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Providence and the Sovereignty of God
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"He's Got the Whole World in his Hands"

HENDRIK R. PIETERSE

With their monotheistic cousins, Jews and Muslims, Christians believe God to be both Creator and Sustainer of all that is. Fundamental to the Christian faith, this belief entails at least four interrelated claims. (1) Ours is a living God, capable of bringing into being the intricately woven web of life we call "creation." (2) God does not leave creation to its own devices but works in it to fulfill the "good" purposes for which it had been created (Gen. 1:31). (3) God's "work" in the world takes the form of providential care and guidance with the aim of fulfilling creation's divinely appointed purposes. (4) God's purposes for and continuing guidance of creation—God's "will"—can be known (at least, to the extent that the finite can comprehend the infinite) through Scripture and perhaps the created order itself.

Taken together, these four claims yield a powerful—and, for Christians, a deeply comforting—idea: sin, destructiveness, and violence notwithstanding, our world is the product of a benevolent God, who is unwaveringly committed to using the divine power to guide the inhabitants and processes of this world toward their benevolent destiny. God has "the whole world in his hands" and nothing, not even death itself, can wrest it away.

And yet, from the very beginning, the doctrine of providence has raised difficult, if not intractable, questions. These questions are no less daunting in our day. Does the fact that the world has a "built-in" purpose (albeit God-given) not lead to determinism; and, if so, is human freedom ultimately an illusion—an epiphenomenon? Does the idea of a pregiven cosmic purpose even make sense in light of what evolutionary theory and modern physics tell us about how the world works? If God has the power to bring the divine purpose for creation to fruition, then why do the forces railing against it seem to hold the world in their "hands"? Is God really in control, after all? Just how do we know "God's will" for our lives, our
leaders, our nation, our world? Is it even appropriate to talk about God's will for a nation; or should we simply abandon the idea given the horrendous abuses to which it has led, and still leads?

Questions like these interrogate not only our notions of God's providence and sovereignty but also our concepts of God's nature. Not surprisingly then, for the authors in this issue, how we think about divine providence and sovereignty cannot and must not be separated from how we understand God's nature and being. Moreover, to be credible and persuasive—both to ourselves and to others—our views of God's nature, providence, and power must be correlated with informed understandings of the world in which we live. Some, such as Thomas Jay Oord and Pamela Dickey Young, do so explicitly, drawing on the categories of process theology and philosophy to formulate credible responses to, in the case of Oord, the age-old, yet-always-contemporary "problem of evil" and, in the case of Young, the seemingly intractable question of how Christians can speak with integrity of "God's will." Oord uses process thought to argue for a "relational theodicy" that, in his view, successfully meets the challenges of theodicy. Young finds process metaphysics the most adequate conceptual framework in which to talk about divine and creaturely freedom, arguing that we experience God's "will" not as the power of fiat or coercion but rather as the faithful and grace-filled guidance of a divine "companion."

Physicist-theologian George Murphy draws on the latest insights of science into the nature and functioning of the cosmos to formulate an understanding of "divine action" that situates God's providential working in nothing less than the meaning of the "crucified Christ."

For us who live in the aftermath of September 11, the question of how to think about divine providence and the destiny of nations has taken on a stark urgency. To this end, Karen Baker-Fletcher's seasoned and sagacious reflections on peace and "nonviolent direct action" are simultaneously unsettling and comforting.

Lew Parks and Bruce Birch are surely right that not many of us think to link providence with the meaning of Christian leadership. Drawing on the books of Samuel, they argue for a vision of providence that will inspire "leaders bent to the larger purposes of God."

Hendrik R. Pieterse is editor of Quarterly Review.
At the time I was asked to write an article on providence and national destiny, the United States was making its first responses to the attacks on September 11, 2001, with a war against Afghanistan for supporting Al-Qaeda. My spouse, Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher had lost a cousin, a firefighter named André Fletcher, at the World Trade Center towers. André was survived by his twin brother, Zachary “Cary” Fletcher, also a firefighter, who helped people get out of the towers. His brother André was in the subbasement of one of the other towers, turning off valves with his crew. André and his crew never emerged.

André is survived by his parents, Lunsford and Monica Fletcher; his twin brother, Cary; a son; and a multitude of uncles, aunts, and cousins in the United States, Canada, England, and Jamaica. The Fletcher family spread from Jamaica to other nations during the middle of the twentieth century. Kasimu and his cousins are all first-generation Americans. André died an American hero. His brother Cary remains a firefighter and is willing to die in the same way. A cousin, Shane Fletcher, is in the U.S. military. They are patriots. Unlike Kasimu, I did not grow up with André and Cary. The rest is for the Fletchers to tell. However, their story of immigration and American citizenship affects my understanding of providence and national destiny.

Many U.S. citizens and hopeful immigrants, historically and today, have thought of America as the Promised Land. The European settlers, who arrived in these lands long after the indigenous peoples, called it “the New...
World," in part as an expression of hope. Once the American colonies won the revolutionary war for independence, the new inhabitants' sense of exceptionalism grew strong and remains so today. The expectation that God is first and foremost on America's side is a reigning myth in American consciousness.

That God would be gracious to only one nation is absurd, regardless of one's patriotism to the nation of one's citizenship. The U.S. has been an important force in establishing the United Nations and keeping other nations in check through the application of international law. Now we are being asked to keep ourselves in check by this same international body. From an international perspective, we must ask not simply "Who is God to America?" but also "Who is the God of providence, who is above all nations and nationalisms?" In relation to a God who is above all nations, how might Americans think of providence? Our sense of what it means to be a U.S. citizen has experienced discomfiting shifts since 9/11. Who are we now and who ought we to become? Does God have a "plan" for our nation?

One response has been to suppose that God sanctions war against "evildoers" with the claim that supporting this view is our only patriotic option. Our president has prayed about these difficult decisions and it appears that, for him, God has something to do with U.S. attacks against "the axis of evil." Some fear that such thinking makes us too much like the terrorists who followed Osama bin Laden in an unusual jihad, or "holy war," in the name of Allah. Regardless, we have waged war against Afghanistan. We have also waged war against Iraq, ostensibly in the continuing commitment to fight terrorism and to liberate the Iraqi people.

The United Methodist Council of Bishops issued a statement in the fall of 2002 in which they opposed war against Iraq and encouraged nonviolent solutions to conflict as the way of Christ. George W. Bush, a United Methodist, felt his own church had abandoned him. He missed the point. The church, or at least the bishops and other Methodists encouraging nonviolent solutions, are not against President Bush as a fellow Christian. To the contrary, we have been praying for him. What we question is whether or not this is God's providential aim for our nation.

Let us move from The United Methodist Church to the United States. Overall, since the twentieth century, the United States has become a nation with a reputation for (1) waging war after a first strike against it, and (2) intervening as lighters on the behalf of allied nations. Some have complained that
America has functioned too much as "the police of the world." However, until the latter part of the twentieth century, these criticisms were matched by a sense of good will from nations that joined us in this effort. As a nation, we have a culture of helping allies, through diplomacy, nonmilitary coercion, and, sometimes, military action. Whether we are pacifists or support military intervention, we are proud of our identity as a free and helping nation. A vast number of us believe this role of helper to other nations is providential, that it is who we are meant to be in our freedom. Those of us who are Christian refer to this sense of destiny as God's providence. At the heart of this understanding is a call to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Our neighbor is the foreigner, the naked, the hungry, the captives, the weaker ones, the widows, and the orphans.

Now our sense of national destiny is being tested. For the first time in postmodern history we have waged war by making a preemptive strike. Some believe this U.S. military action is God ordained. Others contend, as did H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr during World War II, that we have no more claim to the mind of God than any other nation. A nation cannot proclaim that God is on its side to the exclusion of another. No nation can claim to know the mind of God in this way, because the mind of God transcends human knowing.

On both sides of the issues regarding nonviolent, direct action versus war against Iraq, Christians claim to know what is most helpful for the oppressed people of Iraq. But how well have we humans imagined God's aim for the well-being of nations? Perhaps God is weeping for all of us—we who can barely communicate with one another. Perhaps God weeps most for the people of Iraq, who have had decisions made for them rather than with them. In the midst of all the uproar, who, besides God, is listening to the many voices of that diverse group called the "Iraqi people"? The Iraqis are the people from whom God's wisdom about their plight ought to emerge. This is an authentic liberationist stance—to work with, not for, the oppressed.

President Bush speaks of "the liberation" of the Iraqi people, who were "oppressed" by Saddam Hussein. It is difficult for liberation theologians to hear him use the language of liberation and oppression in connection with First World military might. In liberation theology, resistance comes from within the ranks of the oppressed, not from those outside of it. The fact that, in this case, the outside military power is a First World nation that expects economic benefits from those they are trying to liberate runs...
counter to the logic of liberation theology. The language of freedom and of liberating the oppressed is deeply embedded in American and global consciousness. President Bush is familiar with this aspect of contemporary American Christian identity. However, his allusions to liberation philosophy and theology contradict the logic of liberating orthopraxis—right theory and right practice.

The logic of liberation theology requires us to listen to the peoples of Iraq at the grassroots to learn what they believe is liberating, from their epistemological option. The oppressed choose the advocates they believe are in solidarity with their plight. Otherwise, a nation risks imposing its own understanding of "nation" and "providence" upon the oppressed peoples it claims to liberate. Liberation emerges from the providentially liberating movement of God within the oppressed and within their friends through a relationship of solidarity and mutuality. Liberation theologians are clear about this. Yet, there is a caution that liberation theologians must take as well. Those of us who are liberation theologians and advocate nonviolent proactive solutions must be attentive in our listening. When we advocate nonviolent means for liberation, it is important to admit that we are not necessarily on the side of all the oppressed peoples of Iraq. Oppressed peoples, in their diversity, do not think as one monolithic mind.

Provvidence and Testimony

Having acknowledged that none of us can claim to know the full mind of God or the will of all the Iraqi people, I now outline why I maintain that it makes sense, within the limits of human reason, to conclude that God's aim for full humanity is for us to resolve conflict and tension through nonviolent means. I share, as a form of "testimony," some of my own struggle at reaching this conclusion. Liberation theology is contextual. Testimony is a way of providing context for one's understanding of the goodness of a liberating God. It is an important practice in traditional African-American Christianity. In testimony, we share how God has brought us through a hard journey. The purpose of testimony is to build up the body of Christ by proclaiming the reality of God's grace. Sometimes it begins with "You know what I wanted to do" and ends with "but the Spirit held me back and the Lord blessed me and the other party in a concrete way."

I pen these thoughts as an African-American theologian who has benefited from the more positive results of the Civil War. Harriet Tubman's aid
to Union soldiers as a military spy, and the black men who fought with Union soldiers. That war, along with the Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth century, resulted in the freedom that I now have to write this essay. All this has left me forever with a sense of irony when it comes to war. I do not condemn the intervention of U.S. allied forces against the Nazi regime in Europe. I am committed to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s method of nonviolent direct action, yet I maintain a modified Niebuhrian realism toward war.

Of late, those of us who are proponents of nonviolence sometimes make this path sound easy, because we have failed to acknowledge the struggle, discipline, and training required for the practice of nonviolence. At times, this has made our position sound shallow to those who might otherwise join us. We have failed to remember that, as a nation, we rarely understand what “nonviolent direct action” means. We need to offer more opportunities for training in nonviolent methods. Moreover, it is necessary to publicize such training through mass media. Invitations to training in nonviolent discipline could be helpful for multiple generations. As an adult, I found my childhood commitment to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s path of nonviolent resistance sorely tested. I had heard about training workshops but had never experienced one. In an actual life situation I came to understand that nonviolent direct action involves struggle of a kind that I had only heard and read about. When I imagine magnifying my small struggle by hundreds of thousands, I have compassion for all those who struggle as a community, a society, a nation to follow this path of peace and who wonder how this could possibly be the path to which God has called us. As a nation it is difficult to imagine that of which we know so little.

Realism and Peace

I am among those realists who struggle to maintain my commitment to nonviolent direct action. I believe that nonviolence is the higher path that Christians are called to follow. But in my journey to this conclusion, I have entertained hard questions. Violence includes any type of coercion—military force as well as legal sanctions. Legal sanctions are a type of violence, because they impose limitations on other persons. Even nonviolent resistance such as boycotting or marching is coercive, because it is meant to overwhelm the will of one’s opponent. It includes an element of violence, as Reinhold Niebuhr writes, because it threatens the livelihood of those who
are boycotted. Toni Morrison's insight that many traditional West African cultures did not focus on eradicating evil (as Westerners often tend to do) is helpful here. Morrison emphasizes that in this worldview, evil—the power of destruction—is not eradicated but dealt with as an aspect of existence. Similarly, Theophus Smith notes the role of “evil” in homeopathic practices in certain African and African-American worldviews.1 Homeopathy employs a small dose of that which is evil to cure disease. In the West we have seen this practice in the use of snake venom in snakebite antidotes, live polio in polio vaccines, live smallpox in smallpox vaccines, etc. In these instances, that which is otherwise poisonous is strongly diluted to have a healing effect. Reinhold Niebuhr's analysis of coercion, which includes boycotts and other forms of “nonviolent” resistance, is in this sense homeopathic, because there is always an element of violence in so-called nonviolent resistance.2 In committing to nonviolence, one must recognize its homeopathic function. Nonviolence dilutes violence with the good.

War and other forms of violent retaliation toward injustice employ the full force of violence. Historically, there are strong reasons for concluding that war is sometimes existentially necessary. Franz Fanon's work makes this argument. Take, for example, the Algerian plight against the French in the first half of the twentieth century. The Algerians won their liberation by fighting tragedy with tragedy, exacting their liberation from destructive forces with lethal doses of guerilla warfare. It is counterproductive for nonviolent activists to condemn those who employ such means for their liberation. Our job is to find ways to provide actual opportunities for nonviolent direct action and to have compassion for the tragic nature of humankind's existential struggle with forces of creation and destruction. The God of Hebrew and Christian Scriptures has compassion for persons caught in situations so tragic that they see no other way out except violent retaliation. God forgives and saves human beings even in our imperfection. Nonviolence is a high path that not everyone finds the strength to follow. Only God can provide that kind of strength and we humans do not always find it.

Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes says that the notion of a “just war” is an oxymoron.3 This makes sense, because when we return violence with violence, we are stooping to the level of our enemies. We are no longer participating in the good or the just but have made a decision to employ the power of destruction in the most lethal way. This moves beyond questions of nationalism to questions about good and evil, creation and...
destruction, the nature of God, and who human beings are meant to be.

I am an advocate of nonviolent direct action. At times, those of us who advocate nonviolent direct action judge those who do not think as we do. But if God in Christ forgives humankind for its violence, who are we to judge one another? There is good reason to see nonviolent direct action as the higher path for Christians to take. It is unrealistic, however, to expect that either all Christians or all of society will take this path. I agree with Augustine and Reinhold Niebuhr that human nature, including my own, is basically flawed. I see distortion of human nature in myself and in the best of us. Although God has given us this regulating ideal of nonviolence (as Niebuhr might put it), not every member of the human race can and will follow it. Moreover, none of us can follow the regulating ideal of nonviolent direct action (1) without the grace of God that strengthens us, and (2) without understanding what nonviolent direct action is. Finally, there are situations in which the best of us do not know what we might do when pressed to decide between a loved one’s life and the life of a violent perpetrator. It is God alone who has the power to judge the righteousness of another.

Many years ago, a perpetrator assaulted a child that I know and love. Perhaps it was routine or perhaps it was the look on my face, but when I went to the sheriff’s office to give a report, he advised me to stay as far away as possible from the perpetrator. For a long time I denied that I had any violent feelings. Then I began having terrible dreams where I awoke as if I had a gun in my hand to shoot the perpetrator. I was horrified. How could I, a good Christian woman, even dream of such a thing? How could I, a follower of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the gospel of peace since I was seven years old, have these feelings? I felt like I was not myself but someone I did not know.

Over time, I realized that I was this person, and that she was someone for whom God has love, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. I realized that I am only human and that I had to love me for who I am, just as God does. I never acted on those violent feelings, but I had to deal with them. Not acting on such feelings requires prayer and tremendous discipline. I learned two things during that time. First, I can no longer deny that I, like any human being, am capable of what I detest. Second, it is through grace alone that any human being is able to resist the instinctual urge for violent retaliation when one is a direct or indirect victim of violence. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his co-leaders during the Civil Rights movement were
keenly aware of the moral and spiritual strength required not to respond violently when attacked. Therefore, these leaders required that those who wanted to march participate in training sessions in nonviolent methods long before they were permitted to march. Those who failed their training, because they were unable to master the instinct for violent retaliation, were not allowed to march.

As one moves from personal to national commitments, the issues become more complex. Understanding of and participation in nonviolent direct action as a nation is unlikely to come without extensive training. People will not accept what they do not understand or have never learned. Rather than judge those who can envision only violent responses for restraining the violence of enemies, it is more appropriate to prayerfully lament this tragic aspect of who humans are existentially. It is important to pray for God's mercy and compassion for those whose limits are low and who wage war in the name of justice. It is necessary to pray that God's grace strengthen the hearts of those who can see no other way for resolving tension and conflict. Calling President Bush names, as some protesters have done, for not seeing the full potential for nonviolent direct action does not forward the principles of nonviolent direct action. Name-calling is a form of verbal abuse that leaves the recipient firmly unwilling to listen. It is an expression of contempt and a form of violence. Its purpose is to emotionally wound the one who is derogated. It contradicts the aim of those committed to nonviolent direct action, because it fails to enlighten those who are being challenged to consider nonviolent direct action to resolve conflict. The goal of nonviolent direct action is not to inflict wounds but to heal them by transforming the vision of a nation. The means for such transformation must be consistent with the goals, verbally and physically.

In this context, it is worth asking this question: Why in so many traditions, including Judaism and Christianity, is God's nature both creative and destructive? Is destruction one aspect of the divine itself? Or is that a human misinterpretation of the divine? If destruction is an aspect of the divine and we are created in the image of God, then does our own destructive urge, when balanced with the creative urge for life and peace, have a purpose? Is our problem the knowledge of good and evil—a knowledge that, according to Genesis, we were never intended to have? If the problem is that knowledge, then we return to Augustine's understanding of the corruption of the good in creation. Perhaps it is only God who is supposed
to be destructive, according to spiritual and natural laws that are meant to
be worked out through God's grace alone. Why did God allow Joshua and
David to fight, only to have David pay the penalty of not building the
Temple? Why did God use Moses to prophesy all manner of plagues, which
were exacted when Pharaoh's heart refused to soften? Why do we sing with
such fervor "Pharaoh's Army Got Drowned"?

The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures may be employed to support
both violent and nonviolent action against one's enemies. Why is violence
permitted? Is it because of the hardness of our hearts? If so, then it seems
that violence is permissible but not the ideal. For example, Jesus tells one
of his disciples (presumably Peter), "All who take the sword will perish by
the sword" (Matt. 26:51-52; John 18:10-11). He is not told that one who lives
by the sword has no hope for redemption. In the Hebrew Bible, God does
not eternally condemn David, who fought many wars, although David
suffers the consequences of violent acts. Biblically, it appears that wars are
tragic but permissible. One might think of it as a lower, tragic path in
contrast to the ideal path of nonviolence.

Scripture reveals flawed nations who are yet loved by God. A realist
looks at Scripture to examine the beauty and the ugliness, the creativity
and the destruction, to which its pages bear witness. One emerges with a
sense of paradox regarding not only human nature but also divine nature.
What does this say about humans if we are created in the image of God? Is
the capacity for destruction part of that image or its distortion? What does
that mean for my community, my nation, the world, and me? Should we
condone vigilantism and all manner of war? Perhaps having one's eyes
opened, like Adam and Eve, was never meant to be. Perhaps the knowledge
of good and evil, creation and destruction is something we should ask God
to remove from us. Perhaps our prayers ought to ask only for knowledge of
God's creating activity. Perhaps we were never meant to know God's power
of destruction. I must conclude that God's battle with evil is God's own
business. Vengeance is the Lord's, not ours.

I find myself affirming Townes's view of nonviolent direct action as the
only viable solution to conflict, but for different reasons. I come to this
conclusion because I have sat down with the evil of destruction, supped
with it, and asked it questions, and not once did it offer me the cup of
salvation. I found that its only promise for humans is the privation of good.
We are created in the image of God; but being created in God's image does
not mean that we have the mind of God. We are not to keep company with
destruction. It cannot deliver us from evil. The grace of God alone delivers.
According to Genesis, human knowledge of good and evil, the power of
creation and destruction, was never meant to be. Our task as human beings
is, through faith and grace, to transcend the existential realism and imagine
that higher aim toward which God draws us. Existential realism reveals
more about human beings' existential limitations than about God's aim for
creation. It allows us to experiment with forces of good and evil in ways we
were never meant to. Existential realism fails to reveal our full humanity,
which is found only in God. In the end, it is we human beings, not God,
who are held accountable for our actions.

God's aim for humankind is higher than the solutions we have imagi­
ned as a nation thus far. Destruction is a power that God alone fully
understands. Existential realists many of us may be, but we are all called to
be more. We are called to have faith that the ideal can be realized. For
Niebuhr, this is faith in "impossible possibilities." It leads one to lay hold
of those regulating ideals of justice and peace that Niebuhr feebly pointed
to. It leads to ultimate reality. Human beings have three ethical choices: (1)
the way of perfection, (2) the way of that which is permissible, (3) the way
of sin. The second choice is precarious, because its synthesis of good and
evil easily leads to sin, even when it strives for the good. The way of perfec­
tion can be realized only by the grace of God through faith in Jesus the
Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. God alone knows and judges the
extent to which we act in the way of perfection.

Conclusion

The word providence comes from the same root word as provide or provision.
God provides. What God provides is good. Our hope is for restoration to
right relationship with a relational God who is with us in the midst of our
struggle as we choose between good and evil, creation and destruction.
Perplexing as the knowledge of good and evil may be, God's promise to us
is restoration to the good. The Gospels command us to love God and
neighbor, including our enemies, because the kingdom of God, where we
are fully restored to the good, is at hand. God's aim is for the well-being of
creation. Our hope is for restoration to the good, because at the beginning
God said, "It is good." We hope, through grace, to become who we were
originally created to be. God invites our participation in divine love and in
the initial aim for the well-being of a good creation. Creation is called to do what it was originally created to do—to participate in the excellence of divine love. We participate in this divine love not because we humans can erase the painful consequences of sinful acts, but because we say yes to divine love for its own sake. Love is good. Love casts out fear. Love is not violent, jealous, or vengeful. Love includes peacemaking. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt. 5:9). Christians believe these are the words of Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One of God, who was crucified and resurrected to overcome the power of violence, suffering, and death. If we want to find our national destiny within God’s aim for the well-being of creation, then it is in Christ, who hallows the name of God, that we must search and not in that hollow, vacuous place called the absence of good. During our discussions of nonviolent direct action versus war, let us pray aloud and silently at all times the prayer of Jesus, petitioning God, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven . . . Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”

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Endnotes

2. Reinhold Niebuhr does not employ the term homeopathy. However, his analysis clearly suggests that boycotting and other so-called nonviolent methods are violent to the extent that they are coercive. For Niebuhr, such methods carry the threat of violence. See Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932; Reinhold Niebuhr, 1960), 171-74, 233-34, 240-48.
3. Email conversations with Dr. Emilie Townes, Spring 2003.
Evil, Providence, and a Relational God

THOMAS JAY OORD

Christians have implicitly assumed, if not explicitly declared, that if life has purpose, then God must be powerful. Divine power expressed in creation, in ongoing providential actions, and in the expected culmination of the universe provides a basis for believing that life possesses meaning. Life cannot have ultimate meaning if God cannot or does not act powerfully.

Not only is the belief that God acts powerfully crucial for Christians, but speculating how God acts is also crucial for formulating a meaningful narrative by which can Christians live. The sheer manifestation of power, such as the force of a hurricane or a tornado, does not provide ultimate meaning to existence. Rather, the way that God expresses power provides a framework for recognizing the rhyme and reason of life.

Theologians use a variety of words to describe the "how" of God's activity. Wesleyans in particular have historically emphasized love as the overarching descriptor of divine action. John Wesley took love as God's supreme and primary attribute, saying "It is not written 'God is justice,' or 'God is truth' (although he is just and true in all his ways). But it is written, 'God is love.'" Furthermore, "love is the end of all the commandments of God." "Love is the end, the sole end, of every dispensation of God," preached Wesley, "from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things." This emphasis upon the primacy of love has become a hallmark of Wesleyan theology. In short, Wesleyans typically affirm that life's purpose has to do with God's providential expressions of power, and these expressions are invariably loving.

The affirmation that God's powerful expression of love provides purpose to life faces its fiercest opposition from the occurrence of genuinely evil events. In fact, atheists frequently cite the problem of evil as their primary reason for choosing to believe that God does not exist. Add to the recent 9/11 horror such events as the Cambodian killing fields, the slaughter of millions in Soviet-controlled countries, racism, rampant disease and malnutrition, napalm and atomic bombings, genocide and ethnic cleansing, random murder, pointless executions, indifference to the poor and disenfranchised,
sexual abuse of children, exploitation and oppression of women, the global AIDS epidemic, drug addiction, ecological violence, terrorism, the Anglo enslavement of Africans, torture chambers and medical "experimentation," incest, rape, and, perhaps most famously, the Jewish Holocaust of World War II. In the face of such atrocities, Christians must account for their conviction that a powerful and loving God providentially gives purpose to life.

Throughout history, a variety of reasons have been suggested for why a powerful and loving God does not prevent evil. Some theologians, like Augustine, have rejected the idea that any genuinely evil event ever occurs. "To thee there is no such thing as evil," Augustine conjectures in his prayer. Similarly, the "soul-making" theories exemplified in the thought of Ireneaus and John Hick reject the idea that any event is genuinely evil. According to these theories, all events are finally means for producing the human character that God desires. "What now threatens us as final evil," proposes Hick, "will prove to have been interim evil out of which good will in the end have been brought." For Augustine, Ireneaus, and Hick, pain and suffering are merely instrumental for securing some greater good. In the words of the old Steve Miller Band song, "You've got to go through hell before you get to heaven."

In recent centuries, a number of philosophers and theologians have suggested that the reason why God does not prevent genuine evil is because God promises voluntarily—either at creation or in each moment—not to withdraw or override creaturely freedom. God does not veto freedom, so this argument goes, because love entails allowing creatures to act freely.

The problem with this approach is that we can all think of situations in which to prevent someone from inflicting long-lasting pain on innocent people this individual's freedom has to be restricted, at least momentarily. Good parenting and society's penal system presuppose this truth. But the hypothesis that a self-limited God voluntarily provides freedom implies that God is sometimes more interested in keeping promises to endow freedom than in acting lovingly to prevent creatures from inflicting pain upon innocent victims. Tyron Inbody puts it this way: "Omnipotent power that is self-limiting can also be in principle self-unlimiting any time and any place." This self-limited, promise-making God, who presumably answers to no one, should occasionally become un-self-limited and break self-induced promises so as to act lovingly on behalf of "the least of these."

Because the foregoing "solutions" to the problem of evil are unsatisfac-
tory, many contemporary Christians, especially Wesleyans, have searched for solutions elsewhere. Process theology has become increasingly attractive to many of these seekers. In my view, process thought contains three interrelated emphases for solving the problem of evil; and, in what follows, I briefly outline these emphases. I devote particular attention to the final, ‘relational,’ emphasis, because this one represents my own personal formulations. This third emphasis is distinct, although the reader should keep in mind that these three realms are mutually consistent.

Metaphysics

Process thought is on many accounts the most promising venture in contemporary metaphysics. While some traditions of philosophy rest content to analyze language and other traditions reject the task of metaphysics altogether due to deficiencies in ancient and modern metaphysical schemes, process metaphysicians argue that it is as important now as ever to offer a general, albeit speculative, scheme about how things work. One emphasis in process thought for grappling with divine providence and the problem of evil arises from these predominately philosophical concerns.

In his classic work *God, Power and Evil: A Process Theodicy*, David Ray Griffin proffers a process solution to the problem of evil by focusing upon metaphysical issues. Drawing upon the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, Griffin argues that an adequate metaphysical scheme should not consider God as the sole formative factor for the universe. An adequate explanation of existence, in all its manifestations, requires a metaphysical scheme complete with nondivine actors and metaphysical principles.

One metaphysical principle pertinent to the occurrence of genuine evil is that no individual, whether creaturely or divine, can unilaterally determine (coerce) another individual. Speculating that such a principle exists provides a key for solving the problem of evil. "The process theodicy that I am presenting," explains Griffin, "hinges upon the notion that there are metaphysical principles which are beyond even divine decision." In particular, metaphysical principles restrict God from controlling the universe entirely or any individual specifically. Because of this, God cannot be held culpable for failing to prevent genuinely evil occurrences that creaturely actions produce. The problem of evil is solved. The philosophical emphasis upon process metaphysics, then, leads one to answer the question, "Why does God not act providentially to prevent evil?" by responding, 'A meta-
physical principle that no individual can unilaterally control another prohibits God from preventing evil unilaterally."

Social Science

A second way a process theist might tackle the issue of providence and the problem of evil is to attend closely to social scientific evidence. By "social science" I mean disciplines including such endeavors as psychology, history, sociology, politics, anthropology, and related studies. When addressing the issues of our discussion, the social scientist might begin with the data each person knows best: his or her own experience. Reflection upon human experience, inferences from that about nonhuman life, and subsequent further generalization lead to conclusions that shape how a process theist might frame an answer to the problem of evil.

While space constraints prevent me from exploring in depth various social scientific insights derived from personal experience, I note three briefly. First, humans know from personal experience that they are free to act from a limited number of possible actions. Although a few social scientists have suggested theories that state otherwise, human actions and reactions demonstrate that we all presuppose ourselves to be free to some degree. Human freedom is partial, however, because we all find that our bodily members and extended environment place limits on what is possible.

Second, reflection upon the experience we know best—our own—reveals that we invariably assume that some free actions are better than others. This assumption provides the basis for why the social sciences have typically rejected a scientific positivism that fails to acknowledge that existence is value laden. It also provides a basis for overcoming the lure of extreme moral relativism, because it demonstrates that we all appraise some actions as superior to others.

Third, reflection upon our own experience reveals that we all act with various ends in mind. In other words, we are to some degree intentional creatures. Studies done on other complex animals, from ants to chimps, suggest that intentionality is not restricted to humans. In short, we are inherently purpose driven.

The process theist might begin with these widely accepted general insights about freedom, value, and purpose and then speculate what these insights might offer as data for theories pertaining to providence and the problem of evil. For instance, if we find ourselves capable of expressing...
limited freedom, perhaps this freedom is essential to what it means for us to exist. Perhaps it makes sense to speak of humans as inherently free. In previous work, I have suggested that a theodicy that begins with the inherent freedom of creatures might generate what I call a theory of "essential free-will theism." The main point of the essential free-will proposal is that God cannot withdraw or override the freedom that creatures necessarily express. If this hypothesis is correct, then God cannot be held culpable for failing to prevent genuine evil, because even God cannot take away the freedom we all essentially possess. Furthermore, given that humans are products of evolution (albeit theistic evolution), one might extrapolate that much less complex creatures and organisms are also essentially free. God's providential actions with regard to nonhumans could not be utterly deterministic, and therefore God would not be culpable for evil generated from actors in that realm.

With regard to purpose and providence, a social scientist might note that the facts of existence arising from creaturely intentions affect divine governance. This would mean, for example, that free creaturely actions play a prominent role in evolutionary history. The apparent progress toward complexity and beauty results from free creatures responding to God's immanent working in creation. The evolutionary trend toward complexity would be explained by the cooperative effort of God and creatures attempting to increase overall satisfaction. Essentially free creatures that reject the will of a loving God generate the apparent regress and ugliness of the world.

Relational Theology

The third way a process theist might tackle issues of divine providence and evil begins by formulating a plausible doctrine of God. This third emphasis might be called a "relational theodicy." It incorporates insights from and is broadly consistent with the two emphases discussed above.

"God is love," states John in his first letter (4:8, 16). What these three words might mean in large part depends upon how one understands the word love. In recent centuries, the idea that love entails relationship has become a kind of theological orthodoxy. Jürgen Moltmann expresses this orthodoxy well when he writes, "Love cannot be consummated by a solitary subject. An individuality cannot communicate itself; individuality is ineffable, unutterable." In other words, it takes two to love; and an absolutely isolated individual (if such exists) could not be a loving indi-
vidual. Moltmann points out what love as requiring relations means for God: "If God is love, then he neither will, nor can, be without the one who is his beloved." Love relations are necessary to deity; God is essentially relational.

The orthodoxy that relationship is essential to love, however, presents contemporary theologians with an apparent conundrum. The puzzlement is this: Given that love requires relationship, how can one claim that love is an essential divine attribute if, as the dominant Christian tradition has insisted, God created the world out of absolutely nothing (ex nihilo)? If, before the world's creation, God was unrelated and all alone, how can God be essentially relational? How can love be an aspect of the divine essence? In short, how can one affirm both creatio ex nihilo and that God essentially and everlastingly expresses love in relation?

Many contemporary theologians attempt to answer these questions by adopting what they call a "social Trinity." In fact, Moltmann adopts this approach, claiming that God "is at once the lover, the beloved, and the love itself." He suggests that expressions of love within the relations of the Trinity provide an answer to the questions of how God is love and yet creates from absolutely nothing. "In eternity and out of the very necessity of his being, the Father loves the only begotten Son," speculates Moltmann. "In eternity and out of the very necessity of his being, the Son responds to the Father's love through his obedience and his surrender to the Father." Because God everlastingly expresses love through intratrinitarian relations, love can be considered an essential divine attribute and allows the claim that God created the universe from nothing.

Taking the social Trinity as one's only basis for establishing God as essentially relational and essentially love, however, presents several problems. I address three such problems, proceeding from the least to the most important. First, some worry that the claim that relations exist within the Trinity leads to tritheism. After all, if God truly relates to another who is also God, how can this be monotheism? Moltmann's own formulations seem to lead to this tritheistic conclusion. He says, for instance, "The unity of the divine tri-unity lies in the union of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, not in their numerical unity. It lies in their fellowship, not in the identity of a single subject." Of course, social Trinitarians will likely find this objection unconvincing and perhaps claim that its roots lie in an inadequate Western conception of monotheism.
Second, and more important, claiming that God is essentially loving because related within Trinity entails that God’s primary attribute is self-love. Other-love, on this account, is not something essential to God. Lewis Ford expresses this problem well:

We may wonder whether there can be any genuine ‘other love’ [among members of the Trinity]. At least there cannot be any 1-Thou encounters between them . . . [for in such encounters one (or both) parties are enriched by the values of the other]. There can be no enrichment if both already share those values fully. In that case “other love” degenerates into self-love.17

This implies that one’s imitation of the love that God everlasting expresses should be love of oneself. While one ought to love oneself appropriately, Christians have typically argued that altruism, rather than egoism, is the paradigmatic expression of Christian love.

The third and most important problem with considering God as essentially related within Trinity while simultaneously claiming that God created the world ex nihilo relates directly to the problem of evil. If God has the power to act unilaterally to bring something from absolutely nothing, God surely has the power to prevent genuinely evil occurrences.18 If God has the power to prevent genuine evils and yet fails to do so, it makes no sense to affirm with John that God is love. Accepting creatio ex nihilo while admitting that genuine evils occur stymies the effort to conceive of divine power in a way consistent with divine love. While social Trinitarians may wish for other reasons to affirm a notion of the social Trinity as evidence of God’s essential relatedness, espousing the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo results in explanatory peril.

Is there another way to affirm that God is essentially relational, and thus essentially loving, and yet reject the concept of divine power inherent in the notion that God created the world from absolutely nothing? I believe there is such a way; thus, below, I offer a vision of a relational God not culpable for failing to prevent genuine evil.

**Relational Theodicy**

The vision of an essentially relational God that I propose corresponds well with the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and with various Christian voices of the early church. Regarding Genesis, Jon D. Levenson leads a growing
number of scholars who openly acknowledge that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not present therein. "We must face the implication of the affirmation that God, as the creator of the world, confronts forces that oppose divine creation," he suggests. "To say that creation is directed against something should be taken as a denial of the venerable doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*." Early Christian theologians and philosophers, including Philo, Justin, Athenagoras, Hermogenes, Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria, and, later, John Scotus Erigena, also found no good reason to affirm the creation-out-of-nothing hypothesis. Philo, for instance, postulated "a pre-existent matter alongside God." My vision of an essentially relational deity finds more in common with these early-church scholars and with the Christian canon than with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

If God did not create out of absolutely nothing (and if pantheism is also untenable), it seems best to affirm the hypothesis that God has always been related to some "world" or another. Admittedly, there have been formulations of this ancient idea that have been less than satisfying. One general formulation suggests that there was a time in which God was not; God began existing at some point in history. This theory is unsatisfactory, because it implies that something existed before God came into being. Another formulation suggests that some particular individual other than God (typically an evil individual) has always existed. This alternative theory, however, postulates an unsatisfactory dualism of coeternal beings—typically with a dualism of eternal conflict between good and evil. Another theory (and Whitehead has been interpreted, rightly or wrongly, as suggesting this) implies that God would cease to exist should the universe come to an end. This unsatisfactory alternative makes God dependent upon creation for God's very existence, thereby undermining the central Christian claim that nothing can terminate the life of the ever-living, necessarily existing God.

The God-world theory that I suggest speculates that God created our particular universe billions of years ago from primordial chaos. This chaos did not predate God, however, for God would have created the chaotic elements as well. Instead, a rejection of *creatio ex nihilo* provides the opportunity to affirm an eternal regress, meaning that God has everlastingly created and related with some realm of nondivine actualities or another. According to this alternative God-world theory, no nondivine thing exists without the creative activity of God, and nothing can terminate God's necessary existence.
While the idea of God everlastingly relating with creatures may seem strange because of its novelty, even its opponents in Christian history—like Thomas Aquinas—admitted it as a logical possibility. Because Aquinas and others did not envision God as essentially relational love, they did not consider seriously the notion that God everlastingly relates to nondivine beings. Many have also incorrectly assumed that Christian Scripture requires the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo. In the interest of championing divine love as the center and orienting concern of an adequate contemporary theology, we must not allow the strangeness that novelty carries with it to stifle the apologetic for love that seems both warranted and desirable today.

An important feature of my claim that God has always related to some world or another is that divine relatedness is an aspect of the divine essence. In other words, just as God did not decide various features of God's "Godness" (e.g., God did not decide to exist), so God does not voluntarily decide to be relational. To relate to others is necessary to what it means to be God. To say it another way, it is a property of the divine essence that God relates with creatures. While God does not depend upon relations to this realm of nondivines in order to exist, the ways in which creatures respond to God affect the character of God's experiencing life.

Add the doctrine of divine omnipresence to the claim that God has always been relating to some world and we conclude that God always relates to all existing things in every world. To say this in terms of God's essence, we might say that it is a necessary feature of God's very nature to relate to all creatures, all of the time. God would not and cannot do otherwise, because relating to all others is part of what it means to be God. (Incidentally, affirming that God relates to all creatures all of the time provides a basis for affirming another of God's essential attributes: omniscience.)

I find it helpful to use the Wesleyan language of prevenient grace to talk about God's essential relatedness to all creatures. And the doctrine of prevenient grace suggests an important additional feature to the relational theodicy I propose. I theorize that when God acts first (preveniently) to initiate each moment in a creature's life, God provides the power and freedom the creature requires to exist. In this sense, all nondivine individuals are, in the words of Friedrich Schleiermacher, "utterly dependent" upon God. God provides freedom to each agent of existence, and each agent may freely respond to the varied choices each agent faces. To use the language of Randy Maddox, God's initiating action that provides the power for creaturely
freedom is "response-able grace." Or we might call it "relational love."

The key to relational theodicy is the hypothesis that God's prevenient provision of the power for freedom to every creature in every world derives from God's very essence. This means that prevenient grace is a necessary aspect of deity. Because God necessarily provides freedom to all individuals as God essentially relates to the world, it makes no sense to suggest that God could fail to provide freedom to creatures. In other words, God's essential relatedness and omnipresence entail that God cannot withdraw, fail to offer, or override the power for freedom that creatures require in their moment-by-moment life decisions.

The implications of my vision of an essentially relational God for the problem of evil may be apparent by now. Because of God's essential relatedness to every actual creature in every world, God cannot be held culpable for failing to prevent genuine evils. God cannot be culpable, because God essentially and lovingly relates to all creatures by providing them with power for free choices. God could no more choose to cease existing than to cease to provide freedom to those with whom God lovingly relates. The genuine evil of the world results from debilitating choices these free creatures make. I submit that this proposal solves the problem of evil.

When reading the work of theologians in Wesleyan and related traditions, I often encounter scholars who attempt to solve the problem of evil by professing the power of divine love. Typically, however, those who write in this way retain the nominalist tendency of placing love outside of or secondary to God's nature. Those who do consider love as an involuntary aspect of the divine nature typically resort to the claim that God is self-limited when providing freedom to and interacting with creatures. The move I propose here makes love relations with creatures necessary to God, and it provides these theologians a way to overcome the inherent liability of a self-limited deity who fails to become un-self-limited, in the name of love, to prevent genuine evil.

In this relational scheme, we best understand divine providence to entail God's prevenient actions in each moment of the universe's existence to provide lovingly the power and freedom necessary for creatures to respond. I might also point out that God's prevenient action provides the basis for creaturely aesthetic, ethical, and truth-value intuitions. God is literally "provide-ential." When creatures respond well to providential divine love, the well-being of the world increases and creatures enjoy abun-
dant life. When creatures respond poorly by using their God-given freedom wrongly, the world’s well-being decreases as genuine evils occur.

And, finally, this vision of a relational God is of a deity powerful enough to act in ways that give purpose to life. This is the almighty God, whose might is the greatest of any coherently conceivable being. This relational deity is the powerful God who, as I mentioned in the opening paragraphs, provides a basis for believing that life possesses meaning. Because God acts providentially by relating to creatures out of love, we are free to respond by acknowledging the truth found in the words of Charles Wesley’s hymn: “Thy nature and thy name is love.”

Endnotes

1. I want to express my gratitude to those who read through parts or all of this article and made suggestions. They include my Senior Theology class at Northwest Nazarene University (Fall, 2002), John Cobb, David Griffin, Tyron Inbody, Randy Maddox, Don Viney, and Barry Whitney. I dedicate this essay to David Griffin, because his work, encouragement, and wisdom have been invaluable as I continue to wrestle with theodicy.


3. Ibid., 5:462.

4. This emphasis has been explored recently in the volume Thy Nature and Thy Name Is Love: Wesleyan and Process Theologies in Dialogue, ed. by Bryan P. Stone and Thomas Jay Oord (Nashville: Kingswood, 2001).


11. Ibid., 58.

12. Ironically, while it may be true that the church eventually adopted the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* partly to combat the Gnostic notion that the world was inherently evil, it was a Gnostic, Basilides, who originally formulated the doctrine. Basilides found that the doctrine fit well with Greek philosophy’s denial that a temporal God acts in history. As I note later, many early Christian theologians affirmed the notion that God created from something rather than nothing. For perhaps the definitive work on the origin of *creatio ex nihilo* and its adoption by the church, see Gerhard May, *Cretio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of ‘Creation out of Nothing’ in Early Thought*, trans. by A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994).


14. Moltmann greatly confuses his readers by entertaining several hypotheses for conceiving the creation of the world. Sometimes he speaks of God’s creating from chaos, other times of God’s creating from nothing. He even places these apparently contradictory notions alongside each other. He speaks of divine creating as “creation out of chaos and *creatio ex nihilo*” (ibid., 109, 110; see also 113). However, the evidence from his statements about God’s love for the world as voluntary, while the love between the Father and Son is necessary, leads one to conclude that Moltmann ultimately accepts *creatio ex nihilo*.

15. Ibid., 58; see also 106.

16. Ibid., 95; see also 157.


23. Of course, claiming that God's relatedness with the world is an aspect of the divine essence implies various metaphysical principles and the basis of essential free-will theism outlined earlier. It is because of this implication that I consider these three theodicy emphases to be members of the same family.
Providence in a Scientific World

GEORGE L. MURPHY

The Problem of Divine Action

It is a basic article of Christian faith that God acts in the world. Statements in the traditional Christian creeds that God is "almighty" mean not simply that God could do various things but that God is, in fact, ultimately the one who accomplishes all things. Divine action in the world is not limited to some initial acts of creation or to sporadic "acts of God" but extends throughout space and time.

It is a basic principle of natural science that what happens in the world can be explained in terms of rational laws. Nature displays regularities that we can learn and use to extend our knowledge of the world. The successes of science over the past four centuries in interpreting known data and predicting new phenomena provide more than enough justification for the assumption that the universe is amenable to study by careful observation and rational thought.

A little reflection will discern some tensions between these theological and scientific commitments, at least as they have been understood popularly. If a scientific description of the world is, in principle, exhaustive, then there may seem to be no need to speak of divine action at all. Everything can be explained in terms of natural processes. Religious appeals to phenomena that science has not yet explained satisfactorily, such as the origin of life from nonliving material, are properly dismissed as "God of the gaps" arguments. Not only do they reduce God to a kind of specialist who does a few things that science can't deal with, but science has had a tendency to fill in gaps, thus removing the "need" for such a deity.

Furthermore, the way in which the physics of Newton seemed to describe natural phenomena in a strictly deterministic way leaves no room for any freedom of action. This might be acceptable for parts of the Christian tradition with strong doctrines of predestination—except that they are then faced with the question of how God can have any freedom of action if the world is governed by deterministic laws.
An adequate concept of divine action must preserve the belief that God is indeed always at work in the world and does not just intervene on certain occasions. It must also maintain the concept that God has created a world that is not simply an extension of the divine being and that creatures actually "do something," even though they do not act in complete independence from their Creator. On the other hand, the attempt of science to understand the world as completely as possible in terms of rational laws must be respected and not circumvented by a search for "gaps" that can be used for theological advantage.

But there is a more fundamental requirement for a Christian understanding of divine action, one which is often ignored. The God who acts in the world is not some generic deity but the God who has been revealed in the history of Israel, which culminates in the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Our understanding of creation and providence is subject to Luther's claim that "true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ." 2

**The God Who Acts**

We need a doctrine of divine action that takes seriously the real world described by science. 3 It will not be enough simply to repeat traditional doctrines of providence that were developed when the successes of modern science were unknown and when, moreover, the need for a distinctively Christian, and not merely theistic, formulation of such doctrines was often not appreciated. 4 But older ways of understanding God's action in the world can serve as a helpful starting point for a doctrine of providence that takes modern science into account.

Traditional doctrines of providence began with the belief that the world in which God acts has its origin from God, who then preserves the creatures of the world, cooperates (or "concurs") with them in everything that happens, and governs them toward the goals that God desires. The idea of divine cooperation with creatures is of particular interest here. It can be described in the scholastic language of God as the First Cause acting through creatures as second causes. A helpful model is that of a human worker using a tool: the hand and the screwdriver work together to tighten a screw, and neither does the job apart from the other.

But we need to say more than this. Human beings can use tools in arbitrary ways—as some of us may do in hitting a recalcitrant piece of machinery

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with a wrench to get it going! It seems that God seldom, if ever, acts in such a way but instead works with created instruments—elementary particles and fields—in ways that obey precise mathematical laws. God presumably could act in other ways, but doesn't, limiting divine action to what can be accomplished through natural processes acting in accord with rational laws.

This idea of divine self-limitation is closely connected with the theology of the Cross. The name usually given it is a kenotic theology of divine action. The word kenosis, meaning "emptying," comes from the profound passage in Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:5-11), in which he speaks of Christ "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (v. 6-7).

The connection with the theology of the Cross becomes clear when Paul goes on to say that "being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (v. 7b-8). The death of Christ is the way in which God saves the world, but it was not merely a temporary stratagem to accomplish this goal. In his commentary on Philippians, Gordon Fee argues that this emptying and humbling of self of Christ and his death on the cross are to be understood as a revelation of the character of God.

The idea that God limits divine action to what can be accomplished through lawful natural processes is then not simply a concession to the successes of science. It is based on the belief that the cross reveals the kind of deity God is. It also implies an important gift in creation—the fact that things in the world do operate in accord with rational laws, so that we can make sense of our environment. The regularity of natural processes is, of course, essential for the success of scientific investigation of the world.

From the Christian standpoint, we can say that the very possibility of science is a consequence of the theology of the Cross.

But a person does not need to believe, or even know, anything about the cross in order to do science. That God does act with and through natural processes is a matter of trust in the God revealed in Christ, not of scientific observation. It is precisely God's self-limitation that means that what is observed in the world is not God but the instruments with which God works. Natural processes are not only the "instruments of God" but also, in Luther's phrase, the "masks of God." They conceal God from our direct observation. "What meets our eyes," said Pascal, "denotes neither a
total absence nor a manifest presence of the divine, but the presence of a
God who conceals Himself. Everything bears this stamp. 7
Because of this hiddenness of God, it is possible to understand how
things happen in the world even if one has no religious beliefs or assump­
tions. The universe can be studied, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "though
God were not given." 8 We can understand the world without reference to
God because, as Bonhoeffer put it, "God lets himself be pushed out of the
world on to the cross." And, therefore, "God wants us to realize his pres­
ence, not in unsolved problems but in those that are solved."
If this is the case, then divine action will not be discerned by the type
of observation upon which the natural sciences depend. We begin from the
standpoint of trust in the God revealed in Christ, and our attempts to say
how that God acts in the world are part of theology, the process of "faith in
search of understanding"—not the other way around. From this standpoint,
science tells us about the instruments that God uses, and that in turn helps
us to understand how God acts. We cannot, however, expect to have a
detailed explanation of the "causal joint" between God and God's created
instruments, as we might seek a scientific explanation of the interaction
between two physical systems.

The Divine Instruments
The metaphor of God's "tools" or "instruments" may suggest something like
"the six simple machines" of elementary physics and thus may encourage
excessively mechanistic views of God's interaction with the world. It is at
this point that some scientific understanding of the world becomes essen­
tial. We will not consider the components of the world and their interac­
tions in detail, but we do need to look at some basic principles of the
physics that describes them. 9
The laws of classical mechanics formulated by Newton describe how the
momentum (mass x velocity) of a body will change when a force acts upon
that body. If the positions and momenta of all the bodies in a system are
precisely known at a given instant, and if the forces acting between the
bodies are also known, Newton's laws can be used to calculate the positions
and momenta of the bodies at succeeding instants. This theory had many
successes, especially in its treatment of the motions of celestial bodies. One
of its most notable triumphs was the observational confirmation of the
prediction of the previously unknown planet Neptune in 1846. Results like
this suggested that science really had discovered how the world worked.

It seemed, then, that it should be possible in principle to use the laws of motion to find the state of any system, and, in fact, of the whole world, for all future time. And a God who acts through processes that are described by these laws apparently has no choice about what will happen once the system is started in a given state. It isn't surprising that deism—the view that God created and started the cosmic machinery but from that point on doesn't do anything in the world—was popular in the heyday of Newtonian physics. The concept of the electromagnetic field introduced by Faraday and Maxwell didn't change this picture in an essential way, since Maxwell's equations, which describe the field, allow us to understand its temporal development in a similar fashion.

But this classical physics of Newton and Maxwell encountered phenomena in the realms of very small dimensions, complex systems, and high speeds that it couldn't explain. Physicists' picture of the world was changed in fundamental ways in the twentieth century with quantum mechanics, chaos theory, and relativity; and all have important implications for our attempts to understand how God may act through natural processes.

In describing the way in which Newton's mechanics tries to predict the future state of a system, I made the apparently innocuous qualification that this could be done "if the positions and momenta of all the bodies in a system are precisely known at a given instant." Physicists always knew the practical difficulties in making such measurements but believed that they could be done in principle. The development of quantum mechanics challenged this belief.

Heisenberg, one of the founders of quantum theory, analyzed the process of measuring the position and momentum of a particle like an electron, taking into account the interaction between the system that is observed and the measuring apparatus. He concluded that an increase in the precision of measurement of one variable must be accompanied by less precision in the other. This is the content of the celebrated "uncertainty principle," which says that the product of the uncertainties in position and momentum cannot be less than a certain value fixed by the basic quantum constant.

The uncertainty principle cuts off classical determinism at its roots, for the data needed to predict the future development of a system cannot be had. To put it more strongly, position and momentum of a particle don't have precise simultaneous values. It would be wrong to conclude that
quantum theory is unable to give any definite predictions, for it can make very precise statements about the properties of systems. But it can predict only probabilities for systems to evolve in various ways.

Thus, at the microscopic level, strict determinism does not hold. One might, however, wonder about the relevance of this for the phenomena of everyday life. After all, Newton's laws still work quite well for objects that we can see, and scientists and engineers continue to use them to deal with a wide range of phenomena.

But here we encounter a different line of development—that connected with what has come to be called (somewhat unfortunately) "chaos theory." This is directly concerned not with subatomic particles but with complex systems.

Since, in practice, we can't know the initial state of a system with complete precision, there will be an inevitable error in our prediction of its future state. For some systems that will not be a big problem; an error of one percent in the initial state will result in an error of one percent in our prediction. But other systems display "sensitivity to initial conditions," and for them a slight change in the initial state will multiply very rapidly. Two otherwise identical systems that start out in nearly the same state will, after a short time, be in very different conditions.

The earth's weather system, which depends in a complicated way on the motions of the atmosphere, heating by the sun, and other factors, is of this type. We know now that the hope for precise, long-range weather forecasting that would tell us definitely whether or not it will rain in a given city a year from today is futile, for very slight changes in the state of the atmosphere today would completely change that prediction. This is sometimes called the "butterfly effect": the flapping of a butterfly's wings in Asia will alter the weather in New York a week later. And, of course, we can't know what all the butterflies in the world are doing all the time.

The relationship between "chaos" in complex systems and fundamental uncertainty at the quantum level has not yet been completely clarified. But it does seem that the combination of sensitivity to initial conditions and a basic inability to determine those conditions with complete precision implies a fundamental lack of predictability in nature.

Finally, we need to take into account some of the consequences of the theory of relativity. Of course, "everyone knows" Einstein's equation \( E=mc^2 \); but its implications are often not appreciated fully even by physi-
The letter \( m \) stands for mass, a measure of the amount of inert material, while \( E \) is energy, which is defined in elementary physics as "the ability to do work," or the ability to make things happen. Thus, two apparently different concepts—static substance and dynamic process—are related in terms of \( c \), the speed of light in vacuum.

Already in the nineteenth century, geological investigations and evolutionary biology had found that the earth and its living things have not remained constant but have been changing over vast stretches of time. Einstein's work led to the realization that the universe at its fundamental level is continually changing. His general theory of relativity introduced the idea that space and time themselves are a dynamic web of relationships and provided a framework for understanding the discovery that the whole universe of galaxies is expanding. And in the realm of the very small, the combination of relativity and quantum mechanics in quantum field theory gives a picture of matter as composed of dynamic interactions rather than static substance.

**Divine Cooperation in the Real World**

Because of the dynamic character of the world, it is appropriate to emphasize the idea of God's cooperation with creatures—literally "working with" them—instead of the concept of divine preservation. This does not mean, of course, that there is no appropriate sense in which we can speak of God's preserving creatures. But God does this precisely by cooperating with the physical interactions that make possible the existence of atoms, DNA, living things, stars, and other entities of the world, which, while not eternal, do endure for some length of time.

Such cooperation means that we must think in terms of multiple agents. We confess that God "gives food to all flesh" (Ps. 136:25) without denying that solar energy, weather, and human beings such as farmers and cooks are also agents without which we would not have food.

But we have already seen that the weather tomorrow (to take just one of those agents) is not completely determined by conditions today. There is some "play," some flexibility, in the network of relationships between meteorological phenomena. This means that even if divine action is limited to what is possible with natural processes, God is not locked into a single course of action. Thus, God can retain some freedom to act in the world without violating the regular patterns of nature that science tries to
approximate with its laws. That is because those patterns are not so rigid as to require a unique unfolding of the world in time.

This means, among other things, that it can make sense to pray for things to happen. We can pray for rain and believe that God will take our prayers into account in determining what, among the possible outcomes allowed by the laws describing natural phenomena, will actually come about. God is not “intervening” to answer that prayer, as if God would not otherwise be doing anything about the weather, for God is always acting with the processes that produce the rain or clear skies. God “sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” [Matt. 5:45], and the biblical commands to pray encourage us to believe that our prayers for both the righteous and unrighteous have something to do with that.

If we understand God to work in the world today through natural processes, we can think of divine action in the past in the same way. There is a great deal of scientific evidence that the basic laws of nature, the divine instruments, have not changed since the earliest stages of the universe. God made the sun to shine and preserved people’s lives thousands of years ago in the same ways as today.

But if we look back over sufficiently long periods of time, we, of course, do find evidence that the world was different in the distant past. Biological species that were alive tens of thousands or millions of years ago, such as saber-toothed tigers and trilobites, are no longer extant, while species unknown in the past, such as ourselves, now inhabit the earth. Biological evolution has taken place through slow processes of genetic variation and selection.

Some believers see evolution as a serious challenge to Christian faith, and one often hears the issue posed as “creation or evolution.” That is a false dichotomy. In one sense, biological evolution can be understood as an example of the doctrine of providence—God developing various forms of life through natural processes. In a similar way, the detailed knowledge we have of the processes of conception and development of life in the womb are to be seen as a scientific explanation of the instruments God uses to bring human beings into the world, and nobody insists that we have to make a choice between “creation or embryology.”

This is not to say that there are no theological issues that need to be dealt with in connection with evolution. Adequate interpretations of the early chapters of Genesis and other creation texts are needed, and tradi-
tional doctrines of original righteousness and original sin must be worked through in an evolutionary context.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of evolution, however, is the means that God apparently has used for the development of life, namely, the processes of natural selection. Competition for resources and breeding opportunities, privation, and extinction play a major role in bringing about evolutionary change. Mammals, including human beings, are where they are today because the demise of the dinosaurs opened up ecological niches into which they could expand. New forms of life come about in part because of the deaths of older forms, and many people cannot see how a beneficent and loving God could work in such a way. It isn’t surprising that by the end of his life Darwin was unsure whether he could believe in any God.

Here it is important to remember a point we made earlier: The God we are speaking of is the deity revealed preeminently in the crucified Christ, the God who becomes a participant in the evolutionary process and gets killed in the “struggle for survival” (for, in the short term, Pilate and Caiaphas are the winners). And the resurrection of the Crucified One shows that there is hope even for the losers.

This certainly neither provides a neat solution to the problems of suffering and evil in the world nor proves that God is justified in bringing about life through evolution driven by natural selection. It does mean that God does not stand aloof from the suffering of the world but stands with creatures in their suffering. There is a price to be paid for the development of life, and God, along with creatures, pays that price.

As we extend our reflections into the past, we find ourselves dealing with what many people consider the sole content of the doctrine of creation—the origination of the universe and of life. But providence is part of the Christian understanding of creation. (In his Small Catechism, Luther devoted almost his entire explanation of the First Article to God’s care for the individual.12 Though we are far from understanding how the first living things developed from nonliving chemicals, we know that it did happen on earth some three-and-one-half billion years ago. And we can go back even farther.13)

The formation of galaxies, stars, and planetary systems by gravitational condensation and the synthesis of carbon and other elements essential for life by fusion reactions in stellar interiors took place by processes that are fairly well understood. Continuing our journey back toward the beginning
of cosmic expansion about fourteen-billion years ago, we can observe the microwave radiation left over from the "primordial fireball" about half-a-million years after the beginning. We can't detect radiation from earlier epochs, but we do find other types of signals. The lightest atomic nuclei were apparently formed in the first minutes of the Big Bang, and their abundances agree with theoretical calculations. Christians will see God active in all of this, working with gravitational, electromagnetic, and nuclear energies to bring the present structures of the cosmos into being.

The hope of many cosmologists is to explain the origin of the universe's matter and energy, and of space-time itself, in terms of a theory that describes gravitation in quantum mechanical terms. A combination of Einstein's mass-energy relation, gravitational interactions, and the discontinuities characteristic of quantum theory may make it possible to understand how matter could emerge from an initially empty state.

This would not be creatio ex nihilo in the theological sense (for such a theory would still have to assume the existence of certain fields and the laws governing them), but it would display the instruments that God may have used in bringing the material world into being. The God who is paradoxically revealed in the hiddenness of the Cross is the God whose action in creating the universe is concealed by the very creatures God uses to accomplish that work.

Miracles

When I present this view of divine action in a lecture, one of the first questions often is, "What about miracles?" This is a legitimate question in itself; for Scripture speaks of marvelous events, and the concept of "extraordinary" providence is part of the theological tradition. But the prominence often given to miracles is unfortunate. In many cases it betrays a belief that God's activity in the world should really be demonstrated by some phenomena that can be identified unambiguously as divine. To that attitude the appropriate reply is that of Jesus, that "no sign will be given to this generation" (Mark 8:12).

However, there are ways to think about miraculous events in the context sketched here. They need not be considered "violations" of the laws of nature. Perhaps the best approach is to think of them as rare but "natural" phenomena whose possibility God has provided for in creation. Because they occur so seldom, we are unable to discern regularities that
would enable us to fit them into our scientific theories.

But we should also notice that many miracle stories, especially of the
New Testament, seem to describe the same types of things that normally
happen in the world, but in an intensified and accelerated fashion; for
example, the feeding of the multitudes is, in more spectacular fashion, the
kind of thing that happens in the world all the time—the multiplication of a
little grain into a lot of grain and of a few fish into many. This makes it
possible to see miracles, from the standpoint of Christian faith, as signs
that point to Jesus as the presence of the God who is continually active in
the world. "My Father is still working," he said, "and I also am working"
(John 5:17).

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Endnotes

136-39.
2. Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," in Luther's Works (Philadelphia:
Fortress. 1957), 31:33.
3. Useful treatments of the topic include Benjamin Wirt Farley, The Providence of
God (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988); Ian G. Barbour, Religion and Science (San
Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1997); ch. 12; John Polkinghorne, Science and
Providence (London: SPCK, 1989); George L. Murphy, "The Theology of the
5. Gordon D. Fee, Paul's Letter to the Philippians (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans,
6. Martin Luther, "Psalm 147," in Luther's Works (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958),
14:114.
8. Literally eti deus non daretur. For the quotations in this paragraph, see
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, enlarged ed. (New York:
Macmillan, 1972), 360-61, 311.
9. For popular introductions to the areas of modern physics discussed here, see

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10. The phenomena under consideration here obey nonlinear equations of motion. Because of the misuse of this concept by some New Age writers, it is worth noting that there is no immediate connection between this and so-called "nonlinear thinking." Nonlinear equations are those (such as the ones for the motion of fluids) for which the sum of two solutions is not a solution. For a moderately technical introduction to nonlinear dynamics, see G.L. Baker and J.P. Gollub, Chaotic Dynamics (New York: Cambridge University, 1990).


15. C.S. Lewis, Miracles (New York: Macmillan, 1947), especially ch. 15.
The Social Nature of Providence

PAMELA DICKEY YOUNG

Afte every tragic plane crash where hundreds of people are killed, it never fails that some television interviewer finds people who were supposed to have been on the airplane but, for some unforeseen reason, failed to make it aboard. Inevitably at least one of those people will thank God for saving him or her, giving thanks for God’s will to keep this particular person alive. At every funeral home in North America that serves Christian clientele, at least one person (usually many more) for every visitation will claim that God’s will and purpose in this death are mysterious and inscrutable. Nonetheless, the implication is that it was God’s direct and intervening will that this particular person should die at this time. Popular Christian culture usually speaks of “God’s will” as though it is the direct intervention of God in specific outcomes, especially life and death outcomes, for each person in the universe. Such talk assumes a view of divine will or providence such that God is directly in control of at least some events. It also assumes that God stands beyond the universe, acting upon it in specific moments, but otherwise leaving it alone to run its own affairs. But can this popular Christian view be sustained in light of contemporary questions about creaturely freedoms? Do the current scientific and philosophical views of the universe in which we operate every day really permit this notion of divine activity? If not, how can we meaningfully continue to use such notions as “God’s providence” or “God’s will”?

A Metaphysic of Freedom

To talk about God’s will or God’s providence is to talk about the interaction between human freedom and divine freedom, human acts and God’s acts. As a theologian thinking through these interactions, I work with several criteria. These fall primarily into two categories: (1) appropriateness to or congruence with the Christian tradition; and (2) credibility in the contemporary world. With regard to the first, then, I need to keep asking myself whether the God who is being portrayed here is the God of the Christian tradition or some other God. With regard to the second, I need to
ask whether the God being portrayed is one that contemporary human beings would find believable. For example, am I portraying a concept of God that relies on consistency rather than one that relies on inconsistencies? Am I portraying a God who would be credible and recognizable not only to the powerful but also to the many "non-persons" who are asserting their claims to change social systems? Is this a God who will be credible to the poor? to persons of color (some of whom are also the poor)? to women (who may also be among the poor and/or those of color)? And on it goes. Am I portraying a God who is worthy of worship?

When we talk about God with a capital G, we sometimes make the mistake of thinking that this is a singular term that is used in a univocal way by all people. But this "God" is not one God but many; and the invocation of this God often begs the question, Which God are we really talking about here? It behooves us to be clear which God we mean, because much confusion arises, both within Christian circles and from outside, when we assume that all talk of God is about the same God.

At the human level, we experience ourselves as making meaningful free choices from among potential alternatives. We do not experience ourselves as puppets controlled by something beyond ourselves. Our freedoms are not absolute, of course. We experience the limits of being embodied. I am mortal. I feel pain. Some things are simply beyond my physical capacities.

As Marxism and the liberation movements of the twentieth century made us aware, we are also constrained by humanly imposed social limitations such as those imposed by the ruling classes on the ruled, those imposed by patriarchy on the roles of women and men, and those imposed on persons of color by those whose skin color has given them traditional privileges. Certainly one needs to ponder those whose freedoms are constrained by such social systems, but in an age of historical consciousness one can no longer argue that such social systems are put in place by God. They are created by human beings and can be changed by human beings. To argue otherwise is to invoke a God who is not worthy of being worshiped. This God is not worthy of worship if many human beings are simply left out of the purview of this God's care and concern.

We live in the universe, expecting that general rules of cause and effect will be followed and that happenings can be replicated, given the same conditions. Occasionally we come upon what may seem to be a "mysterious" or "inexplicable" happening—a cure, for example, that was not predicted by the
medical experts. At this juncture, popular Christian tradition resorts to the idea of "miracle." However, the problem of determining what counts as a miraculous act of God has been well known and well documented since David Hume asked all-important questions about why we would resort so quickly to God as the only possible explanation of the inexplicable. Surely, "miraculous act of God" is only one possible answer from among many possible answers to the question of why something seemingly inexplicable happens and, as Hume pointedly asks, what counts as the evidence that something should be called an "act of God" and not something else?

Hume's pointed questions push us toward needing to figure out what the term act of God might reasonably mean in our day. Throughout Christian history there has been a desire to preserve both human freedom and God's sovereignty over what happens. Sometimes, there has been discussion of primary and secondary causes. Sometimes we are enjoined, paradoxically, simply to trust both in God's ultimate causality and in our human freedoms. Neither of these approaches seems to me adequate to the kinds of questions raised, on the one hand, by the Enlightenment and, on the other, by those whom society has deemed "non-persons." The former approach still makes God the ultimate author of all human acts, not leaving, in my view, sufficient room for human freedom and responsibility. In addition, it makes God the ultimate cause of all the evils in the world, thus compromising God's all-goodness and seriously putting God's worthiness of worship into question. The latter approach assumes such a difference between God's ways and our ways that we are told simply to assume God's ways are superior. To will the suffering of so many on the way to some end that only God knows certainly makes us wonder whether we are dealing with a God who can be trusted.

Thus, in the remainder of this article, I draw on discussions of metaphysics to outline my own way of dealing with the question of how we can talk meaningfully of "God's will" or "God's providence."

The only metaphysics that, in my view, deals adequately with the interrelation between God and the world is a process metaphysics. Here I depend on the work of Charles Hartshorne and Schubert Ogden. God, in process metaphysics, is a relational God, a social God, a God who, as creative, needs creatures with whom to be in relationship. The God of process metaphysics is a God who is affected by God's creatures and thus changes in response to them. This makes God not fickle but responsive. The traditional Aristotelian notion that the most perfect is the most
unchanging means that we are left with a God who is unresponsive to the changing scenarios in God's universe.

In process metaphysics, God is said to be dipolar, that is, God is absolute in some ways and relative in others. In terms of God's absolute pole, one way in which God is distinct from creatures is that, whereas creatures exist contingently, God's existence is either necessary or not consistently conceivable. That is, in order to be God, God could not be the sort of being who might not exist tomorrow. God is also absolute as universal in the sense that God is related to everything that is, while creatures are only related to some other creatures. Such a view preserves the worshipfulness of God by arguing that there are some ways in which God does not change—God's steadfastness, for example, remains even in the midst of responsiveness to creatures. In terms of God's relative characteristics, God can respond to God's creatures and still be God, because the scope of God's response is what differentiates God from all other relative beings. God "is absolutely cosmic or universal in [God's] capacities, interacting with all others, relevant to all others, relevant to all contexts, and in this sense absolutely universal—the only strictly universal individual or individual universal."

The God-world relationship in process metaphysics is panentheistic. God includes the world, but also transcends or surpasses the world. God does not stand outside the rest of the universe and act upon it. God and the world are in constant interrelationship. Here I find useful the image of a matrix. From the Latin mater, mother, "matrix" can be used to describe the womb, or, more broadly, any place or medium in which something is produced or developed. In mathematics, the matrix is the (usually invisible) form in which a set of numbers is placed in a meaningful arrangement. God as matrix provides the structure within which we can "live, move, and have our being." Metaphysically speaking, God is the one who relates to everything that is.

The world consists of multiple bounded freedoms. All creatures are free within certain limits—the limits of clashing with the powers of others to bring about their own ends. One of the hallmarks of process theology is the acceptance that freedom is not limited to divine and human freedom. There are freedoms down to the smallest levels of being. Cells, molecules, and atoms have freedoms that cannot simply be coerced by the larger entities within which they exist. The example of a cancer cell is useful here. The body of which it is part cannot always either will or coerce it out of existence.

A key criticism of process theology has been that God's freedom, too, is
bounded. This raises the question, what might a notion of unbounded freedom mean in the case of God? The classical notion is that God must be free to do whatever God wants to do in the manner of coercively bringing something to pass. God’s power has been conceived as the power of fiat: speak and it is done. However, all power is social. It depends on having another over whom such power is to be exercised. As soon as there is another, there are creaturely freedoms exercised by that other. Not even God, I would argue, can simply by coercive will bring about any single end, because, beside God’s power, there are other (albeit lesser) powers to take into account.

Furthermore, the image of coercive power is itself questionable as the most adequate view of divine power. Think of human power for a moment. When the power in question is exercised as coercive power, human freedoms are greatly restricted, since coercive power usually has punishment as the outcome of defying coercion. Coercive power is exercised in the mode of dominance and control. It seeks not to convince the will of another but to break it and replace it with one’s own will. But in human terms, there are other ways to exercise power that depend on providing perspective on a situation, making convincing arguments about one’s own way of seeing something, providing an example to be followed, encouraging expansive thought, allowing for trial and error, and so on.

Perhaps, when we think in terms of God’s power, the human image of a good parent is a better image of power than the image of the despotic ruler. When the power of the divine “good parent” is exercised on behalf of the universe and the creatures within it, it works with creaturely freedoms, providing the ground within which those freedoms are exercised and the invitation to exercise them for the good of the whole. God as matrix sets the limits of the universe within which we function. There has been endless speculation on whether ours is the “best of all possible worlds” (see Voltaire’s Candide, for example). In the case of a process metaphysics, it is not that the world must be the best of all possible worlds but rather that the limits set are such that creatures can maximize their creaturely potentials, both individually and collectively. Either these limits maximize the creaturely potential for bringing about the best in every new moment or the concept of God is inconsistent and that “God” is unworthy of worship.

The only possible aim of a God so conceived [as omnibenevolent] would not be wholly to determine the decisions of others—since that, not being coher-
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ently conceivable, is impossible—but rather, by means of [God's] own free decisions, to optimize the limits of all of theirs. By this I mean that the God whom a process metaphysics allows one to conceive would so act as to set limits to the freedom of others such that, were the limits other than they are, the ratio of opportunity for good to risk of evil would be unfavorable. Thus, if God allowed others either more or less freedom than they actually have, there would be more chances of evil than of good resulting from their decisions, rather than the other way around.4

In a process universe there is no static being; there is only becoming. And in each moment of becoming there are countless individual freedoms (including God's) that play into every outcome. The future is future not only to creatures but also to God, who does not know ahead of time the free choices of God's creatures.

In process metaphysics, God experiences everything that happens in the universe, including deep joy and satisfaction as well as deep pain and suffering. The God who includes the world experiences our joy or pain directly as our joy or pain. God also takes that pain into God's own experience of the whole, which provides an ultimate scope for synthesizing all that happens.

Providence and God's Grace

Metaphysics is simply the framework, the bare bones, of providing a conception of God. Metaphysics is but one tool of credibility. And today this tool is out of favor as many postmodern thinkers argue that metaphysics is itself a linguistic game, that language creates reality rather than the other way around, and that there is no one reality behind our descriptive language. In large part, this antimetaphysical view arises as a way to deal with the vast pluralisms and diversities with which we must reckon. In such a view, if there are multiple and competing ways of portraying anything, including the foundations of the universe, then no one metaphysics holds convincing sway; so metaphysics must itself simply be a human creation, a linguistic tool with no reference beyond itself. Religious believers, however, whether they know it or not, have much at stake in maintaining the importance of metaphysics if they do not want their convictions set aside as simply their way among a multiplicity of other ways of choosing to talk about the universe. And confused metaphysics or meta-

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physics that has tried to argue too much contributed to the denigration of metaphysics in general.

Philosophers and theologians have often tried to make metaphysics bear more weight than it can. Metaphysics does not say everything that it is important to say about God. The weight it bears is the weight of conception, outline, skeleton. Nor, it seems to me, does everyone have to accept any particular argument for the argument to be a good one. Just because no argument succeeds in convincing everyone does not mean that every argument is false.

To accept a particular metaphysics supplies one set of constraints on the ways in which we can speak of God. It remains to a religious tradition (in this case, Christianity) to make these bones of metaphysics live with the narrative, symbols, and metaphors of that tradition.

No matter what view of providence one holds, it is clear that not all that happens either to the universe or to individuals within it can be said to be good. The traditional way to account for this is to say that God's ways are not our ways. But such a view of providence is utilitarian in the extreme. The means are always said to justify the ends, even though the ends are mysterious to us and known only to God. The problem with such a view is well portrayed in The Brothers Karamazov:

"Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth."

"No, I wouldn't consent," said Alyosha softly.

But this is not the picture of God that we get from the message of Jesus. The God of whom Jesus speaks is intimately concerned not only with the whole but also with each individual within the whole—healing of mind, body, and spirit are commonplace. People are fed. The kingdom, or reign, of God is inclusive and open to all. Those who encountered Jesus and responded to him are portrayed as those whose lives are changed.

In the Christian tradition, we use the term grace to describe the interaction of God with the whole universe and its individual parts. Over the
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history of theology there have been disputes about the locus of grace. Many Protestants have concentrated that locus in Jesus to the exclusion of other potential avenues of grace. In my view, this has sold short the expansiveness of God's grace and its availability to all. The Roman Catholic tradition has often had a more widespread notion of God's grace in interaction with the world but has then turned around and restricted its fullness to those who encounter it through Jesus Christ in Word and Sacraments. Both ways have failed to take full account of one of the traditional hallmarks of providence—that it encompasses all creation.

For Christians, grace is that life-changing experience of God that comes to them through encounter with Jesus Christ in another creature, or in Word and Sacrament. But to read Jesus as the sole revelation of that grace or as the highest or supreme revelation of God is to limit the expansiveness of the grace that people experience through Jesus. In other words, Jesus is not constitutive of salvation. Salvation depends on God's grace—the grace that Jesus makes known to us; but, if providence is going to encompass all of creation, then that grace must be available to all creatures.

Bonhoeffer worried about "cheap grace"—not that grace came cheaply but that it was cheapened by those who did not see it as demanding a response. I have never been much worried about cheap grace. Grace is, after all, freely given by a loving God who seeks our best. But perhaps there is a place for worrying about a cheapened notion of providence—a view that looks for everything to come out right and that says that if it does not it is because we simply cannot understand it properly. If, as in process metaphysics, the future is neither already determined nor known by God, then providence is not about God's guarantees of that future for us or for the universe.

The Latin word pro can have a future direction, but it can also have the connotation of "being on the side of." It is just this notion of being on the side of creation that offers a useful way to understand providence today. God's providence is not the provision of a guaranteed outcome to my life or the history of the universe. God's providence is God's accompanying the universe.

God as Companion

In the section on metaphysics I sought to maximize what I thought could be said literally of God and to minimize what I thought could be said metaphorically. But in fleshing out religious language, metaphor is a necessity. Here there are a number of metaphors that might be evocative, even
as we recognize that metaphors both open up understanding and have their limitations. Shepherd, mother-womb, lover, friend, father (if not used patriarchally) are all useful metaphors. The metaphor of matrix from earlier in the article allows for an understanding of God as caring and nurturing. The God who is Matrix provides the fertile environment in which we can grow and change. She wills our best and experiences what we experience, for good or ill.

In my view, one of the most evocative metaphors for portraying an experience of God’s providence is the idea of God as companion. A companion is, literally, one with whom one breaks bread. A companion is one who accompanies on the way. Companions offer advice but they do not coerce. They often see a bigger picture than I, caught up in my own concerns, can see. A companion encourages when I falter and criticizes when I fail. But a true companion does not desert me.

Some Christian theologians argue against process metaphysics on the grounds that there is no assured outcome—there is no guarantee that God’s providence will be ultimately victorious over the evils of the world. There is no guarantee that the kingdom, or reign, of God will ultimately come to pass in a final and unmistakable way. For others, Christian and non-Christian alike, the problem of evil is the stumbling block over which any notion of providence falters. Whether in the present or in the future, there is no guarantee that good will triumph and evil will be vanquished.

I tell my students that I get out of bed in the morning only because I trust that things could be different. I know I am an optimist by nature, but I do not think this is a naive optimism. What I mean is that each day, even each moment, presents itself to me and to the rest of creation as a time in which good can happen and suffering can be alleviated. Our daily, moment-by-moment, choices make an impact on the suffering in the world. There is tremendous suffering in the world. In particular, there is the immense suffering of human and nonhuman creatures brought about by human malevolence, greed, and negligence. But we are not powerless in the face of this suffering. Both individually and in concert with others we can make a difference.

To understand the world as theistic means that I am part of a larger whole and that I have meaning and value not only for myself but also for that larger whole. I am valuable to God. I do not claim to be able to convince everyone else to see the world as I do. But one thing the Christian
tradition has to contribute to the well-being of humanity is a set of images that puts the whole of creation into perspective as valuable and that calls us to a way of seeing who we are and where we stand in the universe. I think that this way of seeing can make a difference in the way people conduct themselves in the world. The metaphors and narratives of Christianity can be put to use in the service of the good of the universe. Of course, the metaphors and narratives of Christianity can also, and have been, put to use in the service of malevolence, greed, and negligence. Not neutral, they must be employed with great care and concern for the whole universe.

The notion of providence was never meant to be an individualized notion—God taking care of me to the exclusion of other creatures. Indeed, that is one of the compelling reasons to keep the notion of providence alive. In terms of providence, the narrative of my life and the narrative of the whole of creation are inseparably intertwined.

How, then, do I reckon with horrible evils that are done by humans in this world? I cannot fully explain why some humans choose to live their lives as though they themselves, individually or in some small group collectively, were the center of the universe. I cannot fully explain why some human beings seem to exult in the coercion of others. Sin is a complex human phenomenon, and I expect there are many roots to any one set of behaviors. Given our current mindset that exalts the individual above all others, we should not be surprised to discover many individuals seeking the goods that come with that exaltation.

I think we make a mistake, however, when we do not see that individualism or the exaltation of my particular group is, in fact, a mindset. It is only one way of seeing the world. Pragmatic realism in the realm of international politics means that I must reckon with this mindset. But it does not mean that I must see it as the last or only word.

For me, the notion of God's providence means that things could be different. What humans have created, humans can change. And this requires a change in our way of thinking. If, indeed, I truly understand God as my constant companion, and not just mine but the constant companion of the universe, then I need to begin thinking and acting differently. For in the matrix that is God, I am only one small part. And when I understand that, I am called to live out of that understanding. In our "might makes right" world, where the rich and powerful lord it over the poor and powerless, we make the mistake of confusing our power with God's. Because of
our traditional notions of God's power as coercive, we elide our ability to coerce with a notion of divine will. If I can accomplish it, God must will it.

When I talk about God's will for the universe I need to see myself as an instrument of that will—not in the coercive way of "might makes right" but in the way that seeks the good of the whole. If God's will is to be accomplished, it will be done not by coercion but by love. God's will is profoundly social. It is not a will just for me; it is a will that encompasses everything that is in its interwovenness.

I do not have to—not can I—see God's providence evident in every specific thing that happens. God does not will everything that happens in the course of history. God's will cannot simply be read off history. God's will must be discerned within history and discerned anew in each moment by those who seek it. God's providence is in listening and responding to God's engagement with me and with the rest of creation—an engagement that accompanies but does not coerce.

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Endnotes

3. Hartshorne, A Natural Theology, 136.
Leading from Providence

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"He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me. . . . Indeed, you are my lamp, O LORD, the LORD lightens my darkness. By you I can crush a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall" (2 Sam. 22:20, 29-30).

At no point is the distance between most contemporary accounts of leadership (secular or religious) and the account of leadership given in 1 and 2 Samuel greater than when it comes to the subject of providence. By most contemporary accounts the leader should ask the sort of questions that clear up the fog and reveal a clear path forward to a specific destination. What traits do I need to be successful? Where are the models of excellence? What information must I process? What corporate culture must I penetrate? Where are the land mines? How accurate is our feedback system? What nostalgia is holding us back? What vision will propel us forward? What may we extrapolate from the present to prepare for our future?

According to the books of Samuel, leadership is not about clearing up a fog, or to use a preferable word, a mystery. Leadership is about learning to accept that mystery and to live well within it. In the fecund language of William Cowper's 1774 hymn on providence, leadership means being absorbed by the questions arising from one overriding fact: "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." Are the ominous clouds on the horizon actually "big with mercy" and will those clouds "break in blessings" on our heads? Can I stop projecting the fears of "feeble sense" on the Lord long enough to glimpse the "smiling face" that lies "behind a frowning providence"? Am I strong enough to break rank from those who "scan his work in vain" because of their unbelief? Will I allow God the courtesy of interpreting what God is up to, because I hope that one day God "will make it plain"?

Leaders are normally consumed by action. By one well-known account the daily activities of a chief executive are characterized by "brevity, variety, and discontinuity." Barely half of their activities engage them for as long as nine minutes. They may average 583 activities in an eight-hour day, mostly collecting, processing, and transmitting "soft" information, negotiating poten-
tial or actual conflict, and attending the rituals and ceremonies of the organization. Only ten percent of these activities will last as long as an hour. Yet every leader carries some ultimate interpretation of who he or she is and what he or she does. It is a portable inner vision of self in the world. It is the stash of the pieces of their lives and the weaving together of those pieces into a narrative that gives perspective to the relentless daily practice. For some church leaders the interpretation of self in the world is still beneath the surface of speech. All they know for sure is how much they are not like the persons being described in some of the most popular literature of leadership and management. They hunger for an interpretation that has to do more with mystery and drama than with those glib profiles of success.

For most leaders the interpretation of self in the world is a positive exercise of the imagination, even if carried out only at the edge of consciousness. It has the character of what one prominent writer on leadership calls "the Dream," a vague sense of self in the world that generates energy and a sense of life as adventure. The Dream is "more formal than a pure fantasy, yet less articulated than a fully thought-out plan." For the church leader, this may mean viewing herself or himself in such a character as a rescuer, defender, mover and shaker, midwife, wizard, gardener, or coach.

For church leaders, the Dream must be placed within a narrative of providence—the fabric of God's larger purposes and movements. The Dream is more than a self-referenced project of determination and action. It is a gift of experience and reflection that arises out of the drama of leading the people of God. It is God who gives to church leadership its integrity and God's actions in real time that give to it its weight. To be a church leader is to theologize; to lead well is to theologize incessantly. The books of Samuel have modeled the practice. What power behind the stars responds to social chaos by sending a leader? Who ultimately calls leaders and coaxes them toward their futures? Who finally judges leaders when they err and holds them to account when they repent? From whom do leaders receive their visions for a just society and their inspirations for compassion? How shall leaders manage their hungers and order their loves? And, at their end, the books of Samuel raise the God question once again, this time as the ultimate factor in the practice of church leadership.

Listening to the Books of Samuel

The psalm of thanksgiving in 2 Sam. 22 is attributed to David at a time near
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the end of his life, "when the LORd delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul" (v. 1). It is a duplicate of Ps. 18 and stands as a complement to the Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10). Together, the two songs bracket the stories of leadership in the books of Samuel with the celebration of God’s providence. That providence is the ultimate reality behind the human successes and failures in the leadership of Saul and David. Hannah’s song anticipates that God, who can reverse the powers of the world, nevertheless has chosen to work through a king, God’s anointed one (1 Sam. 2:10). Second Sam. 22 is set as David’s own song that looks back over a career of success and failure, gift and grasp, blessing and curse, and finding in it the steady hand of God’s sovereignty and grace.

David’s psalm in 2 Sam. 22 falls into three parts that together testify to the major theme of the books of Samuel and provide the final key to understanding leadership of God’s people. The first section (vv. 1-20) is thanksgiving in celebration of God’s power to deliver from chaos. It focuses on the grace-filled activity of God’s salvation. The second section (vv. 21-28) extols human moral virtue and the power of righteousness to gain the Lord’s favor. The emphasis is on human ability to claim God’s grace by virtue of one’s own righteousness.

Section three of the psalm (vv. 29-51) serves as a corrective to the impression given by the first two sections. In the king’s voice, God’s ultimate power is acknowledged as central: “Indeed you are my lamp, O LORd, the LORd lightens my darkness” (v. 29). It is followed immediately by David’s affirmation of his own abilities and deeds: “By you I can crush a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall” (v. 30). The verses that follow (vv. 30, 38-39) are filled with first-person affirmations of heroic deeds and mighty acts of leadership against enemies and over obstacles. Yet, constantly alongside the deeds of the royal “I,” the psalm acknowledges the divine, empowering “Thou.” The leader achieves great things through admirable abilities; but all he does is enabled by the grace-filled activity of God, who deserves to be praised (v. 30). God’s saving activity is crucial (vv. 1-20) and human gifts are required (vv. 21-28); but the text in its entirety emphasizes leadership as the unique combination of divine providence and human personality, through which God has chosen to work. This is the emphasis that is at the center of the psalm’s climactic third section (vv. 29-51).

This psalm still speaks to us of the context in which we must exercise leadership for the church. We have retained a sense of the invading reality
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of chaos and its threat to our attempts to find ordered meaning for our lives. During the months of work on this manuscript, terrorists damaged the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and destroyed the Twin Towers in New York City. Anthrax arrived in our post offices, snipers shot down innocent people in our neighborhoods, and our children and friends went off to war twice—in Afghanistan and in Iraq. We know the reality of chaos, but we have lost touch with the corresponding language of deliverance—the elemental way this psalm speaks its conviction that God's power can drive back the chaos. We live in a time when we are enamored of our own human capacities. When these capacities fail to deliver us from crises in our daily lives, our world, and our institutions, we often discover that we have lost touch with a sense of divine power. Only that power is capable of driving back the darkness, restoring order in the midst of chaos, and surprising us with the grace of life when we feel overpowered by death.

Reflecting our culture, our generation in the church prefers the ordered, moral universe suggested by the second section of the psalm (vv. 21-28). The cool, rational, didactic approach of obeying commandments and seeking righteousness tempts us into thinking that we can control chaos by our own efforts. For example, in the face of difficult and divisive moral issues (sexual orientation, abortion, racism) or challenges such as the shape of the family, economic inequities, and the proliferation of violence, the church's leadership is prone to establish study commissions. It passes carefully worded resolutions, seeks new legislation that defines righteousness, and devises pragmatic programs of action. One of the teachings of this psalm may be that such leadership approaches to the vexing challenges of our day have their place only in the context of a more elemental confidence and celebration of God's singular power to overcome chaos and to establish the Kingdom. Such confidence in the decisive role of God's providence may lead us to regard our leadership efforts as less ultimate and self-sufficient. It requires boldness of speech about God's salvation that recognizes that our efforts remain important but cannot save us apart from God's providence working through us, and, if necessary, in spite of us.

This psalm is a final comment on leadership as a unique combination of divine providence and human agency. It is not an idealized story of unblemished heroes and glossed-over failures. In the end, David is a model for our leadership in both positive and negative ways. His career as leader—God's anointed one—divides into two parts at the point of his adultery with
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Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. It has been said that David's story is one first of blessing and then of curse. At first, his life is blessed by his sense of receiving God's gift. He recognizes God's grace in the events that bring him to leadership. What initially separates David from Saul and others as a leader is his constant awareness that whatever his gifts and capacities, his successes and failures, it is God who makes the difference. He prays constantly. He counts on God to make the difference, whether for deliverance or comfort or guidance and, when he has fallen in sin, even for forgiveness (Ps. 51). David praises, petitions, confesses, intercedes, trusts. Whatever his own gifts, David knows he is surrounded by the gift of God's providence working to establish the Kingdom. He is not alone and his leadership is not dependent only on his own resources.

But, as we have seen, David's sense of gift gives way to grasp. He uses his power for self-centered purposes and closes himself off from God's presence and providence. God's judgment through the prophet Nathan and the tragedy of his sons' violent self-centeredness (imitating their father) bring David to the point of brokenness and failure as a leader. Only then does David reclaim his confidence in God's providence as a resource for leadership. In his retreat from Jerusalem to escape the rebellious hand of his own son Absalom, David seems to recognize what he has lost as a center for his leadership of God's people. In 2 Sam. 15:25, he tells his followers, "If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both [the ark] and the place where it stays. But if he says, 'I take no pleasure in you,' here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him." A few verses later (v. 31), we find David praying again, reconnected with the true source of his leadership.

David's name is connected with the psalms primarily to show that, throughout his life, his leadership enfolded in worship. It is an expansive view of worship, encompassing praise and thanksgiving, lament and petition. Even his sin with Bathsheba is enfolded in the providential grace of God's forgiveness (Ps. 51). In the Psalter, Ps. 18 (a duplicate of 2 Sam. 22) is surrounded by other psalms carrying David's name—all of which elaborate the images of leadership carried out in awareness and partnership with God's providential action in the midst of God's people for the sake of God's mission in the world.

In the end, the psalm of 2 Sam. 22 recommends the rediscovery of a leadership in the church that enfolds itself in worship, prayer, and a consciousness
of the difference made by God's providence. God chooses to make Israel's salvation—and ours—a divine-human enterprise. The "I" of a church leader who lives up to his or her calling must confess that what enables wholeness and success in human efforts is the power of the divine "Thou." In the Christian faith, the word for this confessional reality is incarnation. God's "steadfast love" is best known through God's "anointed" (v. 51)—through "messiah," the Hebrew term for "anointed one." Christians claim that Jesus Christ was born in the line of David; that the full meaning of Christ forever includes God's story of acting in, through, and in spite of David.

The model of leadership we see in David foreshadows what we see more fully in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. In affirming the Incarnation, we claim the tradition summarized by 2 Sam. 22 and Ps. 18, with their concluding celebration of a divine-human partnership through which salvation comes. Hannah's song (1 Sam. 2:1-10) begins the story of God's saving work through David. Mary's song (Luke 1:46-55) echoes it to begin the story of God's saving action through Jesus.

This brief journey through David's leadership and its many dimensions reminds us of the crucial difference that rests in God's providence. This psalm of deliverance, obedience, and partnership between God and God's anointed leader David finds its complement in the New Testament claim that Jesus is the one in whom the divine and human are in complete partnership. He is 'the son of David.'

**A Providence for Agents, not Puppets**

According to Samuel, God is certainly in ultimate control. God has definite preferences about future outcomes and is determined to have those preferences realized. In the terms of classical and modern theologies of providence, God leans more toward Calvinist images of control than toward the images of openness in process theology. God wills, God knows, God executes plans through both primary and secondary causes—"not a sparrow falls" without God's awareness. It is hard to imagine this God as having only "abstract essence" awaiting "concrete actualization" by humans (as process theology's dipolar theism asserts). It is even harder to imagine this God restricted to "persuasive" rather than "coercive" action. There is as much of the Unmoved Mover (traditional theology) as of the Most Moved Mover (contemporary theology) in this God. Speaking from a lifetime of hard experience to those urging him to claim his rule in Jerusalem, David
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defers to the priority of God's purposes. "If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, he will bring me back" (2 Sam. 15:25). It is no longer about David; it is about God. In the words of a contemporary Reformed theologian, David accepts God as "[t]he power that bears down upon us, sustains us, sets an ordering of relationships, provides the conditions of possibilities for human activity and even a sense of direction."

That said, the picture of providence emerging in these biblical books is not that of an omnipotent and omniscient Sovereign micromanaging actors and events to comply with a finished script. The God of Hannah and Eli, Samuel and Michal, David and Bathsheba appears to have "middle knowledge" of events. God knows not only the events that do occur but also the events that would occur, if circumstances were different. God is aware of both facts and "counterfactuals." If only Eli's children had turned out differently, then there would have been no need for Samuel. If Saul (Plan A) were up to his calling to leadership, then there would have been no need for David (Plan B). If David had been out with his army in the spring, then there would have been no time for the illicit sexual conquest (Bathsheba) and the bleak trail of repercussions that include the death of Uriah. God is heading somewhere; but God respects human freedom and recognizes human frailty and appears to be aware of more than one way to get there.

Because God in some sense is aware and holds in awareness not only things that are but also things that could be, church leaders are not puppets fated to play established parts in an already finished drama, as is suggested in much traditional teaching on providence that borrowed freely from Stoic images of predestination. They are agents, summoned by a "curtain call" they may answer or ignore. They can choose to listen or not to listen to a "director" whose passion is to bring them "out into a broad place" (2 Sam. 22:20) rather than preserve them in structures of inferiority. At any given moment, they may choose a part from among the available parts in the play and how well to play that part.

Along the way, here and there, God sends prophets or other agents to help. They acquaint church leaders with future plots they had not yet grasped, as when Eli helps Samuel translate the voice he hears calling in the right (1 Sam. 3). They remind leaders of alternative scenarios and their probable consequences, as when Abigail tries to coax David out of his lethal anger toward Nabal (1 Sam. 25). They hold up a mirror to leaders' stolen scripts and miscast acting, as when Nathan confronts the king with
his grasping behavior and infidelity (2 Sam. 12). Sometimes we call these persons prophets, at other times mentors, consultants, advisors, or “significant others” who will tell it like it is.10

Leaders Bent to the Larger Purposes of God

The books of Samuel are clear that there is a benevolent power behind the scenes of the unfolding drama. “It is the LORD who shapes the events and personalities of this time.” All other factors—social, political, economic, geopolitical, leadership—“are bent to the divine purpose.”11 Church leaders should receive this report of providence as a word of encouragement. Behind every belligerent Goliath, beside every raging Saul, beyond every insurrectionist Absalom stands the Lord, who saves us from our enemies.

Church leaders keep themselves grounded in the perspective of providence through the disciplines of theological vision, liturgy, thanksgiving, and storytelling. From the perspective of providence, church leaders routinely engage in the practice of reframing what appear to be insurmountable obstacles. Where demographic studies reveal only a declining population, they see the fields white with a harvest of the unchurched. Where a loan officer at the bank considers their institution to be high risk, they see a mere matter of untaught stewardship. Church leaders are nourished by and contribute to an atmosphere of confidence that all the parts will eventually fall into place (Rom. 8:28-30), and so “it ain’t over ’til it’s over.”

From the perspective of providence, church leaders are always trying to locate their stories and the stories of the organizations they serve under the umbrella of God’s larger story in history. They continually ask after the “macrostory” to which their “microstories” belong. Church leaders are never quite at home only in their own story or the story of the group they serve. In this sense, all church leadership is basically itinerant and self-effacing. It is not about the leader; it is about God. It is not about only the local congregation; it is about the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” In the end, it is not even only about the church; it is about the future rule of God in the world.

The contemporary church often appears to be retreating into a local church culture. Listen to the content of the intercessions during worship. Specifically, listen for the omission of larger church issues, let alone larger world issues. We have learned specificity and directness in prayer, but we apply them only to “me and mine.” Observe how, often, the ministry of all
Christians is not a charge to infiltrate work, family, and school with prophetic voice and gospel alternatives but rather an occasion to blur the distinction between clergy and laypersons around matters of preaching, the sacraments, and administration. We throw ourselves into short-term experiences of hands-on mission in distant places, but are politely silent before the powers and policies that are capable of addressing massively and systemically the squalor of the world’s mission situations.

One of the most poignant moments in the books of Samuel occurs in 1 Sam. 3:18, when the boy Samuel, who is not yet old enough to identify the voice calling in the night, was summoned by God to replace Eli and his sons. Samuel reports the call to Eli. The old priest recognizes that he and his household have been dismissed from the unfolding drama of God's larger purposes in history and, in effect, submits to the grim verdict. Someone else must play the part.

In the middle knowledge of God, those who show up get to play the game. Sometimes we are ready to 'have done with lesser things' and find our better selves in the sacrifices demanded by that game. Sometimes we are not. It is more important that the game go on than that any person gets to play in it. The game of providence is very serious business.

"Where We Came In": A Personal Reflection from Lew

In the small north-central Pennsylvania town where I grew up in the 1950s, the Saturday-night social event of the summer was the local drive-in theater. The main feature was shown twice, with an intermission that seemed to go on forever. My parents would gather and load five sons (one of them an infant) and a larder of assorted homemade snacks into the Ford Fairlane. We almost never made it to the drive-in in time to view the opening scenes of the main feature's first showing. That led to one of the few family games we ever sat still long enough to play. While we watched the second showing of the main feature we would debate the point where we arrived during its first showing. "There!" "No, we never saw that." "Here! This is where we came in." It was a game of collective memory, recognition, and anticipation. And through my adult years as a church leader I have often thought what good practice it was for responding to any leadership challenge. Collective memory, recognition, and anticipation can help church leaders survive the adjustments of the first years of ministry as much as they can help them navigate the complex struggles and competing covenants that come in the
prime of their careers. We must figure out where we “came in” and give ourselves over to the moment in providence that has been given to us.

A huge cloud of anxiety has descended upon the so-called “mainline” churches. We spend increasing amounts of energy and resources to maintain the properties and organizational cultures of an earlier and more vital generation. We recognize and report lower attendance numbers, cut budgets, and lay off personnel. We watch ourselves aging without definite prospects of a next generation to carry on the work. Much of the energy that should be directed outward to meet the challenges of the present is dissipated by internal battles over styles of worship or debates over such matters as normalizing homosexuality. We feel a vague sense of guilt over losing the prophetic public voice we once had. We have become awkward in the presence of our evangelical heritage. We are beginning to openly acknowledge that the cutting edge of our denominations may have shifted to other countries on other continents.

Some leaders in mainline churches are resigned to the present trends. A renewal of our churches would require a “surprising work of God” (Jonathan Edwards’s name for revival), and there is just no way of predicting such visits. Others are pretty sure we could reverse present trends with the introduction of certain easy-to-learn techniques. Most of us are somewhere in between, trying the techniques but unconvinced that any number of tools or programs is the final answer. So, while we exhaust the techniques we also try to figure out our place in the scheme of God’s final purposes for the church, for humanity, and for creation. Where do we come in? What part have we been given to play? Again, in the end, it is not about us; it is about God. As John Wesley prays, “[L]et me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you.”

Until our final place in God’s larger purposes is disclosed, what choice do we have but to give our best to the challenges before us? If today’s church leaders share the “DNA” of the leaders of the books of Samuel, then the repertoire of disciplines for responding to the present moment is fairly self-evident. **Show up. Pay attention. Tell the truth. Duck. Don’t grasp. And most of all, don’t forget to dance madly as David did. Who knows? In the words of Jonathan to his anxious armor-bearer on the eve of battle with the Philistines, “[T]here may be that the LORD will act for us; for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few” (1 Sam. 14:6).**
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Endnotes

1. Material in this article has been adapted from Ducking Spears, Dancing Madly: An Alternative, Biblical Vision of Church Leadership (tentative title), forthcoming from Abingdon.

2. William Cowper, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" (1774), in Olney Hymns (London: W. Oliver, 1779).


8. Terms like middle knowledge and counterfactuals originated in the theology of providence of the Spanish Jesuit, Luis de Molina (1535). His account of providence contrasts with the traditional interpretation over the “tightness” of the connection between what God knows and wills and what is. For the Molinist, God’s foreknowledge always encompasses alternative realities and God’s involvement in creation and history is much more continuous action and reaction than foreordained planning. Alternative futures may depend on human initiative. Two Christmastime classics convey the Molinist contribution to a theology of providence. In Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol ([Roslyn, NY: Walter J. Black, 1965], Stave 5, 88), the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come points Scrooge to the shadows of things that may be but not must be. In Frank
Capra's film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey is given the rare privilege of seeing how things would have been had he never been born (see Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, ed. by William P. Alston [Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998], 76-81). First and 2 Samuel also summon church leaders to a drama where "the shadows of things that would have been may be dispelled."

9. Epictetus provides a typically Stoic image of providence as predestination. "Remember that you are an actor in a play, which is as the playwright wants it to be. ... If he wants you to play a beggar, play even this part skillfully, or a cripple, or a public official, or a public citizen. What is yours is to play the assigned part well. But to choose it belongs to someone else" (quoted in Flint, *Divine Providence*, 19).

10. Along with the crucial questions, "Who is my Abigail?" (ch. 6) and "Who is my Nathan?" (ch. 8), it is also helpful for the church leader to ask, "Who is my Eli? Who can prevent me from foreclosing on future options? Who mediates to me the challenge of a providential God to my tendency to reduce choices to either/or? Who can keep the 'perhaps' in my grammar of faith?"


12. Edwards represents one end of the spectrum of approaches to congregational renewal; see his *The Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton* (1737). It is a posture of waiting with knowledge that renewal can happen but with no particular expectation that it will happen here and now. Charles Finney, in *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835), represents the other end of the spectrum. Renewal in congregations is a matter of choice and technique. Finney foreshadows church growth literature. Is there a third approach, in which the church waits for the Spirit to move but positions itself to receive the blessing and cooperate with the action when the Spirit does move? For an analysis of these two extremes and the suggestion of a middle way, see Peter Mason Moon, "Shall We Gather at the River? Searching for the Seeds of God's Revival of Contemporary Methodism," [D.Min. project paper, Wesley Theological Seminary, 1999].

Calling Pastor-Theologians

JOHN P. BURGESS

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas begins his book *Unleashing the Scripture* with this provocative assertion:

No task is more important than for the church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America. Let us no longer give the Bible to all children when they enter the third grade or whenever their assumed rise to Christian maturity is marked, such as eighth-grade commencements. Let us rather tell them and their parents that they are possessed by habits far too corrupt for them to be encouraged to read the Bible on their own.¹

One might argue in a similar, if less provocative, manner that the church should also take decisions about call to ministry out of the hands of individuals. No more should people come to the church and say, “I feel called to the ministry.” No more should anyone who has graduated from college and poses no imminent danger to society be able to self-select himself or herself into seminary. Rather, call to ministry should be God’s call to ministry through the church. Ministry should be a matter of what the church needs in order to be the church.

But, as Hauerwas acknowledges, the church itself can be possessed by bad habits that hinder it from rightly discerning God’s will for its life. In his estimation, we will not be able to read the Scriptures with understanding (or to worship rightly, or to participate in the Eucharist with integrity) unless we are a people who have been shaped by the way of Jesus and his practice of confession and forgiveness, hospitality, and peacefulness. Similarly, one might argue that the church will be unable rightly to authorize the call to ministry unless it is clear about its own nature and purpose and therefore about the nature and purpose of its ministry.

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Call and Identity

Yet, it is precisely the question of the church that finds no adequate answer in today's ecclesiastical world. As sociologist Robert Wuthnow has noted, North American religion is in a time of restructuring. People continue to profess belief in God but are suspicious of church doctrine. They pray more than ever but distance themselves from other traditional religious practices. They devour books about the spiritual life but are ambivalent about practicing it with others. They do not feel beholden to religious traditions and institutions but, rather, pick and choose beliefs and practices that work for them.

North Americans want to be spiritual without being religious. They seek religious resources that offer them healing and renewal and a sense of personal affirmation, but they are not ready to commit themselves to a disciplined way of life in a community of faith. They are spiritual nomads, closely guarding their freedom to wander in and out of religious communities, even as they long for a sense of community, a place in which they will feel valued and supported in their personal journey.

This stance has vast implications for the church. Almost inevitably, religious communities come to think of themselves as part of a "spiritual marketplace" in which they must compete for "customers." In such a world, the key issue for ministers, or for those considering ministry, becomes that of identity. Just what is it that a minister is supposed to be or to do? Which expectations are right and reasonable and which are more peripheral? Where should the minister focus his or her time? How does the minister sort out just what his or her call is, when the implicit answer always is, "Whatever the market requires of you"?

A church unsure of its own identity conveys a baffling range of images of ministry to its ministers and candidates for ministry. Consider the pastoral activities to which persons in my church (the Presbyterian Church [USA]) are asked to respond when seeking a ministerial position—some twenty items, ranging from corporate worship to spiritual development of members to counseling, evangelism, planning congregational life, ecumenical and interfaith activities, and administrative leadership. A candidate can (and is implicitly encouraged to) circle eight of these activities as having highest priority. Eight priorities simultaneously? Is it any wonder that too many pastors wonder how they can do it all and whether any of it matters in the end?
CALLING PASTOR-THEOLOGIANS

A look at the ads that congregations place when they have a ministerial opening is equally revealing. The Presbyterian Church is "looking for a pastor to excite our congregation ... a pastor with strengths in preaching, pastoral care, and family ministry, who will appeal to youth and children." The Presbyterian Church seeks "an engaging preacher ... a compassionate leader, a good communicator, a strong administrator, and a self-motivated, friendly person who can challenge and nurture people of all ages." Says another ad, "Our small, growing church ... needs a full-time minister who is a vibrant and versatile spiritual leader ... [and] who will nurture and attend to one-on-one needs of the congregation, exhibit a strong visibility in the congregation, and develop an active youth program." Or another, "We seek a creative team player, theologically in the center of the PC(USA), who enjoys life and is fun to be around." Pastors are supposed to be all things to all people, ready and able to attend to every need that comes down the pike, always with a smile on their faces and with nary a discouraging word.

Piety and Truth

What would it take for the church to get clear about its identity and, therefore, about the call to ministry? In the Reformed tradition, the church is best understood as a school of piety. In response to God's grace in Jesus Christ, the church has as its purpose the awakening, cultivating, and exercising of what Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). As Jonathan Edwards could write, "[T]rue religion, in great part, consists in holy affections ... [i.e., in] vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will." While Edwards and other Reformed theologians rejected the emotional excesses of the revivals, they nevertheless insisted that religion was a matter as much of the heart as of the head. By Word, Sacrament, and disciplined life together, the church seeks to shape people's deepest dispositions; and these dispositions serve as springs of transformed moral activity. In the church, people learn to grow, however slowly and incompletely, into more trusting relationships with God and with one another. They learn to practice their faith—i.e., to make it a way of life, and to exercise and strengthen it.

While right belief cannot replace these dispositions and practices, it does play a critical role in shaping them. One of the historic principles of church order of the Presbyterian Church (USA) states that
truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness. . . . And no opinion can be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it of no consequence what a man's opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty.6

In his discussion of the church in Book IV of the Institutes, John Calvin speaks of doctrine as the very soul of the church.7 He continues, "The church is called to be the faithful keeper of God's truth. . . . For by its ministry and labor God . . . feeds us with spiritual food and provides everything that makes for our salvation." In faithfully proclaiming the Word and administering the sacraments, the church sets forth God's truth and shapes itself as a peculiar people who not only grasp this truth intellectually but also take it to heart. As Calvin puts it in his famous definition of faith, God calls us to "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."8

God's truth is existential truth—i.e., truth for us (Luther's pro nobis). It is truth that cuts us to the quick and shows us who we really are—lonely and lost, yet loved by God. In Calvin's thinking, the pastor plays a key role in promulgating this truth; hence, the tradition in American Presbyterian churches of referring to the minister as a teaching elder. As Calvin says, "Nothing fosters mutual love more fittingly than for men to be bound together with this one bond: one is appointed pastor to teach the rest, and those bidden to be pupils receive the common teaching from one mouth." (Note also in the Reformed tradition the key role of ruling elders who take regular measure of the congregation's growth in piety.)

Calling Pastor-Theologians

If the goal of the church is not simply dissemination of information about God but proclamation of life-changing truth from God, then the minister is not so much the academic expert who confronts the community of faith from without but the prophet and pastor whom the community raises up from within. The minister is the one charged by the community of faith to remind it of the most difficult questions of life and death and, therefore, of its existence before God. On behalf of the community, the minister will ask again and again how its members (and those beyond the church, as well)
might come to have their lives reoriented by and towards the living God.

In this school of piety, the minister must be a pastor-theologian. As theologian, the minister represents the theological tradition and its efforts to hear the Scriptures faithfully. The church needs the best thinking of the past—those insights that have proven to be of enduring value in reorienting people's lives toward God. As pastor-theologian, however, the minister understands that the Scriptures and the theological tradition must speak to people's lives today. God's truth can be true for them only if they develop the capacity to hear God's living Word for themselves and on behalf of the community of faith. The pastor-theologian leads people in making connections between belief and practice, between the wisdom of the past and the practice of a living piety in the present. The pastor-theologian is not only an authority but an authorizer—i.e., one who authoritatively directs the church to be the church, the community that listens faithfully for God's living Word and lives it out in transformed dispositions and practices.

Call to ministry thus involves the church in a process of discerning who is called to serve as pastor-theologians and how such persons can be rightly guided and encouraged. The church will be capable of such discernment only to the degree that its own life is deeply shaped by a pastoral, theological discourse that is oriented by Scripture and the theological tradition and engaged in by every member of the church. Ministers themselves play the key role in shaping this kind of ecclesiastical culture.

However, ministers can play this role only if they are alive theologically and remain challenged in their thinking. They must always be making connections anew between belief and practice in their own lives and must be engaged continually in prayer, theological reflection, and practices of piety, both by themselves individually and among themselves corporately. Even as they seek to lead the community of faith to fulfill its theological vocation, they need a sense of being supported in their own theological vocation—not only by the congregations they serve but also by the church's larger institutional structures. The church that authorizes their call must also provide for them to gather with their colleagues in ministry for mutual encouragement in piety and theological reflection.

These colleagues will be first of all other ministers. In Geneva, Calvin began the Venerable Company of Pastors to meet weekly for study of Scripture and theological reflection and debate.
The Venerable Company of Pastors was a disciplined community. Its meetings were more than conversations about abstractions, for their purpose was to encourage pastors to grow in love of God and thereby to grow in faith, hope, and love of neighbors. All of this was for the sake of the gospel—its proclamation, reception, and fulfillment throughout God's creation.

Similarly, the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany organized theological convents. Ministers in a given geographic area would meet regularly for prayer and theological reflection in order to remain firmly rooted in their Christian and ministerial identity during a time of great turmoil and danger. No less today do ministers need to gather with one another in covenant communities in which they can practice their core identity as pastor-theologians and can learn to resist the cultural pressures to become mere ecclesiastical service-providers.

These communities of mutual encouragement and accountability would be strengthened further if pastors met not only among themselves but also with judicatory officials and seminary teachers. In the Reformed tradition, the church's teaching office belongs to all three of these parties. Seminary professors are not beholden simply to the academic guild; they teach to and on behalf of the church. Judicatory officials are more than bureaucratic administrators: they teach the larger church through the resources that they prepare, the initiatives that they sponsor, and the positions that they take on behalf of the church. Together, ministers, seminary professors, and judicatory officials need to strengthen one another in their identity as theologians of and on behalf of the church if the church as a whole is to observe its theological vocation.

Conclusion

If the church wants to think clearly about the call to ministry, it must recover clarity about its own life as a school of piety, in which attention to
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the church's inherited faith leads people to a deeper capacity to think theologically about belief and practice. As a school of piety, the church needs ministers who have the gifts and the preparation to serve as skilled pastor-theologians. Only an ecclesiastical culture in which ministers, seminary professors, and judicatory officials recover their shared teaching office can ensure that women and men are called into ministry not simply because they claim a secret call of God but because the church has called them publicly to the pastoral-theological work of Word, Sacrament, and the shaping of life together.

Let the church from now on call people into ministry who have one clear purpose: to be better theologians than their seminary professors, to be better shapers of church life than any judicatory official, and to do these things with a pastoral sensitivity and wisdom that can teach seminary professors and judicatory officials alike.

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Endnotes

1. Stanley Hauerwas, Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15.
8. Ibid., 1024 (4.1.10).
9. Ibid., 551 (3.2.7).
10. Ibid., 1054 (4.3.1).
The Political Image as the Basis for Wesleyan Ecological Ethics

LAURA A. BARTELS

Over the course of his lifetime John Wesley published position statements on a wide variety of topics. His strongly held convictions on theological matters such as the nature of justification and sanctification are well documented. He also wrote about social issues, including the injustice of slavery and poverty. This proclivity to comment on matters of justice is a tradition carried on by current followers of John Wesley, who seek to extend Wesley’s writings into contemporary situations. Their desire to address social problems from a Wesleyan perspective is often thwarted, however, because Wesley did not propose solutions for many of the questions that currently perplex us.

The number of scholars writing on Wesleyan ecological ethics, in spite of the fact that Wesley did not write such an ethic, serves as one illustration of this quandary. There are many who have tried to piece together a Wesleyan response to the current environmental crisis. Theodore Runyon, for example, admits Wesley did not directly address the issue of pollution or animal rights. However, this admission does not stop Runyon from looking for clues to the position Wesley might have taken on these matters.

He gives several reasons for appropriating Wesley’s theology in this way. First, he thinks the severity of the problem cries out for a response; and, second, he is convinced Wesley’s theology is still relevant for today. In order to demonstrate this continuing relevance, Runyon lays out the framework for an environmental stewardship model constructed from statements made in Wesley’s sermons. This article investigates this model and asks in what sense it can contribute to Wesleyan ecological ethics.

Runyon’s model is based on Wesley’s writings about the political image. In the sermon “The New Birth,” Wesley states that humanity was created to reflect the image of God in three ways: the natural image, the political image, and the moral image. We were created to be spiritual beings with perfect understanding and freedom of will, beings who experienced nothing but happiness and pleasure. This is our natural image. We were to be holy and...
righteous, full of love, justice, and mercy. This is our moral image.

We are also intended to be governors of the earth and to exercise dominion. This is our political image. Albert Outler cites Isaac Watts as Wesley’s source for this three-in-one understanding of the imago Dei.7 According to Watts’s interpretation of Gen. 1:26, God originally gave humanity dominion over the creatures in order to prevent the animals from harming them.8 Wesley did not echo this aspect of Watts’s view; but, like Watts, he did equate the political image with humanity’s role as “lord and governor over all the lower creation.”9

In his sermon on the new birth, Wesley does not explain what he means by “being governors” and “having dominion.” So Runyon turns to another sermon, “The General Deliverance,” to elaborate on the function of the political image. In this sermon, “having dominion” is tied to the idea of being a blessing. The animals were to show humanity obedience and humanity was to reciprocate by being a “channel of conveyance” between God and the animals.10 Through this human channel God’s blessings were conveyed to the other creatures. Specifically, Wesley identifies four such blessings: moral goodness, beauty, pleasure, and immortality.11

In characterizing dominion as obedience, Wesley introduces a mutuality of relationship usually absent from the word dominion. In this relationship the animals show humanity obedience and in return receive God’s blessings through humanity. Human dominion cannot be viewed in isolation from the relationship with other creatures. According to Wesley, humans have dominion as long as animals show them obedience and as long as humanity reciprocates by communicating God’s blessings to the animals in response to that obedience.

Runyon uses Wesley’s statements on the political image as the basis for an environmental stewardship ethic. For Runyon, being created in the political image as God’s governors of the earth means “humanity is endowed with the intellect to comprehend and defend” nature’s ecological balance.12 With this intellect we can maintain order in the natural world. True, this ability has been diminished by “human corruption and selfishness,” but the political image can be renewed by God through faith.13

There are two problematic claims in Runyon’s interpretation. First, recent scientific findings regarding the complex interdependencies in nature have led some environmental experts to dispute the claim that humanity has the intellect to understand, maintain, and be good stewards of the intricate
web of relationships that make up nature's delicate balance. If Runyon is right about Wesley's understanding of the political image, then these criticisms need to be addressed if Wesley is to be truly relevant for today.

In his book *Loving Nature*, James Nash lays out the problems with environmental ethics that emphasize the "management" of nature:

> I and many others, however, have negative reactions to some descriptions, for instance, caretaker, gardener, and especially manager—all of which have been associated with anthropocentric abuse and the strictly instrumental evaluation of nature. Management is a concept that makes sense contextually, for instance, in agriculture, tree-farming, and wild habitat restoration. But it is a wildly arrogant notion when applied universally to describe human relationships with the whole biosphere.\textsuperscript{14}

Nash acknowledges humanity's ability to order certain natural systems toward a desired human end. However, he strongly resists the notion that such an ability can be exercised in all cases. In general, the scale and complexity of the earth's natural systems exceed human comprehension. Unfortunately, many calls for "stewardship" are based on just such an assumption of human ingenuity. This flawed assumption creates the impression that humanity can somehow muddle its way through the responsibility of taking care of the earth even without the knowledge necessary for such an undertaking. Experts fear this ignorant meddling could continue to be disastrous for the earth.

Runyon's second problematic claim is that the political image can be renewed. There is nothing in Wesley's writings to suggest that the political image is renewed by God through faith. Wesley did write about the renewal of the moral image but never that of the political image. In *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, Wesley, quoting Watts, writes:

> But that part of the "image of God" which remained after the fall, and remains in all men to this day, is the natural image of God, namely, the spiritual nature and immortality of the soul not excluding the political image of God, or a degree of dominion over the creatures still remaining. But the moral image of God is lost and defaced, or else it could not be said to be "renewed."\textsuperscript{15}

This statement implies that the moral image can be renewed but that only
a degree of the political image and our original ability to exercise dominion remains after the Fall. There is no mention of the political image's being renewed along with the moral image.

Further, Wesley makes no mention of the political image's being renewed in the New Creation. In "The General Deliverance," Wesley conjectures that in the New Creation animals would no longer need humanity as a "channel of conveyance" for God's blessings. Instead, in the final state animals would have the capacity to know, love, and enjoy God directly, without human mediation.14

In the same sermon, Wesley also describes the extent to which humanity has dominion and conveys blessings. After the Fall, it is the animals' "irrational appetites" that have "full dominion over them" and not human beings.17 Thus, instead of obeying humanity the animals actively rebel against human dominion:

The far greater part of them flee from him, studiously avoid his hated presence. The most of the rest set him at open defiance, yea, destroy him if it be in their power. A few only, those we commonly term domestic animals, retain more or less of their original disposition, and (through the mercy of God) love him still and pay obedience to him.18

It is clear from this quotation that very little of humanity's original dominion remains after the Fall. Most of the animals now view human beings as the enemy and do not show us obedience. They would sooner flee from a human being than be obedient to one. Humanity only retains dominion over the domestic animals, i.e., cats, dogs, and livestock.

The second component of our political image—the communication of the blessings of goodness, beauty, pleasure, and immortality—has been completely lost in the Fall.19 According to Wesley, few examples of goodness remain amongst the creatures, only examples of cruelty and fierceness. Their once-beautiful features are now distorted through the experience of physical pain. Their pleasures in life are few as they are beset by pain, disease, inclement weather, and human violence. In addition, they have lost their immortality and are now subject to death.20

Can this political image, the little we retain after the Fall, serve as the basis for an ecological ethic? What does "being more of a curse than a blessing" or "having dominion over cats, dogs, and barnyard animals"
contribute to this field? If one wants an ethic that celebrates humanity’s ability to manage the natural world, then Wesley’s conception of the political image has very little to contribute. Wesley’s understanding of the political image will not support such a model. However, such a view of human inability and ineffectiveness is humbling; and as Nash has argued, humility is an indispensable virtue in any ecological ethic.21

In Nash’s use of the term, humility is defined as “cautious caring” rather than “humiliation,” “subservience,” “self-abasement,” or “self-effacement.” Humility requires not a low view of humanity but rather a realistic one. It is “caring” in the sense that it considers all creatures, even the nonhuman, to be worthy of moral regard. It is “cautious” because it accepts the limits of human understanding.22

Humility reminds us that our “knowledge is fragmented, our ingenuity is limited, and our moral character is ambiguous.”23 Rather than confidently proclaiming our ability to take care of the earth, a humble, fallen, unrestoreable political image promotes the acknowledgment of limitations and the practice of self-restraint. The cultivation of this virtue has more to offer the current debate in ecological ethics than any claim of human intellectual ability. Furthermore, given Wesley’s own statements on the “imperfection of human knowledge,” a humble political image, I would argue, is more Wesleyan in character than the confident political image proposed by Runyon.24

While I cannot agree with the implications Runyon draws from Wesley’s writings on the political image. I do see possibilities in what he says about the renewal of our moral image—our original ability to reflect God’s love, righteousness, and holiness. As a result of this renewal we are able to sense God’s presence in creation. Runyon thinks this renewed sense of God’s omnipresence will cause humans “joyfully to take up the spiritual-physical disciplines and sacrifices necessary not only to protect the earth but to keep covenant with generations yet unborn.”25

For this part of his argument Runyon primarily draws from Sermon #23, “Discourse III on the Sermon on the Mount”—a sermon that reflects, in part, on Matt. 5:8, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Wesley defines the pure in heart as those “who are purified through faith in the blood of Jesus from every unholy affection; who being cleansed from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfect holiness in the loving fear of God.”26 Wesley uses the phrases pure in heart, Christian Perfection, and entire sanctification interchangeably to characterize the highest degree of faith attainable in this life.
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According to Wesley's interpretation of Matt. 5:8, the pure in heart sense the omnipresent God in nature:

But the great lesson which our blessed Lord inculcates here, and which he illustrates by this example, is that God is in all things, and that we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature; that we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God, which indeed is a kind of practical atheism; but with a true magnificence of thought survey heaven and earth and all that is therein as contained by God in the hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe.\(^27\)

This "great lesson" exposes a reversal in the original created order. Whereas humanity was originally intended to convey God's blessings to the creatures, now the creatures are reflecting God back to us. Our presence was supposed to give the animals a knowledge of God, but now the creation is revealing God to us. Moreover, this dramatic reversal has ethical implications for the way humanity relates to the rest of creation.

Wesley's ethical application of this lesson is found in the warning against practical atheism—the pure in heart do not use or look upon anything in the natural world as separate from God. To unthinkingly utilize something, to treat it as mere matter put here for human consumption, is contrary to the faith of one who is pure in heart. Instead, their sense of God's immanence in all things should cause them to treat the natural world with respect.

There is a similarity here between Wesley's understanding of what it means to be pure in heart and Nash's statement that humility "regards all creatures as worthy of moral consideration."\(^28\) The Wesleyan concepts of the humbled political image and the renewed moral image lead humanity to the same conclusion: the sphere of Christian concern extends out and encompasses all of God's creation.

Unlike the triumphal statements regarding the political image, Runyon's interpretation of the renewal of the moral image seems to hold more promise for ecological ethics. This is especially the case when this understanding of the moral image is combined with a deeper insight into Wesley's statements on the political image. The development of a Wesleyan spirituality and ethic that humbly accepts human limitations and sees a respect for the natural world as one characteristic of the highest degree of
faith would be an important contribution to the field of ecological ethics.

Runyon’s endeavor to show the continuing relevance of Wesley’s theology reminds us of the theological wealth of our heritage. In the case of his attempt to develop an environmental stewardship ethic, this project would have been strengthened by a closer examination of Wesley’s reliance on sources like Isaac Watts. Richard Heitzenrater’s advice is worth noting at this point: “The historian’s task is to understand the past on its own terms before interpreting or appropriating its meaning for the present.”29 A better understanding of the function of the political image within Wesley’s anthropology may have kept Runyon from over-estimating humanity’s ability to manage the natural world. It also could have made the ethic more relevant for today by emphasizing the role of humility in Wesley’s theology.

John Wesley’s theological teachings represent an intellectual inheritance that still holds relevance for United Methodists. However, before using Wesley’s work to support a contemporary position like humanity’s relationship with the natural world, one must first locate him within his own intellectual context. Failure to follow such a methodology opens up the possibility of using Wesley’s corpus as a proof-text. Without this kind of internal integrity such an appropriation of Wesley’s writings will lessen the external validity of Wesleyan and Methodist scholarship for the wider Christian community.

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Endnotes

1. I am grateful to the participants of the Point Loma Nazarene University Conference, ‘God of Nature and of Grace: Wesleyan Perspectives on Creation’ for helping me to further my ideas on the subject of Wesleyan ecological ethics, and especially to James Nash for his helpful comments on an early version of this article.

4. Ibid., 6, 168, 200-07.
5. Ibid., 205.
7. Ibid., note 5.
9. Compare Watts, 189, with Wesley 2:188, par. 1.1.
11. Ibid., 441, par. 15.
13. Ibid., 202, 205.
17. Ibid., 2:443, par. II.2.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 2:442, par. II.1.
20. Ibid., 2:443-44, par. II.3-6.
27. Ibid., 516, 517, par. 1.11.
Who Should Be Allowed to Preside at the Eucharist?

J O H N  E. H A R N I S H

Without a doubt, John Wesley and Francis Asbury would have found this to be an odd question, the answer to which was so obvious it hardly needed discussion: it was the ordained priest/elder/presbyter. In England, John Wesley assumed that the people called Methodists would receive the sacrament on a regular basis in the parishes of the Church of England under the ministry of the duly ordained Anglican priest. Wesley's itinerant preachers and class leaders were not sacramental celebrants but evangelists and workers sent to reform the church with no intention of replacing the properly ordained priesthood. From the time Francis Asbury arrived in America in 1771 until the Christmas Conference of 1784, he restrained the Methodists from administering the sacrament without an ordained Anglican priest. Obviously, this became more difficult as the Revolution unfolded and British priests fled the country. At the continued on page 303

M A R G A R E T  A N N  C R A I N

This question must be addressed from the point of view of mission: What best serves the mission of The United Methodist Church? We Methodists were organized for mission. John Wesley created a system of leadership that could reach out to people all over England (and eventually the colonies) while remaining connected and accountable to one another. The purpose of the system was clear: through Christ to bring persons into closer relationship with the saving God, with one another, and with creation. Our clergy itinerate in order to provide leadership for the "mission outposts" that are our congregations.1

The missional method of Methodism draws deeply on the means of grace (one of which is partaking in the Eucharist), which empower persons for faithfulness and discipleship. Therefore, I believe that any exploration of how we offer the Eucharist must also include a discussion of our mission continued on page 306
same time, Methodist class meetings and congregations were spreading rapidly and the need for the sacraments became acute. One of the compelling reasons for Wesley's ordinations for America and the ordinations at the Christmas Conference was the urgent need for sacramental administration. Dennis Campbell notes that "in 1784 there were 14,998 Methodists in the United States being served by 83 non-ordained itinerant Methodist preachers."\(^1\)

Wesley and Asbury affirmed the longstanding tradition of the church that there could be no sacramental administration without ordination. However, even before the Christmas Conference, the issue was contested in the Methodist movement. It came to a crisis in Fluvanna, Virginia, in 1779, when a group of Methodist lay preachers decided to ordain themselves and grant themselves sacramental authority. The next year the regular conference persuaded them to refrain from administering the sacrament until Mr. Wesley could provide a solution, but this instance indicates the conflicted situation and the urgent need for ordained leadership.\(^2\)

It was only after the Bishop of London refused Wesley's request to ordain Methodist preachers from England as priests to serve the Methodists in America that Wesley carried out the ordinations himself. In 1783, he noted that in America "for some hundred miles together, there is none to either baptize or to administer the Lord's Supper. Here, therefore, my scruples are at an end; and I conceived myself at full liberty, as I violate no order, and invade no man's right, by appointing and sending labourers into the harvest."\(^3\) And so, on September 1, 1784, he ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey as deacons, and then as elders. He also laid hands on Thomas Coke and named him as a superintendent with authority to ordain.\(^4\)

I share this jaunt in Methodist history simply to say that from our beginnings we have affirmed the historic principle that sacramental administration requires ordination, but from the beginning we have struggled with its implementation. The most obvious example in the church today is the sacramental authority granted to local pastors through a license. In this case, the need of congregations without an elder to receive the sacrament has driven us to make what I would call a "missional exception" to the principle of no administration without ordination. Our pragmatic desire for effective ministry allows for nonordained local pastors to celebrate the sacrament in a local setting for a limited time under the authorization of...
an elder. Since 1996 the issue has become even more complex, as we now have *ordained* ministers (deacons in full connection) without sacramental authority in addition to *unordained* ministers (local pastors) who do. Suffice it to say, our journey has brought us to the place where Wesley’s simple answer does not fully address the reality. So, what should be our response?

1. We should begin by affirming the basic principle that sacramental administration is entrusted to the elder by ordination. This is in keeping with the broad ecumenical consensus as represented in the World Council of Churches’ document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Sacramental administration is not a “right” to be claimed but a “rite” of the church entrusted to certain individuals through ordination. The question is not “who should be allowed to preside?” but “who has been entrusted with this task on behalf of the whole church?” For United Methodists, the answer is the elder in full connection.

2. We should affirm the ministry of the local pastor as a missional response to an immediate need, extending the ministry of the ordained elder where an elder is not present. I am sure we will continue to affirm the valuable ministry of local pastors, and the evidence suggests their numbers will increase in the future. I celebrate that. However, we must be clear that this is a *local* ministry, limited by both time and place and functioning under the authority of an elder (usually the district superintendent). The local pastor is the denomination’s missional response to the needs of specific congregations for pastoral care in the absence of an elder—and this includes the sacramental ministry. This pragmatic response is characteristic of Methodism all the way back to Wesley’s use of lay preachers and his decision to ordain Thomas Coke.

3. We should affirm the distinct callings of the deacon and the elder. In creating the office of the deacon in full connection, the church made an important statement about the diversity of callings that are authorized through ordination. Ordination as a deacon is no longer a stepping-stone to elder’s orders but is intended to be distinct from the elder, focusing on ministries of service in the world. If deacons are granted sacramental authority, the result will be the loss of a distinct identity for the deacon. They will be seen once again as “junior elders,” and the opportunity to create a new order of ministry will be lost. The roles of the elder and deacon are made clear as they gather together at the Table with separate functions and are able to model that for the congregation.
4. Elders need to reaffirm their identity as sacramental ministers of the church. All too often, ordination to Service, Word, and Order becomes the dominant model for the ministry of the elder as he or she functions as the pastor/preacher/administrator of a local church. Elders need to see all of their work as an expression of their ordination to Sacrament and carry that witness into whatever form of ministry they assume. When elders are appointed to ministries outside the local church, even though they may not preside at the Table on a regular basis, they represent the church’s identity rooted in the sacrament. Our ministry of Service, Word, and Order should grow out of our ordination to Sacrament.

Thus, to restate my central point: The question is not “who should be allowed to preside?” but rather “who has been entrusted with the task for the sake of the whole church?” And the answer is the ordained elder in full connection.

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Endnotes

4. For a full discussion, see Harnish, *The Orders of Ministry in The United Methodist Church*.
PRESIDING AT THE EUCHARIST

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as a church. Too often, our conversations have focused on sacramental privilege or authority rather than on the missional intent of Methodism.

Holy Communion is a celebration of God’s gifts of creation and salvation, drawing us closer to God and one another through its table fellowship and focusing our lives on discipleship for God’s kingdom. Through the gift and mystery of the eucharistic meal, we are connected to the resurrected Christ. Recognizing the power in this sacrament, churches have guarded against misuse by designating only the called and tested to preside at the Table. Yet, we recently expanded the guard to address missional imperatives. Typically, in current United Methodist practice, only ordained elders preside at the eucharistic table; but the Book of Discipline permits licensed local pastors—who are not ordained—to administer the sacraments. The reason is clearly missional: licensed local pastors are a vital missional link serving congregations.

United Methodists understand that faith is never just about one’s personal piety; faith is always about joining one’s relationship with God through Christ to life in the world. So, at the close of our eucharistic meal, we pray, “We give thanks for this holy mystery in which you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may ... give ourselves to others.” The mystery should flow through us and our lives to the world. We must remember that at its heart, the Eucharist is a mystery of God. We do not control it. The invitation to the Table in our Book of Worship makes this clear: “Christ our Lord invites to his table...” God’s self-giving love, promising transformation and new life, gives the sacrament its efficacy.

We take the sacrament, expecting, as service of Word and Table IV states, “that we may walk in newness of life, may grow into his likeness, and may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.” We expect that people rise from the Table changed. Withholding the ritual from those in the world who hunger for divine grace and new life is antithetical to the mission of The United Methodist Church to reach out to all who desire a closer walk with Christ.

Therefore, I argue that because deacons are especially called and ordained to connect the gracious promises of God to the world, they should be empowered to offer the Eucharist in gatherings of the body of Christ in the midst of their missional work. Deacons are called to lead the whole church in its service (diakonia) in the world. Deacons link the worshiping congregation and Christ’s mission to the world. While an
ordained representative of the church and appointed to a congregation, deacons often spend the bulk of their time outside the walls of the church. Therefore, deacons are in a unique position to reach out in mission to those who desire a closer walk with Christ.

The work of diakonia is an extension of the congregation's (and the whole connection's) ministry. As an ordained representative of the church, the deacon extends the Word through incarnational leadership. For instance, a deacon may be working for an agency that deals with toxic waste or may be running a shelter for homeless women. Or he or she may be teaching persons who are hearing impaired or may be going door-to-door to connect immigrants with the services they need. Or the deacon may be helping congregations to support workers who are not paid a fair wage and who do not have health insurance.

These deacons are ordained ministers of The United Methodist Church and accountable to the annual conference. Therefore, empowering them to offer the eucharistic feast in the midst of their missional service is an extension of the denomination's ministry. Those whom the annual conference has deemed to be worthy of ordination and full conference membership can surely be trusted to respect the power of the sacrament, and the danger in abusing it, as they offer the Meal in their ministry context to those who hunger for the gifts of bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ.

This practice is in keeping with the historic practices of the church, where deacons extended the gifts of the eucharistic table to the needy. Oftentimes, it is the deacon who ministers to the persons who are hungering for the transforming and healing grace of God. More often than not, these people are found in prisons, homeless shelters, or in the military. Many of them feel that they are not welcome in church because of their language, their social class, or their addictions. For them, the opportunity to reconnect with Christ and with the church may come through the power and mystery of sharing spiritual food at the eucharistic meal. And Scripture promises that where two or three are gathered, Christ is present. Why, then, would we not want the deacon, whose ministry represents The United Methodist Church and contributes to its mission, to offer the Holy Meal to those who are most hungry?

I propose that bishops should be given the authority to empower deacons to offer the Eucharist, where appropriate, for the sake of the mission of the church. Deacons who are chaplains in prisons, hospitals,
and the military should be authorized to offer Holy Communion to the suffering, weary, and spiritually hungry persons with whom they are in ministry. Deacons who are in social services should be authorized to offer the Meal to those who are spiritually hungry and who gather as the body of Christ. Deacons who are teachers should be authorized to preside at the Table for a class or retreat that has become a covenant community and that wishes to celebrate the sacrament together. Where it serves and extends the mission of the church, deacons should be empowered to extend the eucharistic table.

I believe in God’s abundant grace. I believe that there is grace enough for multiple settings for the Holy Meal. I recognize its power and mystery, yet I believe that we can ensure that those who are fully ordained and accountable to the annual conference will preside at the Table with humility and care. Aren’t we in danger of incurring God’s judgment if we are so stingy with the Eucharist that we restrict the mission of Christ?

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Endnotes

5. Ibid., 35, emphasis added.
6. Ibid., 49-50.
Advent is the beginning of the church’s year. Unlike the celebration of the new year on January 1, when it is uncertain what the new year will bring, we begin Advent knowing the end of the story. During Advent we look back at the promises of the Old Testament prophets that God would send a messenger to bring salvation to the people. We also look forward at the beginning of Advent with the knowledge that Christ triumphed over sin. Advent reminds us that we live between what was fulfilled in Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection and what will be in the days ahead.

In each of the Advent texts from the Old Testament below, we are given a glimpse into the state of God’s people through the voices of the prophets. The prophets speak the anger of God. The anger of God speaks truth to the people. It is the truth of their injustice, corruption of worship, and murder and of the systems of oppression that pervaded their living. But God’s anger is not the last word. The voicing of God’s anger through the prophets is the beginning of the possibility that God’s people will turn around and return to a right relationship with God.

Advent is most often thought of as a time to prepare for the birth of the Messiah. The prophets remind us that this preparation includes the whole community. In each of the Old Testament selections for Advent, the prophets are speaking to the whole community, not just to individuals. The community must reflect on its life together and ask itself some hard questions. Are there ways that our communities of faith are “exiled” from our true relationship with God? Does our worship honor God? Do our actions reflect our commitments to justice and mercy? It is important for the preacher to reflect on these texts in such a way that the congregation can hear both the words of judgment and the words of hope.

In order for the text to speak to us, it is important to understand the historical setting of each passage. However, the voice of the text is not the only voice in the conversation. It is critical for the interpreters—the preacher
and the congregation—to add their voices to the voice of the text. With this in mind, I offer with each commentary some “entry points” into the conversation between text and interpreter as a way to stimulate a fruitful exchange.

November 30, 2003—First Sunday of Advent

Jer. 33:14-16; Ps. 25:1-10; 1 Thess. 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

The verses from Jeremiah 33 are a statement of the promise of God’s faithfulness in the midst of suffering. Jeremiah prophesied in Jerusalem from the end of the period of the monarchy through the fall of the kingdom of Judah, at a time when the people were without hope. Judah had been conquered by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. The Babylonians overthrew the Assyrians in 612 B.C.E., after the Assyrians had ruled the Ancient Near East for nearly two centuries. The people of Judah were in exile not only from their land but also from their culture. The nation was destroyed (Jer. 33:7); their world was in chaos. In the midst of this bad news Jeremiah tells the people, “Give thanks to the LORD of hosts, for the LORD is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!” (Jer. 33:11b). For a people in exile, this is a much-needed reminder of God’s steadfast care.

Then, in 33:14-16, Jeremiah announces these words of the promise of God’s salvation: Judah will be saved. There will be justice and righteousness in the land. Jerusalem will be a place of safety for the people. Jeremiah doesn’t say when this will happen but trusts that the promise God made will be fulfilled. In a land held in the grip of death and destruction, Jeremiah announces that a “righteous Branch” (v. 15) will spring forth from David. This righteous branch will bring justice and righteousness back to the people of Israel. Israel and Judah will be restored. These words of promise are spoken in the face of the imminent destruction of Jerusalem—an event Jeremiah had prophesied forty years earlier. Even so, for Jeremiah, this calamity is surrounded by the promise that God would restore Israel and Judah.

The Gospel reading also focuses on God’s promise to bring justice, righteousness, and redemption. There is no hint in these verses of the “sweet baby Jesus.” Like Jeremiah, the Gospel writer announces that the beginning of God’s new reign will be marked by destruction (Luke 21:20-24).

It will not be easy for the preacher to stay focused on the ambiguity—the paradoxes—of these texts. There is so much pressure on the first Sunday of Advent to sing Christmas carols, to jump into the celebration of Christmas before we have listened for the word of God from the prophets. The chal-
lence for the preacher is to identify the ways in which the words of the
prophet Jeremiah and the Gospel writer have meaning in our contemporary
situation. Over the past two years, all of us have faced the destruction of
many of our long-held beliefs and of our sense of safety. With the collapse
of the Twin Towers came the sense for many of us of being exiled. The United
States has gone to war with Iraq and in the minds of many Americans, we
have "triumphed." But will we feel safe again?

Jeremiah forces us to look at things the way they really are. The people
were in exile. Jerusalem would be destroyed. There is no denying the pain
of their situation. Jeremiah doesn’t gloss over the realities of their experi­
ence. Nor does he make false promises about the future. There will be
further trials—and through all of them God will be faithful in fulfilling the
promise. In these uncertain times, do we have the courage to see things
the way they really are? Do we have the courage to trust God’s promises?

December 7, 2003—Second Sunday of Advent


It is helpful to rehearse the situation that leads up to the text for this Sunday.
While not the last of the prophetic books to be written, Malachi is last in the
order of books in our Old Testament. His message clearly states the hope
that awaits the righteous and the curse that awaits the wicked. Israel has
dishonored God. They have offered polluted food on the altar. They have
brought sacrifices to the altar that were taken by violence. Would you treat
your governor this way? In every other nation, God’s name is respected, but
not so in Israel (1:6-14).

Malachi identifies the priests as the culprits and the objects of God’s
wrath. He reminds them of the covenant with the tribe of Levi. Because
they have been unfaithful, God will make them “despised and abased
before all the people” (2:9a). He then addresses the sins of the people. They
have married people who have other gods and have been faithless. Because
of divorce the people can’t gain acceptance for their offerings (2:10-16).

There is an interesting exchange in 2:17. The prophet says that the
people have wearied God with their words. When wanting to know how
they have done so, Malachi responds: they did so by saying, “All who do evil
are good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.” Or by asking,
“Where is the God of justice?” The list of evildoers includes those who
oppress the weak or swear falsely and the sorcerers and adulterers (3:5).
This brings us to the text for this Sunday. It is a word of hope in the midst of the charges made against the people. God is about to send God's messenger to the Temple. This messenger will refine and purify God's people "until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness" (3:3b). The Lectionary reading ends with v. 4; however, to get the true import of this reading, we need to include v. 5.

In v. 5 we are reminded that God "will draw near to you for judgment," establishing justice by punishing those who have denied their relationship with God. In response to the people's question "Where is the God of justice?" the prophet responds that this God is coming soon. God's messenger will restore the purity of worship and establish justice.

This is a powerful Advent text. It speaks of hope and the promise that God will come to save the people. And yet, in order to be ready the people must confess their unrighteousness and be purified. It is clear that the prophet understands the temptation of the powerful to abuse the weak. The God of justice requires that this be turned around.

It is important to note that the restoration of the people begins with worship. The people have been lazy in their worship. They have not brought the best animals for sacrifice. As the preacher plans for Advent worship, it will be important to include opportunities for meaningful confession and pardon as a way of preparing for the Christmas celebration. Confession is both communal and individual.

We desire justice and plead to God to bring justice to the earth. And yet, often we are blind to the ways that justice is denied and to our participation in systems of injustice and oppression. It is clear from this text that the messenger that God is sending will bring change—change for all people, not just for those who are guilty of perverting the worship of God.

The preacher may want to couple this text with the Gospel reading. John the Baptist's appearance is like that of the prophets. He announces that he has come to prepare the way for God's salvation. For Malachi and Luke, preparing for Advent requires evaluation of our relationship with God through our worship and of our relationships with our community.

December 14, 2003—Third Sunday of Advent

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

The text for the third Sunday of Advent is a powerful hymn of salvation and praise to God. This hymn must be read in the larger context of the book as a
Zephaniah's ministry is associated with the reign of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.E.). According to 1:1, he is a descendent of Hezekiah. Thus, he may have been trained under the influence of the same teachers who taught Josiah. Josiah led Judah in a reformation of their religious alliances during the time of Assyrian rule. With the death of the Assyrian king, the opportunity came for Josiah to rid Judah of the Assyrian influence.

According to scholars, Zephaniah spoke his prophecies before the completion of Josiah's reforms. If so, it is possible that Zephaniah was influential in stimulating the reformation that Josiah led. In speaking to his own people, Zephaniah sounds an alarm to the complacent citizens of Judah. "[God] will stretch out [God's] hand against Judah, and against all of the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (1:4). The day of the Lord is at hand. For the people of Judah, it would be a day of judgment, for they have engaged in idolatry. Thus, Jerusalem will face destruction. In God's day of wrath, there will be no escape for Jerusalem or, for that matter, for the entire earth (1:17-18). And so, the prophet pleads with the people to submit themselves to divine judgment.

The reading for today is in distinct contrast to this message of doom and destruction. The final verse of the book (3:20) seems to suggest that the people were no longer in Jerusalem. This leads one to suspect that the proclamation of salvation in the book's final verses was probably added during the Babylonian exile or even during the postexilic period. What is clear is that Zephaniah's prophecies were right: God had punished the people and was about to save them.

The assurances in these verses are magnificent. "The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies" (3:15a). "I will remove disaster from you . . . I will deal with your oppressors . . . and I will save the lame and gather the outcast" (3:18-19). And, "I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth" (3:19b).

The prophet is unequivocal in describing God's anguish over the sinfulness of the people. God is a God of justice and will bring justice to the people. Yet, the prophet is just as unequivocal in announcing their salvation: "I will bring you home . . . I will make you renowned and praised . . . I will restore your fortunes" (3:20).

Advent is a time of waiting; but it is an active waiting, not a passive waiting. Active waiting means carefully listening to the word of God, attending to injustice in the world and longing for the day of the Lord. The preacher would do well to attend to the calls to Jerusalem in the early
chapters of the book as a way of gaining clarity about the situation his or her congregation faces today.

In the Gospel lesson, the Baptizer tells us that the way to the experience of salvation is through repentance. The fruits of repentance are the behaviors of right living with our neighbors. If you have two coats, give one to someone who has none. If you have more food than you need, give some to those who have nothing to eat. This is the preparation that leads us through Advent to the joyous celebration of Christmas.

December 21, 2003—Fourth Sunday of Advent
Mic. 5:2-5a; Luke 1:47-55; Heb. 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45
Micah was a product of the country. Some scholars think he was a farmer. His writings are filled with contempt for the oppressors who are ruling the cities. He understood the suffering of the poor. He was a contemporary of Amos and Hosea and a reformer at a time of great turmoil. Like Amos and Hosea, Micah is clear that purity of worship is critical to the restoration of right relationship with God. Micah shares both words of judgment and the promise that God would forgive the people and restore the promise of salvation.

Micah sees the great injustices that would result in the nation’s demise. In chapter 1, he announces the destruction upon Samaria and the punishment of Jerusalem. He identifies the many ways that the people have strayed from the justice that God requires. He then identifies the evils of society that have stirred the wrath of Yahweh. The rich have stolen land from the poor; women and children are homeless; strangers are robbed as they pass through their lands; and the people have turned a deaf ear to the true prophets. They have chosen to listen to the preachers that agree with them. In spite of these offenses, there is still a word of grace from God.

In 5:2-5a, Micah announces the promise that a ruler will be raised up in Bethlehem. The beautiful poetry of these verses reminds the people that the village of Bethlehem will be the place from which God’s act of salvation begins. This man of the country announces that a king will rise up from a most inconspicuous place. Micah has described the city as the place where injustice and inequity reign. He is clear that God is choosing covenant communities in the villages, among the tribe, over the centers of urban life to hold the future for renewal of relationship with God.

Even though there is no direct reference to the line of David, the fact that this ruler is coming from Bethlehem and will rule Israel is evidence
that Micah is stating a longing for the restoration of Davidic rule. This ruler is described as a shepherd and a king. The shepherd will gather his flock from their exile and care for them by providing food and shelter. The king will exercise his rule by gathering the people and providing a peaceful place for them to live. The description is of a king who will care for the people by holding before them the mandate of justice for all people.

It is not unusual to look to the past for a solution to present ills. Micah’s promise of a new ruler makes sense if one looks to the past successes of the kings in David’s line. However, who would have imagined that Bethlehem would be the place that a king from David’s line would be found? It doesn’t make sense. Jerusalem is the place of kings; Bethlehem the abode of peasants. No wonder that centuries later, Herod would be confused by the news that a king had been born in Bethlehem!

Micah’s description of this new king coheres with his words in 6:8: "[a]nd what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" It is through the lens of these words that the prophet sees and assesses the situation facing God’s people. The key is to be in right relationship with God and with one’s neighbor. This is done not by individual acts of will but by the continual rigors of living in community. The call from Micah is to look at our relationships in the larger community. The hard work of Advent is to name and confront the injustices that exist in the places we live. Gifts to the homeless shelter are important; however, it is equally important to attend to the reasons why people are homeless. How can people of faith challenge the systems that simply assume that there will be people unable to find work?

The Gospel lesson for this Sunday (Luke 1:39-55) is Mary’s song. She sings praise to God, who has seen the need of the world and chosen her to bear the Messiah. The Messiah will turn the world upside down. The rich will be brought down. The lowly will be lifted up. Together, the Old Testament and Gospel texts can provide for a deep look at the situation of the world and God’s relationship to it.

**Conclusion**

The prophets defy our attempts to categorize people: good, evil, rich, poor, oppressor, oppressed. They challenge us to look at the systems of our society with the eyes of God. In preparing to preach during Advent, it is important not to use these texts to demonize groups of people—particularly
groups who are not "like us." It is critical to remember that in these texts God provides a way of salvation not because the people have changed their behavior and deserve salvation but because the people need it.

The prophets remind us that our God is a transforming God. It is in God's "nature" to make things different. Early in the history of Israel the people demanded a king to lead them. They wanted a strong leader to keep them safe from other nations. When the kings were overthrown and the people exiled, they still longed for a king to save them and restore them to their former glory. The prophets announce a new kind of leader—a king that is concerned for justice, for realigning the systems of power. This king will feed the people and will be "the one of peace." These texts from the prophets are clear that the people have killed and destroyed the peace of communities. Now imagine a king who is more interested in restoring community than conquering their neighbors!

The prophets remind us that we must not live in isolation from society. As people of faith, we are to be interpreters of the culture. The preacher is called upon to invite the listeners into a conversation that includes the text, the person, the community, and the world. We must continually ask, how does our interpretation affect all of the participants in the conversation? Does our interpretation hurt or destroy? Does it lend itself to easy answers rather than to struggling with the difficult questions of the texts?

Finally, the prophets tell us that God's grace is abundant. God can look at all of the evil that we have perpetrated and still see us as creatures made in the divine image. Even when we try to cover our misdeeds or blame someone else, God is with us and blesses us. When it seems as though the world is out of control and justice is just a dream, God will find a way to let us know that we are not alone. This is the hope of Advent: God with us.

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The New Rhetoric of Youth Ministry

KENDA CREALY DEAN

Cleaning out my office recently, I finally had to face facts: my shelves were bloated with youth ministry books I would never use. I let my students dig through tried-but-discarded strategy books, tie-dye cool gospel vernaculars like God Is for Real, Man, youth-culture commentaries, game guides and ‘idea’ books that included everything from noncompetitive parachute games to the now-suspect chubby-bunny contest. Equally noticeable were the books that were absent—almost nothing on ministry with young people outside of suburban, white, middle-class North America. Almost nothing on how the globalization of contemporary culture or on how technology and changing social expectations increasingly challenge the notion of adolescence itself. Despite throngs of scholars lamenting “problems of American youth,” few mention religion or the church as a possible road to cure. Disturbingly, neither do theologians.

The Literature of Lament: Youth Ministry’s Rhetoric of Despair

The rhetoric of youth ministry in the late-twentieth century, especially among mainline Protestants, was born of slippage: declining church memberships, decreasing moral influence, and—save for the religious right’s brief political apex in the 1980s—evaporating social power. As mainline churches gradually admitted their new marginal status in American society, the rhetoric surrounding their ministry with young people could aptly be described as “a rhetoric of despair.” Denominations bemoaned the loss of young people from their ranks, and ministry analysts launched a new literature of lament that blamed the church’s adolescent hemorrhage, variously, on inadequate leadership training, poor educational models,
dwindling denominational support, demographic shifts, economic cycles, and, of course, the onslaught of secular culture.²

Notably absent from these rebukes was any mention of theology. For the most part, churches remained naive to their own complicity in the loss of young people from the pews. Liberal Protestants blamed conservatives for promising young people easy answers and conservatives blamed liberals for comforting them with "cheap grace" (both true). The fact was that most young people had never been in the pews to begin with, and their fading voices signaled an increasingly toxic culture and a distressingly impotent church. In 1965, the World Council of Churches called for an end to the balkanization of young people into isolated "youth programs," urging congregations to integrate youth into the total mission of the church.³ Financially strapped denominations responded by amputating costly youth departments—yet, as youth staffs and budgets shriveled, no mechanism emerged to help local churches absorb young people into their larger ministries. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development declared the 1980s "an era of massive cuts in youth ministry" in terms of denominational personnel and resource deployment.⁴ By the end of the century, young people's absence, not their presence, had become normative for American Protestantism.

Signs of Hope

Surprisingly, in spite of the litany of crises that ushered in the twenty-first century, the rhetoric of despair that had come to typify the conversation about mainline Protestant youth ministry has begun to soften. Three developments set the stage for this rhetorical change of heart, allowing a "rhetoric of hope" to emerge in the church's conversation about young people, and about youth ministry in particular.

The first development was the late-twentieth-century's renaissance in practical theology. Overwhelmed by the information age's glut of data, modern fractiousness, and moral uncertainty, secular scholars and theologians alike welcomed the practical wisdom of local communities as an alternative route to truth, which had the effect of rekindling academic interest in concrete communities of faith. Meanwhile, a new generation of students entered Christian colleges and seminaries whose coming of age came after the demise of denominational youth ministry, and, who, therefore, increasingly traced their faith formation to parachurch youth organizations rather than to traditional catechesis in congregations. As schools found themselves...
preparing candidates for ministry who had little experience in (or affection for) congregations, youth ministry provided a curricular bridge between students and local churches. For many of these young leaders—whose experiences in life-changing youth groups shaped their expectations for Christian community—youth ministry offered a template for how to “do church” with all age groups and informed their approach to ecclesiology, mission, and ministry, as well. As a 1994 report to the Lilly Endowment conceded, “What has become clear . . . is that youth ministry is ultimately about something much more than youth ministry . . . These [Christian youth] movements are redrawing the ecclesial map of the United States.”

The second development that signaled changing attitudes toward youth ministry was the Lilly Endowment’s decision in the late 1980s to seed youth ministry initiatives in colleges and seminaries. Flush with profits from the “irrational exuberance” of the American stock market, Lilly gave innovative youth ministry the financial encouragement once provided by denominations—with a crucial difference. Lilly tendered this financial support through Christian higher education, not through denominations—a decision that shifted the “center of gravity” for innovative youth ministry away from church bureaucracies and toward theological institutions whose primary focus was Christian vocation, and especially the education of pastors. Besides spawning curricular changes, the decision to fund youth ministry at the level of theological education gave youth ministry new stature as a theological subject and sent an unmistakable signal to pastors-in-training that their ministries included young people.

The infusion of Lilly dollars placed youth ministry squarely on the agenda of mainstream Christian colleges and seminaries in the U.S. Before Lilly’s entry into the discussion, youth ministry (widely considered a place to “do time” until a chance for “real”—read, adult—ministry came along) floated on the periphery of the church’s consciousness. Youth ministry classes in higher education, where they were offered at all, were often outsourced to talented pastors instead of taught by regular faculty. Now theological schools actively cultivated youth ministry initiatives in order to qualify for grant support, and churches responded by adding pastoral positions in youth ministry. Although evangelicals had been professionalizing youth ministry throughout the late-twentieth century, in the 1990s mainline Protestants began to follow suit. A small but influential number of mainline schools (including Emory, Princeton, and Duke) launched major
youth ministry initiatives and added lines for pedigreed professors who gave theological substance to youth-related coursework. By the mid-1990s, the number of professors of youth ministry reached a critical mass, spawning professional guilds and a serious debate about whether youth ministry should constitute a “discipline” of its own.

Meanwhile, a third development contributed to the rhetoric of hope in youth ministry: a rising interest in spirituality among young people themselves. Even adolescents who recoiled from describing themselves as “religious” readily saw themselves as “spiritual.” As young people turned to religion to help them interpret cultural shifts and resist globalization’s homogenizing juggernaut, scholars and policymakers took note. Sociologists who had predicted the triumph of secularization recanted; and social and developmental psychologists, once skittish about religious subjects, began to acknowledge religion’s positive impact on healthy communities and adolescents. Tragedies like the Columbine High School shootings and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 soldered the connection between young people and faith in the public eye. In this cultural milieu, youth ministry grew bolder, demanding legitimacy as a ministry of the church.

Redefining Church: Themes in the Rhetoric of Hope

Just as adolescence has expanded to include nine-year-olds entering puberty as well as twenty-nine-year-olds struggling to make adult commitments, the rhetoric of hope has expanded youth ministry’s scope as well. In some ways, this rhetoric underscores long-accepted themes in Christian youth work—the need for relational methods and radical contextualization, for instance. But the new conversation about youth ministry sounds these themes with a new and almost brazen sense of purpose. Because this rhetoric views young people as capable of theological critique, the new conversation sets out to do more than redefine youth ministry. It aims to redefine the church, starting with passionate communities of youth, on the premise that young people are reliable barometers of the human condition; and their actions may therefore be considered Exhibit A of humanity’s desire for God. At the same time, this rhetoric is intensely local and highly personal, echoing the apostolic community’s emphasis on personal, even mystical, experience with Jesus Christ. As in the early church, this rhetoric of youth ministry tends to emphasize informal enclaves of care and spiritual practice that provide fidelity, transcendence, and intimacy for young people dying, literally, for all three.
For those of us who take more than a casual interest in ministry with young people, this rhetoric offers promise and invites caution. Youth ministry both challenges existing ecclesiologies and risks puerilizing them; indeed, new church movements are frequently accused of being "adolescent." Many visible leaders of today's "alternative" congregations—church movements where pastors intentionally refashion styles of worship, patterns of polity, and forms of nurture to attract Baby Boomers and their progeny—admit strong roots in youth ministry. A quick scan through their proliferating publications shows that, by and large, these leaders simply adapted the visions, methods, and rhetoric of youth ministry to address the adults these youth inevitably became. At the same time, the rhetoric of hope reveals a broader sense of calling on the part of youth ministry itself, as youth and their ministers seek to refashion what it means to be "church" in a frankly pagan culture. The rhetoric of hope's investment in practical theology, global postmodern culture, and communities of faith practice, for instance, suggest an expanding purpose, context, and curriculum for ministry with young people that have implications for the broader church. In short, youth ministry is no longer only about youth.

**A Broader Purpose: From Christian Education to Practical Theology**

What is at stake in the rhetoric of hope's interest in practical theology is rescuing youth ministry from decades of foster care in the social sciences in order to return it to its theological home. For more than a century, the church has conceived youth ministry as a "department" (or sometimes, as the unruly stepchild) of Christian education. The label never quite fit; youth ministry acts more like a microcosm of the church than as an arm of education, and therefore it provides a premier laboratory for engaging lay people (in this case, teenagers) in practical theological reflection. As youth ministers sought more professional credibility, they demanded more substantive training—and because Lilly money guaranteed that much of this training was now offered by colleges and seminaries, youth ministers began to think of themselves and their vocations theologically.

This did not eliminate a relationship between Christian education and youth ministry; it merely recognized education as one practice of youth ministry that helps young people discover themselves called to carry out the church's mission in the world. Youth ministry is, after all, ministry; and the practicing Christian community is its "curriculum"—a curriculum that is mean-
ingless unless participation accompanies cognition. The language of formation and discipleship stresses the embodiment of faith, as young people encounter and incarnate Christ through the mediating practices of the church. For this reason, the rhetoric of hope stresses spiritual formation over "Christian education," discipleship over membership, small groups over youth fellowships. On the one hand, these distinctions are largely semantic. Spiritual practices, after all, are enacted beliefs; doctrine inheres in the imitation of Christ in all its forms. On the other hand, religious education’s alliance with American pragmatism throughout the twentieth century perverted ancient understandings of catechesis. The "handing on of the faith," never intended to be a dogmatic exercise, provided a route for spiritual transformation that sometimes did, and sometimes did not, perpetuate "adult" norms.

A Broader Context: From Youth Culture to Global Postmodernity

In the 1990s, youth ministry expanded its cultural and philosophical horizons as well. Like all ministry, youth ministry is highly contextual; what is distinctive about the rhetoric of hope is that it viewed youth ministry’s "context" as the broader culture of global postmodernity, making adolescents’ reactions to culture emblematic of the human condition as a whole. Fifty years ago, it was possible to speak of an emerging "youth culture." The invention of portable technologies like the transistor, the mandatory age-stratification of American high schools following World War II, the growing disposable income of adolescents that allowed advertisers to develop a "teen market"—all of these factors invited young people to create and consume their own subculture away from the watchful eyes of parents. Consequently, the "adolescent society," as James Coleman called it in 1961, represented a new civilization, as foreign to the American church as any far-flung place on the globe and as much in need of Jesus.

No more. Youth ministry is still missionary work, and adolescents still need Jesus. But the "adolescent society" no longer exists—not because it has vanished but because it has devoured everything around it. Today, all popular culture is youth culture and vice versa, and all age groups participate in it—forcing young people to turn to increasingly marginal and dangerous alternatives in order to distinguish themselves from adults. Youth ministry no longer focuses on the cultural idiosyncrasies of the young as a homogenous group simply because youth culture is no longer idiosyncratic, and because adolescents are not (and have never been) homogenous. The
rhetoric of hope assumes that young people live betwixt and between multiple cultures. "Youth culture" theory is supplanted by "generational" theory, the unsurprising (but highly marketable) observation that people are shaped by the events and popular cultures of their youth.

Yet the new rhetoric of youth ministry also assumes that young people's immersion in broad cultural and ecclesial trends gives them unique resources for navigating culture that could benefit the entire church. Far more important to the contemporary adolescent experience than "youth culture" are the tectonic plates shifting under the weight of globalization and postmodernity, cultural changes that affect adults and youth alike. According to the new rhetoric of youth ministry, cultural upheaval provides opportunities for the gospel, even as it threatens to disarm the church. Like cracks in a sidewalk that allow dandelions to push through, the cultural fissures created by global postmodernity give certain themes crushed by post-Enlightenment rationality space to reemerge, find light, and blossom.

This view reveals a telling feature of the rhetoric of hope: despite the manipulative nature of popular consumer culture, the church can and should use the rips and tears in our cultural fabric as portals to the more adequate narrative of Jesus Christ. The rhetoric of hope frequently turns to popular culture to magnify revelation, pointing out gospel themes inadvertently revealed in the culture that the modern church overlooked or undervalued. The contemporary insistence on personal experience, mystery, and utter connection may illuminate the personal, relational nature of faith, the experiential side of Christian community, the suffering of Christ, and the need for God's transcendence, not to mention Christ's call for solidarity with those who are not like us. In the rhetoric of hope, even postmodern relativism is a sign of spiritual unrest, as our souls seek their rest in God. These themes are not revealed to adolescents because of any latent Christology lurking underneath the surface of popular culture. Rather, faith enables those also conversant in culture—teenagers, for instance—to baptize culture for Christ.

A Broader Curriculum: From Programs to Communities of Spiritual Practice

Perhaps the most noticeable change in youth ministry in the early twenty-first century is the diminished role of denominations, youth programs, and events in favor of relationships and spiritual practices as the primary vehicles through which adolescents encounter God. The popularity of mission
trips—inevitably low tech, limited human operations—offers a case in point. Youth mission trips typically trade razzmatazz for drama, relying on communities of radical care and belonging that are constructed through shared practices of prayer, service, hospitality, and celebration. In the Christian community, practices that imitate the self-giving love of God shape relationships that echo Christ's love. To be sure, the interest in faith practices and the relationships that emerge from them do not eliminate the need for youth programs; good youth programs are communities of faith practices. But contemporary adolescents—justly suspicious of adult abandonment—distrust the institutional ring and relational sterility suggested by "program" ministries and gravitate to them only insofar as they engage practices that foster personal relationships with God and one another.

Christian practices—those ongoing activities of the Christian community that shape us in relationship to God and to one another—therefore assume critical importance as the curriculum of youth ministry in the rhetoric of hope. In the first place, prayer, preaching, tolerance, tithing, living simply, living chastely, conferencing with other Christians, searching Scripture, serving others, and so on tether young people to a faith tradition without shackling them to a particular institutional expression of it, giving faith flexibility and portability. In addition, practices shift youth ministry's attention away from activities and events to communities, which are the fruit of Christian practices. Practices also stress the lived nature of faith, for practices embody Christ's suffering love, thereby preventing Christianity from deteriorating into abstract intellectualism or vapid, generic spirituality. Practices enfold God's love in word, deed, and act and offer concrete points of connection that provide a sense of divine accompaniment in daily life. In short, faith practices allow young people a way to communicate with God without needing a priest, a program—or, for that matter, an adult—to guide them.

The most compelling example of how youth ministry turned to the historic practices of the church to foster authentic community has been youth ministry's recent passion for worship. Borrowed in part from alternative church movements in Europe and in part from creative young pastors who sought to replicate youth ministry's tight-knit communities and experiential methods for the entire congregation, worship offered unparalleled potential to form community through praise and lament, preaching and teaching, hospitality and healing sought by teenagers who gathered to
experience the presence of God. The term *experience* was important; in worship, young people sought an *experience* of God—and practices provided a concrete faith "experience" in which God inhered even if youth did not "feel" God emotionally. The now-widespread availability of technology allowed the innovative forms of piety long practiced in youth camps, conferences, and fellowship groups to be played out in a larger chancel; and youth ministry began a clear drift toward the sanctuary. By the 1990s, worship had become the undisputed focal point of postmodern youth ministry and the fulcrum of the rhetoric of hope—a sign of youth ministry's desire to be located at the center of the Christian community; an expression of youth ministry's global, postmodern context; a celebration of Christian community shaped by practices designed to help young people recognize God in their midst.

**Imagining Church**

The effect of the rhetoric of hope in youth ministry has yet to be calculated. On the one hand, it promises a new sense of vocation for youth ministry and a theological sense of direction as youth ministry becomes more than a platform for placating teenagers. Indeed, youth ministry's great potential may lie in its ability to reimagine the church on behalf of the wider Christian community, in which God has called young people to play an irrepressible and irreplaceable part.

On the other hand, the rhetoric of hope in youth ministry has risks, not the least of which is *hubris* and the possibility that it promises more than it can deliver. Will adolescents be able to reimagine the church in ways that are any less jaded than adults? Or will youth ministry’s expanded vocation on behalf of the church lead to a loss of focus—an abandonment of the church’s mission with young people themselves, returning youth ministry to the "stepping-stone" status it has so earnestly tried to shake? Above all, what is the source of the rhetoric of hope in youth ministry? Is it grounded in the optimism and idealism of young people themselves or in the hope of Jesus Christ, who somehow manages to save the world daily without our help?

The verdict, of course, will be for another generation to decide. What we can ascertain is that the rhetoric of hope enlarges youth ministry’s territory for the twenty-first-century church. Youth ministry’s broader sense of purpose, broader view of context, and broader understanding of curriculum leave no doubt about its vocation on behalf of the larger church. And if the
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predicament of adolescents is intimately linked to the predicament of the church, then the transformation of one implies the transformation of both.

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Endnotes


6. As of this writing (March 2003), Lilly funds implementation grants for youth
and vocation in 88 U.S. colleges, youth and theology programs in 48 U.S. seminaries, and 7 multi-institution research projects on youth ministry, youth and religion, and related subjects.

7. The adolescent distinction between being "religious" and being "spiritual" is one of the findings of the Princeton Project on Globalization, Youth and the Church (1999-2003). Summaries available at www.ptsem.edu.


10. The first of these won small but influential followings as early as the 1960s. Sara Little's Youth World and Church (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968) and later David Ng's Youth in the Community of Disciples (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1984) stand out in this regard.


14. For examples of how to make the practices of the church the primary curriculum for youth ministry, see Dorothy Bass, Practicing Our Faith (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997) and the subsequent volume for teenagers, Dorothy Bass and Don Richter, Way to Live (Nashville: Upper Room, 2002).

The Wesleyan Tradition: A Paradigm for Renewal is a collection of essays offered as a manifesto in grateful memory to the vision of Albert C. Outler and Edmund Robb, Jr. Together, they established A Foundation for Theological Education (AFTE), which envisioned a rediscovery of the Wesleyan tradition in order to renew the church of our day. It is from that infectious spirit and burning passion for renewal that all the contributors to this work (John Wesley scholars and recipients of fellowship awards from AFTE) begin this constructive task of recovering the most salient features of the Wesleyan tradition as a paradigm for renewal.

The crucial axis upon which the thesis of this volume pivots is the old Latin dictum, *ecclesia semper reformanda,* "a church is always in need of reform." Editor Paul W. Chilcote contends that the Wesleyan tradition is forever bent toward renewal, because renewal is making all things new, and this is the essence of love. The very grammar of renewal arises out of a faith that lives in the way of gratitude, full of the joy of discovery, transformation, freedom, expectation, grace, and love. Thus, the Wesleyan tradition is a "faith filled with the energy of love" that contains the basic "signs" of renewal for the church today. Chilcote identifies the primary signs of renewal as the living Word, saving faith, holistic spirituality, accountable discipleship, formative worship, and missional vocation.

The signs of renewal are paradigmatic for the Wesleyan tradition and thereby constitute the basic argument of each chapter. Each "sign" captures the spirit and heart of Wesley's mission to carry the renewing, transforming love of God to the whole world. Taken together, these six signs offer some of the best descriptions within our Wesleyan tradition for raising up "real Christians."

The question of paradigmatic renewal rests on the following questions: Just what is the "Wesleyan tradition"? What are the "signs" of renewal? If the signs of renewal are paradigmatic, then are they in sync with the Wesleyan tradition? Herein lies both the book's strength and its weakness.
Although this work is intentionally more descriptive than analytical, these descriptive renderings of Wesleyan renewal cry out for a deeper analysis of the Wesleyan rationale that underlies them. While the paradigmatic signs are genuinely Wesleyan, they seem to function more from the classic Protestant notion of "reform." Consequently, the paradigm of renewal seems fixed on the Protestant notion of "evangelical" and does not fully implement the Catholic meaning of the term. If the Wesleyan tradition is to be appropriated into this paradigm of renewal, then the Catholic side of renewal from which Wesley also drew should be equally implemented. The book's strongly evangelical interpretation of Wesley seems to eclipse the richness of the Wesleyan tradition more than it seems to fully draw from it. Perhaps this should be the follow-up volume.

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BibleWorks 5 (BW5) gives its users instant access to an outstanding collection of exegetical tools and databases, making a wide and well-chosen variety of modern-language translations quickly and conveniently available to all. To scholars, it provides all the tools and resources needed to do primary biblical research in the original languages. To pastors, it allows those who have only a vague memory of Hebrew and Greek classes in seminary to feel that their time was not wasted.

The databases include several versions of the Greek New Testament, the complete BHS Hebrew Text; the Septuagint in Greek and in English; the Vulgate; twenty versions in English (including KJV, NIV, NRSV, and TANAKH); classic and modern versions in German, French, Spanish, Portuguese; nineteen other modern-language versions, ranging (alphabetically) from Albanian to Vietnamese; some twenty-three concordances, dictionaries, reference works, editable and printable timelines; and a variety of tools for linguistic studies (such as morphologically tagged texts). If you are short of space on your hard-drive, you can choose not to load
any of the above types of data. What BW5 does not contain is greatly to its
credit: unlike many other highly touted programs, BW5 contains no an­
quated commentaries that have been included primarily because their
copyrights have expired.

The User Manual is helpful, readable, thorough, and well indexed. Nearly
four hours of instructional videos (included on a separate CD) make it
extremely easy to get started and to progress rapidly to making full use of the
powerful search engine. Since users are allowed to choose the level of diffi­
culty at which they plan to work, the program is accessible for novices as well
as professionals. The beginner’s level interface is designed to be usable
without even opening the instructional manual. The intermediate level is
menu driven. The advanced level (“power user” mode) enables you to do
everything from simple basic-text searches to complex, sophisticated
linguistic research resulting in graphically presentable statistical information.

I asked a variety of seminary students to try out the program and all
were highly enthusiastic about its potential usefulness in their work. Even
beginners with no previous language study can benefit greatly from the
ability to compare translations or parallel texts and to copy these easily into
their word processors, where they can be edited or arranged for sermon or
liturgical use. Those who have some familiarity with biblical languages will
find that almost anything they can imagine doing with and within the
biblical texts is made possible by this program.

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