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Falling within the purview of the journal are articles and reviews on biblical, theological, ethical, and ecclesiastical questions; homiletics, pastoral counseling, church education, sacred music, worship, evangelism, mission, and church management; ecumenical issues; cultural and social issues where their salience to the practice of ministry can be demonstrated; and the general ministry of Christians, as part of the church's understanding of its nature and mission.

Articles for consideration are welcome from lay and professional ministers, United Methodists, and others, and should be mailed to the Editor, Quarterly Review, Box 871, Nashville, Tennessee 37202. Manuscripts should be approximately twelve to twenty-five pages in length and should be in English and typed double-spaced, and the original and one duplicate should be submitted. No sermons, poems, or devotional material are accepted. Queries are welcome. A style sheet is available on request. Payment is by fee, depending on edited length.

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EDITORIAL

On Learning to Concentrate Without Being Threatened with Hanging

While I was watching two cars crash not long ago my mind wandered to the way the mind wanders. One driver was simply not paying attention to driving, a common enough error these days. We live in a world that seems bent on distracting us, and traffic accidents are but one example of the difficulty of concentrating on something long enough to see it through to fruition. These difficulties are not altogether a question of intellectual pursuits, either, even though the mention of concentration conjures up an image of Rodin's Thinker. The "projects" that we seek to concentrate on may be those of developing personal sensitivity, solution to pressing world problems, and many other things.

For some reason the negative aspects of the concentration problem are more obvious than the positive. We are acutely aware of distractions as a burden, as taking our energy away from things we would rather be doing. So distractions seem like an evil, but they really are not. We have to keep "in mind," that we are distracters to others who are trying to concentrate. We would like others to keep away from us and let us focus on what we want to; but at the same time we would like others to tear their attention away from whatever it is that preoccupies them and pay attention to our concerns. This principle is now being defined as Cole's First Law: behind every person who complains about being distracted there lurks a person waiting to distract others.
We may in fact have a hint here of one of those infinite regressions that philosophers love, because many of us spend our time concentrating on how to distract others. We cannot succeed, however, because we are distracted by the others, and they cannot concentrate on distracting us because we distract them, and so on. However that may be, it does seem most of us are constantly trying to “dream up” (notice how many of our cliches involve mental attention or the lack of it?) ways to interest people. Preachers and teachers and politicians know they must repeat points while speaking, employ metaphors and jokes, and even indulge in forensics. Nor are most of us immune to the temptation to lure an audience into a meetingsplace and then pillory them with our favorite blandishments. The est method seems to be at least partly derivative of this approach (see the article by Robert Hann in this issue).

Writers too must constantly remain aware that the reader’s mind may wander. A dull writer is one who assumes too easily that readers will be interested in his or her writing automatically. (Are you still with me? Did you hear the one about . . . ?) Robert Graves has included in his handbook for writers of English prose the principle, “No unnecessary strain should be put on the reader’s memory.” He gives an example of how, at the end of a long paragraph, a writer may need to repeat the point with which he or she began. (The Reader over Your Shoulder, 2nd ed., 1979, pp. 162-63.) There are about as many writers who forget this principle as there are those who overobserve it, so that we spend half our time reading, “As I said in the first section,” or “Let us now summarize . . . .” No, let us not. Write and pass on, please.

But as I was saying . . . concentration means that in a culture of distraction each of us will be a distracter to someone else. Let us acknowledge this reality, this game, and learn to play it to win. Thus you have been subtly introduced to a metaphor, one that “springs to mind” when we concentrate on concentration: athletics. A receiver in football “looks the
ball into his hands." Crowds at basketball games scream at the poor freethrower, a pressure brought to excruciating intensity when the score is close and little time is left. Baseball games are often lost because of "mental mistakes." (My favorite is the time . . . but no, to tell that story would be a distraction.)

We admire concentration—this is its positive side—not only in athletics but other areas. Those whom we regard as truly competent and interesting are those who have invested themselves in a particular field and mastered it. The winners in the game of concentration seem to know how to do it—why can't we?

We know the superficial reasons, of course. Both readers and writers will daydream, for instance, when they encounter an intellectual obstacle. On this existential and quotidian plane we know that the emotional parts of the brain are sending up signals into the neocortex and distracting us. The limbic or second layer of the brain is allegedly the repository of emotional impulses (including that great distractor, sex), and these signals will push out any mere analytical or information-gathering activities of the brain. The primal or third layer of the brain is even more subversive. Not for nothing is it known as the reptilian brain. Since it controls instinct and survival, it will easily win out over an intent merely to think great thoughts.

So we develop peculiar habits or tricks with which to fool ourselves. Some concentrate only for short periods, a favorite tactic of one-year-olds, faculty members at faculty meetings, and bureaucrats. Another technique often used by those who must go to frequent meetings is to sleep with the eyes open. Others try to solve the meetings problem by talking a lot, a method symbiotic with the favorite tactic of those who simply try to go to sleep. And still others use fantasy—dreaming of using the sweepstake winnings to pay the utility bills.

We can cope with mere wool-gathering, then, and may even enjoy it. The harder part is dealing with concentration when it moves beyond the level of reading or listening. When we say we cannot concentrate we often mean we find it hard
to pay attention to some project over a period of days or even years. In this dimension distraction takes on a more ominous form. These larger projects usually require that we work through institutions, and institutions tend to assume that their priorities should rightly dominate the priorities of individuals. Any professional is aware of the tension between professional standards and institutional demands. Institutions very often ask us to concentrate on their goals and even to work in a style consonant with institutional assumptions. These pressures lead churches to fudge on their membership records, though most clergy would admit the practice is shabby. Colleges, even church-related colleges, find themselves in trouble with athletic associations and support high-pressure methods in fund-raising. Bureaucracies are more notable for their passive failings—keeping a conspiracy of silence when an agency or staff members become otiose, for example. In any case, concentration on goals that professionals know to be questionable is a reality. And the fact that professionals are often led to take part in activities not strictly in line with their own professional work adds to the problem. A hospital chaplain may end up at a municipal hearing on zoning because of membership on a hospital committee, for example. Certainly participation in public affairs is generally worthwhile, but the activity is not only distracting from the professional's actual work, but also leaves the professional feeling inadequate about the public affair, whatever it is. Show me a volunteer on public policy, social services, legislation, and the like, and I'll show you someone who feels insecure about his or her knowledge of the subject.

Finally then we begin to feel we have spread ourselves too thin. Probably the feeling is worse in middle age—Charles Stewart deals with this syndrome in his essay in this issue on the mid-life crisis. We begin to be aware of the many worthwhile and urgent areas of concern in the world around us, from nuclear war to poverty to culture and the arts. C. P. Snow embarrassed supposedly well-rounded humanists when he asked how many understood the second law of thermodynamics. (Why should we, when most of us do not
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know what the first law is?) And not only our ignorance embarrasses us but our incompetence. We know that in order to be "effective" we have to learn how to be managers, how to organize, how to communicate, and so on. The list gets very long indeed when we begin to contemplate what we really should be concentrating on.

It is no use trying to pull a tour de force and asserting that "of course" a particular field or problem "obviously" is more critical than all the rest. If we want to name the Number One problem facing humanity, many would cite this one: "Nuclear war would be the ultimate human and environmental disaster." That statement came from an international congress of physicians. Even so, to do something about nuclear war requires inner strength, knowledge about the natural world, and a variety of skills. In order to do something about nuclear war it might be necessary to concentrate on prayer life. Provided, of course, that God-language does not itself become one of our evasions. Rather than facing a real-world problem, some religionists prefer to invoke the ultimate abstractions. Soren Kierkegaard effectively criticized this ploy in *Purity of Heart*. (SK himself had only fragmentary success in concentrating on his projects, however, as Michael Plekon shows in his essay in this issue.)

But in trying to understand where to begin in the face of the plethora of potential pathologies, we hear people say they understand where we ought to be concentrating. They can tell us what the "right thing" is. These committed people are not arrogant, not absolutist, not alienated, and often not even alliterative; but they do assume a superior point of view. They can point us in the right direction. Michael Booth showed how this sense of superiority is expressed in ironic writing: "The movement is always toward an obscured point that is intended as wiser, wittier, more compassionate, subtler, truer, more moral, or at least less obviously vulnerable to further irony" (*Rhetoric of Irony*, 1974, pp. 36-37). Booth wrote that ironic writers are inviting readers to come and dwell with the writer on a "higher level," to travel upward to a nicer part of town.
I wonder if it stretches Booth's point to say that any serious form of discourse assumes a superior point of view. Preachers, teachers, politicians, critics, commentators, intellectuals—all are insisting on the "right thing," which, no matter how self-effacing the speaker or writer, means that we are confronted with a vast chorus of distracters and must somehow select one thing rather than another on which to concentrate.

The distracters know we are indecisive (and we know they are indecisive, and so on) and shrewdly summon impending disaster to help us make up our minds. We get ads featuring starving children, leaflets with harpooned baby seals, and warnings about the Russians who are coming. Dr. Johnson was right: "Depend on it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

Our complaints about not being able to concentrate cannot be taken at face value, then, because we are all coconspirators in the game of distraction. We know people are more likely to respond in the face of a threat than at any other time. And yet our awareness of this all-too-human trait leaves us dissatisfied. We have the recurring wistful thought that human beings can choose on their own to concentrate on serious and worthy goals and can do it in a way that lends dignity to them. There is at least one place and time where this yearning for the best in humanity comes out.

The baseball player leaves the ondeck circle. He knocks the sand off his cleats. He twirls the bat a couple of times. He adjusts his cap. He steps into the box. Another preliminary swing or two. Then he steps out of the box. He rubs dirt between his hands. He looks toward the third-base coach. He spits. He steps back into the box. He cocks the bat. In comes the pitch. He swings.

All that for one pitch and one swing. But it is concentration with feigned nonchalance, and it is the way we would all be if only we could.

CHARLES E. COLE
1. The structure of the text: The text comprises the last part of Luke’s version of the Synoptic apocalypse. It is parallel to Mark 13, which probably is Luke’s source, although some scholars believe that there was an additional, non-Markan source. It is important to recognize the relation of the lectionary selection to 21:5-36 as a whole, for this is a single discourse and the question that unifies it is expressed in 21:7: “When will these things be and what will be the sign?” (Here and throughout, quotations from the New Testament have been translated by the author, except where indicated by JB for Jerusalem Bible and similar acronyms.) While this question arises because of Jesus’ announcement in 21:6 that the temple will be destroyed, the discourse speaks not only of the fall of Jerusalem (21:20-24) but also of the cosmic signs that anticipate the appearance of the Son of man (21:25-28). Thus the apocalyptic question of the time of the end provides the background for this discourse.

To be sure, the author of Luke is not interested solely in answering this question. Contrary to Matthew and Mark, in which the discourse is private instruction to certain disciples on the Mount of Olives, in Luke it is a public discourse in the temple, the climax of Jesus’ temple teaching to the people.
Among other things, this emphasizes the teaching about the fall of Jerusalem in 21:20-24, for these words directly concern the Jewish temple and the Jewish people whom Jesus is addressing. Furthermore, the way of handling the question of when the end will come and what signs will precede it shows a sharp awareness of the dangerous speculation this question has caused. Although the question is not rejected in Luke 21, the thrust of much of the discourse is to warn that many things regarded as signs of the end are not in fact chronological clues to its coming. To the question in 21:7 Jesus immediately replies with a warning against people who claim that the time is at hand. Then he denies that wars and political disturbances are a sign that the end is near (21:9). Persecution is not a sign of the end (it will take place “before all these things”—21:12), and the fall of Jerusalem, although it fulfills Scripture, is separated from the end by the indefinite period of the “times of the Gentiles” (21:24). The author knows that these events are already past and that the excited people who made them a basis for predictions were only leading people astray.

The signs mentioned in 21:25 stand in contrast with all the supposed signs that have misled apocalyptic speculators in the past. Our text concedes this much to the apocalyptic tradition in early Christian thought: there are valid signs, but these signs are strictly limited to cosmic signs, i.e., unmistakable indications that the cosmos itself is disintegrating. Whether the passage risks any prediction of the time of this disintegration depends on the meaning of vs. 32.

Looking at 21:25-36 more carefully, the structure of the passage can be understood as follows: Vss. 25-33 belong together and finally provide a positive answer to questions about signs of the final events. These final events include the public appearance of the Son of man in glory and the coming of God’s kingdom in fullness and finality (21:27, 31). Vss. 25-28 refer to the shaking of the sun, moon, and stars (“the powers of the heavens”) and depict the fear this will produce in people, contrasting this with the response appropriate to the followers of Jesus. Vss. 29-31 support the validity of
inferring the coming of the kingdom from these cosmic signs by the simile of a tree budding in spring. Vss. 32-33 provide additional assurance of the fulfillment of the prophecies. Vss. 34-36 go on to apply the whole preceding discourse to the present situation of the Christian by words of warning and exhortation. Here the emphasis falls on the need for constant alertness because of the suddenness of the coming of "that day."

2. Clarification of details: Vss. 25-26: The "powers of the heavens" are the sun, moon, and stars. They "will be shaken," and the "signs" are the results of this. This expectation is based on a number of Old Testament passages that speak of the darkening of sun and moon, the rolling up of the sky, the falling of the stars, and the shaking of the heaven and earth (see Isa. 13:9-10, 34:4; Ezek. 32:7-8; Joel 2:10; Hag. 2:6, 21). These images were taken up into apocalyptic thought, including early Christian apocalyptic (see Rev. 6:12-14 and Mark 13:24-25, the more explicit parallel to our Lukan passage). The context in Luke does not suggest that we are dealing with metaphor; some sort of disruption or dissolution of the natural forces of the universe is in mind. However, vss. 25-26 give little description of this; instead, they focus on the fear and anguish of people who belatedly recognize what is happening.

Vs. 28: The phrase "these things" probably refers only to the events in 21:25-27. Previous events do not indicate that the end is near (see 21:9 and the reference to an indefinite period of the "times of the Gentiles" in 21:24). Although RSV has "look up," the translations "stand upright" (NEB) or "stand erect" (JB) are more accurate. Note that the same events that cause fear on the part of those described in vss. 25-26 will cause Jesus' followers to "straighten up" because of eager anticipation of their coming redemption.

Vs. 32: It is difficult to be certain how the author of Luke understood this sentence. Earlier tradition is here repeated with little change. The only significant difference between Mark and Luke is that Mark 13:30 speaks of "all these things" while Luke has only "all things." This change is insufficient to
dispel the impression that a relatively short time limit is being placed on the coming of the Son of man and the kingdom of God. It is not surprising that such a time limit should be stated in the early decades of the church's existence. It is more surprising that Luke would retain it, for the similar statement in Mark 9:1 is made ambiguous by Luke (see Luke 9:27), the disciples' mistake in thinking that the kingdom would come immediately is corrected in Luke 19:11 ff., and the time of the restoration is declared in Acts 1:6-7 to be a secret that the Father will not disclose. The term translated "generation" (genea) can be used in several ways. Often used with a temporal sense, meaning a group of people living at the same time, it can also refer to a group descended from a common ancestor, hence a race, clan, or ethnic group. Consequently, "this generation" has been understood to mean the human race in general. This empties the sentence of meaning, however, since it was generally assumed that humanity would continue until the end. "This generation" has also been understood to mean the Jewish people. However, this does not fit the context, which is concerned with knowledge of the nearness of the end (see 21:31), not with the preservation of the Jewish people. So the temporal sense—the people living at the time of the speaker—is the most likely even in Luke, a Gospel that shows awareness of the difficulties caused by trying to pin down the time of the end. While the fuzziness of the term "this generation" might enable the author to stretch it to include his own time, this is impossible for us, which leaves us with a theological problem (see part 5 below).

Vss. 34-35: The last three verses remind Jesus' followers of their responsibilities. The coming of that day concerns all, including Jesus' followers, and it will come suddenly and unexpectedly on those who are not alert. Note that "cares of daily life" are among the dangers to be avoided (see 17:26-30 for lists of some of these).

Vs. 36: The word translated "watch" in RSV can also mean "keep awake" or "be on the alert." The phrase "at every time" ("at all times" RSV, NEB, JB; "always" TEV, New
10. The text in the context of Luke-Acts: In the sequence of the church year Advent precedes Christmas, and so this Advent text is part of the story that leads up to the birth of Christ. In the sequence of the Gospels this text is part of the events of Passion week; indeed, in Luke it is Jesus' final public teaching, followed immediately by the Passion story proper. This setting may be significant for understanding the references to the Son of man in 21:27 and 36. As these verses indicate, Son of man is the title of the one who is to come with power and glory and be the judge of his followers. But Son of man is also the title of the one who goes to Jerusalem to meet rejection and death (see Luke 9:22, 44; 17:22-25; 18:31-33; 22:22; 24:7). Thus there is significant tension in the use of this title. The Son of man who must suffer will be vindicated when he comes with power and glory. Yet the Son of man who announces that he will come with power and glory must now face the cross.

There is another step in the story which is quite important to the author of Luke-Acts. While the church awaits the public manifestation of the Son of man, it also celebrates the hidden power and glory of its Lord at the right hand of God. The symbol of this present power and glory is the exaltation or ascension of Jesus, which is cryptically announced in Luke 20:17, 42-43, and openly proclaimed in Luke 22:69 and Acts 2:33-36. The exaltation of Jesus is the anticipatory form of his Parousia. It means that Jesus already shares in the divine
power and glory, which will be manifest to all at his final coming.

As a narrative composition, Luke 21:25-36 is a glimpse of the end of the story while the story is still incomplete. The ending of the story strongly influences the meaning of the whole. This ending is future for us as well as for Christians of the first century. We still await the final triumph of God’s kingdom through the Son of man. Not only the meaning of Luke’s story but the meaning of our life stories depends on such a future. This vision of the future has liberated Christians from the values of their societies. New ways of acting are possible because the present is already judged and at key points rejected in light of what is coming. In Luke 21:34-36 the evangelist calls on the readers to live out this freedom from the usual patterns of present life through constant awareness of this freedom-granting future.

The rejection of signs by which the end can be calculated, the unexpectedness of the coming of the Son of man, and the need to watch at every time are themes found in other sections of eschatological teaching in Luke (see 12:37-40, 46; 17:20-24, 26-30). These sections hold to these themes more consistently than 21:25-36, where cosmic signs, at least, are recognized, along with a time limit on the expectation, if my interpretation of 21:32 is correct. It may also be helpful to note that the nearness of the kingdom, something to be recognized by cosmic signs according to 21:31, has already been proclaimed by the messengers sent out by Jesus during his ministry (10:9, 11). The experience of the kingdom’s nearness is not dependent on the cosmic signs. It becomes possible when Jesus begins his work.

4. The message of the text, viewed as a whole: When we relate 21:25-36 to the rest of this eschatological discourse (21:5-24), we can see that there is a negative side to the message: What many people have taken to be signs of the end are not such, and only the disruption of the natural powers of the universe—sun, moon, and stars—are reliable signs. There is also a positive side to the message. Especially important is what we are told about the meaning of the end events for...
Jesus’ followers in the future and in the present. First, Luke indicates the difference in the way in which people in general, on the one hand, and the followers of Jesus, on the other hand, can be expected to face the disintegration of their world. The former group will experience distress and fear, while the followers of Jesus should stand straight and raise their heads in anticipation of their coming redemption.

Second, Jesus’ followers are given instructions for the present. They are warned against allowing their hearts to be weighed down with cares of daily life and by practices that dull their awareness of God’s presence and purpose, so that “that day” catches them like a triggered trap. Instead, they must “be on the alert at every time.”

5. From text to sermon, issues and suggestions: The movement from text to sermon must pass through the intermediate step of theological reflection, for we are faced with the problem of how we are to interpret early Christian apocalyptic. Two extremes should be avoided, in my opinion: The view that almost two thousand years of history make no difference in the appropriation of these words, and the view that texts such as this one are best ignored, for they have no significance for the present.

The text is based on certain presuppositions that rightly raise questions in the minds of many modern Christians. These include the following: (1) There will be a cosmic catastrophe that will be associated with the coming of the Son of man, the full establishment of God’s kingdom, and the redemption of the faithful. (2) Although there are no present signs that enable people to predict the time, these events are possible in the lifetime of the first-century Christians for whom the Gospel is written. Indeed, if my interpretation of 21:32 is correct, these events will certainly happen in the lifetime of most of the original readers of Luke. When we relate these presuppositions to our situation, we should readily admit that catastrophe is a very real possibility in our lifetimes. All the ingredients for a global nuclear holocaust are already present, although we choose to ignore this fact most of the time. However, this is not what the text is talking about.
A nuclear disaster fits neither the negative aspect of the text (disruption of sun, moon, and stars) nor the positive promise of the coming of the Son of man and God’s kingdom. Furthermore, while religious faith is never reducible to calculating rationality, it degenerates into superstition when it ignores the tested experience of humanity. This includes the experience of the nineteen hundred years since these words were written, which show that things did not happen as expected and that, while human life is fragile, the earth and the cosmos are durable and are likely to be around for a good long time. Furthermore, the attempts of many religious people today to combine the words of the Synoptic apocalypse with other biblical material in order to predict the impending end of the world only show how the Bible can be abused. What purports to be biblical prophecy is actually the result of taking diverse biblical texts and forcing them into the common mold of a modern theory so that they can be used to predict events long after the situations with which the biblical writers were concerned. Luke’s caution against taking historical events as predictions of the end is still a guide to sanity today.

Even though we cannot live as though there will be an absolute end to earthly history in the near future, early Christian eschatology is relevant to our lives, for there is an eschatological dimension to the historical events in which we share. By this I mean that these events are preliminary and partial realizations of the judging and redeeming purpose of God which will be realized in its fullness according to the biblical visions of the end. While history may go on, our lives are limited. We have only a few chances to decide who we are, what we stand for, what is worthy of our trust. For us the historical and personal crises of our limited lives assume crucial, i.e., eschatological significance. In relation to these crises the meaning of our lives is determined, with fateful consequences. The author of Luke was aware of the eschatological dimensions of events prior to the final coming of the Son of man, for in the preaching of Jesus and his messengers the kingdom came near (Luke 10:9, 11); and in
events of history like the fall of Jerusalem, God's purpose revealed in Scripture was fulfilled (Luke 21:22). Today the crisis of global hunger and the demand of justice for the Third World may pose decisions that have eschatological dimensions for us.

As we face these crises, we seldom begin with the feeling that they will bring our "redemption" (21:28). Most of us have a stake in things as they are and feel the crisis as a threat. The crisis is a test of our dominant concerns and loyalties. Only those with loyalties beyond their own security, status, and pleasure, and with vision to see a larger purpose, will "straighten up and raise [their] heads" (21:28) as the crisis approaches. For others the crisis will produce the fear described in 21:25-26. The opportunity hidden in the crisis may also be lost because we are not alert to what is going on. Preoccupied with "cares of daily life" and other concerns which, like strong drink, dull our perceptions and responses (see 21:34), we live through the crisis with no awareness of the fateful issues involved and are simply part of the dead weight that must be moved aside to realize God's purpose. But we are called to "be on the alert at every time" (21:36). The alert Christian will recognize in each situation the basic issues of trust and loyalty, being sensitive to God's purpose and promise which can free us from attachment to the values of our society. This alertness is related to prayer in 21:36. The two are intertwined, for alertness means awareness of need, which becomes the occasion for prayer. We can also say that prayer is alertness; it means becoming aware of God's presence and call in each of the situations that we face.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5

Luke 3:1-6

needs to have both texts in mind in preparing for these sermons, for this division was not intended by the author of Luke. Luke 3:1-18 is a single narrative episode, unified by its focus on John the Baptist and his preaching. Indeed, we should probably include 3:19-20, which rounds off Luke’s presentation of John. This observation has important consequences for the interpretation of 3:1-6, for the general description of John’s message in 3:3 (“proclaiming a baptism of repentance”) is given specific content in 3:7-14. There we learn what real repentance means. Preachers have several options here: They can follow the lectionary division while interpreting both parts in light of the total episode; they can preach a single sermon on 3:1-20; or they can preach two sermons on two different aspects of 3:1-20. Any of these options could result in faithful biblical preaching.

Luke 3:1-2 provides a rather elaborate dating and political setting for John’s prophetic call and for the main part of the Gospel narrative. This marks a new section after the stories in Luke 1-2. Luke 3:3 provides a summary description of John’s message, and then John’s role in God’s plan is indicated in 3:4-6 through the quotation of Isa. 40:3-5 in the Septuagint version.

2. *Clarification of details*: Vss. 1-2: The phrase “the word of God [or “the Lord”] came to,” sometimes accompanied by a dating by reference to rulers, is a frequent introduction to prophetic books of the Old Testament (see, e.g., Jer. 1:1-3; Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1) and sometimes to narratives of a prophet’s call (Jer. 1:4). Thus John is presented as a prophet who speaks a prophetic message of repentance.

It is noteworthy that the elaborate dating and political setting of the rest of the Gospel story is placed before the account of John’s work and not at the beginning of the account of Jesus’ ministry. This suggests a link rather than a separation between the periods and activities of John and Jesus, contrary to the view of some interpreters of Luke’s redactional work.3

Vss. 4-6: Luke-Acts repeatedly uses an appropriate Old Testament quotation to interpret the special roles of key
characters in the story. See 4:18-19, an Isaiah quotation applied to Jesus, and Acts 13:47, an Isaiah quotation applied to Paul. These quotations disclose the divine purpose which is being realized through these persons. The first two verses of the quotation from Isa. 40:3-5 (Luke 3:4-5) are dominated by the image of a way or road, each line except the first speaking of the preparation of a road fit for the Lord’s coming. Then 3:6 speaks of the actual appearance of the Lord and of the salvation that the Lord brings. Although the quotation generally follows the text of the Septuagint closely, it reads “Make straight his paths” instead of “the paths of our God,” which makes it easier to understand the coming Lord as Jesus.

Other significant variations: Luke’s quotation omits “and the glory of the Lord will appear” before the last line. Further, Luke and the Septuagint, but not the standard Hebrew text, refer to “the salvation of God” in the last line, a matter of considerable importance to Luke. A similar statement is found in the Hebrew at Isa. 52:10.

While the RSV translates the last line “And all flesh shall see the salvation of God,” TEV, NEB, JB, and NIV say “all mankind.” “All flesh” is the literal sense. The parallel passages in Matthew and Mark end the quotation with “Make his paths straight,” while Luke continues the quotation for two more verses. This is an indication of the importance of these additional verses to the author of this Gospel.

3. The text in the context of Luke-Acts: This is a crucial point in the author’s story. To be sure, two chapters have preceded this passage (with chap. 1 giving the birth of John a surprising amount of attention—John the Baptist is important in Luke), but only in chaps. 3 and 4 do John and Jesus begin the work to which they have been called. The author marks this new beginning by a solemn statement of the time and setting in 3:1-2, and in Acts, too, the activity of John is associated with the crucial “beginning” (Acts 1:22—“beginning from the baptism of John”; 10:37—“beginning . . . after the baptism which John proclaimed”). Luke focuses on John’s activity only in Luke 3:1-20 (although in 7:18-35 Jesus speaks to and about John at some length), but what John begins does not end
at 3:20. However, we must note the relation between parts of 3:1-6 and the rest of Luke-Acts in order to understand that this section will have continuing importance.

As noted, the author likes to define the role of key persons in the story through an appropriate Old Testament quotation. Such quotations immediately follow the first reports of preaching or teaching activity by John and by Jesus (3:4-6, 4:18-19). These quotations tell us who these persons are and why they are important; we are expected to remember these descriptions as the story continues. They enable us to see these persons from God's side, i.e., through a disclosure of divine purpose. This purpose extends beyond John's life, so the quotation not only defines John's role while he is active but also provides clues to what is beginning here that must continue and grow. The author will trace a development set in motion by "the word of God to John" and continuing through the rest of Luke-Acts.

What does begin here that will continue and grow? Before we look at the Isaiah quotation, note vs. 3: John begins to preach repentance for forgiveness of sins. This continues with Jesus (see the statements defining Jesus' mission in Luke 5:32 and 19:10), and the risen Christ passes this proclamation to his followers (Luke 24:47), with the added note that repentance for forgiveness of sins must be preached "to all the nations." Acts describes the apostles and Paul carrying out this command, and in Acts 26:20 Paul summarizes his own preaching in words that remind us of the preaching of John (see Luke 3:8a). John inaugurates the preaching of repentance for forgiveness of sins which Jesus and the missionary preachers of Acts will continue and expand.

I suggested that the Isaiah quotation provides clues to John's role, as the Gospel writer understands it, and to the significance of the movement which the word of God to John initiates. This is so in two respects: first, John, by proclaiming a baptism of repentance, prepares the Lord's way. This theme is sounded in the larger part of the quotation (3:4-5), which is unified by the central image of a road. Elsewhere also the author of Luke makes clear that John has the crucial role of
preparing. This preparation can be spoken of in two ways: John prepares the Lord's way (1:76, 3:4-5, 7:27); he also prepares a people for the Lord (1:17). These two tasks are closely related, if not identical. John prepares the Lord's way by calling the people to repentance. The "people prepared" are a repentant people, whose hearts have been turned (1:17). When the author of Luke, by means of Isaiah, describes John's task as road building, the words of Isaiah are being used to provide images of repentance. Height and depth are to be leveled; the crooked and rough are to be made straight and smooth. This drastic transformation of a terrain that obstructs travel is an image for the revolutionary repentance that is the required preparation for the Lord's coming. Some of the same imagery is used elsewhere when issues of revolution and repentance appear. The language of valleys filled in and mountains brought low (tapeinothesetai) may refer to the same revolution as in 1:52: "He has put down the mighty from thrones and has exalted the lowly (tapeinous)," and the images of crooked and straight reappear in Acts in contexts where repentance, and hardened opposition to the message of repentance, are important (see Acts 2:40, 8:21, 13:10). Thus John the Baptist is the preparer of the way and forerunner not only in the sense that he bears witness to Jesus, the stronger one who is coming (3:16), but also in the sense that he prepares a repentant people, a people ready to receive the Lord because they have passed through the drastic leveling and straightening that Second Isaiah described.

There is a second respect in which the Isaiah quotation reveals what the word of God to John sets in motion. The last line of the quotation (3:6) is a thematic statement of the divine purpose which the author of Luke-Acts believes is being realized in the events presented in Luke-Acts. It is thematic because it is closely related to two similar statements in key passages in Luke-Acts and because many of the major developments in Luke-Acts can be related to these thematic statements. The Septuagint version of Isa. 40:5 uses a neuter form of the Greek word for salvation (to soterion), and this is
repeated in Luke 3:6). This neuter form is found in only three other places in the New Testament. Two of the three are the key passages in Luke-Acts already referred to. Luke 3:6 is linked to Luke 2:30-32 and Acts 28:28 by a common theme and by the common use of this rare word. All three passages probably borrow this word from Isa. 40:5 in the Septuagint. These three passages provide clues to the unity and meaning of Luke-Acts and to the divine purpose being realized in the story as a whole. They occur early in Luke, to orient the reader, and at the end of Acts, to remind the reader of what has been happening. In all three passages the inclusiveness of God's salvation is emphasized. Specifically, this salvation embraces "all the peoples," the Gentiles as well as the people of Israel (Luke 2:30-31), and will be seen by "all flesh" (3:6).

"All flesh" is a sweeping term that fights against any limit the interpreter is tempted to place upon it. Nevertheless, the course of the story makes clear that the author of Luke-Acts has particular groups in mind, groups that have been excluded and to which the statement "All flesh will see the salvation of God" comes as surprising good news. These groups are the Gentiles, to whom the missionary preachers turn in Acts, but also the outcasts of Israel, the sinners and tax collectors, to whom Jesus turns in Luke. Their inclusion is a major aspect of the revolution which God is working and for which John is preparing a people, making them ready through revolutionary repentance.

In presenting the preaching of John, then, the author of Luke is not recording events of small importance that will quickly become obsolete as soon as Jesus appears on the scene. John's preaching marks the beginning of a revolutionary movement that will continue with power through the rest of Luke-Acts. To be sure, John prepares for someone greater. He prepares the way that another will travel and prepares a people who will rightly turn to a "stronger one" (3:16). But John's preaching already has God's final purpose firmly in view and expresses this in language that remains central to Lukan soteriology: "forgiveness of sins" (3:3), God's salvation for all flesh (3:6), baptism "in Holy Spirit"
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(3:16). Furthermore, the repentance for which John calls is not a temporary requirement. It is the continuing, necessary response to the manifestation of God's salvation to all flesh as this salvation makes its way through the world in the surprising ways narrated in the rest of Luke-Acts.

4. The message of the text, viewed as a whole: Unless we choose to ignore what is central to the text, our sermons must concentrate on two interlocking realities: the impending manifestation of God's salvation to all flesh and the revolutionary repentance that is the required human response. These sermons must convey something of the full Lukan scope of these realities. They must point to a salvation that is really world-encompassing and that is breaking down the barriers by which parts of our world have been excluded. And they must proclaim a repentance as radical as the radical imagery of leveling and straightening in the words of Isaiah.

5. From text to sermon, issues and suggestions: Honest, thoughtful, and relevant preaching will require us to face some issues that appear when we attempt to relate the text to our own experience. We can begin by asking whether we really believe what we read in vs. 6, that "all flesh will see the salvation of God." Even if we ignore the possibility that "all flesh" includes nonhuman creatures (which are indeed included in the Son's creative and redemptive work according to Col. 1:15-20), it is still not clear that God's salvation will soon become a vivid reality for all people. There are few signs that the world we know is about to accept Christ or share with the hungry or end its old injustices. This may lead us to conclude that the biblical writers were naïve enthusiasts and that we have learned better.

Nevertheless, we should consider the following before making up our minds: These early Christians, with their eschatological enthusiasm, did not assume that evil, suffering, and rebellion against God had already disappeared or were mere illusions. They affirmed what was to them a relevant and believable hope in the midst of a world that attacked that hope in many ways. The tension was always there. Hope then and now is something more than a logical
deduction from present facts, which often produce only resignation. This does not mean, however, that hope is unrelated to present happenings. At this point Luke-Acts may be particularly instructive. It, like the rest of the New Testament, knows that the present is a time of tension which in many ways contradicts the Christian hope. Although the author of Luke-Acts is sometimes accused of presenting a naive and sub-Pauline triumphalism, David Tiede has rightly recognized that the literary structure of this writing is strongly shaped by "the motif of rejection," which is a "crucial restraint or countercurrent in the flow of the narrative." Indeed, the end of Acts (Acts 28:28), although referring to the prophecy quoted in Luke 3:6, does not record a simple realization of this prophecy. While Paul proclaims that the Gentiles will hear and receive "this salvation of God," the verses immediately preceding emphasize the blindness and deafness of Jews. Because a large part of the Jewish people rejected "this salvation of God," Acts leaves us with something less than "all flesh" seeing God's salvation. Here was a theological problem that the author could not solve, and we are faced with similar problems.

However, Luke-Acts provides guidance for us in the following ways: (1) The biblical promise that "all flesh will see the salvation of God" is not trimmed back because people cannot understand how its realization is possible; it remains the statement of the ultimate purpose of a God who will finally triumph. (2) The author of Luke-Acts knows how to relate the promise to historical experience. Although resistance is powerful, Luke-Acts celebrates significant breakthroughs toward inclusive salvation which testify that God is even more powerful. A hope that is not fully realized does not become vague and irrelevant so long as there are events in present experience that point to significant breakthroughs in moving toward the ultimate goal. The author of Luke-Acts celebrates such breakthroughs when narrating Jesus' inclusion of the outcasts of Israel and the early church's surge into the gentile world. Such events, happening now or becoming newly possible, take on deep significance when we recognize
their relation to the promise. This recognition, in turn, keeps
the promise alive and meaningful.

So the question for the preacher becomes: are there such
breakthroughs, happening now or becoming newly possible,
in the movement toward God’s world-encompassing salva-
tion? If so, they should be celebrated in the sermon as God’s
work in our midst, which calls us to a decisive response. In
thinking about these breakthroughs, we should not forget the
inclusion of social and religious outcasts, the inclusion of
those of other religions. There may be new versions of these
developments today. There may also be breakthroughs
unanticipated in the first century.

Note that the Gospels have taken a text from Second Isaiah,
a prophet who was concerned with the restoration of an
exiled people to its homeland, and have applied it to the work
of John the Baptist and to the salvation coming through Jesus.
The old text became new when related to the new movement
in God’s purpose. Something similar will happen to our old
text (Luke 3:1-6) if we succeed in relating it to the
breakthroughs of God’s saving purpose today. This new
awareness of the old text’s present meaning may be the word
of God coming to us, enabling us to be prophets like John,
prophets calling people to repentance in light of the
world-saving work of God manifest in our history. Thus John
can also serve as a clue to an aspect of the preacher’s and
church’s vocation. Paul Minear has argued that Luke presents
John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles as prophets who
pattern themselves on earlier prophets (Elijah, Moses, and,
for the apostles, Jesus). As Minear also emphasizes, Luke’s
portraits should have something to say about the prophetic
vocation today.

The approach of God’s salvation for all flesh is not simply
comfort, it is also crisis. The approach of this salvation turns
John into a preacher of repentance, for the people must be
prepared, the road must be leveled and straightened.
Disliking hellfire sermons and not wanting to get into trouble,
we may resist this role of prophet of repentance. But that is
what John is, and it is a necessary role. Heads must be turned
in order to see the approach of God's salvation for all flesh,
and selfish, unjust, and exclusive patterns of life must be
straightened out or they will be trampled by the march of
God. So the "word of God," which discloses to the
prophet-preacher the important breakthroughs in the
approach of God's salvation for all, will also disclose where
repentance is required, since most of us resist these
breakthroughs or try to ignore them, continuing to live as
before. The imagery of extremes and opposites in Luke 3:5
(valley-mountain, crooked-straight, rough-smooth) makes
clear how drastic the change must be.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12

Luke 3:7-20

1. The structure of the text: As noted in the preceding
divisions in 3:1-18. The lectionary text for the third Sunday in
Advent is a continuation of the text for the previous Sunday
and should be interpreted in connection with it. Furthermore,
the Baptist by reporting his arrest. This report adds an
important detail to the portrait of John, indicating that he
suffered the typical fate of the prophet. I will include 3:19-20
in my discussion below.

In 3:7-18 John responds to the crowds who come for
baptism. The introductory descriptions of the crowds (3:7, 10,
15) provide the settings for John's responses and mark the
sections of the text. The first two sections (3:7-14), however,
belong closely together. They indicate the radical nature of
the required repentance, with 3:10-14 spelling out concretely
the "fruits worthy of repentance" demanded in 3:8. In the
next section (3:15-17) John clarifies his relation to the stronger
one who is coming. Then 3:18 indicates that the preceding
words are only examples of John's preaching, and 3:19-20
records the prophet's fate.

The words of John in Luke 3:7-9 have a close parallel in
Matt. 3:7-10, but the two Gospels differ in the groups to which
John is speaking. Matthew regards these harsh words as
appropriate for Pharisees and Sadducees, while in Luke they
are addressed to the crowds in general. These crowds have
come to be baptized, i.e., they have already responded to
John's preaching of a baptism of repentance (3:3). Instead of
being pleased with their response, John addresses them in
scathing terms (3:7), drawing a line between the crowd's
superficial response and true repentance. At the risk of
imposing more structure on John's words than is there, we
can say that the warnings and instructions in 3:8-14 deal with
a series of obstacles to real repentance. In vs. 8 John rejects
any repentance that does not show itself in action. Then he
attacks a false sense of security based on religious and
national heritage. To this he adds in vs. 9 an attack on
blindness to the crisis, the easy assumption that nothing very
immediate or crucial is at stake. Vss. 10-14 give concrete
illustrations of the "fruits worthy of repentance" and the
"good fruit" demanded in vss. 8-9. Although there is a series
of three questions and answers in vss. 10-14, the first
exchange (3:10-11) differs from the others, for it concerns the
crowds in general while the other two (3:12-14) concern
persons in special positions. The fruits of repentance will
appear in the way that one behaves toward others in society.
There is first the basic demand on all to share food and
clothing with those in need (3:11). Then those who have the
power to oppress others are enjoined not to do so (3:12-14).
The instructions to the tax collectors and the soldiers in each
case fit the special temptation of each group to be oppressive.
Since 3:18 indicates that Luke only gives examples of John's
exhortation, we are encouraged to think of other people of
power who are inclined to be oppressive. Thus Luke makes
clear that repentance means turning away from selfishness
and oppression for the sake of love and justice in society.

2. Clarification of details: Vs. 11: Modern translations refer to
All of these are attempts to translate *chitōn*, which is the basic garment worn next to the skin. “Coat,” which implies an outer garment for warmth, is misleading.

Vs. 16: What Luke understands by baptism with Holy Spirit is made clear in Acts, but the meaning of baptism with fire is uncertain. On the one hand, “tongues as of fire” appear as the Spirit descends at Pentecost (Acts 2:3). This would suggest that fire is simply a way of picturing the Spirit. On the other hand, Luke 3:16 is surrounded by two references to the destructive fire of judgment (3:9, 17). This suggests that Holy Spirit and fire refer to contrasting baptisms, the one for the wheat, the other for the chaff of vs. 17.

Vs. 18: Although some interpreters would translate simply “preach,” John is described as “preaching good news” if the verb (*euangēlizeto*) has its full force. “Good news” may seem a strange term in light of John’s stern call to repentance and threats of judgment. Recall, however, that repentance is required because of the approach of God’s salvation for all flesh (3:6). John opens the way to forgiveness of sins (3:3), and John’s baptism points to the greater baptism with the Holy Spirit (3:16). John does preach good news.

3. The text in the context of Luke-Acts: In discussing Luke 3:1-6, I pointed out that Luke’s portrait of John has an important function within Luke-Acts as a whole. John marks the beginning of something that continues and grows. This is true of John’s call to repentance for forgiveness and of the accompanying announcement of the coming of God’s salvation for all flesh. In light of this, it is not surprising that some parts of the more detailed description of John’s message in 3:7-17 touch on themes that are important in the continuing story.

In 3:8 John rejects a false sense of security arising from the fact that the hearers are children of Abraham. Ancestry cannot be offered as a substitute for fruits worthy of repentance. In Luke-Acts as a whole the promise to Abraham and his descendants is not rejected; indeed, it is strongly affirmed. This promise is being fulfilled in the coming of Jesus
to the people of Israel and in the Christian mission to the Jews (see Luke 1:55, 73; Acts 3:25-26, 13:26). Salvation through Jesus is rightly offered to the Jews first (Acts 3:25-26) because of the promise to Abraham. However, this does not mean that God’s purpose is limited to Jews or that God’s hands are tied by Jewish rejection. When there is no repentance from Jews or when Jews reject the universal implications of the biblical promise, the mission, guided by God, turns to the Gentiles. Thus the freedom of God proclaimed in Luke 3:8 (“God can from these stones raise up children for Abraham”) is demonstrated in the narrative in Acts, where God’s purpose, which in Luke’s view has always been a universal purpose, is not thwarted by Jewish resistance. This resistance simply becomes the occasion for moving to a new aspect of God’s plan by turning to the Gentiles.

The story of the rich man and poor Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 also has affinities with 3:8-11. The rich man belatedly appeals to father Abraham, but this appeal does no good, since the rich man did not share his goods with the needy when he had a chance. Just so, having Abraham as father is of no value without the fruits of repentance (3:8), and chief among these fruits is the sharing of the necessities of life with others (3:11). The requirement in 3:11 that those who have more than one garment and the minimum necessary food share with others also touches on a continuing Lukan concern. This is not a requirement peculiar to John the Baptist nor meant only for those seeking his baptism. As Joseph Fitzmyer points out, “No other NT writer—save perhaps the author of the Epistle of James . . . speaks out as emphatically as does Luke about the Christian disciple’s use of material possessions, wealth, and money.” Reading Luke 12:13-34; 14:12-14, 33; 16:10-15, 19-31; 18:18-30 will refresh one’s memory on the radical requirements Jesus makes with regard to material possessions, according to Luke. This material emphasis is accompanied by an emphasis on God’s intervention on behalf of the poor and against the rich (see Luke 1:53; 4:18; 6:20-26). John the Baptist was not a crabbed ascetic laying down a requirement which, fortunately, no longer applies. His words
in 3:11 anticipate the requirements Jesus makes of his followers.

The reference in 3:16 to the stronger one who will baptize with Holy Spirit points forward to key events in Luke-Acts. Later references to baptism with Holy Spirit show that Luke traces a progressive fulfillment of this promise. John’s prophecy of the coming of the stronger one finds immediate fulfillment as Jesus appears in 3:21-22. These verses mention Jesus’ baptism only incidentally. They focus on the descent of the Holy Spirit, which remains with Jesus and empowers him in his mission (see 4:1, 14, 18). Later the risen Christ recalls John’s words in Luke 3:16 and announces that the baptism with Holy Spirit is about to take place (Acts 1:5). This happens at Pentecost and again as Peter preaches in Cornelius’s house (see Acts 11:16-17).

Thus the words of John about baptism with Holy Spirit anticipate major developments in Acts, for there are specific references to the fulfillment of this promise at two key points: as the mission begins in Acts 2 and as the leading apostle is shown that Gentiles must be included in the mission in Acts 10:1-11:18. The Spirit is referred to as God’s “gift” (Acts 11:17). It is part of the “salvation of God” which is appearing (Luke 3:6). It also enables those who receive it to speak and act with God’s power, as stories in Acts wish to demonstrate.

The arrest of John is reported in 3:19-20. The placement of this report seems strange, for unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke records the arrest of John before reporting the baptism of the people and of Jesus (3:21). Scholars discuss two possible motives for what we assume is a departure from correct chronological order: (1) Luke wanted to mark a clear distinction between the time of John and the time of Jesus, so John is removed from the scene before Jesus appears and there is no reference to John at Jesus’ baptism. (2) Luke wanted to round off his portrait of John by indicating that his life fit the pattern of the suffering prophet, a pattern that Jesus would also follow. I think the latter view best fits what we find elsewhere in Luke-Acts. The rejection, persecution, and
murder of the prophets is a repeated theme there (see Luke 6:23, 11:49, 13:34, Acts 7:52), and the prophet Jesus will suffer the same fate (Luke 13:33-34). Herod’s arrest of the prophet John sets the pattern, for John is Jesus’ forerunner also in suffering. The importance of this theme for Luke-Acts is indicated by the fact that, contrary to Matthew and Mark, the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth is part of the first episode in Jesus’ public ministry (4:16-30). Jesus is immediately presented as a prophet unacceptable to his own people (4:24). Those in Acts upon whom the prophetic Spirit rests suffer the same rejection and persecution (see especially the parallels between the passion of Jesus and the passion of Stephen in Acts 7:55-60).

4. The message of the text, viewed as a whole: The text contains both a call to repentance and a christological witness (3:16). These are not entirely separate. The stronger one who is coming will be the judge who makes the final disposition of wheat and chaff (3:17). Therefore, his coming reinforces the call to repentance. John’s words about repentance support and expand the summary of John’s message in 3:3 (“preaching a baptism of repentance”) and the related images of leveling and straightening in 3:4-5. More specifically, John’s words seek to correct a shallow response to his call to repentance (they are addressed to crowds who wrongly think that they are ready for baptism). Similarly, his words about the coming one seek to correct a false expectation about himself (3:15). This corrective movement should not be ignored in the sermon, for related shallow or false views may exist today.

The attack on a shallow repentance is rather fully developed. John makes clear that one cannot substitute religious or national heritage for real repentance (3:8), that repentance cannot be postponed or ignored (3:9), that real repentance changes the way we act (3:8), and what kind of behavior will result (3:10-14). The correction of false expectation centers on the people’s confusion of the preacher who prepares the people with the one for whom the preacher is preparing. John must distinguish himself from the stronger one and distinguish his baptism from baptism with Holy Spirit.
5. From text to sermon, issues and suggestions: It will be hard to get a modern congregation to take the call to repentance seriously. Furthermore, many modern preachers do not relish the role of preacher of repentance identifying it with hellfire and damnation preachers or fearing that it will get them into trouble. The text does not suggest that we will escape trouble (see 3:19-20). It does suggest that the preaching of repentance is nevertheless an important and necessary task. If so, the preacher must struggle with the issue of how the task can be done in ways that will help the congregation to hear and respond.

Repentance threatens social and psychological structures on which we base our security. These cannot be distributed without turmoil. Nevertheless, repentance is the necessary way out of the self-destructive patterns of social and individual life. Because repentance is threatening, preachers must expect to encounter a series of defenses when they speak of it. First of all, it will appear to be a “ritual” word. It is something I do in church when repeating the confession of sin. Or it is something I did at my conversion, and therefore I don’t need to do it now. Another series of defenses can be related to John’s words in 3:8-9. I don’t need to repent because I’m a Christian or an American (“We have Abraham as our father”) or because I’m “making it” in business and society. If there are problems, it’s best to ignore them until they go away (the ax isn’t going to strike). As a generality the call to repentance is not very disturbing. The response may be a ritual acquiescence that changes nothing. But the Gospel asks about “fruits.” Change of orientation (i.e., metanoia = repentance) brings change of action, so we can test the reality of repentance by looking at our actions. Luke wishes to be quite concrete about this, as 3:10-14 shows. The simple requirement in 3:11 already shows that we are among the crowds who come to John supposedly repentant but with no idea of what repentance really means. As conflicts appear between the requirements of repentance and the systems of values and patterns of action to which we are committed, the stakes increase and the issue becomes serious. At this point
expect the defense: "This is too much to expect! It's impossible!" This defense should be familiar. You may have used it yourself. Perhaps the words of John can at least expose our hidden defenses. In addition, there may be some openings for real repentance in your congregation if personal and corporate failings have become sufficiently clear.

The correction of false expectation in 3:15-17 may reflect the historical fact that John the Baptist had an influence and following which could rival that of Jesus. While this situation is past, we can ask whether John's words about himself and the coming one provide guidance for the modern prophet-preacher. There are those in the church who, unable to see what the preacher is pointing to, are content to look at the preacher pointing. The more "successful" the preacher is, the more the preacher's words and person attract admiration, the greater the danger of people confusing the preacher with what the preaching is pointing to. This confusion is flattering and therefore tempting. The words of John in 3:16 might become the occasion for repentance by both preacher and congregation from this dangerous confusion. All would then confess that neither preacher, nor the church as organization, nor ritual, nor anything else that we do or have is the answer to our need. Then we will be taking the stance of John, who points away from himself to the stronger one and away from his baptism to the baptism with Holy Spirit that the stronger one will bring. Although we believe that this stronger one has come, he did not leave us in control of his presence and gifts. The one who has come is also the one whom we need and await. The repentant wait with expectant patience and do not try to take the place of the one who is coming.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19


1. The structure of the text. The first chapter of Luke begins with two annunciation scenes: the coming birth of John to his
father Zechariah and the coming birth of Jesus to his mother Mary. The greatness of both of these babies is disclosed by the angel to the parent. Following these parallel scenes, there is a meeting of the two mothers (1:39-56) which clarifies the relationship between the two babies and provides the occasion for a psalm of thanksgiving which discloses to the readers of Luke what God is doing through these events. In this meeting the focus of attention is on Mary and her child. Thus the scene emphasizes the birth of Jesus as the matter of prime importance, despite the wonderful things previously said about John. While Mary is the central character in this scene, it should be noted that Elizabeth’s praise of Mary causes Mary to praise God. This response is appropriate to her as a representative of the lowly faithful for whom God is acting through the messiah Jesus.

When Mary hurries to Elizabeth, she not only learns the truth of the angel’s words about the older woman (1:36-37) but hears her prophetically confirm that Mary’s child will be the Lord, the messiah. Indeed, the unborn John participates in this confirmation. John is already a prophet. As the angel said in 1:15, “He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.” When the baby John leaps in her womb, his mother interprets this as prophetic recognition of the mother of the messiah and speaks the words of praise that John cannot yet speak.

The Magnificat is a poem, and its poetic structure is important to its interpretation. While the structure of the Magnificat has been variously explained, I regard the repeated use of strong action verbs at the beginning of many of the lines as an important structural device. The following rather literal translation attempts to preserve the word order of the Greek even when it violates the rules of good English. It may be necessary to consult a standard translation to clarify the meaning.

46 Magnifies / my soul / the Lord
47 And has found gladness / my spirit / in God / my Savior
48 For he has regarded / the humble state / of his slave girl
For behold henceforth / will call me blessed / all
generations

49 For has done for me / great things / the mighty one
And holy / his name

50 And his mercy / to generations / and generations /
for those who fear him.

51 He has done / a mighty deed / with his arm
He has scattered / proud people / in thoughts / of their
heart

52 He has put down / mighty rulers / from thrones
And has exalted / humble people

53 Hungry people / he has filled / with good things
And rich people / he has sent out / empty

54 He has helped / Israel / his servant
To remember / mercy

55 As he spoke / to our fathers / to Abraham / and to his
seed / forever.

Several things should be noted here. The italicized phrases
represent the strong action verbs that frequently begin the
lines. This pattern of initial verbs helps to mark off the lines
and puts great stress on God's action, to which all the
italicized verbs refer after the first two lines. In each case the
italicized English phrase represents one word in Greek. In a
number of other places also more than one English word was
required to translate one Greek word. The divisions within
the lines indicate that there is a rhythm of phrases in the
poem. Each marked section of the line contains one major
word or one major word and dependent minor words.

The poem also divides into two stanzas or strophes. These
are marked by the two concluding lines of each strophe,
which contrast with what precedes them but resemble each
other. Vss. 49b-50 and 54b-55 resemble each other in both
thought and form. They contrast with the lines preceding
them by shifting from the pattern of initial verbs in
independent clauses and by a change in the rhythm (a short
two-beat line followed by an unusually long line). They
interpret God's intervention as mercy shown in faithfulness to the covenant people, placing this in the perspective of the generations of Israel's history. Just as there is a connection in thought between the final lines of the two strophes, there is also a connection between vss. 48a, 49a of strophe one and vss. 51-53 of strophe two. Vs. 51a repeats the verb of vs. 49a and begins to develop the thought. We can say that the Magnificat goes through the same pattern and over the same ground twice. There is also a significant difference between the two strophes, however. In strophe one the reason for thanksgiving is very personal: the mighty God has done something great for a particular humble woman. In strophe two the scope of God's action expands. We hear again of the mighty God and the humble, but now whole societies are involved. Furthermore, a new group is introduced: People who are proud, mighty, and rich are contrasted with those who are humble and hungry. We have moved from a bipolar contrast between the mighty God and a humble woman to a triangular tension involving two wonders: The mighty God exalts the lowly, those who do not share God's might. The mighty God also puts down the rulers who have a might that looks like God's.

Vss. 51-53 contain the most powerful language of the poem and are therefore its climax. Not only does the thought expand as indicated above, but also strong, graphic words are used ("his arm," "scattered," etc.). These strong words are emphasized and the pace of the poem quickened by the elimination of all articles and most conjunctions. Most important is the strong contrast built into these verses. This contrast is stressed by an a-b-b-a pattern in vss. 52-53 (mighty-humble-hungry-rich, with accompanying contrasting verbs). There is even a rhyme pattern in vss. 52-53, which also emphasizes the contrast. Subject and form mesh: The mighty God's overthrow of the existing order is proclaimed in strong language full of sharp reversals.

The Magnificat is largely composed of language borrowed from the Old Testament. In particular, the song, and to some extent the story, of Hannah the mother of Samuel (1 Sam.
1-2:10) seems to have provided material for Mary's poem. Thus Mary speaks as a representative of the Old Testament people and proclaims the fulfillment of its hope.

2. Clarification of details: Vs. 45: Mary is blessed not only because of her child but also because she responded to the angel's message with faith (see 1:38). In this she contrasts with Zechariah, who was not willing to trust the angel's words (1:20). Vs. 45 can be translated either "Happy is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment..." or "Happy is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment..."

Vss. 51-54: The redemptive action of God for the lowly and for Israel is described with past-tense verbs. Although the story is only at its beginning—the conception of the messiah—this beginning is taken to represent all that will result, so that God's redemption can be proclaimed as already accomplished.

Vss. 54-55: There is an ambiguity in the sentence structure of these verses. "To Abraham" either modifies "mercy," with "as he spoke to our fathers" as a parenthetical insertion, or "to Abraham" is in apposition with "to our fathers," singling out the first of the fathers for special emphasis ("as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham... "). RSV preserves the ambiguity. NEB, TEV, NIV, and JB choose the former interpretation, a dubious choice in my view, and the first three of these translations rearrange the parts of the sentence to make their interpretations clear.

3. The text in the context of Luke-Acts: The Magnificat and the other canticles in Luke 1-2 function like arias in opera. By artistic convention in opera the action may be interrupted so that the audience can participate more deeply in the significance of major events through poem and song. Similarly, the story stops for Mary's psalm, and Mary speaks with a lucid insight and a poetic power that are beyond normal possibilities in order to bring out for the readers of Luke the significance of the coming messiah in God's redemptive purpose. We may also compare this scene (and the whole of Luke 1-2) with an overture, which sounds themes to be developed in later parts of the work. What Mary and, to a lesser extent, Elizabeth say in
this scene pertains not just to the moment but to the significance of the whole Christ story which follows. These words interpret the story in advance, drawing out meanings that might be overlooked apart from the previews that Luke provides in the Magnificat and elsewhere.

The scene is dominated by the mood of rejoicing which pervades the Lukan birth story as a whole. This rejoicing is expressed in language reminiscent of the Old Testament. The use of this language makes clear that the promise to Israel, expressed in the Old Testament, is coming to fulfillment. That the promise is based on this Scripture and pertains to this people is strongly affirmed by Luke. The people who rejoice at the messiah's birth are portrayed by Luke as representatives of Jewish piety and rooted in the Jewish Scriptures. In Luke's theology there is no conflict between asserting that in Jesus God "has helped his servant Israel... as he spoke to our fathers," and asserting that God through Jesus is bringing salvation to all nations. According to the Old Testament itself, as Luke will soon make clear in 2:30-32 and 3:6, the promise to Israel includes making it the medium by which God's salvation spreads to all people. Human blindness may resist this but cannot prevent it.

The fulfillment begins with God doing great things for a woman of humble state (1:48-49). In referring to her "humble state," Mary is not just expressing the humility that all should show before God. Later the poem refers again to God's exaltation of the humble (RSV: "those of low degree"), and there they are contrasted with rulers. Mary speaks of her station in society. She is a representative of the lowly and hungry for whom God is acting in Jesus Christ, intervening for them against the proud, powerful, and rich. Therefore, there is real continuity between God's act for Mary and God's overturn of society in 1:51-53. The Magnificat proclaims that in Jesus Christ God has exalted the humble and poor and has put down their oppressors. Soon afterward Simeon proclaims that "this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel" (2:34). These summaries of what God is doing in Jesus anticipate events in Jesus' ministry, which are emphasized by
their connection with these previews. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus affirms the words of the Magnificat by declaring this to be his mission: "He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, . . . to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (4:18). In 6:20-26 we find Jesus doing what he declared he was sent to do: he preaches good news to the poor. But his beatitudes for the poor are accompanied by woes for the rich, which fits the reversal proclaimed in the Magnificat. Jesus also warns that "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (14:11, 18:14; see also 16:15). This reversal of status is proclaimed as accomplished fact in the Magnificat.

The scene in 1:39-55 also anticipates the later story by presenting John, though still unborn, as a witness to Jesus (1:41, 44). This is related to the role that John consciously assumes in 3:1-18, where John is preparer and pointer to the stronger one (3:4, 16-17).

4. The message of the text, viewed as a whole: In this scene Elizabeth recognizes Mary as the mother of the messiah and confirms to her that she has been chosen for this special role. Mary responds by giving thanks to God. In her poem God is praised as the mighty one who acts with mercy toward the covenant people, in accordance with the promise to the fathers. The two strophes of the poem present the scope of God's action differently. In vss. 48-49a the focus is narrow and personal: "The mighty one has done great things for me." In vss. 51-53 the focus is broad, encompassing whole societies with their contrasting classes. Nevertheless, there is consistency in the view of God's work: in both strophes God acts for those of lowly status. In vss. 51-53 a reversal of position takes place. Not only are the humble exalted but the mighty are put down. Mary celebrates this overturning of society. Through Mary's words the author of Luke prepares us to understand the story of Jesus as the story of a social revolution worked by God.

5. From text to sermon, issues and suggestions: The text presents at least three difficulties for the preacher. First, the basic mood of the text is joy and celebration. This should also
be the basic mood of the sermon, if it is faithful to the text. But it is much easier for a preacher to talk about joy, or exhort the congregation to be joyful, than to preach a sermon that is joyful. Only the last catches the mood of the text. This joy is natural and appropriate because God’s work is recognized as wonderful. This sense of wonder is conveyed by the tensions in Mary’s poem. There is tension between what people are by human standards and what God makes them through the messiah Jesus. Mary is a woman of humble state; yet God has done great things for her. God acts in the same way for the humble and hungry in society, while putting down the mighty and rich. It is this reversal of the ordinary which produces the sense of wonder. Therefore, the sermon must hold on to two perspectives at once: how things look by human standards and what happens when God acts. The wonder appears when we recognize that we are deeply involved in a social system that places high value on power and riches, yet God has brought down all these pretensions with the force of a stock market crash.

We are faced with a second difficulty when we consider the reason for Mary’s rejoicing. While we might like to rejoice with Mary at the wonder of God’s ways, can be rejoice for the same reason she does? While those at the bottom of society have reason to rejoice with Mary, it would appear that the proud, powerful, and rich do not. The preacher and much of the congregation may belong in the latter camp. We may not recognize this immediately, for we tend to compare ourselves with those we envy, that is, those who are richer and more powerful than we are. However, compared to the rest of the world most Americans are rich, and most members of mainline denominations have some power and status in their communities. Many of us can only share Mary’s joy at what God is doing if we first pass through the repentance that John the Baptist proclaimed. This will mean a revolution of values that permits us to affirm God’s concern for the poor and to loosen our grip on power and wealth.

Third, even those who would like to see the lowly exalted and the hungry filled with good things may not feel like
rejoicing with Mary. There is a disturbing conflict between Mary’s understanding of God’s work and actual developments in our society, where the hungry are not being filled with good things nor the rich sent empty away. However, Mary did not make her statements about God on the basis of a survey of political and economic developments. She was responding to signs, events with special meaning as revelations of a purpose of God only partially fulfilled and still hidden from the world. Only those who can see signs will rejoice as Mary did.

Like Mary, we must celebrate God’s salvation in advance on the basis of signs that require faith. In 1:45 Mary was called blessed because of her faith. This faith had to include not only a trust that she would bear a son but also that this son would be the one through whom God would accomplish the revolution celebrated in 1:51-53. Her faith was nourished by a sign that in itself was small: Elizabeth had conceived in her old age and had confirmed that the angel’s words to Mary were true. Only a small bit of the great revolution has taken place in the story to this point—a lowly woman has been chosen for the great honor of bearing the Messiah—but Mary saw this as a sign. God’s exaltation of the lowly, experienced in her own life, was seen in faith as the pattern of God’s action through the messiah, and the pattern of her poem proclaims in its two strophes the link between God’s choice of one lowly woman and God’s shaking of society. If we are to rejoice with Mary, it will probably not be because of what we read in statistical reports of economic trends but because of certain events which, like God’s work with Mary and Elizabeth, can be signs for us. These events, though less than the full salvation for which we hope, reveal to us the God who surprises the world by overturning its expectations and standards.

NOTES

1. For additional help with the Lukan lectionary texts I recommend the following recent commentaries: Frederick W. Danker, Jesus and the New Age according to St. Luke: A Commentary on the Third Gospel (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1972); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The Gospel according to Luke I-IX; Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.)
1. See especially Hans Conzelmann, The Theology of St. Luke (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), pp. 22-27. Not only does 3:1-2 indicate that the new beginning in the narrative is before, rather than after, the ministry of John, but there are also other indications that the author wishes to connect, rather than separate, John and Jesus. The annunciation and birth stories of John and Jesus in Luke 1-2 bring out parallels between these two figures, and these parallels continue: the ministry of each is introduced with a quote from Isaiah (3:4-6; 4:18-19) and ends with an unjust death. For further criticism of Conzelmann's view, see Walter Wink, John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 46-57.

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8. A few ancient Latin manuscripts attribute the Magnificat to Elizabeth. Some scholars regard this as the original reading, in spite of its weak support in the manuscripts. I am not convinced by their arguments.


11. I agree with Raymond E. Brown that Luke sees Mary as a member of the poor and oppressed remnant of Israel. Brown also believes that the Magnificat originated with a Jewish Christian group who identified themselves as the "poor ones." This is less certain. See Raymond E. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979), pp. 340,350-55. This book is a valuable commentary on the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke.
Once we move beyond the existentialist stereotype of Kierkegaard, we find that his work sheds light on our efforts to relate Christ, the church, and society.

Christ's whole life in all its aspects must supply the norm for the life of the Christian following after him and thus for the life of the whole Church. One has to take every particular aspect of Christ's life, straight from his baptism to his resurrection, and show correspondence in the Church.¹

This journal entry was made by a young, idealistic theology student at the University of Copenhagen in 1834, Soren Kierkegaard. Yet later on, these simple correlations between Christ, the church, and the individual Christian were to become far more problematic and complex for him. By 1847 he was to write:

You talk about wanting to find consolation in Christ. All right, but you had better watch out lest there be something egotistical here. You are supposed to be like Christ. All right, then, try this—at the very moment you yourself are suffering most of all, simply think about consoling others, for this is what he did. The task is not to seek consolation—but to be consolation. To seek the company of the cripples, the despised, the sinners and the publicans.²

As we will see, Kierkegaard came to discover that there are many Christs: the loving Savior, the risen Lord, the Suffering

Michael Plekon is assistant professor in the department of sociology and anthropology, Baruch College, City University of New York.
Servant. Christology revolves around the New Testament question, “Who do people say that I am?” and the answers are always diverse: the Christ of consolation, the Christ of conflict, the Christ of culture, the Christ against it. As Edward Schillebeeckx has pointed out in his magisterial study, this question always leads us back to the church, to the followers of Jesus, and what they have said of him. In turn, this church has constantly sought to understand its Lord not simply in theological statements but also in practice—in activity modeled after his. H. Richard Niebuhr gave us a classic depiction of the variety of historical confrontations in Christ and Culture. Throughout this historical tapestry, the threads of Christian accommodation and resistance to society have continued to entangle each other. What we understand of Christ flows from how we understand ourselves as his disciples and from what we think about and do in our social context.

What follows here is an investigation of the later Kierkegaard’s understanding of Christ, the church, and society. Perhaps the name of the Danish thinker does not immediately evoke such issues but rather the grim, brooding angst and despair of existentialism. As will be argued below, the stereotyping of Kierkegaard in existentialist imagery stems largely from lack of attention to the later part of his life and writings. My principal objective here is to re-examine this little-known, later Kierkegaard in order to inspect a provocative, timely understanding of Christian protest and affirmation. This is not solely a historical exercise, for Kierkegaard’s thinking can shed light on some of the dilemmas in which American Christians now find themselves enmeshed early in the 1980s. Who is Christ? What does he say, what does his church say and do about peace and the arms build-up, about poverty and economic security, about discrimination, abortion, the ERA, church and state, and many other issues? At the outset, I must warn that I will provide no specific answers, certainly no dogmatic positions on these issues. Rather the inquiry I intend to conduct is aimed at provoking consideration of possibilities, that is, of various stances Christians can take toward some of modernity’s problems. I believe
Kierkegaard's responses as a modern theological and social critic can provide insight into such possibilities of Christian praxis.

**THE POET OF EXISTENCE AND ITS CRITIC**

Kierkegaard's stature is well-established in modern Western thought. He is often regarded as the "father" of existentialism because of his concentration on the individual and on subjectivity's webs and tangles. His theological contributions include his delineation of the "infinite qualitative difference" between the divine and the human, his emphasis on the paradoxical nature of the Incarnation, and his depiction of the stages of existence and the "leap of faith." Kresten Nordentoft, a Danish scholar, has drawn attention to the rich social-psychological theory Kierkegaard produced: his understanding of the interpenetration of the biological, social, and psychological dimensions of the self; his investigation of the development of personality, identity, and conscience; and his analyses of angst, despair, and guilt.  

Kierkegaard was also a social theorist and critic, and only very recently has attention turned to a little-understood, relatively understudied portion of his life and writings—the convergence of social-theological protest and affirmation in his later years, culminating in his public attack on the Danish church and society in 1854-55.  

Particularly in America, the Kierkegaard with whom we are best acquainted is the author of books with such strange, even forbidding titles as *Either/Or, Fear and Trembling,* and *The Sickness unto Death.* We best know him as a brilliant, demanding stylist who leads us into the labyrinths of consciousness, whirling the complexities of existence around us, placing us in mazes within mazes of thought and emotion. This is the poet of inwardness, the analyst of angst, the dissector of the self, spelunker of its darkest recesses. Although Kierkegaard characterized his writing as "anthropological contemplation," readers have often chosen to examine only his more explicitly philosophical work. Consid-
erably less attention has been paid to his theology and social criticism. Only a very few studies have been concerned with his criticism of the upper class and the bourgeoisie, their life-styles and values, or with his delineation of "spiritlessness," the pathological religious and ethical emptiness of modern consciousness. Also overlooked has been his criticism of the press, of technological innovations, and of liberal efforts at social, political, and ecclesiastical transformation in Denmark during the 1840s and 1850s.

From 1848 onward, Kierkegaard's thinking and literary production changed. The sources and motivations for these shifts are multiple, interrelated, and complex. They include the protests and upheavals occurring throughout Europe in 1848, particularly those in Denmark, which led to the end of absolute monarchy and the formation of a constitution and parliament in 1849. There was also Kierkegaard's abusive treatment by the controversial newspaper The Corsair, treatment he had instigated himself. Of perhaps equal significance was his theological transformation from 1848 on: his rediscovery of the suffering Christ, of the New Testament's radical demands for discipleship, and his own deepened understanding, at the same time, of God's forgiveness, grace, and love. In the years after 1848 Kierkegaard's kinship with his contemporaries but also his divergence from their views became increasingly clear. With the leading intellectuals of his time, he reacted to the aftershock of the French Revolution and to the succeeding waves of modernization sweeping through Europe. A perception he shared with many of his contemporaries was that in the modern world Christianity was in crisis.

Turning from his innovative probing of the ethical and religious life via the pseudonyms, in the years after 1848 Kierkegaard more consistently identified what was passing for Christianity as an illegitimate "compromise" or "accommodation" with secularity. This position was first put forward in the Postscript in 1846 and then emphasized in Two Ages, A Literary Review, also in that year. In his journals and later in published works, particularly Training in Christianity
(1850), his social-theological criticism developed further. As is often the case with religious responses to social change, Kierkegaard returned to traditional sources—the Gospels' historical Jesus, and the models of discipleship and the primitive church found in Acts and the Epistles. Such a strategy of returning to traditional sources and then subtly reworking them formed the foundation of his late thinking and led to the fusion of his theology with social criticism. He had closely followed the development of the National Liberal party in the 1830s and 1840s and observed its struggle with absolutism's conservative social structure and policies. Even into the mid 1840s he remained loyal to this patriarchal-hierarchical conservative social order in which church and state were mutually legitimating. This was precisely the "establishment" (det Bestaaende) that he later came to attack so violently. In the years after 1848, however, his allegiance began to disintegrate, just as did the old order around him. As Bruce Kimnse has observed, Kierkegaard could no longer ally himself with absolutism's proponents nor for that matter with the National Liberals or Grundtvig's party. Rather, Kierkegaard's appreciation of Christianity's transcendence, of the "prioritarian" claims of the gospel, led him to a stance that dissented from all available positions.

Contrary to interpretations of Kierkegaard as unconcerned with society and politics, the voluminous journals of 1848-55 and the published works of that period suggest that he was indeed taken up with these. His understanding of the radical primacy of the gospel and its demands of discipleship, along with Christianity's incommensurability with any specific platform, policy, or institution—all this did not lead him to abandon social or political concerns. In his later writings both the Danish church and society are subjected to careful scrutiny and often ruthless criticism. First in his journals and then later in several books, the newspaper The Fatherland, and finally in his own periodical The Instant, Kierkegaard confronted "Christendom," that is, both the Christianity-culture synthesis of pre-1848 absolutism as well as the newer, liberal, nominally democratic yet still "official" Christian
order of post-1848 Denmark. He attached special importance to a newly emerging group in the society, the "common man" class composed of small farmers, agricultural workers, craftsmen, and servants. Further, his numerous references to the "common man" class were paralleled by many passages in which he spoke about the poor, sick, mentally ill, crippled and disabled, prostitutes, and criminals. All these references to the lower class and to those at society's margins were not merely extravagances, sentimental patronizing on the part of a bourgeois intellectual, such as Kierkegaard was himself. No, he referred back to the New Testament, to the example of Jesus' interaction with such suffering people, to his ministry of healing and his solidarity with them. Kierkegaard had come to realize that the gospel is preached for such as these, that the gospel is about suffering, humility, service, mercy, and love, not about power, wealth, and respectability. Kierkegaard's attack, then, was social as well as spiritual. If, as he maintained, Christianity consists primarily not in intellectual assent to dogma, regular churchgoing, ecclesiastical reform, or middle-class morality but in following Christ's pattern of selfless love and service in everyday life, then the good news of the New Testament cannot remain within spiritual confines. It must be more than "Sunday Christianity," more than "quiet hours" in church. Christianity has more to do with the parlor and the marketplace, Kierkegaard said, paraphrasing Luther, than the pulpit. It is in everyday life that faith is to be practiced; the social world is the arena for the "works of love."

So without explaining away the violent, ugly language Kierkegaard came to use in the public attack, the abuse he heaped upon sexuality, marriage, parenthood, and other aspects of human life, it can be argued that his later writing nevertheless constitutes one of the most forceful fusions of social and theological criticism in the modern period. He views the history of the church as a continuous disintegration, a progressive deviance from the New Testament pattern. For years in his journals and finally in the literature of the public attack, he castigated Bishop Jakob Peter Mynster,
the Danish church's revered primate, as a weak, compromising clergyman, more astute as a statesman than as a religious leader. Kierkegaard turned even more viciously on the Danish clergy. For such civil servants, Christianity was merely a way of earning a living and acquiring higher social status. Ultimately he called the pastors "cannibals," since they fed upon the state, their congregations, and in the end, upon Christ, the apostles, and the martyrs. He pointed to the contempt that the upper and middle classes held for the poor, the sick, and the others at society's edges. The literature of the public attack was written in simple, direct style, without the elegance of earlier writings and was addressed to the ordinary people. To them Kierkegaard ridiculed the clergy as profit-seeking shopkeepers with a Sunday monopoly. To them he urged a boycott of Sunday worship rather than conformity to conventions that made a fool of God. In a country in which most considered themselves Christians, Kierkegaard defiantly made the outrageous claim that authentic New Testament Christianity did not exist. There was nothing to reform. Christianity had to be introduced into Christendom.

In early October, 1855, with the public attack still being waged, Kierkegaard collapsed in the street. He died a month later, adding nothing new to the attack, maintaining that what he had written he could not and would not retract. He left neither concrete proposals for change nor predictions about the future of the church or society. The one-man revolution, as Johannes Sïk has called it, ended as mysteriously and silently as it had begun.

AGAINST THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Although Kierkegaard has been called a defender of the faith against the encroachments of secularization, a prototypical neo-orthodox figure, this is by no means a completely valid characterization. It would be better to describe Kierkegaard's enterprise, using Peter Berger's terminology, as one of both resistance and accommodation to
modernity—one of traditional affirmation as well as radical attack and innovation. Kierkegaard’s action was one marked by selectivity, ambivalence, and shifting. Much of the earlier portion of his authorship was taken up with his own pseudonymous approach to theological expression, yet he also employed the conventional genres of the sermon and devotional discourse, modeled, at least in part, on Mynster, Luther, and pietist preachers. Kierkegaard argued that he was saying nothing new about Christianity but was simply underscoring what was already there in its traditional, orthodox formulations that people had forgotten or chosen to ignore. His published works and journals confirm that he constantly returned to traditional sources such as the church fathers, Luther, and other theologians. But when we inspect what he does with these sources, for example in the Postscript, Fragments, and other texts, we see that it was impossible for him to make a pure return. Something is lost and many things are added in the process. Kierkegaard could well be described as subject to what Peter Berger has called the “heretical imperative.” He selectively appropriated elements of the Christian tradition, discarded others, and used what he chose to retain in his own way and for his own purpose. Like Bonhoeffer much later, he found fault with an exaggerated emphasis on faith and grace in the Lutheran tradition to the detriment of the imitation of Christ, of Christian praxis. He rejected his contemporary Grundtvig, who emphasized the sacraments and the “living word” transmitted to the church. Grundtvig, he thought, made too much of history, ritual, and the church as a corporate body and thus did not sufficiently stress the individual’s relationship to God. Similarly, he opposed what he saw as Mynster’s overly academic theology because it reduced Christianity to “objective” doctrine, with little room for the passionate, radical conversion called for in the New Testament. He also objected to the intellectually respectable Christianity epitomized by Mynster, and he found the revivalist-awakening movements fanatical and misguided. Yet in his own presentation of the essentials of faith, in his emphasis on the Incarnation as
paradox, on the infinite qualitative difference between God and humankind, on the gulf between revelation and history, between knowledge and faith, Kierkegaard was hardly a pure traditionalist. Throughout these and in his understanding of the "leap of faith" and the "contemporaneity" the believer should seek with Christ, there is the peculiarly modern interjection of subjectivity. Kierkegaard's effort to accentuate the subjective, experiential aspect of Christian faith sprang not simply from his own creative genius but also from the romanticist individualism of the early-nineteenth-century world of which he was a part.

So here we have the first lesson Kierkegaard teaches, namely that there can be no absolute "either/or" or zero-sum situation when responding religiously to modernity. Rather there will be selectivity and ambivalence. Inevitably, there is selective retrieval from tradition, selective appropriation of the new as well as selective rejection of both tradition and modernity and ambivalence about them. Modern church and theological history provides more than ample evidence of this: Schleiermacher appropriated the romantic emphasis on feeling but rejected its unbelief. Barth gave a Nein to historicism, but Bultmann and Bonhoeffer embraced its secularizing, demythologizing impulses, while Tillich used psychoanalytic theory in theology. Likewise, the events from the 1960s to the present further illustrate how the church practices selectivity and ambivalence with respect to civil rights, poverty, and a host of other social issues. It is hard, though, for many to acknowledge the existence of such selectivity and ambivalence, perhaps because of desires to remain faithful to a tradition, doctrinally pure or, for that matter, "open" to social change.

Immediately related to the selectivity and ambivalence that Kierkegaard and other modern theologians express so strikingly is what Berger has called "pluralization," the multiplication of competing religious responses. Put differently, any religious response to modernity will find itself in a "marketplace" situation, one in which there will always be competing theologies and parallels or direct and indirect
“carry-overs” from other processes, values, and institutions of modern society. Kierkegaard found himself in just such a situation of “pluralization,” and thus his theological views, despite frequent claims to singularity, competed with, were influenced by, and in turn shaped those of his contemporaries. In fact, the reality of the church and of theology in the modern period consists in precisely what Kierkegaard opposed but inevitably participated in himself. That is, some adaptation or compromise occurs, even if one’s stance is deliberately one of resistance.

While trying to resist (and nevertheless accommodating), Kierkegaard, like his pseudonym Johannes Climacus, began to create difficulties everywhere. He tried to emphasize the presence of God in human history through the Incarnation and stress the everyday practice of following Christ. In the attempt to actualize faith by dwelling on its ultimate home in the individual’s conversion and action, however, a curious, perhaps unintended eclipse of the social and historical appears to occur in Kierkegaard’s thinking. The church, as a social-historical institution, begins to fade, and Christianity becomes more and more an inward pilgrimage of suffering, a one-to-one relationship between the individual and God. The sacraments become adiaphora, matters of indifference in the extreme sense. Scripture, for the most part the New Testament, is read in a rigidly literal way. Kierkegaard seems to forget that both the Scriptures and sacraments are the transmitted heritage of historical communities of faith, in part what Grundtvig meant by the “living word’s presence among humankind.” Kierkegaard’s christology also appears to become one-dimensional, focused only on the suffering Christ. With such a model, for Kierkegaard the Christian life could be nothing but suffering, a hatred for life, and hostility toward all that is human. These are but a few of the theological problems Kierkegaard seems to have created in the later years. Indeed, the outermost layer of his later writings, that stratum most easily read, expresses precisely the hardness and narrowness I have just suggested.

One more feature of the late Kierkegaard is the shifting
character of his thinking, its modification along with changes in his own life and in the society and church in which he lived. Contrary to the view of some scholars and to certain statements of Kierkegaard himself, there is movement, experiment, and change in his later writings rather than a static unity of purpose and strategy. For some time, he remained loyal not only to Mynster but to the established church. He felt that an admission by individuals, perhaps even by Mynster as primate, was the goal to be aimed at, an admission that all were quite short of the New Testament definition of a Christian. No such admission came, from Mynster or anyone else. Therefore Kierkegaard relinquished this objective. Similarly, he came to understand that the “hidden inwardness” he had stressed and his method of “indirect communication” no longer sufficed in his battle with the Danish church and society. There are only a few examples of the shifting of viewpoints and techniques within the later writings. Others have been alluded to, such as the shift in Kierkegaard’s political allegiance and the turn in his understanding of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. The point made here by Kierkegaard’s case extends to other religious responses to modernity, namely that they will not only be ambivalent and selective but also necessarily variable, subject to constant modification.

Finally, it is important to recognize the historical and sociological foci and specificity of Kierkegaard’s attack—that his public attack was directed not abstractly but at both the Danish church and the society in which it was located. Despite the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, Kierkegaard’s offensive did not end at the church’s door but flew beyond to the social structure that the church legitimized and that in turn supported it. That is why Kierkegaard repeatedly ridicules the social significance and utility of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and churchgoing in the public attack literature. It was the sacralization of prevailing social values, relationships, and institutions which he attacked and the prophetic, critical, revolutionary propensities of Christianity which he championed, propensities later
noted by Max Weber. Christianity is to be enacted, to be lived out in everyday life. Yet it is quite another matter to make mere social existence equivalent to discipleship. Christianity has no special affinity with this or that social arrangement or political party. It can be lived anywhere; it is indifferent to particular forms of government. Kierkegaard eloquently expresses Christianity’s transcendence of culture and its stance of witness toward all social-political institutions and their ideologies. Yet such a view of Christianity by no means implies rejection of social and political concerns or a completely negative witness toward human life. Rather, it is my belief that despite other contradictory attitudes toward history and society, Kierkegaard poses an immensely challenging view of Christianity’s relationship to the world and of the church’s stance in society. His model is the Suffering Servant and prophet, Jesus. Like him, the Christian and the church must also be prophet, servant, and sign of contradiction.

**INCARNATIONAL OPTIMISM: KIERKEGAARD’S AFFIRMATION**

The late Kierkegaard’s christology is decidedly dialectical. The overwhelming sense of his later writings is negative and the figure of the rejected, suffering Christ captures and summarizes this negativeness. Yet, as Kierkegaard admitted in his journals, there are other sides to Christ and Christianity. In his early edifying discourses his more affirmative perspectives are easily seen. He describes and praises the simple joys of life, nature’s beauty, and the wonder of friendship and love. Joy and thanksgiving are the themes repeatedly sounded. Kierkegaard’s affirmative impulses did not die with his earlier writings, however, but deepened and were even present amid all the negativity of the later years.

A text that dramatically expresses what I will call Kierkegaard’s “incarnational optimism” is the much under-studied *Works of Love* (1847). Here Kierkegaard compares and contrasts human love with that rooted in Christian faith and
practice. He then makes a most startling claim: that love is present as a given, both in the heart of God and of humankind. Ethics must proceed from this a priori; Christian praxis must assume this completely unreasonable fact to be so. In Kierkegaard’s words, love is always present, as “the sprout in the grain.” From the act of faith that love is present from the beginning in the Creator and his creation, it is then possible to see the continued enactment or “work” of love as God’s command and an invitation to imitate Christ, to participate in the new creation. To put this another way, Kierkegaard’s recognition of the essential “sickness unto death,” the presence of sin in human nature, is balanced by his perception of the “fundamental healing,” as he calls it, of God’s love and our possibility of imitating that selfless love. For all his emphasis on the radical difference between the divine and the human, Kierkegaard nevertheless recognized a deeper bond between Creator and creation rooted in the work of love. It would not be too much to say that the theological vision of Works of Love forms the underside or other side of the late Kierkegaard’s writings, the foundation of the theological affirmation or “incarnational optimism” to which I have referred.

Kierkegaard’s later theology is marked by a constant focus on the suffering Christ, the “prototype” or “pattern.” To be a Christian is to imitate this Christ; thus Kierkegaard’s christology links God to humankind in suffering, not divinely mandated suffering in punishment for sin but voluntary suffering, rooted in the divine action of love and creation. The suffering Christ mirrors both the suffering God and suffering humankind. Human evil, symbolized in the Fall, creates suffering that can be alleviated only by the suffering Christ, and in turn, by all who seek to follow him in the work of the new creation. In our own time Bonhoeffer and others after him have deepened this rediscovery in christology, the renewed recognition of our kinship with God in creation and in the choice to serve, as Christ, in suffering. Yet while Kierkegaard dwells upon the suffering Christ in his later writings, he does not completely lose sight of the other sides
of christology—Christ as gift, as consolation and grace, the Savior and risen Lord. The suffering Christ as the pattern or prototype is so emphasized because the cross, Kierkegaard thought, had been forgotten, as well as Jesus' model of loving service for others, particularly the poor, the sick, and criminals. In words very much like those to be used by Bonhoeffer almost a century later, Kierkegaard accuses the church of abusing grace, of cheapening Christ's suffering, of making his atonement an illegitimate assurance of salvation and an impermissible justification for asocial pietism and ethical lethargy. Luther's corrective, Kierkegaard noted, had triumphed in a way the reformer could never have imagined or condoned. God's grace and mercy had become excuses for hiding behind faith, for basking in self-righteous piety, for refusing to perform the "works of love."

Kierkegaard condemns the behavior of pious people who hear an easy gospel that is spoken to them in "the language of compassion," but who then try to ignore human misery around them and Christ's invitation to imitate him in suffering service. This distorted gospel calms their bourgeois fears and allows them to return home from church to their comfort and wealth without any sense of responsibility, without any compulsion to act like Christ, as a servant of the poor and the sick. Rather, such pious folk actually entertain the notion that the poor and the sick do not have it so badly or that they are responsible themselves for their own situations. What is most important, Kierkegaard claims, is that these unfortunates be removed from sight and mind, either by a soothing sermon or by the police or some other institution of the state. "Is this Christianity?" Kierkegaard asks. Clearly, we have in Kierkegaard's fusion of social and evangelical criticism a witness built upon Jesus' own prophetic example. I think it no exaggeration to claim that Kierkegaard's christological rediscovery and criticism, his stress on Christ as Suffering Servant and eschatological prophet, as we would say today, and his offensive against bourgeois piety in the church, are nothing short of the beginning of a theological revolution against the bankrupt christologies of the Enlight-
enment, of Pietism, and of nineteenth-century culture Protestantism. As Kierkegaard himself saw it, the modern age needs to rediscover the cross, pushed aside, sentimentalized, and prematurely glorified by academic theology and a bourgeois church.

Thus Kierkegaard's stress on the suffering Christ is both a weapon and corrective in his attack upon Christendom, a bringing forward of the "sign of contradiction." Yet there is another side, another moment of the christological dialectic operative here—the affirmation or incarnational optimism of which I spoke. Christianity, as Kierkegaard argues repeatedly, is an enemy of the human condition, but he is quick to point out that God's fundamental orientation is one of love and forgiveness. That is the motivation for God's act of creation and the pattern for his relationship with us, his fallen creation. Christ is the embodiment of God's "fundamental healing," the reconciler of God and humankind, God's sacrament and presence among us. While this incarnational optimism is implicitly present throughout the late Kierkegaard's writings, in counterpoint with the most negative of his polemics, it is especially evident in the discourse he interjected into the literature of the public attack. I refer here to the often overlooked discourse, "God's Unchangeableness," originally delivered in Copenhagen's Citadel Church in 1851. Quite unlike the condemnatory tone we might expect to find, this discourse has as its text Kierkegaard's favorite Scripture passage, James 1:17-21, "Every good gift. . . ." This is perhaps the quintessential statement of Kierkegaard's affirmation, of his incarnational optimism. God, who is love, is unchangeable, always present, omnipotent, all-knowing. Such a God can evoke fear and trembling in us, Kierkegaard observes, yet the message He brings is one of consolation. God is always gift to us in Christ, in the grace and mercy of the gospel. We are to do likewise, to imitate this Christ.

The consequences of Kierkegaard's incarnational optimism and dialectical christology are decisive. To follow Christ means not just spiritual awakening but *metanoia*, a transfor-
information of one's thinking and feeling but more importantly of one's activities and relationships with others. Although much of the late Kierkegaard's writings rings with language and ideas that are world-denying and rejecting, there is also much to warrant the judgment that for him, Christianity has to do with this world even though its telos is eternity. Martyrdom, dying from the world, suffering—all these marks of authentic discipleship make sense only against the backdrop of affirmation which Kierkegaard also expresses and in terms of the church and society he was attacking. Although for him Christianity transcends particular social and political arrangements and stands in critical witness against all policies and institutions, Kierkegaard's christological or incarnational perspective binds Christian discipleship to the world. The way of Christ is a way of the cross, one that leads through Jerusalem, not the heavenly city but the grime and misery of history and society. Christ's pattern is a life of obedience to God's Word and of service to the neighbor, not one of romantic platitudes or empty, self-serving piety. This pattern of evangelical ethics, of Christian praxis, is the fulfillment of faith and the implementation of God's grace for others. It is the pattern, to return to the journal entry that introduces this essay, for the individual seeking to follow after Christ and it is also the pattern for the church. To affirm such a model, to enact Christ's pattern on one's own life, means engaging in continuous personal conversion, the "leap of faith," but also the "works of love," the incarnational encounter with society, a prophetic, critical stance as well as "fundamental healing" and service. For Kierkegaard then, affirmation of faith and its practice are inseparable, as are protest against and affirmation of the social world.

NOTES
2. JP, 1841.
4. A National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship allowed me to work on
THE LATE KIERKEGAARD

Kierkegaard at the University of Copenhagen in 1979-80; and released time and support from the dean and school of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Baruch College, helped me in my work on Kierkegaard, as did Niels Jørgen Cappelarn, Bruce Kirmmse, Paul Müller, John F. Teahan, and Julia Watkin.


10. See Edifying Discourses, 4 vols. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943-46) and The Gospel of Suffering and The Lilies of the Field (Augsburg, 1948).


12. See For Self-Examination, 226-40 for this discourse, which was published between issues 7 and 8 of The Instant, on August 1, 1855, just three months before Kierkegaard's death.

Responses to "Protest and Affirmation"

"Wild Kierkegaard", as Auden called him, guided a lot of people back to belief.

For many of us who read him avidly when the was first being translated into English, Søren Kierkegaard represented a spirited and revolutionary critique of Christian belief.

His severe criticisms of the Danish church and society seemed clearly appropriate to 1940 American Protestant Christianity. And although we recognized the extreme
statements in Training in Christianity or Works of Love. for example, SK nevertheless spoke to us of a quality of Christian commitment which we either longed for or gladly affirmed.

Even his irony made us see ourselves and our congregations in a new way. He wrote of how incredulous he was that local congregations did not break into laughter when the pastor read from such words as “take up your cross and follow me,” or “you cannot serve God and mammon.”

It is this irony, this delicious “wildness,” which oftentimes gets squeezed out of any systematic study of Kierkegaard’s theology. Scholarly research on Kierkegaard is needed, and I am not being disrespectful of that need. Such studies, however, must help us to see in Kierkegaard not only what he said and did but what he means for the church even today.

Plekon sounds as if he wants to recover Kierkegaard’s words for theological use today, which is all to the good. Yet he has stopped short of resolving what seems today the most crucial issue with SK—how to understand Kierkegaard’s heavy reliance on excessive individualism.

Certainly the emphasis that he placed on the dual role of Jesus as Suffering Servant and prophet is basic to any theological expression of our faith. The same is true of Kierkegaard’s clear perception that “to follow Christ means not just spiritual awakening but ‘metanoia,’ a transformation of one’s thinking and feeling but more importantly of one’s activities and relationships with others.” And Kierkegaard’s blasts, throughout his writings, against “the behavior of pious people who hear an easy gospel that is spoken to them in the ‘language of compassion,’ but who then try to ignore human misery around them and Christ’s invitation to imitate him in suffering service,” are close to some of theological motifs in Liberation Theology today.

But these themes are embedded in a pervasive sense of the single, solitary individual. This is what gave Kierkegaard so much of his influence in Protestantism four decades ago. American Christianity grabbed this existentialism with a vengeance; so much so that we find it both difficult and slightly un-Christian to think about, let alone act upon, a
christology that centers itself on the kingdom of God and its liberating power to those in need.

While it may be true, as Plekon argues, that Kierkegaard’s christology was “the beginning of a theological revolution,” the highly pronounced individualism of this revolution has won the day so much that it has now become part of the problem rather than the answer that seemed so clear to many of us forty years ago.

There is no question of the difficulty in moving from “incarnational optimism” with the suffering Christ to the exigent issues of nuclear weapons or abortion or inflation. We can understand how a solitary individual can act from within a given social problem or take a stand against a political program relating to these issues. But Kierkegaard’s theology does not point us very clearly to the central importance of the kingdom of God in Jesus’ ministry and how much this is a church motif, not just an individual theme.

Plekon promises us in the first part of his paper to provide “various stances Christians can take toward some of modernity's problems,” by using the insights of Kierkegaard. But by the time he gets to the end of his essay he has begged off this promise, leaving it to the reader’s own consideration and implementation to provide these examples.

So, I guess it is back to “wild Kierkegaard” to find help in preserving the special quality of individual faith that is so crucial. Yet we will have to look beyond him for guidance in understanding the movement of the kingdom of God in healing and liberation in the communities of the church, the cities, and the nations.

Robert W. Burtner
Pastor, First United Methodist Church
Corvallis, Oregon

Soren Kierkegaard touched my life once more in Michael Plekon’s splendid article, “Protest and Affirmation: The Late Kierkegaard on Christ, the Church and Society.” I will need to read again the Danish theologian’s Works of Love.
The staid, established nineteenth-century church probably needed Kierkegaard more than it knew! Christians in the ninth decade of the twentieth century may find help in discovering the meaning and shape of discipleship by their encounter with the “later thoughts of Kierkegaard” underscored by Plekon’s paper.

We Christians are always ready to view the compassion of Jesus as a promise of God’s compassion for us. We need to view this same compassion as a model for our lives, as well as a sign for the church’s ministry.

I could not avoid reflecting upon the witness of our brothers and sisters in Latin America today as I read Plekon’s comment: “Christ’s pattern is a life of obedience to God’s Word and of service to the neighbor, not one of romantic platitudes or empty, self-serving piety. This pattern of evangelical ethics, of Christian praxis, is the fulfillment of faith and the implementation of God’s grace for others.” Courageous, liberated disciples in many parts of the world are not basking in the extravagance of cheap grace but are immersed in discipleship that reflects the self-giving nature of Christ.

There is nothing startlingly new in the Plekon article, but there is a reminder that can save the church from even more empty pietyism and thus lead it to specific, intentional acts of faithfulness as a servant people.

Richard Truitt
Superintendent, the South East District
Wisconsin Conference, Janesville, Wisconsin
The patterns of adult development are seen by different thinkers to have different stages, but there is a consensus that both men and women face a "crisis" during the middle years. This essay explains how the effect of the crisis extends to an individual's reappraisal of self, world, and God. A short case study shows how one minister coped with his "second adolescence."

The seven ages of life have been in our awareness since Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*. However, serious study of the middle years of life has awaited recent decades. In the 1950s Erik Erikson extended his investigation of childhood and adolescence to include the entire life cycle. Bernice Neugarten has studied the middle years extensively. But only recently have the developmental psychologists George Vaillant, Daniel Levinson, Roger Gould, and others brought some structure to biographical data and some clear understanding of the developmental tasks of mid-life.

My purpose in this paper will be to describe the middle years of American men and women, to discuss the developmental tasks of both sexes, and to examine the possible crises that mid-life may include. Then I will develop a case study as an example of a mid-life crisis. Finally I shall focus on how faith provides a perspective for meeting the tasks and crises of mid-life.
DEFINITIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS

What do we mean by mid-life? Does it have any likeness to previous ages and stages—puberty, for example? It is the same for women as for men? What is predictable about the crisis? Do people from different racial and class backgrounds experience it similarly? And what is normal growth and what is a crisis for those who become middle-aged?

Research psychologists have placed the mid-life years for men between forty and sixty. Marjorie Lowenthal, on the basis of her research, believes women experience mid-life at about age thirty-five. Levinson further describes a mid-life transition period similar to the early adult transition from seventeen to twenty-two. The period before age forty provides a man the opportunity to terminate the early adult era and prepare for mid-adulthood and his new developmental tasks. Gail Sheehy believes that women face different tasks depending on whether they choose to marry as young adults or to have a career. Those who have nurtured children have deferred achievement and face getting into the job market. Those who have chosen a career and now want marriage and children face a different set of decisions. Those who have tried to blend marriage, family, and career face a third set of choices.

Both men and women shift in mid-life from the initiating generation to the generation of dominance, according to Ortega y Gasset. The shift is not physiological but sociological and psychological. Despite the fact that physically one has not changed perceptibly, those at age forty or thereabouts are impressed by society that they now belong to the generation in charge of the main social institutions. There are some physiological changes that we shall describe below; however, this transition differs from puberty in that it is based not on physiology but on society's demands on the individual.

Some persons experience a sudden loss or traumatic accident which perceptibly an intense personal crisis at mid-life. However, Vaillant, Levinson, and others indicate that persons may enter middle age without trauma and face
calmly and deliberately the developmental tasks required of them at this particular period. The manner in which the man or woman has completed the developmental tasks of young adulthood—how much "unfinished business" one carries over to the period, in particular, that which is related to one's vocation and one's marriage and family—will determine whether middle age will be smooth or turbulent. External events can prove unsettling at this period, events such as the death of a parent, a spouse's illness, a serious accident, or a layoff from work. Vaillant suggests that young adults have developed an "adaptation to life," which they hope will carry them into the future. Mid-life, however, provides new challenges and changes, which test that adaptation and necessitate a review. What are those changes and challenges?

**MID-LIFE DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS**

Before developing the growth tasks of mid-life, I want to spend a brief time describing the physical side of middle age. Menopause, the cessation of menstruation, is a normal part of a woman's life cycle, happening among Americans between ages forty and fifty. For some women this involves minor discomfort, less concern about conceiving a child, and what Margaret Mead calls "postmenopausal zest"—a new vitality in all one's activities. For other women, however, whose image is bound up with childbearing and nurturance, menopause represents a real loss, with resulting fears that they are no longer sexually attractive and that their primary purpose for being is over. Many become depressed at this time and experience other physical and nervous symptoms. Men do not go through a physical menopause, but the middle years may bring on symptoms that approximate the female climacteric. Fatigue, nervousness, circulatory complaints, impotence, and insomnia may plague a man in his forties. The intense preoccupation with jogging and other sports indicates the concern of both men and women with their health and physique at mid-life. Good health habits, including a
balanced diet, exercise, and rest, often assume new importance for those in mid-life.

Sexually, men and women come to the peak of their performance at different ages. Kinsey and his associates estimate the male is at his peak at age twenty, while the female does not reach her peak until her thirties. The mid-life male may suffer from performance anxiety, even impotence, while his partner is at the peak of her powers. Various sexual problems may emerge at this period, some of which are symptomatic of deeper problems and others which are the primary concern. An extramarital affair, deadness in marriage, and one or the other partner's putting career ahead of the family may indicate to the couple the need for marriage and counseling. Awareness of each other's emotional needs and keeping in steady communication are of primary importance for the mid-life couple.

Now let us look at the developmental tasks of mid-life. Vaillant and Levinson studied the entrance to mid-life and the middle years of men from populations in the Harvard classes of '42, '43, '44, and of forty selected men from New Haven, respectively. They discovered that they face similar developmental tasks at approximately the same ages. Lowenthal and Gould studied female populations between the ages of adolescence and mid-life and have given us data from which we can formulate the developmental tasks which women face at this period.

Having achieved earlier vocational goals, a man may need to set new career priorities. Levinson speaks of the young adult needing to find a dream, some goals that are bigger than the particular job which he holds. Mid-adulthood involves modifying the dream, making adjustments for one's strengths and weaknesses, and the expectations and demands of particular work structures.

A man may need to reorder his priorities regarding career and family in order to give his wife and family a larger place. Young adults, particularly those in business and professions, become so preoccupied with finding their place and working their way up the ladder that vocational concerns probably
MID-LIFE CRISIS

crowd out the family. Mid-life gives one a chance to reorder one's priorities and to find a better balance in one's life.

A man can become more differentiated, which means recognizing and accepting the hidden, undeveloped sides of his personality. Levinson describes these as polarities, in particular: young/old; destruction/creation; masculine/feminine; and attachment/separation. For me, this typology is too bipolar and fails to recognize the infinite variety of the male personality. I would say that by mid-life a man has probably developed a limited part of himself and needs to uncover previously hidden parts of himself and begin to develop them.

By mid-life a man often recognizes that he is mortal and begins to want to create a "legacy" for his children and others closely related to him. Despite his belief system, a man wants something of himself to be immortal in this life: a business, a piece of art, or an inheritance that he will be remembered by. Mid-life is a period for such creative activity.

Mid-life provides a man with an opportunity to muse about the meaning of existence. Bernice Neugarten calls this "interiority," by which she means "turning inward to the self, decreasing the emphasis on assertiveness and mastery of the environment, enjoying the attainment of specific goals." We shall explore this task more fully under the faith perspective.

If a woman has married and given birth to children, she may now set new priorities involving a vocation and/or responsibility within the community.

The career-oriented woman may feel a need for marriage and family or an alternative to such. She may either blend the two or take a sabbatical from her career while her children are born.

Women may also need to become more differentiated both from their primary family and from their husband and children. A woman will need to recognize her own desires and purposes, neither conforming to family expectations nor piggy-backing on her husband's career and convictions. Assertiveness of her own beliefs and will becomes of central importance to her.
A woman may need to find substantive and exterior form for her creative life. More than likely her interiority will be developed through the care and nurture of children. She now may need community involvement that will call forth her leadership and participatory group skills.

Finally, with her partner she may need to enrich the marriage or relationship of which she is a part. Many marriages fail at mid-life not from outside interest but from lack of cultivation. Both partners need to become alive to each other. Often it is the woman who senses the deadness in the relationship and therefore makes the move to enrich the marriage.

Crises in mid-life occur substantially for men and women for two reasons: (1) failure to negotiate the change from early adulthood to mid-adulthood, with resulting failure to meet one or more of the mid-adult developmental tasks; and (2) stress from a situation outside the individual which upsets him or her in the home, work, or community setting. The mid-adult may then question his or her ability to cope with a job, may doubt the love of a mate, may wonder about the future of life in a certain organization or community, and may doubt the trustworthiness of existence in general. The death of a parent may send such shock waves through a middle-aged man. Previously, all his life may have seemed on the “upgrade.” Now he may realize he is on the downside of life and is the “older generation.” It is perhaps thirty years before he will die, but he knows he is marked for death for the first time.

THE MID-LIFE CRISIS OF A CLERGYMAN

Cy and Do are an attractive middle-aged clergy couple, ages forty-eight and forty-six. They met in high school in New England and really never dated anyone else seriously. Do was a minister’s daughter, her father prominent in the Congregational church, and her mother a leader in women’s circles. She has a brother and sister older than she, both of whom now are out of the church. Cy was not raised in the church but came to
Do’s church to get acquainted with her and joined the church. After a period in the service, he went into business. He was late in deciding to go into the ministry but worked hard in his twenties serving a congregation while finishing college and seminary. Do was preoccupied at the time with their small sons, Johnny and Jimmy.

They served a small church for five years after graduation and at age thirty-five Cy took a college church in western Massachusetts. This was a delightful experience for the whole family. The boys loved the school they attended; Do felt useful in the church; and Cy grew as a preacher and particularly as a social activist.

They received a call to a large city church in 1970, where Cy was to serve as an associate. They opted to buy their own house in the suburbs, where schools were better for the boys and where Do felt safer. It meant, however, that the boys found their friends at another place than the church. In a year they had decided not to attend church school or youth group. Do never felt at home among the women either, and settled for attending worship each Sunday.

A year after their arrival the senior pastor left, and there was some talk about putting Cy’s name among the candidates. He withdrew it, however, and served as interim pastor until a new man was selected. About this time he got into advanced training in pastoral counseling and began to major in counseling and Christian education at the church, finding his deepest satisfaction in these ministries.

Four years after the new senior minister had been installed, certain trouble signs began to appear. He permitted Cy to preach only once or twice a year and grew very wary of sharing administrative powers. The pressure began to build in Cy and broke out in some family problems. Cy’s younger son, Jimmy, had chosen to work as a mechanic and was very happy at it. His older son, Johnny, however, had enrolled at an Ivy League school in pre-law. He received good grades for his first year but flunked out his second year and came home distressed about what he would do with his life. In addition, he was drinking heavily without his parent’s knowledge.
Cy and Do, worried about his future, brought Johnny to a family counselor. The counselor chose to work with the entire family, counseling Johnny independently and seeing Cy and Do separately to discuss what was going on in their lives. Do appeared pretty happy with a part-time job she had gotten in a store but seemed unaware of how she had shut Johnny off from her when she told him to talk with his father about his problems. Cy was in great turmoil about Johnny, but in greater turmoil about himself and his fear of failure at his job.

As Johnny began to straighten out in counseling, Cy and Do’s mid-life crisis assumed center stage in counseling. Cy is a very good writer, and I shall quote several passages to show the focus of his struggle.

The most difficult of all is my not reaching the place I set for myself. I have wanted to be wise and eagerly listened to, actually sought out of by others for what I had to share.

My inner cry is now, “What more could I have done!” I feel some twinge of recrimination in that cry, but I also feel that a promise has been unfulfilled, and, now that a sense of running out of time has hold of me, the promise never will be completed.

I have honestly arrived at the place where I can authentically say from the depths of me, “I would rather not be part of it at all than to be a participant in upholding a fragile leader who makes of worship a disjointed thing and a means of self-preening.” Here’s where I see that I’ve been existing in it narcissistically; I have thought that I could pull it up beyond that, somehow I could make a difference. Not so. I see that now, and there is no longer a reason to continue. I do not know whether this has changed my narcissism. However, I know that it has been sore wounded, and that is all right. The part that still limps on is that I still want to make a difference somewhere, for I know what I know and am convinced it matters greatly toward grace in people’s lives.

Cy’s experience is of a man who did not alter his dream in mid-life but accepted an alternate position which hobbled him in not using all his talents. In other words, he did not
complete the mid-life transition, so that his self-image and his vocational idealism were at cross-purposes. The family, where he sought sanctuary, felt the tension, and his older son tried to fulfill the father's ambitions and came to failure. Cy could not accept this failure, but it showed him his need to relieve the pressure from the family. Cy's vocational crisis was upsetting his entire world.

THE FAITH PERSPECTIVE

Those in mid-life, both women and men, often assess their marriages, their careers, and their personal lives, and in that assessment come to the edges of faith. Activity for its own sake, continual exploring of alternatives, and heavy investment in one area of existence may satisfy the young adult. The forty-year-old wants some stability, however, wants his or her activity to count for something, wants to develop previously hidden aspects of the self, and often has a consuming desire to find meaning and value in existence.

I define faith in Tillichian terms as that which concerns the individual ultimately. A person delivers himself or herself into existence through faith, so understood; faith is what organizes the self and gives some purpose to one's days. A person's faith has both a cognitive and an attitudinal-motivational aspect. The cognitive aspect makes up one's belief system; it is the way one makes sense and finds purpose within the randomness of life events and interpersonal transactions. The attitudinal-motivational aspect is forged of the complex of feelings, attitudes, and value commitments that center the individual's life. For many persons these two aspects of their lives are unconscious, unstated, even ambivalent and at cross-purposes. At mid-life because of growth changes and environmental challenges both the cognitive and attitudinal aspects of faith may be upset, become disorganized, and demand re-evaluation. The lives of Do and Cy are illustrative of two persons to whom this happened and for whom counseling provided an opportunity for such a life review.
The cognitive aspects of faith have been researched most perceptively by James Fowler and his associates. Drawing upon the work of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, Fowler has built a stage theory of faith, which holds that individuals of all cultures and religions go through a structural change in their thinking which gives them the tools for faith in their world. These stages are built on one another and are particularly important for understanding the mid-life individuals’ structuring of his or her world. What was appropriate for adolescence and young adulthood may be outgrown and no longer adequate for the middle years.

To summarize: an adolescent at stage three, which Fowler calls the synthetic-conventional stage, structures his or her faith in interpersonal terms to allow a satisfactory adjustment with peers and help construct a personal identity. The young adult, after leaving home, develops an individuated-reflective faith, demythologizing the earlier beliefs of the adolescent and taking account of the multiple meanings of persons from various backgrounds and ideologies. Fowler notes, however, that many youth and young adults do not wrestle creatively with their belief systems and enter mid-life with much work yet to be done.

The task of faith at mid life Fowler understands to be conjunctive or dialogical knowing. The middle adult opens the self to data existing both within and outside the self, previously unrecognized or ignored. She or he is willing to make the self vulnerable to the paradoxical and the unknown in nature and society. Such persons are awakened to truth beyond the self-contained boundaries of sex, race, class, and religion. The individual recognizes that the wider world reorders parochial meanings and values previously accepted as absolute.

The psychosocial development of individuals has been formulated by Erik Erikson and studied longitudinally by Levinson, Vaillant, Gould, and their associates. Erikson calls the major crisis of mid-life generativity vs. stagnation. By generativity he means the ability to become a parent and to establish the next generation within the society. At this stage
one not only nurtures and sends one's children on their way; one becomes a mentor to young adults and distills knowledge or skills to pass on to one's successors. The negative side of the crisis, self-absorption, is the result of the inability to believe in the human species enough to motivate one to be such a mentor.

Vaillant postulates another mid-life crisis which he found men to experience between ages fifty and sixty, the tension between being "keeper of the meaning" and rigidity. The "keepers of the meaning" ("Best Outcomes" of the Harvard study) were able to live within the establishment and to acknowledge that their days of influencing the social order were limited. Participants, however, felt a tranquility about accepting existence on its own terms. This acceptance was expressed by a willingness to stay with a less than perfect spouse, stop looking for the perfect job, and accept the diminished energy and handicaps of aging. The "Worst Outcomes," on the other hand, were that participants sensed themselves becoming rigid and unable to face the aging process and the takeover of power by junior partners and outsiders.  

Attitudinally and volitionally, this stage of faith involves affirmation, a synthesis of the trust of childhood and the courage of adolescence and young adulthood. Adolescents affirm themselves in relation to peers, and young adults in relation to their mates, children, and jobs. Those in mid-adulthood, by contrast, must affirm themselves in relation to as much of the world as they can and accept existence with its gifts and graces, horrors and handicaps. Where do revelation, transcendence, and providence have an impact? At the point where persons realize they do not create themselves. Those in mid-life have lived long enough to have witnessed the birth of children and the death of parents, to have discovered mystery at the heart of things and to be in awe of it. Their response to the liminal and luminous comes not from outside of existence but in the midst of the order and the chaos of it. Death is accepted, but even more surely is life, as persons affirm the surrounding and sustaining ground of being.
Specifically mid-life offers the chance "to box one's compass," i.e., to take a new sighting and orient life toward basic meanings and values. The self is made up of what one cares about: loved ones, possessions, work, health, life, and death. Those in mid-life are faced with re-evaluating the core of existence: what is central, what peripheral? Particularly with the shift of the central pieces of life—when children leave home, when parents die, when divorce or the death of a mate occurs, when job possibilities fail to materialize, when health fails.

Faith provides both a perspective by which to evaluate life and a response to changes. Fowler makes us aware of the universal quest for meaning, the desire for linkage with larger wholes. Those outside the established church are as actively involved in this quest as those inside it. One needs, however, to be aware, as he cautions us, that many contemporaries may not have finished their earlier cognitive development and have settled for adolescent, even childlike, belief systems. Crisis causes many persons to regress to the security of earlier formulations. The reader perceives in Cy's writing an attempt to get in touch with his young adult affirmations and to reformulate them so that they make sense to him at mid-life.

The search for an authentic self involves a person's affirmations and commitments. Vaillant calls mid-life the second adolescence. It may lack the storm and stress of puberty but typically means the reordering of priorities and commitment to those persons, causes, and institutions which matter most. The hidden parts of the self previously denied are recognized and affirmed. A man may find his tender, nurturing side and may want to reach out toward the young, less fortunate, or the sick. A woman who finds her aggressive side may want to channel it into the service of her convictions or a cause.

The principle seems similar to Jesus' teaching of losing life in order to find it. In mid-life one identifies with the next generation and forgets oneself as a "self-actualizing" young adult cannot. The wisdom of mid-life with its uncertainties, paradoxes, and pain is costly; but learning can occur by
RESPONSE

existence, being open to and being vulnerable to paradox, the uncertainties of change, and the pain of loss. Persons become human not just by accepting their strengths but by affirming their weaknesses and the limits of the human situation. 

Creaturehood is the theological name for this identity. A person belongs within the structures and shape of things; one’s beginning and end are in God.

NOTES

3. James W. Fowler, Stages of Faith, The Psychology of Human Development and the
4. George Vaillant, Adaptation to Life (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977); Roger Gould,
   also Evelyn and James Whitehead, Christian Life Patterns (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979).
   These authors set the Eriksonian psychosocial understanding of personality against a biblical anthropology but do not take account of Fowler’s or Kohlberg’s work.

Response to “Mid-Life Crisis from a Faith Perspective”

The article by Charles W. Stewart proposes to describe the middle years of American men and women, the developmental tasks of both sexes, and the possible crises of mid-life; to develop a case study as an example of mid-life crisis; and to discuss how faith provides a perspective for meeting the tasks and crises of mid-life. Stewart turns in an impressive performance as a player on both the theological and behavioral-science teams in this match and seems to touch all the bases on his way to scoring a run for the mid-lifers.

Regarding his “definitions and descriptions,” we certainly
agree with the author that awareness of being in mid-life may come primarily in response to the expectations and demands of society rather than through consciousness of physical change (one of our "built-in" blessings). Given the variations in available data, it is not surprising that Stewart does not satisfactorily answer the question, What do we mean by mid-life? The research psychologists cited in the article get us into the ballpark but leave us wondering which team is at bat.

Those "mid-life developmental tasks" identified by Stewart which grow out of the expectations and demands of society do indeed prove to be too much for some persons. His list of "tasks" for men and for women have in common the element of "interiority"—a term used to describe that time in life when contemplation becomes more enjoyable than competition. Observation leads us to conclude, however that only a small percentage of individuals at this point in life can afford the luxury of time to "muse about the meaning of existence." Those players we know who have been "benched" are looking for ways to get back into the game rather than reflecting on their reasons for being.

The case study developed in the article is fascinating in that Cy (the clergyman in question) appears to be a good example of those persons who handle the crises of mid-life rather well—which is evidently contrary to the intent of the author. Cy (may his tribe increase) passed up an opportunity to become senior pastor of the church he served in order to pursue an interest in counseling and education. The pastor under whom he subsequently worked was rather possessive of the pulpit and the administrator's desk (a typical player-manager), thus creating a perfect situation for Cy to "practice" his specialties. That the older son chose the way of his peers rather than his parents was disappointing but not disastrous. Cy's diary reflects the therapeutic indulgence as well as the poetic license allowed those who keep a personal record of the universal struggle to associate daily events with the dreams of life. Although he may have failed selection for the All Star team, Cy strikes us as having a secure place in the major leagues.
In the final section of his article, Stewart asserts that faith provides a perspective by which to evaluate those events which create the crises of mid-life. He stirs our interest rather powerfully at this point, hinting that the faith perspective consists of revelation, transcendence and providence—a mighty trio of theological concepts. He proceeds to discuss the perspective essentially from a behavioral-science point of view, however, leaving us to wonder how faith organizes the self and gives some purpose to one's days. We find no fault with his conclusion that men and women come eventually to acknowledge their "creaturehood"; but we are left with the distinct impression that physiological, psychological, and sociological forces would have led them to this point in life with or without faith. To count the innings and number the bases has some benefit, of course; but the reasons for playing the game are not given.

Stewart definitely does us a favor by suggesting that we be alert to the identifiable signs of mid-life and the challenge they bring to take a hard look at our scoreboard. The exercise of faith should make it possible for God to bring grace to bear on the tasks and crises that we experience at this time. This is the perspective that just might get us into old age in time to start the whole process anew.

Edward E. Jayne and Carl W. Flick
Chaplains, United States Navy
Pensacola, Florida
Erhard Seminars Training has provided its form of education to some three hundred thousand persons, one-fourth of whom are Californians. Despite this regional concentration, the way est functions should interest religious professionals. This movement emphasizes once again the relation of religious meaning to morality, most of all the critical meaning of work to the individual.

Many observers of the contemporary religious scene have noted the proliferation of new movements that have become alternatives to traditional religions for many Americans. These movements have included such expressly religious organizations as the Unification Church as well as such less explicitly religious groups as Transcendental Meditation. To some observers, the est training, which was founded in 1971 by Werner Erhard, is another of these new religious movements. Representatives for est insist, however, that it is not a religion, even though it may share certain concepts with Zen and other eastern philosophies. est considers itself to be, in the words of its corporate title, “an educational corporation” and not “religious” or “spiritual.”

Human creations, however, have a way of becoming other than what was planned by their creators. It has been observed that consciousness and therapy groups have sometimes...
functioned as religious movements for their adherents, and it
is not unreasonable to inquire whether this may also have
taken place in est, perhaps apart from the stated intentions of
Erhard and the organization's other leaders. The present
study will be an examination of the phenomena and functions
of est in order to determine the degree, if any, to which est has
taken on the functions of a religious movement.

It is necessary, of course, to define what is meant by a
religious movement. Certain characteristics seem to be found
in most religions. Among these are a founder who is the
teacher and representative of what is believed to be true, a
body of concepts expressing the teachings of this founder,
and an organization employing a common practice for
implementing these teachings. The distinctive function of
religion is suggested in the definition by Fredrick J. Streng,
who calls religion "a means of ultimate transformation." For
the present purposes, then, a religious movement will be
defined as a movement that may be characterized by an exemplary
founder, a body of doctrines, and a common practice; and that
functions for its adherents as a source of ultimate meaning.
The functional portion of this definition is the more critical for
detecting a religious movement: a university course in Freud
may have a founder of its subject matter, a body of teachings,
and a common method of procedure, but academic courses do
not normally function as sources of ultimate value for their
participants. Churches, on the other hand, are usually
thought to offer just that. The old statement, salus extra
ecclesiam non est, is a claim to possess ultimacy. Its functional
meaning is that whatever is thought to be ultimately
transforming is to be found within.

Subjectivity is a factor in any interpretation of literary
sources or of one's own experiences. The latter is especially to
be acknowledged in the case of the present paper. I hold a
Ph.D. in religion and am a teacher and a scholar in that field.
In addition, however, I am myself an est graduate, having
taken the training during the summer of 1978. Occasional
references to my experiences will appear in the following
pages. I hope that it will be clear upon reflection that a
personal experience of est is not more a barrier to scholarly objectivity than is complete dependence on written sources with no direct experience at all.

THE FOUNDER OF est: ERHARD AS SOURCE AND EXEMPLAR

Erhard is clearly not just the founder of est—he is its ongoing source. Adelaide Bry says of an experience at her pretraining seminar: "This was to be the first of many times that I would hear someone quote Werner as though he were God. 'Werner says . . .' is the final word at est, from the trainers down to the pre-trainers." (Erhard is always known in est as "Werner.") Luke Rhinehart compares Erhard's relationship to the est staff to that of a guru and his disciples: It is "the essentially eastern phenomenon of a powerful being (usually a guru or a spiritual teacher) attracting other powerful beings who nevertheless choose to channel their power through their leader."

My experiences of est include that of perceiving the centrality of Erhard. New programs are introduced by the phrase, "Werner has created . . . ," and, as Bry also reports, "Werner says" introduces statements of canonical authority. The trainers present themselves as Erhard's seemingly interchangeable surrogates, who conduct identical versions of the proceedings on his behalf.

That Erhard is esteemed by some in est as though he were a spiritual teacher is unquestionable. What may be asked, however, is whether this is the intention of est and of Erhard himself. It is true that some graduates treat Erhard with something like religious veneration; it is also true, according to a recent survey of graduates, that this fact is bothersome to others. Although writers such as Rhinehart and W. W. Bartley III, who, like Bry, are est graduates, may locate Erhard within the tradition of eastern spiritual leaders, I have not heard of any official spokesperson for est having designated Erhard to be a guru or a person of a unique spiritual status. At one particular guest seminar, it was expressly stated by the
leader that est is neither the only way nor is Erhard the only exemplar of transformation. Erhard's experience, it was said, demonstrates that these experiences are also potentially available to others; it was only claimed that it is more efficient to take the training in sixty hours than to spend years seeking the same results independently. Although it is true, as Rhinehart states, that some graduates "treat him [Erhard] with the love and awe normally associated with that of disciples for spiritual teachers," it seems clear that, where such laudation exists, it is the creation of those graduates who, to use est's language, choose to hold Erhard in this way.

The charge may be made, however, that although Erhard may not claim guruhood, he must surely know that some graduates do revere him in just that way. Does not the acceptance of beatification constitute its claim? In reply, it should be noted that to constitute est as a religion was one of the options rejected in the founding of the organization. If Erhard had indeed wished to become the revered leader of a cult, it is difficult to see why that option would have been rejected. Erhard is in fact aware of the intense attachment of some graduates and has said, "est is a pretty strong experience and people who are looking to get attached to something will come and get attached for a while. . . . Eventually even these people let go because the est experience allows people to become unattached from the need to be attached." If this statement is to be believed, Erhard considers intense devotion to est and to himself to be merely a stage in the maturation of some graduates, a stage that is neither encouraged nor expected to be permanent.

If Erhard is the source and central figure of est, he is also its cardinal exemplar, its representative par excellence. Writings about est often include narratives of a genre we might call "transformation stories," accounts by individuals of the value they received as the result of the training. The form of these transformation stories is remarkably like the "testimonies" sometimes heard among Protestant evangelicals and includes a statement of the speaker's prior condition ("I was . . . ," or
"I was looking for . . . "), a statement of having taken the training, and a description of the results the graduate has experienced in his or her life. The function of these transformation stories, again like religious testimonies, is to encourage guests to enroll in the training, and assistants at guest seminars are encouraged to share their own experiences with the guests in attendance.

The paradigmatic est transformation story, however, is that of Erhard himself. The facts of this story are known to most graduates and are the subject of Bartley's biography. The "before" portion of the narrative includes Erhard's early marriage, his flight from that marriage with another woman and his subsequent change of name (from Jack Rosenberg), his success in sales, and his study of several "consciousness" disciplines. The details of Erhard's transformation experience are often recounted at est events. He was driving toward the Golden Gate Bridge in his wife's black Mustang, when he was transformed. As Erhard describes this experience, "all the things that I had ever heard, and read, and all those hours of practice, suddenly fell into place. . . . I found enlightenment, truth, and true self all at once. I had reached the end. It was all over for Werner Erhard." As the result of his experience, Erhard stopped smoking, lost weight, and "transformed" his relationship with his wife; ultimately he became responsible for his actions in his earlier, "untransformed" state (including responsibility for abandoning his first marriage) and founded the est training. Bartley has written that Erhard's biography "is also a universal story of the search for true identity and for Self."

Occasionally in est one hears reference to other enlightenment experiences such as Zen satori, and no claim is made that Erhard's experience is without parallel. The story of Werner Erhard, however, is est's paradigmatic transformation story, and it is used throughout est to illustrate the process and the result of transformation. Werner Erhard is throughout the central figure of est: its founder, its principal spokesperson, and its primary exemplar.
A detailed discussion of the concepts of est is beyond the scope of this article. Mention may be made, however, of its concept of the operation of recall and of mental processes, called “the anatomy of the mind.” This concept, presented during the final day of the training, states that our minds are mechanisms for ensuring personal survival. When this survival is threatened, the mind recalls similar traumas of the past so that the present danger may be met in the same way as were the earlier ones. The mind, however, will often associate harmless events of the present with previous occasions that were dangerous and so will produce upsetting responses that are not appropriate to the present situation. Furthermore, the mind will operate to ensure the survival not only of the person him- or herself but also of anything the person considers him- or herself to be. Thus, it is said, the mind will allow the individual to sacrifice for the sake of anything with which the person has identified, a process which produces heroes and martyrs. Usually the person identifies with his or her own ideas and points of view and then, in est’s view, the mind will defend their “righteousness” even at the cost of sacrificing the individual’s satisfaction and vitality. The function of this presentation in the training is not to get the mind’s operations to change but to expose its workings so that the trainees may begin to cease to be governed by them.

Since the anatomy of the mind is, as Bry notes, the foundation of est’s epistemology, it is perhaps surprising to be told that neither this nor anything else said by the trainer is to be believed. In Rhinehart’s dramatization of the training, the trainer’s opening words include the injunction: “Let me make one thing clear. I don’t want any of you ——— to believe a thing I’m saying. Get that. Don’t believe me. Just listen.” The trainers will repeat this warning several more times during the following days. That this is not merely the rhetoric of the training is shown by Erhard’s statement, “I don’t think that anyone should believe the ideas that we use in est. The
est philosophy is not a belief system and most certainly is not to be believed.”

There are at least two reasons why Erhard states that the concepts of est are not to be believed. The first is suggested by his phrase, “the ideas that we use at est”: The language of the training, like much of the language of religion and drama, is intended to be evocative and not propositional. Its function is not to offer correct doctrines about psychological or ultimate reality but to move the trainees toward the experiential goal of the training. Like much religious language, its goal is to commend particular attitudes toward life; like the language of the theater, its function is to engage and to direct the responses of the audience. Rhinehart observes, “Seeing the trainer as a master actor... permits us to evaluate his acts and words more intelligently than if we misinterpret him as being a scholar or scientist giving a lecture.” There are no claims to truth beyond the workability of the concepts of est. Erhard has said, “I suspect all codifications, particularly my own. I hold them as pointers to the truth, not as the truth itself.”

A more fundamental reason why the abstractions of est are not to be believed has to do with Erhard’s definition of a belief. In Erhard’s view, a belief is a conception that becomes a barrier to one’s direct experiencing of reality. A dangerous form of belief, in this sense, is what occurs when one’s past experiences are converted into touchstones for evaluating the experiences of the present; when one’s life is experienced only through the filter of previously constructed ideas about life. Not all concepts, of course, are “beliefs” in this negative sense. In est’s usage, an “abstraction,” as contrasted to a belief, seems to be a functionally useful way of putting one’s understanding of things, which assists, instead of blocking, one’s experience of life. Like the Zen finger which points at the moon, however, even statements that are useful can be turned into beliefs and become barriers to experience. “The horrible part about it is that the truth is so damn believable, people usually believe it instead of experiencing it.”

Bartley states that Erhard is not attached to the theoretical
ERHARD'S est

truth of the abstractions of est, and I know of no spokesperson for est arguing that these concepts are propositionally correct. It does seem, however, that some graduates come to hold the ideas of est in just that way. The use of the term abstraction instead of belief does not ensure that a concept cannot come to be a dogmatically held doctrine as a result of its use by Erhard and est. My experience is that many graduates speak as though they believe the language of the training to be not only functionally useful but factually true. One example is the person who attempted to explain in causal terms how she had "created" the traffic accident in which she was injured. In the training it is said that one creates one's experiences of events; for this graduate this had come to mean that she had, by some use of personal power, actually caused the chain of events themselves. The possibility that the concepts of est might become something like doctrines is acknowledged by Bry: "Isn't this another belief system? Some graduates use it that way for a while." It may be true that those who regard Erhard as a guru also choose to hold the concepts of est as philosophical absolutes, and for much the same reasons. When this occurs, however, it is contrary to the statements and example of Werner Erhard himself.

THE PRACTICE OF est:
THE TRAINING AND THE GRADUATE PROGRAMS

The est Standard Training takes place in groups of 250 trainees in a rented hotel ballroom on two successive weekends. Each of the four days of the training begins in the morning, lasts until well after midnight, and is broken by one meal break (usually late in the evening) and a number of briefer restroom breaks. Although the time consumed by the training is said to be sixty hours, my experience was that the total time consumed on the four days was nearer to seventy-five hours. A description of the specific events of the training is beyond the scope of this paper. Rhinehart's fictionalization provides a detailed picture of the training; a briefer account may be found in Bry. The method of the
training consists of three major components: lectures on "data" by the trainer, the "sharing" of experiences by those who wish to do so, and a number of guided meditations or reflections called "processes."

It is difficult to estimate the amount of time taken by the various events of the training process, since trainees are not permitted to have timepieces in the training room. It seems that much of the first day is spent in reviewing the agreements made by the trainees, covering other ground rules, and introducing est's concepts of experience, knowledge, and belief. The second day includes the Truth Process, an often emotional experience connected with recurring problems the trainees find in their lives, and the Danger Process, in which trainees face the audience in rows and discover their resistance to close contact with others. The first day of the second weekend begins with a review of the trainees' agreements and includes lectures on experience as the basis of reality and on one's responsibility for creating his or her experience of that reality. The final day covers est's view of the anatomy of the mind and includes the experience of "getting it," to which the training has been directed. The high emotional level of some of the components of the training is relieved by several relaxing and sometimes humorous processes.

Rhinehart has suggested what may be the best way to understand the events of the training: "It might best be described, if it can be described at all, as theater—as living theater, participatory theater, encounter theater. Once we begin to see est in these terms, much that fails to fit the scheme of therapy or religion or science begins to make sense." In a similar vein, Bartley observes: "The est Standard Training is a new form of participatory theater that incorporates Socratic method: the artful interrogation that is midwife at the birth of consciousness. Like most drama, it has catharsis as one of its aims. Unlike most drama, it also aims to bring the participant to an experience of him or herself which is tantamount to transformation."

The stated criterion for evaluating the events of the training
ERHARD'S est

is effectiveness. Rhinehart states that the components of the training are continually evaluated in terms of their effectiveness and are occasionally changed. Pragmatic bases for procedures abound at est: an assistant who does something incorrectly is told that what he did "doesn't work"; wholehearted and effective commitment to the task at hand is "getting the job done." In response to a trainee’s question why the trainer says the things he says, Rhinehart’s trainer replies, “I’m saying them because Werner has found that the trainer’s saying them works.” No claim of ultimate significance is made for any of the components of the training; like the words of Rhinehart’s trainer, they are used because “Werner has found that they work.”

The literature of est states clearly that the training is complete on the fourth day and that, although the results of the experience may become clearer later, no further training or relationship to est is needed. A significant number of graduates, however, continue to participate in est, either in graduate seminars or as volunteer assistants. Bry states that the purpose of the graduate seminars is “to support the movement created in the training and to provide an environment where graduates can participate in their own and each other’s growth.” The Graduate Review for September and October, 1980, listed eight seminars offered in the various est centers, with topics ranging from “The Body” and “About Sex” to “Experience of Integrity,” “Making a Difference,” and “est and Life.” Bry and Rhinehart report that between 75 and 80 percent of graduates living near an est center enroll in a graduate seminar. The assistants’ program seems to have two dimensions. According to Bry, the value received by its participants “is that it is a real-life after-training workshop in which you get to exercise responsibility along with other est graduates. A free postgraduate course, in effect.” In terms of its value to the est organization, “it saves the cost of thousands of salaries and it provides est with dedicated people to attend to the myriad details . . . that contribute to est’s success.”

According to both Bry and Rhinehart, among the values
which graduate participants receive is a sense of sharing in a meaningful community. Bry writes, significantly: "This experience of belonging—in a special place, with a particular group of people—was once provided by one's church. Today an est graduate might put in long hours of painstaking work and have such an experience—a sense of belonging, of serving." Rhinehart concurs: "Most graduates indicate that the value of the seminar series depends not so much on its ostensible data content or on the processes introduced, but on the sharing on an intimate basis with others." If something like a religious community does exist in est, it is to be found among the participants in the graduate seminars and in the assistants' programs.

If participation in est offers for some graduates some of the values traditionally provided by churches, it seems not to be the intention of Erhard that graduates form a permanent community of disciples. Graduate assistants, whose level of participation is perhaps the most intense among est graduates, are not permitted to assist perpetually. Periodic "vacations" of several months' duration are required before new assisting agreements will be accepted by est. Among the stated goals of est is that its graduates contribute to the larger social environment, and the graduate programs are portrayed as means toward this end. Erhard has said, "When you have experienced yourself, you will know it because it will take you out into the world. Not into a cave. Not into a monastery. But out into the world." Among the programs in which est graduates are encouraged to participate is the Hunger Project, a project to raise public awareness about hunger and to evoke the will to end worldwide starvation. The Hunger Project seeks to enroll an ever-increasing number of people in assuming personal responsibility for the ending of hunger. Once a sufficient number of people begin to act out this commitment in concrete political and economic ways, those in the Hunger Project believe, the end of hunger, already technically possible, will become a reality. In the view of est, the project represents the sorts of activities in which its graduates may be appropriately involved. The graduate
programs are more like a training academy for such involvement than a dwelling place in which one resides forever.

It is clear, however, that there are some graduates for whom est has become a complete and committed way of life. How is this to be explained? First, there are those graduates who intend to become leaders and trainers in est. Beginning as assistants, these persons pass through the Guest Seminar Leaders Program and the Graduate Seminar Leaders Program and may eventually apply for trainer candidacy. The commitment of these graduates is specialized and is analogous to that of members of churches who study to enter the clergy. In addition, it is recognized by est that the need of some people to become attached to something, perhaps to find the churchily values described by Bry, may lead them temporarily to become deeply involved in est. That this sort of devotion to est is expected to be temporary is expressed in the words of Erhard: “Eventually even these people let go because the est experience allows people to become unattached from the need to be attached.” 17

A third reason for the deep commitment of some graduates to est, however, is the urging of the organization itself. Many graduates report having felt pressured to participate in est programs. The graduate seminars are repeatedly announced during the last portion of the training, and those who enroll are encouraged to bring nongraduate guests. Graduates are strongly urged to bring others to est events, and a considerable amount of time at graduate events is spent in establishing an agreement to bring guests and in “targeting” the number who will actually be brought. Guests who appear at est events are taken to small seminars and urged to enroll in the training. According to Rhinehart, graduates are told that “bringing guests is a manifestation of a person’s willingness to participate in life.” When participation in life and participation in the est organization are equated, however, it would seem that the expressed intention that graduates contribute to the larger society is in danger of becoming frustrated. In any event, while it was concluded above that
what Bartley calls "maximal" views of Werner Erhard and of
the abstractions of est are the creation of graduates
themselves, it is clear that the deep involvement of some
graduates in est is, at least in part, the result of the urging of
the organization. Although in principle est recognizes that
graduate participation is not necessary for the effectiveness of
the training, a contradiction between this principle and est's
practice exists because the bringing of guests is the
organization's primary means of advertising its product.\footnote{18}

THE ULTIMACY OF est

Many of the characteristics of a religious movement are
present in est: there is a "transformed" founder, who has
formulated its teachings, who is its primary exemplar, and
who is venerated by many of his followers; there is a body of
teachings, which are held by many to be objectively true; and
there is a community of followers, many of whom have found
in est the values and sense of community commonly
associated with a church.

The more critical question of the function of est remains:
does est function for its graduates as a source of ultimate
meaning? For many graduates, the effect of the training has
been to enhance the religious commitment they already
possessed. A Roman Catholic priest reported to Bry, "est
gave me the experience of what theology has been telling
me." For such an individual, his prior religion, and not est, is
his source of ultimate meaning. Another category of
graduates comprises those who have found the training to
have been valuable but do not find it a source of ultimacy. A
graduate of this sort said to Bry: "I don't proselytize about
est... I know there are a lot of people for whom est is a
complete way of life. I don't support that. I don't recommend
that people go. And it's changed my life." Those for whom est
is not a source of ultimate significance and for whom it does
not function as a religious movement seem to be the majority
of graduates: only 29.1 percent of those responding to a
survey of the graduates indicated that est "has been the most
ERHARD’S est

useful to the quality” of their lives of a number of areas, which included family, education, job, religion, and other categories. This figure represents the responses of those who actually returned the questionnaire. About 20,000 of est’s 255,000 graduates replied to the survey. Since those who are active in est are more likely to have responded than those who are not, it is probable that the proportion of est graduates for whom their participation functions as a religious commitment is actually only a fraction of this figure.19

It is also evident that est does function as a source of ultimate meaning for a minority of its graduates. We have already seen the similarity of est transformation stories to testimonies of religious conversion. It is common for religious converts to conclude from their experiences that their new affiliation is not just one among many but the only way of approaching the Absolute. Although in the training the trainees are told that their lives “don’t work,” this is, as Rhinehart and Bartley have observed, the language of theater. Those who “convert” to est, however, conclude that their own lives seemed not to work before taking the training, and they become deeply involved in est as the source of the ultimate meaning which they did not find elsewhere. Like typical converts, they venerate their teacher as a unique spiritual figure, hold his teachings to be the ultimate truth, and commend the community and its ways to others as the sole vehicle of salvation. What is thereby created is a religious movement of the sect type: joined by conversion, propagated by converting others, and characterized by strong pressure for the converts to persevere in their discipline. On the basis of the foregoing, it may be useful to distinguish between “est-as-training” and “est-as-religion.”20 Erhard has stated that Zen was the essential discipline of those he studied before the creation of est, and several parallel features have been observed between Zen practice and the training. (A useful way of understanding the est training may be as an Americanized and smoothly packaged adaptation of the Zen experience, in much the same way the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association presents an Americanized and
smoothly packaged version of the experience of early Christianity. In both instances, critics on the outside may state that the packaging has radically and negatively altered the contents, while those on the inside will insist that the essence of the product remains unchanged. The necessity of using traditional techniques to attain Zen enlightenment is a matter of dispute. Buddhism, however, has other forms than Zen, and among them is Nichiren Shoshu, an aggressive sect that believes that its founder taught the true doctrine and the only way of salvation. It is to movements like the latter that est-as-religion has its closest parallels.

Bry has observed that participation in est offers to its graduates the experience of belonging that was traditionally provided by churches. Erhard recognizes that some persons may become deeply involved in est as way of meeting their need for attachment but believes that when this occurs, it will be only temporary: "The est experience allows people to become unattached from the need to be attached." Is this, however, the way things always work out? It may be that some graduates whose initial involvement in est was like a religious conversion eventually ceased to need such an intense sense of belonging as a result of the training. Sectarian movements, however, seldom operate to support the autonomy of their members, and it is likely that conversion to est-as-religion may be expected to hinder rather than to encourage one's becoming "unattached from the need to be attached." The cost of meeting one's needs for belonging by joining a sectarian movement is high and requires the surrender of the experience of autonomy and integrity that est-as-training seeks to provide. The belief of Erhard that all graduates will eventually move in the direction of a decreased attachment to est seems to be naive.

Erhard's belief, however, appears to be sincere. Some persons, it is said, appropriate the results of the training more rapidly than others, and the fact that some graduates remain involved in est as a religious movement does not undermine Erhard's belief that even these will eventually lose their need to be attached in this way. In addition, as we have seen, those
who have converted to est-as-religion constitute only a small proportion of its graduates. The more typical graduate is one who has taken the training, has perhaps enrolled in one or two graduate seminars or assisted for a time, and has then moved on to other matters, continuing to believe that the training has been valuable for his or her life. It may be that the number of those for whom est has obviously come to be a religious movement is sufficiently small to be overlooked and not appear to Erhard as a contradiction of his belief. It should also be recalled that the est organization has benefited from the services of its most committed graduates. They have enrolled others in the training, served as staff, and provided other services that have made the expansion of est possible. With this in mind, it may be understood that the leaders of est may, with no insincerity, fail to observe the problems of some of these assistants who have converted to est-as-religion and to consider the presence in the organization of such graduates to be both temporary and innocent.

For most of its graduates, involvement in est has been both temporary and reportedly beneficial. A smaller number of graduates, however, have created a relationship to est that is tantamount to a conversion to a sectarian religious movement. We have seen above that Erhard is est’s principal spokesman and exemplar. There is, however, no evidence that he has sought to be regarded as a religious figure. The est training employs a set of concepts that often become a part of its graduates’ thinking. There is no indication that these abstractions are intended to be taken as ultimate truths, and it appears that those who have done so, like those who have come to venerate Erhard, have done so apart from the instigation of est itself. With regard to the graduates’ level of involvement in est, the evidence is mixed. It is stated that participation in est is to be neither permanent nor a substitute for one’s participation in the world. This point, however, has been obscured by est’s quite pragmatic and this-worldly need to use its graduates in the promotion of its services and by its belief that a “religious” commitment to est will, as a result of the experience of the training, be only temporary. These latter
facts have contributed to the creation by some of "est-as-religion," a dimension quite apart from "est-as-training" and contrary to the intentions of Werner Erhard and the est organization.

NOTES


The most accessible sources about est besides Bry are The Book of est, by Luke Rhinehart; and Werner Erhard by W. W. Bartley, III. Bry's book describes aspects of the est training and organization, Rhinehart's work is a fictional dramatization of the training, and Bartley's book is a biography of est's founder. Each of these has been reviewed by Erhard and carries his statement of support for the author and his or her work, and can therefore be presumed to be, if not "canonical," then at least not significantly at odds with the perspective of est itself.

2. With the addition of the category of the founder of a religion, these features correspond to Joachim Wach's classical statement of the theoretical (doctrinal), practical, and sociological dimensions of religion in Sociology of Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), pp. 17-34. Not all religions display these features to the same degree, of course. Quakerism, for instance, is a religion with relatively few doctrines.


4. The pretraining is a session in the middle of the week before the first training day. Attendance is considered to be useful but not essential to the outcome of the training.

5. Bry, p. 66.


10. The Book of est, p. xii.


13. The point of her statement was not that she had unconsciously driven in such a way as to cause her accident; she believed that she had actually caused the physical events of the accident, including the presence of the other vehicles in the intersection.

14. That the ideas of the training are functional and are not intended to be learned as doctrines is further indicated by the fact that the trainees are not to take notes, and that, at the close of the training, the trainer refuses to review its concepts (Rhinehart, p. 198). By the end of the fourth day the trainees have arrived at the intended goal of the training; the concepts used earlier are no longer important nor, if the trainer's demeanor is an indication, to be taken seriously.

15. Among the agreements are that the trainees are not to leave the training room except at designated breaks, not to sit beside anyone whom they knew before the training, and not to use alcohol or unprescribed drugs during the time of the training.
RESPONSE

including the intervening week. Trainees are given an opportunity to leave and get full refunds after this review of the agreements and again on the third day of the training (Rhinehart, pp. 16, 117).

16. The Hunger Project was reviewed critically in an article by Suzanne Gordon ("Let Them Eat est," *Mother Jones,* December, 1978). The Hunger Project leadership has replied to Gordon's charges that it provides no food directly to the hungry, that its activities are financially deceptive, and that it is a recruiting arm for est (Hunger Project "Fact Sheet," June 1979). A more serious difficulty of the Hunger Project, in my view, is its problem of maintaining contact with its enrollees and converting the single act of enrollment into a course of responsible and effective action. It has, however, effectively raised the awareness of many people regarding the issues of world hunger.

17. Bry, p. 194.

18. See the comments by Zev Putterman, est's director of communication, in "The Dialogue Continues," p. 6. Putterman agrees that graduates have been put under too much pressure to participate. It may be that est will adopt other advertising techniques in addition to the use of its graduates.

19. "The Dialogue Continues," p. 5. Survey forms were distributed in graduate seminars.

20. Such a differentiation is common in discussing Taoism, where a distinction is made between the "philosophical" Taoism of the *Tao te Ching* and later philosophers, and the "popular" or "religious" Taoism practiced in China and Taiwan.

Response to "Werner Erhard's *est*—A Religious Movement?"

It would be an understatement to say that I found Hann's article of immense help in understanding est. Basic information about the centrality of Wener Erhard, his thought, his transformation, his doctrines, his training and graduate programs, est as a religious movement, and the ultimate meanings is very readably presented.

On the positive side we as churchmen and churchwomen might well learn something from the est movement. I found myself reflecting on the training model for est. The training takes place over four days and consists of sixty to seventy-five hours of intensive attention to lectures by the trainer, the sharing of experiences, and guided meditations. There is obviously a high level of commitment to the entire process. What if a local church offered an intensive experience for laity that would involve a similar time frame and would deal with
something such as a "Short Course in Christianity"? I am not speaking here about a course that would simply be an aggregate of tasks and responsibilities for the modern Christian. We have an overabundance of such models already. The great need rather is to enable clergy and laity to reflect on the meaning of life from the vantage point of the Christian faith. That is to say, I would like to see a course that would help Christians to become theologians. By "theology" I do not mean a set of doctrines or a scholarly discipline, but the thinking, knowledge, and understanding distinctive to Christian faith. Borrowing the sixty-hour model from est could give faithful people the opportunity to self-consciously and reflectively begin to understand the statements and symbols of faith and how they bear upon the world. The guiding idea, "The Christian as Theologian," is meant to replace "the Christian as Church Worker" approach. It declares bankrupt any approach to Christianity that sees the faith as only a series of jobs to be done for institutional Christianity.

Second, the est people seem to be clear about the essence of Erhard’s teaching. I doubt if we are as clear about the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as are the est participants about the message of Erhard. In a word, the “canonical” teachings of est are probably better known to the followers of Erhard than are the canonical teachings of Christianity to the followers of Christ. Reading this paper jolted me to admit that it is precisely this center that has not held for many of us who go about ministry in the mainline church. We know how to “run churches” and “maintain institutions” but we are unprepared to interpret the essence of Christian tradition to the contemporary cultural situation. This paper has challenged me to rediscover that which is distinctive in Christian faith and how that distinctive thrust can be interpreted and embodied in our generation.

On the negative side I am not convinced that Hann answers his own question regarding est as a religious movement. He is to be complimented for helping the reader to see certain characteristics in est that are also present in a religious
movement: a "transformed" founder, who has formulated the teachings, who is the exemplar, and who is followed by many; there are a body of teachings and a community of believers who practice the values of est. As Mr. Hann says, "The more critical question of the function of est remains: does est function for its graduates as a source of ultimate meaning?" He answers this question by stating that est, based on a survey, functions as a source of ultimate meaning for a minority and not a majority of its graduates and that the aim of est is for the participants to lose their need to be attached. He concludes, "There is no indication that these abstractions are intended to be taken as ultimate truths, and it appears that those who have done so, like those who have come to venerate Erhard, have done so apart from the instigation of est itself."

Does this mean that the "hidden" purpose of est is to train its graduates to be "barkers outside the tent" as a way of promoting the services of est so that others will pay the enrollment fee? If so, it does not qualify as a religious movement.

Joe E. Pennel, Jr.
Pastor, Belmont United Methodist Church
Nashville, Tennessee
BOOK REVIEWS

THREE BIG BOOKS IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Reviews by Charles R. Foster


These three recent publications by contemporary leaders in American religious education contribute significantly to the discussion of the church’s educational ministry. In The Theory of Christian Education Practice, Randolph Crump Miller has recast a number of previously published essays within the framework of process theology. Miller draws upon his work in the past, but typically directs his attention to the contemporary concerns and experience of church leaders. The two volumes by Groome and Fowler mark the maturing of their work. They establish the frames of reference for what their own research and writing will be in the future. In this essay I intend to describe briefly the emphases in the three books, identify their value for pastors and church educators, and identify several issues that I would like the authors to discuss in greater detail.

WHAT THEY SAY

Miller is known among his colleagues as one who takes empirical perspectives seriously. Influenced by Charles Hartshorne, Henry...
Nelson Wieman, Alfred North Whitehead, and Bernard E. Meland, he finds himself at home with the views of such process theologians as Schubert Ogden, John Cobb, and Norman Pittenger. Miller’s basic premise in his writings is that theology explores what God does. It is not concerned so much with propositions as with events. The particularity of these events is most clearly to be found in relationships—those between persons and those between persons and God.

A second theme consistently to be found in his writings, including this volume, is that theology is the primary resource for understanding Christian education. Following his appointment to Yale in 1952, Miller positioned himself squarely on the side of those religious educators who viewed theology rather than education as the primary source and framework for their thought and work. He observed that his task was to help discern “how Christian education is to be a theological discipline and method” (156). That quest continues to shape his thought. Defining theology as “the truth-about-God-in-relation-to-humanity,” Miller viewed the purpose of Christian education as placing God at the center of all relationships and bringing “the individual into the right relationship with God and one’s fellows within the perspective of the fundamental truths about all of life” (156). Over the years Miller never equated that task as belonging solely to the church school. Rather the educational ministry of the church occurs throughout the life of the church. He consequently takes the worship, social, and missional aspects of congregational life seriously as contexts for the educational task of the church.

The Theory of Christian Education Practice embodies the values Miller espouses. He begins with a discussion of Process Theology, places his 1952 lecture “Christian Education as a Theological Discipline and Method” in the middle of the book, and concludes by exploring several educational issues—e.g., “Worship and Education,” “The Bible in Christian Education,” and the role of education in private schools and universities.

In Christian Religious Education, Thomas Groome struggles with six foundational questions that can be simplified into the “what, why, where, how, when, and who” of Christian religious education (xiv). Groome follows Lawrence Cremin, Whitehead, and Jurgen Habermas in seeking to avoid a view of education that is narrowly intellectual. He also seeks to avoid the imperialism to be found in much educational thought, hence the title, Christian Religious Education. Groome writes about an education that is religious in that...
it focuses upon the relationship of humanity to the "transcendent dimension of life." As a Catholic Christian, he also writes out of the particularity of the Christian tradition, reminding us in the process that we are "only one expression" of the total enterprise of religious education (25).

Perhaps the comprehensive character of Groome's work may be seen in his definition of the purpose of Christian religious education. It "is a political activity with pilgrims in time that deliberately and intentionally attends with them to the activity of God in our present, to the Story of the Christian faith community, and to the Vision of God's Kingdom, the seeds of which are already among us" (25). The power of this rather awkward and complex statement becomes increasingly clear to the reader as Groome discusses each element in it. Perhaps it is sufficient to say that Groome takes seriously the biblical view of the kingdom of God and sees it as the end of all Christian religious education activity. Those seeking to respond to the love and will of God are pilgrims moving toward that reality which is both with us and before us. The pilgrim is engaged in a faith journey which occurs in three "essential and constitutive dimensions." Christian faith requires a "firm conviction" in those beliefs perceived by the church to be central. This cognitive dimension of Christian faith is accompanied by an affective dimension encompassing "a relationship of trust and confidence in a personal God who saves in Jesus Christ" and is expressed through "loyalty, love, and attachment" (61). The third dimension, as one might guess, has to do with action or the behavioral experience of persons. It is caught up in the activity of "faith as doing." This dimension involves taking one's neighbor as seriously as one does oneself.

The interdependence of these cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of the human experience in Christian religious education is evident in Groome's extended discussion of what he calls a "praxis way of knowing." Seeking to avoid the sequential or linear perspectives evident in Miller's view of the relationship of theology and education, Groome asserts that a praxis way of knowing cannot neatly segregate either the procedures or the content of these three dimensions. A praxis way of knowing, Groome contends, "is a relational, reflective, and experiential way of knowing in which by critical reflection on lived experience people discover and name their own story and vision" (149). Cognition and action cannot be separated into two neat activities as many educational philosophies tend to do.

At this point Groome's definition of Christian religious education
begins to come clear. Praxis is not a private phenomenon. It occurs within a social context. Consequently, Christian religious education occurs whenever a group of Christians shares "in dialogue their critical reflection on present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision toward the end of lived Christian faith" (184). Within this statement are five components Groome believes to be central to the educational process.

The first involves a recognition of what Groome calls "present action" or the recognition of what one is doing in one's present situation or circumstance. The second component is perhaps the most crucial in Groome's methodology. It involves critical reflection upon the present event, our memories of the past, and our sense of the future in our midst. A shared praxis occurs within a dialogical setting. This third component, crucial to the building of Christian community, involves the reciprocal actions of "telling and listening" by all who participate in the group. The fourth component is the representation of the church's story, by which Groome means the "whole faith tradition of our people however that is expressed or embodied" (192), in word, art, liturgy, or structure. And the fifth component, Groome proposes, is the response we make to that future in our midst. It is that vision of the kingdom of God which we encounter in the Christian story and which invites us into the future. The vision is not something off in the future: it is revealed in our "lived response" in the present toward the future. In these five components, Groome proposes a provocative methodology for the Christian religious education enterprise. He stands firmly in the tradition of the progressive education movement in this country. In so doing, however, Groome has effectively translated categories from that movement into those integral to the Christian tradition.

Our third volume, Stages of Faith, by James Fowler, has been long awaited by those interested in the author's research in faith development. His articles and lectures as well as the introductory discussions of his thought in Life Maps and Trajectories in Faith have intrigued many concerned with the importance of communicating effectively the meanings and power of the Christian gospel to persons of all ages. For such persons the book is worth the wait. It is written in a highly readable style—a stark contrast to some of Fowler's earlier writings. It reflects a growing awareness of both the possibilities and limits in developmental schemes. And it makes clear that this work will not be the last on the subject.

Faith for Fowler is a human universal. Each person is endowed at
birth with "nascent capacities for faith." It is as significantly shaped by
the social context of persons as it is by those initiatives of "spirit and
grace" which are located beyond the human experience (xiii). The
universal phenomenon of growth in faith intrigues Fowler and
provides the impetus for his research and writing. In this work Fowler
explores in depth his understanding of the nature of faith.
Significantly influenced by the thought of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and
H. Richard Niebuhr, Fowler distinguishes faith from religion and
belief. Subsequently for Fowler, faith is the "most fundamental
category in the human quest for relation to transcendence" (14). The
emphasis here is upon the word relation, since to Fowler, faith is a
relational phenomenon to be found in a three-way or triangular
covenantal relationship. At its most rudimentary level, these
relational patterns involve two-way interactions between self, others,
and what Fowler calls "shared centers of value and power" (17). These
three patterns of interactions point to the interdependence of faith and
identity in the lives of all persons. They emerge from a person's
investment of self in some relationship or meaning that has apparent
worth because of the value we envision that it holds for our lives.
These relationships are many and varied. Many have little to do with
what we normally consider to be religious. The common element in
all, however, are the bonds of trust and loyalty that link us to each
other and to our shared centers of value and power.

Faith for Fowler has yet another dimension. It is imaginal in that it
forms an image of "an ultimate environment" out of which we can
make sense of our lives (28). It is therefore the function of the faithful
imagination to apprehend those truths.

Fowler's work has been set in the context of earlier research on
human development. He acknowledges this dependence in a
provocative conversation staged between his mentors—Jean Piaget,
Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg. In this useful summation of
their thought, he restates their basic assumptions, draws contrasts
among their conclusions, and illustrates the relationship of his own
views to theirs.

The bulk of the book is devoted to Fowler's own description of the
six stages in the development of faith in persons. He introduces each
stage with a vignette from the interviews that he and his colleagues
have conducted. The characteristics of each stage are illustrated in
reference to the data available to both researcher and reader. The
richness and complexity of each stage is explored in some depth. In
the process, both the people he and his colleagues have interviewed
and his theoretical discussion come alive.
BIG THREE IN EDUCATION

For those who are already familiar with Fowler's work, the latter chapters provide a clue to the future in his work. In a provocative chapter he begins to explore the relationship of conversion to development. In another he identifies several issues to be found in developmental perspectives that need to be explored in greater depth: the relationship of faith-developmental potential to be found in persons and the unconscious expectation about the character of adult faith to be found in various human communities that may inhibit or limit that potential; the relationship of developmental patterns in each stage and the tendency of groups to view certain beliefs, attitudes, and actions in normative fashion; and the relationship of the grace of God to developmental patterns in persons. These issues indicate that Fowler will continue to challenge the thinking and the programming of churches for years to come.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT THEY SAY

From one perspective at least, these three books provide a fascinating contrast. One of Miller's lasting contributions may be found in the seriousness with which he has explored the relationship of theology and education. A friend of mine was dismayed by the educational practice in local churches as well as by the insipid character of the teaching in that department in his own seminary during the 1950s. He remarked that Miller's attention to this theme made it possible for him to take church education seriously in his own ministry. The Theory of Christian Education Practice may well bring to culmination Miller's continuing effort to explicate Christian education as a theological discipline. Groome and Fowler write as if that debate has already been settled. They assume the necessary interdependence of theological and educational categories. Perhaps that interdependence is reflected most clearly in Groome's emphasis upon praxis as reflective theological action.

Miller's work should be read simply out of an appreciation for his continuing contribution to Christian education. It is a useful volume for those interested in a reflective survey of issues dominating the attention of many Protestant church educators over the past forty years. It is most helpful in interpreting the implications of Process Theology for the practice of Christian education. The interpretation of Process Theology is not entirely successful, however, because several of the essays in the volume were written before Miller began to use process language and categories in a consistent fashion. The
The other two volumes come at a very different point in the careers of Groome and Fowler. They mark the maturing of their thought and are significant because any person who chooses to engage in a discussion of religious education generally and "Christian religious education" specifically must come to terms with their work.

Groome's comprehensive treatment of the educational ministry draws liberally from biblical themes, the traditions of the church, as well as contemporary educational and theological thought. His efforts clearly establish boundaries for future discussion on the assumptions and methodologies of church education. Fowler similarly marks off lines of debate for those interested in teaching and learning. The power of a developmental framework for understanding the person as learner has long been evident in educational circles. The categories of Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg, among others, have caught the imagination of educational administrators, classroom teachers, and curriculum editors and writers, as well as the makers of toys and producers of radio and television programs. Now Fowler's schema may be added to the list. His clues for understanding the faith responses of persons of all ages may henceforth affect the way pastors and educators approach their preaching, teaching, counseling, and even their administration of parish life.

I particularly appreciate the attention all three give to the relationship between the theoretical assumptions undergirding their work and the methodological implications to be found in those assumptions. This concern is evident in Miller's title, *The Theory of Christian Education Practice*. In the latter half of the book his attention turns directly to several issues encountered by clergy and professional church educators. His advice is often specific and concrete. This concern informs Groome's view of *praxis* as well. Indeed the significant contribution of *Christian Religious Education* may well be found in the methodology Groome proposes for the church's educational enterprise. Groome illustrates his five-step approach out of his own teaching experience with persons of all ages. If adopted by the teachers of many churches, it would certainly overcome the parochialism and superficiality of much that currently goes on in the name of church education.

The implications of Fowler's work for the practice of educational ministry are as readily apparent as Groome's or Miller's and perhaps more easily manipulated and misused. Fowler has consistently been
quite clear that developmental perspectives should not be taken as normative descriptions of the faith experience of persons at given ages during their lives. Yet curriculum writers, editors, and teachers have all too often assumed that Fowler's descriptions were normative. Developmental perspectives provide clues to order our descriptions of persons' behavior and to cluster possible meanings around their actions. Hence these perspectives are more useful in assessing what has happened than in projecting what will happen in any given teaching-learning interaction. They are more helpful in suggesting possible ways to understand the character of the intellectual, moral, and faith responses of persons than they are in proposing normative standards to guide our expectations of their actions.

One other contribution in each volume had caught my attention. Each in quite different ways works out of the assumption that the human experience is a religiously and culturally pluralistic one. Consequently, Miller makes clear that the theological assumptions guiding his thought provide one among several ways of exploring the church's educational ministry. Similarly Groome makes the distinction between religious education and its more particular form, Christian religious education. Groome contends that out of our own particularities we may grow to appreciate the universal concerns to be found in a wide variety of faith systems. Fowler begins with the assumption that faith is a human universal with many particularities. This vantage point allows him to explore the similarities as well as the differences in the faith responses of persons both across and outside the lines of specific religious affiliations. This sensitivity to the reality of religious pluralism is reinforced by the attention of these writers to the use of sex-inclusive language. They demonstrate that writers can communicate effectively while also being inclusive.

THINGS I WISH THEY HAD DISCUSSED

Even though each of these three books makes a contribution to the discussions centering upon the church's educational ministry, I still found myself saying from time to time, "If only he had ..." In Miller's case, this comment occurred most often in relation to the consequences of his writing style. Rarely does he invite the reader into his own struggle with the issues with which he is working. Instead we encounter the interpreted resolutions to those struggles.
Consequently his transitions from one idea to another are often abrupt. He makes leaps and connections that do not come naturally to me. And ultimately I find myself reacting to the volume with a sense of déjà vu, undoubtedly a somewhat unfair reaction.

My reactions to Fowler's and Groome's work are more specific. Both look upon the Christian as one in pilgrimage, but I find myself wondering if pilgrims “develop.” Perhaps my own fascination with the vicissitudes of the pilgrimage has dominated my attention, hindering an easy and quick connection between these two ways of looking at the life of faith. Similarly I am curious about the relationship of the rational and decisional character of Groome's methodology to the often nonrational patterns of obedience to be found in the way of the pilgrim. Hence Fowler and Groome have not yet convinced me that developmental perspectives are necessarily congenial to those persons who have been reared to view life in nonlinear and nonprogressive patterns.

I find myself perplexed by Fowler's claim regarding the universality of faith on the one hand, and his investigation into the nature of faith from within the particularity of the Christian tradition on the other. There may be no tension between the two, but his work would be enhanced by the insights from the other great religions. At the same time I find myself increasingly appreciative of his attempts to understand the relationship of mystery, symbol, and the unconscious dimensions of human experience to the patterns of development he and his colleagues find in persons. I wonder, however, whether or not developmental categories can either contain or explain those largely untapped sources for faithful responding.

I still have not yet decided whether or not Groome has illustrated a praxis way of knowing in his own writing. We do have a critical reflection upon his own journey as a teacher, and we have a brilliant exposition of a methodology for the enterprise of religious education, but the outline of the book is much more reminiscent of Miller's. It is true he begins with an “action,” but it is located in the preface, and the body of the book moves through the traditional and linear notions of what, why, and where, followed by how, when, and who. I wonder what the book would have been like if it had followed the outline of his five components in a shared praxis of education.

Finally, I am not sure that Groome comprehends the extent to which his view of the educational process has been informed by voluntary assumptions about the social nature of human beings. His theological affirmations may reveal his allegiance to the tradition of
the church as it is understood by Roman Catholics, but his methodology appears more deeply rooted in the individualistic and voluntaristic patterns of the Enlightenment and more recent progressive philosophical thought. So I find myself wondering to what extent he may be able to sustain this apparent tension between his theological assumptions and his methodological assumptions.

In sum, Miller has challenged the church to be theologically responsible in its approaches to educational ministries. Groome and Fowler continue that tradition. Each makes a useful contribution to the church in identifying and clarifying an agenda for our own study as well as providing clues for those of us in the church who seek to teach the faith in a complex world.
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