Review of Theological Foundations for Ethics
William M. Longsworth
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EDITORIAL

Disillusioned with Cynicism

A young pastor once went to a funeral home to visit a family whose relative had died. The family was gathered around the casket. The pastor prayed and visited with them, then went into the waiting room where several friends and other relatives had gathered. These people were visiting with one another, talking, smoking, and even joking with one another. They did not seem to be grieving.

The young pastor was bothered at first by their nonchalance. He told himself these people were actually grieving and were just covering it up with banter. But later he realized they really were unconcerned about the person who had died and the family members who were seriously affected. This insight came as a shock, and still later in his ministry the pastor came to see even grimmer pictures of human beings baring their teeth—sometimes even delighting in the death of someone.

This pastor is a friend of mine, and I know he did not lose his faith upon discovering how uncaring and brutal people can be. Nor did he lose his own sensitivity to other persons. But he did become more realistic, and in doing so he illustrated very well how some individuals confront a disappointing or painful reality and move beyond it to a more mature level. And the anecdote is pertinent because of a widespread cynicism in the church and the culture.

What can be done about cynicism? Perhaps it could be lumped together with all those other evils that get a regular pounding from preachers and some nonreligious high-minded intellectuals—things like arrogance, greed, and narcissism. But since part of the program of cynicism seems to be a war on pomposity and pretense—expressed in mere words, it is often said, and so much hot air, which it often is—then an assault on cynicism will have to take another form.
First of all we have to try to understand what cynicism is. The root word for “cynic” comes from the Greek for “doglike”: a cynic is someone who assumes that human beings are dominated by canine characteristics, chiefly selfishness. The original Cynics, the Greek school, taught self-denial as a way of divorcing themselves from the surrounding culture, which they saw as decadent. (This Greek formula could not have taken into account modern versions of decadence like being obsessed with gray hair.) The Cynics derogated cultural principles but for a serious purpose. They wanted to establish a basis for virtue that would be independent of custom and culture. Thus original cynicism was mistrust with an object in view, not mistrust of everything. In that sense, a great many of us are cynical at one time or another, because we do mistrust certain cultural patterns in favor of others. But the contemporary cynics seem to have universalized this philosophy and thereby undercut themselves. For if everything is mistrusted, how can the cynic be trusted?

Perhaps that is why skepticism has become a more acceptable tactic for discourse. For a skeptic is doubtful, too, but mostly about knowledge and claims to truth, not about persons and their motives. In contemporary theology, the rule of “suspicion” has become a means by which statements can be tested for their truth claims. And one can be skeptical or “suspicious” in this sense about many things without doubting that there is a real world or that it has some transcendent order or purpose. Thus skepticism can be useful, and skeptics very often are willing to acknowledge claims to knowledge or truth when those claims can be shown to have satisfactory warrants.

The only reason disillusionment is mentioned in this context is that it seems to be the infection that leads to the destroying disease. Scratch a cynic and you very often find disillusionment—sometimes over very small things. And surely we have all been disillusioned at one time or another. Some might argue that if an illusion is a totally imaginary vision, one with no real grounding in the world, disillusionment is necessary for growth. A child must learn the difference between fantasy and reality in order to survive. Therefore disillusionment is natural and normal.

Why then do some people get off the track and end up
doubting and mistrusting everything? One reason is that the earliest cynics were in fact right about one thing—culture contains within itself the seeds for decline and therefore disillusionment. Perhaps a better example than the ancient Greeks can be found in the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment. Lucien Febvre, the great French historian, claimed that the word *civilization* began to be used only about 1766. And once it began to be used to refer to the positive advance of recent peoples over those sunk in barbarism and savagery, it also began to be criticized by Rousseau and others. One French critic wrote early in the nineteenth century, "I see civilization moving every day further and further, deeper and deeper into an abyss in which I perceive nothing but ruin." So it seems that the notion of civilization itself contains a sort of doubt or self-criticism.

In our case—the case of the Christian church—we can of course readily concede not only that civilization carries a heavy load of pretense with it, but so does religion. Was it not Reinhold Niebuhr who wrote that religion can be downright dangerous because of the temptation of spiritual pride? And perhaps he was following Karl Barth, who in his *Commentary on Romans* spoke of the peril of becoming close to God because at the same time one may become totally alienated from God. We have a very good defense in the church, then, against contemporary cynicism, because we can rightfully say, "No matter how bad you say people are, we know they are really worse!"

This sort of one-ups-personship is not as important, though, as the other defenses against cynicism that arise from the Bible and other traditions. The discussion of Scripture and canon initiated by Lea Keck in this issue suggests a double level of the dynamics of doubt and good faith. The first level derives from the process the early church engaged in while the New Testament writings were being evaluated. "Canon" means rule, and certain tests were applied to determine which Scriptures were ruled in and which ruled out. What this meant was that theoretically every writing was placed under suspicion until it could be shown that it deserved canonization. Perhaps this process was not formal and conscious, but those in the early councils seem to have been skeptical about some things in order to be believing about others.

The second level concerns the recent history of attempts to
understand the Bible in the light of modernism. In the first step, some Christians became disillusioned with dogmatic claims about the sanctity of the Bible. The historical-critical movement was then a way of dispelling that disillusionment with what was conceived of as a way of understanding the Bible while yet remaining modern. But in recent years, many have become disillusioned with historical-criticism. Of the many ways suggested for moving beyond historical-criticism, the most popular seems to be a blend of hermeneutics and interpretation. This level of the Scripture-canon discussion illustrates that disillusionment can become a prelude to new claims to truth, new visions of reality.

Having a new vision seems to be the best defense against cynicism, and in his article on peace and war, William Luther White gives some flesh-and-blood reality to the discussion. As White observes, the cultured despisers of religion have pressed their case against those of us in the church because we have not seemed eager to prophesy against warmaking. Now many in the church decry any sort of approach that would blame people or judge them, and some of these decriers are positive thinkers. The positive thinkers have a reply to cynics, too, which is mainly that we should stress the positive and think about the good things. But positive thinkers are logically in virtually the same bind as the cynics. Positive thinkers reject the critical approach. They say no to nugatory naysayers. And thus they cannot escape being critical themselves, much as cynics are forced finally to admit (at least thinking cynics—the others are "mellow" and impervious to serious thought) that they must believe in at least one thing in order to be credible cynics. Perhaps that is the clue that positive thinkers and cynics are very close to each other at bottom. Both seem to believe that to admit complexity, difficulty, impossibility, is to admit defeat. But as White suggests, the real key to hope for the future lies in assessing reality and then dealing with it straightforwardly.

And that is what Roberta Bondi also finds in the early desert Fathers and Mothers. Humility is a way of getting under disillusionment and finding a firmer and surer bedrock. The desert Mothers and Fathers offered hope for human dilemmas precisely because it did not offer an easy way out. In this regard a good hedge against disillusionment is to have a pessimist
around. With someone constantly harping on human foibles and failures, illusions never have a chance to arise.

Finally, a truly effective antidote to cynicism is not idealism but rather persistence. That is why Jean Caffey Lyles's article on the United Methodist General Conference can be recommended as a part of our anti-cynical campaign. Of all areas of human life, surely organizations are the most popular targets for debunkers and iconoclasts. Precious few will arise to defend the idea of committees. And yet this persistent criticism of organizations says something about us humans—we are addicted to order, or at least the idea of order, and we will keep trying to establish it even if it kills us. Here the modern cynic tries to stay out of organizations, because they have such an odor about them. There is an odor, but it is the scent proper of our species. So the only way to avoid organization is to withdraw from the human race. The best riposte to cynicism is to pursue the reform of organizations while at the same time recognizing they are intrinsically failures.

We can then move beyond disillusionment, whether it is with organizations or the human tendency to pretense or whatever. But rather than concluding "it is all relative" (absolutely not), let me recall the conundrum posed by Erving Goffman, "When is a man kissing a woman really a husband kissing his wife?" What Goffman meant was that appearances can be deceiving. Even a hard-bitten empiricist can be mistaken, which is to say, can have illusions.

And in the kissing metaphor, Goffman suggests that what looks to be a mere generality—another man kissing a woman—can be something very specific and with great force to it. Granted, the kiss may be merely ritualistic. But as we well know, mere rituals are the carriers of great meaning. And on the inside, from the viewpoint of the participants, the show, the illusion being created by their act, may be vital for all kinds of reasons. Whatever those reasons, they are knowing ones, and knowing comes from disillusionment. How many husbands have kissed their wives, and vice versa, all the more fervently because one of the other has been unfaithful or malicious? So there can be knowledge beyond disillusionment. Of course, we are always vulnerable, can always be disillusioned ever more, but we can also move through it to become wiser and more loving souls.

—CHARLES E. COLE
The revival of interpretation as opposed to criticism of the Bible seems inviting, but are there not some good reasons to retain a historical understanding of the church and its Scriptures?

The title of this essay is deliberate, even though at first glance one of those terms appears to be redundant, like "each and every." Scripture and canon sound like two words for the same thing, like car and automobile. Actually, of course, car and automobile are to be distinguished, although in common parlance we use them interchangeably. So too with regard to Scripture and canon. It is useful to see that each word has its own range of associations and meanings. In the word Scripture we recognize the Latin term scriptura, that which is written, the writings. The New Testament uses the Greek ἡ γραφή or the plural οἱ γραφῆς to express the same idea, but normally we translate the Greek as "scripture," not simply "writings," in order to indicate which writings are being mentioned—the writings which are deemed special, sacred or holy, inspired, revealed. Canon, on the other hand, is English for kanon, the Greek word for measuring rod, norm, or standard. When we want to connote the intrinsic special quality of a body of writings we use the word Scripture or Scriptures, but when we want to connote their standing in the community we use the word canon. Canon suggests the formal, juridical standing which Scripture does not.

This distinction locates more precisely the subject-matter of
this essay: the place of the canon in the life of the church. Distinguishing Scripture from canon does not mean abandoning the one for the other. Indeed, because the word canon refers to a closed collection, two things at least are clear. First, this literature was acknowledged to be Scripture before it became canon; second, the canon retains its role in the church primarily because it continues to be Scripture: special writings which have a special capacity to be the vehicle for what we confess is the Word of the Lord. No doctrine of biblical authority generates this experience of this Word. Canonicity is the formal and official acknowledgment by the community that these writings are indeed Scripture. This means that the Bible's standing in the church depends on the church's experience of it as Scripture. Where the Bible ceases to function as Scripture, as special, it ceases to be the canon and becomes instead a resource book on a shelf of great religious classics.

Conversely, the Bible can be experienced as Scripture and yet fall short of being the canon. One of the tasks before us is the rehabilitation of the Scripture as the canon of the church, as the acknowledged norm to which the community knows itself to be accountable, and with which it must come to terms. It is this task that makes the distinction between Scripture and canon significant.

Now if "canon" refers to the Bible as that body of literature with which the community must come to terms, and if "Scripture" refers to the Bible as that body of literature through which one experiences the word so intensely, so intimately, so powerfully that one confesses it to be the Word of the Lord; and if the latter is necessary for the former, then theological education for the church faces a formidable task indeed. For we are tempted by two shortcuts which at first appear to be quite different but which turn out to be quite similar.

On the one hand, our work is proceeding at a time of a strong and growing interest in what is commonly called "spirituality." Protestants have learned to use the Catholic language of formation: the shaping of the whole person into a more fit servant of the gospel. Spirituality is a great attraction today for seminars, clinics, retreats, and the like. Surely this strong interest in spirituality has many roots, but equally sure is the fact
that it bespeaks a wide and deep hunger for what used to be
called vital, personal religion. It is not rare for pastors to reflect
rather caustically on the spiritual aridness of their theological
education, on its intellectualism or lack of attention to their own
personal growth in faith, or in deepening the capacity to pray.

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it ceases to be the canon and becomes instead a resource
book on a shelf of great religious classics.

As far as the current scene is concerned, the more we have
students in theological schools who themselves are looking and
exploring and ascertaining whether the "Christian thing" is
really for them, the more strain is placed on the seminary whose
ethos is more that of a school for educating the committed than
of a church for nurturing the seekers. Some schools feel
themselves infiltrated by charismatics and evangelicals, and
faculties sometimes reassure one another that in our shop, at
least, such students pose no real problem—yet.

The surge of interest in spirituality impinges on our topic in a
very interesting way, for if there is one thing that seems to
characterize the use of the Bible in the many forms of spirituality
it is the almost complete disregard of the Bible as it is taught in
the classroom. What is encouraged is the experience with the
Bible as Scripture, as the means for deepening one's spirituality
directly, uncluttered by any critical judgments. It is true, to be
sure, that for many persons, matters of sources, dates,
authorship, literary integrity, and the like, allow one to make
sense of a baffling book. It is also true that for many others, the
Bible comes alive only when these matters are ignored as they
listen for what the Lord is saying to them or to us. What seems to
be missing, and sorely needed, is an interpretive scheme, a
hermeneutic, a theology of exegesis which makes clear the
relation between the historical explanation and spiritual or
moral appropriation. Faculties are generally much more adept at
breaking up the hardpan clay of Fundamentalism than they are
in clarifying the relation between explanation and appropria-
tion. What we usually say is that there is no recipe, no set of
procedures for moving from one to the other. True enough. But that answer alone is no longer satisfactory; further reflection is in order.

To speak of explanation in biblical study is to speak of historical criticism, mostly done by experts. To speak of appropriation and interpretation is to speak of what is done mostly by amateurs, which is not simply a word for laity. So the question becomes, "If it is the amateur scholar who interprets for the church in accord with his or her appropriation of the text, what is the role of the expert's explanation in this process?" In explanation we try to account for phenomena in the text, and in historical explanation we do so by appealing to antecedents, to earlier sources, borrowed ideas, reused traditions, motifs, and the like. For decades experts have had an unquenchable thirst for antecedents and parallels, and they have succeeded remarkably in anchoring the biblical anthology in the cultures of antiquity. The experts have also succeeded in making it difficult to talk with one another. A specialist in the Synoptics is often reluctant to be caught with his hand in the Gospel of John. Experts in Jewish backgrounds concentrate on the Septuagint, or the Targums, or in obscure apocalyptic texts, or on Samaritans and Essenes. Experts in premonarchic Israel sense that they are strangers and sojourners in the post-Exile literature. In no way do I want to belittle the erudition that this expertise, developed across lifetimes, represents. Even though one sometimes has the impression that the flour is being ground again, on the whole this unprecedented examination of every aspect of the Bible has brought to light an enormous amount of information and considerable body of insight. But no one can master the field anymore. As a result even the experts are amateurs outside their narrow plots. It is little wonder that the student or the pastor is bewildered by this entire explanatory process and its apparatus.

There is another consequence of this massive, explanatory work which makes bridging explanation and appropriation difficult: namely, that historical explanation, in effect, rearranges the Bible. Books are disassembled and reconstructed and put into different sequence, so that we can trace the historical development. The historical student of Paul reads him as a moving target who appears with I Thessalonians and disappears
with Romans. Raymond Brown’s recent book, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, disassembles the Johannine corpus and rearranges the material in order to write the history of a tradition. In both Old and New Testaments we study texts that do not even exist but that must be inferred, namely, the Yahwist and Q. So powerful is this rearranging done for the sake of reconstructing the past accurately that a by-product has emerged as well—a sense of intimidation on the part of the amateur. Instead of giving entry to the text our sophisticated methods of explaining the data create the impression that unless all methods are mastered and orchestrated properly the Bible is more forbidding than ever. The message that seems to come through to student, pastor, ethicist, theologian, counselor is this: do it right or leave it alone.

Given these developments, it is little wonder that persons interested in spirituality find it virtually impossible to link up their concern with explanatory biblical study, and so simply abandon it when they pursue what they regard as really important anyway—direct, spiritual appropriation.

On the other hand, there is another shortcut which, as noted above, turns out to be virtually the same, namely, the rising disregard of the historically oriented explanatory process for the sake of various ahistorical explanatory efforts, whether some form of literary criticism or what goes under the banner of "structuralism." Instead of reading narratives in order to learn what happened or to determine how much the narrative can tell us about what happened, the interest is in the narrative-world created by the storyteller, whether the story refers to an actual event or not. To encounter that created world of meaning, to enter it appreciatively, is goal enough. For these critics the goal is to understand precisely how language works, to arrive at a kind of analytical X-ray of the text as a text, to see it as a whole, as a work of art, and not as a quarry for either facts or dogma. Repeatedly the ahistorical mode of inquiry reminds us that so much biblical study has been preoccupied, perhaps excessively, with historical questions, with genetic relationships so that other important, useful questions have been ignored. Interestingly enough, the newer ahistorical modes can be more effective temptations away from historically oriented explanation precisely because they too operate in the explanatory mode. They
too account for phenomena in the text, promise to help readers understand it and appreciate it, but do so in another mode. Indeed, whereas people who bypass historical study for the sake of spirituality can sometimes be accused of anti-intellectualism, persons who press for the ahistorical modes are highly sophisticated and much of the work has developed its own jargon, its own gurus, its own group of cognoscenti. Moreover, part of the appeal is the critique of all previous scholarship as having been concerned with the wrong questions anyway. Even if on closer examination there is considerable diversity among the participants, there is a kind of messianism in his movement away from the historical. But the point I want to make is this: that the more this kind of biblical study, suggestive and insightful though it can be, turns away from history, the more it approaches charismatic exegesis, because what matters is the transaction between the individual reader and the text. Here too, there is a quest for meaning which does not rely on understanding the text in its historic embeddedness. What matters is having one's spiritual and aesthetic and moral sense enlivened. In this mode of study, the Bible can be Scripture, but need not be canon because continuity with the historical community is irrelevant. The community that matters is the community of discourse which consists of those who read texts in the same way.

I said that theological education faces a formidable task. It is to find a way to continue the historical explanatory process in such a way as to make it more fruitful in the life of the church. This requires not repudiating the current literary, ahistorical approaches but rather incorporating them—a possibility that cannot be explored here. It must suffice to affirm that the Bible is Scripture so that it can become again the canon of the community—that anthology with which the church must come to terms again and again. And here we reach the footing on which this lecture stands—the inseparability of canon and community.

What I am proposing is that biblical scholarship can help the church move forward toward recovering the canonicity of its Scripture by following through on what historical explanation has allowed us to see, and that theological scholarship can help
the church develop a more ample understanding of canon. I want to say a word about each possibility.

What historical study of the Bible has allowed us to see is that the relation between canon and community does not need to be created but recognized and released.

Through historical-critical study of the Bible it has become abundantly clear that the Bible is so involved in the communities of faith that it cannot be isolated from them.

Through historical-critical study of the Bible it has become abundantly clear that the Bible is so involved in the communities of faith that it cannot be isolated from them. The materials behind the present texts were handed on in the communities. When the books of the Bible were written they came into existence in response to the needs of the community. The books were edited and compiled into the texts we have in order to make the texts serviceable for synagogue and church. The manuscripts we have were prepared for community use, and both the formation of the canon and its actual shape is the work of communities. Even if one allows for diversity in the case of the Old Testament, the basic point remains the same. What we know as the canon is inextricably involved in the life of the community at virtually every point until modern times. In short, historical criticism has made it abundantly clear that we would not have the Bible we have without the church.

What is not so clear, however, is whether we can have the church without the canon. I am persuaded that we cannot. Societies and groups and projects concerned with religion we can have in abundance without canon. Religious experiences, even meaningful ones, and access to truths we can have without having the canon, but without canon we are not church.

Now this claim deserves to be considered a bit more. It is of course true that the church existed without the New Testament or the texts which some of its books incorporated, but even then the church used the Scripture of the synagogue. Even if the synagogue canon was not yet closed by the Jewish community,
most of the books of the New Testament used the synagogue Scripture as an authoritative text. It is also true that the whole church never agreed on what books constitute the Old Testament. In any case, even if there is some variation in what constitutes the Old Testament, today each church has a canon, a closed collection. There is no way to undo this, to return to a first-century situation de jure. In principle, to be sure, any church can change the content of its canon. But actually this is no longer possible. Even sharply defined groups like Christian Scientists and the Latter-day Saints have provided themselves with canonical supplements rather than change the inherited canon, the former being the key to the Scriptures and the latter a parallel canon. As the articles of faith printed on a card left by a Mormon missionary put it, “we believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly. We also believe the book of Mormon to be the word of God.” (Evidently there is no ambivalence about that translation.) The same bondedness of church and canon is reflected when liberal groups attend also to the writings of other religions: the more these other texts are valued, the less concern there is to be specifically and avowedly part of the traditional Christian church.

A more adequate view of canon helps the church understand itself in a truly historical way. When the Bible is canon it links one specific historical community to another and the whole church at a given time to its predecessors reaching back as far as Abraham and Sarah. By sharing this canon, we, who may be Anglo-Saxons or Asians, or Africans or Melanesians, appropriate a common funding history, a common vocabulary and imagery, common expectations and values. The more one senses the fuller scope of what is entailed in the relation of canon and community, the more aware one becomes of the impoverishment that marks much of the church’s use of the Bible as mere Scripture—as a body of important and special texts whose standing nonetheless falls short of what a more ample canonicity can entail. Even the church’s appeal to the Bible as the final warrant for doctrines falls short, for it tends to constrict the Bible’s role to that of providing right beliefs and ideas. For much of the church the chief value of the Bible is to provide revealed ideas or authorized morals. Proof-texting abounds among liberals no less than among conservatives. Inevitably, placing
An aesthetic reading of Scripture nurtures a sense of community which is essentially gnostic, an intellectually suggestive experience possible for those who have been initiated into a precise method and a rather arcane vocabulary available to the elite. This approach does not link today's community with its predecessors apart from the forebears in the history of research. What is called for is an approach to the Bible which does not forfeit its role as Scripture but which goes beyond so that it becomes a canon of the community in a more ample way, in a way that builds on what historical study has disclosed about it. One way to achieve this is by overcoming the selective use of the Bible in worship, whether as the basis for doctrine, morals, inspiration, or imaginative insights. Even though preaching is an essential aspect of worship I shall not repeat what I published in *The Bible in the Pulpit*. It is rather the role of the Bible at the lectern that is in view just now.

Even if the Bible is read every Sunday, the fact is that the way it is read virtually precludes the more adequate canonicity of the Bible in the community. Today the only contact most Christians have with the Bible occurs on Sunday morning. This is what makes the use of the Bible in the church and in worship so
important and often so tragic. One can attend every service for years and never encounter more than a series of fragments. If a lectionary is not used, one Sunday’s reading is from Genesis, the next from Philippians, the third from Amos, and so on. The Bible is read as if it were a scrapbook, an assortment of useful passages with no design, no plot, no overarching saga or drama. Even if a lectionary is used, the three-year cycles seldom add up to sustained attention to any given book as a whole. With or without a lectionary, the Bible is fragmented and the congregation deprived of a sustained experience with its canon.

The consequences are made all the worse by the general ignorance of the Bible in the community and by the way it is usually read at the lectern. One may doubt whether any literature is read in public the way the Bible is read in most cases. I refer not only to the holy tone of voice, the mumbling of phrases, and mispronunciation of words, and the like. I refer to the fact that what is read is torn from the context and read as if it were a telephone number, intelligible in itself without any before or after. Now to be sure, announcing chapter and verse is a stylized way of announcing the context, and in some cases an invitation to read along. But if the hearers do not know their way around the Bible it communicates nothing at all; better to give the page number. To be sure, a parable or Psalm can stand alone, but sections of narratives or parts of extended arguments, as in the Epistles, have a setting in the text. A few sentences which give the setting make hearing the lection much more meaningful because the hearer gets the sense of an intelligible whole. What we usually get instead are pious words like “Hear the words of the Lord as it is written . . . ,” followed by, “May God bless this reading to our understanding”—little short of daring God to overcome what just happened. This treatment of the Bible violates what we believe and know the Bible to be, for it simply displays a fragment of a relic as if it were the shinbone of an apostle. The Bible cannot function as the canonical companion of the community when it is mistreated this way in worship.

What is needed is a sustained encounter with the entire Bible, begats and all. This requires us to surround the public hearing of the whole canon with a familiarization of it in the classroom. Only then will the church be able to come to terms with it as its canon. The coming to terms with the canon entails more than
What is needed is a sustained encounter with the entire Bible, begats and all.

Only if the community of faith deals with all of its canon can it come to an adequate understanding of what it is and what it has been. Only such an understanding allows the community to deal with both its identity and its history in a responsible way. Coming to terms with the Bible also entails allowing our perceptions and convictions to be challenged by the canon, a process in which we know ourselves accountable to it. The sheer diversity of the Bible, as well as its particular contents, elicits from the community reflection on fundamental questions because while the whole Bible is equally canonical it is not all equally binding for faith and action. By distinguishing what is authoritative for our own faith and life from what is no longer mandatory, the community comes to maturity.

Three current issues make this point concrete. One is the awareness that in many ways the Bible is a patriarchal book, and that at certain points the translations make the matter even worse. Coming to terms with this aspect of the canon should be the occasion for the community of faith to think through fundamental matters, not simply to tinker with the translations in order to make them more accurate or palatable, and certainly not simply to ventilate outrage. Another issue concerns the manifest antipathy toward the Jewish community expressed in important parts of the New Testament. Rather than issue an expurgated edition from which these passages are removed, as was done for the Fourth Gospel some years ago, it is better to leave the text as it is and to declare that these passages reveal how our forebears reacted to polarized situations and that their
reactions are just that—theirs not ours, and reactions not revelations. Thereby the community today can mature in its identity and take responsibility for its past. A third issue concerns the New Testament disinterest in matters of public policy such as the abusive Roman system of taxation, police brutality, the imperial system itself, and slavery. Nowhere does the New Testament call upon Christians to ameliorate these things, let along restructure society. To hide behind the silence of the New Testament is as irresponsible a use of the canon as it is to make John a liberation theologian or Jesus a Jewish freedom fighter. Both ways proceed on the basis that the Bible must say what we want it to say and need for it to say. Neither claims the freedom to let the past, including the canon rooted in the past, be what it actually was. Relating to the Bible as canon does not require the community to perpetuate the past but does require it to come to terms with its past as a necessary and unavoidable aspect of mature faithfulness today. Having this anthology as our canon does not settle questions but raises them in perpetuity.

We can now return to the port of entry for these remarks—namely, the role of scholarly explanation for interpretation in the community. In the first place, the process sketched is indeed a community process, one in which there is conversation and argument, not simply propaganda for points of view. That conversation in turn rests on the fact that no one is only right and that no one is immune from correction. The difference between the expert and the amateur is relativized when both are members of this community, when each is prepared to learn from the other. Moreover, the pastor's work includes developing the emotional maturity and stability which such a conversation assumes and requires. Furthermore, just as there is no risk-free historical explanation, so there is no risk-free interpretation. In interpretation we rely as much on justification by faith as we do in redemption. Finally, this view of the canon rests solidly on the historical-critical method which has exposed the ways in which the canon is rooted in the multiple cultures in which it was written. The same method has made us aware that we ourselves are no less rooted in our own culture, with its prejudices and blind spots, than the prophets of Israel or the
apostles of the church. Consequently the community of faith has a stake in the ongoing health and vitality of the historical-critical study of the Bible and the history of its interpretation. Far from being the great danger to the church and its canon, historical criticism is the essential method if the church wants to understand itself as a historical community with a historical canon bearing witness to a historical faith.

To Continue the Conversation

*Interpretation* 29 (October 1975) is devoted entirely to discussions of the canon. This issue can be ordered from Union Theological Seminary, 3401 Brook Road, Richmond, Va. 23227. The issue contains the following articles:

- David L. Dungan, "The New Testament Canon in Recent Study";
- Albert C. Sundberg, Jr., "The Bible Canon and the Christian Doctrine of Inspiration";
- James A. Sanders, "Torah and Christ";
- Friedrich Mildenberger, "The Unity, Truth and Validity of the Bible."


**Responses from Readers**

Although not a part of Keck’s concern here, for the canon to have a vital and viable place in the life of the church it is necessary to look carefully at how the canon became canon. Although the selective process used by Jewish rabbis or early church leaders in forming the canon is itself often illusory, the fact remains that selectivity played a role in the origin of the canon, and as Keck points out the whole of the Christian church is still not unified on what is canon and what is not. For example, are Psalm 151 and certain apocryphal books to be included in the canon? The author is extremely concerned about selectivity as pertains to the canon being the canon—selectivity in interpretation which assumes that certain parts of it have little or nothing relevant to say, selectivity in the reading of Scripture in worship which ignores passages vital to faith, living and historical continuity, and selectivity in historical criticism which shuns the whole for the sake of detail. Yet at the close of his article Mr. Keck affirms the selective process by averring that the community comes to maturity by “distinguishing what is authoritative for our own faith and life from what is no longer mandatory.”

The persistent problem is who decides how the Christian community comes to terms with the canon in the life of the church. Keck has given us an array of labels for such persons: experts, amateurs, amateur scholars, specialists, and “amateur” experts. There may be an element of truth in his description and use of these terms but they do not help diminish the already difficult barriers built between laity and scholars. There is a need for a common bond among laity, clergy, and all so-called specialists in the quest for the role of canon in the life of the
church and individual. It was a French physician, Jean Astruc, who laid the foundation for much of historical-critical method, especially as used in the study of the Pentateuch. Here was a layperson, a nonbiblical specialist, doing serious and diligent textual study which became formative for future generations. Nonspecialists still have a vital contribution to make to the study of Scripture and canon be they laity, clergy, or academics. I am not content to label scholars employing historical-critical methods as experts and specialists and those involved in appropriating Scripture as amateurs and amateur scholars. These labels are unnecessary and tend to be intimidating. If we have to have any at all, let us be content with specialist and nonspecialist. Serious study of Scripture and canon is the common responsibility of all.

The situation regarding the selective reading of Scripture in worship, which is done frequently as if in a vacuum, may be grave, but it is hardly as bleak as Keck describes it. I have attended numerous churches in various denominations for years where both clergy and laity have done precisely that for which he pleads, namely, they have provided “a few sentences which give the setting” which have made “hearing the lection much more meaningful because the hearer” got “the sense of an intelligible whole.” To be sure, whether using a lectionary or not this should be common practice among clergy and laity.

I wish to take issue with the following statement: “An aesthetic reading of Scripture nurtures a sense of community which is essentially gnostic, an intellectually suggestive experience possible for those who have been initiated into a precise method and a rather arcane vocabulary available to the elite. This approach does not link today’s community with its predecessors apart from the forebears in the history of research.” This is an unfortunate generalization, for it excludes art as a means of scriptural reading or interpretation, or indicts it as precipitating gnosticism in such a process. Musical, graphic, and dramatic arts, as well as visual journalism and newly developing art forms, can lead often to an actualization of a biblical story, message, or even mood in the present and hence be the vehicle of linking today’s community with its predecessors. This may be done apart from historical-critical methods or the ahistorical approaches Keck has mentioned. Pastors should
be bold to utilize the arts in quest of the church’s understanding of “itself as historical community with historical canon bearing witness to historical faith.”

The most important aspect of Keck’s article is the affirmation, “Relating to the Bible as canon does not require the community to perpetuate the past but requires it to come to terms with its past as a necessary and unavoidable aspect of mature faithfulness today.” The Bible as canon for the church is in one sense a roadmap of the past and a compass for the future. Students of Scripture, specialists and nonspecialists, should have genuine commitment to the use of all research tools and methods at their disposal in the exegesis, interpretation, and appropriation of Scripture and canon for the life of the community and individual. Nevertheless, they still will stand in awe of this book, the Bible, which often speaks to persons with shattered lives and helps them to put those lives back together again apart from historical-critical methods or a conscious attempt to employ a charismatic or ahistorical approach to scriptural interpretation. This should not diminish their commitment to careful and diligent research but rather increase it under the conviction that such a book in its entirety demands the Christian’s lifelong sustained encounter in every sphere possible. This is every pastor’s quest, and Keck has pointed most helpfully in this direction.

S T Kimbrough, Jr.
Associate professor of church music
Scarritt College, Nashville, Tennessee

To state his case, the author uses an argument that seems long, laborious, and at times not entirely clear. In reading the article, I found myself asking “What is the central thrust of this argument and what practical solution will be offered?” It would have been helpful if the writer had at the very beginning stated in a precise paragraph the thesis of the article and the exact direction of its thrust. This might have cut through much of the “fog.”

For example the statement, “An aesthetic reading of Scripture nurtures a sense of community which is essentially gnostic,” left me wondering if this necessarily follows. In what sense are the words “aesthetic” and “gnostic” here used? I believe the author is stating here that the use of Scripture must get beyond mere
beauty and piety, and both its historical context and life-situation relevance must be made clear to its hearers. Keck does not seem to regard a three-year lectionary as a solution to the problem raised. On the contrary, writing from a liturgical and lectionary tradition, I wish to state that our present three-year lectionary does in fact give sustained emphasis to each of the three Synoptic Gospels per year along with interspersed readings from the Fourth Gospel. But beyond this, the lectionary emphasis is not primarily in particular books but in themes centering about the life and revelation in Christ. The lectionary along with the seasons of the church year provide an effective and systematic emphasis on the major doctrines of the Christian faith. Keck is correct, however, in the assertion that this may appear to the congregation as something of a “scrapbook” approach. The author is also right in affirming the need for historical context in the reading of Scripture. In the Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel lessons, a central theme or thread ties these together. It is the task of the pastor or lector to make this relationship clear to the congregation. Quite often this effort is not made.

Aside from the criticisms made, the article has relevance to my own understanding of ministry in that it raises the same concern which I also raise, namely the historical context and relevance of the Scripture as canon within the believing community. I am in total agreement with the writer in that scholarly explanation, interpretation, conversation, and argument are constantly called for. It is the task of the ministry within the community to make this historical-critical study of the canon available at all times.

Rollin A. Swanson
Pastor, Ascension Lutheran Church
Kennewick, Washington

Keck’s differentiation between Scripture and canon is an interesting one. There is much that I find useful. I do think that he would have been more honest if he had described the piece as a way to make sure the historical criticism doesn’t get lost in the process of looking at the Bible spiritually.

One cannot fault his assertion that there has, from the beginning, been a strong relationship between the community
of faith and the Bible. We need only to look at the 1960s to
discover what happens to the church when it forgets to act out of
an understanding of the Bible as canon, as the basis for
struggling and acting in the world.

Keck is also correct in stating that proof-texting abounds, both
from "left and right," or "liberal and conservative." I have
discovered that such proof-texting never solves anything,
except to pit one Bible verse against another Bible verse. It
certainly does not lead to new understanding of Scripture, nor to
the acting out of the faith, both in the church and in the world.

It is, in my opinion, true that many United Methodists are
unfamiliar with the Bible as a whole entity. One advantage of
United Methodist curriculum over "nondenominational" types
is that it does include over the years a greater scope of the Bible.
The curriculum also assumes that each student, from early age
on, has the whole Bible in hand, from which to read and study.

Another advantage is that United Methodist curriculum
introduces students to the church as it has tried to interpret the
canon down through history. All "nondenominational" types of
curriculum with which I am familiar seem to assume that the
church and Christians ceased to exist between the Book of
Revelation and the present. There is no contact with the giants of
the faith as they tried to make the Bible relevant to the world and
culture in which they lived. This, I believe, tends to make the
historical and culture gap between biblical and present times all
the more difficult to deal with creatively.

When I went to one appointment, I learned that a group of
women met for Bible study and prayer one morning each week.
On my first visit to the group, I discovered that their "Bible
study" consisted of each person taking turns readings few
verses as they worked their way through the Bible, verse by
verse, chapter by chapter, book by book. My initial reaction was
one of boredom and of disdain. However, I experienced, as the
weeks went by, a discovery of richness and insight through this
"unhistorical, uncritical" study of the canon. True, the excellent
training I received in biblical studies in seminary provided some
insights to the group, but their relatively simple method of
biblical study helped all of us to come to terms with living out of
the biblical faith.

Keck does us "experts" a service by reminding us that a
combination of several ways of confronting and digesting and living with the canon is crucial to the survival of the church as Christian community.

Jean Marie Grabher
Topeka District Superintendent
Kansas East Conference
The desert Mothers and Fathers offer a word to those overwhelmed by staggering global conditions like poverty and hunger.

What is it that makes a Christian? What are the special attitudes and virtues that form Christian character in ways different from the character of others? How is this character reflected in our daily lives? These questions are pressing ones for those of us in ministry today, whether lay or ordained. Our resources for answering these questions as Methodists are the Bible, our thought about it in the light of experience, and the recorded experience of other Christians, living and dead, who have also desired most sincerely to answer these questions. In the early church, one group of Christians, the founders of monasticism, went so far in their desire to answer these questions and to live out their answers that they felt compelled to renounce altogether the ways of their mainstream culture. They formed for themselves new societies on the outskirts of the late Roman cities and towns, where they lived out their Christian principles of love and prayer to the best of their ability. Central to their principles, and to their vision of the formation of new life in Christ, was the virtue of humility. While I am not suggesting we must all withdraw from society in a similar fashion, I believe that these early ancestors in the faith offer us some help in their vision of Christian humility, in our attempts to live the Christian life today. We may harvest again what was

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sown in the desert so many years ago. In this meditation on an ancient virtue, I hope to offer to you their vision today.

How do we know what they meant when they talked about humility? Fortunately for us, these early Christians left behind them a great deal of written material—lives of the great heroes, sermons, treatises on the Christian virtues. But most important of all, they bequeathed to us several collections of short stories and sayings, whose nearest relatives, in Christian literature, are the parables of Jesus. In the following paper, I have drawn almost exclusively on one of these early collections, as well as on a sixth-century writer, Dorotheos of Gaza, who was steeped in them and used them continuously. This material, like Jesus' parables, speaks to us still with an amazing freshness. Sometimes the stories make one simple point. More often, however, they are only simple on the surface, for they present within themselves a whole view of the world, a whole Christian character by indirect suggestion. They were meant, I believe, to be memorized, turned over and over in the heart, and pondered. In the following paper I have presented many such stories; the paper itself is my own meditation on these stories themselves. I commend them to the careful attention of the reader.

Early in the fourth century, before Constantine, perhaps during the bad times of the last persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire, there grew a restlessness among Christians—a sense of the urgency of the call to the Christian life; certainly a sense of the seriousness concerning the Gospel's statement that, if one is to be a follower of Jesus, then one must be perfect, as Jesus' own Father in heaven is perfect. The conviction grew among many men and women that while it is not theoretically impossible to be a Christian and live an ordinary life in the world, for all practical purposes, only the exceptional person could avoid the temptation to adopt the world's values, if that person chose to try to make a go of it on the world's terms. And thus it happened that about A.D. 269 Antony, the heir and only son of Egyptian farmers, heard the story of the rich young ruler read in church, and responded to it as a call to him. By about 285 or so, he had sold his family property, put his younger sister in the care of a group of spinster ladies, received instruction on living a life of Christian asceticism and discipline from an old
man who lived near his little town, and moved out into the
desert to take up an alternative Christian life-style—that of the
first Christian monk.¹

Antony was not alone; he was the first of thousands of men
and women of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries who made
the same move—people who abandoned life in the cities, towns,
and countryside of the Roman Empire to take up a new,
generally communal life in the deserts and wildernesses of
Egypt and Palestine and Syria. But Antony and his successors
were not world-hating ascetics who chose to work out their own
salvation by themselves with no regard to others. These early
monks and nuns were people who hated neither the world nor
themselves, and they did not hate one another. Quite the
contrary: Dorotheos of Gaza, a sixth-century monk, writing two
centuries after Antony, explains very clearly what they were
about by means of a striking analogy:²

Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the
outline of a circle. The center point is the same distance from any point
on the circumference. . . . Let us suppose that this circle is the world
and that God himself in the center. The straight lines drawn from the
circumference to the center are the lives of human beings. . . . Let us
assume for the sake of the analogy that to move toward God, then,
human beings move from the circumference along the various radii of
the circle to its center. But at the same time, the closer they are to God,
the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one
another, the closer they become to God.

These were men and women who aspired to love greatly.
They saw in the values of their mainstream culture the gradual
destruction of the grounds for human relations. They saw a
culture characterized by a continual jostling for power, by the
need to dominate, by the desire for instant gratification in place
of concern for the long-term well-being of others, and by the
abandonment of love. In its place they saw the ever-present
need to be right all the time; the struggle to feed those appetites
that only seem to grow greater as they are satisfied—appetites
for money, prestige, food, not to mention the other pleasures of
nature; and they say that all of these, some way or another, came
out of the hides of their neighbors, especially the poor.

These early Christians were people caught in the grip of the
vision of what it might really mean to love God with all their hearts and minds and souls and their neighbor as themselves, and this is what they sought in the desert, living together and struggling together and loving together: they longed for and expected for themselves the establishment of nothing less than the new creation, the recreation within themselves of the image of God, lost in Adam and Eve, and made not only visible again, but also available to human beings in Jesus Christ, the son of God. And so they took up their lives of renunciation of property, family ties, social position, claims on the future. They prayed and said the Psalms, performed vigils and fasts, wove baskets or made ropes, and learned to live truly and lovingly with God and one another. According to their own literature, central to this way of life was the adoption and cultivation of the fundamental Christian attitude, humility.

When Abba Macarius was returning from the marsh to his cell one day carrying some palm leaves, he met the devil on the road with a scythe. The devil struck at him as much as he pleased, but in vain, and he said to him, "What is your power, Macarius, that makes me powerless against you? All that you do, I do, too; you fast, so do I; you keep vigil, and I do not sleep at all; only in one thing do you beat me." Abba Macarius asked what that was, and the Devil answered, "Your humility. Because of that I can do nothing against you."

Anyone could fast or renounce what they loved in order to gain what they wanted more: the Christian was not marked by what the Christian gave up—the devil himself is good at renunciation. For these early folk, the mark of the Christian was not renunciation, or for that matter, heroic feats of virtue.

Abba Antony said, "I saw all the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world, and I said, groaning, 'What can get me through such snares?' Then I heard a voice saying to me, 'Humility.'"

Instead, it was humility, the basic attitude of heart that was completely at odds with the fallen world in which the monk lived: humility, which is inexplicable in the stability and security and courage it grants its possessor.
Abba Antony said, “I saw all the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world, and I said, groaning, ‘What can get me through such snares?’ Then I heard a voice saying to me, “Humility.”

It was humility that made these ancient Christians able with the help of God’s grace to take on the task of the transformation of the old creation into the new.

But what was this humility, this world-transforming attitude of heart, so carefully cultivated by the monks? Most basically, it was the living out of the conviction that all human beings, every man, woman, and child, are creatures of God. Human creatures are limited by their physical conditions, their emotional needs, and their proneness to sin; but as creatures of God, they are each one loved by God in their frailty and aided continually by God in the struggle to love God in return, loving at the same time the neighbor as oneself. Humility is the recognition that whatever acts of kindness or virtue a person performs, whatever strength or happiness one has, one’s ability to work well and to love well—all these are possible because God gives them to his creatures as his gifts. Out of this basic attitude of heart flows a whole way of Christian living, and, paradoxically, humility becomes not only the attitude out of which this way of life comes, but also the means by which such living becomes possible.

To begin with, nobody took up the life of the monk or nun without knowing that such a life would entail a life-long process of inner discipline, prayer, and work. No one expected to love God and the neighbor as the self the first day out in the desert: this love was not to follow immediately upon renunciation of the world. Nevertheless, it was an enormous temptation to the beginner to see herself or himself as a hero, confronted with heroic-sized tasks to perform in order to reach that goal of love. Unfortunately, being human, and suffering from human frailty, that same beginner would eventually fail; he would pick a fight with a brother, fall asleep during an all-night vigil, eat during a fast, perhaps even follow a girl home from the market. Then would come the inevitable, soul-destroying despair. Only humility was a potent weapon against this despair that followed upon failed tasks. Beginners had to learn to be humble, that is, to abandon the heroic image of the self and learn to believe that all
human beings, themselves included, are weak and vulnerable. They must learn instead to take up appropriate tasks, and appropriate tasks for weak and vulnerable human beings are ones that can be completed. They must learn to accept it as true that all tasks contribute to the final goal, but the successful ones are small and humble. This is what the story of Antony and the snares is about. Antony groans, and he wonders how on earth he can get through such a minefield. By humility, says the voice: think small; plan for your frailty. Dorotheos of Gaza, a delightful monk and teacher of the sixth century, whom we have already met, makes this point much less enigmatically:

Suppose there are two ladders, one going upwards to heaven, and the other leading down to hell. You are standing on the earth between the two ladders. You would not reason it all out and say "how can I fly from the earth and be once and for all on the top of the ladder?" This is impossible and God does not ask it of us, but he does ask that we meanwhile keep from going downwards and do not harm our neighbor nor offend him . . . nor demean him. And so at last we begin to do a little good and are of help to him in speech, and bear with him, and if he needs something give it him freely, so we go up one rung at a time until finally, with God's help, we reach the top of the ladder. For through this repeated coming to your neighbor's rescue, you come to long for what is advantageous for him as well as advantageous for yourself . . . " This is 'to love your neighbor as yourself.' If we seek we shall find; and if we ask God, he will enlighten us.

If one wished to learn to love one's neighbor, one started small, one began by trying not to do him or her any positive harm, one did not gossip, and one offered small help. But if one remembered the goal of love and continued to work at it, God would help in the day-to-day struggle, and finally would grant the love one sought—but certainly not as a reward for heroic effort, or heroic virtue, either.

Now part of this process of giving up the heroic was learning to let go of the feeling that, unless one's action could be totally free of self-interest, there was no point in doing it because it would be somehow tainted and sinful. To worry about one's purity, said the teachers to their students, was to confuse the means, that is, a life of Christian discipline, with the end, the life of love:

A brother said to Abba Poeman, "If I give my brother a little bread or something else, the demons tarnish these gifts, saying it was only done
The old man said to him, “Even if it is out of desire for praise, we must give the brother what he needs.” He told the following parable: “Two farmers lived in the same town; one of them sowed and reaped a small and poor crop, while the other, who did not even bother to sow reaped absolutely nothing. If a famine comes upon them, which of the two will find something to live on?” The brother replied, “The one who reaped the small poor crop.” The old man said to him, “So it is for us; we sow a little poor grain, so that we will not die of hunger.”

A humble heart would remember that to remain above reproach is not the fundamental task of the Christian. Some of the stories illustrating this point are very funny: one brother, for example, regarded as too rigid by his teacher, is set to stealing from his companions by his teacher, who afterwards stealthily returns what he has stolen in the middle of the night. But others are shocking to us—as they would have been to our own ancient counterparts:

Abba Alonius said to Abba Agathon: “Suppose two men committed murder in your presence and one of them fled to your cell. When the police, coming in search of him, ask you, ‘Is the murderer with you?’ Unless you lie, you hand him over to execution.”

This story illustrates the monk in the act of sinning: not the sinning the modern Christian would see, harboring a murderer, an act which, if we committed it, would make us accessories to a crime, but rather, the sin of lying. All sin is sin and stands in need of repentance and forgiveness, no matter how justifiable. If the means justifies the end, we are still responsible for the evil of the means. Fortunately, humility equipped the brother or sister to deal with this evil through repentance, for the humble heart accepted not only its own human frailty, it also accepted it as a fact that God loves creatures and will not reject them, even damaged by sin:

A soldier asked Abba Mios if God accepted repentance. After the old man had taught him many things he said, “Tell me my dear friend, if your cloak is torn, do you throw it away?” He replied, “No, I mend it and use it again.” The old man said to him, “If you are so careful about your cloak will not God be equally careful about His creatures?”

Humility had no self-image to maintain. It did not, out of embarrassment, hide its sins from itself or others. It knew
already that human beings are prone to sin, and it was ever watchful to escape it. But if sin occurred, there was no temptation to deny it, no temptation to beat the breast melodramatically and say, "How could I have done such a thing?" For the answer was well-known, already. "I did it because I, too, being a creature, am subject to sin. I was not watchful enough." Pervasive guilt, self-loathing, despair over committed sin—these were not problems to those involved in the spiritual life.

A brother said to Abba Poemen, "If I fall into a shameful sin my conscience devours me saying, 'Why have you fallen?' " The old man said to him, "At the moment a person goes astray, if that person says, 'I have sinned,' immediately the sin ceases."

Furthermore, even if that person were blamed for a sin actually committed by someone else, there was no self-righteous anger. Rather, it was accepted as fact that there had been other, real sins actually committed for which punishment had never been meted out. If one could not repent of the sin for which one was accused, one could always repent of others, and thus go on one's way with cheerfulness. Our friend Dorotheos asks his readers:

Now do you perceive the power of lowliness?... In point of fact, there is nothing more powerful than lowliness. If a painful experience comes to a humble man, straightway he goes against himself, straightway he accuses himself as the one worthy of punishment, and he does not set about accusing anyone or putting the blame on anyone else. For the rest, he goes on his way untroubled, undepressed, in complete peace of mind.

The recognition of one's own continuing proneness to sin was a powerful component in the humility of the desert Fathers and Mothers. It also provided the major weapon in their arsenal against the slipperiest, most pervasive, and dangerous temptation they could commit in a way of life that took as its goal the love of neighbor as the self. That temptation was to pass judgment on the actions and life of the neighbor. Very nearly the most difficult of all sins to deal with, says Dorotheos, is judging our neighbor.

That Pharisee who was praying and giving thanks to God for his [own] good works was not lying but speaking the truth, and he was not
condemned for that. For we must give thanks to God when we are worthy to do something good, as he is then working with us and helping us. Because of this he was not condemned, as I said not even because he said, "I am not like other men", but . . . because he said, "I am not like this tax-collector". It was then that he made a judgment. He condemned a person and the dispositions of his soul—to put it shortly, his whole life. Therefore the tax collector, rather than the Pharisee, went away justified.

The Pharisee went away unjustified, not because he was pleased with his own righteousness, but rather because he looked with contempt on a particular tax collector's very being, because of his sin. And the Pharisee in the story would have been peculiarly representative of the brother or sister, whose life was characterized by its strict Christian discipline:

Everyone of us is very careful, on every occasion, to throw the blame on his brother and to strike him down with its weight. Everyone of us is negligent and keeps none of the commandments, and we demand in return that our neighbors keep them all.

But the Gospel was clear:

Abba Theodore said . . . "Do not judge the fornicator, for you yourself would then transgress the law just as much yourself. He who said 'do not fornicate' also said, 'do not judge.'"

No one can judge another, for no one but God knows why or how people come to act as they do. What comes easily to one comes with difficulty to another, and only God can weigh all things even in such a case as that of a mass murderer, for a person can know nothing of the judgments of God. How do you know how much and how well he fought against it, how much blood he sweated before he did it? Perhaps so little fault can be found in him that God can look on his action as if it were just, for God looks on his labor and all the struggle he had before he did it, and has pity on him . . . you may well know about the sin, but you do not know about the repentance.

To be humble is to identify with the sinner, and rather than gloat over the fall of anyone, when you hear of it, say "oh Lord, him today, me tomorrow!" The story is told of the black monk, Abba Moses: 17
A brother at Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, "Come, for everyone is waiting for you." So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug filled with water and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, "What is this, Father?" The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another." When they heard that, they said no more to the brother, but forgave him.

Moses himself, who was noted for his kindness and his generous disposition, had, in his own former life, been a robber. But humility went even further than this: one must not simply refuse to judge another; one must also protect the sinner from the consequences of the sin. If one remembers the murder committed in the presence of the brother, one also recalls that he was told to conceal the murderer from the police. In a less extreme case, this story was told of Abba Ammonas:

Abba Ammonas came one day to eat in a place where there was a monk of evil repute. Now it happened that a woman came and entered the cell of the brother of evil reputation. The dwellers of that place, having learned this, were troubled and gathered together to chase the brother from his cell. Knowing that Bishop Ammonas was in the place, they asked him to join them. When the brother in question learned this, he hid the woman in a large cask. The crowd of monks came to the place. Now Abba Ammonas saw the position clearly, but for the sake of God he kept the secret; he entered, seated himself on the cask, and when they had searched everywhere without finding the woman, Abba Ammonas said, "What is this? May God forgive you for this accusation!" After praying, he made everyone go out, then taking the brother by the hand he said, "Brother, be on your guard." With these words, he withdrew.

Abba Poemen was asked, "If I see my brother committing a sin, is it right to conceal it?"

The old man said to him, "At the very moment when we hide our brother's fault, God hides our own, and at the moment when we reveal our brother's fault, God reveals ours, too."

And of Macarius the Great, whom we met coming home from cutting reeds, in his conversation with the devil, it was said that.
he had become a god upon earth, because just as God protects the world, so did he cover the faults which he saw, as though he did not see them.

The men and women we meet in these stories and sayings are long since dead, and their dust is scattered over the deserts of the Near East. But these images of humility still speak to our hearts with a combination of whimsy and urgency.

What are these images really about? Much of what they depict seems impossible, even outrageous to the modern Christian, especially in ministry. How can we refrain from passing judgment? Not to look with scorn on my neighbor on the next block is one thing: I can manage that, if I feel I must. But not to feel Christian self-righteousness toward people in government who appear to be willing to break up homes, withhold food from children, and act with callousness toward the helpless is nearly beyond me. What about a man who murders children? The virtue of humility is countercultural. It was countercultural then, just as it is now. It wreaks havoc with all individualistic values: it is not a "live and let live" attitude: it does not say, "it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere." It does not believe that Christian values are subjective, each person negotiating his or her own values with God in private. It is stern and difficult. It calls for the renunciation of all deep attachments to what the world holds dear: goods, social advancement, the satisfaction of the appetites at the expense of others, the right to dominate others in any personal relationship. Even in a watered-down version this renunciation comes hard: try taking responsibility for the way you provoke certain kinds of behavior in the people around you just for one day. Try repenting of a particular sin as soon as you commit it, and then put it out of your mind. Try giving up the luxury of feeling guilty, rather than repenting. These are the easy parts of humility.

But if humility is hard, it is also powerful. Humility is not a synonym for passivity. Humility has to do with taking radical responsibility for the things that happen in life: Abba John the dwarf said, "Who sold Joseph into Egypt?" A brother replied, saying, "It was his brothers." No! The old man said to him, "It was his humility, because he could have said, I am their brother, and have objected, but because he kept silent, he sold himself by his humility. It is also his humility which set him up as chief in Egypt."
Make no mistake: these desert Fathers and Mothers were not simply gentle eccentrics living out solitary lives in isolation from the rest of the world. They always seemed to be in the thick of things. They ruled Egypt, like Joseph. Their influence was awe-inspiring. Augustine of Hippo, for example, heard an account of the life of Antony and other stories of these same men and women we have just met from his friend Ponticianus, who was a high official in the emperor’s court, and his conversion so long delayed and so painfully come to, was thrust upon him. These people electrified their age. Crowds of people flocked to them for advice, not just on religious matters, but in all matters regarding human relationships and even property, and the crowds included emperors, bishops, and generals, as well as common people. The brightness of the light of their influence illumined the hearts and ideas and actions of Christians all over the empire.

Our own hearts and ideals and actions are greatly in need of such an illumination. Clergy and laity alike need to rethink what we want and how we want to get it. Accommodation to society even for a big church like ours can only go so far. Christian values cannot be the values of the world. Insofar as we have accommodated ourselves to our culture, we have been only partially successful in our own desire to love God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. Needless to say, now is a time when we are actually losing ground in accomplishment of that desire. Whatever we try, like Macarius, the devil can beat us at our own game. Now is the time to take up the weapon the devil doesn’t have.

There are more than fifteen hundred homeless men and women in Atlanta, Georgia, each winter night. Unless they are
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provided with shelter, even if it drops to zero, most will sleep on the street. To shelter this many people is a heroic task. In fact, it is so overwhelming, that one can only turn away from it in horror. The very idea drives us to despair. The task is too large, the world too evil, the bureaucracy too great, and God too unfeeling. But humility does not accept this judgment, having abandoned the idea of heroic tasks to be performed by heroic Christians. Humility says, “Our church basement can shelter ten people; ten people is not many, but there will be ten human beings who will not freeze on the streets.” Humility tells us not that ten is enough, but that ten is a start. Humility does not mind if it looks silly. It does what it can.

Humility keeps hold of its goals— to love the neighbor, rather than to look good in the eyes of God or humanity, or self.

Humility keeps hold of its goals— to love the neighbor, rather than to look good in the eyes of God or humanity, or self. Humility is tough, and in spite of what a casual look might suggest, its claim is that it is realistic. It knows that force will not be effective against violence, and if it is not effective against it, then force is not realistic, either: 24

They said of Abba Macarius the Egyptian that one day he went up from Scetis to the mountain of Nitria. As he came up to the place, he told his disciple to go on ahead. . . . There, the disciple met a priest of the Pagans. The brother shouted after him, saying, “Oh, oh, devil, where are you off to?” The priest turned back and beat him up, and left him half dead. Then, picking up his stick, the Pagan fled. When that Pagan had gone a little further, Abba Macarius met him, running, and said to him, “Greetings, greetings, you tired man!” Absolutely astonished, the other came up to him and said, “What good do you see in me, that you greet me this way?” The old man said to him, “I have seen you wearing yourself out without knowing you are wearing yourself out in vain.” . . . The other said to him, “I have been touched by your greeting, and I realize you are on God’s side. . . . I will not let you go until you have made me a monk.” Through him, many Pagans became Christians. So Abba Macarius said, “One evil word makes even the good evil, while one good word makes even the evil good.”

Part of the toughness and realism of humility is its conviction that every one of us, being human, is prone to sin; we suffer
congenitally from a weakness in the face of temptation, and a lack of purity of motives. This means we must watch ourselves and our motives at all times. We must not allow ourselves to feel that we have risen above temptation, nor are we shocked when we meet sin in ourselves or in the people we work with. Good people, and good churches, for that matter, are prone to sin, as well as those we label bad. When humility meets sin in these places, it goes solidly on. It does not abandon its commitments; it does not indulge itself in the luxury of disillusionment. It does not despair, nor does it wallow in “feeling guilty.” It keeps on going, for the realism of humility also grants it tenaciousness.

Finally, humility is gentle in a jagged world. It refuses to bully, to exercise psychological dominion over others. It calls for the renunciation of the right to terrorize others by any means—at a personal level, or a national level. It has given up the swaggering stance of the hero. Instead, humility covers the sins of the world, like Abba Macarius, who was said to be, in this respect, like God himself. God who is the source of all humility. We would do well for ourselves in our modern struggle to answer those questions with which this paper began, in our attempt to form Christian character, if we could recover even a fraction of the sense and centrality of humility in the Christian life.

NOTES

1. Life of St. Antony, 1-4. For a good English translation, see Athanasius, The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus, translated by Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). For a good history of early monasticism see The Desert A City, by Denys Paget (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966). In the following notes, I have assumed that the reader is not a specialist in the early church, and I have directed him or her to material available in English translations. In all cases, the Greek and Latin texts are readily available to the scholar.


3. For the classic statement of the hope of the Christian in the fourth century, see Athanasius, On the Incarnation.

4. There are many collections of the Sayings of the Fathers which have survived from the early church, in Greek, Latin, and Syriac. The two most readily available translations of the collections in English include The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection, translated by Benedicta Ward SLG (London: A. R. Mowbray and Co.), 1975; a translation of a Greek collection; and “The Sayings of the Fathers” in Western Asceticism, selected translations by Owen Chadwick in the Library of Christian Classics Series of a Latin translation of a lost Greek original (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958). This story is from Ward, Mac. 11, pp. 109-10. It is also found in the Latin collection translated by Chadwick, Part XV, 26, p. 163. For another interesting and edifying collection of stories and sayings also available in English, see Palladius’ Lausiac History, Robert Meyer, translator (New York: Newman Press), vol. 34, Ancient Christian Writers, 1904. The first two of these volumes work well for discussion with lay or clergy classes. There is also...
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a much shorter book of excerpts, also well worth using with lay people, by Helen Waddell, The Desert Fathers (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1972). Dorotheos is also particularly accessible to the modern Protestant reader.

10. Ward, Poemen 95, p. 152. In this collection there are more than two hundred sayings of Abba Poemen, who is certainly one of the most attractive of all these Fathers; his words and actions are marked by deep love and compassion for all with whom he came in contact. Abba Poemen also appears throughout the Latin collection in Chadwick.
12. P. 152.
17. Ward, Moses, 2, p. 117.
26. The anonymous author of the fourth-century Macarian Homilies expresses it well: “Just as neither the ages above nor the ages below can grasp the greatness of God and his incomprehensibilities, so neither the worlds above, nor the worlds here on earth can understand the humility of God, and how he renders himself little to the humble and small. Just as his greatness is incomprehensible, so also is his humility.” (George A. Maloney, translator, Intoxicated with God: The Fifty Spiritual Homilies of Macarius, Homily, 32, p. 180).

Responses from Readers

In spite of all the signs of a so-called “return to religion,” there is a familiar ring to Roberta Bondi’s description of the fourth century. Against a culture dominated by those values, whether in the fourth century or the twentieth, the call for humility comes like a breath of fresh air.

What is there about the Christian life that is different, that marks our life-style as distinctive from the culture around us? Bondi suggests that humility is the key to that distinct life-style and leads us through some very clear understandings of what humility means in the Christian life. In the process she reminds us of the continued relevance of the Fathers and Mothers of the desert for the spiritual life.
One of the real struggles for any minister is the desire for the heroic. We want to move from center stage at seminary graduation to center stage in the community where we serve, in the annual conference, and the total life of the church. Bondi reminds us that humility begins with the giving up of the heroic, with the living out day-to-day of the small things which make up a life and lead us on to perfection. She points out the practical implications of humility in such things as recognizing and living with our own sin and forgiveness, judging others, dealing with the sin of others. All this is countercultural, as she admits. Yet is it not precisely on this issue that we want guidance—how am I, as a Christian, different in my life-style from the life-styles of the secular world? The answer is that a life of love-humility is one means which leads us to that end.

John O. Gooch  
Pastor, United Methodist Church of Green Trails  
Chesterfield, Missouri

The only thing more astonishing than the humility of the desert Fathers is the wholesale abandonment of it by the American clergy. Nothing is more emphasized in the life of our Lord than his humility. Paul thinks through the humility of Jesus theologically and sees that the way in which God works out our salvation is inseparable from the salvation that he works out. In other words, humility is not merely an attractive trait in Jesus, it is the technology of atonement. Most of the people whom we admire out of our past are strongly marked by humility. But in the present and among our contemporaries it is treated as a bizarre eccentricity among those who happen to have a taste for such things.

Newman complained more than a hundred years ago that when we use the word humility we ordinarily mean “a stooping forward unattended with the slightest effort to leave by a single inch the seat in which we are so firmly established. It is an act of a superior, who protests to himself while he commits it that he is superior still, and that he is doing nothing else but an act of grace towards those on whose level, in theory, he is placing himself.”

I can think of no single thing that would give the leadership of the church more credibility in a secularized society than the pursuit of humility. Nor anything less likely to happen. Many
projects that promise effectiveness to our leadership are pressed upon us by friends and leaders. We are led off to assertiveness-training workshops and enrolled in management-by-objective seminars. We are bombarded with techniques by which we can make an impact on society and get the attention of the sleepers in the pews. Nearly all of these proposals on examination turn out to be appeals, in ways subtle or crass, to pride. Why doesn’t anyone consistently badger us to attend to what all the masters of the spiritual life have agreed is the most difficult and most necessary quality in ministry?

At least, again, we have the evidence before us. Immersed as we are in a culture that completely misunderstands humility and surrounded by parishioners who are decidedly uncomfortable with it, I need all the help I can get to know what it looks like in action, and to urge its cultivation.

Eugene H. Peterson
Pastor, Christ Our King Presbyterian Church
Bel Air, Maryland

Roberta Bondi asks, “What is it that makes a Christian?” She is asking a bedrock question, one that cannot be ignored. She asks the question in a way that addresses both clergy and laity.

I found Bondi’s spiritual exercise quite helpful precisely because she didn’t let me wallow in guilt feelings. She didn’t treat humility as an archaic medieval word—like “chively.” She celebrated the contemporary toughness of humility in an image-conscious, success-oriented world—and church.

But I have this strange aftertaste. How do I translate humility into my workday? What does it do to ministry by objective? How does it relate to the latest church growth conference? Dare we allow humility (do not judge) to enter the debate on homosexuality? What course does humility take in coming episcopal elections? How does it relate to the power politics between the Vatican and Poland?

Humility teaches me that I cannot ignore these questions. But it also tells me that I must live in the midst of their ambiguities—and live on behalf of an unambiguous Christ.

William B. Oden
Pastor, First United Methodist Church
Enid, Oklahoma
CURING WHAT AILS
GENERAL CONFERENCE

JEAN CAFFEY LYLES

Playing "what's wrong with General Conference" is everybody's game, but a journalist who knows how other denominations conduct their business has a few tips for United Methodists.

When Dr. Kenneth Greet, the top official of British Methodism, visited his American colleagues at the United Methodist Church's 1980 General Conference in Indianapolis, he found the gathering "ankle deep in democratic sludge." Toward the end of the eleven-day session of the UMC's quadrennial decision-making body, the "democratic sludge" got even deeper; to change the metaphor, the 1,000 delegates all but suffocated under the avalanche of legislative proposals—which included the record number of 20,000 petitions from individuals, local churches, annual conferences and other units of the denomination. J. Richard Peck described the overload of business in Newscope:

Taking every legislative shortcut imaginable, General Conference raced its way through 1,898 specific pieces of legislation to a 1 A.M. closing on April 25.

Veteran delegates took action early in the ten-day session to expedite matters. Time limits for arguments were reduced from three minutes to two minutes to one minute. Legislative proposals passed unanimously by committees were hustled through. Meal times were shortened. But by the final day, delegates knew that even more shortcuts were needed. Finally, only one amendment was permitted for every piece of

Jean Caffey Lyles is associate editor of Christian Century and is well-known for her astute reporting of ecclesiastical conferences.
proposed legislation, points of order were bypassed, and courtesies were abbreviated. Exhausted delegates felt there should be a better way of doing business, but few wanted to give up the right of every individual church member to petition the legislative body.

Playing "what's wrong with general conference" is one of the great indoor pastimes in United Methodism's connectional culture. Any number can play, and the game is always in season, though it is most popular in the weeks immediately following a General Conference, when frustration is at its highest point over the real or perceived failures of the system to function in the best interests of the church. Qualified players are those who have survived at least one of these impressive and exhausting gatherings in its entirety. One can be regarded as having won a round when one's critique is taken seriously in high places and when some element of one's proposed reforms of the system is adopted.

My particular vantage point for presuming to offer a critique of General Conference is that of a journalist who attends not only the United Methodist meetings, but also the general conventions, assemblies, or synods of a number of other Protestant denominations—each of which has its distinctive quirks as well as certain similarities to all the others. My comments and suggestions are based not on extensive research, study, and statistics, but rather on the obvious elements that quickly become apparent to a working journalist or to any other visitor who observes closely the workings of a General Conference. I did interview several General Conference experts, and I found especially useful Alan K. Waltz's "The 1980 General Conference: An Evaluation" (research information bulletin 82-1, GCOM, 1982).

The descriptions of the 1980 General Conference at the beginning of this essay suggest some of the most common problems cited by many critics in regard to the legislating process. I will return to them shortly, and mention others; first, it might be well to say something about the purposes of General Conference. The glossary of the 1980 Book of Discipline informs us that General Conference is...
than constitutional amendments, which also require a vote of all the members of all the Annual Conferences. It is composed of elected lay and ministerial members, in equal numbers, from all the Annual Conferences.

That is GC's official purpose. It should be evident to anyone who has spent much time hanging around these conferences, however, that these gatherings have several other important purposes that do not necessarily show up in the official documents. General Conference is a "family reunion," a gathering of the connectional family, a time for joyously sharing with friends and colleagues from across the church. It is the church gathered for spiritual renewal, for "rallying the troops" on a worldwide basis. It is an educational event, enabling delegates and others to become better informed about the work of various general agencies and to learn more about the issues involved in questions of church and public policy. It is where the local church meets the general church—any church member or group in the local church can petition the conference on any subject and, at least in theory, has an opportunity to affect the direction taken by the church at large. It is a place where new leadership for the church surfaces, a moment for addressing the state of the church, an occasion for projecting to the public an image of United Methodism, and above all, a spectacle, a glorious cast-of-thousands event, the best free entertainment in town for eleven days, an exhausting drama-comedy-tragedy-farce, better than an old-time revival camp meeting, the Barnum and Bailey Circus, Star Wars, the Lincoln-Douglass debates, a Sunday school Christmas pageant, and the Texas Legislature all rolled into one. That is an exaggeration, but only a slight one.

Before suggesting that the whole process of General Conference may have certain flaws that need fixing, it is only fair to point out some of the things that United Methodists are doing right.

1. The United Methodists who go to General Conference tend to operate at a fairly sophisticated level of competence. Their adeptness with Robert's Rules of Order probably can be attributed to their experience at annual conference level. In recent years reports and proposals from general agencies have been supplied to delegates well in advance; these delegates come well
The system somehow succeeds in handling an enormous mass of legislation.

2. The system somehow succeeds in handling an enormous mass of legislation. It is probably only through a practical device called the "consent calendar" that this has been possible in recent years. (Pieces of legislation passed unanimously in committee are dealt with in a package motion on the floor, excepting only those items which anyone calls for removing from the batch for separate consideration.)

3. The printed Daily Christian Advocate, though expensive to produce, is a wonderful resource, quite superior in every way to the manner in which paperwork is handled in other denominational conventions. The DCA includes preliminary reports, a listing of petitions by title (with as many as 20,000, printing each in full is no longer practical), a numbered listing of legislative committee reports ready for floor action, daily news and photos of the conference and —most amazing of all—a daily verbatim transcript of every word uttered in plenary legislative debates for the preceding day. (In addition to its more immediate uses, it is a marvelous tool for historians.)

4. The presiding officers—bishops—are selected by a committee. They are chosen for their abilities, and on the whole do an excellent job. The bishops with the highest reputations as skilled parliamentarians and presiders are given the longest, most difficult sessions and the sessions where volatile issues are scheduled for debate. At least, that is the intention. It is a very different situation from that in denominations that choose a presiding officer for symbolic or political reasons, without reference to his or her proven abilities and experience in shepherding a large, unruly assembly through an almost impenetrable thicket of legislation.

5. In recent conferences there has been a sincere effort to impart a more "inclusive" flavor to the proceedings—with more
women and minorities involved in committee leadership, and
more minority and overseas bishops chosen for preaching
duties.

6. The General Conference is a well-planned event. A local
committee, a convention manager, a Commission on the
General Conference, a rules committee, and several other
entities are working years in advance to plan every detail and
ensure that the machinery runs smoothly.

Turning to General Conference's problems, let me first make
some general observations:

• General Conference is expensive, and the cost is rising. The
1980 meeting in Indianapolis cost $1.6 million; the 1984 session
in Baltimore is pegged at $2 million.
• At the same time, the volume of legislation has increased to
the point where the integrity of the democratic process is
threatened.
• The frustration level rises dangerously when United
Methodists feel that their voices have not been heard by their
decision-makers, or when they perceive manipulation or
"unfairness" in the process.
• Some customs associated with General Conference carry a
weight of symbolism that may either reflect or clash with certain
values and principles the church claims to uphold.
• Wise stewardship demands that the General Conference
make the best use of its human resources—namely, its leaders.

First, let us ask: Can the expense of GC be reduced, or at least
held to its present level? Some efforts are already being made.
The Daily Christian Advocate costs about $150 a page to produce
on-site; 1984 plans are to reduce the number of pages devoted to
the verbatim of proceedings by printing only legislative debate
and editing out material that relates to courtesies, worship, and
other nonlegislative matter. One can conceive that in the future
this "congressional record" of Methodism may become a luxury
the church can no longer afford, though its elimination would be
a great loss. Costs could be reduced somewhat by publishing the
verbatim transcript pages back in Nashville afterward, rather
than providing it to delegates the following morning, as it is
done now. According to DCA editor Roger Burgess, the cost per
page to produce it "back home" is only $80.
It is impractical to suggest saving money by meeting for a shorter number of days, or meeting less often than quadrennially. The press of business is too great. As it is, the General Conference meets less often than several other major Protestant governing bodies (Episcopalians meet triennially; United Church of Christ, Disciples, and major Lutheran bodies biennially; Presbyterians and Southern Baptists annually).

By drastically cutting time now devoted to worship, courtesies, and special presentations, and by working all day and evening on both Saturday and Sunday, the conference could chop a couple of days off its session—but few would advise such a course. The other elements—including time for rest—are important to the event.

The suggestion of saving money by meeting on a university campus has occasionally been raised. Such a meeting would have to take place in summer rather than spring. Church convention managers who have investigated that possibility report that it is almost impossible to find a campus with adequate meeting, sleeping, and eating facilities for a major church convention. (In addition to 1,000 delegates, there are bishops, agency staff people, alternate delegates, volunteers, visitors, spouses, etc.—a crowd of more than 5,000.) Large cities with modern convention centers and ample hotel space have proved to be the most workable sites.

Meeting in a central location near the population centers of United Methodism would help hold air travel costs down. But it would interfere with the long-accepted custom of rotating meetings through each of the five jurisdictions. Within a given jurisdiction, it is possible to choose the cheapest of several options and to negotiate for the best prices. For example, Indianapolis has a better supply of moderately priced hotel rooms near a convention center than Chicago does. The union labor costs in cities also affect the price of conventions.

The Discipline calls for a General Conference that has from 600 to 1,000 delegates. Cutting the number of delegates to 600 would save a substantial amount. The leaner legislative body would also be more efficient, and a larger percentage of delegates would be able to participate actively in plenary debate. But GC delegates are unlikely to vote for a reduction: they would be reducing their own chances for election in the next
The overload of petitions is the GC's most serious problem, and the key place where reform is needed.

Reducing the per diem allowance for delegates is another possible measure. What would be the effect? More triple occupancies of hotel rooms? More hot dog lunches and fewer steak dinners? Mostly it would mean asking delegates themselves to shoulder more of the burden of GC expense. Some would be able to make that sacrifice; others would not. Do we want to discourage less affluent persons from serving as delegates? One hopes not. It is in the church's interest to provide a certain degree of comfort and quality in lodging and meals so that delegates will have the energy and morale to maintain the exhausting pace and do the best job possible.

It appears then that it will be difficult to reduce costs (or even to hold them down, in light of rising air fares and hotel room rates) unless the church is willing to sacrifice some of its present practices that are firmly established.

Because of the high costs of meeting, General Conference cannot address its work overload by meeting more frequently, or meeting for more than ten or eleven days. But the volume of legislation needs to be reduced, or dealt with more efficiently.
1,350 petitions. What if 100 local churches did the same? Interestingly, the phenomenal increase in petition-writing in recent GCs appears to be largely a result of a campaign by the Good News caucus to encourage petitioning on certain subjects. The large number of identical and similar petitions on controversial topics (homosexuality, abortion) suggests that petitions are no longer a way to get new ideas considered, but a kind of all-church referendum on selected issues. If the Church and Society Committee has three bushel baskets full of petitions asking that the church do thus-and-so, the committee will (so the reasoning goes) conclude that here indeed is the consensus of the grass-roots church. But since petition-writers are not a cross-section of the denomination, one cannot draw that conclusion. The Good News strategy has succeeded in subverting a useful process of the church and making it unworkable. Perhaps a concerted campaign by some church agency is needed to persuade potential petition writers not to clog the arteries of General Conference by sending in petitions that duplicate proposals already made.

One possible way of reducing the duplication and eliminating the frivolous petitions is to require individuals or caucus groups to funnel their proposals through the screening and refining process of a charge conference, a district conference, or an annual conference. A petition that does not survive the scrutiny of one of these bodies would probably not make it at General Conference either. This change in procedure would, of course, increase the workload of those other bodies. Annual conferences in particular do not have the resources to lengthen their agendas in a year when election of GC delegates takes up considerable time. But annual conferences are already dealing with a considerable volume of petitions; they could set up committees for screening to facilitate the handling of them.

There currently is no consensus in the denomination for curtailing the individual’s right to petition General Conference. It might take several quadrennia to develop such a consensus; advocates of the idea should begin now to promote the idea. In my view, it is a step that will have to be taken sooner or later. United Methodism is not, and never has been, a direct democracy. It has representative structures, and it should use
There currently is no consensus in the denomination for curtailing the individual's right to petition General Conference.

1. There should be a concerted effort to educate and inform the constituency about the importance of correct form for petitions (i.e., one petition is properly about only one subject, and treats only one paragraph of the Discipline).

2. A policy should be followed of discarding petitions that fail to follow correct form.

3. Work sessions for the reference committee are needed in advance of GC to ensure that the petitions are sent to the appropriate committee, the one organized for most efficient consideration. The petitions secretary and staff do sort out petitions and refer them to committees; but dozens of errors are made in referral, and many petitions have to be reassigned to different committees after the beginning of GC.

4. Instead of the present setup of ten very large committees, a larger number of committees with fewer members could probably get the work done faster and give more attention to each piece of legislation.

5. Computerization of all petitions for easy tracking at every stage might be expensive, but it could save time and enable a more responsible handling of the material.

6. A study is needed to ascertain whether petitions from individuals and local churches are in fact getting fair consideration. The common assumption is that only agency-produced material is given serious attention. Is this perception accurate? General agency proposals are printed in full and available well ahead of time in the DCA. If individual and local church petitions were subjected to an annual conference screening process, perhaps the number would be small enough to make practical the printing of their full texts in the advance DCA. Giving more weight to legislation from annual conference would reduce the imbalance between annual conference power
and general agency power that is perceived by some observers. (In this regard, R. Sheldon Duecker’s comments in his book *Tensions in the Connection* [Abingdon Press, 1983] are useful.)

One of the most troubling effects of the petition overload is the way it affects plenary debates. Early in the session, there is time for adequate discussion of items. As time draws short and a major portion of business remains to be completed, rules are suspended and debate is truncated severely. No matter what board and committee work has been done to prepare and refine legislation, the plenary should be able to give the items more than a glance. Major changes in the Discipline affecting the life of the church have not been given adequate scrutiny when the church’s top decision-making body reduces its debate to a one-minute speech on each side. The danger of giving rubber-stamp approval to committee decisions is that committees in their present form are not true cross-sections of GC membership, but groups with particular vested interests.

For a variety of reasons, the delegates, officials, visitors, and press need to hear full and fair discussions of major issues confronting the denomination. A well-informed church is one by-product of a good legislative process. When adequate debate is not possible, the frustration level rises; there is a sense that strings are being pulled by persons with power behind the scenes and that responsible decision-making has been impeded. If the General Conference could agree to be somewhat more stringent in limiting debate and reducing time spent on courtesies and coffee breaks very early in the session, perhaps it would not have to be quite so ruthless in its time-saving measures on the final day.

United Methodists could ease the frustration level over the limited time for debate by borrowing an idea which the Episcopalians and Presbyterians have used with great success. At these churches’ large legislative gatherings, provision is made for “open hearings” under the auspices of legislative committees. A hearing may be scheduled on any major issue in which interest is high; the hearings take place at a time when most interested persons will be able to attend, and in a room or auditorium that will hold a crowd. Whereas only a limited number of delegates will be able to have their say in a plenary debate, any one may speak at an open hearing—delegate,
bishop, agency staff, theologian, ordinary lay member, or pastor. Persons with special expertise on the subject under debate may furnish testimony that would otherwise be unavailable. Speakers are recognized in the order in which they signed up with pro and con speeches alternating. Each speaker has the same time limit—say, four minutes. In a two-hour hearing, close to thirty speakers can be heard, and listeners often leave with the sense that they have heard all the issues raised, all parts of the church have been heard from, and strong feelings have been ventilated.

Two other suggestions might improve the functioning of committees. Many critics (including David A. Clyburn, Jr., writing in the June 5, 1980, issue of the *South Carolina Christian Advocate*) have pointed to the conflict of interest inherent in the self-selection process of delegates to committees. Many members of general boards who are also General Conference delegates choose to be on the committee that deals with their board's legislation, in which they have a vested interest. Delegates are understandably reluctant to give up their freedom of choice in this matter, but a fairer method would be assignment to committees by random selection, which would produce a cross-section of General Conference within each committee.

Election of committee officers takes up valuable work time; and again, a core of board members in each committee may dominate the process. Why not have committee leadership named in advance by some trusted group—for example, by the bishops or by the Commission on the General Conference? The appointive method might produce a leadership team equal to or even superior to that secured in elections. The appointing group could be directed to name a balanced slate, taking lay/clergy parity, sex, geography, race, and other such factors into consideration, and to give prime consideration to competence for the task. Whatever system is used, committee leadership will probably continue to be a forum for “auditioning” for the episcopacy, even with the deliberate inclusion of more laity. Having the officers named well in advance of General Conference could allow them to begin boning up on parliamentary procedure and to have early orientation for the job.

The matter of presiding officers deserves some comment. Under the current system, with a different bishop presiding at
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It seems a shame that for most of the General Conference, bishops serve essentially the same function as the pots of chrysanthemums that line the edge of the platform; that is, they decorate the stage. At the first General Conference I attended, I served as a page to the bishops and thus learned a well-kept secret: the two primary occupations of bishops at General Conference are (1) autographing souvenir hymnals and (2) sending notes to their delegations and their spouses. It seems a great waste of human resources.

Can we find a better way by observing how other denominations use their bishops? The Lutheran churches' practice seems to offer a possible option: their bishops are part of the legislative body. United Methodist bishops' abilities and experience could be employed more profitably if they were members of General Conference with voice and vote. Each active bishop would lead his or her delegation. Retired bishops would continue to take turns presiding, but with fewer bishops presiding, each for several sessions. The interaction of bishops, clergy, and laity would be healthy for the church, the annual

each session—morning, afternoon, and evening—there is a certain lack of continuity and a certain unevenness of leadership. Despite intentions to pick only the most skilled presiders, the committee responsible is inevitably swayed by political considerations. Greater continuity and consistently high quality could be better maintained if a smaller number of bishops served for more than one session each. If the conference used one-third the number now used for presiding duties, both these needs would be served.

What about the bishops who are not picked to preside and are not asked to preach at morning devotions? Where do they get to exercise leadership?
United Methodist bishops' abilities and experience could be employed more profitably if they were members of General Conference with voice and vote.

denomination for the very best preachers, be they bishops, other clergy, or laity. A fair number of women could be included—something that is not possible now, since there is only one woman bishop in the council. One or two ecumenical guests could also be included on the preaching schedule.

Would the bishops dominate the legislative proceedings if they had voice and vote? Presiding officers would, of course, have to exercise fairness in recognizing persons to speak. The system currently used for recognition of delegates who are seeking the floor could be altered to ensure impartiality. Under present practice, delegates stand at their seats and wave an orange card in the air. This system is subject to manipulation: a presiding officer may recognize only delegates whom he or she can call by name, or only those whose views on a subject are known. The chair may recognize a veteran speaker known to be forceful and articulate for one side of an issue, and an inarticulate, inexperienced youth delegate to present the other side. The far corners of the hall sometimes get ignored.

Another system used by some denominations is less subject to manipulation. Delegates who want to speak line up at each of several microphones, and the presiding officer recognizes the various microphones in turn. To assist the chair in determining a delegate's purpose in seeking the floor, a monitor at each microphone may hold up one of several large color-coded cards, indicating whether the speaker has a speech for, a speech against, a point of order, a procedural motion and so forth.

A final category of possible changes has to do with matters of symbolism. Customs and practices should be in harmony with
the announced values and commitments of the denomination, but sometimes they clash.

Is the UMC committed to ecumenism? Then why is every speaker and preacher heard during the eleven-day meeting a United Methodist? Why not have a great ecumenical festival worship service sometime during the conference, at which an ecumenical guest preaches? Or why not invite “ecumenical delegates” as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has done—asking selected representatives from several sister denominations to participate fully in the life of the conference, having voice and vote in committee, voice but no vote in plenary?

Is the UMC an international church? Most of the resolutions passed at General Conference are couched in language suggesting that the UMC is purely an American denomination and ignoring the fact that it is a global church. Can delegates be made more aware of their use of language?

What symbolism is conveyed by a special section where only wives of bishops may sit? And by the special badges indicating by color the “rank” of bishop’s spouse? Are these signs of the church’s elitism, clericalism, sexism? I can imagine a new generation of bishop’s spouses being uncomfortable with the implications of such symbols and preferring to wear a badge and sit in a gallery simply marked “Visitor.”

What symbolism is embodied in the 54,000 homemade cookies baked by local United Methodist laywomen and consumed by the delegates at coffee breaks? Warmth and hospitality? An overfed, affluent church oblivious to a hungry world? A stereotypical image of laywomen’s role in the church? How many phone calls did the cookie chairperson have to make before 54,000 cookies were assured? What if the cookie bakers had used the same time, money and energy to feed hungry people in their community? (Even critics of this custom, it should be noted, have not been known to boycott the cookie table!)

Obviously, some of the changes suggested in this essay are more needed than others. I offer them in the hope of stimulating discussion which will produce reforms to aid the conference in fulfilling its espoused purposes, so that it may serve the church more effectively as United Methodists enter their third century of life as an organized denomination.
A college chaplain reflects on the possibility of nuclear war upon reaching age fifty.

Who can say why anyone remembers vividly a few moments from childhood while most experiences are buried and forgotten? Let me share with you an impression of a long-ago summer day. Perhaps my reflections will bring some fresh perspective to your own life story. I was in grade school at the time, and living in a small town near Indianapolis. It was a lazy summer afternoon. I was enjoying the rocking motion of our front porch swing, waiting for the newspaper to arrive. I don’t think I often noticed the front pages in those days; even then I was addicted to the comics. When the paper arrived on this particular day, I was astonished by one item on the front page: war had broken out in Europe (1939). I could hardly believe it! There was nothing in the experience of my early childhood to suggest that war might be possible in my lifetime. I had never heard war news on the radio, I had never seen a war movie, I had never read a book about war. I knew that there had been a big war in Europe earlier in the century, but that was supposed to be the very last one! The world had now grown civilized. I had the distinct impression that warfare belonged somewhere in the past, with knights and castles. I didn’t speculate long about the implications of the news that day. After all, the comics were still waiting! And at the age of eight, the comics seemed far more real to me than did Europe. But I do remember my keen surprise—my astonishment—that war should be possible in my own lifetime.
Years later America became deeply involved in that war. An older boy in the neighborhood was drafted by the army. I took over his paper route. Ralph never came back: he was sent to some Pacific Island, and he perished there. By now I had begun to read the front pages of news more avidly, following the daily maps of battles, advances, retreats. As I swooped about town delivering papers on my bike, I often fantasized that I was really on a motorcycle delivering important communiques to the Allies. . . . From time to time, busloads of German prisoners would pass through my Indiana hometown; I never heard where they came from or where they were going. . . . The places of conflict were very remote to my experience, but the ultimate victory was never in doubt. I remember few other details prior to August, 1945.

August 6, 1945: a date that is seared into my memory. On that day a new American bomb killed 80,000 Japanese instantly. I read and reread the accounts of what happened at Hiroshima. Most Americans, as I recall, were ecstatic about this fantastic weapon. For some reason, I was not. Despite all the propaganda, I think I felt a touch of sorrow that so many thousand human beings had been vaporized that day. And as I slumped there on that gray sofa in the living room, I had the chilling knowledge that afternoon that my future would forever be haunted by the shadow of that Bomb. I knew, without a doubt, that the history of the future would be distinctively different from the history of the past. A poet said, “The bomb that fell on Hiroshima fell on America too.” I felt that! None of us could ever again escape its presence. When the tabulations were finally in, we were told that there had been 50 million casualties in World War II—half of them civilians. Only one-half of 1 percent of these were Americans (416,000). War had become expensive for us, but still it remained very remote from our shores.

A few years after that war, I had the chance to spend the whole summer in Europe. I was amazed at the devastation everywhere. Even after several years of rebuilding, the mines were extensive: London, Hamburg, Cologne. There were still many refugees, with no homes of their own. I was surprised that so many managers of hotels and restaurants were either quite young or quite old; the middle generation, it seemed, had
largely ceased to exist across Europe. I was aware also of a forest of canes and crutches wherever crowds gathered in Europe at that time: the scars of battle were visible everywhere.

I didn’t know what I might do about it, but I was increasingly convinced that war is a monstrous evil, and that I should do whatever I could to encourage international communication, understanding, and negotiation. I met a few persons “from behind the Iron Curtain,” as they used to say in those days. Russia seemed to me a terrible and evil place, and I certainly didn’t know why anyone would want to go there.

Eventually I began to hear some stories about the Soviet Union, and the vigor of the core of Christians there. My curiosity was stirred. My ignorance of the Soviet Union was almost absolute: this was not an appropriate subject for study in high school or college in my day. But if peacemaking is supposed to be a Christian task, as the Scriptures declare, that would surely have some implications for relations with the Soviet Union. Jesus had said, “Love your enemies.” Well, everybody recognized that the Soviets were Enemy Number One. So shouldn’t I make some attempt to understand these strange people? And perhaps help them to better understand us as well? With this idea in mind, I made three trips to the U.S.S.R. during the 1970s.

I cannot briefly summarize more than two months of experience in the Soviet Union. But let me say something. I found that ordinary Soviets are warm, hospitable people, eager to talk with Americans and eager to share their experiences with us. They are a proud people: within the memory of folks still living, they have transformed a backward peasant culture into a mighty industrial power. The Soviets are also a fearful people. They are dreadfully frightened over the possibility of another war—whether with China or with the United States. They know what war is like! They suffered so heavily in World War II. And they don’t intend to be taken by surprise again.

For most Americans, war has remained quite remote. We lost many lives during the last world war—half a million people. But the Soviets lost forty times as many persons as we did! Their toll was twenty million! Nearly every Soviet family lost some of its members during those harsh days. Can anyone here imagine that they could easily forget that catastrophe? And given that
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historic fact, can we possibly be surprised over their anxiety about national preparedness now?

I have no trouble believing that ordinary people in the Soviet Union genuinely yearn for peace. I know they do: this is not propaganda. Whatever the designs of the Kremlin and the Pentagon, the common people of this world long for peace!

I visited Leningrad—that beautiful and heroic city which was encircled by the Nazis and shelled almost daily for two and a half years. One and a half-million people died—but Leningrad did not surrender! Do you really think the people of Leningrad need to be persuaded that peace is in their best interest?

I visited Minsk—a city that has been occupied by foreign invasions 101 times in its recorded history. The late-middle-aged women in this region of Byelorussia outnumber the men of their age group eight to one. Can you imagine that these folk have forgotten the destruction of war, or that they want to risk invasion ever again? We need to see the world for a moment as it appears to the people of Leningrad and Minsk, to sense how threatened they feel, how fearful they really are. Yes, fearful, of us.

Well, 1983 is a long, long way from that lazy summer afternoon in Indiana when I discovered that war could indeed intrude upon the twentieth century. And it's a long, long way from that August day in 1945 when our nation owned only two atomic bombs. Where has the Christian church been in the discussion about the arms race and disarmament? Denominational leadership has often been in the forefront of the peace movement. But the same cannot be said of ordinary Christians or of average congregations. The Catholic bishops, assembled in Vatican II, declared: "Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God, and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation." Many Christians have lagged behind on this question. I confess that I have not been eager to get involved in this complex and painful controversy. But what alternative is there now?

Albert Camus, the French existentialist, once said to an audience of monks:

The world expects of Christians that they will raise their voices so loudly and clearly and so formulate their protest that not even the
simplest man can have the slightest doubt about what they are saying. . . . We stand in need of folk who have determined to speak directly and unmistakably and come what may, to stand by what they have said.

Do agnostics, like Camus, have a right to expect this kind of behavior from us Christians? Will they discover that kind of integrity in you, in me?

A quarter of a century ago, the sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote a book called The Causes of World War III. Nonreligious himself, Mills concluded with a "A Pagan Sermon."

We (pagans) truly do not see how you can claim to be Christians and yet not speak out totally and dogmatically against the preparations and testings now under way for World War III. . . . You Christians are standing in default. . . . Who among you is considering what it means for Christians to kill men and women and children in ever more efficient and impersonal ways? . . . As pagans who are waiting for your answer, we merely say: You claim to be Christians. And we ask: What does that mean as a biographical and as a public fact?

I think our critics have been right about this. The world deserves better models of compassion and peacemaking than most of us Christians have yet supplied.

Christians are aware that pain and suffering and death are a part of life. But we also know that in God's power we have victory over death. Yes, humans live and die. Civilizations live and die. Perhaps even planets live and die. But God has created this world and has called it "good." God has invited all of us humans to share the joys of creation, and to partake of the "abundant life," to live by the Spirit, even now. Indeed, it would be "a crime against God" for us to end civilization, or to risk the end of all life on this planet.

The time has come to work for an immediate reduction in our nuclear arms stockpile. We have not become secure by threatening to drop twelve bombs for every ten the Soviets launch. Will we be less secure if we threaten to match every ten of their bombs with eight of our own? Might we, with bold initiative, actually launch a peace race in place of the arms race? We have successfully proved to all the world that we are willing to risk war. I, for one, am now ready to risk peace. Either way, there is a gamble. But when all the odds are in, I still prefer to risk being a peacemaker.

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Paul's Letter to the Romans was sent in lieu of a personal visit to the Christian community in Rome, and Paul intended that the letter convey a spiritual gift he would have preferred to deliver in person. In fact, Romans is the only one of the epistles that was written to a congregation Paul had not previously visited. In contrast to those personal (private) epistles such as the Letter to Timothy and the Letter to Philemon, this is a congregational (public) communication addressed to all in Rome whom God loves and has called to be God's people. In such letters Wesley observes that Paul "proposes the pure, unmixed gospel, in a more general and abstract manner." (John Wesley's New Testament, John C. Winston Co. 1953, p. 223.)

One example of how highly Christians have come to value Paul's Letter to the Romans is found in Martin Luther's Preface to St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, where he describes the epistle as "the chief part of the New Testament and the clearest gospel of all." (Anders Nygren, Commentary on Romans, Muhlenberg Press, 1949, p. 1.) Undoubtedly this tribute was earned by Paul's struggle to make clear what he had been teaching about the role, function, and goal of faith—peace with God. In the letter we have a clarity and comprehension that evolved out of the preaching endeavors of three missionary journeys.

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In the first part of Romans, Paul emphasizes that hope is an important quality of Christian faith. Christians can be hopeful because of what God has done in Christ and because of what God is doing through the Holy Spirit. Christ died for us while we were still sinners. Through the Holy Spirit, God's love is flooding our hearts. In spite of the experience of suffering, Christians can be hopeful. Our Christian faith is evoked by God's love, and even the suffering of the cross did not end God's love for us. Suffering only makes love purer and more profound. So although we suffer, our hopeful faith does not disappoint us. Our suffering is not felt to be a visitation of God's wrath, for even in suffering we are still at peace with God—we continue to live with God in and through our pain. Wesley goes a step further and declares that unlike Jews who regard tribulations (suffering) as a sign of God's displeasure, "we reserve them as tokens of His fatherly love, whereby we are prepared for a more exalted happiness." (John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, Epworth Press, 1958, p. 536).

Hope is the dominant mood of the new era that began with the Resurrection, and the door through which we enter the domain of hope is faith. We live out of the assumption that we are always with God (even in suffering) and that all God has is ours. We have but to live as true heirs. The writer of the 119th Psalm repeatedly declared his hope in the Word of God. Since that Word has become flesh and dwelt among us that hope has been multiplied greatly to us.

Luther's hymn "Out of the Depths I Cry to Thee," based on the words of Psalm 130, firmly restates this clear Old Testament connection between God's faithful Word and our hope. It also echoes an insight from our passage in Romans—boasting is made possible not through our merit but through God's grace. The hymn concludes, "His help I wait with patience."

If we are inclined to ask how we could presume to make such a preposterous claim to God's affection, then we should first consider Paul's comparison of God's love with our love. Paul notes that we value our lives highly and will hardly consider laying down our lives even for a just person, though for a good person, in the right circumstances we might risk death. In contrast to our human behavior, God has shown divine love to us in that before we were good—before we were just—indeed
while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. God's love toward us is wondrous, unmerited, gracious love that comes to us while we are helpless, dead in our sins. It rescues us and raises us up. When God gives us an example "of rescuing the life of another by laying down our own" says Wesley, "how can we now doubt God's love?" (John Wesley, Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament, Epworth Press, 1958, p. 536.)

In the new United Methodist Alternate Rite for the Sunday Service the words of assurance which are spoken by the minister following the prayer of confession are from this text, "Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that is proof of God's love toward us" (5:8).

Regarding the nature of the verb "to show" that is used to identify God's action toward us, we become aware of a need for a more emphatically inclusive verb form—a verb form that would include past, present, and future action. For the kind of unmerited divine love that has been shown to us in the death of Jesus on the cross continues to be shown to us in the lives of contemporary disciples and will be made to shine forth in future disciples.

On occasion, the limitation of Christ and the showing of divine love toward humanity is so profound and so astounds the secular world that society is moved to give it recognition, as in the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Mother Teresa. Nor is such awareness apparent only in international circles. Many local communities have their own Christian heroes and heroines whose saintly lives have shown forth God's love and enabled their human venture to glow with the good news of the gospel.

In no generation since the crucifixion has the love of God, shown in the way of the cross, been without witnesses. Moreover it is our faith and determination that future generations shall also have witnesses. So to express adequately our understanding of this good news we do need a truly inclusive verb form that expresses the past, present, and future loving/saving action of God. Perhaps "God shows us" is the best we can do in our effort to catch up all the fullness and promise of this salvific energy let loose in the world. While it points to the present, it does not preclude the past or the future.

Although the drawing of historical parallels (especially when situations are separated by centuries and by multiple technolo-
gies) has marked limitations, our setting in the world of today is somewhat like the setting of Rome in Paul's day. Rome was a major power and the United States is a major power. People from many parts of the world came to live in Rome, and people from many parts of the world have come and are coming to live in the United States. Rome was a commercial center, and the United States is certainly a commercial center. People living in Rome were the advantaged people of Paul's day, and people living in the United States are among the advantaged people of our day. Rome exported a culture, and the United States is accused of exporting culture—western imperialist culture.

Since Rome was a powerful political and commercial center, people looked to Caesar to secure the future and only incidentally did they turn to the gods. People would be more apt to ask “Where are the legions fighting now?” and “What roads, amphitheaters, and baths is Caesar building?” rather than “Are we at peace with the gods?” and “Do we have the blessing of the gods?” Securing the future depended on extending Roman rule and Roman law, they thought. So if one were concerned about the future, the question would not be “How is it with the Gods?” but rather “How is it with Rome?”

Consequently, when Paul sought to persuade the Christians in Rome that salvation comes neither through obedience to the law nor through good works but solely by faith, he was not only doing battle with previous Jewish and Christian views about salvation but he was wrestling with a basic nonfaith orientation of the residents of Rome as well.

Perhaps the most striking similarity between the people of Rome and citizens of the United States is that while they could be classified with the “have” peoples of the world who were rich in power and material possessions, at the same time they also could be accurately grouped with the “have not” peoples of the world who were poor in the things of the spirit—who were not venturers in faith. Such similarity of theological outlook merits particular consideration.

Paul writes of people who can rejoice in suffering, who know that they are reconciled to God, and who have a great hope. It is not likely that the residents of Rome would have described themselves in this fashion. They may have applauded the courage and readiness of their legions to suffer battle on the
frontiers of the empire or in the remote provinces. They may have been excited as they watched the suffering of gladiators engaged in deadly contests in the coliseum and followed the victories of their favorite contestants. But as for themselves, they preferred the comforts of Rome’s baths and palaces and the cures of their physicians and wines—domestic and imported.

As for the gods, Romans may have thought of themselves as knowledgeable about the gods and, perhaps as adequately observant of accepted standards of piety, but reconciliation would have to await the offerings of the priests in the temple ceremonies. There was no priesthood of all believers.

Hope for the Romans would have hinged on the power of their empire. In a smaller way it was prompted by the thrusts of their culture. For good measure they might have considered actions to appease the gods. Athens, for example, had prudently erected an altar to an unknown god.

So Paul’s way of speaking about these matters was strange. A resident of Rome might have found it interesting, but not particularly credible. Perhaps some will feel that this is where the comparison breaks down, declaring that Americans do view the Christian faith as credible. After all, George Gallup reports that 94 percent of the citizens of the United States believe in God and 93 percent express a religious preference (Religion in American Life, A Summary of Qualitative Research of the Unchurched, 1982, p. 31). However, the evidence to support the vitality of such an American view does not appear to be overwhelming. Gallup also reports that only 40 percent attended a church or synagogue in a typical week. Moreover, in her article “Charity Needs Coercion,” Barbara Bergman, professor of economics at the University of Maryland observed:

Another reason that we cannot go back to voluntary provision for a sizable portion of human needs is the atrophy of habits, and attitudes, and institutions that used to support voluntary giving. A higher proportion of us used to attend religious services regularly, where there was social pressure to give, where compassion for the less fortunate was instilled and where collection was done at low cost. (New York Times, Dec. 31, 1981.)

All of this makes clear that what the Apostle Paul decided to write to the citizens of Rome in the first century was an
incredible credibility; and, that as we attempt to declare this good news to twentieth-century citizens of the United States we also have the difficult task of proclaiming an incredible credibility. As Jesus was being drawn nearer to the cross he heard Pilate ask, “What is truth?” and in this Lenten season as we are being drawn nearer to Good Friday we hear those about us sighing “What is faith?” Like truth, it suggests a kingdom that is neither in this world or of this world.

We could imagine the readers of this epistle saying to Paul, “If you were seriously going to propose that we put our trust in such a faith then surely you could do better than this Jesus story. Gods don’t suffer and sacrifice for people. People suffer and sacrifice to the gods. The least you can do, Paul, is to get the roles straight.”

Here we are at the heart of Paul’s communication problem. Neither residents of ancient Rome nor contemporary residents of the United States have found it easy to accept God’s grace as credible. We are really afraid to let anyone love us that way, that much, when we are not just nondeserving but absolutely undeserving.

Of course, if such a gracious, unmerited loving action were credible—were believable—then everything else Paul has to say would follow: “now that we are reconciled, much more shall we be saved by his life,” could be affirmed. Then we could act freely out of the conviction that all things are possible with God. What Paul is saying would truly be the sine qua non of God’s credibility if it were credible. So not just for Jews or Greeks but for Romans and Americans, Jesus Christ is folly and a stumbling block. Jesus crucified for us is God’s incredible credibility.

During this Lenten season, will we allow ourselves to listen to Jesus—really to hear what he is saying? Will we entertain, even in the smallest way, the possibility of that divine incredible credibility? Do we dare to be divinely loved? When Jesus described the good shepherd, he described an incredible credibility. The good shepherd searches for lost sheep, knows them by name, lays down his life for them, and is no mere hireling. The sheep discern the loving credibility in the good shepherd’s voice.

This is why we speak of being justified by faith: God’s credibility is so incredible that we have to risk an act of faith to
accept it. The only way we can adequately listen to Jesus is through the ears of faith.

Remember how Martin Luther put it. "If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger or ungraciousness."

(Roland Bainton, Here I Stand, Abingdon Press, 1950, p. 65.)

In these early verses of the fifth chapter Paul suggests an interesting progression of spiritual experience which leads from faithful suffering to being grounded in hope, and from hope to the flooding of our hearts with love. The heart that suffers faithfully and becomes grounded in hope dares to risk opening itself fully to the love of God—to partake of the divine nature with abandon. We hear this progression echoed in the First Letter to the Corinthians—"now abideth faith, hope, and love and the greatest of these is love." The flooding of our hearts with love is the sign and seal of our reconciliation with God. Thus suffering provides the opportunity to become grounded in hope and to rise to a new life in which we are at peace with God.

The parting thought of the passage is at once the most arresting and the most challenging. If God used suffering and death to show us the wonder of divine love toward us, then just imagine what spectacular salvation God will show us with life—"how much more shall we be saved by his life?" Just imagine, if God were to flood our lives with love, and we were to be fully reconciled to God, what saving work God might do with our lives! The potential is particularly impressive if we find ourselves living in the faith that Nygren finds Paul expressing in these final verses:

Through His life we possess final salvation. To live in Christ is to be free from the wrath of God. This is to be delivered both from the present wrath which God reveals from heaven against all human ungodliness and unrighteousness, and from "the wrath to come," which will be revealed on "the day of wrath." It is this of which a Christian may rightly boast. (Commentary on Romans, Muhlenberg Press, 1949, pp. 205, 206.)
Scholarly discussion of the Letter to the Ephesians presents us with a curious paradox. On the one hand we have serious questions raised about whether Paul is the writer of the letter and about whether the Ephesians were the intended recipients. On the other hand the author's peculiar sensitivity to and apt reflection of Pauline thinking and theological perspective are emphatically affirmed. The latter observations seem to indicate that if Paul is not the author, then the writer must have been an intimate companion and fellow worker, such as Onesimus or one other of his more able students. (Francis Gerald Ensley, *Paul's Letters to Local Churches*, Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1956, p. 47.) In style the letter is clearly different from other Pauline epistles, but in substance it has remarkable affinity with them. Scholars further intrigue us with the suggestion that Ephesus may have been the locale in which the letter was written rather than the destination to which it was sent. There is some consensus around the view that the letter was, in fact, directed to Christians at large with an aim of promoting Christian unity. In its greeting, the letter does not explicitly evidence a familiarity which Paul obviously had with the persons and work at Ephesus, but it appears to be directed instead to a wider constituency—"the saints who are also faithful" (1:1).

Edgar Goodspeed theorized that Ephesians had been written as an introduction to the corpus of Pauline epistles and that its frequent similarity to Colossians simply indicated a longer familiarity with that composition. However, unlike many other passages in Ephesians, our lection does not have a parallel in Colossians. (Goodspeed, *Introduction to the New Testament*, University of Chicago Press, 1937, pp. 224-26.) Regarding Ephesians as introductory to the Epistles would account for its comprehensive statement of Paul's teaching and for its unreserved tribute to the supreme worth of Christianity. Such a view of Ephesians as introductory to the corpus of Pauline epistles is also compatible with its early and frequent inclusion...
with that corpus and compatible with its author's evident indebtedness to the other letters.

The letter has been described as a practical rather than a theoretical message aimed at healing divisions within the Christian community and summoning them to a common unity in Christ and a new quality of life. (Albert E. Barnett, *The New Testament: Its Making and Meaning*, Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946, pp. 190, 191.) The writer describes disobedience to God as darkness and stresses that Christ has called us from such darkness into light. As we journey with Jesus during this Lenten season, toward fuller and finally total obedience to God, we are challenged to confront our own inclination to live in darkness and remember that we are called to "walk as children of light" (5:8). We need to ask, in all humility, in what sense any divisions among us may be signs of our disobedience to God and our persistent inclination to prefer darkness.

It is especially appropriate that Charles Wesley, not his brother John, was the author of the sermon "Awake, Thou That Sleepest," based on the hymn fragment in verse fourteen. Wesley preached the sermon at Oxford University on Sunday, April 4, 1742, and pressed his hearers to make serious examination of the state of their souls. He confronted the congregation with a barrage of questions: "art thou ready to meet death and judgment? . . . Canst thou stand in His sight? . . . Hast thou secured the one thing needful?" Charles strove earnestly and enthusiastically to shake awake those whose deep slumber was the product of being dead in their sins. (Edward H. Sugden, ed. *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, Epworth Press, 1935, pp. 68-86.) This sermon suggests that if Charles Wesley were preaching to us during this Lenten Season he would urge us to a much sterner self-examination than we are inclined to undertake penitently, insisting that the choice we have to make is the difference between being dead and being alive, being asleep and being awake, walking in darkness and walking in the light. Like Charles's own experience, it is a matter of being convicted and converted. Lent is a time for "backsliders" to take seriously the promise that if we will awake, Christ will give us light.

Our text also suggests that when we are gathered as church to worship, we are called to a collective examination of our life together. As church do we need to hear the call to awaken? As
church, have we been walking in darkness? Are we too much married to other organizations in the community and are we neglecting our role as the body of Christ? Are we in danger of drifting into darkness and do we need to turn back to the way of light so that as church we may be “light in the Lord”? The Faith and Order document discussed by the Ecumenical Council of Churches when it met in Ghana in 1974 suggests how we might appear as church when the light of Christ is shining through us:

A community which listens and gives thanks; a community in which we can freely seek the truth without risk; a community of reconciled people; a community of service which is freely and totally at the service of one another and of all people, particularly those that are rejected by society; a community following in the steps of Jesus which freely accepts the poverty imposed on it and tries to make good use of the wealth it is given; a community of spontaneous celebration in a world planned down to the last detail. (Hans Küng/Jürgen Moltmann, eds. An Ecumenical Confession of Faith, Seabury Press, 1979, pp. 97-98.)

This is not too much to hope for if we are working as children of light, for we have the promise that “Christ shall give you light” (5:14). The words of Third Isaiah remind us of the familiar prophecy, “Arise, shine; for your light has come” (Isa. 60:1). The words of the hymn fragment have been described both as a portion of an early baptismal hymn and as a compilation of Old Testament texts. In either case they represent a traditional faith-hope and expectation.

Rudolf Bultmann enhanced our appreciation for the New Testament use of the image of light when he wrote:

In the Old Testament, too, in Judaism as well as in Hellenism, and most fully in Gnosis, “light” is used to designate God, God’s nature, and the sphere of the divine. In all its variations, however, the ultimate underlying notion is that the real meaning of light is the luminosity man needs in order to find his way in his daily as well as his spiritual life. (The Johannine Epistles trans. R. Philip O’Hara, Fortress Press, 1973, p. 16.)

William Barclay suggests this sense of the image of light in his translation of the passage: “your connection with the Lord has made you light. You must behave as those who are at home in the light. For the light brings as its harvest everything that is good and right and true.” (The New Testament, Vol. 2, Collins, 1969, p. 124.)
Our lesson further suggests that we can obtain help for our effort to live as children of light by learning "what is pleasing to the Lord." Our text is telling us that our penitential practice needs a learning component. The temptation is to decide for ourselves what would be pleasing to God rather than asking God to reveal divine pleasure to us.

Jesus' own way of understanding God's will, or "what is pleasing to the Lord," grew out of his familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures. John Wesley also was unequivocal about the need to turn to Scripture to learn about what is pleasing to God. Though Wesley read widely and published much, he declared himself to be a man of one book, the Bible. Charles Wesley was equally attentive to the Bible, and his hymns are replete with biblical content. It has been said that if the text of the Bible were lost, much of it could be reconstructed from the hymnody of Charles Wesley.

Here it is important to discern that for the Wesleys, reading the Bible was more than a means of reverencing God's Word. It was not an end in itself. Their reading of Scripture changed the way they lived their lives. For them hearing the Scriptures and reading the Scriptures were learning experiences. They expected to be instructed through God's Word. In this Lenten season shouldn't we confess that too often our hearing and reading of the Bible are acts of respect—of reverence, and not acts of learning? Can we come to the hearing and reading of the Bible with a new goal and "try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord"?

Following John Wesley's instructions for reading the Scriptures may help us to have more of a learning experience:

1. set apart a time each morning and each evening;
2. read a chapter from both Old and New Testaments;
3. read so as to know the whole will of God and decide to do it;
4. give attention to the connection and harmony between basic doctrines like original sin, justification by faith, the new birth, inward and outward holiness;
5. engage in serious and earnest prayer before reading;
6. with regard to the state of your heart and life, pause frequently to examine yourself.

Wesley urged, "Whatever light you receive should be used to
the uttermost and that immediately." These instructions reflect an intention to learn and to act upon what we learn. (Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament, Schmul Publishers, 1975, p. ix.)

Wesley's paraphrase for "darkness" in verse eight provides us with good grounds for viewing light as a product of learning, for Wesley paraphrased darkness as "total blindness and ignorance." This association of ignorance with darkness is implied in the familiar expression, "I'm in the dark about that," meaning "I'm not informed about that." So if darkness is the product of ignorance then it would follow that light must be the product of learning. (Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament, Epworth Press, 1958, p. 717.) Perhaps walking in the light could call for an openness to learning as children. This thought would be especially congruent with our text if verse fourteen is indeed a fragment from a baptismal hymn. Regarding ourselves as mere babes in the faith who have much to learn will help to give us a more open learning attitude.

If our text is summoning us to a continuous learning adventure throughout our Christian life then it may be prompting us to ask some hard questions about the educational ministry of our church. Are many inclined to feel that when they have completed the confirmation class or the membership training class, the bulk of their Christian education is finished? Could we add another phrase to our membership vows—to be loyal to the church not only by prayers, presence, gifts, and service, but also by learning? Are we as church providing adequate challenge and opportunity for the continuing education of our adult members in the pulpit and in the classroom? Can there be effective ministry by the laity without effective learning by the laity? If a congregation is going to take this passage from Ephesians to heart, then surely such questions must be asked. This need is especially evident when we reflect on the goals for learning accentuated in verses nine and eleven.

Christian learning which leads to light produces as fruit the good, the right, and the true. Second, it exposes or reproves the works of darkness. Part of the difficulty in "doing the good that we would do" is determining what that good is, in the first place. For example, if we wanted to alleviate hunger in an African nation we could find ourselves studying whether it would be better to buy foodstuffs and distribute them, or finance
teaching of better methods of farming and fishing and purchasing new tools, or building a road from the coast to inland villages so that the fishing catches could more readily be transported inland. Perhaps a program would be needed that would utilize all three approaches. As we are attempting to do the good in such a situation we need to learn more about the situation, especially from the people on the scene who are trying to cope with it. Lent might be a good season for an intensive education program related to a mission commitment of the church so that people better understand the true necessity for sacrificial giving to carry out that mission project.

Or when a congregation becomes caught up in an effort to expose and reprove the practice of driving while under the influence of alcohol in an effort to help reduce the alarming number of traffic fatalities attributed to drunken drivers, then it is confronted with a wide range of proposals: increase the severity of the legal penalties that can be imposed, raise the legal age for drinking, restrict the sale of alcoholic beverages, accelerate educational and media campaigns against drinking and driving, provide for more effective enforcement of current laws, expand our treatment centers for alcoholism, give more support to organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous. What kind of support to give, and where, will not be an easy congregational decision and certainly will call for learning more about the problem. All of this is to suggest that Christian action in contemporary society needs to be enlightened—to be well-informed. Jesus himself seemed to turn away from superficial analysis and easy answers. Instead he sought to become more open. Jesus grew in wisdom. He was a learner. He listened to God in prayer and Scripture. He listened to people—eating, talking, and living with those who were hurting, and debating in public with scholars and lawyers. Through such listening he learned what was "pleasing to the Lord." He could say that feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison, and making peace is to please God. For us to learn what is pleasing to God in our time will require similar rigor in listening, discussing, and acting.

The June 18, 1981, issue of the New York Times carried a full-page advertisement titled "A Theology for the Ministry of
St. Bartholomew's Parish, which reported on a difficult study and discussion that was occurring in that congregation. It read in part:

... mindful of the church’s calling to life in the world, to ministry, the Vestry decided to consider the lease or sale of the piece of land and building next to the church. Was it greed that prompted this decision, as some have said? Was there insensitivity to the neighborhood and some sort of architectural illiteracy as others have supposed? The answer of course is No! The answer is that the Vestry is committed to the worship and ministry of God, and faithfulness to that commitment requires that any opportunity to enhance or expand that worship and ministry be considered... We at St. Bartholomew's believe that faithfulness to our Lord leads to a moral and Christian imperative to seize upon the extraordinary opportunity before us to consider the lease of the Community House, terrace gardens and the air rights over the church. The possibility exists to provide permanent ministries to the most broken and destitute of this city and the world—people who would probably never be so fortunate as to observe the air over the church that was used to feed them. To do less would be blasphemy because it would be idolatrous. By devoting part of its possessions to this ministry in the world, St. Bartholomew’s would be faithful to its tradition and to its Lord.

We can hear in these excerpts from this report a congregation agonizing over its effort to determine what is the good and right thing to do as it seems to avoid darkness and to share the light of Christ in a twentieth-century metropolis. In this opportunity before them to secure substantial funding for needed ministries some members seem to hear the call, “Awake, Thou That Sleepest.”

Whether or not we attempt to let learning lead us farther down the paths of light, it is clear that this Ephesian admonition does not intend to leave us the option of continuing to walk in darkness. We are explicitly summoned to leave a life of darkness and to embark on a life of light. Verses eleven and twelve warn us against such a dark direction several times—“take no part in... it is a shame even to speak of the things.” Indeed verse eight indicates that it is a past state to which we should not return. To leave the armed forces before completing your period of enlistment is completed is normally construed as desertion. Likewise to leave the way of light would be deserting Christ, who has called us to become light. Walking in light is not one among
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several options. Rather it is the way that we are called to go. Perhaps this clean-cut distinction between the way of light and the way of darkness, and the firm insistence that having been called into the way of light we are no longer to associate with darkness is what enables us to boast along with the writer of the Gospel of John, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (1:5).

Our best hope of all, that we will be able to continue to walk in the light and live as children of the light, is Jesus Christ. Verse eight declares, “now you are light in the Lord,” and verse fourteen assures us, “Christ shall give you light.” One of the peculiar qualities that we experience in our encounters and fellowship with Jesus Christ is light. Our lives are brightened and illumined with the presence of Christ. In “The Supper at Emmaus,” Rembrandt has represented this quality visually, and the light emanating from Christ, the central figure, immediately captures the eye of the viewer. The hymn writer Ambrose of Milan has represented Christ’s light in the words of the hymn, “O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright.” (Book of Hymns, 1966, 29.) We are drawn together by Christ’s light. If we walk in the light as he is in the light we have fellowship with one another. These words of I John 1:7 are captured in another hymn (The Methodist Hymnal, 1939, 523.) As we respond to the summons to walk in the light, we become one in the Lord. Christ the true light that enlightens everyone draws us together, and then forward into the way of the Lord. In word, deed, spirit, and indwelling presence he becomes the light of our lives and gives us light. We are being called to step firmly out of the darkness and to become visible disciples of Jesus Christ.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Romans 8:6-19

Since Paul had not previously visited the Christians in Rome, shared their congregational life, or exercised a ministry among them, he was not in a position to admonish or encourage them in the way he had Corinthians and Thessalonians. Instead, he
focuses on central questions about their new faith with the intention of clarifying it and of strengthening them in their Christian belief. Wesley stressed that it was Paul's intention to show that neither the Gentiles by obeying the laws of nature nor the Jews by obeying the law of Moses could obtain justification before God. (Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament, Epworth Press, 1958, pp. 513, 514.) The pericope for this lection provides a reply to the question, What is the new life in Christ? Not a life of the flesh, says Paul, but a life of the spirit, and this spiritual quality makes all the difference in how we experience life. A fuller understanding of the distinction which Paul makes will help us have a greater appreciation for the reply of Jesus to Pilate, " 'My kingship is not of this world' " (John 18:36). In the kingdoms of this world, the kings reign over those who are in the flesh. Those who are in the Spirit, however, have a different allegiance. If Pilate had rightly understood the reply, he might well have been alarmed!

Paul describes the new life that is possible when our spirit responds to—becomes host of—the Spirit of God in Christ Jesus. He does this by contrasting life in the Spirit with the old life of the flesh. When we are living in the flesh, we are caught with catering to the appetites and impulses of our carnal nature and we cannot please God. We are incapable of obeying the law (vs. 8). So for all practical purposes we are dead to God. It is Paul's clear intention to draw a radical contrast—to show a marked difference between the before and the after.

If we feel that Paul is too blunt and harsh in his unequivocal declaration that those who are living the life of the flesh cannot please or be acceptable to God, then the words of the contemporary author James Baldwin may help us appreciate that Paul is expressing a recognized biblical view.

The Bible is probably the most important book of my early life. . . . I began leafing through the Bible looking for I know not what. It was not due to what we call a religious impulse. I was not looking for consolation. But the Bible has quite chilling and arbitrary ways of describing the human condition. "The way of the transgressor is hard." A dry, brutal, take-it-or-leave-it statement. . . . So we search the pages of our inheritance to find the true shape of our responsibility and the terrifying dimension of our freedom. ("Books I Enjoyed," The New York Times Book Review, December 5, 1982, pp. 63-64.)
Paul, too, is saying that the way of the transgressor is hard. In contrast to this somber scenario Paul is declaring that we have the potential for becoming Spirit, too. While we cannot escape our fleshly nature, we can allow the Spirit to save us from being in bondage to the flesh. Indeed the Spirit of Christ can so permeate our being that we can become spiritually minded. The transformation is so complete that we feel ourselves to be children of God and cry out "Father." We know that we are becoming heirs of life eternal and that our old nature has passed away.

If we were to try to put Paul’s message in the language of a moviegoer we might say: “You have the potential to become an E.T.—an extraterrestrial whose life span is well beyond anything forecast for earthlings and whose home is a home not made with hands, out beyond earth’s atmosphere with the God of the universe. Just as the Spirit of Christ dwells in you so you can be with others in spirit. A light will shine from within you and warm their hearts.”

Here in the eighth chapter we encounter the dualism Paul has mentioned earlier (sixth chapter). There is an earthly body and there is a spiritual body. The members of the body find themselves at war with one another. Don’t eat those calories. Don’t take that drink. Don’t lust after that man. While battling the flesh, Christians live in the spirit and walk in the spirit confident that with Christ they will win the battle. (Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, Muhlenberg Press, 1949, pp. 33-35.) The right man—the man of God’s own choosing—is on our side. More than that, we are empowered by a new relationship with God. No longer are we a fearful plaintiff appearing before the divine judge pleading guilty to having violated God’s law and hoping for a suspended sentence. Now we come as adopted children, who are recognized as legitimate heirs, crying “Father.” We are family. No longer are we just violators of the law to be processed through a legal system but now we are prodigal children coming home. Now instead of a sentence there is the possibility of a celebration. The family rejoices when the lost is found and when the dead become alive.

However, in order that we not risk reducing our understanding of Paul’s use of the word flesh merely to appetites of the
human body and his use of the word *Spirit* to something “otherworldly” we need to keep in mind Ernest Kasemann’s warning:

... the primacy of christology even over the church is retained. The community is not an extension of Christ nor is Christ merely the vitality which animates it. Both in terms of history-of-religions development and in terms of the theological center it is completely misleading to interpret being in Christ in the light of being in the Spirit. The very opposite is both true and necessary if Christ is not to be merely one interchangeable power among others and the church is not to be a mere band of enthusiasts who glory in the integration into the supernatural. (Commentary on Romans, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, William B. Eerdmans, 1980, p. 222.)

According to Paul the “change agent” that brings us from death to life is the indwelling Spirit of God. The Spirit of God witnessing to our spirit enables us to affirm a new life (8:16-17). We must do more than obey God’s laws. We must answer the call to become spiritually active—to welcome the spirit of God into our being, to be hospitable to the spirit of God, to respond to God’s Spirit through our spirit, to be fully open to the restoration of our souls. Paul challenges us to be brave enough to risk becoming spiritually alive.

The practical people of Rome must have felt that when dealing with the gods it is far safer to stay rooted and grounded in the flesh. From that stance we can grudgingly give the gods what is due, but no more. Our response to the challenge to “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” will be far different if we have allowed the spirit of the God of Jesus Christ to dwell in us. Our spiritual orientation can have profound material consequences. Paul is calling us to risk such consequences in order to become fully alive.

Paul is enough of a realist to recognize that going through such a change of life may well cause pain and real suffering. Just ask anyone attempting to withdraw from child abuse, overeating, alcoholism, or drug addiction. But, says Paul, do not be afraid to risk the suffering because it can become a way of sharing in the suffering of Christ—of entering into the fellowship of suffering (vs. 17). Moreover, this suffering (painful
as it may be) is in no way comparable to the as yet unrevealed splendor that is in store for us.

Now the strange tone of these verses suggests that Paul is speaking of a real change of life and not of any pretense or affection. I once attended a Broadway performance of the play Agnes of God. At the close of the drama the psychiatrist, played by Elizabeth Ashley, experiences a new openness to the reality of a life of faith. In her first curtain call following this moving scene she angrily urged members of the audience to protest the noise of nearby construction work which was clearly audible during the matinee performance and she referred to the construction workers as "swine." This bitter ad hominem outburst shattered the thoughtful, reflective mood and made it all seem like empty, theatrical pretense. A pretended spirituality which leaves us free to harbor bitterness toward those for whom our Lord died will not effect the change of life to which Paul points. He is not speaking of a spiritual garment which can be put on or off at will but of a genuine change in our whole way of life.

The dynamic of the new life which Paul envisions for us is the indwelling spirit of God that bears witness to our spirit and moves us toward peace with God. Paul's point is that it is the indwelling Spirit of God that makes possible our peace with God—a peace which the fleshly person alone cannot know. The film critic David Sterritt, writing in the Christian Science Monitor, criticized the film Ghandi for failing to reveal adequately the spiritual dynamic of Ghandi's existence. Sterritt wrote:

it is too bad Ghandi doesn't have much resonance or insight to match its dignity. Eager to survey the scope of Ghandi's career, director Richard Attenborough never digs below the surface. This would be a failing in any biographical picture, but in the case of Ghandi—who considered every aspect of his life and work to be charged with moral and spiritual significance—it's a fatal flaw . . . there was far more to Ghandi than statesmanship. He saw his public life, his private life, and his spiritual life as wholly intertwined. (The Daily Record, Northwest New Jersey, January 18, 1983, p. 37.)

As a film critic, Sterritt seems to be saying very much the same thing that the biblical scholar Albert Barnett reported Paul to be saying in this passage from Romans. Actual righteousness,
however, is the fruit of the vitality stimulated in man's inner nature "by the Spirit." (The Letters of Paul, Abingdon, 1947, p. 39.) The plain fact is that if we rely solely on our carnal self, all our striving will be losing. We need the Spirit of God to call us forth into the land of the living.

Karl Rahner has suggested that the very disciplines which we are inclined to think of as leading us away from a spiritual center may, in fact, be drawing us into a deeper spirituality.

The attitude of objectivity, modesty, responsibility, and quiet usefulness is one that is expected and taken "professionally" in the world of science and technology, and where such responsibility is felt to be unconditional and is practiced as such, we have a genuine relationship with God, though it may not bear that name. For the ultimate, absolute principle of all responsibility is called God. That silent listening for what we ought to do is a listening to God. (Do You Believe in God? Paulist Press, 1969, p. 54.)

Silent listening to God is a way of becoming more open to the indwelling of God's spirit.

At a convocation on preaching sponsored by the Word of God Institute at Emory University in December, 1982, participants were reminded by Edward K. Braxton, scholar in residence, North American College, Rome, that one of the hardest tasks is the task of preaching in a way that lets the hearers know that they have been offered a gift. Difficult or not, that surely is the task which should be undertaken by anyone who is attempting to preach from this portion of the eighth chapter of Romans. Key words which describe the gift are life, peace, heirs, and glory. If we were looking at a catalogue of gifts for those residents of first-century Rome or of twentieth-century America who already have everything, life, peace, and a glorious inheritance should rate rather well.

In order to receive these splendid gifts of God, we must receive the son who brings them. There is no way we can secure these gifts while rejecting the guest. We cannot obtain these gifts for ourseleves. Yes, Paul is writing about a spiritual Savior who is our gift from God. In an important sense, this portion of the Letter to the Romans is a description of what it is like for the Christian to receive God's gift of the Spirit of Christ and to live with that gift. Paul makes it clear that we will be holding the gift
in an earthen vessel. Appetites and yearnings of our flesh which have tempted and plagued us in the past will still be with us, and control of them—or victory over them—will not be automatic. We may still have to abstain from drinking alcohol, stay on low salt or low sugar diets, count our calories, and exercise. We may not be able to hear or to see one bit better than we did before we received the gift of the Spirit. However, the Spirit does comfort us as we struggle to cope with the weaknesses and demands of our flesh. Through our weaknesses we may come to know truly the full power of the Spirit.

Neither will the gift of the Spirit deliver us from all suffering. We will still be in the same struggling community striving to deal with the same difficult issues. Answers to troublesome questions may not be any easier to come by. However, now we will suffer with Christ and we will not be alone in our hurt and hardship. Strength to endure the suffering will flow into our lives through the visitation of the Spirit. No longer will we view suffering as a sure sign that we are in God's disfavor. Suffering may become an opportunity to draw nearer to Christ and to appreciate more fully those words, "for so persecuted they the prophets."

So while the gift of the Spirit does not remove us from our carnal body or from experiences of suffering, it does bring us strength and understanding for coping with them and the fellowship of a comforting companion who was tempted in all things as we are and who knew sorrow, grief, and death on a cross. We feel confident that his Spirit will lead us through our valley of the shadow and that we will be raised up even as God has raised him up.

Even though the gift of the Spirit does leave us with the same carnal nature and with the same suffering, it also brings us a wonderfully new future. Our future is made new because our family is extended. We have a new parent—a new God-parent. There is another home where we are welcome. The system that supports us is broadened and lengthened. Our church home gives us a foretaste of the love and fellowship that we will enjoy in our heavenly home. Much of our fear and loneliness is taken away because what we formerly viewed to be the end is now only the beginning. Our personal time is expanded beyond our comprehension, and this new perspective on time makes possible a new patience.
Our future is also new because others have new hopes for us. We are recognized as children of our parent-God and as true heirs. Moreover, people expect us to possess added dimensions of character—dimensions of forgiveness, caring, and sharing. They want to be able to say of us, “see how they love one another.” It seems entirely probable that we will be called out into ventures that we never dreamed of, in places that we have never been. With the Spirit of God leading us, the future appears to be wide open. Candidates for youth and adult baptism who will be told, “We have prayed that God . . . would . . . release you from sin, sanctify you with the Holy Spirit, and give you the kingdom of heaven, and everlasting life,” should be alerted to these new possibilities in their future. (Book of Hymns, 1966, Section 828, p. 4.)

It is possible to say these things because Paul understands the Spirit of God to contain the person of God as we have come to know it in Jesus Christ. The person of God “parents” us—mothers and fathers us—through the Holy Spirit, and that is why we exclaim “Abba.” In Paul’s understanding the Spirit is not a depersonalized force or presence. The Holy Spirit is another form of God’s personal presence communing with our person. As promised, the spirit is a personal comforter. It is the personal quality of the spirit that assuages our loneliness. So the spiritual gift which Paul wants to bring to God’s beloved in Rome is a new future with new support, new companionship, new status, new expectations, and a new time.

PALM/PASSION SUNDAY

Philippians 2:5-11

This excerpt from the letters (1:1–3:1 and 3:2-4:23) to Philippians was written from Rome as the prisoner Paul awaited the rendering of a verdict which might mean his death. This lection seems particularly appropriate for the Sunday when we observe the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and anticipate his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Paul, a prisoner for Christ, reminds us of how Jesus humbled himself, became a slave, and was obedient even unto death upon the cross. There is something
startling, yes even shocking, about the stark realization that both Jesus and Paul were arrested and imprisoned. In being obedient to God they experienced hurt and humiliation at the hands of humans. Even though God had highly exalted them, their salvific servanthood was humiliating, painful, and costly. Moreover, Paul's imprisonment in Rome was not a new experience. He had been previously jailed in Philippi, as well.

There is a special pathos in the Philippian correspondence because the Philippians had been so faithful in their support of Paul's work (4:15, 16). Even now he is thanking them for their gift which they had sent with Epaphroditus. As the time of the final rejection of his appeal draws near, Paul turns to that community of Christians who have been the most constant in affirming him and his work. In addition to thanking the Philippians for their generous support, Paul writes to warn them against an erroneous version of the Christian faith emanating from the Jerusalem church which tends to hearken to the Mosaic law rather than to thrive through faith in Jesus Christ. This lection summons us to reflect on the attitude of Christ as guidance for our own faith stance. In urging the Philippians to live in harmony with one another, Paul directs them to aspire not to obedience to the law but to a common confession of Jesus Christ the Lord.

Jürgen Moltmann has observed:

This confession of Jesus Christ means in the first place his confession to us and only then, in the second place, our confession to him. He is our witness before we can become his witnesses... Our confession of Christ must therefore be oriented toward the confessing Christ... In the different periods of history, in the many and varied civilizations on earth and on the hostile fronts of social and political conflicts, only he forms the common link... The Christ, the Lord, the Liberator is Jesus. What hope, lordship and liberation is in truth is therefore revealed through him, his life and his death, not through our dreams. The subject determines the predicates we give him on the basis of our experience of faith and our hope. With our predicates and titles we anticipate the kingdom in which Jesus is the truth and the life for all men and in which, "every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (King and Moltmann, An Ecumenical Confession of Faith, Seabury Press, 1979, pp. 14, 15.)
Paul appeals directly to the example of Jesus as the way to oneness of mind and a community of shared love for one another. He urges the Philippians to take the same attitude for themselves that Jesus took for himself. He did not boast of his divinity or cultivate adulation but humbled himself, becoming a man and actually dying on a cross. Here Paul may be quoting from or paraphrasing a liturgical hymn on the incarnation. (See Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible*, Mayfield Publishing Co., 1980, p. 278.) Jesus so gave himself to the serving of others that he became as their slave. Soon in our observance of Lent we will be recalling how he girded himself with a towel and washed the feet of his disciples to emphasize his servanthood and theirs. This very Sunday we recall his entry into Jerusalem—meek, lowly, and riding on the foal of an ass and not on a stomping, snorting white charger like a conquering military hero. Paul wants us to understand clearly that Jesus did not seek to honor himself. He left the honoring to God. If any one of us hears these words of Paul and does not feel their sharp challenge to the way we are living, then we are completely missing the radical intention of Paul’s message. After telling us of the perfect humility of Christ, the text fairly shouts at us, “What are you grasping at?” It’s God’s question to Adam and Eve all over again, “What have you done?” It’s God’s question to Cain, “Where is your brother?” It’s the question in the parable, “When did we see thee hungry?” It’s the question of the disciples at the table, “Is it I?” The challenge is at once personal and profound.

For Christians, says Paul, the name which every tongue should confess—the name at which every knee should bow—is the name of one who humbled himself, became as a slave and suffered death on a cross. If anyone had prophesied that one day the celebration of this humble entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem would take place around the earth and occur in practically every nation and every tongue, surely the skeptics would have scoffed “impossible!” This is not the sort of entrance that is normally recorded in historical scrolls or made a national holiday and extended to future generations. This was not a man of letters, laws, or legions. He was not king, governor, or high priest. It may have been spontaneous, but it was pitiable. Yet God has highly exalted him.
The persistence of the celebration of Palm Sunday is all the more remarkable when we recall that for first-century Christians the confession, “Jesus Christ is Lord,” could be a matter of life and death. The Roman Empire called for the response, “We have no Lord but Caesar,” and the arena and martyrdom awaited those who instead confessed, “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Especially in our time, it is worth noting that the language of this call to confession is the ultimate in inclusiveness (vss. 10, 11). We are all to confess Jesus Christ as Lord—all nationalities, all races, all walks and stations of life, male and female, slave and free, alive and risen. As Charles Wesley put it, “Let every soul be Jesus' guest! Ye need not one be left behind;/For God hath bidden all...” (Book of Hymns, 1966, 102.)

Paul wants to direct our attention to the humility of Jesus not only because we see in Jesus a more perfect example of humility but also because we see in Jesus a spirit of humility that inspires and enables us to be more truly humble. In commenting on these verses John Wesley emphasized that Jesus Christ emptied himself of divine fullness as a way of becoming humble. Wesley suggested that Jesus appeared to be empty and that taking the form of a servant meant emptying himself. (Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament, Alec R. Allenson, 1958, p. 730.)

Leslie Weatherhead’s description of a visit by Albert Schweitzer, in a sermon titled “Meek and Lowly of Heart,” also suggests a kind of emptying of self in order to be fully present to others.

...and then to remember that our guest is probably the greatest living exponent of Bach’s music, a great philosopher, a great theologian, and a world-famous missionary-doctor, was to be able to imagine what it must have been like to have been with Jesus. There was no conceit, no pride, no assumption of superiority—just a happy man who was perfectly and completely himself and as natural and unaffected with us as he was with our little girl, listening to our ideas as if they had value, seeking our views when they could not possibly have contributed to his wisdom, and doing all this not as one who was condescending or playing out an act, or setting himself to be patient with us, but one who was clearly enjoying ordinary human fellowship. My wife and I knew that we were witnessing the true humility of the truly great. (The Autobiography of Jesus, Abingdon Press Festival Book, 1980, pp. 64-65.)

In the eighteenth century the portrayal of Jesus Christ as an obedient servant captured the imagination of many. Some, like
George Washington, used the phrase, "obedient servant" as a closing description of their relationship and attitude toward the person with whom they were corresponding. For example, after unequivocally rejecting Colonel Nicholas's suggestion that the thirteen colonies become a kingdom over which Washington could reign, Washington closed his letter: "With esteem I am Sir/Your Most Obedient Servant/George Washington." (A Treasury of the World's Great Letters, Simon & Schuster, 1940, pp. 175, 176.) The very fact that such a closure sounds so archaic—so foreign—indicates just how difficult it is for us even to think about adopting the attitude and role of an obedient servant.

Nowhere is the rejection of such a description of one's attitude and role any more striking than in the titles given to workers and professionals. The closer the job is to a service function the more fully the title will be drawn-out to disguise it. All across America the message that the employee seems determined to communicate is, "I'm nobody's servant. I don't do windows, make coffee, tote bales, or go for anything."

Rather than asking, "Did those people in Jerusalem shouting hosannas really want a suffering servant for a Savior?" let us turn instead to the people gathered at our own Palm Sunday services and ask, "Do we really want a suffering servant for a Savior?" Even more problematic, do we want the Apostle Paul to tell us as he told the Philippians, "Have the same mind and attitude as Christ Jesus"? Do we want to hear a call to empty ourselves in order that we may be more open to the needs of others? As we recall the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem amid waving palms and hosannas, in truth, are we celebrating or scoffing? Do we believe—do we have faith that God will exalt those who humble themselves?

In a sermon titled "The Religion of Abraham Lincoln," Ernest Fremont Tittle concluded that Lincoln intentionally sought to be a humble instrument of God's will. Tittle suggested that indebtedness to the Bible, church attendance, and prayer contributed to Lincoln's orientation.

Religion made Abraham Lincoln a righteous man and completely delivered him from the spirit of self-righteousness. . . . He saw clearly the evil of slavery and the tragic folly of rebellion. But he felt no hatred nor even anger toward his fellow countrymen of the South. "They are just what we would be in their situation," he once said. . . .
Those are merciful, and those alone, who know themselves to be in need of mercy. Only a man who himself felt the need of a divine forgiveness and healing could have uttered those immortal closing words of the Second Inaugural: “With malice toward none; with charity for all. . . .”

He wanted to go down in history as a great man, yes, but he wanted above all to be a humble instrument in the hands of his Heavenly Father to work out his great purposes. And in Abraham Lincoln the saying came alive, “He that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” (“The Religion of Abraham Lincoln,” The First Church Pulpit 17 [February 1949]: 10-12.)

This Palm Sunday, Paul is calling us to do something different with our living. Paul is calling us to look beyond earthly heroes to a heavenly hero—to see how Christ came down from heaven to be with us and to show us God's love. Paul is calling us to give up attempts to exalt ourselves and to leave the exalting to God. Paul calls us to believe that God will raise us up. He calls us to abandon our cautious conservatism and to join that small crowd on the outskirts of Jerusalem in waving palms, shouting hosannas, and confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Even though this Palm Sunday is being celebrated around the world in practically every tongue and every country, the truth of the matter is that compared to the total population of the world we confessing Christians are a fairly small crowd. If we were celebrating Palm Sunday in Russia or China, and it will be celebrated in both of these countries, we might feel like an even smaller crowd. However, we celebrate not to please or impress the masses but to honor the humble obedience of Jesus to the will of God. Our own participation has consequences because it publicly signals our joyful loyalty to a suffering Savior.

The last few words of the passage offer some guidance regarding the manner in which we make our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. Our confession is not to be made as an act in which we take pride nor as an act for which we expect to be honored. Rather our confession is to be made to the glory of God. The temptation to lord it over others stalks us even as we make our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. If we were intending to demonstrate that we were holier than others through confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, we would not be
humbling ourselves or giving God the glory. We would be the hypocrite standing on the street corner to pray. Our confession should not become a form of boasting. Rather it should become a means of honoring God. Even a common confession will not unite us if we use our confession as a means of personal boasting. However, a common confession made to the glory of God may well draw us closer together in, "a fellowship of kindred minds."

If the letters to the Philippians represent the last of Paul's prison correspondence, then they deserve special consideration. There is a sense in which they are like the testimony of a dying person. Though he may soon be cut off out of the land of the living he is not commending himself but rather commending Jesus Christ humbled, obedient, crucified, and highly exalted.

In this process Paul also gives us a lesson in christology. Christ who was fully divine came down to earth and became the fully human person Jesus. Emptying himself of divine stature he became as a slave in human society, humbly serving others and revealing an amazing and immeasurable love for us.

In August, 1976, the U. S. Postal Service reminded our citizenry that nurse Clara Maass provided us with an example of how a person could take upon herself the condition and suffering of others in order to save them from such suffering and death. The postal service issued a commemorative stamp picturing Clara Maass in her nursing uniform above the caption, "She gave her life."

Clara Maass was graduated from Newark German Hospital School of Nursing in 1895. She later became head nurse in that same hospital. (In 1952 it was renamed Clara Maass Memorial Hospital.) She volunteered as a nurse with the U. S. Army when the Spanish-American War broke out. She was sent to the Philippines in 1900 to continue her work with victims of the dreaded yellow fever. Later she returned to Cuba, where experiments were being conducted by Maj. Walter Reed, Maj. William Gorgas, and other team members. Once again she volunteered for dangerous duty. She would be one of those to be bitten by the Stegomyia mosquito to verify that it was indeed the carrier of yellow fever. In just ten days she died. Nurse Maass was the only American and the only woman to die during these experiments, which resulted in virtual elimination of the
disease. Nurse Maass, a person in good health, volunteered to take upon herself the sufferings of yellow fever in order that a way to save others from its painful and fatal effect might be discovered. In a way similar to that in which a divine Christ assumed the role of a suffering human being, a healthy nurse Maass, skilled in caring for those suffering from the fever, voluntarily took upon herself the role of a suffering invalid. Here is a shared concern to save people from suffering and shared humbling of oneself as a means of serving and saving others. It moves us to exclaim with Charles Wesley, "O Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done!" (Book of Hymns, 1966, 420.) Notice Wesley's reminder that Jesus was, "the incarnate God" and "the Father's co-eternal Son." In this season of Lent Paul is calling us to appreciate the humbling as well as the dying.

NOTE

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BOOK REVIEWS

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ETHICS

Review by William M. Longsworth


Critics of some approaches to Christian ethics have accused certain authors of viewing the particularities and relative shadings of good and evil in the moral landscape from the abstract vantage point of a theological airplane. (Reinhold Niebuhr levels such a charge against the theology of Karl Barth. See *Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 [Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941], p. 220. But the criticism can be made of others as well.) To some extent, for various reasons, and with different degrees of appropriateness, this observation applies to each of the new books on Christian ethics considered here. This criticism has its point. Though it is doubtful that such an entity exists, the ideal book on ethics would combine penetrating insights into tangled moral issues with clear connections being drawn between these incisive observations and the fundamental theological convictions out of which they arise. No one of these books accomplishes this formidable task. Each falls short on the side of particularity, though this criticism is more applicable to Pannenberg and Barth than to Gustafson, in that Gustafson will address more specific moral questions in the second volume that is to follow the first.

On the other side it must also be acknowledged that addressing the theological foundations of ethics is not irrelevant to the resolution of

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particular issues. At the deepest level of existence each person functions from some basic integrating perspective when entering the hospital room, the counseling session, a home for a pastoral visit, the committee meeting, or the pulpit. Some such perspective affects everything one does. It is helpful to bring this perspective into the open for self-conscious examination. For all their differences, each of these books seeks to contribute to Christian ethics at this basic level of reflection. They realize their aims in more and less helpful ways.

Of the three books, Pannenberg's *Ethics* is the least helpful. This negative judgment does not reflect an assessment of the content of his theological or ethical position. It reflects the limitation of the kind of book it is. This collection of essays written over a sixteen-year period (1962–77) is not arranged chronologically. The essays are grouped around three general topics, namely, theological foundations for an approach to the social order (society, law, the crisis of ethics), discussion of the theology and ethics of certain figures (Gerhard Ebling, Ernst Troeltsch, Martin Luther), and reflections at a high level of generalization on moral issues (world peace, the unity of humankind). The essay form does not permit Pannenberg to develop major theses supported by sustained argumentation. As a result one finds repetition of rather commonly held thoughts about both historical figures and moral questions.

Despite the limitations of the essay form, however, Pannenberg's offerings are not devoid of insight. Three basic theological/ethical themes can be observed in what has been collected. The first is that ethics (law, society) must acknowledge its metaphysical and theological foundations (18, 77). Failure to recognize the true ground of ethics provides the avenue for turning finite human structures into absolute ones. He develops this foundation both apologetically as "truth" or "the whole of reality" (44–46), and confessionally as God's sovereign rule as manifested in the lordship of Christ (10, 137). For ethical implications, he relies primarily on the confessional formulation and stresses the importance of conceiving of God's rule and kingdom as constructively related to the highest human good in order to avoid the disastrous results of certain of Luther's and Lutheranism's negative formulations of the relation between the spiritual and earthly kingdoms (110, 127–29).

Pannenberg's second theme is an obvious corollary of the first. A social order properly acknowledging its theological foundation is itself finite and provisional, and cannot on its own accord be endowed with ultimate significance (11, 136, 185). His third theme articulates some of the ethical principles related to the theological foundations that govern decisions about the social order. Unfortunately these do
not achieve any more specificity than the rather common references to
equality, freedom, love, and peace (21, 65, 137, 139, 146, 151, 156).
Some value always accompanies the repetition of basic truths. But
these essays do little to advance the discussion at any level—ideologi­
ically, historically, or ethically. No doubt, this failure results primarily
from the limitations of the essay form.
Gustafson’s *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* does not suffer from
the strictures of episodic observations. His work leaves no doubt about
a persistent theological thesis supported by sustained argumentation.
At issue is only the adequacy of the theological perspective advanced.
Gustafson’s basic concern is to displace Christian ethical reflection’s
preoccupation with what is good for human purposes and well-being
as the central criterion of moral content (9, 18, 93, 104, 112, 186). In its
stead he argues that the concern for “the human” needs to find its limit
and its place in the wider context of a cosmocentric and theocentric
perspective. For him the question is not what is good for human
purposes. It is how human concerns can fit into God’s purposes; how
humans can honor and glorify God (18, 19, 25, 41, 113, 342); how
human ends can appropriately be related to all other things in their
common relation to the power that both sustains and bears down on us
(113, 158, 164, 195-99). Gustafson wants anthropocentrism replaced
with theocentrism. He wants tunneled human vision replaced with a
wider vision (308-15).
The question about Gustafson’s proposal is whether the specific type
of theocentrism he advances is actually strong enough to provide the
center he wants, or whether in fact he does not really propose an
enlightened, critically understood cosmocentrism. Admittedly, this
question is overstated. Certainly, important dimensions of what
Gustafson seeks to express would be lost if all reference to God were
removed. But that is precisely the point. Exactly what would be lost?
What irreducible remainder of what he wants to affirm could not be
expressed in terms of humans finding their appropriate place and limit
within the fabric of the cosmic and social order? Putting this question
this way reflects two concerns. Are Gustafson’s theological affirma­
tions so weak as to provide almost no meaningful sense to assertions of
divine freedom, agency, and rule? With his strong emphasis on human
empirical verification for theological statements, despite his noble
efforts to displace human well-being as the center of ethics, does a kind
of anthropocentrism remain after all? Does he have an anthropocen­
trism not of content, but of criteria of perception?
Gustafson’s theology is his own version of Tillich’s method of
correlation. But in Gustafson’s case empirical analysis, both scientific
and social, replaces philosophy in establishing the limits of what can be
said about God and God’s action. Gustafson relies on two sources to
generate his theological claims. One is the Christian tradition itself,
though it is primarily the Calvinist tradition filtered through Jonathan
Edwards. The second is religious piety, what he identifies with his
human and religious “senses” of dependence, gratitude, obligation,
repentance, possibility, and direction (61, 130-34, 260-78). But what he
is willing to say about the theological dimensions of these claims is both
tentative and strictly limited by “human experiences, both ordinary
and critical,” and “modern accounts and explanation of nature and
other objects to which we are related” (226). More specifically he states
that “ideas of God cannot be incongruous with well-established data
and explanatory principles established by relevant sciences and must
be in some way indicated by these” (257). Thus, even though he seeks
to displace human concerns as the central criterion of ethical reflection,
how strong is the theocentric focus when human perception of divine
possibilities and limits still remains in a significant sense “the measure
of all things”?

Gustafson is not unaware of what he has done. He knows the
problem with which he wrestles. He knows the options, and he has
made his choice (226). In his discussion of Karl Rahner he queries,
“How does one in a prudent effort not to say too much too specifically
and with excessive certitude, say enough about God to develop a
theological ethic?” (37) This is the question that must be addressed to
his own work.

His theological affirmations are marked by tentativeness. His
descriptions of the senses of dependence, gratitude, etc., are
compelling. But his statements about their theological ground is weak.
It is not clear that he himself asserts that God is the final ground of these
senses. Instead he appears primarily to describe what the Christian
tradition asserts, and how religious piety views their foundation (133,
135). The Christian tradition asserts that God is the Other. Through
Gustafson’s description of human experience he seems willing only to
say that it is not unreasonable to move from the experience of others to
the experience of an Other. He clearly admits that he is dependent on
the Christian tradition for his basic theological assertions (195). The
question is whether he himself is willing in some straightforward and
flatfooted way to assert not only that it is plausible to conceive of God
as the Other, but that God is the Other. He speaks of the sense of a
powerful other (164), of the powers that sustain and bear down on us
(195), of persons being limited and sustained by governance (187, 205).
But what is affirmed about God in this context is limited by what can be
“experientially confirmed” (234). Hence, as with most apologetic
theologians, the real sense in which he speaks of divine initiative and
action in his discussion of God as creator, sustainer, judge, and redeemer is severely limited (236-48). In order to retain the title "theocentric" does Gustafson not in some sense need to advance some strong theological claims?

This same theological tentativeness is evidenced in his reliance upon depicting theology as a way of construing the world (135). This again is a descriptive statement, an indication of how theology functions. It is not a statement that itself asserts anything about the content of theology. Statements about God such that it is "plausible to acknowledge" (92), or that "it may be perceived" (195) are characteristic of this work. Gustafson is concerned that he does not claim too much for theology (33). I think it can be said that he does not.

Does he on the other hand claim too much for the human? He is realistic in his own perception of human sin, "the human fault," namely, the human tendency to idolatry, pride, infidelity, and sloth (185, 293-304). Does he in the light of this show excessive confidence in the ultimate test value of refracted and reflective human experience? Theologically, is there not a significant sense in which God ultimately tests us? Some of Gustafson's modifications of traditional theological claims about divine action and providence (179, 180, 186, 187, 274) and about personal immortality (183) are important. But behind the literal meaning of some of these traditional theological affirmations lies a fundamental claim about the priority of God, about the initiative, action, and agency of God's rule. Before theological claims such as these, we do not so much have a reason to be tentative about what we say about God. We have reason to be tentative about ourselves, about what we say God can and cannot do. In contrast with Gustafson (226), but in sympathy with Kierkegaard, I think that despite all that reasoned reflection on experience can say, faith in God finally requires a qualitative leap. Finally, either God rules or we do, and the ultimate choice between these alternatives is unavoidable.

Gustafson's observations about the limits of human concerns as they are to be discerned in their relation to the relation of all things to God are helpful (186, 197-99, 338-41). The primary question is that with his still considerable confidence in human perception, has he not too severely limited God?

Barth's problem is precisely the opposite. Gustafson stresses the priority of human experience and is most tentative in his affirmations about God. Barth stresses the priority of God's action and is most tentative about his affirmations of human responsibility. Throughout all of Barth's writings his strongest affirmations have been about divine action—the action of God in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit. This is the objectivism of his thought. It is not that he does not make
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affirmative statements about human action. He does. It is just that his strong conception of human sinfulness never permits those affirmations to stand without immediate qualification. He continually takes back with his left hand what he gives with his right. As a result, Barth's ethics have consistently been the weakest aspect of his theological thought.

With The Christian Life, a translation of the last lecture fragments of the Church Dogmatics, the previous ethical fragment of the Dogmatics, IV/4 (Baptism, § 75), is framed on both sides. Now present is his general introduction to the special ethics of the doctrine of reconciliation (§ 74), and his exposition of the invocation ("Our Father," § 76), and two petitions of the Lord's Prayer ("Hallowed be thy name," § 77, and "Thy kingdom come," § 78). His intention to complete this section of his ethics with his exposition of the remainder of the prayer, and with a closing section on eucharist or thanksgiving, was not fulfilled.

These last fragments contain all of Barth's most characteristic themes. They show that while shifts of emphasis may be discerned in his thought, he is predominantly faithful to his fundamental theological concerns. His increasing focus on christology, evident in II/2, did lead to a stronger emphasis on the sovereignty of divine grace. But his radical understanding of human sinfulness, most strongly articulated in his Epistle to the Romans, persists throughout his writings. The recurrent themes seen in these fragments confirm the fundamental continuity of his thought.

Barth's main points in this volume are three, namely, his strong assertion of the priority of divine action and rule, his radical negations of human self-reliance and self-righteousness, and his tentative affirmations of human action as it reflects and witnesses to (attests) divine action and rule. Barth's most important assertions, in contrast with Gustafson's, are his characteristically strong affirmations of the absolute priority of God's free gracious electing and judging action, rule, and claim upon human life manifested in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. God's action in relation to the human is God's free electing decision (5). All that is human receives the content of its determination from the faithful God who in relation to unfaithful persons elects, claims, confronts, engages, decides, judges, justifies, sanctifies, and calls them into service (6, 10, 15, 157, 185). God reaches and seizes (32). God commands and rules. God establishes right and righteousness (237-61).

His affirmations about divine action, in principle, give Barth the strongest theological position available for the strongest imaginable ethic. God's rule has already begun in creation (116), and in Jesus Christ (166, 167). The parousia began at the Resurrection (8, 111). In
God's action in Jesus Christ, God's kingdom has already come, God's will has already been done (11). Nothing human can escape God's lordship in Christ and God's final triumph over the lordless powers (214, 218). This is a victory which has been accomplished in fact in Jesus Christ, and in principle for all who live "between the times." Hence, it is impossible for believers to accept that one is both righteous and sinner, that one is simul iustus et peccator (158-62). God's action in creation and in Christ has established God's lordship, and there is no room for darkness (147). The existence of darkness usurps God's rule (148). This is the Calvinist strand in Barth's thought. It provides a very strong basis in principle from which believers could receive their marching orders as they attempt to bring personal, ecclesial, and communal life into congruence with divine rule.

Protestations to the contrary, however, there is a simul in Barth's thought. Believers are conceived as simultaneously saved and sinners, and Barth is prevented from drawing the constructive conclusions for ethics that are provided in principle in the Calvinist strain in his thought. His aversion to drawing these ethical inferences stems from his concern to protect the freedom of God, from his radical assertion of human sin, and from a residual strain of existentialist occasionalism.

On the theological side, Barth is reluctant for persons to order personal and social life according to principles drawn from basic theological insights since it interferes with the freedom of God in the next moment to do and require a new thing (4). This point is reinforced on the human side by his residual existentialist occasionalism. Barth, wanting theology to be free of the influence of any philosophical school, would protest this accusation. But the impact of existentialism persists nonetheless. He consistently characterizes the interaction between God and persons as an ever-new event (32, 142, 143). Such an approach to divine human interaction does not arise from the study of Scripture alone.

A commitment to the freedom of God and the persistent influence of existentialism contribute to preventing Barth from developing his ethics, but the major factor is the same one that deeply affected Luther's thought, namely, his strong emphasis on the radical nature of human sin. Barth, like Luther, fundamentally distrusts the human proclivity to self-justification and self-reliance. His greatest fear is that any power given into human hands will be turned against God in self-assertion (105). At all cost he seeks to avoid this consequence. Hence, no affirmation of human responsibility is permitted to stand without immediate major qualification. All affirmations of the human are tentative and must be hedged by constant reminders of human
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Sinfulness. God's goodness is absolute. Human goodness is problematic (3). In relation to God the Father, persons are always unprepared, undeserving, weak little children (79), in total poverty (88), who constantly resist grace (179, 185). Human sinfulness exhibits itself in the manifest ignorance of God in the world (122-24), in the church (138-40), and within oneself (151-53). As a result, after awhile, Barth becomes tiresome to read. In the very instant one is reassured by some of his affirmations about human action, one knows in the very next instant he will find some way to undercut them. And he does.

What affirmations of human responsibility he does make, then, either reflect divine action and, thus, do not stand on their own, or are of such a general nature as not to give anything specific to which humans can cling as their own possession. Always they are hedged by reminders of human sinfulness. Believers are to reflect divine action. In their action they are to "attest" God's action in Jesus Christ (20-22), to invoke or call upon God (43, 71), to witness to God's work (97), and to show zeal for the validity of God's word (111). At the most general level Barth affirms that God has elected to work in the world through the work of God's children (103). But the content he provides for this work, the lines of direction (7), remain at a high level of generalization. His ethics in this volume could be summarized as the human witness to divine lordship over against the lordless powers in solidarity with and for persons in the church and in the world. In attestation of God's lordship in Christ and the Holy Spirit, believers are in rebellion against the disorder of worldly powers that are in disobedience to that lordship (93, 173, 174, 207, 234). They seek to manifest God's solidarity with humankind (23, 68, 100-102, 198, 266), in being for human rights, human freedom, and peace on earth (205). Believers work for this as individuals but also communally in the decisive witness of the church (70, 82, 83, 190). This is the work and struggle of believers between the times, between the time of God's action in creation and Jesus Christ, and the time of God's final victory.

The importance of the affirmations Barth does make is not to be discounted. But as with Pannenberg, the specificity of their content is not all that helpful. For all the value of Barth's theology, the unresolved tension between the Calvinist and Lutheran roots of his thought, exacerbated by the residue of existentialism, leaves his ethics in this volume, as in much of the rest of the Dogmatics, caught in generalization, vacillation, and ambivalence. Dialectics may be good for theology, but it is bad for ethics. Finally, I think, the ethical dimension of Barth's thought is unsatisfactory. Each of the books considered has its strengths and weaknesses. Gustafson's and Barth's works are particularly thought-provoking.
Their observations are valuable not only for what they themselves propose, but also for the sparks they strike in dialogue with the reader. Neither of these volumes offers a completely adequate treatment of the subject. But both are worthy resources as one develops a position of one's own. Which of these books the reader should pursue, if not both, depends on which side of one's thought needs most to be challenged—the theological or the human.
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