Quarterly Review

A JOURNAL OF THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES FOR MINISTRY

Preaching for the 21st Century
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Preaching for a New Time

Beginning with John Wesley's controversial decision to employ lay preachers in the quest to "reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land," proclaiming the gospel has been central to the self-understanding and practice of Methodists. For Methodists, including United Methodists, such proclamation finds multifaceted embodiment in the church through faithful individual and corporate practice of the "means of grace." And yet, preaching the good news remains a preeminent and sacred obligation in the worship life of United Methodists. Given this centrality of preaching, we thought it worthwhile to devote an issue to pondering the question: What does faithful preaching look like in the twenty-first century? Thus, the theme for this time around: "Preaching for the Twenty-First Century."

The preposition for in the theme tags two motifs that find resonance in all five theme articles in this volume. (1) Preaching is forever historically, culturally, and linguistically situated; it is always for a particular time and place. (2) Flowing from the contextual nature of proclamation is the awesome responsibility of discerning the "signs of the times" in such a way that the preached word for a particular time and place is also suited for that time and place; the Word proclaimed must be embodied—incarnated—in a concrete situation to be heard and received as good news.

These two motifs are taken up in different ways and at a variety of levels by the authors in this issue. In reflecting on the greatest challenge facing United Methodist preachers in the new century, noted preachers Tyrone Gordon and Adam Hamilton both single out the intellectual, pastoral, and theological integrity of the preacher as the key concern. For Gordon, preaching with a relevance that persuades flows from pastoral leadership that is prophetic and countercultural. Of the myriad roles characterizing pastoral leadership today, claims Hamilton, the opportunity to preach thoughtful, substantive, and compelling sermons is central. Preparing
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sermons of this caliber takes time—and lots of it. Thus, in our time-starved culture, establishing and guarding adequate time for sermon preparation is the greatest challenge facing preachers in our day.

In different ways, both Aida Irizarry-Fernandez and Eben Nhiwatiwa reflect on the vexing question of what constitutes effective and persuasive preaching in a world characterized by a dizzying plurality of cultures and languages. For Irizarry-Fernandez, authentic preaching in a multicultural context exists in the necessary tension between the plurality of cultures and the Word that transcends and so transforms all cultures. Guided by the theological principles of hospitality, mutuality, and hope, preaching amidst different cultures becomes a “dance” with the Word that celebrates the diversity of gifts in the unity of the Spirit.

Nhiwatiwa provides a marvelous exposition of the theological, homiletical, and exegetical principles and practices needed for any preaching that aims to connect with the hopes and struggles of twenty-first-century hearers. Throughout, and in a conversation that yields rich insight, Nhiwatiwa dialogues with the Western homiletical tradition in light of the theology and practice of preaching on the African continent.

Susan Bond invites preachers who have abandoned the Pauline corpus as a source of preaching to reconsider. Accusations that Paul is a defender of the status quo and a sexist, even a racist, in no small way rest on a history of interpretive blunders prompted by highly contextual, often seriously misguided, theological interests. However, says Bond, developments in recent Pauline scholarship open up exciting possibilities for preaching Paul in a way that offers a truly prophetic word for our day.

How, asks John McClure, can preachers “claim theology in the pulpit” so that preaching may become “a pivotal sounding board” for the theological conversations that are happening in and beyond the congregation? Using semiotic and dialogic models, McClure offers a mode of “practical theological thinking” that allows preacher and congregation to understand and articulate their respective “operative theologies” in order to embed preaching in the rich textures of the congregation’s discourse about God. This becomes the context for what is arguably the most important aspect of preaching theology: a sense of preaching as a living theological vocation.

Hendrik R. Pieterse is the editor of Quarterly Review.
I recently asked two outstanding United Methodist preachers to reflect on this question: What is the greatest challenge facing United Methodist preachers in the twenty-first century? Here are their responses.

Tyrone D. Gordon

The United Methodist Church is facing some challenging times in this new century. Our declining membership, dwindling financial resources, divisive theological issues, and the like are causing many members to wring their hands, take sides, or throw in the flag of surrender as if we were people who have no hope. However, the United Methodist preacher cannot succumb to this somber mood or adopt this pessimistic spirit. He or she must face these challenges with faith, authority, and optimism. I once heard an old preacher say, “If God can raise Jesus from the dead, then God can do anything!” This includes God giving the preacher whatever she or he needs in order to face these new and difficult challenges before both society and church.

The preacher has a vital role to play in leading the church through these challenges. The apostle Paul writes,

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Rom. 10:14-15, niv).

These words lay out the importance of the call upon the preacher’s life and how valuable her or his ministry is in today’s culture and time. The
preacher must believe with deep conviction that her or his call is from God and that she or he is an ambassador of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This in and of itself helps put into perspective the challenges and obstacles facing those in the preaching ministry of The United Methodist Church.

The preacher has an awesome task balancing being priest, prophet, teacher, and leader in a rapidly changing world and social climate. The new century has thrust upon the preacher and the church changes unimaginable just a few years ago. September 11, a nation at war, terrorism, a politically polarized nation, the debate over homosexuality, poverty, racism, sexism—these issues and more have influenced and/or inflamed the outlook of our society, our culture, and our world. In many respects, these issues have changed the way we do ministry and meet the needs of our communities. These challenges cannot—indeed, should not—be addressed in a vacuum. The church must be the spiritual and moral leader of the world and the society. It must be on the forefront, at the cutting edge, with an understanding and proclamation of the gospel that address the issues that face people and our society every day. In spite of these changing times, I remain persuaded that people are still seeking the right answers and are still asking the question: "Is there any word from the Lord?" With this in mind, I am reminded of a verse from a well-known gospel hymn often sung in the African-American church: "Oh! The world is hungry for the living bread / Lift the savior up for them to see; / Trust Him and do not doubt the word that he said. 'Til draw folk unto me."

A great challenge facing United Methodist preachers in this new century is a maintenance mentality, so pervasive in many of our congregations. Our denomination seems to be in a maintenance mode, which is a sign of desperation—and desperation causes us to do desperate things in order to survive! We have a great future ahead of us. God beckons the church from that future to join hands with God and be a part of what God is already blessing in our communities, our nation, and our world. God is calling us forward; but the "Back to Egypt Committee" that has such a strong hold in many of our congregations is pulling the church in the opposite direction. The challenge for the preacher is to see where God is leading and to interpret and lead the congregation through the wilderness to the promised land of the kingdom of God as it is lived here on earth.

How do we move congregations from an old model of ministry to a model that reaches a new generation and addresses the issues of this day
and age? The question we ought to be asking ourselves is this: How do we proclaim the "old, old story" in ways that are relevant to our culture? There is nothing wrong with what was. But our credibility will continue to be called into question if we do not present the gospel in today's terms for today's times. Leading the church through change, when so many are comfortable with where we already are, is an uphill battle for most preachers in the United Methodist tradition. Shifting persons from an old paradigm of doing church into a new paradigm is a challenge for the twenty-first-century preacher. He or she must learn to integrate shepherding (handholding, counseling, encouraging, and the like) with the prophetic aspect of leadership, which challenges the church, the individual, and, ultimately, society, to participate in God's plan of salvation, liberation, and redemption.

In _African American Church Growth_, Carlyle Fielding Stewart III defines this kind of prophetic leadership as

> [t]he process of calling the people of God into an awareness of God's saving, liberating and redemptive acts so as to compel the radical participation of individuals and communities in spiritual, social and personal transformation. The result of that transformation will be the realization of human wholeness and potential in the present, as well as in the future.

In light of the current "maintenance" mindset in many of our churches, the challenge for the United Methodist preacher is to strive for this kind of leadership so that the church can be faithful to a holistic gospel and a holistic understanding of salvation.

The United Methodist preacher must develop a new style of leadership for this new century—a style that will ultimately call the preacher to see her or his role in line with the prophetic leadership of the Old Testament prophets and of Jesus Christ. The preacher's challenge is to combat the pervasive self-centeredness, selfishness, and the "what-can-God-do-for-me?" attitude. Instead, he or she should encourage an attitude that asks what great things we can do for God and God's kingdom! The challenge is to help persons understand once more the meaning of sacrifice, self-denial, self-giving, and of being the voice of justice for the dispossessed, the oppressed, and the most vulnerable in society.

We must call into question individualistic views of salvation that ignore the gospel's social, economic, and political implications. Our understanding
of salvation has become so individualistic that we have forgotten that God loves the world and not just the individual! Our challenge is to proclaim a gospel that counters the consumerism that has infiltrated both church and society. Rather than influencing society, the church is allowing society’s ungodly influence to distort the message it preaches. The “gospel” of success, prosperity, and who-has-the-biggest has invaded the church. Preachers need to call their churches back to faithfulness to the gospel and make clear the distinction between “success” as defined by the world and success as defined by God. We need to expose this misguided theology and call the church back to a faithful proclamation of the total gospel.

These challenges facing the United Methodist preacher can and must be confronted. Preachers are called not to win a popularity contest but to believe the Word, to proclaim it, and to model it. Jeremiah Wright, Senior Pastor of the Trinity Church of Christ in Chicago, told my church in Dallas, “So many clergy members don’t want to speak a prophetic word. . . . Who is going to call into question what politicians are doing if it is not the clergy?” Wright’s summons requires of the preacher to have an open mind in order to experience and hear God’s voice not only in the Scriptures but also in the events of society and the world. This is no easy task, but it is a challenge that we can undertake. God calls us to it and God will empower us to do it!

The new century brings with it a new set of issues, challenges, and problems for the United Methodist preacher. And the times ahead harbor many more challenges. However, these challenges can be tackled because the Spirit of the Lord is upon us to preach, proclaim, deliver, and recover. We can speak a word of salvation and liberation! We can utter a word of transformation and justice! We can proclaim a word of release and peace! As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

Tyrone D. Gordon is Senior Pastor at St. Luke “Community” United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas.

Endnotes

I will end this essay by responding with a one-word answer to the question the editor has posed. Before sharing that word, I offer a few observations about the role of preaching and preachers in the twenty-first century.

For the average churchgoing adult in a United Methodist congregation, preaching is the primary faith-shaping event. Adult Sunday school is important, but often plays a greater role in offering community and Christian fellowship than discipleship. Disciple Bible Study has been a tremendously important tool for our churches; but fewer than 11 percent of United Methodists have taken the course. One-on-one mentoring with a pastor can play a key role in an individual’s faith development, but only a very small percentage of our members will be able to do this with their pastor. For a large number of our members, the one thing they will regularly participate in to grow in their faith is Sunday morning worship. Within the context of Sunday worship the one element that offers the greatest opportunity for discipleship and faith development is the sermon. With this in mind, let us briefly consider the role of preaching and preachers today.

Today, preachers play a host of roles for their congregations. We must act as teachers and theologians for our flock, recognizing that for most adults our sermons will be the one opportunity they have to hear from a theologically trained leader on a weekly basis. Many Christians today suffer from preaching that fails to teach them theological or biblical truth. Many of our people know very little about the Scripture or about their faith.

Recently I was sitting next to a man on an airplane who saw me read my Bible. (I was working on an upcoming sermon.) As we spoke, he said that he was a lifelong Christian. He inquired about the topic for my sermon and I told him I was preaching on the Bible itself—how it came to be. He proceeded to offer his insights on the topic, expressing gratitude that so much of the Bible was inscribed on stone tablets by God! His comments reminded me of the kinds of things I have heard lifelong United Methodists say—which underlines the importance of preaching that teaches and instructs people on the essentials of the faith and the Scriptures. If our people are going to learn about the Bible or about Christian theology, it will likely be from their pastors.

In addition, in today’s post-Christian culture our members find their faith challenged daily, on the one hand, by the voices of skeptics hostile to
the faith and, on the other hand, by the teachings of fundamentalist Christians. They are challenged by life in an increasingly pluralistic world, wondering why one should be a Christian rather than a Hindu or a Muslim or a Buddhist. And they regularly find their faith challenged by life itself, particularly by the perennial problem of how to reconcile their faith in a good and loving God with a world in which tragedies happen routinely. As pastors we play a key role in helping our congregants understand the faith and why they should continue to be Christians. We will be for our congregations their most important apologists, reminding them weekly why Christianity is credible and compelling. In addition, if we take seriously the task of reaching out to the 50 percent of the population that are nonreligious or nominally religious, we will act not only as apologists but also as evangelists—helping our listeners discover the power of the gospel for their lives.

These roles alone dictate a very serious approach to preaching—one that flies in the face of much of what we have been taught about homiletics in the past few decades in mainline seminaries. Over the past thirty to forty years, preaching in many United Methodist churches has become shorter and more devotional in nature. There is little in the way of teaching and often less in the way of real substance. This is easy to understand in the light of the shortened time allotted for sermons in our worship services. While Wesley's sermons seem to have been thirty minutes or more, today the tendency is toward sermons less than half of that time. Several years ago, one United Methodist seminary professor told his class, "If you can't say it in fifteen minutes, it's not worth saying." I found this comment interesting considering this same professor required fifty minutes three times a week to teach his students how to preach! But if preaching is really just a short devotion on a biblical text, then perhaps fifteen minutes is more than enough time. Recently, a mainline pastor in my community announced to his congregation that he would never preach sermons longer than seven minutes!

If we take seriously our role as teacher, apologist, and evangelist, then is it really possible to fulfill that role adequately in just fifteen minutes per week? Before answering, let us consider several other roles today's preachers must fulfill.

In addition to being teachers, apologists, and evangelists, today's preachers are called upon to be therapists, shepherds, and pastors as well. Sitting in your congregation this weekend will likely be at least one person...
who contemplated suicide this week. Somewhere in your congregation will be a number of couples whose marriages are falling apart. According to one statistician, 16 percent of the U.S. population suffers from anxiety and panic disorders—that is one in every six people sitting in your congregation. A startling number of people struggle with addictions of one kind or another. In any given week someone is remembering the loss of a loved one or contemplating some tragedy in their network of friends. These persons come to church looking for hope and help in coping with life. They want to know if the Bible and Christian faith can actually help them. They need more than a devotional message; and it is likely that coming to worship will be their only place to turn. Most will not seek therapy or schedule an appointment with you for pastoral care.

Of course, the preacher’s role today is even broader than teaching and healing. We are also called upon to “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12). This means that we are providing the training, the challenging, and the tools essential for our congregants to live out their faith as salt and light, both in the church and in the world. I once worked for a company that gave their employees virtually no training before deploying them—with disastrous results. Most employees were ineffective at their work and unsure of themselves, because they weren’t properly trained. Often, as we send the congregation into the mission field of life each Sunday following the benediction, the church does little better. Our role must include preparing, training, and inspiring people effectively to live their faith in the world.

One component of this is teaching people how to do Christian ethics. Our task is not simply to spoon-feed our congregants the answers to complex societal and personal ethical problems. As pastors we often have failed adequately to teach our people how to apply the biblical witness and the church’s tradition, reason, and experience to serious personal and societal issues. Having preached on these issues and having sought to teach and model for my congregation how to do this, I have experienced the challenge and joy of doing this in the context of a sermon. It is critical that the church speak to these issues and help our congregants think biblically and theologically about them.

There are a host of other roles we play as preachers, but I will mention only one more. If we are the preaching pastor we are also likely the senior pastor of our congregation. We are the pastor assigned to lead this particular
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charge. As such we are the senior executive of the church. We may not like the use of business terms to describe our work, but we cannot afford to miss the point that every organization requires a leader and that leaders are called upon to lead. John Kotter, retired professor of leadership at Harvard Business School, summarized the three key tasks of a leader as (1) casting vision; (2) aligning the resources to accomplish the vision; and (3) motivating and inspiring people to do whatever is necessary to accomplish the vision. Pastors do this in a variety of ways, but there is no greater opportunity for offering this kind of leadership than preaching.

Clearly, we have got our work cut out for us as preachers. I am convinced that we cannot do this work effectively by treating our sermons as devotionals. We cannot offer a bit of exegesis, an interesting interpretation of the text, and a handful of stories and feel we have accomplished this work. Some preachers may succeed in this, but I cannot effectively "invite, form, and send" Christian disciples or act responsibly as teacher, apologist, evangelist, shepherd, equipper, and leader by preaching fifteen-minute devotional messages each week.

There are a host of churches in the United States today where people can find shallow, superficial, and irrelevant sermons offering little more than platitudes and stories. Often those churches where pastors are taking seriously the roles of preacher described above are conservative or fundamentalist churches. I am convinced that the world needs United Methodist preachers who offer sermons from a Wesleyan theological perspective—sermons that teach, inspire, equip, and heal; that are thoughtfully and carefully prepared; that are substantive; that make a compelling case for the Christian faith; that actually help people live that faith; and that prepare Christian disciples who will shape their culture and communities. This picture of preaching and of the role of the preacher is not new to Methodism—it is part of our heritage. Preaching, coupled with small group ministry, defined early Methodism. We were a movement led by lay and clergy preachers who took seriously the role and responsibility of preaching and who believed that preaching could change the world! When this kind of preaching is offered, people's lives and communities are changed, churches become healthy, vital, and alive; and people will drive for miles to hear it.

But here is the caveat: This kind of preaching requires a tremendous investment of time on behalf of the preacher. It requires time in advance
planning—retreats two or three times a year—to pray, read, study, and reflect upon the connection between Scripture and the needs, opportunities, and challenges in a given community of faith. It calls for time in study, reading, reflection, research, exegesis and, most important, prayer on a weekly basis. It demands time in writing and rewriting sermons, as well as in rehearsing them to empty pews so that the Word is preached with effectiveness and conviction. Better and wiser preachers than I may need less time, but for most of us twelve to fifteen hours will be a minimum. More complex sermons may require as much as twenty hours. Forty percent of a fifty-hour work week might reasonably be devoted to the one thing that has the greatest potential to affect the greatest number of people in our community: our preaching.

All of this brings me to the answer to the question posed by the editor of this journal: What is the greatest challenge facing United Methodist preachers in the new century? The greatest challenge is time. And the answer, whether we serve a small, rural church; a mid-sized, urban church; or a large, suburban church, is protecting our preparation time. I cannot presume to know what this involves for other preachers. But I know of many pastors who have taken their preaching to a new level by deploying laity in doing ministry on certain days to ensure adequate preparation time; by helping their congregation understand the value of adequate preparation time for preaching; and by personally managing their calendars and forcing themselves to take the time needed to develop sermons that fulfill their calling.

Preaching is the most important thing we do in shaping the faith of an entire community of people. It is in this act that God’s Spirit works to connect the Scriptures and God’s word to the lives of the people. Effective preaching will teach, convince, encourage, heal, challenge, equip, and lead hearers to a life of faith as nothing else can. But this kind of preaching cannot happen unless we, as preachers, will devote adequate time to our sermon preparation.

Preaching Paul

L. Susan Bond

Poor Paul. He has been the whipping boy of feminists, social activists, and persons of color. He has been accused of promoting the status quo and accused of being a social conservative. Paul has been cast as sexist and probably racist. Most contemporary scholarship has added to this list of misunderstandings and scourges. Paul has been shipwrecked, beaten, jailed, and grossly misrepresented.

A Legacy of Distortion and Betrayal

Neil Elliott is correct when he observes, "Paul himself is far more an advocate of human liberation than the inherited theological tradition has led us to think."1 Elliott is not alone in this perspective; but his work offers one of the most thoroughly helpful approaches for preachers who interpret Pauline texts for contemporary believers.

Elliott identifies two major "problems" within the inherited theological tradition that have contributed to misunderstanding Paul. The first problem is the "pseudepigraphic device" of conflating undisputed Pauline writings with disputed or pseudo-Pauline writings.2 He argues that the socially conservative or politically pragmatic writer who mandates obedience to Rome is not the same writer who claims that "[i]n Christ there is no Jew or Greek." Some interpreters will attempt to harmonize these differences by claiming that Paul was a contextual preacher who said different things to different communities depending on the argument at stake.

This contextualizing approach is somewhat more benign than its harmonizing twin. The problem is compounded not just by an attempt to harmonize the two sets of writings but also by a common approach that actually grants the disputed writings hermeneutical power over the undisputed letters. "[T]he inauthentic letters have even contaminated the way we read Paul's genuine letters...[T]he oppressive face of the 'canonical' Paul is largely the reflection of words Paul never wrote."3 Elliott goes to great lengths to demonstrate how we read texts about Rome, about women, about households, and about "the Jews" as authoritatively Pauline
and how they have become the hermeneutical lens through which we read Paul's more liberating claims. Elliott argues that even within the undisputed letters there are interpolations by later writers (pseudo-Pauline writers) that tend to contaminate and skew Paul’s own theological project.4

Beyond this canonical betrayal, there is another traditional stumbling block that interferes with a genuine Pauline encounter: his mystification at the hands of the theologians and the homiletical tradition. Some of the so-called “paradoxes” are explained away by a spiritualized hermeneutic that led him to value “inner freedom in Christ” instead of “socioeconomic freedom,” which was after all “merely a civil matter” without theological significance to the church. This interpretive strategy is most recognizable when dealing with that pesky Galatians text, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female” (3:28). Traditional hermeneutical and homiletical gambits have depoliticized verses like this (usually in a misguided attempt to “submit” to governmental authority) and claimed that the implied equal status is only a spiritual status and not a recognition of real social equality. Real social equality would challenge the status quo, something American slave-owners realized when preachers and converted slaves took Paul literally and expected manumission.5

This spiritualizing strategy was certainly bolstered by Martin Luther's approach to Pauline theology. For years, J. Christiaan Beker has written about Luther’s “hold” on interpreting Paul, but even in the twenty-first century we continue to see the depoliticized approach reinforced in ordinary lectionary helps and homiletical approaches. According to this spiritual or depoliticized approach, the key to Pauline theology is justification by grace. Luther’s legacy encourages us (still) to see Paul as an opponent of Judaism and “works righteousness” and to rely on spiritual freedom instead of social freedom. As Elliott writes,

Once the Reformation made Paul’s discussion of justification by faith in Romans into “the center, not only of the Pauline message but of the whole Christian proclamation” (Käsemann), nothing could prevent the apostle’s perceived critique of Judaism in that letter from being similarly placed at the heart of his theology.6

As Elliott, Beker, and other New Testament scholars attest, using a so-
called Pauline theological center (grace vs. works) as an interpretive strategy for the Gospels and for early Christianity leads to hermeneutical mistakes across the board. What we think Paul said is serious business for preaching from both Pauline and other texts. It is probably safe to say that generations of preachers have been re-inscribing a highly spiritualized, depoliticized, moralistic, and socially conservative brand of Christian superiority. Preaching maintains a homiletical tradition of interpretation; we tend to preach sermons the way we have heard them preached before. So, when we have to preach a sermon on the ten lepers in Luke, we are immediately tempted to make the same hermeneutical leap that Luther made: the nine lepers were legalistic and self-absorbed and did not recognize the true Messiah. The tenth leper was somehow spiritually superior, having recognized the Messiah and knelt at his feet.

**Vindicating Paul**

One of the obvious starting places is with the canonical record. New Testament scholars and homiletical scholars are not of one accord on the best way to do this. Elliott tends to suggest a rigorous distinction between the true Pauline material and the pseudo-Pauline material, and he gives primary authority to the undisputed letters and portions. He wants to reverse the legacy of reading through a spiritualized and depoliticized interpretive strategy. The pseudo-Pauline materials get second-class status (at best) and must submit to scrutiny by the undisputed Pauline materials. For Elliott, an egalitarian, socially liberal, politically committed, and fundamentally Jewish-friendly Paul is the key to reading the disputed texts and letters.

To put the point in strong language, we must recognize, on principle, that the Paul who speaks to us in the New Testament as a whole is an artificial composite, resulting in part from a campaign of deliberate revision of the memory of Paul. . . . [W]e must be prepared to judge that the author of 1 Timothy, for example, was as much a betrayer of Paul as his "disciple," a saboteur of one form of Pauline community as much as a member of a Pauline "school."7

Others are reluctant to embrace this approach. Elizabeth Johnson and Luke Timothy Johnson argue along the lines of J. Christiana Beker, who writes: "[E]ven in their failures the early interpreters of Paul provide the church today with important guidelines and warning signals."8 Elizabeth
Johnson sounds a similar note: "If Paul did not write them, they do not cease to be the church's scripture." In her recent book on preaching and the Pauline "problem," homiletician Nancy Lammers Gross sides with this more conciliatory (and canonically conservative) school of thought. She does so, for the most part, from the same canonical concerns as Johnson's, Beker's, and Luke Johnson's. But she also does so from literary-critical concerns that authorial intentions are less important than rhetorical intentions when it comes to interpretive strategies. To some extent, Lammers Gross is almost indifferent to isolating "authentic" Pauline theology, since her strategy is to preach the way that Paul preached (contextually) and not necessarily the same theological content that Paul preached.  

Whether we agree with Elliott's more radical approach or adopt the more conciliatory approach outlined above, we should at least acknowledge that, from a practical perspective, many preachers have already de-authorized the most troubling claims of the pseudepigraphical texts; we just let them die by default and skip over them when they come up in the lectionary cycle. Maybe we should just be more open and honest with our listeners and tell them why we cannot put those particular words in our mouths. Maybe church school classes should run concurrent with preaching series, so that lay people would have exposure to the same theological debates and dilemmas their preachers do. As we will discuss later, radical honesty may be a homiletical necessity.

Beyond the canonical problem, we have the issues of what constitutes the center or contours of Paul's theological thought. If it is not Luther's depoliticized justification by grace (grace vs. works), then is it something else? The most compelling and convincing discussions come from those who claim that Paul's theology was thoroughly apocalyptic in its understanding, even if his letters were not apocalyptic visions or apocalyptic literary genres. To say that these claims are compelling and convincing is to attest to the power of a liberating theo-ethical vision as well as to the explanatory and interpretive traction they provide. Additionally, since much of the New Testament writings are apocalyptic in perspective, this move puts Paul back in conversation with intertestamental Judaism, the Gospel writers, and the early church.

The basic structure of Paul's apocalyptic thought is grounded in the idea that the world is constantly in danger of temptation and corruption by the powers and principalities. While Paul (and the other early writers) may
have had images of some spiritual demons flapping around. The notion of powers and principalities cannot be reduced to the presence of simple supernatural beings or agents. The powers function to hold communities together in corrupt systems of relationship, abuse of power, and domination strategies. The powers are seductive and powerful because they operate deceptively; they blind* people and bind* them in captivity. The “Old Age,” or “this generation,” is dominated by the powers and principalities. “The System deludes people into thinking not only that they deserve their positions [of privilege or powerlessness] but that this social order is the only one possible.”

In the “New Age,” people will be freed from their blindness and captivity. They will be able to recognize the powers and the deceptions and will form new kinds of human communities. Part of the prophetic task of the religious leader was to name the powers and their operation and to point to an alternative vision of God’s hope for the world. The proclamation of God’s future was a fundamental challenge to hierarchies based on merit, social status, or any other kind of human construct. Apocalyptic thought was not just a pie-in-the sky hope for heaven but a motivation for social change. As Beker puts it, the motifs of dualism (Old/New, blind/sight, dark/light, captivity/freedom) stress *that God’s plan for the world engages the Christians in a battle against the present structures of the world.*

The same kind of argument shows up in Beker’s subsequent work, as well as in the work of Walter Wink and Paul Minear; and it also comes to bear in Elliott’s discussion of Paul’s politics. Elliott claims that Paul was not “converted” from Judaism to Christianity but was “called” by a vision of the risen Christ to assume a prophetic vocation. Paul’s prophetic vocation involved public proclamation, social critique, and the formation of ethical communities. Key to Paul’s own theological understanding was the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, which indicated that God operates in history through apparent weakness and continues to work toward the future by vindicating the victims of violence and abuse. By the grace of God, men and women nevertheless continue to live out the power of the resurrection even within the realm of Death, decked out in the splendor of the current world empire and to defy the thunderous threats of death, trusting themselves to a God who gives life to the dead. Even if Paul were not leading a resistance group or calling for acts of civil disobedience, his theological worldview, grounded in the Cross and Resurrection, would
have been inherently political and threatening. His thinking was parabolic and consistent with the social reversals and the kingdom of God at the heart of Jesus' own preaching. From this perspective, it is almost impossible to imagine that Paul would have urged Christians to view Rome as a legitimate authority, to keep the women quiet in gatherings, or to justify human slavery.

Obviously preachers will flinch at the idea of becoming apocalyptic thinkers themselves. We have already tinkered around with existentialist and therapeutic strategies to demythologize much of the New Testament, and Paul may have seemed a welcome break to generations of preachers who wanted to preach just about "spiritual" things and leave politics to the secular world. In fact, thanks to the grip of Luther's theology on homiletical hermeneutics, we have been doing it for a long time.

Demythologizing Paul's apocalyptic worldview and ethics is really not so difficult to do for those of us who have some familiarity with liberation theology or contemporary contextual theologies. Instead of reducing the powers and principalities to inner turmoils and emotional conflicts, we can easily and faithfully interpret them as systems of cultural and political domination and merchants of death. Douglas John Hall's work in The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death is extraordinarily preacher friendly. He casts the apocalyptic worldview of the biblical witness into contemporary North American social reality.

What better way to describe the situation of the nations of the earth in the last quarter of the twentieth century than to say that they have made a covenant with death? There has been a tacit agreement among the powers that be that life, if it is to endure, can only be guaranteed by a dangerous pact with death . . .

With the kind of fervor usually reserved for fanatic forms of religion, the empires pile up the weapons of megadeath.19

As Charles Campbell claims, "[T]ruthful speech becomes the means of nonviolent resistance to the Domination System."20 Of course, all those familiar with apocalyptic rhetoric, particularly with Paul's rhetoric, will recognize a peculiar rhetorical device that is key to Paul's understanding of the Cross and the Resurrection. Alexandra Brown and others have referred to this as a "rhetoric of folly," which functions to disclose realities at the same time that it redefines them. Speaking of the Cross, Brown writes,
From the conventional wisdom of the old world, it is the symbol of suffering, weakness, folly, and death. But from the perspective of the new creation, it is the transforming symbol of power and life. The movement of his audience from the one perspective to the other through the re-presentation of the cross in preaching (the repetition of the kerygma) is Paul’s persisting apocalyptic objective, not only in 1 Corinthians but throughout his writings.  

For Paul, the only way to reverse the death spiral and the domination of the powers and principalities is to refuse to play the power game. The Cross is not a symbol of powerlessness but the ultimate rejection of the power game. On the cross, Jesus demonstrates the ultimate power—death defiance. And by God’s activity of resurrection, the Jesus strategy is vindicated. No wonder Paul can crow, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55). Of course, let us give credit where credit is due. Paul is probably quoting Hosea, “Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction?” (Hos. 13:14). It is not likely that Paul thought Hosea was doing a commercial for Jesus, but that Hosea’s own apocalyptic flavor of prophetic rhetoric attested to the same reality.  

Women preachers (and other disenfranchised folks) who have been loathe to preach from Paul might find him a good conversation partner if they take his rhetoric of folly seriously. Paul is categorically suspicious of anything that looks like group pride, group power, or hierarchical strategies. referring to these as “worldly wisdom” or strategies “according to the flesh.” Paul is regularly accused of being dualistic, valuing the spirit over the flesh; but that is probably a gross simplification of Paul’s thinking. Paul seems to identify two kinds of spirituality: one kind that takes its cues “from the flesh” (worldly domination systems) and another kind that takes its cues “from the spirit” (the mind of Christ). Both kinds of spiritualities are embodied, but they operate their embodiment by domination and nonviolence, respectively.  

From this perspective, Paul’s odd language in Romans 12 makes more sense. He urges believers to make their bodies living sacrifices that belong to one another as part of the same body. Before we jump to any conclusions, we should note that Paul is probably not asking women (or any other marginalized group) to undertake this as an act of unilateral submission; rather, this is a mandate for all believers to be alive in their spirituality and not
to consider themselves better than other members of the community. It functions as a call to an ethical and embodied spirituality, not just an assurance of individual salvation. Communities of believers are what David Buttrick has called “the advance guards” of the Kingdom. Christian communities are to embody a new way of living together, as a corporate and anticipatory witness that the world is being redeemed. Our changed communal life, which takes its cues from God’s future, is a sign to the world of an alternative way of life. This, says Paul, is what spirituality is all about—not to benefit ourselves but to benefit the world. We are to show forth God’s redemption in action.23

Operating from within a rhetoric of folly, vulnerability is real strength; love is power; and social failure is religious success. In fact, the rhetoric of folly is not just instructive but essential to understanding the Christian faith if we want to avoid reinforcing cultural values of domination and sociopolitical coercive control. Other good resources for understanding the rhetoric of folly as it relates to gender issues are Sally Purvis’s *The Power of the Cross: Foundations for a Christian Feminist Ethic of Community* and Mary Solberg’s *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross*.4

Besides the rhetorical strategy at the heart of Paul’s theology of the Cross and the Resurrection, there is a language issue that should be of interest to preachers. David Williams’s book on Pauline metaphors can be almost revelatory for the preaching task. Not limiting himself to the metaphors of the undisputed or “real” Paul, Williams treats all the letters as authoritative for consideration. However, attending to Paul’s metaphorical world, we find other strands of continuity with Judaism as well as Paul’s mission to the Gentile world. Some of his metaphors are thoroughly drawn from Hebrew Bible motifs and others are taken quite specifically from Roman society.

Paul’s Jewish roots are still evident and constitute the structure and content of his theology although the content of his theology was radically re-oriented by the Christ event. Sometimes his medium—his metaphors—reflects the Jewishness of his upbringing; for example, he portrays himself as the “friend” of the bride or sees the olive as a symbol of the people of God.25

Williams does not attend to the apocalyptic theology that probably undergirds many of Paul’s metaphors, but his work is certainly friendly to
an apocalyptic interpretation. For example, his discussion of the labor and delivery metaphors in Rom. 8:18-25 seems tamed to a somewhat Luther-esque commentary on the final installment of our own salvation, but it could just as easily be expanded to the more politicized and social meaning of "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now" (8:22). Some of Williams's most helpful work on metaphor will assist preachers in making sense of some of the most offensive images: slavery, sacrifice, submission, headship. His work with the "pedagogue" metaphor directs preachers to a better understanding of Paul's relationship to Israel. A preacher sympathetic to Neil Elliott's canonical preferences will notice that certain metaphors associated with Paul do not show up in the undisputed letters.

Charles Campbell's homiletical work offers guidelines for preachers that could just as easily be guidelines for faithful living. Campbell does not draw exclusively from Pauline work but from the general understanding of New Testament powers and principalities. He claims that the preacher's primary task is to deal with the powers and to unmask them. The powers work as social, conceptual, and political constructs. They distort our perceptions and dominate our lives with rules and structures, punishments and rewards, appeals to self-preservation, and death threats. We are not called to destroy the powers, since they are simply part of fallen creation—and they must be redeemed. In fact, any intention of destroying the powers would simply be playing the "destruction," or punishment, game—a symptom of Old Age thinking.

From there, Campbell moves into discussions of the nature of the church, communal ethics, and politics. Since the power of "the powers" is actually invisible to us, blinded as we are by the notion that they do not exist, "the monstrous homiletical heresy of recent years is the assumption that the whole drama of the gospel takes place between God and human beings. The aggressiveness of the powers and the moral captivity of people have received inadequate attention." 26

In fact, he claims, much Christian preaching actually participates in the domination system by trafficking in deception, pride, violence, and appeals to self- or institutional preservation. He calls for homiletical virtues of friendship (mostly as moral commitment instead of friendly feelings), honesty (as exposure of unpleasantries and as directness promoted by Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed), resistance (advocacy and dangerous memories
promoted by Johann Metz), anger (as compassion with victims promoted by Bev Harrison’s ethics of anger), patience (especially as an “ethic of risk” promoted by Sharon Welch), and a wild apocalyptic hope that the world can be redeemed (see Paul Minear).

Campbell’s list of virtues is consonant with discussions of virtue lists in other works on Paul. And his list of virtues helps us interpret Paul’s own advice to congregations. When Paul offered lists of fruits of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 6, Galatians 5), he was actually identifying “signs” of faithfulness as they manifest in interpersonal and intergroup relationships. Fruits of the Spirit are not just inner dispositions but actual concrete habits of interaction, almost as if Paul were instructing congregations to practice humility, exercise generosity, cultivate patient waiting, and practice peace. Paul was probably interested less in the spiritual or heavenly benefits to individuals (if you’re virtuous you’ll get to heaven) and more interested in forming communities that would operate by different standards. Christian congregations were to be a sign to the world that God was active in redeeming social life. As Victor Paul Furnish concludes, “It is misleading, then, to say that Paul is here seeking to paint in words the portrait of the good man [sic]. . . . [T]he effect of Paul’s enumeration of the excellences is to broaden the Christian’s responsibilities, not to limit them.”

Conclusions

Much of the recent scholarship on Paul and related topics has opened the Pauline corpus to new interpretive possibilities. For preachers who have abandoned Paul, there is significant hope in recapturing Paul’s vision of a redeemed world, his understanding of systems of domination, his communal ethics, and his love of Judaism. Even though we have sketched out only hints of the “rehabilitated” Paul, it is safe to say that the old complaints about him are probably grounded on generations of interpretive blunders. Paul probably was not a “convert” in the usual sense and probably not the theological conservative we have been led to believe. He probably was not Lutheran or even Anselmian (no sacrificial atonement in Paul). He probably saw himself as a Jew following a Jewish messianic prophet and called to evangelize the Gentiles and graft them onto Israel’s future. In the process, he most likely offended Jews and Gentiles. He probably was very interested in political realities and social transformation and willing to look like a fool for it.
Preachers will want to take the undisputed letters of Paul on their own terms and avoid interpreting them from the socially conservative approaches of the disputed letters. Preachers will want to find ways to demythologize Paul's apocalyptic thought into social categories and will find good resources for this in his metaphors and the rhetoric of folly. We probably will have to rethink notions of individual salvation, Luther's interpretations of Pauline theology, apolitical sermons, hierarchical theologies, and Christian superiority. In short, we will have to humble ourselves and tell the truth. We will have to name the powers in our common life, from the way they operate politically and militarily to the way they operate subtly in our own religious behaviors and assumptions. With Paul, we may have to point out where folks are being bewitched and bedazzled. We also will have to admit our own complicity in the domination system. Anything less is just self-deception and a capitulation to the powers that hold the pulpit captive.

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Endnotes

2. The undisputed Pauline letters are Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.
4. In "The Canonical Betrayal of the Apostle," Elliott claims that the most troubling texts are either pseudepigrapha or interpolations. We may consider them canonically authoritative if we wish, but we should not use them to understand the genuine Pauline corpus. God's judgment on "the Jews" (1 Thess. 2:14-16), the mandate for women's silence (1 Cor. 14:34-35), and urging submission to the government (Rom. 13:1-7) are increasingly considered by scholars to be interpolations into otherwise undisputed Pauline materials.
5. In 1706, Puritan leader Cotton Mather stirred up a bit of trouble with his treatise "The Negro Christianized," in which he argued for the abolition of slavery based on a demystified and politicized reading of Paul.


10. Nancy Lammers Gross, If You Cannot Preach like Paul... (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).


12. This should remind us of Jesus’ inaugural address in Luke’s Gospel. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus proclaims, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”


15. Elliott’s interpretation of Paul’s relation to Judaism and his “paradigm shift” is much too complex to discuss here. Readers are urged to become familiar with Elliott’s claim that election could be extended to Gentiles and that non-Jews could in fact be grafted onto Israel’s promises without becoming Jews. The “expansion of election” shift would become problematic for Jews and for Gentile Christians. Paul’s polemics were directed against both exclusive Jewish election and against Gentile Christian superiority. According to Elliott and Paula Fredriksen, both postures embraced a kind of religious pride that Paul could neither tolerate nor resolve. See Elliott, Liberating Paul, 140-80.


17. Ibid., 180.

18. For more insight into the variety of social and political groups operative in early Christian contexts, see Richard A. Horsley’s works: Sociology and the Jesus

23. In contrast, Frank J. Matera’s lectionary help on Romans 12 advocates an interpretation based on Luther’s strategy of salvation and justification by grace through faith. He sees it as a mandate for moral living and seems to confine the eschatological and communal thrust of the text to personal morality. See Strategies for Preaching Paul (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 42.
27. See Victor Paul Furnish, Theology and Ethics in Paul (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 81-89.
28. Ibid., 87, 89.
Preaching Theology

JOHN S. McCLURE

I would go so far as to say that nearly everyone has an operative, or functional, theology—a living, working, theological worldview. This is the case even if God is relegated to the relatively minor status of a human psychological projection or a mythological prop. Most people, and surely those who have some religious inclination, place themselves within a larger story, or metanarrative, replete with a cosmology and an understanding of good and evil in which God (or some divine or semi-divine presence) plays a relatively major or minor part. If this person lives in North America and has experienced some interaction with the Christian faith, this story can include any number of other characters or themes, including Christ, the Holy Spirit, demons, faith, redemption, and some sense of personal eschatology.

Pastors of churches large and small know only too well that their parishioners harbor all kinds of theological ideas, some of which are very well considered, but many of which are imbibed by osmosis from magazines, television, the Internet, public or private school educators, family members, and various relationships or institutions. Teaching an adult Sunday school class on "what the church believes" is a good way to begin to encounter some of these operative theologies and to see their impact on people's lives and upon the life and ministry of the church.

It is foolish to think that the entire task of lay theological education in congregations can be accomplished from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. Any attempt to bring theological coherence, consistency, and relevance into the pulpit or to preach for theological change or renewal will have to be accompanied by similar efforts in Christian education, pastoral care, evangelism, liturgy, and administrative leadership. In fact, I would argue that careful attention should be paid to the entire symbolic and communicative life of the church from the perspective of Christian theology. Pastors need to pay very careful attention to all of the ways in which they are helping people talk themselves into being Christians on a day-to-day basis, both within and beyond the church.

This is not to say that Christian faith can be socialized through the
simple learning of certain words, phrases, symbolic gestures, and ritual practices. As Paul Tillich reminds us, theology is simply a way in which we reflect on something far deeper, that is, our faith. We might say that faith is both "prelinguistic" and, in many respects, "precognitive." At a conscious level, our theological words and our faith get caught up together in such a way as to challenge, deepen, and change one another. Although there are many arguments for which of these comes first—faith or theology, the felt experience of God or words about God—it is very hard to make any verifiable judgment about which is the proverbial chicken and which is the egg. No matter which comes first, the fact remains that we need our theologies in order to help us understand, deepen, and communicate our faith. We also need theological words and ideas in order to determine whether the theological thoughts that we have are simply idiosyncratic or whether, in fact, they are shared by others around us.

The preaching ministry is carried out on a week-to-week basis in front of the largest gathering of church members that is likely to meet on any regular basis within a specific congregation. Because of this, the pulpit can be a pivotal (if not the pivotal) sounding board for the theological conversations that are taking place elsewhere within and beyond a congregation. Most people are eager to hear what ordained representatives have to say about the crucial spiritual topics that emerge from within their daily lives: Why does a good God permit suffering? What is evil and where does it come from? How am I to understand what is wrong with me and with the world around me? Who is Jesus Christ anyway? How is the Holy Spirit at work in my life? What can I hope for? How can I love my enemies? The list goes on and on.

Several years ago I invited a group of preachers to make a list of as many of these kinds of questions as they could, identifying topics of theological significance they knew were on the minds of people in their congregations and in the world around them. A large blackboard was soon filled with questions, problems, and issues. Then I asked the group how many of them had preached a sermon explicitly on one of these topics in the past two months. I would not permit them to raise their hands for a sermon that only mentioned or dealt incidentally with one of the topics. They could only respond if they had honestly preached a complete sermon on one of these topics. Not one of them raised a hand. I then invited them to listen with me to what non-mainstream, nondenominational preachers were doing in the
pulpit. The night before, I had downloaded from the Internet, almost at
random, MP3 sermons by several such preachers. We listened to brief snip­
pets from three or four sermons. In each instance, the preacher was very
carefully and consistently articulating and explaining what most of us would
call fundamentalist doctrine and applying it directly to the stuff of everyday
life. The class concluded that, in fact, consistent theological preaching was
being done in our society but that it was not occurring as often in main­
stream congregations as in independent, fundamentalist churches.

We could say much about the possible reasons for this. However, no
matter what the reasons, these questions remain before us: How can we, as
mainstream Protestant preachers, claim theology in the pulpit? How can
we preach a consistent and coherent theological message that will help lay
people and those in the culture around us discover and nurture a dynamic
faith in Jesus Christ in ways that will be helpful for living in these very
difficult times?

**Rediscovering Our Theological Convictions**

For nearly ten years, theologian Burton Cooper and I taught a course on
Theology and Preaching. Over the years, as we adjusted our teaching
methods for this course, it became clearer and clearer that it was hopeless
to run away from theological pluralism to the high ground of a particular,
chosen form of theology. The fact is that in a pluralistic age such as ours,
there exists a broad range of reasonable theological options taught in most
mainstream denominational seminaries, each of which could be attenuated
to bear the unique marks of denominational traditions. It was crucial,
therefore, that we help preachers discover, or rediscover (after the theolog­
ical deconstruction of the first year of seminary), their own operative theo­
logical commitments. We needed to help preachers move toward their own
deepest theological convictions about God, Christ, and Church at the
point where their living faith and the church's theologies intersect. We had
to foster the discovery and embracing of one's working theology and then
relate the convictions that constitute that theology to theologians who
have articulated similar convictions throughout the church's history. In this
way, we sought to connect operative theology with ecclesial theology in
such a way as to invite preachers to find themselves within the kaleido­
scope of the church's theological traditions and contemporary theological
constructions.
With this in mind, we developed a theological profile that our preaching students could use in order to determine the basic contours of their own theological convictions. This profile includes several sections. In the first section, students are asked to locate their convictions regarding various hidden determinants or authorities for what they believe. The profile asks them to select from a range of positions on the authority of the Bible, experience, reason, and church tradition. By far the most helpful hidden determinant is what we came to call a person's theological "mode." A theological mode is determined by each preacher through the investigation of their "beginning point," or "starting point," for doing theological reflection. Options include the existential mode, for those who begin with questions regarding the meaning of existence and finitude; the transcendent mode, for those who begin with the transcendence of God and divine revelation; the ethical-political mode, for those beginning with issues of justice or inequities of power; and the relational mode, for those beginning with the organic-aesthetic relationality of life and cosmos. These modes, or "beginnings," will usually show up in the ways a preacher defines the human condition, human sinfulness, and the nature of redeemed life. For instance, for the existentialist, the human condition is defined by issues of overwhelming complexity and meaninglessness. Sin emerges as anxious finite beings seek to secure themselves in the world through various forms of idolatrous behavior. The redeemed life is found when a sense of reconciliation with life and God is restored. On the other hand, for someone in the ethical-political mode, the human condition is defined in terms of injustice and oppression. Sin is predominately structural or demonic in nature, and the redeemed life resembles Isaiah's peaceable kingdom. As preachers get in touch with these basic, hidden "modes," many of the other pieces of their operative theological system begin to fall into place. In the remaining sections of the profile various doctrines are considered, including a range of options for understanding theodicy, the relationship between church and culture, the relationship between the church and other religions, atonement, and eschatology (personal and historical).  

It should be accentuated, however, that simply discovering one's operative theological convictions is not enough. It is crucial to bring those convictions into relationship with the larger Christian tradition, with theologians who have provided tremendous resources for reflecting on and nurturing faith. In our classes, once a student's basic convictional profile has been
determined, we assign readings from within the tradition to each student so that he or she can discover his or her theological "cousins" within the church historic and ecumenical. At the same time, we ask students to explore other theological models by interacting with the theological profiles and sermons of those in the class who are different from them. In this way, students learn to respect and to understand those who bring other theological perspectives to bear in the interpretation of Christian faith. They also learn what it takes to begin to negotiate a hearing for their own messages in relation to congregations in which there are people who represent diverse theological views.

**Practical Theology, Not Applied Theology**

Once preachers learn to determine their operative theologies and to place them into relation to larger traditions, it is to be hoped that they will learn how to broaden this theological loop to include a thorough reading of the living, human theological documents around them in congregations. It is crucial that preachers learn to listen deeply, comprehensively, and theologically to lay people, assessing the spiritual convictions and wisdom that lay people bring to the doing of theology. They need to ask how it is that they can preach sermons that will deepen, broaden—sometimes challenge—and always be instructed by the theological convictions present in the church. I sometimes tell my students that they will never move a listener to the place that he or she can hear anything beyond their own operative theology, unless they as preachers are willing to move through that operative theology on the way to a new place.

Even more important, it is incumbent upon preachers to ask these very practical theological questions: Theologically speaking, what is needed in this congregation, at this point in time? What is God doing here, and how can my preaching help the church discover and act upon this? This may force us to ask which aspect of the theological system is absent, in disarray, or in need of conversation and, perhaps, rethinking. What kinds of questions are people asking? What is going on in people's lives that makes a particular theological model or idea crucial at this time? Instead of simply applying a particular theological model, therefore, it is crucial to ask practical theological questions and then determine which theological answers are needed in a given situation. Of course, it is also true that doctrines ask hard questions of us and, indeed, often convict us in that we are asking all the wrong questions. This can also be determined through practical theo-
logical reflection in which a congregation's blind spots are well analyzed and considered in relation to the larger theological system. In order to move toward this practical theological thinking, two models or methods must be considered: semiotic approaches and dialogic approaches.

Preaching and Semiotics

Semiotics, sometimes called "semiology," is simply the study of signs. More a brimming analytic toolbox than a strict discipline, the field of semiotics has had a significant impact on literary criticism, the analysis of folklore, cultural anthropology, cultural and media criticism, sociology, political theory, hermeneutics, phenomenological and deconstructive philosophies, local theology, and, most recently, congregational studies. Two very practical things can be done with this rather complex field that can help preachers understand what is going on theologically within their congregations and how to relate their preaching more effectively to it.

The first thing that needs to be done is for preachers to determine what they are up against in terms of the congregations in which they are preaching. What views of Scripture are already present and how is the Bible used? What repertoire of theological (and nontheological) topics and themes already predominate in a congregation? What theological worldviews are present in the congregation and how did they come into being? What cultural and experiential assumptions exist in the congregation?

It is essential, therefore, to do a thorough semiotic analysis of the congregation, or congregational study. By congregational study, I mean an analysis of the signs or symbols that define both the ethos (tone, character, style, and mood) of a congregation and its worldview (metanarrative, reality-picture, deep structure). This is a kind of ethnographic analysis of a congregation, as if it were a culture, which attempts to discern how it is that a unique configuration of religious symbols and signs emerges in a community in such a way as to become an emotional and logical model of and for the "way things really are." On the one hand, how is it that the symbols of Christian faith are actually used within a specific congregation to express the very depths of reality, in essence becoming a theological model of this reality? On the other hand, how is it that these signs or symbols become a theological model for shaping that which is really real as it is lived out in daily life?

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, in her book *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk*
Art, has created a very useful process for doing this kind of theological ethnography within the congregation on behalf of the preaching ministry. Tisdale shows how preachers can engage in guided interviews; study archival materials such as church bulletins, old sermons, fundraising brochures, and newsletters; do demographic analysis; consider architecture and visual arts; study rituals, special events, and activities; and observe people and their usual practices—all in favor of theologically exegeting congregations in a way that resembles exegeting a written text. At the end of this process, Tisdale invites preachers to make strategic, practical theological decisions. These decisions can take five different shapes:

1. Preaching can affirm and confirm the right imaginings of the congregational heart.
2. Preaching can stretch the limits of the congregational imagination.
3. Preaching can invert the assumed ordering of the imaginal world of the congregation.
4. Preaching can challenge and judge the false imaginings of the congregational heart.
5. Preaching can help congregations imagine worlds they have not yet seen (or even imagined).

To these five possibilities, I would add a sixth. Preaching can allow itself to be shaped and transformed by theological imaginings that are emerging within the operative theology of the congregation. In 1995, Alex Garcia-Rivera published a book entitled St. Martin de Porres: The "Little Stories" and the Semiotics of Culture. In this book, Garcia-Rivera demonstrated how the "little story" that emerged within a Roman Catholic congregation in Lima, Peru, challenged and ultimately subverted the "big story" of the Catholic tradition's theological anthropology and eucharistic theology. Without recapitulating the entire book, suffice it to say that the unique eucharistic practices within this parish, in which the Communion elements were distributed in rather dramatic ways among the poor, did much to raise the stature theologically and culturally of the poor and marginalized. This practice challenged the official, Thomistic theological anthropology in which these persons represented the bottom rung of a hierarchical human ladder. It is important, therefore, when doing semiotic or ethnographic research of one's congregation, to be attentive to ways in which local practices of faith can provide fresh openings for the winds of the Spirit.

The second thing that must be done is to determine what aspects of
congregational theology are addressed by sermons (as distinct from rituals, Sunday school classes, prayer groups, etc.). This is a matter of determining what semiotic codes, or "conventions of communication," are expected in a sermon and what theological assumptions and commitments these codes are responding to within congregational life. To determine this, we have to bring semiotic analysis to bear on the sermon, determining these "codes," and then treat these codes as lenses through which to view those aspects of congregational semiosis (signifying, meaning-making) that these codes are both mirroring and shaping. In *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies*, I provide one way to accomplish this, identifying four primary codes in preaching: scriptural, semantic, theo-symbolic, and cultural. Looking through the lens of the scriptural code we discover the congregation’s sacred memory, its way of recalling the foundational events of faith. Over time, the way Scripture is used in preaching responds to and shapes a form of memory, or *anamnesis*, within a congregation. Looking through the lens of the semantic code we can see the whole topical and thematic life of the congregation—its lexicon of organizing ideas. Over time, the way ideas are managed in the pulpit responds to and shapes a repertoire of ideas and the way that a congregation holds those ideas to be true. Looking through the theo-symbolic code, we can observe the way that themes, ideas, symbols, and ethos shape themselves into a theological story or narrative. Over time, the way a preacher relates ideas about God, humanity, sin, redemption, and church responds to and shapes a theological and cosmological myth, or metanarrative, in congregational life. Finally, looking through the cultural code, we find a congregation’s experience of the gospel, the ways in which our listeners are imagining theology in relation to daily life and the practice of faith in the world. Over time, the way a preacher illustrates sermons and uses the stuff of our common cultural life responds to and supports the way a congregation experiences faith in daily life.

This form of semiotic analysis suggests ways in which congregational theology is formed based on an analysis of what trained preachers do with these four primary codes. In other words, it treats the study of signs through the lens of the sermon, rather than through the lens of the actual, richly textured semiotic life of congregations. Preachers are invited to identify their own theological style and commitments within these four codes and to be aware of what they are doing, semiotically, over time, in a congregation.
Preaching and Dialogue

Ultimately, semiotic approaches to practicing homiletical theology in parish contexts, as important as they are, leave something to be desired. Ethnographic study constitutes an essential analytical process and can contribute enormously to the process of socializing and resocializing congregational theologies. However, semiotic practical theology for preaching is able to work only at the level at which theology is represented (or signified) within congregations and does not begin to address the ways in which this theology is, in fact, constituted minute by minute in the interpersonal and interactive life of the community. Ultimately, semiotic approaches do not take preaching and embed it within a living dialogical process in which theological meaning is being created and shaped by the ongoing conversations and verbal interactions that make up church (and cultural) life. Many theorists of language and communication have recognized this and have argued for post-semiotic philosophies of communication that are more dialogic in nature (Gadamer, Bakhtin, Volosinov, Schrag, Stewart). As Bakhtin puts it, "The speaker is not Adam"; and the basic unit of language is not the sign but the actual human utterance itself. According to Bakhtin, "An essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance is its quality of being directed to someone, its adreessivity." Bakhtin goes on to say that "each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication. . . . Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account." With this in mind, the preacher as practical theologian is less likely to focus on the larger system of signs within congregations as a shared lifeworld for learning and doing theology and will focus more on the kinds of theology that are developing in every instant on the boundaries that exist between speaking subjects. This way of cultivating theology within congregations accentuates the otherness of each human being within a congregation—the many ways in which we are all strangers to one another at the same time that we are working together to articulate a communal faith. The preacher will focus on the ways in which theological ideas, concepts, beliefs, and practices emerge in dialogue between persons who are, in actuality, very different. Of course, these conversations rely upon the larger field of theological ideas and constructs within a culture, a tradition, and a congre-
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gation. This way of thinking is post-semiotic, not a-semiotic. The accent is placed more upon the event or eventfulness of theological communication, its "in-the-nowness" and the unique ways in which theology is spoken into existence in this very particular moment and place, and less upon controlling and manipulating larger structures and systems of signs.

In order to place preaching into the middle of this process, I encourage a method of preaching called "collaborative preaching," in which preachers are encouraged to hold sermon "roundtables" before preaching. In these roundtables lay persons, from the center of church life to its margins (and beyond), are involved in a process of sermon brainstorming each week. These roundtables change membership regularly, so that an "in group" cannot develop. I also encourage preachers to leave behind lectionary study groups where a standard form of biblical interpretation is encouraged and the theology that is produced is primarily clerical in nature and to interpret biblical texts with ordinary people in a variety of social locations. This usually means leaving the pastor's study altogether for the process of brainstorming sermons and perhaps even leaving the church building, preparing the sermon in a public place. Sermon roundtables meet in a variety of places, including public buildings, homes, and shelters. The goal here is to come to terms with the unique, strange, and sometimes bizarre interpretations of the gospel that are around us in our culture, in the minds and hearts of good church people, and latent within the recesses of our own lives. In this way also, our theologies have the opportunity to become truly public theologies rather than theologies that will have authority only in an insular way within the ecclesiastical world.

No matter how dialogic practical theologies of preaching are construed, the preacher is re-imagined as the host of a conversation, rather than as a prophet, herald (keryg), witness, or storyteller. In essence, the preacher is seen as someone who is initiating, facilitating, and stewarding an ongoing conversation in and through which the congregation is talking itself into becoming more deeply and fully Christian. This process accentuates, highlights, and even dramatizes the many ways in which a congregation is uttering (creating) or constituting in this very moment its own theological witness. While the sermon remains a single-party communication event, it is embedded within and re-presents an actual interactive, multi-party communication process in which a group of ordinary people are discerning, articulating, and practicing theology.
Theology of Preaching

The final, and perhaps most important, aspect of preaching theology is sometimes called "the theology of preaching," in distinction from "theology and preaching." At this level, preachers are called upon to assess their most profound understanding of what kind of theological "event" or transaction with God is taking place when a preacher speaks. Here we ask questions such as, "What does God want to happen when I stand up to preach?" "What is God doing during a sermon?" "Why preach?" "What is the purpose of preaching?" When we start to answer these questions, we begin to understand that ultimately preaching is not only about discerning, correcting, or enhancing the church's theology, by whatever means. At this level we have to own up to the ways in which preaching becomes God's word to us in ways that transform, evangelize, heal, guide, and sustain human life and open up a future in which the presence, power, and purposes of God prevail. There are many ways of thinking intellectually about how it is that preaching becomes "gospel," or world-transforming good news. Some understand this as a part of preaching's role as one of the threefold forms of the Word of God. For some, it has more to do with the unique priestly role that preaching plays in helping people to name God's grace in daily living. For others, preaching becomes gospel through an iconoclastic announcement of an eschatological world that is, in most respects, completely contrary to or otherwise than the world as we know it. For some, this occurs when preaching faithfully announces God's far-reaching forgiveness, which saves us from sin and guilt. And for others, preaching becomes good news as a word of divine hope that perseveres in spite of overwhelming odds in a world of suffering and despair.

At the heart of each of these theologies of preaching lies an experience of preaching as a living theological vocation. Unless a preacher develops this final sense of preaching as a theological vocation, all of our tinkerings with our own operative theologies, semiotic representations of theology in local contexts, and even the moment-by-moment constitution of theology in dialogue will have no undergirding or sustaining meaning or purpose. This is to say we cannot divorce our efforts to improve the relationship between theology and preaching from our fundamental decisions about our vocational theology of preaching. We can theologically script and re-script our own lives and the lives of others with great precision and still not know a
thing about the transforming power of the Word of God in our own lives, in our preaching, and in our churches. Therefore, throughout all our efforts to improve the ways we preach theology, we must always bend an eye and an ear to the ways in which our theological vocation as preachers is being shaped and developed. It is as we live into this vocation, not just intellectually but also with full existential commitment and embodied energy, that an integration occurs in which we will know, in all of its fullness, what it means to preach theology.

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Endnotes

1. We have now published this profile in our recent book Claiming Theology in the Pulpit (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003). This book also includes transcripts from the dialogue of a class in which this profile is used in the preparation and crafting of sermons.


4. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 110-21.

5. For more on codes, see Daniel Chandler, Semiotics: The Basics (New York: Routledge, 2002), 148.


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9. Ibid., 91. Quoted in Stewart, Language as Articulate Contact, 120.

10. As Bakhtin puts it, the "true essence" of "the event of the life of the text... always develops on the boundary between two consciousnesses, two subjects." (106) Quoted in Stewart, Language as Articulate Contact, 120-21.

11. In the Roundtable Pulpit (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), I focus primarily on roundtables for persons within the congregation itself. Later, I expanded this notion to include others beyond the doors of the church. See "Collaborative Preaching from the Margins," Journal for Preachers 22 (Pentecost, 1996).

12. For other dialogic models, see Lucy Rose, Sharing the Word: The Preaching in the Roundtable Church (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); Ronald Allen, Interpreting the Gospel: An Introduction to Preaching (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999).
Preaching amidst Different Cultures

AIDA IRIZARRY-FERNANDEZ

A Story

Last year, just a few days before a charge conference in one of the Korean churches on my district, I was asked by the pastor to preach a brief sermon before going into the business session of the agenda. I had to confess that I was surprised and somewhat anxious about this request. This will be an interesting task, I thought to myself, a Latina woman preaching in the pulpit of a Korean church. Many questions quickly rushed through my mind. Would I be able to connect through the preached word? Would the message be relevant to this particular community? Would the soul of the sermon be lost in the translation? Would I need to make my sermon brief so as to prevent people from losing interest during the process of translation? How often does this community hear a woman preacher?

After some pondering, I accepted the invitation and took some basic steps for my sermon preparation. My first task was to pray for discernment. I asked the Holy Spirit to lead me to the appropriate biblical text for the occasion. My prayers were answered. The text selected, Jer. 29:4-11, contained the letter that Jeremiah sent to his people living in exile. As I reviewed my personal notes about this congregation, I also listened carefully to their particular history. I discovered that this was indeed an appropriate and relevant text for the occasion.

The next step was to become familiar with the Korean church in the United States—their struggles and accomplishments as an immigrant church in a strange land. In my exegesis of the text, I discovered that the Korean community and my own Latino community shared some experiences with the prophet Jeremiah. So I found common ground with my Korean friends despite our distinctive cultural differences. I spent time praying for the congregation and for myself. I asked the Source of all inspiration, "God, I have done my part; now it is your turn."

When the day arrived, there were about twenty-five people in the worship service. The pastor had prepared some praise and worship music
just before the sermon. Neither the pastor nor I was sure what to expect, but both of us believed we were stepping on holy ground as we led worship together. It all came together in a beautiful tapestry. My message was brief and succinct but filled with passion. The expressions on the people’s faces and their verbal and nonverbal behavior convinced me that a three-way conversation—between God, the congregation, and me—was taking place. The feedback I received from members was encouraging. The pastor said to me, "You were able to understand and connect with our experience." A lay leader commented, "You touched the heart of our congregation today." I believe that both the preacher and the congregation were blessed by God’s presence that day. Frank G. Honeycutt once said that "a central role for the preacher is to get a sense of the message, faithfully speak it, and get out of the way."1

Challenge and Opportunity

The God we worship transcends culture. After all, God is the Creator of humanity. It is human beings who create culture. Culture allows a particular group to design and assign its values, norms, thinking, and behaviors. In a highly diverse and fast-changing community homiletics needs to begin with the recognition that the Creator gave humanity the ability, wisdom, and will to create culture. Thus, diversity is a means to celebrate creation. The preacher in a multicultural, postmodern world is invited artfully to proclaim the unity of the spirit while affirming cultural pluralism.

Preaching in a multicultural context is exhilarating and challenging. A careful look at various sources of statistical information, demographics, new technology, socioeconomic analysis, and political discourse shows that in the new millennium the church will continue to be highly diverse and pluralistic. A new chapter in the history of Christianity in the United States is being written; and it suggests that the homogeneous, traditional worship of the previous century is increasingly becoming an exception to the norm.

Delivering a message in such a multicultural, pluralistic context may trigger some anxiety in the faithful preacher. Cultural proficiency and tension over inclusion and exclusion, semantics, and theological and doctrinal interpretation are among the factors that contribute to the preacher’s anxiety.

In preparing a sermon for a multicultural community, preachers must be fully aware of “internal cultural differences.” Eric Law explains that these internal cultural differences go beyond what can be seen, heard,
smelled, or touched. "It is more a matter of perception and feelings. The
same event may be perceived very differently by two culturally different
persons because the two different internal cultures highlight different parts
of the same incident." 3

Some months ago, I preached at a multicultural event in Georgia. It
was very interesting to hear the feedback from the people. A Latino
woman told me she found my sermon very uplifting, observing, "I felt
affirmed in my faith and in my culture." A white man said he appreciated
the risk I took in my sermon. "Today," he said, "you challenged my faith
and my culture." Both individuals heard the same sermon but clearly
perceived its message in different ways.

As important as awareness of cultural differences is, the preacher
needs to remember that "the world of faith is created not when we jam
theological propositions down another's throat. Faithful people are created
when we hear the voice of Jesus calling our names." 4 One of the greatest
gifts of the Wesleyan tradition is the understanding that our theological
task is not only to strengthen human reasoning but also to nurture experi­
ences and relationships, our rich history and traditions, and the power of
the biblical text. Preaching in a multicultural setting provides ample oppor­
tunity to deploy this gift. It is a unique way in which preacher and congre­
gation make theology together. The congregation takes ownership of what
it is hearing in a more active manner by inquiring and searching their souls
for the truths spoken from the pulpit.

Preaching in the midst of another culture follows closely the etiquette
of contemporary preaching, which emphasizes

that the sermon ought to be contextual and never generic. The preacher needs
(a) to interpret the situation of the congregation from the standpoint of the
gospel, (b) find a form or genre of preaching that is congenial to the theolog­
ical claim and orientation of the preacher and the community, and (c) that
gives the sermon a good opportunity to fulfill its purpose. 5

Perhaps more than in any other context for preaching, homiletics in
multicultural preaching strongly appeals to the imagination. Creativity is
certainly a jewelry box waiting to be opened. All we need to do is take a
close look at our environment and at the multiple resources we can find
for our sermon in disciplines such as anthropology, ecology, archeology.
ethnography, to name a few. The ever-learning preacher must move beyond the comfort zone of his or her field of expertise to other sciences and arts.

Preaching has a didactic component. Therefore, creativity in preaching attempts successfully to appeal to the multiple intelligences of the learner regardless of his or her race, ethnicity, and physical abilities. As a matter of fact, the whole worship experience should incorporate as many elements as possible in order to instill an unforgettable lesson through their imprint on the worshiper's soul.

As long as they do not subvert the integrity of the message, spontaneity and freedom in the pulpit are additional gifts in multicultural preaching. The preacher must remain very cautious with the language and/or nonverbal expressions he or she deploys. Language, as part of "perhaps the most spectacular integrative processing that engages body, mind and emotion," provides the preacher with a unique opportunity to touch the human soul. Eunjoo Mary Kim, in Preaching in the Presence of God, expands this concept when she asserts that "through language, reality is re-presented, new meaning is created, and the power and presence of God are realized."

Preaching is not passive but interactive. It leads to a crossroad where multiple parties meet. People, preacher, God, history, culture, current events, values, norms, traditions, past regrets, open wounds, future dreams—all intersect in a transformative chaos. In this chaos, the preacher becomes an instrument of the Spirit guiding the community toward a life-giving spiritual path. In a multicultural setting the energy surrounding the preached Word is almost electric, discharging enough "voltage" to illuminate the spirit that seeks and wants to be enlightened.

**Dancing with the Word**

One of the most precious blessings of the homiletical task in a multicultural environment is the encounter of God's people with God's Word. Regardless of background and language, a special movement, which seems to gather individuals into one family, happens when the Word is faithfully preached. Then, ordinary listening becomes corporate holy listening where one can almost hear the whispers of the Holy Spirit.

Preaching in a multicultural setting is like a dance. You do not need to know the steps; all you need is to follow the rhythm of the music and feel in your body the energy coming from the vibrations of the dance floor.

In the dance of multicultural preaching we are invited to begin with
the familiar, with that which everyone can relate to—the front-page news, the story of a well-known figure in the community, the weather, and the like. Even a comment about an object in the sanctuary, such as a stained-glass window, the baptismal font, the altar, or the cross may prompt an opportunity for establishing rapport. The familiar helps both the preacher and his or her dancing partner to release the anxiety of that first moment. It helps to set an atmosphere of hospitality and mutuality.

In his visit to Athens, Paul provides a great example for captivating an audience’s attention and for making the initial connection. He addresses the community with genuine interest and praise, observing, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22-23).

The next step in the homiletical dance is to move from familiar to more complicated material, guided all along by excellent hermeneutical work. In a multicultural setting, while recognizing and affirming diversity, the message nevertheless should always bring worshipers together in a concrete connection. It should summon listeners to become the visible body of Christ in the community and in the world.

Through the dance with the Word we attempt gracefully to move the dancer from stagnation to action, from indifference to caring, from unbelief to faith. In other words, it is a dance that moves people from sending a check to Habitat for Humanity to actually being involved in building such a house in a Latino barrio. The dance gently but firmly turns people around, from occasionally including a Korean hymn during worship to intentionally developing a multilingual worship service. Perhaps it swings dancers from a casual conversation about sexual orientation to an engaging, discerning Bible study about homosexuality.

Another way of describing multicultural preaching is to call it a vehicle for the reign of God in our midst, with all its many colors and hues. Multicultural preaching must always have an invitation:

To believe for those that do not believe,
To love for those that do not love,
To dream for those that do not dream,
Until that which we wait for becomes a reality.
The homiletical task in a multicultural setting compels us to break down barriers and to confront and dismantle the "isms" that obstruct our path toward justice and peace. The preached Word may serve as a map of the Kingdom that helps people to identify the various sources of healing, joy, restoration, reconciliation, and strength in the Christian journey. It will also help them to recognize the dead ends and dangerous alleys of hypocrisy and bigotry. For preachers, a multicultural location affords the opportunity to take the scenic road toward God's reign, were the imagination is abruptly inspired and the intellect pleasantly disturbed.

Guiding Theological Principles

On February 28, 2002, I participated in the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Multiethnic Center of the Northeast Jurisdiction. I was assigned the theme "Theological Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity for the 21st Century" and asked to provide a theological overview of race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism for the contemporary church.

In my presentation, I stated that multiculturalism is founded on three theological constructs: hospitality, mutuality, and hope. These constructs celebrate our rich diversity, authenticate our connectedness with one another, and recognize God's extravagant grace toward all of us. These same constructs can serve as theological guiding principles in preaching in the midst of another culture.

Hospitality
Multiculturalism is rooted deeply in hospitality—in welcoming the stranger and the foreigner in our midst. The Apostle Paul tells the Ephesians, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). In the words of Eugene Peterson, "You are no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You are no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here." These powerful statements guide the preacher in a multicultural community. They can have a tremendous impact on the life of the recipient of the Word. They can be heard as life-giving and life-transforming.

To practice hospitality is to follow the model Jesus set for us in the upper room. He shared himself with all those gathered around the table. In the mystery of God's grace, this table transcends time, welcoming persons of all ages, cultures, and languages to the paschal meal.
Growing up, even though my family was very small—mom, dad, my younger brother, and me—I always experienced dinner as a special time. The pot of rice and beans was always big. Indeed, our table was always ready to accommodate both invited and unexpected guests. It was around the table, amidst the sharing of stories and nourishment, that I often witnessed the slow transformation of strangers into friends. New friends left the house satisfied with my mother’s or father’s cooking and carrying a bag of goodies for the road.

Paul encouraged the church in Rome to practice "hospitality to strangers" as one of the disciplines of the new Christian community (Rom. 12:13). Gentiles and Jews, men and women were invited to develop a new set of values while dismantling the practices that failed to promote a sense of unity as followers of Christ.

As a guiding principle for preaching amidst different cultures, the practice of hospitality has two expectations: first, welcome all into the household of God; second, send new friends home with a "bag of goodies" to share with others on the road.

**Mutuality**
The second guiding principle is mutuality. "Mutualism" is the belief that mutual dependence is an essential underlying factor in attaining social well-being. It suggests a common interest that binds people together. In his letter to the Romans, Paul invites the believers to be mutually encouraged by one another’s faith (1:12). This is precisely what the preacher in a multicultural setting expects his or her message to do—to encourage and cheer up one another in Christ’s love.

The preacher invites people to be in relationships in which persons are accepted for who they are and in which everyone is treated with dignity, respect, and compassion. This is by no means a novel idea; indeed, it is an ancient gospel commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” . . . “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37, 39).

If one person in the relationship abuses, oppresses, or dominates the other, mutuality is lost, the commandment is broken, and the social well-being of those in the relationship is fractured. In the absence of mutuality, only one person in the relationship benefits.

It is important for the preacher to be cognizant of his or her position
of power and privilege in the pulpit. He or she has the power to preach the gospel and the privilege to serve as God’s instrument in delivering a message. To abuse this power and privilege would be sinful. Mutuality calls for humility and holy listening on the part of the preacher.

Hope

The third guiding principle in preaching amidst different cultures is hope. Through hope, the believer learns to rely with confidence on God’s grace. For multiethnic and multicultural communities, particularly, hope is rooted in the reign of God. Bishop Paruga’s hymn *Tenemos Esperanza* (“We have hope”) powerfully captures the essence of living hope. He writes,

Because Christ came to enter into our journey,
because he broke the silence of our sorrows,
because he filled the whole world with his glory, and came to light the darkness of our morrows.
Because he came a stranger, poor and lowly.
Because he lived, proclaimed love and healing,
Because he opened hearts of hungry people,
And brought life to all who would receive it.

In hope we are forever celebrating.
With courage in our struggles we are waiting,
In trust and reassurance we are claiming,
This is our song of freedom for all people.
In hope we are forever celebrating
With courage in our struggles we are waiting,
In trust and assurance we are claiming
this is our song.\(^1\)

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The incarnate Christ, becoming one of us, experiencing rejection, exile, pain, and suffering, is the midwife of endless hope. There is no doubt that the members of a multicultural community will not be blinded by shallow optimism or demoralized by fatalism. But they will live by an enlivened hope that does not let them down. As Paul says to the Roman church, “Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5).
Jesus was born, raised, and nurtured in a multicultural world of Jews, Romans, and many other ethnic groups desperately wanting to preserve their heritage in a rapidly changing society. Jesus' preaching challenged those who wanted to remain homogeneous and exclusive. His example is one we are invited to follow.

The day of Pentecost provides another example of multicultural preaching. Stephen Rhodes wisely affirms that "the miracle of the first Pentecost was not just that people could proclaim the good news of salvation in other tongues, but that in their diversity of languages, through the power of God's Spirit, they understood one another."12

Invitation

A colleague of mine once observed, "We all preach in the midst of culture." The effective preacher in the twenty-first century is invited to be fully aware of and to recognize the extraordinary diversity of today's church. A congregation may appear homogeneous, but the context in which it lives and does its mission is not.

Faith is at the heart of preaching in a multicultural community—that faith described by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). Thus, the effective preacher also will boldly trust that the Holy Spirit will inspire, guide, and anoint the message God has conceived in the preacher's mind and soul. Prayer, prayer, and more prayer will aid the preacher to use effectively the great variety of resources available for responsible sermon preparation.

Preaching in a multicultural community encourages the congregation and the preacher to claim their role as the body of Christ, with its multiple members and diversity of gifts. Preaching in the midst of a diverse and pluralistic community is deeply spiritual and always aims to bring hope with life-giving words. Are you ready for this exciting task?

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Endnotes


3. Ibid.


9. See the “Hispanic Creed” by Justo Gonzalez in the Spanish hymnal, *Mil Voces Para Celebrar* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1996), 70. This widely used creed is a powerful affirmation of faith founded in the notion of humanity as a highly heterogenous community.


Preaching That Connects for the Twenty-First-Century Hearer: An African Perspective

EBEN K. NHIWATIWA

Preaching is one of the ministries of the Christian church that has regularly received piercing jabs from critics within and outside the community of believers. Thus, it is appropriate that at the cusp of the twenty-first century we assess where we are and where we need to go in regard to the church’s preaching task.

Today’s preacher faces a multitude of questions. One key question is this: How do I preach in a way that truly connects with twenty-first-century hearers? In this essay, I broach this question by examining selected trajectories that are likely to continue to influence the range and scope of preaching. The thrust of the article is that preaching in the twenty-first century must attend to several critical areas: sensitivity to the context in which the gospel is preached, the message, the identity and place of the preacher, the hearer, and the communication of the gospel.

My approach is to dialogue with Western homileticians and interweave the African perspective as the discourse progresses. To talk without a disclaimer about an African perspective is presumptuous. Africa is a continent with a diversity of peoples and cultures. The expansive territorial space and the intricate maze of customs and traditions defy any attempt to view the continent through monolithic lenses. Of course, this does not mean a wholesale rejection of the existence of similarities that cut across nations and form the core substance of singular, common ground for the African people. Yet, for the purpose of this essay, I focus primarily, though not exclusively, on preaching experiences in Zimbabwe.

A Working Definition

Although there is no single definition of preaching, it is important to have some idea about what one thinks is happening when called upon to preach. Definitions of preaching are in themselves significant tools in the study and
practice of preaching. In his Lyman Beecher lectures at Yale University in 1877, Phillips Brooks coined what is surely the most frequently cited definition of preaching.

Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men [sic]. It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality. Neither of these can it spare and still be preaching. The truest truth, the most authoritative statement of God's will, communicated in any other way than through the personality of brother man to men is not preached truth. ¹

The habit of viewing preaching as essentially communication has gained momentum through the years.² For the African context, the idea that preaching is sifted through the preacher's personality is most appealing. The character of the preacher is reflected as a sine qua non variable in the preaching event.

Another helpful definition that resonates well with African experience comes from J.I. Packer. Packer defines preaching as "incarnational communication from God, prophetic, persuasive and powerful—that is, power-full." Preaching is prophetic in that the words of the preacher "must carry the word of the God who speaks." Further, preaching is persuasive in that the aim is to win disciples for Jesus Christ. Finally, preaching is power-full because there is a close-knit relationship between the word of God and the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that makes the word pierce the hearts of the hearers.³ Any definition of preaching that takes account of the preacher as prophet, whose role is to preach "power-full" and persuasive sermons under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, will be positively received both by the African preacher and by the hearers of the gospel. These two definitions are not exhaustive, but they are adequate as a starting point for the purpose of this essay.

Contextual Preaching
Twenty-first-century preachers will be called upon to continue to search and name the prevailing contexts in which the gospel is to be preached. Such contexts can be viewed at two levels. First is the global level, in which human beings, by virtue of their creatureliness, experience fears, anxiety, despair, joy, peace, and happiness, irrespective of the particularities of the causes of such feelings and experiences. It is important for preachers to
remember the global nature of preaching. It is an exercise in myopia when homileticians urge preachers to know their immediate contexts at the expense of global awareness. The gospel is inherently universal; otherwise it would have been impossible to preach Jesus Christ outside the geographical and cultural borders of Palestine. The second contextual level of which the preacher should be aware is the local level—the nitty-gritty of a given culture. Contextual preaching requires that the preacher, the message, the ways and means of communicating the gospel, and the person in the pew—all be considered within specific contexts.

In attempting to chart the way for preaching in the twenty-first century, we need to understand our context in the new century, albeit less than a decade old. As early as 1930, Carl Wallace Petty characterized the hearers of the gospel of his time as a "tough-minded generation," whose preoccupation was the search for wealth. What excited his generation was technological advancement, anchored in the belief in the power of education for personal redemption. While there is a vast difference between technological advancement in the 1930s and today, the fact still holds that technology is having the dominant impact on people's lives, especially in the developed countries.

Years later, John Stott would acknowledge the difficulty in trying to imagine what the world would look like in the year 2000. He predicted that computers would likely be as common as calculators were at the time of his prognostications. Stott stated,

We should certainly welcome the fact that the silicon chip will transcend human brain-power... Much less welcome will be the probable reduction of human contact as the new electronic network renders personal relationships ever less necessary. In such a dehumanised society the fellowship of the local church will become increasingly important, whose members meet one another, and talk and listen to one another in person rather than on screen.

Stott even postulated that this person-to-person contact in communicating the gospel in an atmosphere of "mutual love, speaking and hearing of the word of God is likely to become more necessary for the preservation of our humanness, not less."

The African scenario is still spared a number of the vicissitudes being experienced in the West as a result of the Enlightenment and technological advancement. Africans are on the receiving end of the fruits of these
epochs in human history rather than equal participants in them. Consequently, the widespread secularism and the resultant decrease in church membership in some mainline denominations are not yet common experiences in African societies. There is no vocal challenge to preaching or to the role of Christianity in general. Few African preachers intentionally try to address the issue of how preaching should be done in this or that era. It is not that preaching is at its best in the African churches; rather, the environment is still conducive to the proclamation of the gospel.

Some of the issues now being voiced about preaching within the Western context are anathema in most African societies. Take, for instance, David C. Norrington’s expression of disdain for the position of the preacher and the sermon: “By using the regular sermon, the preacher proclaims each week, not in words, but in the clearest manner possible, that, be the congregation never so gifted, there is present, for that period, one who is more gifted and all must attend in silence upon him (less often her).” The rest of Norrington’s book argues for the substitution of preaching with other forms of ministries, such as Bible study and group meetings to enhance communities. With rare exceptions, if any, the African preacher still enjoys pulpit bliss with all the support one could expect from the congregants.

While the context of the Western preacher can now be described as “postmodern,” many Africans in rural areas have yet to see an electric bulb. Postmodernism, we are told, has no regard for universal knowledge and claims to absolute truth, be it in religion or in any other sector of human experience. Knowledge consists of sets of propositions that one could espouse or reject depending on the current mood. But is it advisable and wise for African preachers to be complacent and regard the rise of secularism in the West as remote to their own context? In their book Secularism in Africa: A Case Study: Nairobi City, Aylward Shorter and Edwin Onyancha raise a word of caution for the African preacher. The study calls for a reassessment of the widely held conviction that Africans are wholly religious in all aspects of life. Shorter and Onyancha refer to Pope John Paul II’s observation that there is a hovering threat of secularism over the horizon of the African continent. In summary, secularism “refers to a situation in which religious faith for one reason or another is felt to be superfluous.”

There are signs that urban residents in Africa are beginning to adopt Western lifestyles. Not only are there seeds of secularism in the religious
soil of contemporary Africa but also emerging forms of individualism and sheer greed. What does one make of a story that appeared in a government-owned newspaper in Zimbabwe, titled, “Mortician arrested for stealing corpses to purchase fuel”? Zimbabwe is going through a period of excruciating economic hardships resulting in the scarcity of basic commodities, with fuel shortages being the most prominent. The significance of this story for African preaching, especially in Zimbabwe, is that the sanctity of human life is readily being flaunted. African cultures have never questioned the intrinsic value of the human being. When Africans read that human beings are created in God’s image, it merely confirms their high regard for the value of human life. Notwithstanding the political oppression and ill treatment of citizens on the continent, the African, steeped in traditional social and religious values, is taught to treat other beings with dignity and respect. Indeed, this respect is extended unreservedly to the dead.

Thus, the twenty-first century may mark a watershed in African preaching, not in terms of a paradigm shift in the way Africans are regarded as inherently religious but rather in terms of a deeper awareness of context. In the new century, contextual preaching will continue to call upon preachers in all cultures to be cognizant of both their global and their immediate surroundings. In understanding his or her culture, though, the preacher should be conscious of the pitfall of glorifying the hearer’s culture. The African preacher must be constantly aware of this temptation. Instead, contextual preaching should give the preacher the opportunity uncompromisingly to address those cultural traits that are overtly contrary to the texture and tenor of the gospel.

**Message**

Anyone familiar with books on preaching has probably noticed a preponderance of focus on the method of communicating the message instead of on its content. In as much as homileticians become innovative in ways of sharing the gospel, a balance should be struck so that the content of the message is not relegated to the periphery. As one author put it, “For some preachers . . . fads in communication become more stimulating than the message.” In assessing Wesley’s preaching, Richard Heitzenrater notes that “Wesley’s ability to gather a crowd and hold their attention was grounded in what he said, rather than how he said it.”

Of course, a cursory glance at Wesley’s sermons leaves one with a
feeling that they were "heavy" on the ear. Faith, grace, sanctification, Christian perfection—these were not "light" topics. Or take Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14-36. Who would dare preach in this way and still expect an enthusiastic response from twenty-first-century hearers? And yet it was the very stuff of Jesus' death and resurrection that led Peter's hearers to respond, "Brothers, what should we do?" (v. 37). Sermon analysis shows that Peter used the narrative approach, starting from the familiar territory of the patriarchies and proceeding to the unknown factor of the crucified Messiah. The Apostle was conversant with the traditional beliefs of his people and contextualized his message accordingly. When all is said and done, it was the content, not the method, that made Peter's sermon memorable, even to the present day.

Time and again, Paul would remind his hearers that he had only one message to preach—Christ, crucified and resurrected from the dead. Likewise, the message of the crucified Christ was central to John Wesley's sermons. One of Wesley's contemporaries, Johan Henrik Liden of the University of Uppsala, Sweden, upon visiting England in 1769, had this to say about Wesley's preaching as compared with that of Wesley's fellow English preachers.

It is unpardonable that during the blessed Passion Week it never is preached a word about the Suffering of Jesus, but about entirely other subjects. What is this but to be ashamed of the Cross of Jesus which however for ever is the foundation of our salvation? This is the real reason why Mr. Wesley created so great attention by his sermons, because he spoke of a crucified Saviour and faith in his merits—such the people never had heard. Educated people pronounced this doctrine enthusiastic and heretic—just as if not the greatest heresy is to forget Christ.13

Twenty-first-century preachers could expect to be confronted with similar attitudes toward the gospel. The temptation remains the same, namely, to neglect to preach Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected.

In the prologue to his book *The Preacher: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word That Moved America*, Richard Lischer gives the impression that it is a matter of surprise that Americans willingly gave an ear to King, whose point of reference in his speeches was overtly Christian. The thrust of Lischer's account, among other things, is an analysis of the rhetorical...
strategies that attracted hearers to King’s oratory. However, early in the book, Lischer observes that the content of King’s message proved equally magnetic. On top of the myriad sociopolitical issues raised in the speeches, King always had a “message from another realm—a spiritual standard that informs and judges this world and ultimately promises to save it from corruption.” One could say that that “other realm” was the anticipation of the dawn of a new age as encapsulated in the Sermon on the Mount. An upbeat method of rhetoric without an equally upbeat message would not have sustained King in his struggle for civil rights. On the other hand, Steve Harper reminds preachers of the importance of a personal commitment to and experience of the Christian faith. The call to personal faith should be the focal point in preaching. He points out that “the message of personal salvation is not going forth consistently in the Church. . . . Too many churches have settled into a moralistic view of Christianity that is fundamentally humanistic rather than Christo-centric.”

**Issues Related to the Message**

Reference to the message has implications for the relationship of preaching to the word of God and to the hermeneutical process, as well as for the question of the authority of the Bible.

First, every preacher should take a stand on what he or she understands by “the Word of God.” The preached message is intricately related to the Word of God. In African culture the spoken word carries much weight. Until recently, it was viewed as a sign of disrespect to invite relatives to a wedding by sending a card. The honorable way is to dispatch the invitation by word of mouth. For Africans, the word has the potential to do good or to do harm, to heal or to condemn. The African will concur with the prophet Ezekiel when he said, “I the LORD will speak the word that I will speak, and it will be performed” (Ezek. 12:25a). According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Word of God is Jesus Christ. “Christ is not only present in the word of the Church but also as the word of the Church, i.e., as the spoken word of preaching.” This is the view African preachers and others ought to take into the pulpit in the twenty-first century.

Second is the preacher’s understanding of the role and place of the Bible in the proclamation of the gospel. For the African preacher, the sufficiency of Scripture—the notion that the Bible contains all that is necessary for human salvation—is a given. Africans are not yet at a stage where the
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Bible's place and authority are being questioned. It causes the African preacher considerable spiritual anguish to be informed of the "wide chasm" between the world of the Bible and the modern world, which prompts many contemporary preachers to shy away from using the Bible as the authentic and authoritative source for preaching.19

Most, if not all, African preachers would agree with John Kurewa when he says,

My observation is that, indeed, the African church regards the Bible as central in its life, overwhelmingly biblical. I have also followed the preaching of some of the independent and charismatic churches in Zimbabwe, and have been equally impressed by their recognition of the centrality of the Bible in the life of their communities.20

In an analysis of sermons in Zimbabwe, I concluded that the Bible is taken "as the inspired Word of God which is used to validate the points the preachers raise in sermons."21 Twenty-first-century preachers might do well to reclaim the central role of the Bible in preaching.

Third are issues of hermeneutics. The preached word should be the product of a multifaceted approach to biblical interpretation; that is, the preacher should be open to a variety of vantage points from which to read and interpret the Bible. For example, in discussing a liberation ethic, Bonganjalo Goba proposes an analytical-materialist approach to the biblical text. There is need for an "analytical reading of our world" as an entry point to unlocking the meaning of the Bible. The interpreter should first "acquire epistemological lenses and concepts before we encounter the world of the Bible analytically."22 Thus, in the search for meaning, the preacher must interface her or his worldview with that of the Bible. Still in the paradigm of liberation theology, Diego Irarrazaval raises what he calls "people's hermeneutics," according to which people read Scripture not to interpret the text but to interpret their lives with the aid of the Bible. The "meaning" of the Bible is more than a mental concept; "it is also consolation and strength felt by the heart and carried out by 'works' of salvation."23

Standard biblical commentaries no longer withstand the scrutiny of a "hermeneutics of suspicion." These commentaries attend to the meaning of the biblical text through form criticism and the historical-critical method but at the expense of understanding the community to which the text is
addressed. Further, they separate exegesis from expository tasks by assigning different authors to the process of interpretation. For the African preacher, "biblical interpretation, systematic theology, moral and pastoral theology; all should be connected with the actual situation in Africa." Similarly, from the perspective of pastoral care, C.M. Mwikamba notes that, to be effective, spiritual leaders and African clergy should "interpret and contextualize the Bible for both their personal and community spiritual enrichment." Feminist theologians are calling for biblical interpretation free from gender stereotypes and patriarchal images, which limit preaching to seeing the world from a male, dominant position. "Preaching does not only interpret the gospel of God's love," asserts Annette Noller, "but it also interprets our reality and reconstructs our relationships in an implicit or explicit way."

Such a multifaceted hermeneutical approach is indispensable for effective preaching in the twenty-first century. To the African preacher it is the message of hope needed to lift the hearer out of the ashes of hopelessness that has engulfed most of the African societies today. The effective message speaks of an omnipotent and omnipresent God able to subdue and overcome all forms of fear. Last, it is a message that does not shy away from preaching Christ crucified and resurrected.

The Preacher's Niche

Homiletical components cannot be examined completely in isolation from one another. One's understanding of the identity of the preacher may be preconditioned by one's view of the place and role of the Bible in the whole scheme of preaching. Similarly, the message and manner of delivery can be influenced by the way the preacher perceives the hearers. In any event, the preacher's identity and place in the preaching event require sustained attention.

Thomas Long has identified various images that have been assigned to the preacher at different times in history. He settled on the preacher as a witness. Among the images he discussed, however, the preacher as the herald is more germane to the African perception of preaching. The herald speaks what has been given to him or her. Here the African preacher and hearer identify once more with Ezekiel: "He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat" (Ezek. 3:1-2).
majority of people in rural Africa have not even heard of computers or email messages. In some cases, even a telephone is available only to the privileged few. Messages are still passed on by sending someone from one hut or village to another. At most gatherings where information is being shared, it is common to hear the messenger say, "I have been sent by the chief . . ." In such a context, the preacher may appropriately see himself or herself as the herald sent by God to pass on the message. The congregation cooperates by shielding the herald from a sense of loneliness in the pulpit. Such support of spiritual and emotional warmth and welcome to the pulpit are usually extended through song and prayer. The songs and prayers implore God to give the preacher the message and to "hide" his or her face from the people so that only the presence of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit is felt. I remember vividly the experience I had at a Methodist Sunday service in Durban, South Africa. A group of men and women accompanied the preacher from his seat to the pulpit amid exuberant fanfare in the atmosphere of worship. With such physical and emotional assurance no preacher can afford the careless luxury of taking preaching lightly.

Contrary to the Western notion that because the preacher is a human being therefore "[w]hat is at stake . . . is the humanizing of preaching," Africans want the preacher's humanity in the pulpit to give way to the divine side of proclaiming the gospel. For them, a preacher answers to the divine calling—indeed, African church members hold the idea of a "call" in high regard. To them, the fact that a clear understanding of what constitutes a call can be illusive at times is inconsequential. Africans will concur with Henry Mitchell's claim that the person of the preacher is rooted in the call.

Another issue is the character of the preacher. To be sure, African believers acknowledge that the preacher is "a man [woman] of their own coasts—since the preacher is not an alien among those to whom he or she speaks the word of God; he or she is, indeed, in geography and in condition one of those to whom the word is borne, 'one of their own coasts.'" But when it comes to the moral uprightness of the preacher, Africans would rather have him or her behave as if he or she were living on another planet and were above all manner of human frailty. That the preacher is an earthen vessel should be referred to only as a polite expression of humility and not as an excuse for engaging in immorality. George Sweazey points out that hearers like the preacher before they like the sermon and, conse-
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quently, "the emotional response to a sermon is closely connected with the emotional response to the preacher." Bishop Abel Muzorewa indirectly referred to the centrality of the character of the preacher in this comment about his father: "My father's deep religious convictions, and the irreproachable life in which he lived out what he preached on Sundays, left an indelible impression upon me." For the African preacher, and hopefully elsewhere, hearers of the gospel will continue to expect their preachers to live what they preach. In this sense the saying that the "medium is the message" remains true for the preacher in the new century. Christians are privileged to expect their preachers to enter into moral covenants of trust with them. As our societies become increasingly secular, the demand will grow for preachers to live exemplary lives.

Enter the Hearer

At the center of any homiletical thought is the hearer. Much of the criticism being leveled against preaching has to do with perceived barriers that prevent clear communication and total connection between pulpit and pew. However, there are encouraging trends in which the position of the hearer takes center stage. One may begin by assessing the auditory world and environment in which the listener finds him- or herself. It is a world in which the good news of the gospel threatens to be overwhelmed by bad news. The horrific attacks of September 11, 2001, continue a litany of incidents of violence and horror around the world, raising to new levels a sense of fear, despondency, and insecurity.

In Africa, the hope that the end of colonial rule would usher in a new period of freedom across the continent has been dashed by continued fighting, war, and displacement of people. Unbridled greed, rampant corruption, political oppression, disregard of human dignity, the AIDS pandemic—these are now integral aspects of life in most African nations. Engelbert Mveng, SJ., poignantly captured this miserable state of affairs when he notes that Africa today is "a horrible and lamentable battlefield of famine, AIDS, tribal wars and genocide." This is the context in which the person in the pew listens to the proclamation of the good news. The challenge facing both preacher and church in the twenty-first century is this: Which news will overcome the other—the good news or the bad news?

Preachers and hearers need to engage in a partnership in which the
preacher hears what the people are hearing and the people confirm that the preacher truly is in touch with their world. Myron Chartier has defined active, effective listening in communication as

the quest for meaning and understanding. More than the physical process of hearing, listening is an intellectual and emotional process in which a person integrates physical, emotional, and intellectual abilities in an active, emphatic search for meaning. It is incumbent upon the preacher to remember that the hearer will be searching for meaning behind all forms of rhetorical strategies. The African preacher has been grounded in a tradition that does not separate the actor from the audience—for all are participants at different intervals in the "play" of preaching. This sense of connectedness between preacher and hearer should be strengthened. Fred Craddock is right when he claims that the contemporary preacher is preaching to a hearer with numerous options. No longer do hearers accord the preacher the sole prerogative of the authority of the Word and the pulpit. Improved communication of the gospel will continue to depend on good rapport between preacher and hearer.

Communication through Imagination

When I left Zimbabwe for the U.S. to pursue further study, an article about me in the United Methodist newspaper *Umibo* ("witness") fondly recalled my "imagistic preaching." At the time, it did not dawn on me that the reporter, in analyzing my sermons, inadvertently stumbled on a characteristic of preaching and a method that the gurus in the field of homiletics in the West had yet to consider seriously. Now, I learned my "imagistic" preaching not from my missionary professors but rather from my upbringing: the way my parents used the imagination to narrate the gospel stories; the skill with which the village elders around the campfire at night created whole worlds through their imaginative telling of fables; and, indeed, the whole African community, which constitutes the crucible for shaping young African men and women during their formative years.

Discussing imagination under the rubric of communication does not mean that it is the "end product" of preaching. Imagination can be discussed at any stage of sermon preparation and delivery. Imagination should be the constant companion of every effective preacher from start to
Anyone who has ever responded to a sermon with an enthusiastic "a-ha!" knows the power of creative imagination in the preparation and delivery of a sermon. The fact is, the journey from the ancient world of the Bible to the present can be navigated only by way of the imagination. Africa has not felt the full impact of the Enlightenment, which disparaged any reference to the power of imagination. African preachers are amazed to see Western homileticians encouraging preachers to take the imagination seriously in preaching. They wholeheartedly agree with Craddock: "Imagination is fundamental to all thinking, from the levels of critical reasoning to reverie and daydreaming. . . . Images are not, in fact, to be regarded as illustrative but rather as essential to the form and inseparable from the content of the entire sermon."37

For me, of all the skills that come into play in the process of communicating the gospel, imagination is at the center. Most of the approaches, techniques, skills, and designs proposed for crafting, delivering, or performing sermons implicitly or explicitly incorporate the imagination. Inductive method, storytelling, use of idioms, proverbs, poetic style, dramatic presentation, and any other rhetorical strategy—all take root in the fertile soil of imagination. The idea of preaching as storytelling has substantial purchase in the field of homiletics. But anyone familiar with cultures where stories are part of everyday life would agree that imagination is germane to the art of storytelling. Storytelling demands impromptu, creative imagination.

For imagination to enrich preaching requires some environmental "props." One major such support is the existence of communities of people who freely interact and have time to listen to one another's stories. The rank individualism of Western culture is inimical to storytelling, because telling stories is always a communal activity. Stories are shared experiences between people. Thus, there is interest among homileticians to link preaching to communities in general and especially to the church as the community of believers. As Lischer puts it, "Without the community's performance of the word, the chasm between the Book and contemporary communities of faith is unbridgeable."38 It is true that one of the many purposes of preaching is to build communities. However, preaching also is a response to the existence of communities. When God so loved the world and decided to send the Son, it was in response to the existence of a community of people.

Sometimes it appears that homileticians are merely naming and
renaming the same method or principle under a different guise. Preaching as "performance" has been in circulation for some time. Now some scholars are talking of a sermon as "an open work of art." Hermeneutically, this "open work of art" creates an "aesthetics of reception." The way I see it, an "aesthetics of reception" allows preaching to be palatable to the hearer as an active participant in and through the sermon. All these ideas, we are told, should be classified under the "New Homiletic." Martin Nicol uses the term New Homiletic to refer to the work of authors such as Buttrick, Lowry, and Eslinger. The underlying thrust of these works is that preaching should be a discourse that emanates from the creative work of the imagination. For Nicol, Brueggemann's idea of preaching as poetic should be taken seriously. "For I consider the first eleven pages of his [Brueggemann's] book Finally Comes the Poet to be a treatise on the shape homiletics should take in the future." To what extent does this pattern of homiletics originate in the oasis of imagination? Nicol provides the answer, "Brueggemann's vision is that poetic, imaginative preaching, empowered with the texts of the Bible, will herald the new territory of God's Kingdom." To quote Brueggemann, "This happens when the poet comes, when the poet speaks, when the preacher comes as poet." 39

Creative and effective preaching by any other name will follow the imaginative trail. African preachers are encouraged that imagination, which is the hallmark of storytelling in African communities, is now being espoused as a universal tool for preaching that connects with the hearer. In the West, the germ of the idea of the "New Homiletic" as work of creative performance goes back to Craddock. In his book As One without Authority, Craddock develops an argument for inductive preaching as opposed to the rationalist and propositional deductive method. Craddock helps African preachers to name a characteristic extant not only in sermon development but also in the circles of conversation in the African communities. For example, Ernst Wendland's study of preaching style among the Chechiwa in Malawi has shown inductive preaching to be the normative pattern. An "inductive-relational" style of preaching, he concludes, is more adaptable to communities with closely knit relationships, as is still the case in African societies. 40 Yet, Mitchell's and Lischer's books show that inductive preaching, which demands an imaginative mental framework, has long been part of the tradition of the African-American preacher. African-American preachers trace their rhetorical strategies not to the Greco-
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Roman heritage but to their African roots. Ideally, imagination will continue to distinguish effective communicators of a gospel that connects with the twenty-first-century hearer.

Conclusion

Preaching that connects for the twenty-first century hearer must reclaim the main tenets of proclaiming the gospel. Preachers should focus on the understanding of the context in which people hear the gospel; the crucified and resurrected Christ as the message; the preacher's place and identity as one who responds to the call to ministry; and, finally, ways and means of communicating the gospel imaginatively. Yet, at the end of the day, we can rest assured that the Jesus Christ whom we preach "is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb. 13:8).

Endnotes

6. Ibid.
12. Richard P. Heitzenrater, The Elusive Mr. Wesley, John Wesley as Seen by Contemporaries and Biographers (Nashville: Abingdon), 283.
13. Cited in Heitzenrater, The Elusive Mr. Wesley, 289.
35. Christopher, Preaching as Communication, 51.
36. Craddock, As One without Authority, 14-15.
37. Ibid., 77, 80.
38. Lischer, Preacher King, 217. See also Steimle, Preaching the Story, 39; Buttrick, Homiletic, 262, 268; Craddock, As One without Authority, 43; and Taylor, How Shall They Preach?, 82.
39. For a discussion of the "New Homiletic" and the authors named in this article, see Martin Nicol, "The Art of Preaching Versus the Doctrine of God? The Role Dogmatics Play in Preaching," in Immink and Stark, eds., Preaching: Creating Perspective, 184-95.
In his recent book Affirmations of a Dissenter, United Methodist Bishop C. Joseph Sprague identifies the real issue behind many current conflicts within the denomination as the question of biblical authority. In a chapter devoted to biblical authority, Sprague uses the issue of homosexuality as a foil for exposing the "inconsistent literal reading" of Scripture by conservatives, an approach that earns them the label "neoliteralists." While conservatives have been lenient on divorce, war, and the role of women, he claims, they have responded to the issue of homosexuality with rigid literalism. He makes charges and then raises questions for conservatives:

1 I do hereby dissent from the arrogance of neoliteralism and the cowardly silence of progressives. In dissenting, I ask these questions of neoliteralists. Given your stance on homosexuality, how do you read the words of Jesus on matters related to divorce and remarriage? The taking of human life whether in war or by capital punishment? The gradual, but apparent acceptance of women as leaders in the church? By posing these questions I presuppose that the neoliteralistic methodology demands consistency in biblical interpretation and that the neoliteralists are far from consistent in their interpretation, application, and use of Holy Scripture.

Sprague goes on to deal with each issue in turn—divorce, war, and the role of women. In this article, I respond specifically to Sprague's accusation of conservative bigotry in relation to its acceptance of women. I do this...
first by looking specifically at Sprague's charges and then by reviewing two key New Testament passages: 1 Cor. 14:33b-36 and 1 Tim. 2:8-15.

Sprague's Dramatic Dilemma for Neoliteralists

Sprague celebrates the fact that many women are currently in positions of leadership in United Methodism but then recalls a time when "neoliteralists" opposed their inclusion in ministry. After asking why they have altered their position, he sarcastically asks the rhetorical question of whether it is because the words of Scripture have changed. "Hardly," he answers. Sprague then quotes 1 Tim. 2:9-15:

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man, she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

About this text, Sprague concludes:

This passage presents a dramatic dilemma for neoliteralists as they now point proudly to women leaders in their midst? That is, at face value, the 1 Timothy text about the place of women in leadership in the church (namely, nowhere) is clearly not being followed in their daily practices. What is the biblical hermeneutic at work that makes rather obscure biblical texts definitive and exclusive regarding homosexuality, while the unambiguous statement in 1 Timothy is either ignored or defied?

Sprague again registers his dissent from the neoliteralists' hermeneutic that "makes of scripture a theological and political cafeteria line that suits the political appetite of neoliteralists instead of inviting all of us to feast and be nurtured by the whole biblical offering." Sprague's accusations are very serious, as they question the moral
integrity of those who use Scripture in seeking to uphold the church's position on homosexuality. I believe that a review of conservative interpretive approaches—both inside and outside the United Methodist Church—will show that conservative acceptance of women in ministry has largely been a result of intertextual biblical interpretation rather than a matter of treating Scripture as a "cafeteria line." 9

Women's Roles in the New Testament

A detailed study of every passage relevant to the question of women's roles in the church is beyond the scope of this article. But the two passages that are generally recognized to be integral to the discussion, 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, will be briefly examined. 8

1 Cor. 14:33b-36

This first text of concern reads as follows:

As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?

When Paul instructs the women to "be silent," he uses the Greek word 

silas, which means "to be silent," or "to keep silence." Its corresponding noun, sila, means "silence." 9 Taking this text at face value would mean that women were not allowed to make a sound in the plenary services of first-century congregations. They had to remain "mute." Few scholars, even among the most conservative, would accept this understanding. For example, Robert Rowland suggests that the consequences of a full, literal, and unqualified reading of this passage would be absurd. With tongue in cheek, he writes:

If they are to be silent in the worship assembly, they cannot make public confession in the assembly, but they must make it elsewhere. Nor can they confess faults or solicit prayers, or speak to their husbands, children, or neighbors. They cannot say "Amen." Common courtesy remarks such as, "Excuse me," "Thank you," "Please," or "I'm sorry" could not be uttered. If Paul meant
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"mute" in all the churches, then mute (silent) women must be! Who gave any man or group of men the authority to pick and choose? We want to "have our cake and eat it, too."10

Another writer in the fundamentalist tradition, Rubel Shelly, points out that, indeed, "taken at face value and without qualification, this text likely requires more than anyone has been willing to demand."11 Aside from the problem of inconsistent application in the church, if this is a prohibition of all speaking by all women in all congregations, then Paul has contradicted the instructions he himself gave earlier in the same letter, where he instructed a woman on the propriety of public prayer and prophecy (11:5). Therefore, there must be some cultural or contextual clue to unlocking the meaning of this passage.

Indeed, the key to unlocking the passage comes from its larger context. Paul's strict demand for silence appears in the context of a discussion of congregational gatherings in which the Holy Spirit caused such gifts as tongues and prophecies to be manifested. The immediate context has to do with the authoritative interpretations of those tongues and prophecies. Two or three prophets are to speak, after which others are silent while an authoritative interpretation is given (14:29-33). So the context of 1 Cor. 14:34-35 is Paul's discussion of church order. Apparently, in the relevant verses, Paul's concern is that some women were interrupting during this teaching period of the church service.

Craig S. Keener notes that "informed listeners customarily asked questions during lectures, but it was considered rude for the ignorant to do so." The women who attended these services had less access than men to training in the Scriptures and public reasoning, and so Paul wanted them to stop interrupting the teaching period of the church service. It is not that he did not want them to learn. Indeed, "he provides the most progressive model of his day: their husbands are to respect their intellectual capabilities and give them private instruction."12 Until these women became better acquainted with the Scriptures, they were distracting others and disrupting the order in the church service.14

1 Tim. 2:8-15
The second crucial passage, cited earlier, states that a woman is to "learn in silence"; that she is not "to teach or to have authority over a man"; and that
she is "to keep silent." Conservatives, no less than liberals, have grappled with this text for centuries. I offer five observations.

1. This passage seems to appear in a larger context of instructions regarding congregational life and worship, particularly in light of a specific heresy Timothy was facing in Ephesus. Manfred Brauch offers two possible reconstructions of the situation in Timothy's congregation at Ephesus: First, it may have been that the women in the Ephesian church were the main advocates and promoters of the false teachings, which were disrupting the congregation. Second, it may have been the women in particular who were being especially targeted by the heretical teachers (3:8). So 1 Tim. 2:9-15 appears to have addressed a particular heresy focused on women and women's roles.

2. The context of the entire pericope is that of public prayer. The "like­wise" (hosautos) of v. 9 may be an important interpretive clue: "Although the grammar is not clear on this point, the 'likewise' of 2:9 probably suggests that Paul, who has just instructed the men on how to pray, now turns to instructing the women in the same way." Just as he wants men to pray without arguments, so Paul wants women to pray "in modest clothing." Both instructions are given in the context of public prayer.

3. The Greek words aner and gune may be better translated here "husbands" and "wives" rather than "men" and "women." The American Standard Version translates aner as "husband" 29 times and gune as "wife" 33 times. And these renderings seem to be suggested by the immediate context, in which Paul mentions Adam, Eve, and childbearing, a possibility limited to husband-wife relationships. So rather than having given instruction for men and women in general, he may have been giving these admonitions for husbands and wives in the Ephesian congregation.

4. Readers must have an awareness of the assumptions of the text. Some fundamentalists, such as Bob Berard, writing in Contending for the Faith, criticize those who struggle with these hard texts for making assumptions in areas where the text is unclear. However, other conservative interpreters recognize that there are assumptions made even within the text itself, due to the occasional nature of the epistles. Paul's letters were situational, addressing specific situations with which he and the recipient were familiar but which we can only infer or "assume." Indeed, it is clear that in this text Paul is not urging the lifting up of hands; rather, he assumes the practice. Rather, his wish is that when prayer occurs, it takes
place without the arguing described in 6:3-5. Likewise, despite his instruction that "if she would learn anything, let her ask at home (1 Cor. 14:35), it is clear that Paul assumes here that women are learning as part of the assemblies. And, while Paul wants the women to continue to learn in the assemblies, he is again concerned with the manner in which they learn." He explains that they are to learn in ἑσυχία, which refers to a demeanor, not to total silence.

5. Paul's appeal to Genesis does not have to do with an "order of creation" argument in which man is seen as superior, while woman is more emotional, as demonstrated in the Fall, and therefore unsuited for leadership. But the creation account in Gen. 1-2 affirms male and female as equal and complementary. Men and women bear God's image together (1:26-27), and together they hold responsible sovereignty over the created order (1:28). Woman's creation is for the purpose of delivering man from his loneliness as well as to provide him with a complement (2:18). Indeed, the creation account of Genesis is polemical.

Over against an ancient view that the gods played a trick on man by creating woman of inferior material, the creation account of Genesis affirms the woman to be of the same essence as man ("bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh"—Gen. 2:23). Thus the view that God intended the woman for a restricted role in home, church and society cannot be grounded in the order of creation.

The creation account is not recorded to give readers an "order of creation" or a model for hierarchy but to explain the nature and purpose of the creation of man and woman. That is, the creation account explains to readers that man was incomplete and woman was created as a complement. In regard to the Genesis text's relevance for the Ephesian church, Thomas Geer concludes,

When, in this instance, the intended complementary relationship between man and woman is destroyed due to the domineering attitude of the women, Paul's appeal to remember that woman was created after man is not an appeal for a return to male dominance and female subjection, but to return to a complementary role.

Indeed, the curse of Genesis 3:16—"Your desire shall be for your..."
husband, and he shall rule over you"—does not report God’s created design for a male hierarchy.

Rather, these words announced a cursed existence because of a broken relationship between the human creation and the Creator. A restricted place for woman, and male-over-female dominance, is thus not the divine purpose but an expression of human sin.32

In light of these five considerations, it appears that the heresy in the Ephesian church was one to which the female members were particularly susceptible because of their lack of opportunity for education in the Scriptures. Much of the false teaching in Ephesus was being spread through the women of the congregation. Craig Keener concludes,

Presumably, Paul wants them to learn so that they could teach. If he prohibits women from teaching because they are unlearned, his demand that they learn constitutes a long-range solution to the problem. Women unlearned in the Bible could not be trusted to pass on its teachings accurately, but once they had learned, this would not be an issue, and they could join the ranks of women colleagues in ministry whom Paul elsewhere commands.33

Paul does not seem to be speaking in universal language here. Rather, he has addressed the men’s problems, which he has heard about; and he likewise addresses the women’s problems with which he became familiar. Therefore, Paul’s counsel here seems to be specific to the problems of the Ephesian church. In light of these tentative conclusions, Thomas Geer deliberates over the question of how to apply this passage to the modern church.

We are not living in first-century Ephesus, nor are we first-century people. . . . Just because Paul wanted the wives in Ephesus not to teach, it does not necessarily follow that he wanted all women in all places and in all times to behave in exactly the same way.34

But, indeed, the principle of the text does apply. The conflict in Ephesus led Paul to prohibit the women there from teaching; and the letter as a whole implies that no male teachers influenced by false teachers ought
to be allowed to teach either. Those men or women sufficiently taught, and whose doctrine was not stained by heresy, were free to teach. "When freedoms do not disrupt the worship and health of a congregation, Paul supports those freedoms."\textsuperscript{15}

If these two texts, 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, are to give any guidance in the discussion of women's roles, then they must be interpreted in light of Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer male or female" in Christ. There is no hint of inequality between the sexes in Gen. 1:26-30; it is only at the Fall that this begins to emerge (Gen. 3:16). Sexual discrimination has prevailed since the Fall. While Old Testament society was patriarchal, Jesus' attitude toward women during his ministry was revolutionary in its implications and, following his ministry, the prominence of women increased in the early church. In Gal. 3:28, Paul reveals God's ideal, as expressed prior to the Fall, which should now begin to be implemented in Christ.\textsuperscript{36} The church should serve as a catalyst for moving toward the ideal held out by Paul.

Conclusion

This brief article has sought to use the role of women as a test case for Sprague's accusation that conservatives have been lenient on scriptural interpretation in the case of women's roles but legalistic in terms of how they have responded to homosexuality. I have sought to show that the acceptance of increased roles for women in the church, including ordination, has not been an acquiescence to political pressures but rather the result of careful biblical study.\textsuperscript{37} Conservatives have sought to be consistent in their hermeneutical approach to Scripture.

It is not clear, however, that hermeneutical approaches or exegetical processes are the crux of the issue here. For, while Sprague laments "the nearly unchallenged takeover of the biblical high ground" by "neoliteralists" and claims to affirm "that the Bible is and ever shall be the primary source of authority for all Christians,"\textsuperscript{38} he also writes that, in the discussion about the role of women, "retreat to the words of 1 Timothy as sacred Truth (words written not by Paul but by an anonymous veteran leader of the early church in the second century) is nonsensical."\textsuperscript{39} Whether 1 Timothy was pseudonymously authored or not, it does appear that Sprague is absolutely correct about what is central in the religio-political battle over homosexuality: biblical authority.\textsuperscript{40}
Endnotes

1. C. Joseph Sprague, *Affirmations of a Dissenter* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 21. In this article, I use the terms liberal and conservative. While recognizing that they are not completely accurate and not necessarily always representative of those being described, I feel that Sprague’s terms—neoliteralist and progressive—are too laden with inappropriate implications to be useful. Neoliteralist sounds pejorative and progressive implies that those who hold more conservative or traditional views are somehow regressive and/or repressive.

2. Ibid., 22.

3. Sprague notes here that the Confessing Movement and the Institute for Religion and Democracy both have women in key leadership positions.


5. Ibid.


7. The following textual interpretations are excerpted from my book, *A Heritage in Crisis: Where We’ve Been, Where We Are, and Where We’re Going in the Churches of Christ* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 92-96, and are used by permission of the publisher.

8. The reader should also examine the role of women in the ministry of Jesus, in the apostolic church, in the Pauline churches, the roll call of Paul’s workers
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in Romans 16, and the "no longer male and female" passage of Galatians 3:28.
13. It may also be that these instructions were to "wives" who were interrupting their husbands as they (the husbands) attempted to give an interpretation to a tongue or prophecy. If γυνή in 14:33b-35 were translated as "wives," it would then be instructing wives to cease interrupting their husbands' interpretations, waiting until they got home to discuss them.
14. Further attention should be given to 1 Cor. 11:2-16. James D.G. Dunn draws attention to an often-neglected point: when Paul deals with the question of a woman's ministering in the assembly, he approaches it as an issue of "authority." Paul's instructions were not for the purpose of restricting women's prophesying but "that their prophesying might, with a 'proper' hairstyle, not be distracting" and thereby be authoritative. See James D.G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 589-91.
16. For detailed discussions, see David M. Scholer, "1 Timothy 2.9-15 and the Place of Women in the Church's Ministry," and Catherine Clark Kroeger, "1 Timothy 2:12—A Classicist's View," in Alvera Mickelsen, Women, Authority and the Bible (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 193-244.
20. Figures given in the context of Rowland's discussion, 87-88.
21. Thomas C. Geer, Jr., "Admonitions to Women in 1 Timothy 2.8-15," in
26. “Lifting up holy hands” is a circumstantial participial phrase.
28. The word for “quietness” in 2:10 is the same word that is used for the “quiet life” of the community in 2:2. The community is obviously called not to a life of mute silence but to a life characterized by a peaceful demeanor.
33. Keener, The IVP Bible Background Commentary, 112.
35. Ibid., 302.
37. See endnote 6.
38. Sprague, Affirmations of a Dissenter, 21-22.
39. Ibid., 33. The parenthetical statement is his; the italics are mine.
40. Ibid., 20.
Response to Ralph K. Hawkins

TEX SAMPLE

Ralph Hawkins takes up Joseph Sprague's challenge to neoliteralists' "inconsistent literal reading" of Scripture, electing to address especially Sprague's "accusation of conservative bigotry in relation to its [the neoliteralist's] acceptance of women." In the limitations of space assigned me here, I can only take up a few concerns in a paper that is problematic throughout.

My first concern is that of Hawkins's characterization of Sprague's charges. In the quotations from Sprague that Hawkins uses, Sprague accuses the neoliteralists of "arrogance" and of "inconsistent literal reading," not of "bigotry." Hawkins needs to stay with the Sprague quote he uses, not with Hawkins's reconstructive characterizations.

Later, he quotes Sprague's dissent from the interpretations of neoliteralists that "makes of Scripture a theological and political cafeteria line that suits the political appetite of neoliteralists instead of inviting all of us to feast and be nurtured by the whole biblical offering." Hawkins then accuses Sprague of questioning "the moral integrity of those who use Scripture in seeking to uphold the church's position on homosexuality." Certainly, Sprague does accuse the neoliteralists of a theological and political reading of Scripture. Here, again, Hawkins would do well to attack the Sprague quote Hawkins uses, not a charge he does not make there. You can certainly argue that a point of view is theologically and politically determined without necessarily accusing the people who hold that view of a lack of moral integrity. They could, for example, simply be ideologically consumed.

Hawkins turns to 1 Cor. 14:33 and 1 Tim. 2:8-15 to demonstrate his belief "that a review of conservative interpretive approaches . . . will show that conservative acceptance of women in ministry has largely been a result of intertextual biblical interpretation rather than a matter of treating Scripture as a 'cafeteria line.'" (291)

It is important to note that Hawkins has shifted the argument in two ways. First, he has changed Sprague's term neoliteralist to conservative. Hawkins gives his reasons in endnote 1; but if Sprague meant to say conservative, I suspect he would have used that term. Hawkins needs to stay with
Sprague’s argument. Furthermore, arguments against a conservative approach—for example, a critique of Richard Hays’s work on Rom. 1:24-27—will take a different shape from those against a neoliteralist view.

Second, Hawkins admits that he is working with “conservative interpretive approaches” (391, italics mine). This is an important admission—one that some seem unwilling to make with their emphasis on the “literal” reading of the text. As we shall see below, Hawkins really does do an “interpretive approach.” In this sense, he is not a literalist. (Incidentally, I agree with Stanley Fish’s claim that no one can read a text “literally.” Everyone reads a text as part of a community of interpretation. Certainly Hawkins does, as we shall see.)

In Hawkins’s “conservative interpretive approach” any number of questions need to be raised. The first is his use of the notion of “larger context.” Hawkins restricts “larger context” to the biblical text in question. He alludes to the larger societal, patriarchal context only twice: once in a comment that Paul “provides the most progressive [an interesting choice of word] model of his day . . .” (292) and the other when, in conceding that “Old Testament society was patriarchal,” he notes Jesus’ revolutionary attitude toward women and “the increased prominence of women in the early church.” (296) (Observe here that Hawkins does not mention the patriarchal character of New Testament society.) Throughout the paper he ignores the influence of the larger patriarchal context. But the fact is, the cultural frameworks of Scripture are a condition of the text. These cannot be avoided by a tendentious use of the “larger context” of a pericope that brackets out this patriarchal influence.

Second, Hawkins uses approvingly Craig Keener’s observation that “[the women . . . had less access than men to training in the Scriptures and public reasoning . . .] This is why Paul wanted “them to stop interrupting the teaching period of the church service.” (292) Do Hawkins and Keener actually believe that all the men exclusively had this access to training and public reasoning but that no woman did? This is a tendentious claim and presumes knowledge of that specific context that neither of them has. Note here, too, that he avoids a discussion of 1 Cor. 14:33b-34, where Paul says, “As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent.” Again, this is no situational or occasional claim, at least for “all the churches” of that time.

Third, Hawkins’s use of the situational and occasional character of the epistles of Paul is troublesome in terms of the logic he uses and reports
from others: for example, in his discussion of 1 Tim. 2:8-15. Note Manfred Brauch's "two possible reconstructions" of the situation in the congregation at Ephesus. Brauch argues that "it may have been that the women were the main advocates and promoters of false teaching, which were disrupting the congregation." (293) He then argues, as approvingly reported by Hawkins, that "it may have been the women in particular who were being especially targeted by the heretical teachers (3:8)." (293) Then Hawkins states, "So, 1 Tim. 2:9-15 appears to have addressed a particular heresy focused on women and women's roles" (293, italics mine). To argue that something "may have been" (twice!) and then that it "appears to have addressed" is an unjustified leap in logic.

Yet more, by the time Hawkins lays out his five points, he quotes with approval Thomas Geer's claim that "the intended complementary relationship between man and woman is destroyed due to the domineering attitude of the women." (294) What Hawkins does here is to take his "may-have-been" and "so-it-appears-to-be" logic to arrive at a conclusion that the problem is the "domineering attitude of the women." His interpretation is not "in the text" but rather reads, quite candidly, like blaming the women in order to avoid owning up to the patriarchal and hierarchical influences in 1 Timothy.

Notice, too, that, in his discussion of 1 Tim. 2:12, Hawkins drops the underlined phrase "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man" (italics mine). Hawkins rephrases this: "a woman . . . is not to teach or to have authority over a man." (292, italics mine) This softens 1 Timothy's more absolute statement. "I permit no woman" is hardly an occasional or situational statement, as Hawkins claims. Further, 1 Timothy supports this claim by noting the order in which Adam and Eve were created, not only from his argument that Eve, not Adam, was deceived in the Fall. This order gives precedence to men, as 1 Timothy states: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve . . . At this point and others, Hawkins's discussion fails to see the hierarchical and patriarchal influences in both the Creation and the Fall as recorded in Genesis and as argued in this passage from 1 Timothy.

Finally, it is interesting that Hawkins quotes Sprague's comment that 1 Timothy as eternal truth is "nonsensical" and concludes from this that "Sprague is absolutely correct about what is central in the religio-political battle over homosexuality: biblical authority." (296) Yet, Hawkins himself places the 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy passages in "larger" and more "immediate contexts" and sees these as making "occasional" and "situ-
tional" claims in order to argue that these passages are not binding on women in all times and places. Thus, to defend "conservative" interpretations against Sprague's charges, Hawkins renders these texts contextual, occasional, and situational, and therefore not eternally true. Hawkins may quarrel, perhaps, with Sprague's use of the word nonsensical, but he finally agrees with Sprague that these two texts are not eternal truth. Further, what Hawkins's paper does is to illustrate that the issue is not biblical authority but rather the character of biblical authority and of biblical interpretation. But Hawkins's inadequate use of context, his misuse of logic, and his tendentious readings of texts are neither a good instance of conservative hermeneutics nor the kind of critique Sprague's work needs.

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Rejoinder to Tex Sample

RALPH K. HAWKINS

I appreciate Dr. Sample’s response to my article but must take issue with him on a number of points. My comments will be limited to the 1 Timothy passage, where Sample focuses his attention.

1. Throughout Sample’s response, he assumes that patriarchalism and hierarchalism inform Paul’s writing of the texts in question. To assume, for example, that Paul’s instruction to the women/wives in 1 Timothy is an insistence that they be submissive to men is just that—an assumption. The text says nothing about to whom the women are to be submissive. It would seem more consistent with Pauline theology to suggest that he is urging obedience to God, not patriarchy.

2. Despite Sample’s accusations that I "ignore" the larger, patriarchal context (301), it is within the context of patriarchalism—both in the Old and New Testament periods—that I seek to interpret the texts under discussion.
Sample argues that my interpretation is "not 'in the text' but rather reads, quite candidly, like blaming the women in order to avoid owning up to the patriarchal and hierarchical influences in 1 Timothy" (302). In my reconstruction, Paul's comments are not geared toward blaming the women, but towards supporting their freedoms. The conflict in Ephesus led Paul to prohibit the women there from teaching. The letter in its entirety suggests that any male teachers influenced by false teachers should not teach either. Men or women who had been sufficiently taught and whose doctrine remained free of heresy were free to teach. Along this line, Paul's instructions were given not to prevent women from learning Christian doctrine but to permit their learning of it: "Let a woman learn" (v. 11). My argument sees Paul not as "blaming" women but as empowering them.

Recall that women did have teaching roles and offices in the New Testament church (e.g., Titus 2:3-4). Paul's instructions here were not that a woman could not teach but that they needed to conduct themselves in such a way as not to usurp authority over teachers who had already been duly designated. Yes, the women are enjoined to be 'silent'; but I have argued that this is a poor translation (291-92, 294). The word ἡσυχία refers to a demeanor rather than to total silence. Paul and others impose this same demeanor for men in several other passages (e.g., Acts 22:2).

3. Sample says, "'I permit no woman' is hardly an occasional or situational statement, as Hawkins claims" (302). On the contrary, Paul's statement here seems to have been particularly addressed to the situation at Ephesus, since he endorses women in leadership roles in other places (e.g., Rom. 16:1-3).

4. Sample argues that the order in which Adam and Eve were created "gives precedence to men" and that Paul uses the Genesis text to make this point (302). As I argued, the creation account was not intended to give an "order of creation" or a model for hierarchy (294-95) but served polemical and explanatory purposes regarding the nature and purpose of the creation of men and women. Even for Calvin the "order of creation" did not seem to be a solid ground for the subordination of women; and Luther understood that men and women were equal at creation and that the curse of Gen. 3:16 was a result of the Fall.1 To be sure, there was a traditional division between men and women in Hebrew society; but chauvinistic attitudes did not begin to appear until around the fourth or third centuries B.C.E. Even after this time, much Jewish literature dealing with the Fall (or portions thereof) implicates Adam alone (e.g., Sirach 15:14). Thus, I suggested that Paul's reference to the
"order of creation" was an appeal for a return to a complementary role (294).

5. Sample concludes by suggesting that "Hawkins renders these texts contextual, occasional, and situational, and therefore not eternally true" (303). He concludes that I "finally agree with Sprague that these two texts are not eternal truth" (303). Sample's effort to have me ultimately side with Sprague falls short in his failure to distinguish between what is "true" and what is "binding." All of Scripture is "true" but not all of it binding on the Christian. The Old Testament prescribes sacrifice, but this is not binding for the Christian because Christ is the fulfillment of the sacrificial system. In the New Testament, Paul urges believers to greet one another with a holy kiss, but this is not binding because it was a custom peculiar to their culture and not ours. Paul's injunctions in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 were aimed at situations in Corinth and Ephesus, and it does not necessarily follow that he wanted all women in all places and in all times to behave in exactly the same way. For Paul's initial readers, his instructions were both true and binding. It was true that, in those places and under those circumstances, the wives should not teach until they had themselves been taught soundly. The principle would certainly remain applicable today: wherever women or men are led astray by heresy, their teaching ought to be restricted.

This study of the passages from 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy has sought to serve as a test case for "neoliteralist" hermeneutics. Sprague has asked, "What is the biblical hermeneutic at work that makes rather obscure biblical texts definitive and exclusive regarding homosexuality, while the unambiguous statement in 1 Timothy is either ignored or defied?" What I have sought to show is that "neoliteralists" have not "ignored" or "defied" the 1 Timothy instructions (or those in 1 Corinthians) but have accepted expanded roles for women based on careful biblical study. I am not suggesting that the conclusions of conservative interpreters are inerrant but simply that they have tried to be consistent in their hermeneutical approach to Scripture. It is this approach that allows us to advocate for expanded roles for women while, at the same time, upholding the church's position on homosexuality.

Endnotes
What do we mean by United Methodist relatedness?

WILLIAM B. LAWRENCE

In the pile of fresh mail one morning was a letter from the chief executive of an accredited theological school, asking for suggestions of persons who might be considered for a senior academic leadership position at his seminary. Attached to the letter was a brief statement describing both the position and the school. The description of the school, which is formally affiliated with another denomination, included a note that the institution has “close ties to the United Methodist Church.”

Such claims—and disclaimers—about affiliations between ecclesiastical and educational institutions are curious things. When the late Terry Sanford was a child in eastern North Carolina back in the 1920s, his parents took him to Durham for a look at the new campus of Duke University, which was then under construction. He recalled his parents saying to him, “Son, we will never be able to afford what it would cost to send you to school here, but we...”

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TED BROWN

Over the years there has been no shortage of conversation about the meaning of church-relatedness. Study commissions and special task forces have come and gone. Volumes have been written and published. Conferences have been hosted and adjourned. Yet the question now seems no closer to resolution than when it was first raised.

As a practical matter, there is clarity about what it means to be United Methodist-related. The United Methodist Book of Discipline charges its University Senate “to provide an effective review process to ensure that schools, colleges, universities and theological schools listed by the University Senate and qualifying for Church support have institutional integrity, well-structured programs, sound management, and clearly defined Church relationships.” In the latest version of the University Senate’s Organization, Policies and Guidelines, “assessment criteria” are defined in each of these areas and used as a...
want you to know that we are Methodists and that this is our school.”1

Duke, of course, was established by Methodists, and a United Methodist school of theology is part of the university. But did the Sanford family’s conviction that Duke was a “Methodist” institution actually make it one? Does a theological school that is either independent of any—or affiliated with some other—denomination have the freedom to advertise its “close ties to the United Methodist Church”? Does a university with some historic or organizational link to the church have the freedom to define what a meaningful relationship with the church is?

A school may claim some relationship with a denomination (even when no such relationship formally exists), because it may help in matters of student recruitment or fundraising. A church may claim some relationship with a college or university (even when that relationship is tenuous at best), because such an affiliation may seem to enhance the prestige of the denomination.

But educational and ecclesiastical institutions with affiliations and relationships are often wary of one another. A significant spirit of anti-intellectualism inhabits the soul of the American church, and many persons have been warned about the dangers of having their faith educated out of them. A substantial amount of fear exists on many academic campuses that any emphasis on church connection could harm student recruitment or fundraising among some constituencies. Further, the faculty may fret over whether they will be required to sign statements of belief regarding their personal views and the content of their teaching. As a result, academic and ecclesiastical bodies may deny, disclaim, or discreetly overlook affiliations with one another.

The United Methodist Church and its predecessor denominations claim to have established more than 1,200 schools, colleges, and universities,2 with about 10 percent of them still in a relationship with the church. That does not mean 90 percent of the academic units founded by the church have gone out of business. Some are thriving institutions. For instance, Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Vanderbilt University in Nashville, and the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, all were founded by earlier generations of Methodists. But they have disaffiliated and have formally declared themselves to be independent and unrelated to the church.
Among the 123 academic institutions listed by the church as “United Methodist-related,” the definition of “United Methodist-related” varies. Some schools (for example, Syracuse University, Drew University, and the University of Denver) consider themselves “independent.” Others (for example, High Point University and Dillard) do acknowledge their historic affiliation with the church but seem cautious about going beyond that. Yet others (for example, Emory University and Southern Methodist University) are “owned” by the church. But even where the church—through an annual or jurisdictional conference or some other United Methodist entity—“owns” the academic institution, such ownership does not necessarily yield a specific definition of what it means to be United Methodist-related.

Regardless of the formal character of an ecclesiastical-academic relationship, it is worth considering three possible models of “relatedness” between the church and the institution of higher education. For convenience, let us call them parental, partner, and parallel models.

A parental model sees the college or university as the institution that the church birthed and nurtured. There is a natural desire to care for the academic institution that the church created. There can also be a desire to control it, perhaps (in a benign sense) to prevent it from falling victim to some predatory forces or perhaps (in a malignant sense) to maintain domination of it. In the long run, this parental model cannot succeed in building a strong academic environment any more than a controlling parent can nurture a wise and mature child. The church must allow its “offspring” to discover the best way to accomplish its own mission—which, after all, is why the church created it in the first place.

In a partner model, the university and the church share responsibility for academic and ecclesiastical roles. This sounds like a mature and professional way to respect each other’s freedom to accomplish their respective assignments. But the truth is the church does not want the university to intrude on its work any more than the university wants the church to dictate its policies. For instance, in a United Methodist theological school, the work of education for ministry is related to decisions about ordination to ministry. But boards of ordained ministry and clergy sessions of annual conferences do not want to cede to the academy their obligation for discerning an individual’s call to or gifts for ministry. And divinity schools do not want to cede to ecclesiastical bodies the obligation to judge the intellectual credibility of research into biblical, histor-
ical, or ethical questions. The partner model does not work, because it requires yoking very different animals with distinctive capacities for distinguished service.

The parallel model does have some promise for defining United Methodist-relatedness, however. Parallel lines remain in a consistent relationship with each other, but part of the relationship requires maintaining a consistent distance from each other. Communication is essential to ensure that the appropriate distance is maintained by both. It is also crucial that the two remain faithful to their distinctive missions, so that they maintain movement toward their goals. But if they draw too close together or get entangled, they will do worse than destroy their relationship. Also, they will lose contact with their individual mission tracks.

Therefore, to be a United Methodist-related academic institution is to maintain active communication with the church, articulate a distinctive mission, be honest about the importance of honoring the separating distance, and respect one another’s unique role in the grandest of Methodist visions. That vision is to reform the continent and spread scriptural holiness over the land.

Methodists created educational institutions because reforming the continent required educating the people (not just the Methodist people, and not just about Methodist matters). A healthy, consistent, parallel distance between church and academy is still the best way to pursue that vision.

And, along the way, we United Methodists have to be vigilant about those who may claim “close ties” to our church. Their purpose in doing so may not be to honor our mission but to entangle themselves in our life. And that could certainly cause us to lose our way.

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**Endnotes**

1. Sanford did not earn a degree from Duke but did serve as its president for sixteen years.

set of standards to review the 123 institutions currently related to The United Methodist Church.

The criteria on church-relatedness refer to the "marks of church relationship which should be manifested if an institution is to be related meaningfully to The United Methodist Church." These marks include:

- Self-identification as church-related through mission statement and printed materials
- Curricular evidence of the church connection
- Worship and service opportunities for the college family
- Exploration of the place of religion in curricular and co-curricular activities
- Exploration of the place of religion in the larger society
- Recognition of the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church
- Institutional leadership that understands and respects the church connection?

Helpful as these criteria are in providing guidance for the work of the United Methodist University Senate, they represent a one-sided view of the church-college relationship. The truth is, a church-related college requires a college-related church. What does it mean for The United Methodist Church to be meaningfully related to its educational institutions? What are the "marks" of a church that takes its educational mission seriously? The Discipline says little and the University Senate nothing about the criteria for being a college-related church.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest uses of the words relate and relationship date back to 1490 and connote "being borne or thrust in between things" and "to have or make reference to." Thus, a relationship is something that exists between two entities. As two entities begin meaningful interaction, a new reality comes into being. As that new reality develops, each entity begins to redefine its self-understanding in reference to the relationship. A genuine, meaningful relationship between church and college requires lines of communication and links of organization that lead to regular and natural interaction. It entails a mutuality of understanding and a genuine empathy for the challenges and needs of the partner.

The current church-college connection in The United Methodist Church falls short of being a true relationship in this historical sense of the word. It seems more rhetorical than empathetic. With notable exceptions,
the denomination struggles to understand its mission in higher education and is less than motivated to become a true partner. In addition, many of our colleges have become cynical about, if not downright indifferent to, the church relationship. Even those institutions that have maintained the lines of communication with the church bring a limited amount of imagination and energy to the connection. The true potential of the church-college connection is certainly not being realized.

United Methodist colleges bear a significant responsibility as they consider revitalizing the church-college connection. In particular, they must improve their ability to bring value to the relationship. An often-heard refrain on our campuses follows the theme "Just being the best liberal arts college we can be is our best service to the church." There is a case to be made for that assertion. But the truth is that the fundamental mission of a liberal-arts college is several levels removed from the problems currently facing the denomination, especially the challenges of static membership and diminishing leadership. The United Methodist Church needs its colleges now more than ever; for, when it comes to modern culture, they are among the most relevant and vital of its ministries. Unfortunately, at just the time when the church's need is greatest, our colleges seem inattentive and uninspired when it comes to the church connection.

Our colleges must not be coy about their role in recruiting leadership for the churches or even in recommending the denomination to their students. United Methodist colleges represent the best source for future church professionals; yet the task of challenging students to consider church vocations is among the most haphazard things colleges do. Further, the colleges are among the church's best sources for educating committed lay leaders; yet only a handful of colleges have systematic approaches to identifying and training future lay leaders. Perhaps most telling, our colleges represent a vital source for potential church members; but few of our institutions really encourage students to consider church membership.

Academic freedom demands that we approach this agenda with care, but it certainly does not require that we forfeit the church connection altogether.

There are significant structural challenges that must be faced squarely if we are to revitalize the church-college connection. In the organization of the denomination, institutions of higher education have their connections through the annual conference. From an efficiency perspective, this may be the logical locus. However, in terms of effectiveness, connecting an institu-
tion through the annual conference offers little to assure the continuing vitality of the relationship. The challenges the church faces—especially those that may be aided by the colleges—are rarely addressed at the annual conference level: leadership development, membership growth, stewardship. Conversely, the annual conference provides only symbolic access to the things the colleges need most: visibility, students, dollars, and volunteer leadership. From the perspective of adding vitality to the connection between church and college, we need to explore ways of directly linking institutions with local churches.

On January 4, 1758, John Wesley noted in his journal, "I rode to Kingswood, and rejoiced over the School, which is at length what I have so long wished it to be—a blessing to all that are therein, and a benefit to the whole body of Methodists." In a sentence, Wesley summarized the hope and potential of the church's mission in education. Not only do our colleges have a responsibility to "bless" our students but also to be a genuine benefit to the church. Likewise, following the Christmas Conference of 1784, Bishop Francis Asbury wrote to all Methodists, explaining their obligation to establish a school in the proximity of every church in order "to give the key of knowledge to your children and those of the poor in the vicinity of your small towns and villages." From its very beginning, American Methodism prescribed a close connection between educational institutions and local churches. It was never meant to be a purely rhetorical relationship based on theology; it was to be a pragmatic and beneficial partnership on both sides.

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Endnotes

The Gospel readings for Advent 2004 are all taken from the Gospel of Matthew. The reading for the first Sunday of Advent (Matt. 24:36-44) is the "be ready" passage, anticipating the coming of the "Son of Man." The lection for the second Sunday (Matt. 3:1-12) finds John the Baptist preaching repentance and preparing the way of the Lord. The third Sunday's reading (Matt. 11:2-11) contains a remarkable exchange between John the Baptist (by way of some of his disciples) and Jesus. In response to their question 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus observes, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (vv. 3-4). The lection for the fourth Sunday of Advent (Matt. 1:18-25) chronicles the account of Jesus' birth. Perplexed by all that is going on, Joseph is reassured by a message from the angel, culminating in the powerful promise, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means 'God is with us'" (v. 23).

To get into these passages from Matthew's Gospel, it helps to understand the relationship of this Gospel to the other three Gospels. The Gospel of Mark is written like an Alfred Hitchcock thriller and is best understood when read straight through in one sitting. It contains few sayings and lots of parables, and it moves fast. The key word is immediately, and there is a rising crescendo of hostility against Jesus until, finally, he is crucified. Then it is as if the curtain closes, opens again, and there is the Resurrection—only to close again quickly. Afterwards, the reader is left out of breath.

The Gospel of Luke is written to show us that Jesus is not just the Jewish Messiah but the Lord and Savior of the world. This Gospel (which, with Acts, is a two-volume work) lifts up outcasts and Samaritans and women. It is fascinating to note what is unique to Luke. For example, the
accounts of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, Zacchaeus, the Pharisee and the tax collector, the grateful Samaritan leper, the genealogy of Jesus (going back to Adam), the penitent thief on the cross, the shepherds coming to the manger, the “Father forgive them” words from the cross—all of these amazing biblical passages are found only in the Gospel of Luke. There is a strong emphasis on the birth stories and on the Resurrection. Many scholars believe that Luke (and the Apostles’ Creed) were written to refute Gnosticism and Ebionism.

The Gospel of John is philosophical in tone and differs from the Synoptic Gospels in order, chronology, and phraseology. There are no parables but, instead, allegories and “I am” statements. Only about 8 percent of this Gospel has any parallel in the other Gospels. While the Synoptics emphasize the kingdom of God, John focuses on eternal life. The purpose of John’s Gospel is stated clearly in 20:30-31: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing in him you may have life in his name.”

The Gospel of Matthew is the “Jewish Gospel,” written for Jews and Jewish Christians to convince readers that Jesus was indeed the Messiah predicted by the Old Testament prophets. This Gospel is a systematic, comprehensive manual of the life of Christ and of biblical theology. It is intended for church use (perhaps the first church-membership manual) and is the only Gospel that mentions the word church. This Gospel is arranged carefully with topics that are easy to remember, suggesting a context in which the church’s life was well organized and subject to a carefully conceived moral code. Matthew compares Moses and Jesus as lawgivers. Both were saved from infant death at the hands of wicked kings. Both gave inspired law from the mountaintop, prompting some scholars to refer to Matthew as “The New Law.”

The writer draws on other sources but feels free to add to, rearrange, and rewrite them. While he follows the basic outline of Mark, Matthew organizes Jesus’ sayings into units—for example, the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7 and a series of parables on the kingdom of God in chapter 13. He defends Christianity against charges of heresy. Far from being a heretical group, he avers, Christians are the New Israel.

Matthew often links events to the Old Testament and, unlike Mark, commences his Gospel with a genealogy of Jesus that moves back through
David to Abraham. And while Mark emphasizes Jesus' miracles, Matthew lays stress on the Lord's teaching.

We are fortunate to have all four of the Gospels. But we are even more fortunate to have the Christ of whom they speak.

November 28, 2004—First Sunday of Advent
Matt. 24:36-44; Isa. 2:1-5; Ps. 122; Rom. 13:11-14

This difficult passage is about the Second Coming and the importance of being spiritually ready, awake, and watchful. We know from history that some groups have taken this theme to such extremes that they use all their energy watching and longing for the Second Coming; consequently, they do nothing creative, constructive, or compassionate in their daily lives.

When I was in fourth grade, my teacher, Mrs. Gladfelter, would say, "Boys and girls, get out your math books and turn to exercise 37. I have to go to the office. Work on the exercise while I am gone." After she had gone, one student would go to the door to watch for her return. All the other students would throw paper wads, pull pigtails, sleep, walk around the room, or look out the window. Nobody would do anything constructive. Soon the student at the door would yell, "Here she comes!" Everybody would grab their math books and pretend to be studying. Something like that can happen in our spiritual lives if we push the "watching and waiting" for the Second Coming to extremes.

Even worse, in some cases tragic results have occurred when some religious leader announced with great drama the exact moment of Christ's return (even though the Scriptures make it quite clear that only God knows the day and the hour). People caught up in the fervor of their leader's pronouncement have (at the precise moment predicted by their leader) jumped off cliffs or out of trees to fly into the arms of the returning Christ. The results were tragic.

What insight can we draw from this passage for our lives today? I see three key truths.

1. Only God knows the day and the hour; so our calling is not to speculate about that but to be ready and to live every day as if it were the day when Christ returns.

2. These forceful verses challenge us to get our priorities straight—to not focus on material things but to "set our affections on things above," on the eternal things that do not rust and corrode.
This passage reminds us that we are ultimately accountable to God and, thus, to prepare and be ready for that.

December 5, 2004—Second Sunday of Advent
Matt. 3:1-12; Isa. 11:1-10; Ps. 72:1-7, 18-19; Rom. 15:4-13

One of the most colorful characters in all of biblical literature explodes on the scene in Matthew 3. Wearing clothes made of camel's hair and a leather belt and eating wild locusts and honey, John the Baptist arrives to prepare the way for the coming of the Christ. John never minces words but speaks boldly and courageously.

John fearlessly rebukes evil wherever he sees it. Kings, religious leaders, ordinary folks—all equally faced the Baptist's unhesitating rebuke if they were doing wrong. After years of being silent, the voice of prophecy resounds once more in John the Baptist. He shines a bright light on the evil he sees and gets people ready for the advent of Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world. With great urgency, he calls people to repent, to turn around, to do an about-face! It is as if he is saying, "Turn away from your evil ways and turn toward righteousness!" In other words, John not only rebuked sinfulness, he also called people to righteousness.

Magnanimously, John points beyond himself to Jesus. He calls people not to fall down before him but to get ready to follow the Messiah (cf. Mal. 4:5). In John's time, the people believed that Elijah would return to usher in the day of the Lord. Here is John the Baptist, dressed like Elijah (camel's hair and leather belt), announcing that the time for the Messiah's arrival has indeed come.

King Solomon built many roads during his reign. Some of these were paved and were known as "the King's highway." The prophet Isaiah uses this imagery in chap. 40:3, when he proclaims, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Matthew connects the ministry of John the Baptist with Isaiah's pronouncement. Thus, John reiterates the prophet's summons to "make straight" a royal highway (3:3), for the King of Kings is on his way!

December 12, 2004—Third Sunday of Advent
Matt. 11:2-11; Isa. 35:1-10; Luke 1:47-55; Jas. 5:7-10

What an amazing passage this is! John the Baptist has been arrested by King Herod and thrown in prison. John wants Jesus to hurry up and bring in his
Kingdom, to "zap" the Romans and with his power quickly to create a new era of peace, prosperity, and tranquility. John the Baptist and Jesus were relatives and, as relatives sometimes are wont to do, John becomes a little impatient with Jesus. So, as only one cousin could say to another, John (via his disciples) confronts Jesus with a pointed question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (v. 3). In other words, John wants to know, "What are you waiting for? What's the holdup? When are you going to get with the program? Why don't you hurry up and establish this Kingdom we have all been longing and praying and waiting for?"

Jesus' response to John is one of the mountain-peak moments in all of Scripture. He says to John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (v. 4-5).

What was Jesus saying to John—and indeed to us? Simply this: Real life is in the turbulence. The Kingdom is not found in some comfortable nest insulated from the problems of the world. The Kingdom is the power of love reaching out to those who are needy, sick, broken, and hurting and bringing them help and hope and healing. That's what the Kingdom is about. Wherever acts of love, compassion, and kindness are happening, there is the Kingdom. God's kingdom is found not in military might or wealth or power or force or political clout but in gracious acts of love. The Kingdom consists in love and sacrifice and service to others.

Jesus pays tribute to John, saying, "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist" (v. 11). John is the forerunner, the messenger, the prophet. Then, as was so often the case, Jesus ends with a thought-provoking statement, "Yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (v. 11b). This means that John was pre-Easter. He did not experience the full work of Christ—the meaning of his death on the cross and of his resurrection and ascension.

December 19, 2004—Fourth Sunday of Advent
Matt. 1:18-25; Isa. 7:10-16; Ps. 80:1-7, 17-19; Rom. 1:1-7

This is one of the most profound passages in all of Scripture, because it reminds us dramatically of God's greatest promise to always be with us! Later, in Romans 8, the apostle Paul underscores this theme, proclaiming...
that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Every year, there is a great longing to be "home for Christmas." Everywhere we go in the days that lead up to Christmas we have this longing, "I'll Be Home for Christmas." This is precisely what this classic passage in Matthew 1 does for us. It brings us home to the real meaning of Christmas, to the most magnificent truth in all of the Bible, to our Lord's greatest promise: Emmanuel. God is with us! When we accept Christ as Savior and commit our lives to him, nothing can separate us from him and his love. God is always with us—that is what Christmas is all about.

The great people of faith have always believed in God's steadfast, unfail­ing promise to be with them. Take Moses. Caught in a seemingly hopeless situation between Pharaoh and the deep Red Sea, he believed God was with him. So he went forward trusting God to open a way—and God did!

Or consider Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They entered a fiery furnace trusting God to be with them—and God was! Likewise, little David stood before the mighty Goliath. What chance did a small boy with a sling­shot have against this giant of a warrior? But David believed that God was with him—and it made all the difference!

It is interesting to note that when Matthew wanted to capture the meaning of Christmas—that is, the meaning of the Christ-event—he reached back into the Old Testament, pulled out an old word, dusted it off, and used it to convey the message. The word was Emmanuel. Emmanuel, "God is with us," is what Jesus is all about. And anyone who believes this promise and accepts and claims it, will find his or her life transformed.

In many ways, Joseph is the forgotten man of Christmas. Yet he has much to teach us. A Christmas card featuring a painting of the manger scene by a fifteenth-century artist named Ghirlandaio has been making the rounds in recent years. It depicts Mary and the baby Jesus in the foreground, surrounded by the shepherds and the animals. Joseph, however, is in the background, looking up into the heavens with a quizzical look on his face. He is scratching his head, as if to say, "I don't get it! What in the world is going on here?" The great lesson we learn from Joseph is that even though he did not understand all of what was going on at that first Christmas, he accepted, welcomed, and celebrated it. Even though he was likely bewildered by it all, he embraced Christmas. He welcomed the Christ-child into his life with open arms.
JAMES W. MOORE

We are so much like Joseph. We cannot possibly comprehend the full meaning of Christmas. But the good news is, we don't have to. Like Joseph, all we have to do is trust God and embrace and celebrate the astonishing news of Christmas: "Emmanuel... God is with us!"

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Something simply must be done. The findings of a 2002 *Pulpit & Pew* study are less than shocking for many of us who continue to witness the growing number of pastors leaving local church ministries. The *Pulpit & Pew* research report shows that women and men continue to exit the pulpit and find venues other than the local church to live out their ordination. Reasons include disillusionment with the itinerant system, family needs, and financial hardship. Not surprisingly, this trend is even more prevalent among women clergy. A 1997 study on clergywomen retention in The United Methodist Church, published by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and the Anna Howard Shaw Center of Boston University School of Theology, revealed that women were leaving parish ministry in greater numbers than their male counterparts. Many find their place in some form of extension ministry, where specialized ministry can be done "beneath the radar screen" of the bishop and cabinet. Others choose simply to relinquish their orders, foregoing the substantial cost incurred while following their call into ministry. All these decisions to exit come with great costs to the individual, the local church, and the denomination. In this article, I make a case for continuing theological education that addresses the whole person in ministry. I argue for a form of theological education that is more than a cerebral quest for knowledge and that embodies what we say we believe. I describe a continuing-education opportunity called "Covenant Colleagues," which seeks to answer the concerns and cries of clergywomen in their first ten years of ministry, as well as challenge them to further their theological study in the years following ordination.

The fact that anyone voluntarily departs parish ministry should raise concern for the church; but it seems that institutional attention is triggered only when the effects of those departures have dramatic monetary impact. Of primary concern is the cost invested in the individual while attending seminary: With the continued forecast of a lack of elders to replace those
who will be retiring in the next five-to-ten years, every dollar spent to educate their replacements is of vital importance. This fact, coupled with the rising costs of a seminary education and the decline of the Ministerial Education Fund, should cause the church not merely to sit up and pay attention but to stand up and work toward the redirection of this trend.

There is no doubt that great financial challenges exist for the clergy—both men and women—in their first ten years of ministry. Many have substantial educational debt and young families. The demands of young families can hinder clergy by often distracting them from those areas of ministry that will provide them with the nurture and support to stick with parish ministry through the difficult first years—especially “her” ministry. The financial debt contributes to much unhappiness as well as making other things impossible for young families.

Adding to the financial challenges of the young-in-ministry (regardless of age) is the reality that women of all ethnicities continue to face challenges unique to their sex in the local church. Much progress has been made in churches regarding the acceptance of women as pastoral leaders. Yet one still hears of persons leaving the worship service before the woman preacher gets to the sermon, while, in other instances, individuals leave a congregation when a woman is appointed as pastor. Others who stay may act out their aggressions, directly or indirectly; and many refuse to respect women in positions of authority. It is understandable that many women do not survive, much less thrive, beyond the first ten years. Add to this the real or perceived lack of support by one’s local and conference community and the fact that women who take first and second appointments as pastor in charge are often located in isolated situations.

The 1997 study was released in the same year that I assumed the position of director of continuing education at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology. Early in my tenure at Candler, in an attempt to develop our niche in the landscape of continuing theological education, I worked to develop unique opportunities for continuing education—programs that were not being done by any other institution. An attempt to address the retention of clergywomen in The United Methodist Church attracted my attention, since I too had left the local church for an extension ministry appointment.

Two questions occupied my attention:

• Could a program of continuing theological education assist in addressing this matter?
CONTINUING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR CLERGYWOMEN

If so, how could this be done in a way that clergywomen as well as the churches they serve benefit and prosper?

The answer to the first question is yes—but only if we believe that education is more than merely educating the mind. The divisions in theological education between mind, soul, and body must be eliminated if we truly believe that we are to love God with all our "passion and prayer and intelligence and energy," and our neighbor as ourselves.

The growing separation between seminary education and practical ministry must be overcome as well. The church must embrace a renewed understanding of continuing growth and education. Such an understanding views life not as "blocks" of learning that may or may not connect but rather as an ongoing stream of new knowledge and awareness and change.

I use the term renewed because the Book of Discipline clearly holds forth high expectations that the church's clergy engage in "continuing education for ministry, professional development, and spiritual formation and growth in order to lead the church in fulfilling the mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ." In reality, how many district superintendents hold their pastors accountable for their continuing education? How many churches insist that their pastors not merely take vacations but engage in continuing education and then provide the funds for clergy to do so?

The answer to the second question above is a program known as Covenant Colleagues, an experiment in non-degree, sustained, continuing theological education that attempts to address the needs of the whole person in the first ten years of ministry—those critical years that lay the foundation for long-term effectiveness. The goals of this experiment are to

- deepen the spiritual core of clergywomen, grounding and centering them for life and ministry
- assist women in finding and maintaining balance in their lives that will further enable them to serve God and the church of Jesus Christ effectively
- facilitate the continued practice of lifelong learning into the professional and personal lives of clergywomen
- form networks of ongoing support in their local area and across annual conference lines
- encourage cooperation and collaboration—not competition—among women in ministry

Covenant Colleagues pay attention to the soul through the regular
rhythms of worship and liturgy. There is a daily celebration of the Eucharist and morning and evening prayers—and each night the women commit to a covenant of silence. Individuals are given the opportunity for spiritual direction with a spiritual director who continues to offer guidance between modules, along with the possibility of walking the prayer labyrinth. Critical to the Covenant colleague is the creation of a safe place to laugh, cry, shout, and sing. One of the significant ingredients of this program has been the investment in music, which in and of itself has worshipful and therapeutic advantage.

The minds of these gifted women are stoked by educational stimulation throughout each four-day module. At least one faculty person is employed to lead the educational direction of the group according to a particular theme or emphasis. Some modules may be more cognitively inspiring, while others tantalize the mind through art and creativity.

Addressing issues of the body is important to the covenant of these women. During their first orientation, the colleagues are told to take care of themselves first and foremost during each module. They are encouraged to listen to their bodies for signals that they may have been unwilling to address or were simply too busy to notice. A private room for each woman allows the opportunity for much-needed rest. Good nutrition is available in the three meals provided. Numerous opportunities for exercise are available, as well as the occasional treat of a body massage.

The total experience is undergirded and guided by the recognition of the individual's uniqueness. Through work with Myers-Briggs and the Enneagram, the colleagues are aided in knowing and understanding themselves better. This awareness is often critical to their ability to thrive in their homes and to work more effectively in their churches.

In essence, Covenant Colleagues attempts to educate the whole woman for life and ministry, continuing the theological education of seminary, addressing the practical aspects and realities of ministry and acknowledging one's spiritual being as that which weaves together the many and often-fragmented parts of one's life. Oh, that the program could accomplish all that! However, by spirit and design, the Covenant Colleagues program makes an attempt to recognize these fractured parts and models a spiritual way of life that knows peace amidst the chaotic moments of life. One could only hope that someday all our attempts to educate for a seminary degree and beyond would embrace such a holistic approach!
CONTINUING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR CLERGYWOMEN

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Endnotes

2. The complete study is available on the website of the Anna Howard Shaw Center at http://www.bu.edu/sth/shaw/retention/.
5. Information about the Covenant Colleagues program is available online at http://candler.emory.edu/ACADEMIC/OCMC/COVCOLL/.

It is a common understanding that much contemporary theology draws heavily from human experience. Methodist and Radical: Rejuvenating a Tradition seeks to connect experience-based theologies "from the margins"—class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality—with a foundational tradition in early Methodism.

Essentially, the writers and editors of this volume of thirteen essays assert that radical understanding and practice of ministry, ecclesiology, hermeneutics, and evangelism are a natural path for today's Methodists and other Christians, because these are not new but based in the practical theology of the first "people called Methodists."

The volume puts Wesleyan thought in conversation with a wide range of perspectives—feminist, Latin American, African and African American, Asian and Asian American, South Pacific, and British, as well as a voice with particular concern for the marginalization of the poor and of gays and lesbians. As they comb Wesley's teachings and practices they challenge all who practice Christianity in the Methodist traditions to ask how faith is called to respond to historical injustices and the real-life crises of today—and to see this incorporation of spiritual and practical as congruent with a Wesleyan heritage. Writers offer a particular challenge to those who preach and lead congregations, urging us not to succumb to what several describe as United Methodism's "preferential option for the middle class" (e.g., Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., "Breaking Down the Walls of Division: Challenges Facing the People Called Methodist").

Some important reminders from the Methodist tradition include Wesley's call for radical discipleship (John Vincent, "Basics of Radical Methodism: Challenges for Today"; Harold J. Recinos, "Barrio Christianity and American Methodism"; and Stephen G. Hatcher, "The Radicalism of Primitive Methodism") and Wesley's attempts to unravel the causes of poverty and call for changes to eliminate them (Joerg Rieger, "What Do Margins and Center Have to Do with Each Other?").
METHODIST AND RADICAL: REJUVENATING A TRADITION

treating the symptoms. Perhaps the most important basic reminder to a
Western Christianity that seems ever in danger of being completely spiritu­
alized and emotionalized is the notion that Wesleyan piety moves horizont­ally as well as vertically. That is, our relationship with neighbor is as signifi­cant as—indeed, is part of—our relationship with God. And a corollary:
works of mercy—one side of the means-of-grace coin that is such an impor­tant part of Wesleyan spirituality—bring grace to the merciful, not just to
the “objects” of their mercy (Rieger, “Margins and Center”).

Wesley challenges us today, just as he challenged the Christians of his
day. And the writers of Methodist and Radical point us to many of the
progressive elements of John Wesley’s teaching that continue to have
meaning. That said, I am not convinced Wesley was the radical that Rieger,
Vincent, and colleagues seem to assume he was. There are radical elements
in the Methodist/Wesleyan traditions, but to find them one has to move
beyond John Wesley.

To be sure, Wesley insisted that Christians are called to be merciful and
loving to the suffering; but does that make him a radical? And, if so, in what
way? Wesley’s well-known insistence that Christianity could not be a private
religion might have been a radical understanding of the faith, especially for
his time. But his insistence that Christian love must be lived out in the world
did not include removing the “root” of unjust institutions or extreme changes
in politics, etc. Wesley’s conservative understanding of government as God­
ordained is well known to scholars; it led to his out-and-out rejection of the
premises of the American Revolution. In addition, he barred preachers from
even addressing political topics in sermons—except in defense of the king.
Further, with rare exceptions (for example, the antislavery movement and
some of his “Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions”), Wesley
focused on calling for reform on the basis of humanitarianism or personal
responsibility (i.e., for the wealthy who benefited from land enclosures),
rather than on demanding change in laws and institutions.

However, further on in the Wesleyan traditions, we find leaders at least
as radical as Wesley, if not more so. One offshoot from the Methodist tree
was founded solely on antislavery convictions. The Wesleyan Methodists
were so “radical” about one issue that they were willing to leave a denomi­
nation over it. One founder of the Wesleyan Methodist church, Luther Lee,
was also radical on “the woman question.” He preached the ordination
sermon for Antoinette Brown, the first woman recorded to be fully
ordained. While John Wesley eventually permitted women to preach, he was cautious about it and never allowed large numbers of female preachers. However, several Holiness/Pentecostal churches, which grew out of the Methodist tradition, did. The Salvation Army, the Church of the Nazarene, the Pilgrim Holiness Church, and the Pillar of Fire all supported women’s ministry. Church leaders read the Bible with “new eyes”—an early instance of feminist hermeneutics. The founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, A.B. Semple, argued that Jesus was not a man by gender but was simply “man” as in “human being.” And Methodist Frances Willard, through the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, fought hard for the vote for women.

Moreover, much later in the “mainstream” of Methodism, the Methodist Federation for Social Service (MFSS) and its leaders, such as Harry Ward, urged the denomination in the 1930s to work for the “abolition of a dying capitalism” and sought to create a classless society, thus doing just what scholars have pointed out Wesley failed to do: strike at the root of a problem.

Does this make MFSS, Harry Ward, other leaders of the time “radical”? What about the Pentecostal/Holiness churches, often caricatured as conservative, if not backward, but that were certainly far ahead of their time in the nineteenth century? And what about Wesley? *Methodist and Radical* has only a brief introduction and conclusion, so I was left wondering how the editors defined “radical.” But if we consider the simple dictionary understanding of the word radical—seeking to change or eliminate the root of a system, problem, or institution—then I think some of Wesley’s heirs, including those “conservative” Pentecostals, are better qualified than he is.

*Methodist and Radical* is an important reminder that Methodists can turn to their traditions to find precedents for vigorous engagement with the political and social world and for forward-thinking theological interpretation. Unfortunately, it generally treats “Wesley” as synonymous with “Methodist.” In so doing, it fails to consider the significant contributions of later Methodists and relatives and perhaps overestimates John Wesley’s own contributions to a radical Christianity.

Reviewed by Naomi Annandale. Annandale is Pastor of First United Methodist Church in Oswego, New York.

In this little book, Gustafson raises one of the most enduring questions for theologians since the Enlightenment: When the same phenomena are addressed or accounted for by both religious and secular discourses, how should Christians (theologians, ethicists, pastors) respond to these different modes of interpretation? How do nonreligious accounts affect theological or religious accounts? He assumes that the interactions between religious and nonreligious modes of interpretation are inevitable for anyone who lives in our current Western context. Much more than academic, these questions are relevant for anyone striving to be a faithful Christian in a world where multiple interpretations of events, actions, and texts are communicated in educational systems, television programs, news magazines, novels, and other aspects of popular culture. In fact, Gustafson says, most people either tacitly or explicitly alter or abandon some traditional beliefs and practices in light of secular accounts of creaturely life and events; for example, our reading of Genesis 1–2 (68). An Examined Faith seeks to elevate methodological and reflective self-consciousness in order to preserve the integrity of religious discourse and mitigate cognitive dissonance.

The first chapter introduces Gustafson's assumptions, the issues he analyzes, the importance of the project, and some typical strategies that have been employed to avoid the difficult questions he attempts boldly to face. Chapter 2, through an overworked example of a hypothetical college student, explains how the theme of human nature is one site where a plurality of disciplines intersects at various levels of inquiry. He then uses this example throughout the text to concretize his analysis.

Chapters 3 and 5 constitute the heart of the book. In the former, Gustafson outlines three “ideal-typical” options for negotiating interpretive pluralism and in the latter he gives a critical assessment of each. At one extreme, theologians employ a “rejection strategy”: the theologian rejects nontheological insights and discoveries as insignificant for theology, ministry, and ethics either by claiming that religious and secular forms of discourse are incommensurable (allowing for multiple accounts of truth) or by claiming that the only truth is theological truth. As examples of this approach he names Christian fundamentalists and theologians associated with postliberalism, Radical Orthodoxy, and postcritical theology who
deride "the Enlightenment project" and exploit postmodern philosophy to justify their own theological isolationism. Specifically, he engages Stanley Hauerwas, Peter Ochs, and John Milbank, giving convincing arguments that these models of rejection are not viable in our contemporary context. Despite their claims, Gustafson argues, "they cannot self-legislate their subject matter and its methods insofar as subjects they address are also addressed by other disciplines" (10). The danger of this first option is sectarianism.

At the other extreme are theologians who allow nontheological disciplines to absorb and completely determine theological and religious interpretation. Curiously, Gustafson provides no examples of this second approach. This brings us to the third (middle) option: "accommodation" and its wide range of possibilities. On the far left is Philip Hefner, who claims that "God-talk should be viewed as expressing something about our experience of a world that is scientifically understood" (46). He gives priority to biology as a comprehensive interpretive scheme and incorporates insights gained from natural science into a compatible theological interpretation of Christian symbols. In this approach, science does not completely determine theology but functions to authorize a certain theological trajectory. Occupying a "centrist position" is Edward Farley, who takes biological insights seriously when formulating his understanding of the human but resists biological reductionism. Attempting to develop a multidimensional account of the human open to the natural and social sciences as well as modern philosophy, Farley sketches a phenomenological portrait of the human being without an initial appeal to Christian Scripture or tradition. He then develops traditional Christian themes in ways consonant with this depiction. Farley rejects theologically supported dualisms and allows secular disciplines to limit his theological arguments without absorption.

After a brief excursus on liberation theology, Gustafson treats Karl Barth's "right-leaning" (my phrase) accommodation strategy. For Barth, says Gustafson, nontheological accounts can tell us about "phenomenal man," but these are only symptoms of the "real man"; "they merely give a portrait of a shadow" (62). The "real man" is disclosed only in relation to God's special revelation in the true human being, Jesus Christ. Only after we have understood the real human in relation to Jesus can we discuss phenomenal man and reinterpret these insights according to a new orientation made possible by revelation. Barth does not reject the insights of secular disci-
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plines but refuses to make them the basis of theology. "[T]hey are accepted within their limits, and then reinterpreted christologically" in such a way that they cannot function to criticize Barth's theological starting point (63).

Gustafson, who claims to follow "a classic liberal theological tradition," favors a methodologically self-conscious appropriation of the accommodation strategy. "The major contribution of theology and ethics in interactions with scientific and other secular accounts," he explains, "is to expand the received information by interpreting it from a different perspective" (82). Given the superiority of accommodation, Gustafson presses the next logical question: What criteria ought theology, ethics, and other religious discourse to use in response to nontheological disciplines and discourse? (6)

While repetitive in places, the book is well organized and gives an insightful depiction of our contemporary context. Gustafson helps us see the inevitability of theological struggles that create cognitive dissonance for all who live amidst interpretive pluralism; and he persuasively argues for the need to ask ourselves how we should negotiate this pluralism without becoming sectarian or losing the unique contributions of our religious traditions. Furthermore, although some will find Gustafson's classification of postliberalism and Radical Orthodoxy with fundamentalism too general and his classification of Barth as an accommodationist surprising, the fair reader will find that the book raises crucial issues with which every thoughtful theologian, ethicist, and pastor must struggle. Finally, while Gustafson points the reader to his book Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective for a more detailed account of his own position, An Examined Faith would have been stronger had he ended by answering his own question about the appropriate criteria for determining how to respond to insights from secular disciplines. Instead, he gives us a meditation on the tragedies of human life and history in light of the events of 9/11—broodings that are not strongly connected to his overall project. Nonetheless, the book is stimulating, sometimes persuasive, and worth a careful read.

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