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QUARTERLY REVIEW
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Summer, 1987

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EDITORIAL:
THE WRITING PASTOR

CHARLES E. COLE

Aug. 18, [1851]

I preached on the plaza at 4 1/2 to a multitude of men of every cast. Gamblers, etc. When I was speaking of the death of the ungodly, how miserable they died, some poor wicked wretch cried out it is a lie & swore most profanely. He was shot I guess under the fifth rib & could not stand it much longer. They soon took him off...*

So wrote Methodist preacher Charles Maclay in his journal while attending annual conference at San Francisco. As an example of pastoral writing it is modest enough but slightly unusual. The ambiguous wording caused some to wonder later if Maclay, who sometimes carried a sidearm, may have been the one who “took off” the dissenter in his midst.

Few members of today’s clergy write about such intriguing topics, although it is possible many have considered the possibility of disposing of querulous laity and perhaps bothersome bishops by the means that Maclay intimates. Members of the clergy do write, however, and yet not enough write, and of those who do, not enough do it well. The lack of good writing by the clergy is unfortunate, because men and women of the clergy have distinctive opportunities to reflect on the human condition and the great issues of the day in a way that qualifies them to write. The clergy also, perhaps more than other professional groups, does its work through words. Assumption: Those who live by the Word must know how to craft words.

Conclusion: wrong assumption. What then might be some sound premises for clergypersons who want to write?

One assumption is that writers are crazy. Why do I say this? Because writing is not only hard work but possibly hazardous to one's health. Members of the clergy should not act superior toward all those writers who became alcoholics. Narrow is the gate here, and the desperate writer turns to any source of inspiration available. Theodore White's aphorism was, "I write with bourbon, but I always rewrite with coffee." The initial impulse is compulsive, agonizing, often ecstatic. The revision is extremely hard work.

Writing remains the heart of the thinking and imagining central to our being. Writing makes us sweat because we are pulling something up out of our insides, something that belongs to our inmost being, and we feel driven to share it. Preachers who can remember how fervently they preached after their early calling, and how matter-of-fact their preaching became in later years, may scoff at this description of writing. And admittedly one cannot maintain the terrible intensity of the possessed artist. Yet truly creative writing requires more than the journeyman mentality, and anyone who contemplates becoming a writer needs to understand that a price must be paid.

We are justified in paying the price if we have something to say and can say it well. Most good writers write about limited subjects they know well out of their own experience. Their writing does not come with a generic label but always bears a brand name. That is, it is specific to the writer, the subject, and the reader. Thus one of the first tasks facing a writer is: what am I good for? Or maybe we should ask: what good am I for? When you know that, you know what you can write about and for whom you can write. This goodness comprises the individual identity and experience of the writer and is not some abstract moral principle. Unless a writer learns how to express this unique voice, the copy turned out will be lifeless, abstract, uninspiring—which are exactly the vices of much that is printed but could never be considered literature.

I do not mean to imply that good English has no general characteristics. One suggestion I have for anyone wanting to write for publication is to read The Elements of Style, by William
EDITORIAL

Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White. These writers characterize good English as possessing grace, clarity, and force. They seem to work out of an old-fashioned philosophy that values the spare and the accurate over the rich and the colorful. Since Strunk and White wrote, we have learned to love writers who go beyond their traditional aversion to the luxuriant and the fantastic. I think of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, many science fiction writers, and writers like D. M. Thomas and Philip Roth who combine the mythological and the real. Nevertheless, overwriting and prolixity are greater dangers for most writers than writing that is too thin and spare. Strunk and White provide some general principles to which most writers must pay heed, especially beginning or inexperienced writers.

The authorities I rely on, besides Strunk and White, are H. W. Fowler, *Modern English Usage*, and Wilson Follett, *Modern American Usage*. In recent years there has been a proliferation of works, particularly on American English. Writers like Theodore Bernstein, Edwin Newman, and William Safire have elaborated on slang and popular nuances, and they have helped make Americans aware that language, though plastic, has its limits and its proper usage. These advocates of good American English stand in contrast to the semanticist school so beloved of some journalists and educators. S. I. Hayakawa and Rudolf Flesch have stressed the need for simplicity—have overstressed it, in my view—and have also argued for the kind of manipulation that advertising has made great use of. I refer to the emphasis on “you” and to the conscious use of emotionally loaded terms (“heart,” “home,” “feel”) to gain a response. This utilitarian philosophy contrasts with the understanding of language as organic to the human being that Strunk and White and others espouse.

Another important component of the more traditional view is the close link between thinking and writing. Whereas advertising and the media magnify the importance of feeling and talking, William Zinsser advises, “Clear thinking becomes clear writing: one can’t exist without the other” (*On Writing Well*, 1976 ed., p. 7). This separation of thinking from feeling may at first seem artificial and even wrong, especially to pastors. But not if we understand language to be the single most characteristic
human activity and one that embraces thought, will, feeling, and all that is innately human.

Writers who are also readers can appreciate why clear thinking needs underscoring. An enormous amount of contemporary writing seems to spring from something other than the human mind. We are daily attacked by atavistic advocates for anti-intellectual audacities. We are likely to blame commercial interests for this degradation of language, and surely many people in marketing and public relations must accept some blame for the blather that passes for English. Bureaucrats are another target, and they too have been guilty of some of the worst modern contortions of our beloved language. Yet we should honestly admit that religion and education have also been responsible for some of the vacuous verbal monstrosities that afflict us. Thus we come back around to the importance of clear thought.

Pastors and members of the clergy have some advantages over other writing professionals, however, and one of them is the conditioning to think with the use of metaphor and symbol. As Sallie McFague wrote, "Metaphor is ordinary language. It is the way we think" (Metaphorical Theology, p. 16). Since we are talking here about narrative and story as well, we can see that pastors have a natural base on which to build constructive writing habits. Analysis, induction, deduction, and logic—all these can be extremely helpful in writing. But they remain instrumental to the more critical principles of metaphoric language. The use of metaphor enables writers to do much more than merely inform or explain. It provides an avenue to actual disclosure, to suggestion and imaginative participation. Preachers know this.

Another trait of most preachers and pastors that predisposes them toward writing is an appreciation for the other person. Writers must have sympathy and understanding for the reader, just as preachers do for a congregation of listeners. True, there is a classical debate here: does one write for oneself or for the reader? White wrote, for instance, that although writers must sympathize with readers, "the whole duty of a writer is to please and satisfy himself, and the true writer always plays to an audience of one" (Elements of Style, p. 70). And it is true that a
writer must be seriously intent on writing, almost compulsive about it. The way I would respond to White is: one writes for oneself but publishes for others. That is, insofar as writing is an essentially lonely task, as a writer one must satisfy the voice within and must write only what one sincerely thinks or feels. Letters, poetry, journals (like the one of Charles Maclay quoted at the beginning of this essay), and many prayers are composed this way. But when someone asks to have that writing published, then the focus must necessarily shift to the reader. For then one is engaged in a social task, writing that seeks to gain the attention of others and converse with them.

This basic need to think of the reader is often flouted (not flaunted, unless one is a total exhibitionist), and the result is typically writing that is overlong, boring, and irrelevant. We could find some good examples in academic writing, which is often published for reasons other than the need to be read; but think of how many instances of this we see in church committee reports, church board publications, and religious books. Editors are mightily sensitive to such vapid prose, and any aspiring writer would do well to ask at each point in a piece of writing, "Does anyone need to read this?"

A greater problem for preachers is how to make the transition from an oral to a literary form. The biggest difference in speaking and writing is simply one of time—a reader can absorb language much faster than a listener. Preachers know that in order to get the attention of a congregation they must first strike a sensitive chord, and they also know that in order to keep that attention they must string things out, so to speak. A good preacher knows how to enrich and elaborate so that listeners not only follow the discourse but become engaged. (Television has shortened the span of time in which all this takes place, but listening still takes longer than reading.) When this same mode of language is applied to the printed page, however, the language becomes loose and readers are likely to become impatient and lose interest. Good writing is compact, succinct, and to the point.

In emphasizing brevity, we should not slight the importance of explanation or argument. One of the most common failures of writers, even well-known writers, is that they do not show the reader how they got from point A to point B. A writer needs to
test a discourse or narrative by asking, "What is the basic argument? Does it flow? Would it be clear to someone else?"


Three things would help most writers that I encounter in my work as an editor: (1) Tell readers why you are writing—what is the problem, the question, the issue that you propose dealing with, and why is it important? (2) Write aesthetically; that is, provide concrete details, helpful metaphors, and pregnant quotes and intimations throughout a written piece. (3) Develop the thought, so that a reader who becomes engaged will ascend from one level of thought to another and finally to a conclusion. The conclusion, however, can often be inconclusive, particularly if the writer has been honest and, after investigating, finds the problem or question more complex than originally thought. Some writers actually compose the conclusion first as a discipline in thinking clearly.

One of the most common mistakes of writers is a failure to consider the relation of development of thought, or argument, to the scope of a piece. The scope can be too narrow, as when one writes fifteen pages on what Wesley thought of lame horses; or too broad, as when an essayist proposes to show the integration of behavioristic psychology with kinetics. Somewhere in between lies the happy medium that we as editors and readers desire. It is the difference between making an entire meal of potato chips and Kool-Aid and consuming a repast of two salads, three entrees, and a couple of desserts. The judgment about whether one has achieved this happy medium is subjective but closely related to the maxim about thinking and its relation to writing—if you can think it through and state it within the appropriate space, it is right.

Another problem facing writers is how to say something new or original. But as a caveperson must have asked, "What is originality?" It lies as much in articulation as substance. Many times writers succeed, not because they have revolutionary ideas, but simply because they can state things in a fresh or clear way. Most of us have appreciated survey writers this way.
Someone who can look back over the history of Christian doctrine or ethics or theology and help us to see the connections is a helpful teacher. Similarly, sometimes writers can use humor, satire, or an unusual extended metaphor to throw light on a common problem. The putative exemplary model for a writer, however, remains the person who by experience or research has come up with an insight or conclusion that alters our view of a subject. The underlying question that editors ask is, “Does this writer say anything new or different about this subject?”

Perhaps it is not necessary to list other mistakes that writers make. Most writers know what is appropriate to send to a publication, and most know they should send material to only one publication at a time. Publications differ on acceptance of previously published material, but a writer should always make clear whether the material has been published. Writers sometimes become tendentious through using too few sources—it is always possible to find a thinker who agrees with your own prejudices and then expound on how profound this thinker is. Tone can sometimes be a problem, too, and good writers address their readers as equals without talking down to them or moralizing.

It is only fair to ask what writers can expect from editors. Suppose you have written something you believe has value, and you send it to a journal like ours. What should you assume will happen to your valuable work? One justified assumption is that you will hear from the editor in a reasonable period of time. Reasonable, like everything else in this creation, is relative. In our case, we acknowledge receipt of materials within a week or two, but it may take from two weeks to three months for us to tell a writer whether we will publish the material. Writers should not necessarily expect their manuscripts to be returned, especially if they were unsolicited, but if they do not hear from an editor within a reasonable time they are justified in withdrawing their manuscripts from consideration.

Another expectation: writers should expect criticism. The criticism may be succinct, of course: “Your manuscript is inappropriate for a journal dedicated to reflection on ministry.” But it can also be long and constructive. Following a review, a writer should expect some requests for revisions. Not all these need to be complied with, but here the writer and editor must
have a conversation about what will make the piece strong and publishable. Finally, writers should expect their work to be edited. Relativity here enters in again, but it is a rare writer (empirical data indicate a null set) who does not need to have some vague antecedents clarified or some unnecessary words struck. Writers who refuse to be edited are a little like chefs who do not want waiters to handle their food.

How does one begin writing? Usually with reading. Reading good writers imbues us with an appreciation for strong language, and it provides us with good models. Above all, one should read the publisher that one intends to write for. Try to discern what the publisher likes or does not like, what the publishing enterprise is all about. Eliminate those inappropriate manuscripts. Usually you can read the fine print in the front of a periodical to discover its purpose, but it is also good form to write a letter of query before investing too much time in writing. A no at an early stage can enable a writer to put energy into the most worthwhile projects. And a yes—well, it's an invitation that motivates.

Most teachers of writing advocate writing every day, and probably preachers and pastors are used to doing so. The writing might be strictly personal, and many good writers develop a discipline of writing a short amount each day, even if it is discarded later. Sometimes, though, the schedule of a pastor makes it impossible to sit down and write daily, so iron rules cannot apply. Undoubtedly, any serious writer is continually writing in his or her head, however, so that as new experiences take place one is thinking how to shape them for writing. (Inside every writer exists an editor, however sloppy or easygoing.)

Writers should expect negative criticism and rejection. Mark Twain said that after writing something, the writer should ask a friend or colleague to read it and comment on it. After receiving this response, the piece should be revised. This process should be repeated several times. Finally, wrote Twain, when everyone else is happy with a piece and the author is completely disgusted with it, it is ready for publication. Since the greatest virtue needed by a writer is courage, this experience of failure must be endured and overcome. The solution is obvious: keep trying.

—Charles E. Cole
Why Wesley always emerges as closer to practical ministry than to systematic theology.

This paper reflects my dissatisfaction with a standard conception of theology and its application to John Wesley's thought. In the light of this standard view the substance of his thinking looks derivative and second-rate and its form unhelpful. But what if Wesley's thought diverges from that standard not because of its weakness but because it is ordered according to a different conception of what theology is and does? What if the measuring stick rather than the object measured is askew? If we set aside our preconceived notions about theology and examine Wesley's thought on its own terms, we begin to see in it a kind of complexity and integrity not generally appreciated, and in doing so learn to conceive of theology and its task in a different way.

According to a standard view, theology is essentially an intellectual discipline in which Christian doctrines are constructed, interpreted, and arranged. The results of the process are "theologies" or schemes of concepts organized in some cohesive way. What makes a theology distinctive is the particular slant given a doctrine (e.g., Augustine on sin), or the innovative arrangement of doctrines (e.g., Luther's sola fide). The form this conceptual deliberation takes and the application

Mark L. Horst is associate pastor at Excelsior United Methodist Church in Excelsior, Minn. He is a graduate of Yale University, with a Ph. D. in theology. Current research interests include exploring ways to recover an understanding of theology as the language of the church, and Wesley's psychology of spiritual formation.
made of it, according to this view, are of secondary importance and of interest to those called practical theologians.

I find this picture overly formalized as a general account of what theologians do; but when applied to Wesley it is particularly incongruous. This application presses his interpreters in two equally unsatisfactory directions. Either they search his sermons for the conceptual scheme which constitutes his “real” theology, and which—it seems to them—he did not always work out very clearly, or they concede that Wesley was not about the standard theological task and admit that he popularized theology for the sake of simple folk.¹

In his address to the Seventh Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, Albert Outler warned his listeners against confining Wesley’s thought in this way: “All theologies claiming to be Wesleyan must be based on the whole Wesley as he was (and not on this aspect or accent in his thought and praxis) . . . He must be investigated on his own grounds and in accordance with his own theological intentions—which were not, in the first instance, denominational nor sectarian.”² Outler’s warning challenges us to immerse ourselves in the rich and exciting variety of Wesley’s theological activity.

Wesley never clearly characterized his own reflection, and he remained unconcerned with questions of theological method. Any attempt to discern the “method” or logic of his thought must begin with what he does rather than what he says about it. If his theologizing has a discernible method it seems to have been uneystematically determined by his life of religious reflection and concern, to have sprung from his understanding of the nature of Christian faith. It is, says Outler, “a theology less interested in the order of Christian truth (as in school theologies generally) than in the Christian life. Its specific focus is the order of salvation as an eventful process that stretches across the whole horizon of Christian existence” (p. 44).

In order to examine the character of his thinking more closely, we need to isolate and examine a strand of it. His discussion of faith is worth our attention in this regard, for it shows both the precision and breadth of his thinking. Rather than thoroughly investigating his remarks on faith, I intend to examine the kind of issues he considers respecting it, my aim being the general
characterization of the content and form of his thought. We find Wesley concerned with several aspects of faith: its intellectual, dispositional, and practical components, all of which sustain a Christian form of life.

INTELLECT, DISPOSITION, AND PRACTICE

Faith has a significant intellectual component: it is insufficiently though necessarily characterized by assent to the Christian truth set forth in a variety of creedal and doctrinal summaries. Whatever else faith may be, it is in part the intellectual recognition of certain true propositions. Wesley does not do much more with this claim than show forth its insufficiency: the devil himself shares this faith with us. It is nevertheless important to see that the doctrinal formulas have a necessary place in the life of faith, that creedal doctrines are "interwoven with all true Christian faith."3

Those truths to which believers assent are significant to the extent that they order our thoughts and actions, emotions and attitudes. They provide a context in which we strive, fear, rejoice, and hope. Wesley notes both the significance and the limitations of intellectual assent when he says, "Though the form [e.g., creedal assent] may be without the power [i.e., the love of God and neighbor], the power cannot be without the form. Outward religion may be where inward is not; but if there is none without, there can be none within" (7:457-458). Creedal faith might be impoverished, but without such assent there could be no faith at all.4

Saving faith is characterized not only by assent to the truth but by certain dispositions in the believer. "From the faith of a devil it is fully distinguished by this—it is not barely a speculative, rational thing, a cold, lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head; but also a disposition of the heart" (5:9; emphasis added). The treatment of faith as a "disposition of the heart" twists in and out of Wesley's work in seemingly endless variations.

In a general way, "disposition" indicates the way faith inheres in a human life. Faith is a disposition of the heart when it fundamentally reshapes the believer's attitudes and emotions, thoughts and practices in relation to God, our neighbor, and
ourselves. Wesley’s frequent summaries of faith make this clear. Right and true faith is “a sure trust and confidence which a man hath in God, that, by the merits of Christ, his sins are forgiven, and he reconciled to the favour of God; whereof doth follow a loving heart, to obey his commandments” (5:23). Saving faith is distinguished from creedal assent by the dispositions of trust and confidence manifest in the allaying of our fears and anxieties as well as the fortitude of our hope and love.

Faith is a disposition of the heart when it fundamentally reshapes the believer’s attitudes and emotions, thoughts and practices in relation to God, our neighbor, and ourselves.

The “disposition” of faith can be described in both “outward” and “inward” terms; the reshaping of a life has many aspects. Faith brings about an outward and visible change in the believer’s life. “Here let no man deceive his own soul. It is diligently to be noted, the faith which bringeth not forth repentance, and love, and all good works, is not that right living faith, but a dead and devilish one” (5:23). Included in this outward form of godliness are the following: (1) doing nothing that the Gospel forbids, (2) doing good, (3) using the means of grace, and (4) sincerity and the hearty desire to do God’s will in all things.

Equally important for the disposition of faith is the inward transformation of the heart, including our emotions, motivations, and desires. Christian faith, according to Wesley, involves the whole body, “all that is guided by the intention, as the body is by the eye: All thou art; all thou doest; thy desires . . . ; thy thoughts, and words, and actions” (5:362). He boldly describes the kind of character transformation a believer ought to expect. Faith cuts a dramatic swath through the range of human capacities and abilities: it involves “such a love” of God “as engrosses the whole heart, as takes up all the affections, as fills the entire capacity of the soul, and employs the utmost extent of
all its faculties" (5:21). Dispositional faith, then, is a matter of reshaping our emotions and attitudes as well as our practices and thoughts.

Much of Wesley's preaching involves the specification and elaboration of the emotions and attitudes which are a part of saving faith. The Sermon on the Mount provides him with a portrait of faith in its various branches. He uses it to illustrate the complex character of Christian holiness and to specify the kind of dispositional change he looks for in believers. In doing so he uses a variety of categories, including "poverty of spirit," "purity of heart," "holy mourning," "meekness," and "mercifulness." Together they constitute a vocabulary of the heart and enable a finely textured evaluation of the inward religion which Wesley considers so much a part of faith.

In this way his discussion of faith filters out into a general evaluation of the human heart in its richness and diversity. His discussion of "meekness" typifies the general project. Wesley considers no disposition more essential to Christianity than meekness. He understands it to be a kind of emotion which regulates all other emotions. Vain imagination keeps the emotions from complete development while waiting for the future fulfillment of its wishes. Meekness counters this tendency by "preserving the mean in every circumstance of life" (5:263). It amounts to something like patience or contentedness. As such, meekness grounds the emotions in present experience rather than future hopes by directing them toward God. Of the meek Wesley says, "They are always content, always pleased with what they have: It pleases them, because it pleases God: So that while their heart, their desire, their joy is in heaven, they may truly be said to 'inherit the earth'" (5:266). Meekness orients the emotions so that the bounty of God's goodness can be known even in this life and God's promises tasted before their complete realization in eternal life.

A variety of practices or methods undergirds these dispositional features of faith. Among the practices frequently included in Wesley's explication of faith are prayer and fasting, self-examination, and reception of the sacraments. Prayer, for instance, seems to him not only the natural expression of faith but also a practice integral to the dynamic process of coming
near to God. He writes, "The Spirit or breath of God is immediately inspired, breathed into the new-born soul; and the same breath which comes from, returns to, God: As it is continually received by faith, so it is continually rendered back by love, by prayer, and praise . . . being the breath of every soul which is truly born of God. And by this new kind of spiritual respiration, spiritual life is not only sustained, but increased day by day" (5:226). This characterization is not merely poetical flourish; Wesley conceives of prayer as an essential practice for those related to God in faith.

His discussion of the practice of fasting shows something of the interrelation between the doctrinal, dispositional, and practical elements of faith. The practice of fasting helps form the dispositions of the heart. Wesley observes that people who are affected with any powerful passion are "often swallowed up therein, and even forget to eat their bread." Here then is a link between physical desires and the emotions. Indulging the physical appetites has equally direct consequences for the emotions, resulting in "sprightly folly," "airiness of mind," "levity of temper," "gay inattention," and a "giddiness and carelessness of spirit." Wesley reasons on the basis of this correlation that the process might be reversed so that in order "to remove, therefore, the effect . . . [we] remove the cause" (5:350). In this way he conceives fasting in the context of God's commandments and spiritual nurture to be a positive and potentially awakening enterprise. Every season of fasting might be "a season of exercising all those holy affections which are implied in a broken and contrite heart."

Wesley shows the dynamic relationship between the intellectual, affective, and methodical aspects of faith by treating it as a "form of life." As a well-defined way of life, Christianity could be distinguished from other characteristic forms. He distinguishes the natural state of humanity from the state of bondage to the law, both of which he contrasts with the state of adoption as children of God. In general, he thinks, "a few names may be found of those who love God; a few more there are that fear him; but the greater part have neither the fear of God before their eyes, nor the love of God in their hearts" (5:98). By speaking of faith as a form of life and by distinguishing it from other forms,
WESLEY'S THEOLOGY

Wesley gathers up all the component features of faith into a single description and illustrates their cumulative effect.

If completeness were our aim, this exposition of Wesley on faith would be far from finished; it has, however, served to show the wide-ranging nature of his discussion and to illustrate something of its inner coherence. We are now in a position to take a rough account of the content and form of theology as he practiced it.

CONTENT AND FORM

Our first question might be, can the theologian legitimately address such a broad range of interests in so varied a manner as Wesley does? But I think it best to postpone that question since, in its very formulation, it presupposes an understanding of what theology is and does. Let us, rather, recognize that Wesley does address a broad range of issues in a varied manner and consider the consequences of this strange mixture upon our understanding of the theological task. For Wesley, it seems to me, this variety of interests reflects a method of theologizing which continually struggles to account for the diverse and varied ways in which Christian faithfulness forms our lives. Theology is not one activity but many activities, each of which contributes to the formation of a Christian life.

Both the content and form of Wesley’s thought illustrate his continual refusal to separate a conceptual account of Christian truth from its application in the believer’s life. He seems unwilling to distinguish between practice and theory. Instead he elaborates theological concepts in terms of their use in the believer’s life and binds his discussion of Christian teachings and practices to emotions and attitudes. Wesley is concerned with the Christian life in its entirety; he therefore expands the scope of theology to include the practical, affective, and intellectual features of that life. A theological treatment of any of these components must also take the others into account.

For instance, theology is, at least in part, about the business of clarifying Christian doctrines. But for Wesley the achievement of clarity is a varied task that cannot always be accomplished by purely intellectual means. Wesley hardly doubts the perspicacity
of creedal formulas, but he does doubt the helpfulness of truth
in that form alone. God has not, after all, sent a son into the
world merely to show us something true, but to rescue us from
the bonds of sin and death. We can describe this activity in
propositional forms and assent to its truth, but these truths are

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mulas, but he does doubt the helpfulness of truth in that
form alone. God has not, after all, sent a son into the
world merely to show us something true, but to rescue us
from the bonds of sin and death.

theologically significant only to the extent that they are
interwoven into the life of faith. Wesley is particularly
concerned with lack of clarity as it develops in that relationship.
But because of the variety of ways in which doctrines relate to
dispositions and practices, that confusion can take many forms.
For that reason doctrinal clarity in Wesley has no standard
form—as it does, for instance, in Aquinas. What it means to be
clear about a doctrine might involve dispositional formation,
practical instruction, or conceptual explanation.

Wesley never ignores the bearing of the practical disciplines
on inward formation and doctrinal clarity; thus he further
elaborates the content of theology. Fasting and prayer, for
instance, properly fall within the domain of theological analysis.
Here again theology can plot the interweaving of faith's various
features.

The intertwining of doctrines and Christian inwardness
extends the content of theology to cover the range of attitudes
and emotions by which we exercise our faith. Wesley's interest
in the appropriation of Christian truth entails a rich and varied
description of Christian life with its emotional, motivational,
and passional content. That subjective or inward analysis
becomes part of the content of theology, so that the theologian
must be psychologically attentive to people in their great
diversity.
This treatment of emotions is at odds with certain modern theological trends. Wesley does not assume that Christian teachings and practices are simply an expression of certain emotive experiences. He is not interested in reducing the various aspects of Christian faith to one unifying factor. Instead he respects their integrity within the Christian life. By treating Christianity as a form of life, Wesley establishes a context in which to consider doctrines, disciplines, and emotions as contributions to that life without interpreting them as expressions of something different.

Wesley’s concern with general Christian wholeness extends his theological interests from creedal formulations to dispositional content to disciplines and practices. The range of his interests is remarkable but not surprising, given the nature of his task.

Attention to the Christian life in its various facets leads to a change in the form as well as the content of theology. Theology is not complete when we confine ourselves to discussing the range of concepts, emotions, and practices which compose the life of faith; we must be formed by them as well. Theology has a part in bringing to birth and nurturing faith; it promotes Christianity in its various aspects. For that reason theology, as Wesley practices it, cannot be done just on paper.

One consequence of this diversity is that theological reflection must be attentive to its own voice or mood: it cannot be neutral or dispassionate but is rightly characterized by a concern and love. Wesley’s work brims with examples of passionate concern for his listener. He terrifies and gladdens, he presses us to decision, urges us to see our failings, helps us to imagine the power of God and the peace of those who know it. In this way his writing engenders a proneness or susceptibility for Christian faith. It also sets various Christian doctrines in a proper emotional context. For example, sin is properly spoken of with a certain concern or seriousness, grace with joy and hope. We might go so far as to say that when theology fails to do this it falsifies its own teachings as they relate to Christian living.
By showing this concern with Christian living, theology becomes closely allied with the task of preaching. It is not at all surprising that so much of Wesley's own theological work takes that form, for the sermon includes the opportunity to promote Christian faith while attending to the mood of what is said. Many theologians have said that their work was done in the service of preaching, but Wesley makes good on that promise by aligning the concerns of theology with those of preaching.

But theology as Wesley practices it is more than preaching. Christian understanding is tethered to a much broader spectrum of activities. It seems, then, that the practice of a variety of disciplines or methods is part of being theological, so that prayer and fasting, scriptural study and self-examination, good works and self-denial are all aspects of the theological task. The business of the theologian is to exercise these features of Christian understanding and to encourage that understanding in others.

Here again the implications of Wesley's theological practice diverge from the standards of academic theology. He refuses to characterize Christianity in theoretical terms—no matter how practical the theory might be—overturning any form that isolates the intellectual from the dispositional or practical. Christian theology speaks the language of the heart, that is, it addresses the whole person and does so in a manner that accounts for the wholeness of our selves.

Wesley's practice avoids the modern notion that theological talk merely describes or expresses the interests which Christians of various persuasions already hold. Theology is not a malleable putty of our individual interests; it is the process of shaping lives according to the model of God's handiwork and therefore primarily a prescriptive rather than a descriptive exercise. It presupposes an obedience to God's will as concretely manifest in law and gospel and made known to us in Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

CONCLUSIONS

Much of what I have observed as characteristic of Wesley's thought cuts against certain rather popular ways of treating it, in at least three ways:
WESLEY'S THEOLOGY

(1) It undermines the idea that Wesley can best be understood as offering a popularized version of what theologians ideally might work out in their studies; it challenges the ideal of a systematic theology. Christian concepts are determined and explained by reference to the use we have for them rather than the arbitrary demands of a theological system.

The advantage of recognizing this feature of his thought is that it can prompt a vigilance against such demands in our treatment of Wesley and our own theological work. We do not need to conform our thinking about God to the expectations of the theological profession. Instead, Wesley's method puts the burden of explanation on those who insist that Christian concepts find their significance and meaning in systematic conceptual treatments. Furthermore, it encourages us to make all our thinking about the church and the Christian life theological thinking.

Judged on its own terms, the integrity of Wesley's thought depends more upon its effectiveness in forming lives than on its systematic character.

In his article, "Responsible Grace: The Systematic Nature of Wesley's Theology Reconsidered," published in this journal, Randy Maddox attempts to rescue Wesley from his "third-rank" standing as a theologian by demonstrating that Wesley's theology is, in fact, "scholarly and systematic." Rather than questioning the need for a "systematic" theology, Maddox attempts to redefine the criteria for determining the concept "systematic" in such a way that it can apply to Wesley. I think, however, that Wesley's theological interest in the whole of Christian life eliminates the importance of such a claim. Judged on its own terms, the integrity of his thought depends more upon its effectiveness in forming lives than on its systematic character. Maddox acknowledges the practical nature of Wesley's thought without realizing just how practical it actually is.

(2) It undermines the supposed need for a kind of intellectual
apologetic on behalf of Wesley’s theology. Much of the secondary literature seems intent on demonstrating that Wesley really is a learned scholar even though he does not write like one. The scholarly task becomes a matter of supplying the footnotes which Wesley neglected. But if there is something intentional about the method of his thought, then maybe all that scholarly apparatus is less significant. Perhaps Wesley’s neglect of it is itself as significant a feature of his work as the information he leaves out.

There is, after all, an important sense in which Wesley could be called an anti-intellectual; he understands the limitations of thought in relation to Christian life and is consequently critical of any attempt to make it something purely intellectual. Faith cannot be counterfeited by a few intellectual moves, because its authenticity is a matter of a whole life. If this theme is taken seriously, then, we must also consider the purpose of and need for scholarly formality in our time as well as his. Yet we cannot forget that Wesley’s constant and rigorous examination of Christian faith in its various facets led him to read, argue, and think with imagination and precision. His long life of reflection exemplifies an awakened and alert intellect.

(3) It undermines the treatment of Wesley as the cultural and historical captive of eighteenth-century England. The historian’s authority in theological matters can be exaggerated. We should not deny the relation of Wesley to his times, but we need not make that relation the sole criterion in understanding him.

Wesley’s own analysis of forms of life provides a basis on which we can converse with believers in another age; those who share a similar form of life might find a common understanding in spite of cultural differences. The most important thing standing between Christians of today and Wesley is an unwillingness to struggle after the perfection of faith, to be challenged by God’s abiding presence in our lives, and to see in the glass of creation the image of the Creator’s loving-kindness.

Wesley’s theological method might best be described as an experiment in Christian wholeness. His reflection follows the form of the faith he seeks to transmit. Because that faith affects not only our thinking, but also our practices, attitudes, and
emotions, his reflection ranges over these varied topics. But Wesley goes further than this. He extends the range of theology beyond the interweaving of these various topics. It seems that becoming theological, for him, also means encouraging these practices and thoughts, attitudes and emotions in our own lives and the lives of those to whom we minister. Theology, for Wesley, circumscribes the process by which our lives are renewed in God’s image and through which God shapes and molds us after the pattern of our Lord.

NOTES


3. 6:205; this and all subsequent citations from Wesley refer to The Works of John Wesley, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1872).

4. To say this, however, does not commit Wesley to the philosophical dogma that propositional truth claims serve as a logical foundation for Christian faith. Jerry Walls argues unconvincingly for such a position in his article, “What Is Theological Pluralism?” Quarterly Review 5:3 (Fall 1985): 44-62.

5. This notion finds voice in the pages of the 1984 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, ¶9, pp. 82-83.

"THIRD-CLASS" MINISTRY:
URBAN MINISTRY IN THE SMALLER CITY

GILBERT R. RENDLE, JR.
AND
FRANK H. SANDERS III

There are significant differences between large metropolitan areas and smaller cities—differences that call into question the assumption that strategies for urban ministry appropriate to the large city should be used as models for ministry in the smaller city.

No one really questions the need for ministry to the city. Urban ministry is as biblical as Abraham interceding for Sodom, Jonah being sent off unwillingly to Nineveh, and Paul moving without ceasing through the major cities of the New Testament world with his ministry to the gentiles. Somehow the arithmetic increase in the number of people in the city geometrically increases the need for and the opportunity to minister to human suffering and to speak a word of hope to listening ears. The past and present need for ministry to our cities has moved us ever steadily toward the concept of "urban ministry," and virtually every annual conference with a metropolitan area within its bounds has focused its thinking, staff, resources, and financial support on some form of ministry to the urban setting.

But what needs to be recognized is that all urban ministry is not the same in all situations. All too often the magnitude and the intensity of human need in our cities has invited and guided
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the response from the church in crisis fashion. And, as we often do when responding to a crisis, we are not always careful to diagnose the uniqueness of each presenting problem before offering our solution. In some ways this approach has led us to make some questionable assumptions about our cities and our strategies for ministry to our cities. For although human need is universal from person to person and city to city, it is not equally true that all cities are alike. Neither do all cities with their attendant differences invite common or similar strategies of ministry.

As urban pastors who have served in both major metropolitan cities and in smaller cities, we have begun to look at "urban" churches, meaning, for us, those churches that (1) are actively involved in ministry to the city at a program level, (2) use their facilities as a site for one or more programs of ministry to the city, and (3) have church members as volunteers in city ministry programs. As pastors of such urban churches it has been our experience that in some ways we share a deep commonality with our sister and fellow clergy in other cities. But in some other subtle ways we experience that urban ministry in a very different way. And the critical variable that we would like to focus on is the size and structure of our cities. For we currently minister in "third-class" cities, a designation in the state of Pennsylvania indicating that we are not a major metropolitan area like Philadelphia (a "first-class" city) but that we have a population sufficiently large to be an "urban area" with urban resources, urban problems, and urban needs. Although we face many of the same problems as our colleagues in a major metropolitan area like Philadelphia (population 1,700,000), our smaller urban settings in Reading and Allentown (populations 79,000 and 103,000 respectively) present their problems and opportunities in different forms and require different responses. We would not suggest that ministries to the smaller urban settings are themselves one of a kind without variations and differences based on the uniqueness of each city setting. However, it is the general difference between major and smaller urban settings that we would focus on in this essay and which we believe makes our similar Christian ministries to both first- and third-class cities dissimilar in form and content.
The purpose of this essay, then, is to argue that urban strategies for ministry in smaller cities should be different from those in metropolitan areas. Some of these differences make the strategies more compatible with church initiatives, some less. But it is important to recognize the differences, because urban ministries in smaller cities have a character of their own, and only in appreciating its distinctiveness can we understand how to mold strategies that are effective and sound.

WHO DOES THE MINISTRY?

One of the critical differences can be identified by looking at who does the ministry. Churches in major metropolitan areas are likely to have paid professional staff directing and performing large segments of their ministry. Although they are far from devoid of volunteer participants, these churches seek direction and expertise in persons with special training, skill development, or ethnic heritage. In the smaller city, however, ministry is largely carried on by volunteers. The local pastor is often the only paid staff member, participating in the community programs of the church as a volunteer and adding those duties to the already full responsibilities of congregational leader and connectional professional.

In part, this difference between major metropolitan ministries and ministries to the smaller cities is tied to the differences among the churches of our cities. In the larger cities our United Methodist Church has a foundation in the ethnic minority sections of the population. In smaller city settings it is more accurate to describe the United Methodist churches as fully or substantially white, Anglo churches whose members continue to worship and minister at a location long after the neighborhood has gone through transition and the church members have made the switch from neighborhood to regional church, from local to commuter congregation. The difference in staffing, then, between metropolitan and smaller city ministries is related to the ethnic differences of the churches sponsoring the ministry. For with our denominational emphasis on the ethnic minority local church, major resources will continue to be directed toward major metropolitan areas where we find our ethnic minority
churches. Those churches will continue to find themselves with the financial resources to staff and direct their ministries professionally. Without that financial support from outside, the ministries in the smaller cities will continue to turn to their own more available resource, i.e., church members and volunteers (e.g., part-time or unemployed parents, and retired men and women), who see an opportunity for personal giving and personal growth in Christian ministry in their city.

Again, we would not argue that one form of urban ministry is to be preferred over the other. Rather, it is indicative of the different responses required by the differences in our cities and the churches of our different cities. From the smaller city perspective there are both advantages and disadvantages to the style of ministry required. On the plus side, the requirement to depend largely on volunteers offers opportunity to minister not only to the disenfranchised and troubled people of the city, but to the highly franchised and "untroubled" person as well. For if

**Simply in order to provide a sufficient volunteer and resource base to care for the multiplicity of responsibilities that must be handled without paid staff, a smaller city church sponsoring a program will need to reach out to include other churches connectionally or ecumenically.**

the suburban homemaker comes in to cook in the soup kitchen or the retired teacher with an academic background comes in to offer food or clothing to the migrant farm worker, both giver and receiver of ministry have had the opportunity to cross the silent and deadly barriers of race and class to confront the sameness and similarity of their lives in spite of their differences—an opportunity afforded to both persons almost nowhere else in our society.

Similarly on the plus side, the requirement to rely on volunteers forces the smaller city ministry into an easy and stable ecumenism. Simply in order to provide a sufficient volunteer and resource base to care for the multiplicity of responsibilities that must be handled without paid staff, a
smaller city church sponsoring a program will need to reach out to include other churches connectionally or ecumenically. For example, a food ministry program in one of our churches depends upon a pool of more than 150 volunteers, of which only about 40 come from the sponsoring church. The remainder of the volunteers represent members of other United Methodist churches, other Protestant denominational churches, Catholics, Jews, and persons who hold no faith identity but who find the work consistent with and important to their personal values.

On the negative side is the cost to the smaller city urban churches which sponsor the programs of ministry to the city. Since there are few major outside sources to provide funding and other resources to these programs, the local church that initiates and sponsors this urban work often assumes the double financial liability of congregational plus community ministry. In a day of limited resources to run our churches, this becomes a measure of sacrificial giving. For when "shoestring" smaller city ministries are trying to make ends meet, it is often the sponsoring church that fills in the missing resources through in-kind contributions of space, utilities, insurance, and materials. And perhaps more hidden is the double burden that comes from an inflated budget. For if the income of community support for such programs is added to the income side of the church budget, and program and operational expenses of such programs are added to the expense side of the church budget, the local congregational budget has been substantially inflated.

Also on the negative side is the double bind presented by the easy ecumenism. For, on the one hand, smaller city ministry programs need to be broadly ecumenical in order to amass the necessary resources, as mentioned above. On the other hand, if the ecumenical base is too broad, the hope of denominational support and involvement is diminished because a shared ecumenical base reflects less denominational control over available resources. Consider the current problem of emergency shelters for homeless persons. In one of our cities a shelter program is faced with the double bind with regard to Episcopal and United Methodist resources. On the one hand, the Episcopal involvement is determined by a principle that states that they will do nothing by themselves (denominationally)
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that is better accomplished with others (ecumenically). And Episcopal funds are unavailable without demonstration of full ecumenical control. On the other hand, as commercial liability insurance becomes increasingly impossible to purchase for such programs, the broad coverage of the United Methodist self-insurance program is also unavailable unless the shelter becomes a fully United Methodist program (i.e., excluding ecumenical control required by the Episcopal involvement). Such programs in the smaller cities are caught in the double bind of needing to be both ecumenically inclusive but denominationally controlled.

Finally, on the negative side of the ledger is the inflated personal cost to members of the smaller city urban clergy who find themselves in the dual full-time jobs of offering pastoral leadership to a church congregation and simultaneously offering program leadership to often risky, controversial, and very time-consuming urban ministries. A significant difference between the clergy in smaller third-class cities and metropolitan clergy is that the former are pastors of "regional" or "special interest" churches, whose present or prospective church members often travel some great distance to get to the church. And as they travel they are not only passing other city churches with similar programs and problems to get to their own city churches; they are also passing well-established and productive suburban churches which are able to offer full and significant congregational programs, such as active youth ministries, complete Christian education programs, and often specialty ministries to the elderly, single persons, interest groups, etc. The double or inflated responsibilities of the smaller city clergy are to offer leadership to community ministries that will call people into the city and into the city church, but then simultaneously to offer leadership to a congregational ministry "competitive" with the suburban offerings which will keep the people there once they have entered the city.

PERCEPTION OF SOLVABILITY

Another critical difference between metropolitan and smaller city ministries is the perception in smaller city urban churches
that something can be done to correct the problem and offer some lasting or systemic solution. The word "perception" is not used here to suggest that Christians in the smaller city are somehow naive in wanting to make critical changes nor to suggest that Christians in the metropolitan city are jaded or insensitive in not thinking that they can make critical changes in their city. It is more an issue of the magnitude of the problem and the assumptions that underlie efforts to work with the problem. For like the difference between a broken finger and a broken pelvis, both of which are broken bones, the size of the bone and the implications of the break change the perceptions and the spirit of the person who has to deal with the fracture.

This difference in assumption and attitude was exemplified in a conversation between two pastors. A pastor from a smaller city was talking about the difficulty and time-consuming nature of the task of providing money for apartment security deposits for people with housing problems. The pastor from the metropolitan city simply laughed, saying that it was not a problem for him at all; for he would never offer security deposit money to anyone, since people would then line up for blocks, asking for the same help.

While some of our colleagues in the major metropolitan areas practice a form of triage, trying to locate some who can be "saved from the meatgrinder," the pastors and volunteers in the smaller third-class cities tend to think that their situation is more manageable.

So that while some of our colleagues in the major metropolitan areas practice a form of triage, trying to locate some who can be "saved from the meatgrinder," the pastors and volunteers in the smaller third-class cities tend to think that their situation is more manageable and will try to initiate more systemic changes to address the problem. To some extent, the perception of solvability can encourage persons to commit more personal
energy, when they feel it is possible for them to make a difference rather than when feeling like a drop in an unfillable bucket.

Despite the timeless admonition that we will always have the poor with us, and despite the national crisis of unemployment of which the local scene is only a reflection, the size of the smaller third-class city suggests more overtly that the church can make a difference. Public officials are more accessible in the smaller city inasmuch as they remain dependent upon grass-roots support. Face-to-face meetings with public officials are not difficult in these cities, and city offices and officers are more easily held accountable to their constituencies.

Similarly, the ordained clergy has a stronger voice in the smaller cities. There is a clinging to some of the more traditional and historic national values in our smaller cities, which are not quite so beset by the multiplicity of values and competing lifestyles of our larger metropolitan areas. And in a nation that still, in part, understands itself as “Christian,” there is a respect for the clergy and the churches of all of our major faiths—a respect that affords the clergy entree into political and community problems and projects. Landlords can be addressed individually in a dispute. Community pressure groups can be solicited or withstood on the strength of the history and value of the church in the community.

Returning to the difference in the magnitude of the problems, there is not only an attitudinal difference for those involved in major metropolitan ministries and those involved in smaller city ministries; there is also a reality connected with size that allows for a different approach and style to the ministry. For example, homelessness is life-threatening to the individual no matter how many persons share the dilemma of being homeless. But from the helping point of view, it does make a difference when the number of homeless is estimated in the thousands, as it is in Philadelphia or New York City, and when the number of homeless is estimated in the hundreds, as it is in Reading, Bethlehem, or Allentown. Although it requires a tremendous amount of coordination of professional and political helpers in a metropolitan area, the smaller scale of the third-class city allows for practical beginnings to shelter people by simply opening up a
church basement in the winter, as was done in Reading, or by designating months in which individual churches would open their facilities, and both cots and homeless people would wander from church to church, as was done in Bethlehem.

One of the critical differences that is produced by the perception of solvability in smaller cities is that, unlike their metropolitan counterparts, smaller city urban churches tend individually to choose to be involved in community ministries. In the metropolitan areas, individual local churches tend to be part of a larger denominational strategy. The strength of their numbers is needed to address their problems and to supply necessary resources. At the 1985 Northeastern Jurisdiction Urban Ministries Network Training Event in Philadelphia a considerable amount of time was spent using the developing "Metro Ministries" program as an example of the kind of cooperation needed to address urban ministry in the metropolitan setting. "Metro Ministries" is a program of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference, designed to provide staff, strategy, and major resources to a coordinated ministry in Philadelphia and neighboring Chester. Individual churches, clergy, and church members are seen as a part of the whole and are invited to be included as part of the larger strategy.

In contrast, urban ministry in the smaller cities tends to be initiated by individual churches who choose to be actively involved with the community because they understand such involvement to be part of their own unique ministry as a local congregation. Such a church might quickly move on to solicit ecumenical or connectional support, as discussed before. But the decision making is begun and managed by the boards and committees of the local churches in response to their own environment and diagnosis of community problems. Attendant on that choice is the additional risk and inflationary costs to ministry in the individual church, as mentioned before. It should be noted that if there is any denominational strategy for urban ministry in the smaller cities, it still tends to be initiated at the local or district level, since it is hard for a conference or national church to identify with the multiplicity of smaller cities. Subsequently, it tends to be approached without substantial financial or staff resources from outside the local church.
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COMMUNITY TRANSITION

The final difference to be discussed in this overview of the urban ministries of smaller and metropolitan cities is based on a rather fundamental difference in reaction to changes in community neighborhoods. In both large metropolitan cities and in the smaller third-class cities it is a familiar pattern for a neighborhood to change its ethnic identity. In many cases neighborhoods can be identified where ethnic conversion has been repeated two or more times, and as housing availability or city code enforcement policies change over a period of years it is possible to watch the geographic center of ethnic groups shift and swing across the city blocks.

One of the significant ways in which the United Methodist Church has responded to these changes in the metropolitan area is to support local churches in transitional neighborhoods through a transition of their own. White churches in black neighborhoods are supported through a transition that allows them eventually to become black churches. As the Hispanic population swings from one section of the city to another, buildings are shared or utilized by Hispanic congregations where the ministry is following the people. Because such changes in a church can and do produce crises of major proportions, the transition of a church from one ethnic character to another is often prompted and supported from an outside denominational source rather than from an internal need to address the change (see "To Build the City—Too Long a Dream": Studies of Urban Churches, Alban Institute, 1982). Transitional churches, then, seem to be a response to community change in the large metropolitan environment. For it is there that overall strategies of the denomination are mounted, resources provided, and directions set for local churches to follow.

Since smaller city urban churches tend to operate on their own resources, as described before, and are often free to choose to be involved or not involved in community ministry, the transitional church is not a model often followed in these smaller cities. As a matter of fact, there are no identifiable churches in eastern Pennsylvania third-class cities that have gone through...
ethnic transition—a history discovered when one smaller city urban church began to raise questions of the prospect of doing so at its own initiative. Rather than transitional churches, smaller cities tend to follow other paths. In some cases white, Anglo churches become white enclaves in ethnic neighborhoods, living out a long, painful, and dwindling demise. In other cases these white, Anglo churches change their style from a neighborhood congregation to a regional church, continuing to sustain its membership by drawing on people who willingly travel across the city or from surrounding suburbs because of special programs offered in the city context.

In some sense the geography itself permits such options. For smaller cities are often urban in every sense of the word, but their size permits transportation and movement impossible in the metropolitan areas. Where it might take a pastor in Philadelphia thirty minutes or more to go from one hospital to another within his own section of the city, the pastor in a third-class city might be able to cross her whole city from side to side and be out in a suburban or rural area in less than twenty minutes. Such freedom of movement allows members more freely to return to their “inner-city” church from their own residential corner of the city or their suburban home without the inconvenience of slow and interrupted driving. And if the smaller city urban church is in the downtown business section, access is often even easier for evening meetings and Sunday services, since the business people have already gone home and there is a certain “emptiness” left behind that is easily driven through.

The result seems to be that there are fewer ethnic minority United Methodist churches in smaller cities since there is little pressure and less support to help a congregation through such a change. There are few black United Methodist churches in smaller cities despite the sizable black populations in these cities. The exception to this pattern currently lies in the development of Hispanic churches in smaller cities, which are themselves not transitional. Instead, many of these Hispanic churches or congregations are the result of the active white, Anglo congregations who watched their surrounding neighborhoods becoming Hispanic and who chose to initiate
programs and ministries to this changing community. But rather than change the character of the white, Anglo church, the Hispanic program more often develops its own congregation and then goes in search of its own building and separate church home.

CONCLUSION

In describing one generalized form of ministry by comparing it to something else there is the risk of being perceived as advocating one form over the other. The intent of this essay is not to argue for smaller city urban ministry against metropolitan urban ministry. Rather, the hope is to begin to attend to the differences in urban ministry from setting to setting with the aim of developing strategies and allocating resources in productive and creative ways. Since so much of our attention to urban ministry has been focused on the major metropolitan cities in the past several decades, we do need to rethink our support for our ministries to the smaller cities.

We need to rethink the allocation of our denominational resources. It is not a matter of diverting resources from ministries in major metropolitan areas, for the church does not have enough to offer to the plight of the people in our major cities under current conditions. But with the resources that are available to the smaller cities we need to begin to think much more ecumenically, offering our own “slice of the pie” without restrictive concerns for ownership and control.

We also need to give greater attention and appreciation to nonchurch sources of funding which are increasingly available to churches and church programs in the smaller cities. Whereas city, state, and federal funds are often exclusively available to
secular programs and agencies in the major cities, the constitutional line between church and state is not so critically drawn in the smaller cities, where there is a greater willingness to allow the church to play a role in the helping network. Local church programs can apply for F.E.M.A. (Federal Emergency Management Agency) funds in the smaller cities. Ecumenical church programs can receive United Way support in some cities. County commissioners, who serve as conduits for funds, can be addressed by individual members of the clergy, churches, and church groups. One issue concerning our denomination's resources for smaller city ministries yet to be effectively addressed is training and coordination in efforts to move into such ecumenical and secular opportunities.

Similarly, we need to rethink our denominational support of pastors in smaller city urban churches. Typically the pattern in smaller cities suggests that there will be one identifiable local church in a given denomination per city that is active in urban ministry. Therefore, the pastor of that local church is often isolated from denominational peers who are facing similar challenges of urban ministry in other small cities. Much can be accomplished by developing supportive networks of such urban clergy over a number of small cities in a conference. Since there is a uniqueness to active urban ministry in the smaller cities, involved clergy can learn much from the shared dilemmas and the varieties of models used by counterparts in other small cities. Models of ministry and specific programs will necessarily vary from city to city, for all smaller cities are not alike and do not call for identical responses of ministry. Nonetheless, a network of such pastors would counteract the sense of denominational isolation and the burden of feeling that one must single-handedly diagnose the problem and also construct a response of ministry. In major metropolitan areas this network of pastors exists naturally in both formal and informal structures based on shared geography and shared crises. In the smaller cities there is no shared geography or crisis to bring our active United Methodist urban pastors together. Therefore, if a supportive network is to be formed, it must be intentionally developed around the unique role of the clergy in the smaller city setting.

If we are to rethink our denominational support in the smaller
city, we need to reconsider our recognition of the efforts of these clergy personnel. There is a very heavy burden carried by these persons as they initiate, administer, and volunteer in programs addressing the urban crisis. Simultaneously, they must also minister to their local congregations and, in a time of renewed interest in church growth, compete with nearby suburban churches whose own agendas do not include programs responding to human needs which so heavily drain resources. The stress and potential personal burnout of our pastors in the smaller cities is very high. And while we may not be able effectively to change the situation, much personal support could be offered by our United Methodist Church in the formal recognition of the double and sometimes triple responsibilities that these smaller city pastors bear.

Simply stated, urban ministry does need to be acknowledged in our smaller cities. It is not the “poor relative” of our larger and more structured strategies in major metropolitan cities. More accurately, it is simply different. It is a different response to the same social and faith crises faced in both types of cities—a different response elicited by a different environment. Since its resources and its opportunities exist in different form from metropolitan urban ministry, it is not necessary to assume that smaller city urban ministry needs to compete for conference or national dollars, or staff to address its problems.

However, it does seem to need to compete for attention. Smaller city urban ministry does need to be identified and understood on its own terms. It is not simply a smaller version of what we have come to know in our major metropolitan cities. Members of our clergy who are involved in smaller city urban churches are isolated and at risk. Without overall strategies and connecting resources, their professional, spiritual, and personal lives are depleted at intensified rates. Our churches which are involved in smaller city urban ministry are similarly isolated and at risk. Again, without overall strategies and connectional support, they will continue to pay the double price of their ministry, depleting themselves in a day of already dwindling dollars and persons. It is essential that we begin to come to terms with urban ministry in third-class cities—and to realize that it is anything but "third-class."
If in the move to postmodernism theological lan­
guage is “depotentiated,” to put it mildly, can we
find in literature a language that speaks of theologi­
cal mysteries in ways appropriate to the range and
depth of theological passion?

Italian novelist Italo Calvino declared, “I believe more and
more in literature as a language that says things that other
languages can’t say, that literature has full status as a form of
knowledge.” At a time when theological language is con­
fronted by the apparently debilitating challenge of postmodern
consciousness, these words carry a special relevance for
Christian thinkers. For those seeking to chart the course of
theology in the domains of postmodernism, assistance from
literature may be timely indeed. From a variety of quarters the
role of imagination in theological reflection has been high­
lighted, and perhaps it is time to move this discussion from the
methodological arena to the substantive, that is, actually to seek
in literature the kind of language that will say things that
theological language is unable to say.

But what do we mean by “postmodernism”? Growing out of
the radical critique of modernism initiated by Friedrich
Nietzsche and carried forward by such contemporary French
thinkers as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, postmodernism signifies a questioning of root assumptions about such fundamental matters as the human subject, language, and truth. Faced with the “death of God,” modernism gloried in the discovery of the human subject as the hidden referent of theological language: postmodernism finds fault with the very preoccupation with “presence,” whether the presence of a divine or a human subject lurking behind language. For postmodern thought there can be no metaphysical world behind the world of phenomenal experience: the reality of absence, in all its dimensions, is central.

The possibility of absence is traced back to the linguistic gap between a sign and what it signifies, or, in the language of Ferdinand de Saussure, between the “signifier” and the “signified.” Whereas the modernism of Paul Tillich saw symbols pointing to and participating in the reality they signified, contemporary theories of the sign stress the arbitrary character of symbols and their role in repression and substitution for that which is absent. This absence, however, is experienced as release: postmodernism seeks to enjoy the free play of language released from tutelary presences. The human capacity to live out of the texts of its own imagination, the textuality of human experience, is to be celebrated and freely enjoyed.

Is the quest for God, then—the desire to encounter the pre-eminent Other, the Presence of all presences—to be dismissed as a neurotic longing, a hangover from the halcyon days of premodernism and modernism? Not necessarily. It could be argued that while such matters may not have an object of direct reference, theology can and must continue to speak of them, for they constitute a central element of human experience, even if that experience is allowed only as a form of desire. Yet irrespective of the fate of religious desire, the situation of theology as the discipline burdened with the task of overseeing language about the divine Presence and the human subject is under severe challenge. How is it possible to find the language and the forms with which to speak nonreferentially about, for example, the experience of human transformation under the influence of transcending power?

A comparison of the status of narratives of personal
transformation in modernism and postmodernism furnishes a useful illustration of the depth of the problems theology now faces. Once at home in the evangelical traditions of rural and urban churches, personal testimonies of the transforming power of God came under increasing stress in the modern period. Trafficking in the concepts of "miracle" and "divine intervention," such narratives ran counter to the notions of natural process and human autonomy—concepts dear to the heart of modernist thought. Yet how much more problematic is the situation for the postmodernist theologian! Under the relentless scrutiny of the "hermeneutics of suspicion," autonomy appears as a bourgeois illusion, and the very notion of a substantial human subject is suspect. How could it be possible then to speak of the synergy of the divine and human purposes and energies in human experience? Under the conditions of postmodernism, narratives which seek to do just that are problematic in the extreme, possibly already things that cannot be said.

Perhaps this is precisely the context in which to apply Calvino's quote which opened our discussion. If in the move to postmodernism theological language is "depotentiated," to put it mildly, can we find in literature a language that speaks of theological mysteries in ways appropriate to the range and depth of theological passion? In short, can literature say things which theology can no longer say?

Can literature say things which theology can no longer say? In seeking answers to these questions we turn to two recent Pulitzer Prize-winning novels, *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker, and *Ironweed: A Novel*, by William Kennedy.

*THE COLOR PURPLE*

The action of this novel comprises the restoration and transformation of sisterhood. Two black sisters, Celie and
Nettie, living in a situation of rural poverty and familial oppression, are wrenched apart by the perfidy of their "Pa" and, ultimately, restored to one another in a process that transforms them both. This wonder of a novel recounts a process of transformation in which not only the main characters but the very notions of sisterhood, family, and, finally, God are expanded to more inclusive dimensions. The novel opens with an account of how Celie literally laid herself down for Nettie, securing her sister’s release from a bondage Celie takes upon herself, and it ends with Celie’s remark, “I think this the youngest us ever felt.” Transformation has overtones of rejuvenation, even redemption.

Sisterhood and family are both deeply charged words for Walker. Elsewhere she has written about the cohesiveness of the black family as it confronts outside pressures, but in this novel it is the black family itself that is the source of the oppression felt by the separated sisters. The girls’ supposed father subjects them to sexual abuse and, with Celie’s husband’s willing connivance, wantonly imposes upon them the conditions of their decades-long separation. If the novel’s action restores and transforms the sisterhood, it also transforms and re-establishes the family. It can be noted in passing that the forces of white racism enter only marginally into this story: the focus is upon the healing from within of a diseased and distorted set of family relationships.

Walker signals her intention to present this transformation as the outcome of a synergy of divine and human energies in her dedication:

To the Spirit:

Without whose assistance
Neither this book
Nor I
Would have been
Written.

The notion that this book and the author’s life were written with the assistance of the Spirit immediately suggests that more than
any “merely human” action must account for the transforma-
tions here narrated.

Further, the choice of letters to God as the formal device which
opens and closes the novel suggests that Walker wishes to
underline the suggestion of a transcendent power that is
present, at least, in the perception of the protagonist. These
letters to God are strange letters, undated, unsent, and
undeliverable. Naturally there is no reply to them, unless we are
to take the unfolding action as that response. The letters are also
prayers, although again the form is only approximated.
Addressed to God, they lack the common elements of prayer,
praise, petition, confession, and a concluding amen. Yet as the
action proceeds, some of these elements do appear: writing to
Nettie and not God, Celie ends many letters with “Amen”; the
final prayer-letter comes nearest to the prayer form, having
address, praise, and concluding amen.

Of course, the choice of formal device does no more than
suggest this transcendent element. It is to the narrative itself that
we must look for evidence of this claimed synergy of human and
transcendent intentionality. Indeed, the letters to God, after the
first five or so, become the bearers of the narrative of a gradually
evolving relationship between two women, Shug Avery and the
protagonist, Celie. This relationship, recounted to God, takes
the character of the restoration of the lost sisterhood in a
transposed form. Shug, the new sister, is not related by blood to
Celite, and their bond is animated and supported by sexual
desire and feeling.

The gentle evolution of this narrative is sharply interrupted by
a letter from the blood sister, Nettie. Ejaculatory in form like
Celite’s first letters to God, this letter tells Celie that, contrary to
her belief, Nettie and Celie’s children are alive, together, and
shortly to return home from Africa. Stunning as this information
is, the primary devastation of the letter for Celie lies in its
revelation of the deception and malevolence of her husband,
Mr. ______. Celie’s shock and rage at this revelation draws her
nearer to Shug and precipitates their removal from Mr. ______’s
house, a crisis in Celie’s conventional religious faith, and the
consummation of the sexual relationship between Shug and
Celite.
Celie’s loss of faith in the conventional God of her youth is chronicled in her final letter to God in this sequence, in which she declares, “You must be sleep,” and in the letters she now writes to Nettie. Celie has a new focus for her love and longing in Nettie, and “God” no longer functions as this focus and source of support. However, Nettie retains something of a transcendent or mythical reality for Celie. Again the letters, like the prayers, are more narrative than dialogic, and they now frequently end with the “Amen” the prayers lacked. Letter and prayer continue to be approximations of form which in fact approach one another, just as Nettie and God seem to stand indirectly for one another. This impression is reinforced by the new understanding of God which Celie derives from Shug and which supplants her conventional understanding.

Shug’s God is one of creation, who delights in the creation and in all the feelings and desires of human creatureliness. As Shug tells Celie of this God, she is “grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh.” Over Celie’s protests, Shug insists that “God love all them feelings.” Instead of a big, grey-bearded white man, this

In a formula at once at home in the mystical and the feminist traditions, to find God Celie must leave man and “enter into the Creation.”

God is “inside you and inside everybody else.” This God “ain’t a he or a she, but a It. . . . Don’t look like nothing. . . . It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything . . . everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you’ve found It.”

Clearly this God has much in common with the God of the mystical tradition, and in other ways, with American Romanticism. Shug reports her discovery of God in terms familiar to the mystical tradition: “It come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all.” The way to feel this God, this It, is through the natural creation. Trees (an important symbol for Celie’s struggle throughout the book), birds, and other people
are the vehicles for discovering this mystical God (see pp. 30, 165, 178, 229). As the Romantics would have advised, Celie is counseled to “conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock.” Nor is this emphasis uncongenial to feminist thought. In a formula at once at home in the mystical and the feminist traditions, to find God Celie must leave man and “enter into the Creation.”

This is precisely what she now does. Her removal to Memphis, Tennessee, and her discovery there with Shug’s help of love, work, money, friends, and time mark stages in her transformation into a person with pride, security, and a sense of self-worth. In the course of the final movements in the action, Celie demonstrates a faith that transcends loss and disappointment. When Shug leaves Celie with her new lover Germaine, Celie is able to breast her grief and depression, expressing a contentment suggestive of Paul’s, expressed in the letter to the Philippians: “I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound.” Of her departed Shug Celie says: “If she come, I be happy. If she don’t, I be content.”

Celie’s sense of sisterhood and the presence of her loved ones has a universal and transcendent quality. A telegram telling of the sinking of the ship aboard which Nettie and the family are believed to be returning home fails to upset Celie’s sense of equilibrium. She refuses to accept Nettie’s death, either disbelieving the fact or, more fundamentally, knowing that Nettie cannot be taken from her even though she may be changed. This, perhaps, signals a new understanding of death as a kind of change: “I don’t believe you dead. How can you be dead if I still feel you? Maybe, like God, you changed into something different that I’ll have to speak to in a different way, but you not dead to me Nettie. And never will be” (pp. 229-230).

Celie’s final letter recounts the restoration of both Shug and Nettie to her life. With the return from Africa of her sister and children, Celie’s family circle is complete. Even the transformed Mr. _____, now referred to as Albert, his (transformed) son Harpo and wife Sofia are included. This final letter is once again addressed to God, but now certainly the God of creation that Shug has taught and embodied: “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (p. 249).
In this final letter-prayer the approximate and incomplete form of the earlier communications is filled out. Truly a prayer form, with both address and amen, with thanksgiving and narrative, this letter achieves the completion appropriate to the completed action.

At this point it is appropriate to pose some questions of the narrative we briefly examined. If “enter into the Creation” is the imperative that guides Celie’s intentionality in this process of transformation, what is meant by creation? It seems that creation is to be identified with nature, including the natural vitalities of human life. Walker writes evocatively of spring and Easter in the first of Celie’s letters to Nettie. The characters stress the importance of trees, flowers, birds in their personal transformations. Yet this depiction of nature fails to acknowledge its darker, destructive powers. Has Walker fallen prey to a romantic view of nature and its positive potentialities?

Further, the It of creation is encountered in other persons, especially through sexual encounter. In Shug’s arms Celie is awakened for the first time to the joy and freedom of her own sexual nature. Shug is a character who exemplifies in her open and nonexclusive sexuality the vitalities of the creation. Yet not all sex in this book is liberating, and here, perhaps, we find a hint that not all in nature is good and transformative. Pa’s distorted and exploitative sex patterns point to fundamental modes of oppression in this novel. On the other hand, freely initiated, freely accepted, mutual sex belongs to the transformative order of creation.

For Celie, her sisterhood with Shug is the vehicle for her entry into creation. Shug’s particular brand of sisterhood, encompassing same-sex sexual love, offers Celie a way to experience her connectedness with the rhythms of nature and a way to universalize her sisterly relations. What she has first felt only for Nettie she now feels, in varying degrees, for Sofia, Mary Agnes, and others. Is it Albert’s and Harpo’s contact with this sisterhood that facilitates their change, and Pa’s exclusion from it that keeps him stuck where he is in his sexist masculinity? It seems so, for nothing else in the story accounts for Albert’s change from oppressor to a sensitive, open person.

Still, the picture is not entirely clear. How one makes the
selections necessary to identify this God of creation is not spelled out; and we do not learn how this God is to be distinguished, if at all, from a god of natural vitalism. However we finally relate these factors, it is clear that the characters within the novel experience the brush of something beyond themselves. Elements of the complex of created reality—natural vitalities, the beauty of the earth, the subtle and life-enhancing energies of human sexuality—somehow combine to suggest not a God of the "beyond" but a God of the "here and now." Walker's vision of an "immanent transcendent," offered only in suggestive traces, carries power and persuasion.

IRONWEED: A NOVEL

William Kennedy's Ironweed: A Novel is less obviously a narrative of transformation. Like the ironweed of the title, the protagonist, Francis Phelan, resists change and formation. An urban bum, entrenched in his pattern of violence, marginal existence, and flight, Francis is as far, and perhaps farther, from home and family than Celie ever was. And there is little on the surface level of the narrative to suggest that any change is likely. Yet at its close the novel raises with singular power the possibility that Francis, too, through no intention of his own but through the engagement of a shaping force that has eluded his definition and resistance, finds shelter in the bosom of his family, comes home under the "holy Phelan eaves."

The clue to this transforming possibility is found in the novel's sharply distinctive narrative style. Throughout the novel we are shocked to find dead persons who will not die but continue in some sort of shadowy, underground existence in which they are able to communicate with Francis. Indeed this dialogue is sustained, detailed, and intense, and at crucial points it pushes the action forward to its next development. By means of this somewhat surreal style, Kennedy is able to detail Francis's attempt to come to terms with his past, with the ghosts that still haunt his inner consciousness. Near the close of the novel, Kennedy abruptly switches his narrative style with a passage written in the subjunctive voice. In this striking "would" section, the lines of Francis's inner and external narratives come
together and a powerful resolution is achieved. To demonstrate this effect we now trace the tightening arc of the novel’s action.

The action occurs at Halloween and the dawn hours of All Saints’ Day, and opens, appropriately enough, with Francis’s first visit to the grave of his son Gerald. Gerald is one of many ghosts of Francis’s past to be animated by his return to Albany, scene of so much of his life, its crimes and escapades. In another seemingly fortuitous encounter with his living son, Billy, some seven days earlier, Francis had discovered that his wife Annie has told no one that it was Francis who dropped and killed their baby son, Gerald. This tragic event, we learn, led Francis to his life as a fugitive, and the revelation of his wife’s unexpected lack of blaming or bitterness activates a process of dealing with the past he has hitherto fled. As a result, in the course of a momentous day, Francis returns home for the first time in twenty years, visits his wife and children, and encounters the death of another loved one, his bum companion, Helen. It is this scene, Francis’s encounter with the dead Helen, that Kennedy chooses to describe in the subjunctive voice. Signifying the first death of a loved one that Francis does not flee, the passage gathers a peculiar significance.

Leading up to this passage, a series of tensively written scenes chronicles an emerging crisis of self-assessment for Francis. Driving with “Old Shoes” to the “jungle,” he reflects upon some power in events beyond himself, pulling him away from the ones he has so recently re-encountered: “What and who were again separating Francis from those people after he’d found them? It was a force whose name did not matter, if it had a name, but whose effect was devastating.”

Attempting some sort of self-definition in the face of this unnamed force which impels him along, he acknowledges that he is at war with himself, “his private factions mutually bellicose, and if he was ever to survive, it would be with the help of any socialist god but with a clear head and a steady eye for the truth.” To this man, dogged by a passion for truth, even his guilt seemed suspect, not worth dying for, serving “nothing except nature’s insatiable craving for blood” (p. 207).

With a group of bums huddled together against the cold in a shanty area called the jungle, Francis makes his confession,
telling for the first time how he had dropped and killed the baby Gerald. But the confession seems wasted on the uncomprehending bums. It does not ease Francis’s guilt. Instead of finding ease from his pain and personal degradation, Francis is pitched lower, feeling that he is not capable of making a right decision, that he is as wrongheaded a man as ever lived: “He felt certain now that he would never attain the balance that allowed so many other men to live peaceful, nonviolent, nonfugitive lives, lives that spawned at least a modicum of happiness in old age” (p. 215).

In his dismay at not knowing wherein he differs from other men, he still believes that he is “somehow stronger, more given to violence, more in love with the fugitive dance, but this was all so for reasons that had nothing to do with intent.” His mistrust of his own reason and will dwells with his sense of his own private wisdom and purpose: “He had fled the folks because he was too profane a being to live among them; he had humbled himself willfully through the years to counter a fearful pride in his own ability to manufacture the glory from which grace would flow” (p. 216). His recent experience with the other bums, the foolishness of his “confession” lead him to the insight that his guilt is all he has left.

A murderous attack on the gathering of bums by a group of Legionnaires interrupts Francis’s painful self-examination, and he fights for and wins his own survival, although not that of his friend Rudy. Checking his natural, even congenital, impulse to run, as he has now once again committed murder, Francis remembers his bum companion, Helen. With religious reverence he mounts the steps at Palombo’s hotel where she stays and gently he enters her room, now also a room of death.

At this point Kennedy breaks his usual narrative style with a movement into the subjunctive voice. In words of great beauty and tenderness, Kennedy pictures how it would be for a bum like Francis to love a woman to the end: “He would then reach down and touch Helen on the top of the head and stroke her skull the way a father strokes the soft fontanel of his newborn child, stroke her gently so as not to disturb the flowing fall of her hair” (p. 223).

This encounter with the dead Helen calls up Francis’s
encounter with his dead son Gerald. For Helen is straight in her death, not crooked like so many others; she is at rest, even beautiful in death. The association with Gerald is unavoidable:

Gerald rested in his infantile sublimity, exuding a high gloss induced by early death. His skin a radiant white-gold, his nails a silvery gray, his cluster of curls and large eyes perfectly matched in gleaming ebony. Swaddled in his grave, he was beyond capture by visual or verbal artistry. He was neither beautiful nor perfect to the beholder but rather an ineffably fabulous presence whose like was not to be found anywhere in the cemetery, and it abounded with dead innocents. (pp. 17-18)

In the opening scene at Gerald’s grave, Gerald had spoken words to Francis which “imposed on his father the pressing obligation to perform his final acts of expiation for abandoning the family”:

You will not know, the child silently said, what these acts are until you have performed them all. And after you have performed them you will not understand that they were expiatory any more than you have understood all the other expiation that has kept you in such prolonged humiliation. Then, when these final acts are complete, you will stop trying to die because of me. (p. 19)

Kennedy’s choice of theologically suggestive words—“expiation,” “confession,” and “sanctuary” and, earlier, “grace” and “mystery”—suggests the openness of his narrative to the transcendent, but it is in the unfolding of these events which follow and fulfill Gerald’s prediction that we see the mystery of the transcendent influence in Francis’s life. His encounter with Helen in her death constitutes one of, perhaps the last of, these “final acts.” Consistent with Gerald’s foretelling, Francis does not understand the acts to be acts of expiation. Nor is he aware of the change that has been wrought in him, although he is able to stop his own pursuit of death. Whereas he fled Gerald’s death, and all the other dead persons in his life, Francis does not flee Helen’s death. He stays and performs the rituals of mourning and loss. In facing her death, head-on, he begins, almost imperceptibly, to face Gerald’s. Yet, again, consistent with Gerald’s foretelling, in his lack of awareness of the significance of this change Francis sets out once more to find a freight train
and leave town. This has been his lifelong pattern, for "by now he was sure only that he lived in a world where events decided themselves, and that all a man could do was to stay one jump into their mystery" (p. 224).

That something qualitatively different happens in the scene of Francis's visit with the dead Helen is underlined by Kennedy's choice of the subjunctive narrative style. No longer the omniscient author, he simply opens possibilities for the reader. Perhaps the style is Kennedy's way of respecting the tenderness and intimacy of the scene. He refuses to lift the veil on this event of human mystery and thus achieves a rare evocation of the mystery of human change and transformation. It is the evocation of Gerald in the grave that brings the subjunctive passage to a halt.

Francis is not left to his own sad devices. As he hurtles south in the freight train, other scenes and persons come to him: women in his life, the city and home he is leaving, and, finally, "Strawberry Bill." Francis's desperate flight and lifelong search for a place of safety now comes down to this: Is the grave the only security a man can have? Or is there another place, a place of which home stands as some sort of provider? Trapped by his visions, Francis sees the picture of home that Bill evokes for him, a place where "they got a cot over in the corner, near your old trunk."

Now the moon and his whiskey bottle strike up some melody, a set of "divine harmonies" which impel him "to leap off the train and seek sanctuary under the holy Phelan eaves." Here finally is the end of the fugitive dance, a place of shelter which, in turn, evokes another, transcendent order of protection and sanctification: "The empyrean, which is not spatial at all, does not move and has no poles. It girds, with light and love, the primum mobile, the utmost and swiftest of the material heavens. Angels are manifested in the primum mobile" (p. 227). For the time being, however, until things get absolutely straight, Francis can rest in his old home. "That room of Danny's had some space to it. And it got the morning light too. It was a mighty nice little room."

Despite himself, Francis has given up his pursuit of death.
POSTMODERN NARRATIVES

Just as Gerald foretold in the opening scenes of the novel, Francis has performed his final acts of expiation and, almost unconsciously, found his way to a form of wholeness beneath the shelter of the embracing empyrean.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing analysis it follows that *The Color Purple* and *Ironweed* give voice to elements of the mystery of the transformation of human lives. In each novel the narrative form displays both the integrity of the human life and an openness to the working of some transcendent influence. Transformation of life is under the sway of some influence beyond the person’s individual intentionality, yet is still firmly rooted in the character’s own narrative. This central religious mystery is presented in these works with responsiveness to the range and depth of theological passion. Still, it would be foolish to suggest that literature can play all the roles of theological language, enabling us, say, to conceive of the concepts of *divine, human,* and *their interaction* in ways commensurable with postmodernism. In a more modest vein we can suggest some ways in which these two novels move theology toward postmodernism.

In the first place, both novels offer traces of the transcendent that grow out of the sense of absence. For Celie the locution “G-O-D” arises out of the displacement of her need for a reliable father and acts in some ways as a substitute in that absence. In a literal sense, the silence of “G-O-D” is not experienced as an obstacle but is taken for granted. Out of the absence of the father and the silence of God, Celie offers her final prayer with its wonderfully inclusive and resonant address, “Dear God. . . Dear Everything. Dear God.” In Francis’s world the presence of the ghosts of his life form a kind of motif of death and absence. Further, the nameless force he seems to be fleeing is never reduced to an element of his own psyche, yet is certainly no *deus ex machina.* It is in the absence opened up by his sense of pursuit that the suggestion of a transcendent power is evoked.

Second, each novel resists the sort of closure that may be theology’s special impediment in relation to postmodernism. In each work the reader is left with the play of possibilities whose
resolution must be the reader's own existential task. Questions for "reader response" abound: Will Celie's newly found sense of life carry over into the social experiences of racism the novel avoids? Will Harpo and Albert continue their transition from oppressive chauvinists to the "sensitive human beings" the text hints at? These questions and their answers must remain the reader's own. Albert's report that "everybody bound to get some of that [understanding] sooner or later. All they have to do is stay alive" strikes this reader as a rather facile viewpoint in the face of entrenched racism. Still, by posing no more than possible alternatives the novel avoids any suggestion that its resolutions carry over into comprehensive solutions to social and historical realities. Readers cannot avoid coming to some judgment in their own imaginative extrapolations of the novel's trajectories. In short, the novel will oblige its readers to make judgments about the experience of racism in all its ugly forms.

A certain equivocation is built into the very form of *Ironweed*’s account. There is a sense of the subtle ambiguities of human experience and a reserve in relation to naming the transcendent, a reserve that may be excessive for some readers. The transformation Francis experiences emerges out of both his engagement with the qualities of resistance that mark his life and *something beyond himself*. Finally, it is despite himself and through an engagement with the nameless force at work in his life that Francis enters into a sphere of change, perhaps of grace. Francis carries his past with him and finds his rest as the journey of his inner life comes to correspond with his external journey. He does not "save himself": indeed his turning point seems to grow out of the realization that he cannot render his own salvation. At his own extremity, gripped by a bleak vision of an unrelenting fate and a sense of his incorrigibility, Francis may find the place of shelter and security and become, at least in suggestion, one of the angels manifested in the primum mobile. Yet his indirect evocation offers no possibility that we might confuse the transcendent force with the vitalities of nature or human sexuality. It would be unfair to say of either novel that it reduces or resolves the sense of absence into human presence, although *The Color Purple* seems near to this "modernist" failing at times.
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Third, each novel opens up a sense of the “textuality” of religious experience and calls up the task of hermeneutics in relation to theological activity. Celie’s life becomes endurable through the texts she writes and the letters she later receives. The content of her relationship to “G-O-D,” a relation of desire in the midst of absence, is contained in these letters. Further, her rootedness in the traditions of the black church sets her sense of God in relation to classical texts of black experience, including not only the Bible but also the spiritual and gospel song.

Francis’s oblique relation to Irish Catholicism establishes resonances throughout Ironweed. The setting of the action at Halloween and the early hours of All Saints’ Day suggests a time when the mysteries of the dead and the living abound. The evocation of the medieval closed universe, the empyrean, and the primum mobile in the novel’s closing pages sets Francis’s story in the context of a cosmic homecoming that captured the imagination of earlier generations of religious believers. Such a home is no more available for this protagonist than it is for contemporary readers of fiction. But the evocation of this text underscores the point that all life is lived in search of metaphors of homecoming and finds its partial rest in displacements such as these.

The allusion to other texts opens up lines of suggestion and overtones. Here, at the very least, theological language is released from any bondage to literalism. The theological task is highlighted as that of pondering texts in search of interpretation. It may well be that one of the central contributions of postmodern consciousness to the theological task is that the range of what counts as theological writing is of necessity enlarged.

It may well be that one of the central contributions of postmodern consciousness to the theological task is that the range of what counts as theological writing is of necessity enlarged. It is the argument of this paper that such an enlargement should include such texts as The Color Purple and Ironweed: A Novel.
If these texts help to move theology towards postmodernism in the ways I have indicated, they also suggest that theology may find and explore new voices. Whether or not literature succeeds in saying "things theology cannot say," it may certainly suggest new patterns for a hermeneutical theology and a new location of the experiences of transcendence. As John Dominic Crossan suggests, it is at "the edge of language and the limit of story" that we may rediscover the "excitement of transcendental experience."

NOTES
4. Walker has written, "Family relationships are sacred... In the black family, love, cohesion, support, and concern are crucial since a racist society constantly acts to destroy them." Contemporary Authors, vol. 37-40, 1st rev. (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research, 1973, 1979), p. 583.
BIOGRAPHY AS A RESOURCE
FOR MINISTRY

CHARLES W. STEWART

Biography and autobiography can enrich our understanding of what it means to live a life of faith.

Telling stories of heroes of the faith has been a source of inspiration from primitive times to the present. The early Israelites formed an identity around the stories of the patriarchs. Early Christian congregations found courage to face Roman persecution by listening to stories of Stephen, Peter, and Paul. The blood of the martyrs was not only the seed of the church; the lives of the saints became the lifeblood of its members. The Hebraic-Christian faith is uniquely a story of a people, and telling life stories has proven to be a way of awakening faith and keeping it alive.

Along with symbol and ritual, story occupies a central place in the life of a Christian community. The minister is called to tell the gospel story through preaching, counseling, and example. Biography and autobiography can provide significant resources for that ministry. When counseling, the minister listens to a parishioner tell his or her

Charles W. Stewart is Howard Chandler Robbins Professor of Pastoral Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.
own story from within the perspective of the Christian story. Ministers may or may not tell their own stories many times; nevertheless they have an understanding of how others have embodied the faith to enrich their understanding of the Christian pilgrimage. Getting inside a person's existential struggles, discerning the way in which people make important life choices, seeing people grow in their understanding of faith—this is the heart of the minister's task.

The minister is an interpreter of the faith, in particular, faith as incarnated in individuals and in groups. Reading the life stories of Christians as they have attempted to express their faith in their lives should enable the minister to become a better interpreter. How to select from those life stories which the minister has available, and how to bring those life stories to the use of a congregation become issues of paramount importance to the minister. I want to address these issues in this essay.

**BIOGRAPHY AS A LITERARY FORM**

Let us begin by looking at biography as a literary form. What do we mean by biography? By autobiography? What are their several forms? And what is their particular relevance within a religious context?

Biography can be defined as a factual account of an individual's life from birth to death. An autobiography is a self-written biography. We can include letters and journals as the author's immediate report or private account of his or her life. Some literary critics include novels, essays, and poetry among autobiographical materials. One must admit that all creative writing has some capacity to express some of the author's life and character. However, for the purpose of use in ministry, I plan to limit biographical writings to those pieces which consciously attempt to tell the story of an individual's life.

The prototypical autobiography is Augustine's *Confessions*. William C. Spengemann states that the three forms of autobiography find their origin in this work.¹ They are: the historical form concerned with self-explanation; the philosophical form concerned with self-portrait; and the poetic form, which can be likened to psychodrama. The *Confessions* is
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historical in that Augustine bases his story on what he recalls of his life before and after his conversion. It is philosophical in that he reflects theologically about the meaning of creation, of time, and of his calling before God. It is poetic in that he creates a piece of literature in the account which not only tells us something about himself and his era but about ourselves and our time.

Janet Gunn says that in order to understand an autobiographical writer, one should examine three areas: (1) impulse: what motivates the writer to tell his or her story? (2) perspective: what is the unique point of view that the writer takes on his or her life? and (3) response: how does the writer expect the reader to respond to the story that is told? In addition, Gunn states that the "worldliness" of the writing provides a context for the story, that is, selfhood has no meaning whatsoever outside the shared meaning of a common world. She offers Henry Thoreau's Walden as a good example of the autobiographical process. At Walden Pond, Thoreau wrote, "Time is the stream I go afishing in." How is one to understand this statement in relation to what Thoreau did and how he interpreted his life? Gunn says, amplifying the figure of speech, "The self is . . . the bait Thoreau would use. . . . And what he would catch is Walden Pond, the 'earth's eye' that represents for Thoreau reality itself."

A "creative" autobiography should be an instrument of discovery, a means by which the writer and the reader can discern the meaning of events. Autobiographical writing is not a private but a public act. Rather than simply being introspective, the author takes a stance or perspective on his or her life. Thoreau reads his life in a certain way from a particular belief about himself and his place in the scheme of things. And he beckons the reader toward that vision not only of himself but of his view of the world and of history. As Marcel Proust says, "In reality, every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without the book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself" (quoted in Gunn, p. 90). So the reader is concerned with how the author depicts his own pilgrimage—but more than that: how he interprets the historical events he has lived through. The reader invests himself in the author's life story in
order to understand first what it means to the author, then to reflect on what it means to himself.

The autobiographer’s belief system provides a context out of which one understands that person’s life. Gunn says there is a credo ut intelligam (“I believe in order to understand”) in every autobiography, a faith perspective by which the author attempts to understand his or her life pilgrimage (p. 24). Whether one is reading Augustine’s Confessions, written in the fourth century, or Dag Hammarskjöld’s Markings, written in the twentieth century, one can look for the certainties of the author and points at which those certainties are tested and put in question. The encounter with suffering and evil and the reformulation of faith are what the reader can learn from participating in another’s life. The author’s credo cannot be adopted, nor that life cycle repeated; nevertheless, how the author reads life and the perspective adopted are significant. How the successes and failures the author experiences shape his or her faith can provide readers with hope for their own lives and incentive to formulate their own credos. One might pick up a biographical work out of curiosity; one identifies with the biography out of the subject’s struggle to make sense of life and to develop a world view. Reading biography, therefore, should enlarge the minister’s perspective on history as well as enrich the understanding of how individuals meet the change and challenge of their own eras.

THE CHOICE OF BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIALS

Choosing from the vast number of books available to the minister presents him or her with several questions. Should one select from the past or stay with contemporary writers? Should one read biography or autobiography? Should one read from within one’s own culture or seek out figures from other racial and national groups? In reading as a background for preaching, should one read only the lives of the saints or should one include flawed lives, even lives of cynics and agnostics?

If the reader chooses to read biography or autobiography from the past, one should do so against some knowledge of literary criticism. It is useful to understand that the genre of biography
has undergone changes since Augustine wrote his *Confessions*. Rousseau's *Confessions*, written in the eighteenth century, has an entirely different purpose from Augustine's *Confessions*; and although lacking a theological framework, Rousseau develops his experiential understanding of himself within a philosophy of nature. Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, written about the same period, springs from a rationalistic understanding of human nature and a desire to set an example for the citizens of the new American Republic. Contemporary biographical writing takes account of the multi-dimensional understanding of human development: historical, psychological, and sociological. And in today's secular and pluralistic world, one needs to relate to the many streams of influence affecting the writer.

Is it more helpful to read biography or autobiography to get an accurate account of a person's life? One would think that autobiography would give the reader more immediate access to the subject. However, since the advent of depth psychology, we have become aware of how many defenses even the most mature writers use in presenting themselves. Autobiographers screen their memories and present a self-portrait they want readers to accept. Biographers have the advantage of perspective and distance from the subject. They can see the subject within his or her social context and often have access to the subject's letters, diaries, and publications, as well as to the observations of and conversations with the immediate family and associates. However, the biographer may have an axe to grind and therefore not maintain objectivity toward the person studied. Moreover, the biographer is one person removed from the individual one is reading about, and thus one does not have the experience of carrying on a dialogue with that individual.

Perhaps the best way to gain a balanced picture is to read both an autobiography and a biography of the subject of interest. If an autobiography is not available, one can read several biographies. A case in point are the biographies of Paul Tillich by his wife Hannah and by Rollo May. To read only Hannah Tillich's account, one would get a highly prejudiced account of Tillich the womanizer. To read only Rollo May, one would come away with a reverential account of the theologian. Reading Wilhelm and Marion Pauck's account gives the reader a more objective
account of Tillich, one acknowledging his faults but with an appreciation of greatness.3

Reading the lives of the saints—no matter from what period of the church’s history—should provide the best material for sermons, because the process of becoming a saint is of most interest to contemporary Christians. Many church members probably have the impression that there is an elite within the church, the saints and martyrs, whose lives are far above their own. Autobiographical writing, such as Augustine’s Confessions, makes the reader aware of a saint’s own struggle with weaknesses. A contemporary perspective on Martin Luther, like Erik Erikson’s Young Man Luther, helps the reader to understand not only Luther’s struggle for a firsthand faith, but how that struggle relates to his own search for identity. The important matter is how the reader understands the faith process, whether from reading biography or autobiography.

Is there anything to be gained from reading the lives of deeply troubled persons, i.e., alcoholics, mental patients, criminals, and the like? One must readily acknowledge that all lives are flawed to a certain extent, and that having read the most bizarre account of a criminal, one must say, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” It is significant, however, that most readers want a success story, a recovery from mental illness or a return to sobriety. When reading Thomas De Quincey’s Confessions of an English Opium Eater, one wants to believe he is writing from a recovered state. The appendix, which De Quincey added after he began to use the drug again, dashes the reader’s hopes. Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar helps one understand the hell she experienced which drove her to suicide. But unless one is a clinician, the minister is not likely to find much material here for preaching. (I assume one does not use accounts of individuals’ lives as negative examples.) Anton Boisen’s Out of the Depths, however, is another type of autobiographical writing. Here one encounters a man plagued by psychotic episodes, who rises above his suffering to find meaning and to communicate with his fellow sufferers. Troubled lives can surely bear study. But within these accounts one probably should look to see not only whether the writer is capable of coping with tragedy but also whether he or she can write about the experience meaningfully.
Finally, ministers should be aware that biographies from other races and cultures can teach them and their congregations something. To read the biography of Gandhi—not a Christian but a saint from another culture and religion—is to open one’s eyes to an outstanding leader of the twentieth century. To read the biography of Kosuke Koyama is to become aware of a Japanese Christian who has developed a liberation theology from within his struggles with the poor in Southeast Asia. Reading Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* awakens the reader not only to the awful racial ghettos in America, but also to the poetry which release from such ghettos makes possible. To read Dag Hammarskjöld’s *Markings* is to become aware of a contemporary world leader’s struggle with prayer, and of the *shalom* which saying yes to God brings in the midst of the uncertainties of such struggle. Choosing writers from different cultural backgrounds can help to shake the prejudices and rigid thinking that many adults fall into and to open up to them a richer and broader understanding of the world.

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THE USE OF BIOGRAPHY IN SERMONS

One of the minister’s primary tasks is to find an interface between the gospel and the listener’s life. Biographical writing can help in one of two ways: first as an illustration to a point in a sermon; and second by providing a picture of a life in progress, the life itself being the sermon from which the listener can understand the life of faith. Each use has its strengths and weaknesses, which I shall spell out below.

One of the best ways to make a theological or moral truth come alive is by illustrating it with the story of a person in the ambiguity and uncertainties of his or her existence. Jesus’ parables are one of the best examples of how a master teacher
does this. In the parable of the prodigal son, both the truth about God as a forgiving parent and the life experience of a father receiving a penitent son back into his graces after a rebellious period touch hearers at a level of depth. There is a resonance between the illustration and the truth it illustrates. Paul Tillich’s sermons provide a contemporary example. “The most important ingredient of Tillich’s effectiveness as a preacher,” says Marion Pauck, “was the plain fact that he almost always preached to himself, and therefore to everyman. In some way or other each sermon-topic grew out of what he himself had experienced, directly or indirectly” (Pauck, p. 230). In the sermon, “You Are Accepted,” he reflected the struggles he had experienced as an immigrant, but more than that as one who hungered for the love of women and whose aspirations for fame belied his belief that God demanded nothing of him but trust. So he wrote:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. . . . Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!”

The second way a preacher may use biography is by telling the complete story of a particular individual. This could take up the entire time allotted to the sermon, but it has its advantages. For example, preachers might plan a series of sermons around the conversion experiences of Christians from the time of Paul to the present. Or they could discuss the ways in which various persons throughout Christian history have dealt with the problem of suffering. They might also draw on the biographies of contemporary women and their struggles for liberation and
faith. The meaning of conversion can be illuminated by the understanding that it has been experienced in various ways and with various interpretations throughout Christian history. To understand Augustine, for example, it is useful to realize that he did not write the *Confessions* until a decade after his conversion. With that distance from the experience he knew he had not merely made the transition from a Neoplatonic to a Christian philosophy, but that he had accepted Christ and was closer to his mother’s and Ambrose’s New Testament faith.

Biographical material can be misused in preaching in several ways. Perhaps the most flagrant misuse is to read into a person’s life a quality of character one wants to illustrate. Let Abraham Lincoln serve as an example. Preachers probably refer to Abraham Lincoln’s humility as much as to any other quality of his character. But to read Carl Sandburg’s *Lincoln: The Prairie Years* is to become acquainted with a different man: a rough-hewn pioneer to be sure, but one who possessed a sure self-confidence and who from the beginning was a leader of men. Far better to draw an accurate picture of Lincoln than to distort his life to make a point about humility. What this says is that sermons about qualities of character often move toward abstractions and away from incarnational truth.

Another misuse of biography is quoting a fragment of a person’s experience out of context. Far better to leave such a quotation out of a sermon than to distort its meaning by failing to put it into proper context. On the other hand, by contextualizing an experience, one may illustrate the uncertainty and ambiguity of that person’s life. The “happy ending” of fiction may be missing; however, the illustration may speak more meaningfully to the listener’s everyday experience.

A preacher misuses a life story by reducing it to a merely factual account, by distorting it so as to fit into a prearranged sermon structure, or by overinterpreting it so as to empty it of its facticity. The farther one gets from the text of a person’s life, the less meaning it has. Returning to the person’s own journals, letters, and accounts of self helps the preacher to tell the story truthfully.

In telling the life in progress of individuals, it is possible to deal with their lows as well as their highs, their defeats as well as
their successes, and to let the total life experience speak to the listener. In such instances the preacher may not need to draw out the inferences of the life's meanings. The biography can stand in its own right as a sermon. For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters from Prison* has excellent homiletical potential. Putting the writing into the context of Bonhoeffer's life, as Eberhard Bethge does, makes it more appealing. The average listener will not confront martyrdom. However, he or she does struggle with loneliness, misunderstanding, and the problem of evil. The account of how Bonhoeffer becomes a person of faith so as to be able to meet the ultimate test makes for a stirring sermon.

One must admit that to preach a life story one must foreshorten, encapsulate, and digest biographical material. However, if a congregation can be encouraged to read certain materials before a sermon, they will be able to listen more intelligently to the minister's exposition of a life. Another suggestion is to organize a reading group which could study the biographical materials together before the sermon. The preacher could then gather questions from such a group to help in building the sermon.

**THE CONGREGATION'S RESPONSE**

E. L. Doctorow writes:

> Narrative is the art closest to the ordinary daily operation of the human mind. People find the meaning of their lives in the idea of sequence, in conflict, in metaphor, and in moral. People think and make judgments from the confidence of narrative; anyone at any age is able to tell the story of his or her own life with authority. The narrative mode of thought comes universally to people as, for instance, mathematical or scientific reasoning do not. Everyone all the time is in the act of composition, our experience is an ongoing narrative within each one of us.

How then does listening to another's life story help individuals live their own lives? What can they learn of personal value from another person's story? Are there any qualifications they need to be aware of in the homiletical use of biography? We have already indicated that the minister should not lift up
the lives of the saints as an elite group within the church. Listeners can be deflated and discouraged by envisioning some persons as heroic in contrast to their own seemingly unheroic lives. Neither is it helpful to try to get listeners to accept the credo of another person, drawn from that person's unique experience. The depth psychologist, Carl Jung, wisely points out with respect to Jesus:

Are we to understand the "imitation of Christ" in the sense that we should copy his life . . . ; or in the deeper sense that we are to live our own proper lives as truly as he lived his in its individual uniqueness? It is no easy matter to live a life that is modelled on Christ's, but it is unspeakably harder to live one's own life as truly as Christ lived his.

What then are helpful responses of the listeners to hearing the story of another's life? I believe helpful responses occur at three levels. First, hearers make a surface response. They are curious about the circumstances of a person's life. But they then see a parallel between the dilemmas faced by the biographical subject and the dilemmas of their own lives. They want to understand the events of the past, the skein of circumstance and fate which thrust the subject into the present moment. They want to understand how the subject faced the perplexities of the moment, how he or she handled the crises relating to work, family, and friends. They have brought questions of this sort to the church service, and they listen to the sermon hoping for some direction. The difference they find in the biographical sermon and the usual sermon is that here is a person's life story played out before them rather than a theological homily. Their interest is whetted and they listen attentively.

Second, the listeners are moved by the story to begin to think about how the story makes connections with their lives. The religious context of the church facilitates that attitude. However, listening to the narrative also enables them to formulate theological questions related to their own life experience. How can they, in the midst of struggle and conflict, discover their identity? How can they cope with events like choosing a life mate, the raising of children, changing a vocation, aging? How do they manage the imponderables like accidents, the death of their parents, the defection of friends? All of these issues
impinge on their belief systems—what they believe and what they hold to be of meaning and value. Their own lives appear to move too slowly and too much at the discretion of others or the whim of chance. Here in a short span they can put their lives alongside the lives of another and formulate the "meaning" questions to ask of themselves.

Third, the listeners learn the process of faith by observing it in the life of another. As in good drama, the listeners identify with the protagonist, find their emotions purged thereby, and at the end of the story may gain hope and courage in spite of the brokenness and ambiguity they brought with them. John S. Dunne calls the process "passing over," by which he means, "entering into a sympathetic understanding of [other's lives], finding resonances between their lives and your own, and coming back once again, enriched, to your own standpoint." 7 As previously stated, the listeners may not want to borrow another's faith, but to understand how that faith was formed in the beginning, and how it met the test of existence, and how the subject reformed his faith under fire. What listeners may learn is the process of trusting God, of affirming God's will in life, and of confronting suffering with courage. No other art form teaches people that like the story of another life.

Hearing another's story is like having a conversation with a wise and seasoned traveler.

For Augustine, the fully recollected person is the person standing before God. Surely reading or hearing biography should enable individuals to do this. However, the minister should recognize that every life is different as to its origin, context, and vocation. Some biographies will speak to one reader or listener and not speak to another. The common ground in all life stories, of course, is our common humanity. Reading or listening to biography should enable us to acknowledge with the Psalmist that God has indeed "made us a little lower than the angels and crowned us with glory and honor." From the story we the listener-readers have heard, we
learn we have a place in the scheme of things, unique and of
importance to the Creator. Hearing another's story is like having
a conversation with a wise and seasoned traveler. One returns to
one's own journey with a renewed zest, a willingness to
confront one's own lot, and faith in the God who sets us all on
our separate journeys.

SUGGESTED READINGS

I have developed this list over the past several years of teaching
a course entitled "Religious Maturity," drawing on the lives of
contemporary religious leaders.

BONHOEFFER, DIETRICH:
Bethge, Eberhard. Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of
the martyred German pastor and resistance leader. Bethge
was Bonhoeffer's friend and has excellent sources and insight
into Bonhoeffer's life and character.

BUBER, MARTIN:
Encounter: Autobiographical Fragments. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court,
1967. Buber reflects on significant events in his life which
shaped his I-Thou philosophy.
Friedman, Maurice S. Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue. Chicago:
Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1955. The best interpreter of Buber
develops his biography, showing the events and persons
which led Buber to his espousal of dialogue, and the
personalism so prominent in his life and teachings.

DAY, DOROTHY:
The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day. New York:
Harper, 1952. The struggles of a social activist toward
individual salvation. How she and her colleagues brought the
Roman Catholic Church to an awareness of labor unions and
the working class in New York.
HAMMARSKJÖLD, DAG:
*Markings.* Trans. Leif Sjöberg and W. H. Auden. New York: Knopf, 1964. A terse, enigmatic journal of a former secretary-general of the United Nations. It should be read alongside a good commentary like the following:

KING, MARTIN LUTHER, JR.
King, Coretta Scott. *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969. King's wife writes of his life from its beginnings in Atlanta through the eventful period of the civil rights struggles. This is a close, personal tribute to one of this century's most influential Christian leaders.
Bishop, Jim. *The Days of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Putnam, 1971. A biography in documentary style that begins with King's death and then goes back to trace his origins, education, and emergence as the civil rights leader.

MERTON, THOMAS:
*The Seven Storey Mountain.* New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948. Merton is a good writer and tells the story of his pilgrimage from journalism to life in a Trappist monastery. It is much like Augustine's *Confessions* set in the twentieth century.

LEWIS, C. S.:

NIEBUHR, REINHOLD:
*Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic.* New York: Meridian, 1929. Jottings by a young social activist minister in his first
parish in Detroit. Should be read by every young minister in the first parish.


SCHWEITZER, ALBERT:
*Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography*. Trans. C. T. Campion. New York: H. Holt, 1933. One of the classical autobiographies of this century. Schweitzer presents the first fifty-six of his years, and how he emerged from being a man with scholastic, musical futures ahead of him to become a medical missionary in Africa. It is helpful to see the interpretation of his thought with his life.


TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, PIERRE:


TERESA, MOTHER:

TILlich, PAUL:
Pauck, Wilhelm and Marion Pauck. *Paul Tillich: His Life and
Thought, vol. 1, Life. New York: Harper & Row, 1976. A balanced picture of one of this century’s great theologians, largely the work of Marion Pauck, the daughter of one of Tillich’s colleagues, Wilhelm Pauck. Draws on Tillich’s works and letters in Germany and in the U.S. Wilhelm Pauck wrote most of the second volume on Tillich’s thought.

NOTES

The story of the Exodus is the story of the Hebrew Scriptures. From the focal point of the Exodus one looks back to the stories of the promises made to Israel's ancestors and forward to the narratives of Israel's life in the land. Even in exile, hope was nourished by evoking the memory of exodus. It is no accident that the story of the Exodus is the only story which the Torah instructs the people of Israel to retell. This story is central to their identity as God's people. "When your child asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the precepts, the statutes, and the laws which Yahweh our God commanded you?' then you shall say to your child, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt when Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand... in order to give us the land which he promised by oath to our ancestors'" (Deut. 6:20-21, 23b; my trans.).

Because the Exodus is a story to be retold, one can scarcely begin the task of exegesis and exposition without giving attention to the text as a story. The preacher may well wish to approach the retelling quite indirectly, through other narratives that intersect with or echo that of the text. In the novels that we read, in the family stories that we pass down, and in the accounts of the more recent immigrants to our communities, the...
great themes of exodus are frequently present in our own experience. Whatever form the retelling takes in the sermon itself, preparation should begin with the recovery of the experience of reading or hearing the text of Exodus.

Before we move to the text itself, though, it is worth thinking for a moment about narrative. The experience of reading or hearing a story differs from the experience of looking at a picture. Looking at a picture, we have a general impression of the whole—instantaneously—and only thereafter do we notice the details that have not consciously registered. Reading or listening is different. There we do not see "the big picture" all at once. We have to wait for the story to unfold in time, word by word, sentence by sentence. We are aware of time and movement.

Not all kinds of reading or listening are the same. Someone who writes a technical or scientific article is careful to lay out each step in a logical, systematic fashion, leaving no gaps as the argument moves from point to point. The reader has only to follow and absorb what is being said. Not so with reading or listening to a good story. Much of what makes a story pleasurable is that we, as readers or hearers, are not asked to absorb passively what unrolls before us, nodding in agreement. We are required to take a more active role. We form opinions about characters from the clues we are given—often to discover that the characters do not act the way we expected them to and that we will have to revise our opinions. We anticipate what is going to happen next and are eager to discover whether our guesses will be confirmed or overturned. Within limits, we are as gratified at being surprised as at being right. And no matter how long and detailed the story, the teller remains something of a sketch artist. There are always details or surmises that each individual reader or listener must supply, that the author will never fill in for us. Hence the fun of talking about stories and discovering that we all read or hear them slightly differently.

There is a particular dividend for the preacher who studies biblical narrative in the light of its poetics, its art of storytelling. The attention paid to event and to character in understanding biblical narrative quickly brings to the surface matters of meaning and value. But it does so in a nondidactic way. No one who studies the storyteller's art in a particular narrative is
tempted to boil down the story into its "message" and serve it up as so much theological bouillon. Biblical narrative has a marvelous penchant for showing rather than telling. It also gives warrant for analogous types of sermon making.

LECTIONS AND NARRATIVE INTEGRITY

The lectionary cycle is not always friendly to narrative. For the whole story of the Exodus, of course, one would have to read at least the first fourteen chapters of Exodus, a scope that goes far beyond the three chapters that the lectionary sets before us. Even these three chapters cut off the dialogue between God and Moses before it is finished in Exod. 4:17. Still, the stopping place for this cycle of readings is not wholly arbitrary. In the rather long speech to Moses in the second part of Exodus 3 God provides Moses (and the reader) with a preview of the events that are about to unfold. In this anticipation of the future the culmination of the story is already foreseen, and the one who hears it has a sense of closure.¹

There are somewhat different problems with the way the lectionary has edited the selection for the first Sunday. In the interest of brevity, the introductory verses (Exod. 1:1-5) and one very important episode (Exod. 1:15-20) have been omitted. However the preacher chooses to use the lection in the actual service and sermon, it is essential to study the story in its narrative integrity, not just the verses set out in the lection.² In order to get a clearer view of the relation between the lectionary selections and the narrative structure, it is helpful to compare the episodes with the lections:

| Introduction  | 1:1-7 | First Lection | 1:6-14, 22-2:10 |
| Episode 1     | 1:8-14 |  |
| Episode 2     | 1:15-22 |  |
| Episode 3     | 2:1-10 |  |
| Episode 4     | 2:11-22 | Second Lection | 2:11-22 |
| Transition    | 2:23-25 |  |
| Episode 5     | 3:1-4:17 | Third Lection | 3:13-20 |
|               |        | Fourth Lection | 3:1-12 |

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It might seem odd, since I have stressed the aspect of storytelling in Exodus, to realize that there is absolutely no suspense concerning the ultimate outcome of the story. That is true not only for those of us who have heard the story before; it would also be true for a first-time reader who has just finished reading Genesis. The end of the story has been given away more than once, in Genesis 15, 46, and 50. The dying Joseph's last words at the very end of the book of Genesis are, “God will visit you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (Gen. 50:24b).

Why bother to tell the story? Let there be light; and there was light. Let my people go. And they let them go. And they went. Clearly, our attention is not engaged by not knowing how the story is going to turn out. It is not just the goal but the getting there that matters. That may be an observation on the poetics of biblical narrative, but it is also an insight into biblical theology. What matters is not just the divine will but the very concrete way in which people experience and participate and are transformed in the realization of the divine will in history. Poet Anthony Hecht referred to Egypt as “that old school of the soul.” This sentiment should not be taken as bad theodicy—i.e., God causes suffering because it builds character. When we attend to the story we see that the oppression is Pharaoh's doing. But the deliverance does not occur as simple divine fiat or even as a matter solely between God and Pharaoh. Deliverance requires the engagement of those who suffer; and this is where the suspense of the Exodus narrative lies.

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Exodus 1:6-14, 22-2:10

These stories admonish us to be alert to the power and presence of God who is already at work in the daily struggles and small victories of those who suffer.

As the story begins, it is still a family history—“These are the names of the sons of Israel,” that is, the twelve sons of the patriarch Jacob. But there is the sense of a transition and a
transformation. The narrator compresses many years into two short verses, telling us that "Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation" (1:6). The reader, having felt a pleasant release of tension in Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers and the settling of his father's family in Egypt, finds such a sentence disturbing. Losing our familiar characters, even to a peaceful death in old age, is unsettling. We have to start over in uncharted territory.

The new story begins propitiously enough in verse 7: "But the descendants of Israel were fruitful . . . so that the land was filled with them." One of the hallmarks of Hebrew narrative is its economy. Words are never wasted. A casual reader or hearer will understand from verse 7 that Jacob's descendants prospered in Egypt, but the reader with a sharp ear for echo will hear much more. The children of Israel are "fruitful," they "multiply" until the land (the same word in Hebrew as "earth")) is "filled" with them. These, of course, are the words with which God blesses the first human couple in Gen. 1:28. Very quietly the narrator has revealed the hidden presence of God with the Israelites in Egypt. God had already made a promise to Jacob, saying, "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt; for I will there make of you a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again" (Gen. 46:3b-4a). To the one who has ears to hear, the narrator has indicated that the Israelites' fertility is no accidental phenomenon but the presence and blessing of the God of life. The Bible loves this teasing play between surface and depth reality. Just when we are sure that we are experiencing exile from God, it delights in showing us how we blunder unseeingly like Jacob upon the very house of God (Genesis 28). When we are being so wise and discerning about the signs of the kingdom, Jesus startles us by announcing that it is already "in the midst of you" (Luke 17:21).

This little allusion by the narrator in Exod. 1:7 should put the reader on guard. Throughout almost all of chapters 1 and 2 there is no explicit reference to God. God does not seem to be present. There are just ordinary people doing very human things. Having subtly warned us against too flat a reading of reality, the narrator pays us the teasing compliment of saying no more
about the possible presence of God in the struggles of the people who enter the story at this point.

The whole problem of how to discern the true significance of events is one that the reader often shares with the characters. Meir Sternberg, one of the best writers on biblical narrative (see suggested readings), has even made the claim that what truly distinguishes the human from the divine in Hebrew thought is not mortality (as it was for the ancient Greeks and Near Eastern peoples) but the radical difference in knowledge (p. 46). “A human being sees what meets the eye; but Yahweh sees into the heart” (I Sam. 16:7b; my trans.). When we read in Exod. 1:8 that the new king of Egypt did not “know” Joseph, we are put on guard. What does it mean—that he has never heard of him? Or, more ominously, that he does not understand the significance of who Joseph was and what he did? A person whose insight is deficient or distorted is, in Hebrew thought, a fool. And a fool is dangerous.

The first thing we hear from the king of Egypt is his statement to his subjects that “the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us” (v. 9). Now since his two words (“many” [= “multiplied’] and “mighty”) are the same in Hebrew as two of the words that the narrator used to describe the people of Israel, we might decide that he is a person of insight after all. But the king’s anxiety and suspicion about the Israelites surprise us. We can only relate it to the fact that he does “not know Joseph.” Consequently, his insight is partial and twisted. Our suspicions are confirmed as the king proposes to “deal shrewdly” with the Israelites. His reasons for doing so are a projection of his fears—“lest they multiply, and, if war befall us, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land” (1:10). Again, we are struck by the combination of insight and fantasy in the king’s words. We know that the Israelites will indeed leave Egypt, as God promised Jacob. But Pharaoh’s fantasy of what will happen is merely the projection of his own fears. His fear gives him almost prescient insight, but in a form distorted by that fear. We are saddened at how intimately we recognize him: his ambivalence toward the stranger, perceived as valuable but dangerous; his desire to control the alien in his land. It echoes the fantasy-ridden racism that was the legacy of slavery in this
country, the pathological anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany, the fear-haunted contradictions of apartheid.

Pharaoh's plan to control the Israelites is to diminish their vitality through overwork and exhaustion in building the store cities of Pithom and Raamses. Things do not work out, however, as Pharaoh had planned. Instead of diminishing, "the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied." The Egyptians' reaction is interesting. The narrator tells us that the Egyptians began to "dread" the Israelites, or, as a Hebrew dictionary more graphically defines the word, "to feel a sickening dread, to feel loathing." That is a psychologically discerning statement. The Israelites' fertility and vitality even in the face of oppression appears to the Egyptians as something unnatural, uncanny—as indeed it is, being divine blessing. The Egyptians' fear and their inability to control the object of their fear find expression in loathing, an emotion that transmutes fear into hatred.

Although the Pharaoh's attempt to diminish the Israelites through oppressively hard work appears not to have succeeded, the Egyptians continue the forced service, adding a measure of active violence and cruelty (the translators render the phrase "with rigor" [RSV] or "with ruthless severity" [NEB]). If the reader had enjoyed the image of the Egyptians' dismay at having their plans produce the opposite of what they intended, the last verse of this episode is rather more bleak. Although the enforced servitude may not have diminished the numbers of the Israelites, we realize that the Israelites are suffering. What Pharaoh has done has "made their lives bitter."

When someone in biblical narrative declares that they are going to deal shrewdly, it is a dead giveaway that their cleverness is going to be shown up as stupidity. Pharaoh had hoped to achieve his end by indirect means. When his first attempt fails, Pharaoh tries again. This time, in episode two, he enlists the aid of the women who serve the Hebrews as midwives. There is a very ancient disagreement as to whether these are Egyptian women ("the Egyptian midwives of the Hebrews") or Hebrew women ("the Hebrew midwives"). The Hebrew consonantal text would bear either interpretation. The narrative makes the most sense if we conclude that these were Egyptian women. As Pharaoh plotted with his own people in
the first episode, so here too, even when he decides to take more
direct action, he hopes to do so in a way that will cloak his fullest
intentions. It is a clever plan. He summons the midwives and
gives them secret instructions. When they attend the Hebrew
women at birth, as soon as the baby comes out of the womb,
they are to note the sex. If the child is male, they are to kill it; if
female, they are to let it live. Pharaoh’s plan is crafty. Mother
and child are in a very vulnerable position before the midwife. A
midwife’s “carelessness” or surreptitious motions as she
delivers the child can result in a dead baby, with no one able to
say just what happened. Pharaoh’s goal is to engineer an
increase in the number of stillborn male children. As God had
given the people of Israel a mysterious fertility and vitality, so
Pharaoh in his shrewd dealings attempts to produce a
mysterious rise in the infant mortality rate. This pairing
foreshadows the later attempts of Pharaoh’s magicians to match
the signs and wonders that God has given to Moses and Aaron
to perform.

There is something else worth noting. Why does Pharaoh
specify that only male infants are to be killed? If he is worried
about the numbers of the Hebrews, it would seem to make more
sense to kill the females. We have to remember his fantasy of the
danger from the Hebrew people. Pharaoh judges power and
danger by very human standards. He associates power with
military strength, with male prowess. If he can control the
males, he can control the danger that he envisions from the
Hebrews while still continuing to exploit their economic value.

“A human being judges by outward appearances, but
God . . .” If Pharaoh fears male power, God will outwit him
through women. Biblical narrative delights in God’s choice of
unlikely agents of salvation. It is another instance in which an
element of the storyteller’s art chimes closely with a significant
theological value. Pharaoh’s paranoid fear of the Israelites is
defeated because the midwives “fear God” and refuse to kill the
children. It is not incongruous that Egyptian midwives could be
said to fear God, for the character of the righteous gentile occurs
elsewhere in biblical narrative. Pharaoh presumably hears that
the change in infant mortality he had been looking for has not
occurred and summons the midwives. How could the midwives

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possibly deceive him and protect themselves? As it turns out, they are more shrewd than Pharaoh. Their answer is a beautiful piece of rhetoric, playing on Pharaoh’s fears and fantasies about the Hebrews. “The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women,” they say. So Pharaoh had already suspected from the uncanniness of their fertility! The next phrase is something of a pun. The midwives continue, “They are vigorous; before the midwife comes to them, they have already given birth” (1:19; my trans.). The Hebrew word for “vigorous” literally means something like “full of life power.” But the word could also be taken as an ethnic slur to mean “they are animals.” Like dogs, they whelp without assistance. So how could the midwives carry out Pharaoh’s secret plan? Whatever way Pharaoh takes their comment, the midwives’ statement persuades him because it begins with a prejudice that he holds and plays on his fear and loathing.

The second episode closely parallels the structure of the first, a technique that Hebrew narrative uses often. Just as Pharaoh made the forced labor harsher when it failed to have the effect he wanted, so he does not give up his plan of selective infanticide. He can no longer be secretive about it, however, but now enlists the entire Egyptian people to kill the infants by throwing them into the Nile. Again, the reader’s delight in seeing Pharaoh outwitted is tempered by horror at the public infanticide that follows. Giving ourselves over to the narrative can school our perceptions and our emotions. Most of us do not know what it is like to live in harsh oppression. The narrator’s close mixing of joy and sorrow, triumph and despair involves the reader vicariously in what it must feel like to struggle against oppressive power.

As the reader is still contemplating with horror the decree of Pharaoh, the narrator abruptly shifts both tone and scene. “Now a man from the house of Levi went and took to wife a daughter of Levi” (2:1). There is an extraordinary quality of ordinariness in this opening line. This is everyday life. But it is everyday life in the shadow of Pharaoh’s savage command. What had been seen from the perspective of the entire people is now focused in the life of one couple. In the narratives of Genesis most of the marriages that have been the subject of
interest are plagued with barrenness—Sarah and Abraham, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel. Here, where sterility would be almost a blessing, the narrator no sooner announces the marriage than we are told that “the woman conceived and bore a son.”

Although it is not clear that the narrator intended to make an explicit allusion to Genesis 1 here, the mother’s expression of delight in her child (“and when she saw that he was a goodly child”) is a close echo in Hebrew of the words with which God expresses delight in creation (“and God saw that it was good”). Sometimes narrators do as well by accident as they do by intention. To the extent that the mother’s response to the child to whom she has given birth parallels God’s response to the world God has brought into being, we receive a kind of subliminal reassurance. Having read Genesis, we are aware of God’s care for creation and special care for the family of Abraham. Surely this child will not die.

Our recollection of Genesis is encouraged and confirmed by what follows. Although the child’s mother hides him for three months, she realizes she cannot do so indefinitely. And so, the narrator tells us, “she took for him a basket made of bulrushes, and daubed it with bitumen and pitch; and she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds at the river’s brink” (2:3). Biblical narrative often works through situations of analogy to enrich meaning. The reader or listener is called upon to make connections that the narrator only obliquely hints at. What is being evoked in this description? A destruction of many by water from which one is saved by floating on the water in a boat—few would miss the allusion to Noah no matter what English translation were used. The Hebrew text underscores the reference even more clearly, since the word for “basket” is the same rare word used in Genesis 6 for “ark.” The narrator has not made us any promises, either explicitly or implicitly. But by describing the mother’s actions in a way that evokes the story of Noah, our hopes for the safety of the child are inevitably raised.

How far are we entitled to go with reading this story in light of Noah’s story? Should we think only in terms of our hope for the child’s safety or are we warranted to hear some implication that here, too, as in the time of the flood, God is at work, judging the
corruption and violence of the world and sustaining the righteous? That seems like rather a lot to load onto one small verse; and yet, once the obvious connection with Noah is made, it is hard to resist a more general comparison between the two stories. Maybe the very ambiguity of the allusion is important. I think this is another instance in which the “how” of the narrative is as important as the “what.” The narrator does not tell us what to think. Nor are there any hard and fast narrative rules to make the choice for us. Different readers will choose to hear the allusion more or less strongly, without one choice being necessarily correct and another incorrect. The act of choosing, of being actively involved in the story making itself, is of great importance. There is a continuity between what we are called upon to do as readers and hearers of the Bible and what we are called upon to do as people of faith. The situations of our lives and communities are narratives, too, albeit unfinished ones. Understanding a contemporary situation in light of a certain biblical narrative is a way of “reading” the present circumstances. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s reading of the struggle of black people in America in the light of Exodus was not just a nice rhetorical flourish. It was a claim of faith that gave the grounds for hope to those who were living out their own story. But his use of Exodus was not a mechanical one. There was no attempt to demonize even his bitterest foes by casting them as the Egyptians to be drowned in the sea. He joined the Exodus story to his vision of the beloved community.

In an ironic way the mother in Exodus 2 has complied with Pharaoh’s decree. She has cast her baby into the Nile, but in order to try to save him rather than to destroy him. The reader is quite surprised to hear that the baby’s sister stationed herself nearby to see what would become of him. We did not know he had a sister. If nothing else, this detail serves to put us on notice that we, as readers, do not know and do not see everything that is going on. The story quickly comes to a climax. Pharaoh’s daughter and the women who attend her come down to the Nile to bathe. She sees the basket and, apparently curious, sends her maid for it. It is interesting to pay attention to what the narrator tells the reader and what the characters themselves say. Take verse 6, for example: “When she opened it she saw the child;
and lo, the babe was crying. She took pity on him and said, 'This is one of the Hebrews' children.' Now we know that the sight of the crying baby causes her heart to go out to him, because the narrator tells us so. But all Pharaoh’s daughter says out loud is, 'This is one of the Hebrews' children.' This statement is all that the baby’s sister has to go on, but she risks approaching Pharaoh’s daughter and immediately asks if she should go and fetch “a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you.” So much is left unsaid. Does Pharaoh’s daughter guess the relationship between the young girl and the baby and the astonishing plea for rescue that is nowhere stated but everywhere implied in her question? If so, she does not let on but answers with one terse command: “Go.” Again the narrator tells us that the girl goes and gets the baby’s mother. But she apparently is not introduced as such to Pharaoh’s daughter. And Pharaoh’s daughter, whatever she surmises, keeps up the pretense that this is a business arrangement, offering to pay the woman for nursing the baby.

There is one other matter that Pharaoh’s daughter may have wondered about, though the narrator says nothing about it. It is a matter that generations of readers have puzzled over, reaching different conclusions. Did the baby’s mother and sister plan the whole scheme out carefully? Did they have some prior knowledge of the Egyptian princess’s character? Did they know it was her habit to bathe just there on the bank of the Nile? Or did they just take one action at a time, hiding the baby, and then when he was discovered, spontaneously deciding to risk all on a narrow chance? There is absolutely no way we can know. Why does the narrator tease us in this way? Meir Sternberg has a theory about Hebrew narrative’s very common tendency to leave the reader guessing. As I mentioned before, Sternberg claims that in Israelite perspective “God stands opposed to humankind not so much in terms of mortality . . . as in terms of knowledge” (p. 46). He goes on to note that although this distinction is sometimes made explicit, it is more often mimed in the structure of narrative itself. The various storytelling techniques have “the effect of twisting, if not blocking, the way to knowledge . . . The ubiquity of gaps about character and plot exposes to us our own ignorance.” Finally, “the only
knowledge perfectly acquired is the knowledge of our limitations” (p. 47). In my opinion Sternberg points to something important in emphasizing the way in which the gaps in the storytelling resemble those of life itself. But I think he misconstrues the intent when he sees it as an attempt to humble human pride.

Consider the story we are trying to understand now. The mother’s actions have been presented as a parable of God—the words that record her delight in the baby echo those of God; her protecting the baby in an “ark” recall God’s similar protection of Noah and his family. Perhaps the way to proceed is to continue thinking in terms of analogy. We know that she and her daughter loved the baby. What we cannot find out, no matter how hard we study the clues, is just how their love gets translated into the baby’s deliverance. It is plausible either way, but we cannot know whether they forsees and in a sense control the events that unfold or whether they use what they happen to find— the curiosity and compassion of Pharaoh’s daughter—to work the baby’s salvation. Of course, that is just the theological question that these opening chapters of the Exodus story present to us—the subtle play of divine providence and the dynamic of free human agency in that providence. God had promised Jacob to be with him in Egypt and to bring his family up from Egypt; but where has God been in all of this? We have had cruel kings, clever and courageous midwives, compassionate princesses, determined mothers, and bold sisters. God, or ordinary people? Now everyone for whom this story is a “twice-told tale” already knows that the baby in question is no ordinary baby but the person who is going to be God’s agent in leading the people out of Egypt. This baby’s salvation certainly looks providential. Are we to assume that God has been behind the scenes, guiding and directing? Or is God’s way of working salvation one which makes use improvisationally of that which free human agency produces? The narrative will not allow us to settle this question one way or the other. It hints at a kind of both/and truth that is much better communicated by showing in narrative than by telling in doctrinaire statements. It is not in order to humble our pride that the narrative withholds information that would let us in on the way the mother or God
sets about the business of deliverance. What the narrative does is to tease us into catching a glimpse of something that we often claim is absolutely hidden from us.

I have already revealed the surprise that the narrator keeps until the end of this episode, namely, the baby's identity. Consider what this revelation of the name does to the emotional ups and downs of the reader. I mentioned before that the first two episodes about the oppression had a particular pattern to them. Pharaoh institutes oppressive measures. Despite his plans the people prosper or the measures are evaded. We rejoice in the outwitting of the Pharaoh who would "deal shrewdly." But just as we are triumphing, the story closes with Pharaoh renewing the oppression in a way that checks our spirits. Certainly the readers will have enjoyed the story of how one particular baby is saved. Again, it is apparently powerless women, plus his own daughter, who outwit Pharaoh. Having learned from two previous repetitions that our rejoicing may be cut short, the reader might approach the end of the episode with a certain amount of dread. After all, focusing so much attention on the saving of one baby only underscores the heart-wrenching fate of the ones who are not saved. How could this episode not end on a depressing note? The way it in fact ends is with the mother, having weaned the child, bringing him to Pharaoh's daughter who adopts him as her son. As part of this adoption she gives him a name—Moses (Mosheh), "because I drew him out [mashah] of the water" (2:10). Even an Israelite who was hearing this particular story for the first time would know from other traditions who Moses was and what he did. Our sadness at the deaths of so many Israelite babies is made endurable because we know the promise of salvation for the whole people that is implied in the identity of this baby.

There are many homiletical possibilities in these episodes, but perhaps one of the most fruitful is the opportunity the text provides for reflection on the perennial issue of the power and presence of God in the context of suffering. These narratives give no easy answers. If anything, they exclude some cherished complacencies, such as the belief that God's people are always protected from harm. In these stories suffering is undeserved, prolonged, and bitter. Ordinary people lose control over their
lives, are abused, and see their children murdered. But just as
the complacency of comfortableness is denied in these stories,
so is the complacency of despair. The people do not give up but
instead resist Pharaoh's cruelty. The narratives make us reflect
on the relation between their actions and the presence of God. I
suppose we have a tendency to think of God's power and
presence as made manifest only in dramatic situations, such as
the deliverance of the people at the Reed Sea. While the Bible
does claim such dramatic reversals of apparently impossible
situations as manifestations of divine presence, it also claims to
see God's sustaining presence and power in the resilient vitality
of the oppressed Israelites, in the cleverness and courage of the
midwives, and in the way three very different women scheme to
save one baby.

There are so many seemingly intractable situations of
oppression in the world. Poverty, political repression, and
institutionalized racism tend to overwhelm those who experi­
ence them. Many communities despair when the one company
that provides jobs decides to move its operations. An
economically dependent young woman with small children may
feel utterly trapped in a violently abusive marriage. While we
yearn for a dramatic deliverance, these stories admonish us to be
alert to the power and presence of God who is already at work in
the daily struggles and small victories of those who suffer. And
they remind us that these quiet episodes may be part of a larger
story of deliverance, the outcome of which we do not yet see.

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Exodus 2:11-22

The hospitality of the Hebrew community and its
very understanding of what constitutes community is
based on its collective memory of how it feels to be "a
stranger in a strange land."

The fourth episode begins many years after the end of the
previous story. Moses has grown up. One day, the narrator tells
us, "he went out to his people and looked on their burdens"
(2:11). Both distance and identity are very economically
suggested. Moses might well have considered himself an Egyptian, a fortunate soul who had escaped being part of the underclass. But when the narrator says “his people,” we realize that Moses has chosen to identify himself with his Israelite heritage. Still, he is not one with them. He has to “go out” to them. He does not share their burden but “looked on” it.

What Moses sees is an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, “one of his people.” The description of Moses’ response is brief but vivid. “He turned this way and that. Seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sandy ground” (2:12; my trans.). It is not entirely clear what goes on in Moses’ mind in this brief scene. The narrator does not let us in on Moses’ feelings but leaves us as observers to form our own judgments. When Moses “turns this way and that,” is it just to be sure that the coast is clear? Or is he hoping that someone else will intervene, perhaps an Egyptian with official authority over the one who is beating the Hebrew man? If we understood the words this way, we could translate, “when he saw that there was no one else, he killed the Egyptian. . . .” What is at stake is understanding how Moses comes to his identification with the oppressed Hebrews. Has it already crystallized for him, so that his action in defense of the Hebrew is almost reflexive, or is he forced in a moment of crisis to discover not only who he truly is but what that identity calls him to do? Michael Walzer, in a fascinating study of the Exodus narrative called Exodus and Revolution (see suggested readings), suggests that this latter interpretation of Moses’ action inspires a passage in the prophet known as Second Isaiah. In a verse that “obviously echoes the Exodus test,” “Isaiah imagines God looking down on the evil in the world and on the sins of Israel and waiting for, looking for, some human response: ‘And he saw that there was no man, and he wondered: that there was no intercessor; therefore his arm brought salvation unto [Israel]; and his righteousness, it sustained him’ (59:16)” (p. 44). This interpretation is certainly theologically richer than one that assumes Moses was just making sure he was unobserved! But in truth the narrator does not give us grounds to decide what was going on in Moses’ mind, and that very ambiguity makes Moses’ character more real to us. There is an opaqueness, even a quality of mystery that
we encounter when we try to construct a person's self-understanding and motives from their actions, even when that person is very well known to us.

The distance between self-understanding and the way we are perceived by others is brought sharply forward in what follows. On the following day Moses goes out again. This time he sees two Hebrews fighting with one another. Again Moses intervenes. Perhaps he is beginning to see himself in the role of deliverer. In any event he says to the one whom he perceives to be at fault, "Why are you striking him?" The man's reply is both surprising and shocking. "Who set you up as an officer and judge over us? . . . Do you mean to murder me as you murdered the Egyptian?" (NEB). The initial shock for Moses, of course, is that a dangerous deed that he thought was carefully concealed has become known. We are not told how, but we can probably guess that the Hebrew man whom Moses saved the day before has told his friends what happened to him. The secondary shock, however, is the ugly way in which this other Hebrew man perceives Moses. In his jealousy and resentment this man sees Moses as someone no better than himself who has gotten all the breaks in life and who now loves the taste of authority—officious, interfering, flaunting his power to save or destroy others. Moses' immediate concern is to deal with the first shock, the discovery of his violent deed. But, as we shall see, there is reason to believe that the second shock was not lost on him either.

The theological reflections of Brevard Childs (see suggested readings) on the violence of this episode are particularly sensitive. He notes that there is no moralizing in the text. Rather, a spare narrative leaves issues for the reader to ponder. Moses acts for another, though his act is open to other interpretations. Moses attempts to act in secret. But can an act of justice really be done in such circumstances? Moses' intervention between the Hebrews is an attempt to reconcile; but his own act of killing makes Moses now unable to act as reconciler. The use of violence for the sake of justice is neither condemned nor commended but presented, realistically, in all its ambiguity.

What Moses fears turns out to be the case. Pharaoh hears of the deed and Moses flees for his life, a lonely parody of an
exodus. Moses finds his way to Midian in northwest Arabia. There he sits down beside a well. The narrative has been so fast-paced, both in terms of action and emotion, that one almost feels that the narrator is giving Moses time to catch his breath there by the well while the seven daughters of Reuel, the priest of Midian, are introduced to the reader. We are told that they took care of their father's sheep and watered them at this well. Wells were public places in the ancient world, places where strangers would naturally come to make inquiries. But they also have a special place in the world of Hebrew narrative. It was at a well that Ebenezer chose Rebecca to be the wife of Isaac. Closer to the present situation, it was at a well that the fugitive Jacob met and fell in love with Rachel. To have Moses sitting by a well and to be told, by the by, that the local sheik has seven daughters who come to this well to water their flock is about as blatant a hint as the narrator can manage.

The particular turn that this episode at the well takes is one that reinforces our sense of Moses' character. No sooner have the women done the very laborious task of drawing the water for their sheep than a bullying group of shepherds comes up and drives the women off, planning, apparently, to take the water for their own sheep. Moses intervenes, driving off the interlopers, and even watering the sheep for the women. In every action in which we have seen the adult Moses, he has defended the weak against the strong, the innocent against the guilty, the victim against the oppressor. Hitherto, Moses has not received much thanks for his efforts, and it appears initially as though his gallant action at the well has not been adequately appreciated either. The women leave Moses at the well when they return home. There is a piquant irony in their account to their father of what has happened. They tell him how "an Egyptian" rescued them from the aggressive shepherds and watered their sheep. Of course he must have been dressed as an Egyptian, but it is precisely Moses' not being an Egyptian that is the ultimate reason for his being in Midian at all.

At least Reuel's response is gratifying. He is appalled at his daughters' lack of hospitality to the stranger who has interceded on their behalf and makes them go at once to fetch him. The narrator passes over the actual scene of Reuel's hospitality and
his implied offer to make Moses part of his household. Laconically, the narrator says only that “Moses agreed to live with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage” (2:21; NEB). Our expectations about the romantic possibilities of a meeting at the well seem to be fulfilled. The last verse of the episode, which tells of the birth of their first child, however, is poignant and painful. Moses names the child Gershom (a play on Hebrew ger, “alien” and sham “there”), “for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land” (KJV). Although he is willing to stay with Reuel and take up life as a member of his household, Moses is not and cannot be a Midianite. Although he was raised as an Egyptian and was culturally an Egyptian, Moses discovered that he could not ultimately know himself as an Egyptian. When he had responded, however, to his sense of being inalienably a Hebrew, he was rejected and put in danger of losing his life. Moses is not, I suggest, speaking only of his situation in Midian when he says, “I have been a stranger in a strange land.” To give his son this bitter name is an index of how central the experience of alienation is to Moses.

This is where the lectionary selection ends, leaving Moses (and the reader) in a rather bleak state of mind. Moses’ situation is rich in analogy with other biblical characters whose involvement in the drama of God and Israel leads to rejection and alienation. One thinks of Abraham, called away from homeland and family; or of Hagar, cast out as the mother of the “wrong” son; of Joseph, sold to foreigners by his own brothers; of Jeremiah, who felt betrayed not only by his community but by his God. In the Gospels, both in Jesus’ sayings and in the narrative of his life and passion, the themes of rejection and alienation are always before the reader.

To be sure, alienation is not the last word of the biblical story. Moses is vindicated and leads the people out of Egypt. Resurrection follows crucifixion. The temptation to press on to the final triumphant outcome speaks more to our own wishes, however, than to the pace of the biblical narrative. Dwelling for a while with the alienation may be homiletically richer. In Leviticus God commands the people as follows: “The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you,
and you shall love [the stranger] as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 19:34). The hospitality of the community and its very understanding of what constitutes community is based on its vivid collective memory of how it feels to be a stranger, to be an alien in Egypt, “that old school of the soul.”

The pastor who invites a congregation to recollect experiences of rejection or to recall the emotions associated with deep alienation ventures into dangerous waters. Bitterness and anger may still lurk there. But the risk is often worth taking. Wherever people tend to see one another as automatic strangers—whether because of differences of class, ethnicity, or culture—there is a tendency to dehumanize others. Israelite tradition insisted that the people use their own experience of alienation as a means of becoming aware of the humanity of the stranger.

The lectionary selection omits a brief bridge passage (Exod. 2:23-25) that describes the condition of the people in Egypt during the years that Moses lived in Midian. We are told first that the king of Egypt died and that the people groaned and cried out on account of their bondage. I have always assumed that the cry was addressed to God, but the text does not exactly say so. Since the narrator has just mentioned that the old king has died, it is possible that we are to understand that the people are crying out to the new king, hoping that he will reverse the policies of his predecessor and return conditions to those of the good old days. However the cry is addressed, the sound of it ascends to God who hears—or overhears. The narrator tells us that God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The last verse is curious and rather difficult to translate. “And God looked upon the people of Israel, and God took notice” (2:25; my trans.). There is a wonderful potentiality in the line, the feeling of pent-up power that one experiences as a thunderstorm builds but before the first drop of rain has fallen.

Alongside this sense of expectation, however, one has to admit to a certain theological disquiet. Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal when they vainly prayed, saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is musing, or he has gone aside, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened” (1 Kings 18:27). Has God been musing or asleep and only now
awakened to the situation of the people in Egypt? To assume so would be to make a liar of the God who promised Jacob to be present in Egypt with him. It does serve to reawaken our sense of the enigmatic hidden presence of God that was a feature of the first three episodes of the narrative. If it seems unlikely that God only now takes notice of the fact of the people’s oppression, it may be that what God sees and takes notice of is a ripeness in the situation and even in the people themselves. Although the Bible presents deliverance as a freely given gift from God, it is never something that is imposed. It must be accepted freely as well. As the rest of the Exodus story demonstrates very concretely, deliverance can be a disturbing and disorienting experience, so much so that even the pain of bondage looks attractive because it represents something known and predictable (Exod. 16:3). Although there continue to be anxiety and murmuring on the part of the Israelites, the cry of the people appears to be the indication for which God was waiting that the people are ready to accept their deliverance.

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Exodus 3:1-12

Moses’ question, “Who am I?” is answered by the narrative of his life and by the divine response, “I will be with you.”

The sense of expectant potentiality that the reference to God’s taking notice generated is answered in chapter 3. If God has seemed enigmatically hidden before, here God’s presence and words dominate. It is noteworthy that the narrator lets the reader in on crucial aspects of the situation before Moses perceives them. The scene opens with Moses shepherding the sheep of his father-in-law. There is absolutely no indication that Moses is after anything except fresh grazing land when he takes his flock toward Horeb. But our expectation is raised when the narrator informs us that Horeb is “the mountain of God.” Even more explicitly the narrator says that “the angel of [Yahweh] appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.” We see more than Moses does. Sternberg has made the
interesting observation that when the narrator uses the word translated as "lo" or "behold," it is often a signal that what follows represents a change of perspective. Specifically, the words following "lo" or "behold" will present the limited perspective of one of the characters. That observation certainly fits the present case. Although we already know what the burning bush actually is, Moses sees only its strange external appearance. "And he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, 'I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt'" (3:2b-3).

Now what is the point of this? For one thing this technique has the effect of keeping us from identifying completely with Moses. We look at him rather than with him, because we see what he does not yet understand. There are other things that we know that Moses does not yet know. Moses, after all, does not know that God has heard the people's cry, remembered the covenant, and prepared to act. Consequently, although the content of what God says is important for the reader, the suspense in the chapter has more to do with what Moses' role and reaction will be.

As Moses comes forward to see the odd phenomenon he has encountered on the mountain, God speaks, revealing to Moses the holiness of the place. God's self-identification in verse 6, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," echoes Exod. 2:24, where God remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses responds with proper humility, covering his face and waiting to be addressed further. Again, God's words echo Exod. 2:25. The verbs "to see," "to hear," and "to know" or "to take notice" are the same ones the narrator used to describe God earlier.

It has often been noticed that verses 7-8 and 9-10 seem to be almost duplicates of each other. Commentaries will explain these doublets as traces of two pre-existing narrative accounts (that of the Yahwist in verses 7-8 and of the Elohist in verses 9-10). And so they may well be. By preserving these similar accounts alongside one another, however, the storyteller responsible for the present form of the narrative draws our attention not only to what is alike but to what is different
between them. In the first pair of verses God refers to the oppression of the Israelites and then says, "I have come down to deliver them." Verse 9 repeats the account of how God has taken notice of the oppression. Its companion verse, however, begins, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people" (italics added). Whatever their original source, the way in which the doublets are used in the narrative brings into explicit focus that relationship between divine agency and human agency that was so tantalizing in the first two chapters. "I have come down" and "I will send you" are parallel expressions. Irreducibly different, they are inextricably linked.

I suggested above that the way this episode begins encourages the reader to attend not only to what God says but to Moses' response. And it is at this point that Moses is called on to respond. Perhaps we should take stock of what we know of his character and situation. In his actions he has been decisive, even impulsive. He has intervened to stop oppression on three different occasions, fleeing only when it was clear he was powerless to do anything else. Moses has disclaimed his identity as an Egyptian prince and made it clear that he can never understand himself as a Midianite. The narrator's words and Moses' own actions have made it clear that "his people" can only be the Israelites. God's choice of Moses seems to be a perfect fit of person and task.

Consequently, Moses' self-deprecating response, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the [Israelites] out of Egypt?" strikes the reader as unexpected and rather ironic. Of course, we are not supposed to respond to Moses' reply just from our knowledge of his character and situation. Hebrew narrative and, for that matter, Israelite religion have certain conventions that are followed when God commissions a person for a particular task. The person called is supposed to respond with an objection, alluding to his or her own unworthiness. Gideon objected that he was without the social requisites of leadership, being the youngest member of a household from the humblest clan of Manasseh (Judg. 6:15). Jeremiah objected that he was still a boy, unskilled at speaking (Jer. 1:6). Isaiah experienced an overwhelming sense of his own and his community's sinfulness (Isa. 6:5). These objections serve an
important theological purpose. They are reminders that the outcome of the mission is not a matter of human ability but of divine intention. Consequently, the reassurance from God that follows the objection is almost always some variation on the statement, "I will be with you."

There is a bit of an enigma here, however. The theological point and the narrative structure seem to be at odds in the case of Exodus 1-3. The narrator has been at great pains to show us that Moses is precisely the right person for the divine commission. There has even been that lurking sense that from birth on a special divine providence has been shaping Moses for his life's work. And yet, the traditional form of the commission is at pains to remind us that God's work does not depend on human ability. Perhaps this is another of those instances in which a tension that is not resolved helps us get a glimpse of something that cannot be put into a direct statement. The tension affirms that rich human particularity is nurtured by God. Indeed that affirmation is central to a deeply historical, incarnational faith. At the same time the qualities that God makes use of for particular purposes cannot be reduced to a moral inventory. To judge from the story of Moses, they may include such disparate things as privileged upbringing, a personal knowledge of failure, moral courage, the experience of deep loneliness, and so forth. Moses' question, "Who am I?" is intended as a rhetorical question, but it is worth taking seriously. It is answered both by the narrative of his life and by the divine response, "I will be with you."

It is characteristic of narrative that it comments on universal human experiences by presenting concrete situations and characters. Attending to such narrative elements in the exegesis of a text opens up the possibility of exploring points of contact between the situations of members of the congregation and those of the characters in the text. Moses, after all, is presented as a character for whom certain early possibilities and expectations appear to have been foreclosed. Now when possibility re-opens in an unexpected way, Moses' question, "Who am I that I should go?" has a haunting quality. It is a rare adult who has not struggled with the feeling of lost possibilities, of options foreclosed by choices made long ago. Moreover, as
anyone knows who has ever compiled a résumé, there are strong societal pressures to answer the question about identity in terms that impoverish our full humanity. It should be possible in a sermon that takes seriously the narrative quality of this text to direct the listeners’ reflections in a different way. It provides an invitation to consider how the full range of a person’s experiences, perceptions, emotions, and reflections—and not simply an occupational or social label—constitutes that person’s identity. The narrative does not look primarily to the past, however, for its perspective on identity and possibility. Because Moses’ question is answered with the promise of the divine presence, there is an open-ended quality to the theme of identity and possibility. While that may be a liberating word, it can also be a disconcerting one, as the final lection indicates.

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Exodus 3:13-20

The depth of Moses’ resistance to God’s commission is an index of how much he would prefer to cling to the familiar pain of his alienation rather than risk the encounter that will restore him definitively to his own people.

As mentioned at the beginning of our investigation, the lectionary selections do not coincide with the natural boundaries of the text in several respects. If we took the end of the dialogue between God and Moses as the end of the present episode, we would have to place the conclusion of the unit no earlier than Exod. 4:17. To get a sense of what is at stake in the exchange between God and Moses it will be helpful to take a general look at what is included there.

In terms of the audience’s expectations the entire episode should have concluded with the previous lectionary selection, at the end of Exod. 3:12. After all, the traditional model for the commissioning of an agent had been completed. God had confronted the chosen person (from the burning bush), spoken to him about the general context which has given rise to the
divine decision (the situation of the people in Egypt), and specified the actual commission (the sending of Moses). Moreover, the polite and conventional objection has been made, an objection which has been met by divine reassurance and the giving of a sign. To all appearances everything is now settled and the audience has a right to expect that the story will move on to the carrying out of the commission.

Instead, Moses makes it clear that his objection was not just a matter of polite form. Moses balks. He does not want to go and continues to raise objections. Three more times, in fact, in Exod. 3:13; 4:1; and 4:10, Moses tries to convince God not to send him. Why? Moses' reluctance seems completely out of character. Our perception of Moses has been shaped by seeing him intervene boldly three times. Impetuous is a word that we might readily associate with him, but not timid or reluctant to act. Could it be that Moses is simply afraid for his life? He did, after all, flee from Egypt when the king tried to kill him. However reasonable it might seem, this fear is not among the objections that Moses makes. Physical courage is not what he lacks. After the stock objection about personal unworthiness (3:11), one objection, the one with which we will be more closely concerned (3:13), has to do with the identity and nature of the God who is sending him. Significantly, Moses does not ask on his own account. The question emerges as he imagines being questioned by the people to whom he is sent and being unable to respond to their interrogation. The next objection (4:1) also arises from Moses' fears of being disbelieved and rejected by the Israelites. The last objection (4:10,13) is that his poor qualities as a speaker will discredit him when he tries to persuade the people.

The intense humanness of these fears is remarkable. Equally remarkable is the fact that the better part of two chapters in the epic of Israel's deliverance and formation as the people of God should be given over to the very personal anxieties of Moses. It is worth some puzzling over, both in terms of the narrative and in terms of theology. If we, as readers, were first surprised at Moses' extreme reluctance, the fact that each of the objections has to do with his reception or rejection by the people of Israel helps to make his response more intelligible. We recall Moses' embittered reference to himself as "a stranger in a strange land"
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and his earlier rejection when he attempted to intervene in the dispute between the two Hebrew men. The alienation that Moses had experienced is reborn in an intense fashion when God commands him to return to Egypt. One is even tempted to agree with Moses. Perhaps he is not a good choice for deliverer.

The response of God to Moses' reluctance is as singular as Moses' refusal to play his assigned role. Each of the first three objections is met with patient reassurance. To the first objection of personal unworthiness, God pledges to be with Moses. To the objection that Moses will not be able to answer the questions of the Israelites, God responds with self-disclosure. To the objection that the people will not believe that God has really appeared to Moses, God offers three dramatic signs of presence and power. But finally, when Moses protests his poverty as a public speaker, God replies sharply to him. As Moses continues to beg to be let off, we are not surprised that the narrator tells us that “the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses.” What is astonishing is that Moses succeeds in winning a concession from God. Aaron, Moses' brother, will be sent with him as the one to speak.

The depth of Moses' resistance is an index of how much he would prefer to cling to the familiar pain of his alienation rather than risk the encounter that will restore him definitively to his own people. His personal drama foreshadows the very similar resistance of the Israelites to their salvation, the murmuring tradition in which the people experience nostalgia for the days of slavery and repeatedly put God to the proof. These stories have long stood as a kind of parable of the complex experience of sin and redemption. But there is still the matter of the indignity that God suffers in being argued with, bargained with. The Bible has a very high view of the dignity of God, a point which Moses is quite capable of playing on in a later argument with God (Exod. 32:11-12). Showing God as a deity who, even in anger, refuses to make simple obedience an absolute value puts in question the old canard that Judaism and Christianity are “slave religions.” They are, rather, the religions of slaves who have been freed.

Having looked at the full context of the final lectionary selection, it is time to examine that specific passage in more detail. In these verses, Exod. 3:13-20, Moses raises the
hypothetical question of the Israelites: “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” It is hard to see just what it is that the Israelites are asking. To assume that their question is the equivalent of “who?” or “which one?” does not make sense. The basic issue of identity has been established by referring to “the God of your ancestors.” The question must be about something else. In Hebrew, as in English, “name” can refer not only to identity but to reputation. Both languages use the idiom “to make a name for oneself.” The question is perhaps better taken as a request for credentials. Given the recent oppressive experience of the people in Egypt and the apparent divine absence, a (perhaps cynical) question about the credentials of this God is not implausible. At any rate the ambiguity of “name” seems to be intentional. The answer that Moses receives is a play on the personal name of God, Yahweh.

“God said to Moses, ‘I AM [ehyeh] WHO I AM [ehyeh]. . . . Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM [ehyeh] has sent me to you.’ ” Clearly, that is both an answer and a nonanswer. As Jack Lundbom has pointed out, the sentence structure “x is x” is a common way to put an end to a discussion. We use expressions such as “and that’s that” or “but rules are rules” when we want to signal that a particular matter is closed. So here, too, both the self-referential content (“I am” or “I will be”) and the structure (“x is x”) refuse the legitimacy of the question.

More seems to be involved than just a divine rebuff, however, because the word ehyeh has been used only two verses before in 3:12. There God reassured Moses’ doubt of his own self-sufficiency by saying, “I will be [ehyeh] with you.” Hebrew narrative uses repetition with great carefulness, and it is impossible to hear “I AM sent me” without hearing the echo of “I am-with-you is the one who has sent me.” Lurking behind the almost playful refusal to be interrogated is the divine promise. Almost surprisingly, the “I am who I am” statement does not in fact end the speech. God adds a further statement of self-identification, though it is one that reminds the people of what they already knew rather than disclosing new information. “Say to the Israelites, Yahweh, the God of your ancestors,
the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’” (3:15; my trans.). As God discloses to Moses how he is to bring the Israelites out of Egypt and into “a land flowing with milk and honey,” past, present, and future promise are united in the resonances of Yahweh and ehyeh. “This is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.”

Each of the lections has been concerned with the relationship of divine presence and human action, and yet each illumines different aspects. As I suggested earlier, the suspense of the Exodus narratives does not lie in the general outcome of the story but in seeing how individual people and communities respond to the offer of deliverance. The reluctance of Moses and, subsequently, of the Israelites to give up their unsatisfactory but familiar situations is psychologically acute. These stories might provide, for instance, an opportunity to explore in a nuanced and nonjudgmental way the frustration and guilt that people feel when they try to give up patterns of life that they know to be destructive or self-limiting but to which they find themselves inexplicably clinging. Care-givers, too, annoyed by the reluctance of the disadvantaged to adopt what seem obvious solutions to pressing problems, may be helped by these stories to comprehend the real anxiety produced by liberating change. One of the significant features of biblical narrative is that it seldom allows itself to be reduced to a message. It invites people to consider, to imagine, to explore points of view and emotions that might well be impossible to communicate through the didactic word alone. Just as clearly, it is impossible to do justice to the homiletical richness of such stories in a few short sentences. Inexhaustible, they are like the jars of oil and meal that Elijah provided for the widow of Zarephath. With every use the narratives appear to be renewed and refilled with meaning.

SUGGESTED READINGS


NOTES

1. It is amusing that the lectionary omits the last two verses of chapter 3, verses that describe how the Hebrew women will “despoil the Egyptians.” The lectionary apparently finds this an unedifying conclusion for the divine speech.

2. There is another reason to object to the omission of Exod. 1:15-21. The celebration of women as agents of God’s salvation is an important biblical theme that it is wrong to minimize or obscure. As God honors the courage of the midwives (Exod. 1:21), so should we.

BOOK REVIEW:
THREE BOOKS ON SPIRITUAL LIFE

TIMOTHY K. JONES


Many observers believe this country is witnessing a spiritual quest of growing proportions. Interest in religion among Americans clearly appears to be on the rise.¹ Such ferment, however, may not be as promising for our churches as it first seems. Many spiritual seekers doubt that churches are equipped to satisfy their quest. Pollster George Gallup's organization found that large numbers of Americans, churched and unchurched alike, agree with the statement, "Most churches are not effective in helping people find meaning in life."² They evince little interest in what Thomas Merton calls the "dry husks of literal abstraction," hungering instead for a living relationship with God. Perhaps that explains in part the surveys that report that six in ten unchurched Americans agree that "most churches and synagogues have lost the real, spiritual part of religion."³

The church itself is sometimes skittish around people with deep spiritual leanings. We fear that spirituality involves a retreat into a cozy half-world, that prayer somehow has little to do with the hurts and hungers of a wider world. Dostoevski's character in *The Brothers

Timothy K. Jones is pastor of Christ Our Peace Church of the Brethren in The Woodlands, Texas.
Karamazov captures our worst fears: "Here in this hermitage are twenty-five saints being saved. They look at one another and eat cabbages."

Three books have recently aimed at a biblical spirituality that goes beyond both dry theory and the religion of "God and me unendingly." They voice their convictions from traditions as varied as high-church Episcopalianism to pietist Quakerism. But the books of Richard Foster, Iris Cully, and Gale Webbe all try to articulate a way of praying that does more than barricade the spiritual within themselves. When nourished by biblical faith and rooted in community, they argue, the spiritual life can enlarge us and enable a fuller engagement with our neighbor. Deep spiritual longings need not end in ostrichlike isolation, they suggest, but will in fact nudge piety from quiet corners of retreat.

COMMON GROUND

The Quaker writer and teacher Richard Foster argues in Celebration of Discipline, for example, that faith must move beyond superficiality and the "doctrine of instant satisfaction." The need in our world, he writes, is "not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people" (1). Inward disciplines like fasting and prayer, outer disciplines like solitude and simplicity, and corporate disciplines like confession and worship, Foster believes, call us "to move beyond surface living into the depths." These disciplines thereby guard us from an aloof, private spirituality. Foster stresses, in fact, that far from being esoterica, the disciplines are "for ordinary human beings: people who have jobs, who care for children, who must wash dishes and mow lawns." And while Foster weaves into his text quotes from ancient mystics and visionaries like Brother Lawrence and Meister Eckhart, he also repeatedly quotes activist writers like Douglas Steere and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Episcopalian educator Iris Cully similarly draws on her encyclopedic reading to widen the horizons of piety. Cully, too, promises no instant entrée into the life of prayer. It is a process of growth. "The spiritual life must be cultivated" (ix), she says. It takes time and, above all, nurture. "Just as human relationships mature through the years . . . , so the relationship to God, which we call the spiritual life, can only be developed slowly. It is an educative process" (14). And it is a process, she asserts, which cannot be left only to individual efforts. Whatever one's vocation, "it is necessary to discover time for specific spiritual nurturing, and to engage in activities through which the spiritual dimension of life can transform the actions themselves" (34). Here the
church becomes crucial as the prime nurturer. "The individual is strengthened by the presence of other believers. One is taught Scripture by listening to readings from the Bible; one learns how to pray by participating in the prayer of the people of God" (35).

Gale Webbe, also an Episcopalian, would agree with the accent on discipline and cultivation within the Christian community. He bemoans "our religious climate with its strong bias toward individualism and subjectivism" (54). We must be clear, he argues, that spiritual exercises are not for our pleasure and comfort, but "are means toward seeking and knowing God" (54). Spiritual life indeed demands a willingness to walk through valleys and of religious warmth. We do not rest only, he insists, in the company of the Son of man who came "eating and drinking"; we also follow one who "fasted forty days and forty nights." We "toast him with wine," yet must also "adore him in hunger" (31, 32). Webbe bluntly adds, "Wholesome religion . . . cares very little how I 'feel' and astonishingly little about T. . . . Corporate religion is, obviously, the only kind appropriate to the Body of Christ" (32). Disciplines or practices like fasting, prayer, and receiving sacraments all must cultivate and prepare the soil of our heart before we can gracefully respond to the presence of God. They set our feet on the path of growth in a way that shallow emotion or truncated individualism never can.

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

With all that these writers share, each leaves common ground to explore directions unique to their backgrounds. Celebration of Discipline, for example, uniquely explores and catalogues the disciplines (or practices) of the spiritual life. Because of what Foster terms society's "abysmal ignorance of the most simple and practical aspects of nearly all the classic Spiritual Disciplines" (3), Foster throws light on a spectrum of disciplines. His unmistakable debt to Quaker thought enriches rather than impoverishes, for he has drawn freely at the wells of Protestants and Catholics, as well.

I was impressed how successfully Foster tackles a subject that can easily lapse into legalism or dogmatism. He knows that the disciplines can "become dull, death-breathing tools in the hands of modern Pharisees" (164). For the most part he advocates an approach characterized by spontaneity and openness. Just as important, Foster works at complementing his grasp of the devotional classics with practical questions.

His discussion of the "inward" discipline of meditation is a good
case in point. "Place the hands on the knees," Foster instructs, "palm up in a gesture of receptivity. Sometimes it is good to close the eyes in order to remove distractions and center the attention on the living Christ" (21). He reviews other concrete details, such as breathing and meditation on Scripture. His detailed discussion of fasting not only speaks of using it to cultivate "a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings," but also concludes with practical suggestions on duration and the physiological importance of breaking the fast with a light meal of fruits and vegetables.

Foster helpfully weaves in strands of biblical insight in a way that generally avoids trite answers or prooftexts. His explorations of simplicity and worship are rich with images from Jesus' teachings and Paul's letters.

This insistent return to the balance of Scripture helps Foster tread the middle ground between seeing the spiritual life as wholly a result of our efforts (which leads to frantic activity) or as solely God's doing (which leads to passive quietism). Foster sums up the disciplines as a way to "place ourselves before God so that He can transform us" (6).

Cully echoes Foster's attention to spiritual practices. But while Education for Spiritual Growth covers a wide range of biblical, Christian, and even non-Christian religious exercises, it is much less a "how-to" catalogue. Because of her conviction that "spirituality is never a product," but a "process evidenced in a lifestyle" (ix), her discussions focus on the nurturing, educative process. As a seminary professor of religious education, Cully wants not only "to help people learn about and nurture spiritual growth in their own lives," but "also to help them become teachers who can nurture others into spiritual development" (x). Cully can help the pastor or teacher apply insights from a book like Foster's. She is conversant not only in the vocabulary of the spirit, but also the language of developmental theory and psychology.

She very helpfully, for example, talks of the psychological dynamics of conflict in the spiritual life. Spirituality can, but should not, be an escape into privatism, an effort to avoid painful personal or social conflicts. She therefore distinguishes between withdrawal, which can rejuvenate and heal, and avoidance, which is destructive. She ponders in an insightful chapter, "How can the educative process contribute to a withdrawal that is strengthening rather than weakening, that equips people for struggle rather than protecting them from struggle?" (95).

Cully makes an even more distinctive contribution. In common with writers like James Fowler or John Westerhoff is her careful attention to stages of faith development. Her concern to relate the stages to
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nurturing spiritual life is unique, however. She examines ways the church can foster spirituality in the child or adolescent through significant religious events such as Christmas and Easter (127). I liked the concreteness of passages like this:

As soon as a child begins to understand words, believing parents will frequently spend a moment at bedtime referring joyfully to the spent day’s events, speaking of God, and in a connecting gesture softly touching the child’s hands or head. . . . God becomes connected with rest, quiet, security, and joy—all good experiences. (126)

Gale Webbe’s The Shape of Growth covers ground common to Cully’s and Foster’s books but assumes a distinctly Anglican perspective. So while Webbe provides guidelines for practicing meditation or gives advice on finding time for devotional reading, he unapologetically accents principles unique to his theological tradition.

The distinctiveness lies in more than terminology (which Webbe readily admits is “Episcopalian”). He assigns prominence to the Eucharist as a catalyst for deepening spiritual life, for example. Or he discusses the sacrament of reconciliation (absolution). And Webbe thereby helps to correct an imbalance that sometimes plagues Protestant and free church devotional writers. The more pietist (and Quaker) Foster, as a case in point, pays little regard to the sacramental nature of Christian faith, ignoring the Eucharist even in the chapter, “The Discipline of Worship.” Webbe finds the liturgy of the church too crucial to overlook, the corporate wisdom of the Book of Common Prayer too rich to undervalue. His is a valuable reminder even for those in a non-Anglican tradition.

Webbe also helpfully explores the whole realm of what he calls “ascetical theology.” In this he reinforces an emphasis dating back to the words, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself . . . and follow me.” Webbe hereby also echoes classical writers like Thomas à Kempis or more contemporary writers like Thomas Merton (who directs the one who wants to pray to “untether yourself from the world . . . loosing all the fine strings and strands of tension that bind you, by sight, by sound, by thought, to the presence of other men’’”).

As Webbe argues, “classical spirituality, faithful to our Lord . . . knows nothing of religion that tries to rise on the wings of prayer alone, in the forlorn hope that one is not really chained to the rocks below” (20). Disciplines like fasting or the observances of Lent are
critical for Webbe in freeing the spirit’s movement toward God (23). It is not that we must escape the world; it is more that we must be free from it.

He buttresses his argument with what he calls “diagrams,” or “maps” of the spiritual life. One of these maps, for example, traces an ascending trail through three levels: the “purgative way,” the “illuminative way,” and the “unitive way.” On the first level, the activities of discipline and denial may at times dominate. But as one moves through such purgation to the second, illuminative way, there is surer self-knowledge, a greater sense of comradeship with God, and a weaning from the practiced and ordered activities. Finally, “one enters into the Unitive Way whereby one humbly knows oneself to be a son of God, bound to his Father by the warmest love and abandoned to him in complete trust” (10).

Webbe knows that diagrams of spiritual life cannot transform. But for those on the journey, they offer glimpses and signposts that guide and enable one better to negotiate the path.

UNBROKEN GROUND

With all that is good in these three books, there are questions that remain to be answered. Even the broad experience of these three writers has not kept them from leaving some soil unturned. This was true for Celebration of Discipline. Even with Foster’s obviously eclectic reading, something troubled me. I was disappointed to discover how little Foster connected his spirituality with global compassion. As Cully notes in her book, the invitation of Christ to “come ye apart” ends with a command to feed the multitude. In the best traditions of spirituality, growing communion with Christ leads to growing compassion for the world. Foster would affirm that. But he does not pursue the implications.

To his credit, Foster does quote Thomas Merton to the effect that the person who “has not meditated on the extermination camps of Dachau and Auschwitz has not yet fully entered into the experience of Christianity in our time” (quoted on page 28). Foster does devote a chapter to the discipline of service. And his treatment of the discipline of simplicity is radical in its implications. But aside from a brief line about demonic powers on the personal, social, and institutional levels (148), there is virtually no grappling with what it means to confront the institutions of our time with the claims of the kingdom of God.

Foster has avoided exploring how spirituality can be a force that propels people to decry apartheid, or confront oppression in Central
America, or visit the imprisoned, or work for nuclear disarmament, or fight pornography. Prayer is a decidedly radical act: in praying we acknowledge the claims of the Lord over and above every social institution. So writes Thomas Merton: “When I pray for peace, I pray not only that the enemies of my country may cease to want war, but above all that my own country will cease to do the things that make war inevitable.”

Given Foster’s Quaker roots, I therefore found this neglect of the linkage between prayer, social activism, and peacemaking remarkable. Foster is clearly visionary, but he stops just short of being prophetic.

While Cully’s *Education for Spiritual Growth* more adequately addresses the issues relating to the global community, I sense a weak link in another area. Cully provides an encyclopedic survey of religious practices; she ranges far and wide, with a chapter detailing Jewish, Islamic, and Buddhist practices. She covers with appreciation Eastern techniques such as yoga and transcendental meditation. But even more helpful than this cursory survey would have been a deeper probing of Cully’s own Christian tradition.

In this regard I was intrigued that Cully, and to some extent Foster, virtually ignore the emerging spirituality of charismatic Protestants and Catholics. The charismatic movement is insistently reminding the wider church of unclaimed streams of spiritual experience. While Cully cites Orthodoxy’s “Jesus Prayer” as a movement from “words to wordlessness, from petition to adoration, from self-consciousness... to God-consciousness” (54), she seems unaware that such an experience overlaps and resonates with charismatic devotion. One scholar sympathetic to Pentecostalism writes of a functional similarity between speaking in tongues, Quaker silent worship, and the liturgical worship of the Catholic and Episcopal churches. All three, he hypothesizes, “permit the analytical mind—the focused, objectifying dimension of man’s intellect—to rest, thus freeing other dimensions of the person... for a deeper openness to divine reality.” Charismatic piety has increasingly become a voice to reckon with in any discussion of spiritual life. Cully would enrich her study to incorporate such emerging voices.

Finally, the greatest limitation I found in *The Shape of Growth* had to do not with its heavy Episcopalian flavor—one soon learns to “translate” the jargon. What concerned me most was Webbe’s tendency toward dense language and complicated theory. Though he early on defends his dictum, “applications are impossible without principles” (9), Webbe nevertheless is not as strong on covering practice as outlining theology. That may be fine, depending on the
goals of the writer (and reader). But the danger remains that one will spend great energy mastering the maps and diagrams of spiritual life and not sit down and prepare for the living encounter with God. We learn to pray by praying, by attending to what Cully calls the "careful mix" of understanding the spiritual life and actually living it.

That in fact is a good word when approaching any book on prayer or the spiritual life, whether these three or others. We must combine a heart that thirsts for new insights with a spirit that is willing to patiently absorb what we read. It is not enough to read and accumulate ideas. We must somehow learn to make them our own as we allow God to remake us.

These three books with their varied approaches and differing perspectives are all excellent places to begin. Even with their limitations.

NOTES
5. The Imitation of Christ (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), pp. 94, 95, where Thomas à Kempis stresses, "In dying to the world, lies all our health. . . . There is no other way to life and true inward peace but the way of the Cross, and the way of daily submission of body to the Spirit."
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