift? How do we learn together that liturgy is not a fence around the sheep and shepherds, causing them to feel hemmed in and kept from the luring and verdant pasture beyond? How do we learn to see and be shaped by liturgy as a gracious enclosure in and out of which the good shepherd leads us to eternal life?

There is no legislative solution to the question of what acceptance and faithfulness to the church's liturgy and worship resources mean. The pathway we need may be best found in a central feature of our tradition, namely, Christian conferencing. This conferencing aims at theological formation of our lives and practices and takes place at all levels of the church's life—from local churches to annual conferences to orders of deacons and elders to general agency staff to the Council of Bishops to our ecumenical partners.

This ongoing conferencing would help us recover the gift of ritual and liturgy as a means of being and becoming God's people for the life of the world. The ritual of the church shapes us in a certain direction and is robust enough to be contextualized in each location and cultural context. Certainly Article XXII is limber enough to admit this:

It is not necessary that rites and ceremonies should in all places be the same, or exactly alike; for they have been always different, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's word.4

Music, symbols, gestures, utilization of space and acoustics, use of the senses and embodying the praise of God and prayer for the world should always be porous to the Holy Spirit's work among us. Liturgy includes received patterns, prayers, and practices; but it is never the "people's work" until this particular people enact and breathe them Sunday by Sunday. Recovering the church's liturgy means a living appropriation of it under the
guidance of the Spirit and by the appreciative welcome of gifts from the church of all times and places. Maybe, to paraphrase a saying, "Our ritual has not been tried and found wanting; it simply has not been tried." Perhaps we need to admit that we have not known enough to know how to try it! If God is for us and Christ has so much to give us, can we not truthfully say, "Lord, we want to worship you vitally and faithfully; help us in our need to catch up on what we have not known?"

Worship and evangelism are not the same thing; they are also not exclusive of each other. In the fifth century, Leo the Great said that what was tangible in Jesus when he walked the earth has now passed over into the sacraments. If that is true, then vital, sacramental celebration and understanding may be more potent evangelism than we have imagined! Clearly, accepting the church's liturgy can never mean forsaking our charism of evangelization and missional service. But we dare not construe worship as a function of church growth either. The conversation needs to begin and be carried on at many levels, so that what we promised explicitly in ordination becomes implicit in our ways of being and doing church and we find that the liturgical pasture is both green and expansive.

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Endnotes

3. Ibid., ¶103, Section 3.
4. Ibid.
may change, but it remains the same as it is faithful to the spirit, memory, purpose, and identity of its heritage.

The question of liturgical innovation is twofold: First, is it ever acceptable? Second, if so, what are the criteria that guide United Methodist clergy in such innovation?

Is liturgical innovation ever acceptable? Three sources help us formulate an answer: doctrine, historical precedent, and current reality. Article XXII of The Book of Discipline clearly supports innovation in worship as it struggles with the tension between faithfulness to tradition in the face of constantly changing life:

> It is not necessary that rites and ceremonies should in all places be the same, or exactly alike; for they have always been different, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word... Every particular church may ordain, change, or abolish rites and ceremonies, so that all things may be done to edification.¹

Methodist history supplies us with ample historical precedent for liturgical innovation. Wesley provided his preachers with a carefully crafted, highly structured "Order for a Sunday Service." But it soon became evident that this service did not fit the context of the American frontier and, thus, it was largely abandoned. Wesley himself realized that the order was designed for maintaining the faith of people already oriented towards Christianity and church. It was not designed for outreach and thus not structured to welcome people who had little or no experience in the faith or the church. Wesley's response was to allow and practice flexibility in different contexts. When involved in outreach to people who had no experience in traditional liturgical practice, Wesley used mainly singing, extemporaneous prayer, and preaching. When leading worship in congregations with long-running experience with the church's liturgy, he employed the Order for Sunday Services.

One final reality that provides an answer to the question of innovation comes from the continued existence and healthy faces of innovation and diversity in United Methodist worship. Consider the diversity of music and worship that takes place across the church at any given time. I have been privileged to be part of a number of churches that worshiped in a variety of ways. I grew up in a university church with its huge sanctuary, robed choir,
massive pipe organ, and carefully designed, liturgically patterned worship services. I experienced powerful moments of worship around a campfire with my youth group. While at seminary, I was part of a former Evangelical United Brethren congregation, a multicultural congregation with worship styles that faithfully articulated its diversity. I have been the pastor of a small country church that loved to use the *Cokesbury Hymnal* in the evenings before "altar time." I now serve as the founding pastor of a large, diverse church that makes extensive use of art, dance, imagery, and a variety of musical styles. In each of these situations, I participated in the core activities of the worshiping community and was part of a body of Christ whose members were growing closer to one another and to God and were prepared for service in the world. Now, who is to determine which one of these liturgical forms is more authentically faithful to our Wesleyan heritage?

Even this cursory look at our doctrine, Wesley's example, and the reality of diversity and innovation in the church's worship makes clear that liturgical innovation is acceptable to meet the purposes of the church in different contexts. The question is this: What are the criteria for faithful innovation?

The first criterion has to do with the *substance* of the liturgy. Innovation must be sensitive to continuity in pattern and purpose. The liturgical traditions of the denomination provide continuity of expression and content to our worship experiences over time and from place to place. The pattern of worship is found in the *Hymnal* (p. 2): and, as ordained to Word, Sacrament, and Order, elders are bound to keep faithfully to the order of worship. The elements of the worship experience—gathering, prayer, adoration, proclamation, response, confession, thanksgiving, and sending forth—constitute our pattern for communal worship. While expressed differently, these elements should be accounted for in the flow of the service. The key is to determine what is the changeless spirit and memory that must be maintained and then faithfully to articulate it in ways that are meaningful to a given time and situation. It is in the dynamic tension between tradition and creative innovation that we find the energy needed for faithful, relevant, transformational worship experiences.

The second criterion is *theological.* Faithfulness to the tradition and purpose of worship in the Wesleyan tradition is not first of all about which liturgy we will use. The fundamental questions are theological: Is the order of salvation clear and present for those who participate? Is prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace woven into the worship experience, calling
people into the ongoing process of God's redemptive work in creation? Does the form of our worship recognize and articulate the universal grace of God, which draws us towards repentance? Do our services call people to the reality of transformation and rebirth through the justifying grace of God? Do they provide settings for thanksgiving and for continued growth in grace and selfless servanthood (sanctification)? If these elements are not present, then it does not matter what the style of the liturgy—they lack the continuity and integrity of our Wesleyan theological tradition.

Our denomination's designated worship resources represent a library of possibilities for the construction of worship services that are faithful to our theological purpose and tradition. These resources, however, should be seen as resources rather than restrictions. We are God's children who share God's creative genes and likewise have been given all creation as the palate for our worship of God.

Our liturgical tradition is a beautiful repository of faith, heritage, and theology and a great source of life for us. The issue is this: How should we relate to this tradition as we move into a new and ever-changing present? It helps to remember that our liturgy serves to point to the sacred. We do not worship the liturgy. Ascribing sacred worth to the wrong thing can become a big problem, as the Pharisees discovered when Jesus chastised them for swearing by the gold on the Temple rather than the Temple itself, an act that makes the gold sacred (Matt. 23:16-22).

Innovation is part of our Methodist tradition. After all, wasn't every piece of our current liturgical tradition at one time new? I wonder what would have happened had John and Charles Wesley refused to adapt to the language and the needs of their community. Change is a reality in our lives and in our institutions. Maybe it is our task as United Methodist clergy to be creatively and purposefully methodical in our approach to providing Word, Sacrament, and Order to a body in constant transition.

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Endnotes

Paul enjoyed a special relationship with Christians in Philippi. Not only had they embraced the gospel with enthusiasm but they also worked hard to spread the gospel. Paul notes that they are the only church to support his efforts elsewhere (Phil 1:5; 4:14-18). These contributions do not mean that the Philippians were more prosperous than Paul's other converts. Most people remember the famous battles in which Octavian and Mark Anthony defeated those who had assassinated Julius Caesar (42 B.C.E.) from reading Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. Octavian honored the city by re-founding it as a Roman colony. Its extensive agricultural lands provided a place to settle discharged veterans. Since the city stands at a strategic location along the Via Egnatia (a highway across northern Greece to Asia Minor), the emperor may have sought to ensure its loyalty to Rome.

Acts 16:11-40 indicates that women were the most prominent converts and support for Paul's founding mission in the city. Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, came from Thyatira; she must have owned a villa-style house in order to accommodate the church meeting there. It seems likely that most of the church members were "outsiders," traveling merchants like Lydia or artisans like Paul or slaves owned by others engaged in these activities. Some may also have come from the ranks of the urban poor. However, the city's wealth lay with the elite landowners who controlled the rich agricultural lands with their villages that surrounded the city. Few such persons would have had opportunity to encounter Christian preaching. The veterans with citizenship and a stake in the privileges of the earthly city were also unlikely candidates for conversion. When Paul directs the reader's gaze toward a heavenly citizenship with Christ (Phil. 3:20), he suggests that we need not worry...
about exclusion from the human world of power and privilege. In 2 Cor. 8:1-5, Paul describes the churches in this region as suffering material poverty and persecution. Their continuous generosity should put the prosperous Christians of Corinth to shame. So, what distinguishes the Philippians is not material prosperity but a richness in spirit.

Paul's note in the opening thanksgiving (1:3-11) of friendship and affection for aid given and devotion to the gospel sounds throughout the letter. But Paul also worries that the unity and enthusiasm that undergirded the church are showing cracks. Some preach in a spirit of rivalry (1:15). Two well-known woman preachers, Euodia and Syntyche, have fallen out (4:2-3). Christians need reminding that love puts the needs of others ahead of self-interest (2:1-4). Others could divide the church even further if they try to establish a Christian community on the basis of physical marks (circumcision) and other Jewish religious customs (3:2-19). Hostility from outsiders is not making life any easier (1:28-30). Philippians concludes with a note of thanks for the aid that Epaphroditus had brought with him (4:10-20).

Earlier we learn that Epaphroditus had fallen ill after arriving, causing concern at Philippi (2:25-30). Some scholars think that our version of Philippians has combined shorter notes from a back-and-forth correspondence between Paul and Philippi during this period.

Paul's imprisonment serves as the focus for the anxiety evident in the letter. He could be condemned to death. The Apostle maintains a spirit of joyful confidence in the Lord and hopes to instill the same spirit in his readers (1:18-19; 4:4-7). Lest we think that all Paul means by "joy" is the happiness people will feel when Epaphroditus finally returns home in good health (2:25-30), it is worth recalling what life was like for prisoners. Municipal slaves or lower-level military personnel were not shy about beating and torturing those in their charge. Rank and privilege could protect the well-connected from such treatment and from the heavy chains also used on prisoners. The gifts brought by Epaphroditus may have served to ameliorate the conditions under which Paul was held, as well as provide some food and warm clothing. We do not know where Paul was being held. His reference to the "imperial guard" (1:13) need not mean Rome, since soldiers from that group could be found elsewhere. First Corinthians 15:32 points to a tradition that Paul had faced a mortal threat in Ephesus. Messages could be more easily exchanged between Ephesus and Philippi than between Philippi and Rome. Paul expects to visit Philippi soon if he is released (2:23-24).
But the "if" should not disappear behind Paul's own faith and joy. As a Jew, Paul might experience ethnic hostility from non-Jewish prisoners and guards. Prisoners might steal food from one another. Those discarded in confinement could die from disease or starvation as well as maltreatment. Aside from the physical dangers, most people in the first century saw imprisonment as a mark of shame, even if an individual were acquitted. Consequently, some of the Philippians may have tried to dissociate themselves from the Apostle. Second Timothy 4:16 depicts Paul as abandoned by all at his defense. Consequently, the Philippians' decision to send Ephaphroditus as an envoy to assist Paul took some courage. Ordinarily, it is the prisoner who needs to be encouraged to bear up. Philippians moves in the opposite direction. Paul has composed a letter of consolation for his distraught friends in Philippi. They must come to value the things that are really important (1:9-10). Paul is not "shamed" by sharing in the fate of Christ as long as he continues to testify to the gospel (1:19-21). Turning to the selections of Philippians chosen for the Sundays in Ordinary Time, we can begin to trace the contours of the "joy in the Lord" that lie at the heart of Paul's letter of consolation.

September 22, 2002—Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Phil. 1:21-30; Exod. 16:2-15; Ps. 105:1-6, 47-45 or Ps. 78; Matt. 20:1-16

Today's reading from Philippians begins after Paul has explained his concrete reason for writing: the confusion caused by his imprisonment. Initially, he uses a bit of reverse psychology to pull something good out of a bad situation. The gospel, he says, is being advanced for three reasons:

1. The Roman soldiers serving as jailors are hearing the Word. (It was part of their job to listen in on prisoners.)

2. With Paul out of action, others are stepping up to the plate and preaching the Word fearlessly.

3. Even those whose rivalries could divide the community and cause Paul distress have managed to spread the gospel.

Paul concludes that he can only be filled with joy at such results (1:12-18). Then he turns to a more theological reason for his optimism. He knows that the Spirit of Christ is there, no matter what happens. Rejecting the cultural stereotype of prison as "dishonor," Paul insists that if he continues to bear courageous witness to the gospel, he will honor Christ "in my body" (1:20). He does not need to die a martyr's death to do that. The physical
abuse of prisoners would be more than sufficient to bestow on Paul's body marks of suffering that link the apostle with the Crucified (Gal. 6:17).

Though we are accustomed to honor those who die as a witness to the gospel, Paul's first-century converts were shaken by the prospect. They did not yet have such a cloud of faithful witnesses. They may even have thought Paul's imprisonment and Epaphroditus's sudden illness to be signs of divine displeasure. Paul sets out to correct any wrong impressions by invoking some commonplaces from Stoic philosophy. The wise person is able to evaluate what is really important. External sufferings over which one has no control should not be allowed to disturb one's peace of mind or firmness of purpose. Paul presents himself as a man with a choice to make. To what degree is death or life really his to determine? The Athenian philosopher Socrates (399 B.C.E.), when put on trial for atheism and corrupting the young, refused to plead in a way that would win over the jury or to negotiate a way out of the death sentence. Perhaps Paul envisages himself making an overly bold speech before his judges that would result in death. Though he considers death the preferable option because it means being with Christ, it is not the best one for the circumstances. The Apostle backs away from that precipice out of concern for the Philippians. Their faith and joy are not yet mature enough to stand the consequences of losing him so Paul reassures his audience that their prayers (v. 19) will be answered. He will return to see them.

Is this promise just wishful thinking on Paul's part or selfishness on the part of the Philippians? Hardly. They too have a share in suffering for the gospel (vv. 27-30). Paul does not spell out the details, since they were familiar to both parties. Since Paul compares their suffering to his own, the opponents of v. 28 must be non-Christians, not the rival gospel preachers referred to earlier (1:15-17). Such opposition could take any number of forms, such as verbal abuse, exclusion from a trade association, ostracism from a family group, or legal charges of introducing disruptive foreign gods into the city. We do not know the situation in Philippi. But we do know that Paul expects some form of suffering or ridicule to be the lot of all Christians. He also qualifies the promise to see the Philippians again. Whether he makes it back or not, Paul wants to hear that they are standing firm in support of the gospel and of one another (v. 27). He smuggles in a theological sidebar to underline the importance of doing so. By refusing to be intimidated, Christians show the unspecified charges against them to be
false. The wicked who bring such charges against God's elect set themselves up for condemnation (v. 28).

September 29, 2002—Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Phil. 2:1-13; Exod. 17:1-7; Ps. 78:1-4, 12-16; Matt. 21:23-32

The centerpiece of today's reading is a poetic celebration of Christ's self-emptying (kenosis) on the cross and his subsequent exaltation at the right hand of God (vv. 6-11). Attached to the “Christ Jesus” of v. 5 by the relative pronoun who, this string of main verbs and participial phrases is often printed in short, parallel lines rather than as prose. Paul appears to be quoting a familiar set piece about Christ, which could be read on its own as a “Christ hymn.” However, this section also has a critical role to play in Paul's message for the Philippians. In last week's reading, the Apostle's mindset in jail served as an example for his audience of how to think about what both the Apostle and the church were suffering. Now, we are to take our example from Christ himself. Paul has also shifted to another issue, the need to shore up unity of purpose and self-sacrificing love in a community under pressure.

Paul needs to bring out the liturgical fire power in support of his definition in v. 4 of what it means for Christians to share a common purpose and to treat one another with love and compassion: each of them should care not for their own interests but for the interests of others. The RSV translators tucked in a “not only to his own interests,” which has been rightly corrected in the NRSV. Just as Paul himself decided for the Philippians’ needs against his own preference (1:23-26), so all Christians must be ready to put the needs of others ahead of their own. An ancient audience, well schooled in a honor-shame culture, was no happier to hear this definition of humility (sounds more like “humiliation!”) than would modern Americans brought up on messages of self-help, self-esteem, and self-assertion—all decidedly not self-emptying. In Phil. 2:19-21, Paul hopes to send Timothy as his emissary, because Timothy can be relied on to place the interests of others ahead of his own.

The poetic piece that depicts Christ as the model for this Christian attitude provides evidence for very early belief in the divine status of Jesus, since Paul's letters antedate the Gospels by at least two decades. Much exegetical ink has been spilled over what sort of “shape” or “form” or “likeness” to God is implied by v. 6. Those who favor a “high” christology insist that the text implies preexistence with God, which Christ willingly surren-
ders in the self-emptying of incarnation and death on the cross. Those who assume that Jesus' identity with God can be affirmed only in the divine act of raising and exalting him after his death suggest a parallel with Adam. Because he was free of sin (2 Cor. 5:21), Jesus retained the image of God in which we were created. He was not subject to the penalty of death. Unlike the disobedient Adam, Jesus humbled himself even to the point of death. God's response was to bestow God's own name and cosmic authority on this truly righteous one. On either reading, the hymn is a stunning model for Christians who must constantly resist the false standards of power and greatness held up by the culture in which they live. For those Christians who are the poor, dishonored, and humiliated ones in the world, the imagery has a different meaning. Jesus/God has entered into their suffering.

Paul returns to direct exhortation in v. 12 and once again reminds the audience of his absence. Their Christian obedience cannot depend upon Paul's return. Instead, Paul suggests another motive: "fear and trembling," that is, an attitude of awe and reverence for the mighty saving acts of God (e.g. Exod. 15:16; Isa. 19:16; Ps. 2:11). Even without the Apostle, God's presence working in and through the community will accomplish God's will.

October 6, 2002—Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

After promises of a visit by Paul's trusted associate, Timothy (2:19-24), and the return of Epaphroditus, who had been seriously ill (2:25-30), one might expect the renewed call to find one's joy in the Lord (3:1) to introduce the letter's conclusion. Instead, Paul breaks in with a sharp warning against "dogs... evil workers" (3:2). The persons he has in mind do not appear to be members of the Philippian church. Perhaps Paul has no specific group in mind. His earlier struggles against Christians who think that they need to take on circumcision, the Jewish sign of God's covenant, as well as other Jewish customs, may be responsible for the severity of this warning. Christians who seek to be circumcised or to adopt other Jewish customs are abandoning confidence in Christ, who is our salvation (3:2-3).

Paul's experience once again becomes the model for Christian understanding. Paul is not speaking to the question of how Christians who are also Jews might relate to that heritage. If Philippi had a Jewish community, it has left almost no archaeological traces.² Paul may even hope that the Philippians will substitute whatever counts as privileges in their cultural
world for those that had shaped his experience as a devout Jew. Paul's overarching objective is to show the Philippians what it means to "rejoice in the Lord" (3:1). Such joy only emerges for those who consider everything else garbage in comparison with Christ (v. 8). Is Paul hostile to his Jewish heritage? Is he degrading his Pharisaic training and his meticulous, "blameless" observance of Torah? No. He tells us that, at the time, he would have called all that "gain" (v. 7a). Just as Christ put aside "equality with God" (2:6), Paul surrenders everything he had valued in life to know Christ (v. 8).

In Galatians (3:1–4:31), Paul had hammered out the difference between a righteousness gained through a life of faithful obedience to Torah and God's free gift of righteousness through faith in the Son, who died for us. He gives no argument for or explanation of this theological insight here. Instead, Paul returns to the imitation of Christ in suffering (vv. 10–11). During the Maccabean period (2 Maccabees 7), Jews had drawn the connection between a martyr's death and his or her bodily resurrection. Paul employs a simpler argument by analogy here: The power of Christ's resurrection will be extended to anyone who has shared Christ's suffering. At the same time, Paul takes care not to presume on God's power. "If somehow I may attain . . . ," he writes in v. 11. He is also careful not to presume on his own achievement (v. 12). Using the athletic metaphor he loves, Paul describes himself as an athlete straining toward the finish line (v. 14). The race metaphor provides a helpful analogy for the intense focus on Christ, which leaves everything else behind. Once the starter's gun fires, the runners have nothing else in mind but the finish line. No time to look around, wonder about your training, or change your mind. Today, athletes often talk about "being in the zone," those rare times when everything "clicks." Paul uses a slightly different expression for the "zone" in a Christian life: being taken over by Christ (v. 12). The athletic image also serves to relate our effort to lead a Christian life and arrive at the finish line to the desire and not to reintroduce righteousness based on obedience to rules. Christians have no personal claim to the power of God, which carries them through the pain and suffering to the finish line, to life with the risen Christ in our heavenly commonwealth (3:20–21).

October 13, 2002—Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Philem. 1:1-9; Exod. 32:1-14; Ps. 106:1-6, 19-23; Matt. 22:1-14

Today's reading brings back the theme of joy (vv. 1, 4) as a header to a section
of brief hortatory notes to the congregation. Paul typically concludes his letters with such exhortation. We learn something else about Paul's athletic imagery in the first verse. The real "crown" is not a matter of personal achievement. Paul doesn't labor in the competitive spirit of rivalry that he observes in some others (1:15; 2:21). No, his beloved churches are the crown he anticipates to find at the end of the race. Were they to fail, Paul's life and his sacrificial death—if it comes to that—would be in vain (2:16-17). Were they to fail, even as robust a spirit as Paul's might find it hard to call up joy in suffering (2:18).

To make sure that does not happen, Paul has one more piece of business to attend to, namely, to mend a quarrel between Euodia and Syntyche (vv. 2-3). He asks another anonymous person, referred to as a "loyal companion," to take up the task of bringing about a reconciliation. This notice provides further evidence for the significance of women in this church. Paul treats them as full members of a group of missionary preachers who worked with him to spread the gospel. Even though we know nothing about what caused the tension to which Paul refers, we can be glad that Paul produced this bit of evidence for his work with female associates.

As he couples the motif of joy with promises of God's peace (vv. 4, 7, 9), Paul once again reminds us that his audience had been deeply shaken by his imprisonment. These brief ethical sentences focus on the learning and understanding that the Philippians need to cultivate. Paul has no ax to grind over some lapse in moral conduct. We have known since the beginning of the letter that any cracks in the Philippians' conduct are the result of anxiety over Paul's fate and hostility from outsiders. Anyone who has had a child, friend, or business associate tossed in a foreign jail or a child or friend held as a prisoner of war can empathize with their plight. Every scrap of communication is treasured and searched for clues. Perhaps the Philippian church did the same with this letter.

How do we cut through the anxiety? We are not surprised to hear that Paul recommend prayer. Thanksgiving may be more difficult, though Paul has provided a model for it in his own conduct. But he also has a more general therapy for attaining what the philosophers would have called "peace of mind" but what Christians know as the "peace of God." It's a matter of focusing our attention on the right things and letting the rest go. The list in v. 8—"whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure," etc.—serves only as a guideline. And if the Philippians are in doubt about how to act or live, Paul invites them to look back not just on his teaching but
also on his way of acting for an example (v. 9). How can Paul promise the Philippians that they will experience God's peace if they follow his word and example? His own experience. God is there in the midst of suffering.

Conclusion

Many Christians imagine Paul as a distant, somewhat austere, figure. Yet the ties of love and concern that are so evident in his correspondence with the Philippians show a different side to the Apostle. Jail, local opposition, squabbles between valued coworkers, illness, separation—so much to be anxious about. And yet, Paul says, "Rejoice! Give thanks! Discern God's hand in the situation as you see the gospel message being spread."

By omitting much of the concrete detail about Paul's situation and that of his coworkers, the lectionary readings almost erase the moving, personal character of Philippians as a letter of friendship and consolation. "Jail was like that? How did he ever survive?" one lady remarked during Bible study. "I always thought Paul went around like someone having a root canal," another remarked. Another surprise lurking in those surrounding verses is the extent to which Paul credits others—the Philippians, Timothy, Epaphroditus, the anonymous "loyal companion," even Euodia and Syntyche—with the success of his mission in the region. For Paul, all the honor and glory belongs to God and Christ, not to human beings who have been handed a great story to tell the world.

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Endnotes

1. A thorough discussion of imprisonment with reference to the episodes in Acts can be found in Brian Rapske, The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting, Volume 3; Paul in Roman Custody (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).
The academic study of evangelism is a relatively young discipline. Yet the subject matter has been the topic of extensive publishing in European and North American Christianity for the past three centuries. Many seminaries now have faculty positions in this area, some only recently created. Candidates for ordination as either deacon or elder in The United Methodist Church are required to take a course in this area. In what follows, I outline the shape and issues in the emerging discipline of evangelism.

Often, when church people talk about evangelism, they fail to communicate, because they use the word in significantly different ways. One of the reasons for this confusion is that systematic theologians have neglected the discussion of the concept, as Walter Klaiber’s survey in *Call and Response: Biblical Foundations of a Theology of Evangelism* (Abingdon, 1997) has shown. Not surprisingly, many ministers in mainline denominations tend to react either favorably or unfavorably to specific practices they label evangelistic without significant theoretical reflection on the goals of such practices or how best to follow them.

The chapter on defining the term evangelism is the most helpful part of Darius Salter’s *American Evangelism: Its Theology and Practice* (Baker, 1996). However, the most insightful discussion of the problem is found in William Abraham’s *The Logic of Evangelism* (Eerdmans, 1989). For many people, evangelism is basically proclamation. But, says Abraham, while proclamation is an important part of evangelism, it neglects the many other aspects of evangelistic practice seen in the New Testament. Abraham also tackles the understanding of evangelism associated with the church-growth movement. The hard-nosed empirical research of Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner has brought new vigor and clarity to the field of evangelism; however, the church-growth model of evangelism has serious theological inadequacies. Instead, Abraham argues for a definition of evangelism as “that set of intentional activities governed by the goal of initiating persons...
into the kingdom of God for the first time" (p. 95). Initiation into the reign of God includes six dimensions: moral, experiential (conversion), theological, baptism, gifts of the Spirit, and spiritual disciplines. Thus, Abraham suggests that there are many practices that can count as evangelism, if directed properly, and that genuine evangelistic practice must be multifaceted to cover all six of these areas.

Abraham also argues for the centrality of the reign of God. So does Mortimer Arias (Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus [Fortress, 1984]), who suggests that evangelism must pay attention to New Testament scholars who see the reign of God as the key element in the preaching of Jesus. Arias asks why this theme has been eclipsed in the history of Christianity and uses it as a way of linking evangelism with ministries of social justice. Orlando Costas, in Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization (Eerdmans, 1989) and other books, also points out that authentic evangelism must include the good news of freedom from oppression in all its forms. Too often in European and North American Christianity, the ministry of evangelism has been seen as belonging to those who support the cultural status quo, with its injustices of racism, sexism, and oppression of the poor. A number of Latin American liberation theologians have suggested that authentic evangelism actually challenges these structures and sides with the oppressed. Priscilla Pope-Levison's Evangelization from a Liberation Perspective (Peter Lang, 1991) provides a helpful overview of both Roman Catholic and Protestant authors in this tradition.

Clearly, how one reads Scripture will deeply affect one's definition of evangelism. For Walter Brueggemann, in Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-storied Universe (Abingdon, 1993), the crucial question is the announcement of God's victory over the powers of evil. Using many illustrations from the Old Testament, Brueggemann shows how outsiders can become insiders, jaded members of the community can find a reinvigorated faith, and children can become believing adults. For him, all of these practices qualify as evangelism.

Two other issues are especially crucial for a theology of evangelism. The first is the relation of this area of ministry to the mission of the church. Darrell Guder's The Continuing Conversion of the Church (Eerdmans, 2000) builds on the work of the Gospel and Our Culture Network. Their earlier work Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America
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(Eerdmans, 1998) sought to articulate a missional ecclesiology for the post-Christian culture of North America.

The most helpful book in addressing this issue, however, is David Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis, 1991). This magisterial work uses Hans Küng's understanding of paradigms in Christian history to suggest that for each paradigm there has been a corresponding understanding of the church's mission. Bosch argues that the New Testament is a missional text, because the earliest paradigm understood the church and all its activities as essentially missionary. We now find ourselves in a time of crisis, which should be understood as both danger and opportunity. Bosch outlines an emerging postmodern ecumenical paradigm of mission. While, in this paradigm, evangelism is one component of mission, it is an essential component; for one cannot participate in God's mission to the world without offering each person and community an opportunity for a radical reorientation of their lives (p.420). When Bosch's book is read alongside Loren Mead's *Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (Alban, 1991), evangelism and mission begin to look radically different; for now every congregation is on the front lines of mission. The historical inadequacies of Mead's book should not obscure the fundamental truth of his argument: once the church understands that Christendom is dead, everything must change. Bosch's thorough scholarship shows convincingly that persons who seek to be in mission without doing evangelism are as mistaken as those seeking a form of evangelism not grounded in the overall mission of the church—and ultimately in God's mission to the whole of creation.

This raises the question of how evangelism relates to Christian discipleship. In *Church for the Unchurched* (Abingdon, 1996), George Hunter III analyzes several congregations he calls "apostolic" and discerns the practices they hold in common. One of these practices is that they have a compelling vision of what Christians ought to become. How would a congregation answer a "pre-Christian" who asks about the end result of the Christian life? The possible answers—baptism, education, spiritual formation, worship, social action—all have to do with the meaning of discipleship. This is where Abraham's understanding of initiation is both helpful and confusing. On the one hand, it shows that evangelism is concerned with the stage of entry into the Christian life. On the other hand, there is no clear marker that shows when the initiatory stage is finished and the
process of Christian discipleship is fully underway. The fact is that evangelism is essentially related worship, education, spiritual formation, social justice ministries, sacraments, prayer, mission, and preaching. When properly done, each of these should have an aspect that is evangelistic. What makes them so is the intention of the practitioners to initiate pre-Christian persons into the Christian life through these activities. Evangelism, therefore, is an activity of the whole congregation. The crucial question is this: How can pastors and laity become leaders of evangelistic congregations?

Walter Klaiber’s beautiful metaphor of “call and response” suggests that evangelism should be like breathing out and breathing in for a congregation. By welcoming outsiders into its life and then equipping them for ministry in the world, an evangelistic congregation grows in both numbers and outreach. Richard Warren’s Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission (Zondervan, 1995) and Mark Mittelberg’s Building a Contagious Church: Revolutionizing the Way We View and Do Evangelism (Zondervan, 2000) share ways in which Saddleback Church (Warren) and Willow Creek Community Church (Mittelberg) have developed congregational systems that emphasize both evangelism and discipleship.

A crucial aspect of any understanding of a congregational approach to evangelism is the ministry of the laity. Too often, mainline congregations in North America see laity as consumers of services offered by professionals. A missional understanding of the church requires that all Christians view themselves as missionaries and that evangelism is the task of every Christian. How does one get the average Christian to share his or her faith with others? It is essential to show that evangelism is both rooted in and governed by the commandment to love one’s neighbor. In addition, lay people must be trained to invite others into the Christian life, to share their experiences with God in the church, and to genuinely welcome new persons into the faith. This requires that Christians learn how to cross cultural barriers—race, ethnicity, age, education, and income levels—to build relationships with persons who are different. The new program Witness: Exploring and Sharing Your Christian Faith (Discipleship Resources, 2001) has a great deal of potential to help lay people grow in this area.

I teach an introductory course in evangelism that addresses the biblical, historical, and theological aspects of this ministry. But I tell my students that, when it comes to the practice of evangelism, the expert is the person with ministry experience in a specific context. If evangelism is
essentially relational—helping persons grow in their relationship with God and with God's church—and if persons are different because of their different cultural contexts, then evangelism will take different forms in different situations. Effective evangelistic strategies must take into account the cultural realities of the persons being addressed.

Rosie Nixson's *Liberating the Gospel for Women* (Grove Books, 1994) provides a contemporary discussion of how women can and should participate in this ministry. While a number of its arguments will seem antiquated to those who no longer deal with issues of whether women should be ordained, it provides a helpful discussion of how women from a variety of different cultural settings can be evangelists. Also, scholars like Priscilla Pope-Levison and Laceye Warner are engaged in historical research to recover the stories of North American women evangelists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such efforts will dispel the stereotype that evangelism is a male activity.

Carlyle Stewart's *African-American Church Growth: 12 Principles of Prophetic Ministry* (Abingdon, 1994) helps to expose the cultural setting of books like Warren's *Purpose Driven Church*. While there is a great deal of overlap between the two books, Stewart's work has a focus on engaging issues in the community that is lacking in Warren's book.

Kevin Ruffcorn's *Rural Evangelism: Catching the Vision* (Augsburg, 1994) shows that evangelism can be done in rural areas. Ruffcorn discusses the issues and strategies that allow rural congregations to practice this ministry well. Evangelism is about catching a vision of what is possible in a particular context.

Good books about evangelism in the Hispanic context are tough to find. Here, ecclesiology plays a particularly important part in shaping one's view of evangelism. Roman Catholic books speak about evangelization, which frequently means discipleship or the ministry of social justice. Pentecostals often assume that Catholics are not Christians; thus, evangelism means helping persons become Christian by joining their denomination. Catholics sometimes assume that all baptized persons are Christian and thus, by definition, consider almost all Hispanics Christians. Mainline Protestants, because of their ecumenical orientation, are often confused about what evangelism among Hispanics might mean. A great deal of work needs to be done in this area.

Many persons argue that the postmodern context is essentially multi-
cultural. One of the best books addressing this context is Stephen Rhodes's *Where the Nations Meet: The Church in a Multicultural World* (InterVarsity, 1998). Rhodes was pastor in a diverse community outside Washington, DC. He led a congregation that included many different nationalities, languages, and ethnicities. He argues that God's will is that the church should be diverse, reaching all the peoples of the world. More specifically, each congregation should embody that diversity. His theological insights and practical experiences make this an important contribution to the field.

A variety of books address the generational issue of how to reach Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and others. What is clear from all these books is that effective evangelism requires an intimate knowledge of the people one is called to serve. What music do they listen to? Must one have music by dead Germans to worship authentically? What about the use of video screens in worship? How important are small groups in a wired culture? How important is teaching the Bible to post-Christian people who often don't know if Peter was a fisherman or a tax collector? When evaluating such books, questions have to do with the thoroughness of the research and the level of sensitivity to the gospel-culture issue. These questions are also crucial for determining how digital media should be used in advertising to and communicating with pre-Christian persons. It is clear that television and radio are essential tools and that the church needs to improve its ability to communicate through these media. The United Methodist Church's *Igniting Ministry* campaign and the Episcopal Church's *Church Ad Project* are two important efforts that need careful evaluation. They are both on the right track; the crucial issue is how to improve them.

Important and exciting work is currently being done in the field of evangelism; yet much more remains to be accomplished. How the different authors relate to one another is an important question. Contrasting the work of Mortimer Arias with Rick Warren suggests that each has a great deal to contribute, and yet a synthesis is not at all easy. It is an exciting time to study evangelism and to help the church shape its ministry in this area.

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Negotiating the minefield of Christian sacramental theology at the turn of the twenty-first century takes both courage and skill. In this slim volume, Mark Stamm guides us artfully through the terrain, providing readers with an accessible and colorful map that locates both Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in the overall geography of United Methodism.

The book begins by identifying the main landmarks of the journey that Stamm is inviting us to take: Christian community and Christian identity; the biblical witness about the nature of God’s love and the Wesleyan model of faithful discipleship to that witness; and the anchor of tradition and the lure of the future. Intertwining examples from experience with theological reflection from Methodist expositors of the past, Stamm shows how the sacramental life can become the pathway between these various essential elements of the United Methodist expression of the Christian faith.

In the chapters that follow, Stamm addresses many pressing contemporary questions voiced in congregations and seminary classrooms. How “open” is the Lord’s Table? In what sense is baptism “new birth”? How scrupulous must we be about the Communion elements? In each case, Stamm takes care to balance pastoral sensitivity with doctrinal clarity and lifts up the ultimate values of love and reconciliation over unyielding sacramental exactitude. For Stamm, the liturgy itself becomes the grounding for theological discourse, and citations from the Baptismal Covenant and the Service of Word and Table serve to explicate the points being made. In this way, the book also becomes a forceful apologetic for the teaching authority of the services in the United Methodist Book of Worship and the Hymnal.

Sacraments and Discipleship also leads us through the interpretation of particular passages of Scripture that have traditionally plagued both theologians and worship leaders. In his treatment of Wesley’s understanding of baptism, Stamm manages to avoid the pitfall of “Aldersgate-ism” without
negating the centrality of claiming our baptismal calling; and, with regard to Communion, he stresses the Wesleyan call to see the Supper more as gift and promise than as mere obedience. A number of practical suggestions for the nourishment of the sacramental life of congregations further enhance the book: models of baptismal sponsorship and aids to the frequency of Communion and to generosity in the use of bread, wine, and water. In this way, Stamm invites readers into both a new understanding and a new way of practicing, as well as a new mode of integration between the two.

When relating the book to the future of Christian sacramental theology as a whole, one wonders about the degree to which United Methodists can maintain a truly Wesleyan sacramental outlook while responding to current trends in systematics. What will happen to sacramental theology in the Methodist tradition as we increasingly try to understand the sacraments as more than simply “grace delivery mechanisms” and begin to see them as occasions of mutual presence and self-disclosure? And will Stamm’s project help us as we continue to seek to explicate the ultimate human problem, which may or may not be simply the quest for the eradication of sin? One would hope that Stamm will now turn his scholarly attention toward a more creative and expansive Methodist sacramental theology, taking such issues into account.

This warmhearted and gracefully written volume is a valuable resource to all who seek to encourage faithful, thoughtful discipleship in the United Methodist tradition. It is to be recommended to pastors and all others who seek to apprehend the heart and lifeblood of United Methodism.

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Beyond Foundationalism attempts to bring evangelical theology into contemporary discussions on theological method within a postmodern context. Grenz and Franke advocate a nonfoundationalist, interactionist theological method that can help rescue theology from its destructive accommodation to modernity and foster a vital, relevant, open, and flexible theology for the church in its various cultural and social incarnations. In short, the authors want to further what Hans Frei referred to as “generous orthodoxy” (p. 27).
In Part I, after examining how postmodernism has shaped contemporary Western culture and its critiques of foundationalism, the authors offer a proposal that focuses on the world- and identity-constructing language of the faith, not unlike Pannenberg's "coherentist theological method" (p.50).

Part II explains that postmodern theology is a constructive theological conversation, or "perichoretic dance," between three conversation partners. (1) Drawing on speech-act theory, the authors try to demonstrate how the Spirit speaks through Scripture, making it the "norming norm" and primary conversation partner for theology. (2) Then they show how tradition casts a hermeneutical trajectory in which theologians engage in their primary tasks as members of an "ongoing listening community." (3) Finally, culture requires a critical and mutually informing conversation with various cultural forms through which the Spirit can speak, including outside disciplines, such as philosophy and the social sciences.

Part III proposes three "local motifs" that, together, give coherence to all local theologies and enable us to discern a "family resemblance" among truly Christian theologies: theology's structural motif, the Trinity; its integrative motif, the community of faith; and its orienting motif, eschatology.

This well-argued and persuasive book engages a wide range of thinkers, including Peter Berger, Clifford Geertz, Josiah Royce, and Jean François Lyotard; it also tackles interesting philosophical themes, such as the linguistic turn, the nature of authority, metanarratives, and the concept of truth. It also raises many questions. If other religions are, at least in part, cultural products, and if the Spirit speaks through culture, then does the Spirit speak through other religions? Moreover, even though the authors argue for an open and flexible theology, their portraiture of what is "authentic" Christian theology could be construed as a particular interpretation of the Christian "belief mosaic" that has in some sense been absolutized to exclude certain theologies that follow a more liberal trajectory. These comments notwithstanding, Beyond Foundationalism is a substantive contribution to the methodological debates in theology and an essential read for those who are interested in ecumenical conversations about theological method.

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Issue Theme:
God in the Twenty-first Century
Locating God for the Twenty-first Century
Delwin Brown
The Holy Trinity: The Very Heart of Christian Ministry
David S. Cunningham
Feminist Theologies and the Possibility of God-Talk
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Rob Weber

A Word on the Word
Lectionary Study
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Book Reviews
Sacraments and Discipleship, by Mark W. Stamm (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2001)
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Beyond Foundationalism, by Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001)
Reviewer: Mark E. Reynolds

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