Early Methodist Hymnody and Hymnal Revision
Craig B. Callaway

The Birthday Visit
James E. Sargent

Guilt and Pastoral Care
Leroy T. House

Preaching from Matthew in Pentecost

Membership Decline in the Mainline
William H. Willimon and Robert L. Weis

Review of Works in Augustinian Studies
Eugene TeSelle

Recent Books in Theological Hermeneutics
Charles M. Wood

Review of Christian Identity and Theological Education
Frederick Sommig
QUARTERLY REVIEW
A Scholarly Journal for Reflection on Ministry

A publication of The United Methodist Publishing House
Robert K. Feaster, President and Publisher
and the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry
F. Thomas Trotter, General Secretary

Editorial Director, J. Richard Peck
Editor, Charles E. Cole
Assistant Editor, P. Holley Roberts

Quarterly Review (ISSN 0270-9287) provides continuing education resources for professional ministers in The United Methodist Church and other churches. A scholarly journal for reflection on ministry, Quarterly Review seeks to encourage discussion and debate on matters critical to the practice of ministry.

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

Articles for consideration are welcome from lay and professional ministers, United Methodists, and others, and should be mailed to the Editor, Quarterly Review, Box 871, Nashville, Tennessee 37202. Manuscripts should be in English and typed double-spaced, including notes, and the original and two duplicates, without the writer's name, should be submitted. No sermons, poems, or devotional material are accepted. Queries are welcome. A style sheet is available on request. Payment is by fee, depending on edited length.

Quarterly Review is published four times a year, in March, June, September, and December, by the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry and The United Methodist Publishing House. Editorial Offices are at 1001 19th Avenue, South, Box 871, Nashville, TN 37202. Circulation and business offices are at 201 Eighth Avenue South, Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202. Second-class postage paid at Nashville, Tennessee. Quarterly Review is available at a basic subscription price of $15 for one year, $26 for two years, and $33 for three years. Subscriptions may be obtained by sending a money order or check to the Business Manager, Quarterly Review, Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202.

Quarterly Review: A Scholarly Journal for Reflection on Ministry
Fall, 1987

Copyright © 1987 by The United Methodist Publishing House and the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry.
Editorial: Testament of Z
Charles E. Cole

Patterns of Worship in Early Methodist Hymnody, and the Task of Hymnal Revision
Craig B. Callaway

The Birthday Visit
James E. Sargent

Pastoral Care and the Healing of Guilt
Leroy T. Howe

To the End of Time: Preaching from Matthew in Pentecost

The Present Crisis: The Impact of the Membership Decline in the Mainline Churches
William H. Willimon and Robert L. Wilson

Book Reviews:
Works in Augustinian Studies
Eugene TeSelle
Book Reviews, cont.:
Theological Hermeneutics
   Charles M. Wood............................................................. 91

Joseph E. Hough, Jr., and John B. Cobb, Jr., Christian Identity and Theological Education
   Frederick Sontag............................................................ 101
EDITORIAL:

TESTAMENT OF Z

Called to be a writer, Z became a preacher instead. He could not account for this discrepancy other than to attribute it to circumstance. There was no newspaper in the town in which he grew up, nor was there a library. The only link with the great world of ideas was the radio. From it there came a stream of incredible characters to people the sterile life of a child living on the plains during World War II. Magnificent voices, unblemished by the flat resonances that Z spoke and heard every day, taught listeners that "the Shadow knows the hearts of men," and that if rescue ever came it would appear in the form of a solitary ranger on a swift white horse.

Then there was the voice of Z's father. Not stentorian, not dramatic, heavily laced with archaisms and considerable obscenities. Yet it was a voice with finality in it, a voice that wasted no effort, and a voice of authority. His mother's family came from the piney woods of the South. Farmers, mechanics, truck drivers, they drewled out stories of family and friends, laced with jokes and racisms. He and the other children sat and listened, alternately bored and intrigued with adult secrets and commonplace news.

It seemed inevitable that Z would transfer his fascination with aural (and oral) discourse to the church. The preachers he heard were hardly eloquent. Since the church was Methodist, however, the hieratic scepter passed frequently from one to another, and a childhood and adolescence spent listening to old men and young men and visiting revivalists as well as mature
presiding elders and an occasional guest preacher from the county seat, brought out for special ceremonies—the exposure to all these homiletical exercises inevitably conditioned Z to consider the possibility that he, too, might some day speak from the pulpit.

He had to overcome one problem, however. When the Lord spoke through that inner voice of intuition, it did not say, "Go preach to the multitudes." It said, "Be a writer." From his first day at school, Z knew, his mother knew, and his teachers and classmates knew, that he was above all a writer. Ordinary in arithmetic, clumsy on the playground, capable in music, he was superb at writing. His papers were invariably selected to be read before the class. His mother praised him for his ingenuity in constructing stories. He himself liked to do nothing better than read, then write like those he read: Richard Halliburton, Rafael Sabatini, Jack London, Willa Cather.

In college Z struggled briefly with the problem: Should he major in journalism or in English? If journalism, he would go out after receiving his degree and become a newspaper writer. He knew a little bit about journalism from an older brother-in-law who was a reporter for a large city daily. The first time Z visited him, his brother-in-law took him out to cover an accident. They looked down from the causeway into the dark waters of a coastal bay where a car lay upside down. Later Z would accompany his brother-in-law to political fish fries, high school football games, and large construction projects, like the new tunnel being constructed under the bay.

Z knew, then, what it meant to be a writer, at least the kind of writer he would be at first. Later, he felt confident, he would write novels, biographies, perhaps important histories (Dwight D. Eisenhower's *Crusade in Europe* was then a best seller, ghost-written, Z's college professors confidently informed him). The difficulty was those voices, voices that in Z's undergraduate experience became ever more sophisticated and ever more insistent on the prestige and value of the spoken word. The professors with their traces of aristocratic backgrounds, the visiting poets with their dark metaphors and biting humor, even Z's classmates, who by their close reasoning and severe logic threw him for losses, intellectually, time and again. These
became the determining factor, and in his senior year Z applied for theological school.

Like most young people, Z felt confident he could engage successfully in polyphasic activity. Thus he had no qualms about getting married, moving to a distant part of the country—the East—and enrolling in a seminary where his classmates were highly diverse and extremely competent. For the first year or two of theological school, Z struggled with himself, not his studies. Was he competent sexually? Could he compete with these other bright students? What was he to do with a culture loaded with "foreign" accents—Italian, Irish, New England Yankee, New York Bronxese? He almost sank beneath the load. But slowly he began to adjust. Once, worried that he could not master the intricacies of Kant, Hegel, Fichte, and Schopenhauer, he went in to see his professor of philosophical theology. These minds were too subtle for him, he said, and he would like to withdraw from the course. "Why, bless my soul," laughed the professor. "Remember these guys put their pants on one leg at a time, just like you." And he proceeded to convince Z that no thinker was as weighty as the thinker or the thinker's disciples made themselves out to be.

Buoyed by such small successes, Z worked through biblical studies (more texts to be examined, this time in Greek and Hebrew), church history, theology, ethics. And for some reason he became mesmerized by ethics. Possibly it was the appeal of the world-famous professor who taught ethics at the seminary, possibly it was the latent moralism in Z's Methodism, but whatever the reason, Z felt drawn to ethics. He read Paul, Augustine, the Neo-Platonists, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, and of course Wesley, not for their theology or religion, but for their understanding of *telos*, of acting in all its phases, of fulfillment of the *imago dei* in goodness and truth and justice. These intellectual obsessions received some object lessons in reality when Z joined other students in supporting the sit-ins in the South, then just beginning. He wrote a press release for a student protest. The graduate student in charge laughed at Z's prose. It was one of many abuses that he suffered at the hands of graduate students, who seemed to imitate all the weaknesses of the professors on whom they depended while reflecting few of their strengths.
Emerging from seminary, Z and his wife and their first infant went straight to the parish, back on the plains. It was his mission. And certain of who he was and what he needed to do, Z set to work getting involved in the community. Joining the Unitarian minister, liberal professors from the local college, a few black leaders, and one or two of his Methodist colleagues in ministry, Z learned a new language. The immediate problem that presented itself was integration of the public school system. The ethical categories that Z had learned in seminary proved inadequate to the stormy present, and he quickly adopted the lingo of activism. What needed changing was not merely a policy but "the system," a system marked by "structures of injustice" and "interlocking interests." Some advocated "dialogue" with the Establishment, but Z learned the futility of this approach from those who pointed out how quickly one became "co-opted." The conservative blacks who seemed reluctant to join a protest were understandably persuaded by a "false consciousness" and could be safely discounted. What was more important was that the "forces for change" (i.e., Z and his activist friends) have "good communication" with each other, engaging in a "participatory process" where some were "facilitators," others "technocrats," and still others the "out-front spokespersons." All of these needed to know the "line" so that a consistent "front" was presented to the media and to opponents, and a "planned strategy" put into effect. Along the way, Z learned to avoid some landmines: the "fake liberals," the persons with "verbal skills" but lacking in "follow-up" or "measurable results."

Z made one large gain during his activist days. He met a slightly older preacher who befriended him in a no-nonsense sort of way. When Z seemed to be fudging on a hot issue, his friend would say, "I always feel like going home when we get to this point. But I know we have to stick it out." And Z would get himself together and walk through fire. Nor would his friend let him go too far in his self-deprecation: "Let's don't play 'poor me' today." They were heckled at public meetings, confessed how badly they preached after being out on the picket line all day Saturday, and drank beer together. The gain of a friend was
not matched, however, by any large confidence that changes could be made in the community.

Changes took place, but they seemed to result as much from outside forces and individual idiosyncrasies as from the efforts of the community organizations. When Congress passed an important Civil Rights bill, it affected Z’s community, all the way from the mayor and vested interests of the Establishment down to the racists who were Z’s neighbors and parishioners. One local politician gave an object lesson in political pragmatism by voting for funds for busing because, he said, “I’d rather get on the front end of the wagon instead of the tailgate.” Z could never be such a pragmatist, perhaps because it was uninteresting. All that seemed to be involved was a calculation about which way the wind was blowing and then a decision to bend in the proper direction. Politics, he began to feel, was always several light-years behind because it was forced to deal with commonalities.

And Z discovered that he himself was among the more ineffectual “change-agents.” He marveled at the black woman who could make a speech before the city council and change votes, or the crafty in-fighters among the activists who knew just what to say and when to say it in order to bring a committee around to their point of view. Z could see that he himself was outspoken, unpersuasive, incapable of arousing enthusiasm or altering convictions of others.

His self-confidence received another jolt when he was asked to move from his appointment. He had not given enough attention to his parishioners, it was said. He was tendentious in his preaching, it was said. The congregation was not growing, and in a lightning-swift move at the charge conference Z was asked to seek another appointment. Z felt as if he had been fired. He had failed. And he felt embarrassed for his family and guilty for all the mistakes he had made.

It was the time when the culture was going through a mass upheaval, too, with the Vietnam War struggling to an end, “silent America” sounding its horn, and women beginning to stir themselves up. The woman in Z’s life, who happened to be his wife, embodied her own version of feminism. She objected to Z’s “dominance by verbal skills,” his controlling the budget,
his rationality. She wanted to cast off the shackles of domestic servitude and become herself. Z felt at first more and more diminished by these changes. His sense of failure became myopic and narcissistic. He began to enjoy feeling sorry for himself. But he moved to another church, his wife decided to remain with him, and Z entered on a program of self-development.

Rushing out of the house at 5:30 in the morning, Z ran up the hill toward the palatial estates in an adjoining neighborhood. There he would be safe from the snaps and snarls of local hounds, and he silently cruised past large mansions set back from the street and fronted by long, well-trimmed lawns and clumps of soaring elms and pecans. He could sense only the sound of his own breathing, and returning home after a jog he felt ascetically cleansed, hardened, ready to endure the cruelest calamity or the most intolerable routine imposed on him by the ecclesiastical machinery. The saying was sure: Jog five miles early in the morning and nothing worse could happen the rest of the day.

He took his life-lesson to heart. He had, in fact, been negligent, he decided. He had not paid attention to his first duty—to be a pastor. He used his newly found sense of discipline to force himself to serve. In the morning he prepared his sermons. In the middle of the day he made hospital calls. By afternoon he was driving from house to house, talking to retired members of the congregation and housewives home during the day and shut-ins. He returned home late in the afternoon, watched the TV news and ate, then went out again, this time to call on prospective members. Diligently he labored through church committees, mentally sleeping through long budget discussions and the plans for the every-member canvas. He was the house chaplain, and he gloried in saying prayers and "being there" at every meeting.

The inward turn led Z back to reading and the arts. He began to realize that everything had an aesthetic component to it. The brown prairie landscape around town became a shimmering chiaroscuro during the summer and fall, and he marvelled at the sight of long roads running out to a vanishing point on the horizon, of grain elevators by the railroad tracks, of billboards,
and even of tin cans scattered on his front lawn by wild passersby in the night. Suburbia became a subject in his mind for a historical museum. Amazed at how such privatistic obsessions could lead to the same ranch-style houses, all with iron filigree on the carports, all with aluminum shutters and overdecorated mailboxes, he had a fantasy: Someone should walk into one of these houses at dinnertime on a weekday in the spring, offer the family a million dollars to leave everything exactly as it was, and then encase the whole thing—spaghetti cooking on the stove and TV on in the den—in a giant plastic bubble. Future generations could then see and hear and even smell exactly how the middle class lived in twentieth-century America.

Worship, too, had its theatrical side, he decided, overcoming a prejudice against worship as performance. How things looked mattered, even if they looked ordinary or improvised. Every sound fitted in, from the man who blew his nose during the moment of silent prayer to the off-key alto in the choir. And there were roles, too, from that of the self-important head usher to the widow in the second row ready to give her mite. Once a lay speaker broke down while giving the mission report. Her son had served as a missionary overseas, had contracted malaria, and had died—all years before. But she began to cry while standing at the lectern during the Sunday service, and she was taken outside for a drink of water and some consoling. Z kept the service going but later he thought: "This was an act, but it was sincere. People seemed genuinely moved. Something real happened in worship—imagine!" It was moving, it was real, and it was drama, pure drama. He wanted more of it.

The trouble was, not everyone saw it that way. Z would have been embarrassed to say, "We don't need more firepower, we need more people power." But the black Baptist preacher said it and everyone loved it. No one thought it was role-playing, though. Z's teen-age son did not think he was playing a role when he sullenly picked his way through the evening meal. The people in the church took themselves very seriously when they recited, "Christ has no hands but our hands! To do his work today," or asked for help "from the man upstairs." And Z began to get confused about what was art and what was reality. They seemed to merge and become one, a dangerous situation,
especially if one admired the paintings of René Magritte or Willem de Kooning, as he did. Z suffered another lapse. He became bored with preaching, bored with meetings, bored even with people dying and having babies. He looked at himself in the mirror—"profoundly superficial," he thought, a "technicolor version of a Rothko print called 'Gray on Gray.'" He was a marginal man in a marginal organization.

Before he fell completely off the edge, the bishop caught him. Z's wife and children began to complain about the town. They had been there too long. It was so . . . so-so. Z had let himself be pushed around in the ecclesiastical game too long. He needed a change. Don't talk to the district superintendent, his wife said, elevating him to "that pious wimp." Go straight to the bishop, she said.

So he went. But the result was different from his expectation. The bishop needed someone in the conference office. Someone who knew the ropes, who could provide a steady hand. Thou art the man. Back home, Z ruefully admitted, "I asked for a promotion and they made me a bureaucrat." But the job meant a move to the big city, so on that score Z had for once delivered the goods.

The job was something else. Very little drama here. Z was given a long title and the task of "initiation, coordination, and evaluation of program." He knew nothing of what these terms meant, but it was no problem because one had to know very little to be a bureaucrat. In fact, the more officials he met from national and ecumenical agencies, the more he realized the truth to "ascending levels of irresponsibility." He saw people on the line fired when they made mistakes. Those in the front office escaped unscathed, protected by boards who seemed never to exercise any discipline. For once he would have liked to see chief executives called to account for their bumbling. But it never happened. Elected board members liked being on boards too much, he decided, since it got them out of town and to the big city.

Z was not always skillful at the in-fighting, the protection of turf, the kowtowing to people with power. His boss, the bishop's administrative assistant, had whims that were honored: coats and ties during working hours, clean desks at the
end of every day, no jokes about Jesus. The last stricture Z felt the cruellest. What would Jesus have thought about such a rule? He would have rolled over in his grave, Z was sure.

Z found himself using a new language. No one ever said "money"; "resources" and "funding" were used instead. "Fund balances" (money left in an account at the end of the year) were to be avoided. He was involved in endless "interfaces," people were "credentialed," and they "networked" and "itinerated," sometimes while "dialoguing" or "facilitating." To his horror Z one day found himself composing the following sentence: "The program objective will be determined by analysis of data resulting from postconsultative evaluation." He slowly felt himself turning into one of the computers, beeping and blinking, being "accessed" or "downloaded," an electronic drone.

He brought himself back to reality. Yes, people were actually fed through the programs he so assiduously guided through to completion. Yes, this was the language of organization, but the church was more than organization, it was people: Hispanics working in health clinics and chaplains consoling the grieving and abused women being given a new life. It was good, he knew. It was just—what the organization did to people. After they had been in the bureaucracy for a while their faces became expressionless, their voices toneless, their movements tailored to present a certain nondescript image. But maybe they were called, this was their calling, he argued with himself. After all, just because he was no good as a bureaucrat—he sometimes disagreed with the boss in public, and he often forgot to bring the correct files to meetings—did that mean that no one could serve God in this way?

One day his mentor called, the friend from the old days. "Still feeling sorry for yourself?" he asked brightly. Z admitted he was. "I got a deal that’ll cure warring madness," his friend said. Z wanted to know if the appointment in the Bay Area had finally come through. "No, dear brother, this one is for you," his friend said. He went on to say that he had been talking with an official in the mission agency and they had discussed the need for someone to teach in Zaire. "I only thought of you because of your name," his friend said. "Is this a form of preacher-
dumping?" Z wanted to know. "Take a retread from the States and send him to the Third World?"

Before long Z was talking with an African bishop. "We don't want a visitor," the bishop said. "We want someone who can stay for several years and live and work with us." The job was that of a teacher. Z's wife would be needed as well. Here they were on the eve of retirement, considering a call to Africa. And they went.

At first they were overwhelmed by the romance of it all—speaking French, the exotic flora and fauna, the strange culture. Z learned new rhythms of patois and African tongues, patterns of silences enriched by face and hand movements. But people in Zaire were not playing their role properly, Z thought. They seemed serene, almost beatified. They should have looked pained and troubled. Otherwise how could the church raise money for them? His wife admonished him for this cynicism.

Z discovered what was happening in the Third World. Nothing. The sun comes up and the sun goes down. People are born and work and suffer and die. Change comes very slowly. One must remain content to be. Was this the ultimate calling? He thought of the way he had always thought of calling. You could be called to be a preacher. Amen. Or you could be called to be a shoemaker or a salesman. Amen. And you might even be called to be a politician or a college president. Amen and amen. But this only meant what you did, not who you were, and Z summoned up no imaginary amens for the thought that one might be called as a human being. Not religious enough. In religion, we always have to add something to the given. If there's a dance, we turn it into a ritual. A song into a hymn. Some words into a prayer or a sermon. Was this the problem of the church?

People were worried about the church back home. It was declining. They should have come to Africa. The Holy Spirit seemed to have moved to the southern hemisphere. Here Christianity was growing apace, people were wild to be religious, it was as if the millenium had arrived.

Yet there was suffering, too, and that seemed to make a difference. In the States, people were worried about the institution dying. Here people were dying and the church was
thriving. A curious irony. When Z was young he thought Paul’s grand words in II Corinthians 4 applied to the church—“always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” And after observing the church from the congregation down to the bureaucracy, Z wondered why it had not died centuries before. It seemed called to be a dying body. But in the body of the church he knew, the central concern was how to keep it alive, to resuscitate it by blowing into its nostrils the artificial breath of programs and crusades and new techniques. Let it die, Z thought. Then let there be a resurrection. That was it. The church was afraid there would be no resurrection so it administered its own life-support system. The result was a walking corpse.

Z returned to the United States to live out his days on his beloved prairie. When he died, his friend said, “Z was not called home. He was called into question.”

—Charles E. Cole
PATTERNS OF WORSHIP IN EARLY METHODIST HYMNODY, AND THE TASK OF HYMNAL REVISION

CRAIG B. GALLAWAY

John Wesley himself was responsible for several hymnbooks, including the 1780 Collection of Hymns. What can we learn from his example?

The subject of hymnody is very much alive in the United Methodist church today. With the present work of the Hymnal Revision Committee in full swing, under the mandate of General Conference, is it any wonder that people from every reach of the church are now making their hymn preferences and concerns a matter of public record? At such a time we should not overlook the "classical" sources of our tradition. To do so would be to miss some of the best resources we have for responding to current questions and issues about the hymnal.¹

What, after all, would a "Wesleyan" hymnal look like today? One answer to this can be given by looking at the early Methodist hymnbooks. Thereto we could do no better than to examine the famous "Large Hymn-book," A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists (1780). This hymnbook, edited and arranged by John Wesley, and containing mostly Charles Wesley's hymns, has long been recognized as a classic of Methodist worship and spirituality.²

I shall examine the structure of the 1780 hymnbook according to three specific features. These will by no means exhaust the resources of this wonderful collection; but they will show in

¹ Craig B. Gallaway is a Ph. D. candidate at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, where he is currently working on a dissertation on the topic of the christology of the Wesley hymns. He is also a deacon in the North Texas Conference and serves as a consultant to the Hymnal Revision Committee.

²
basic outline how early Methodist patterns of theology and experience may inform our present task of hymnal revision:

1. One of the explicit principles according to which the hymns of the 1780 Collection are arranged is conformity with "the experience of real Christians." Of what significance is it that this hymnbook consciously targets a range of experience as a way of focusing the activity of worship?

2. A wide variety of christological and theological images ground the experiential framework of these hymns. What is the systemic significance of their range and pattern of location?

3. The hymns employ a pattern of modes of address, which qualify the complex of imagery and experience in the 1780 hymnbook. Why is it that these hymns "speak" in a variety of voices, involving the community of faith and the persons of the Trinity in a drama of dialogue?

A PATTERN OF EXPERIENCE

The first question concerns the significance of the arrangement of the 1780 Collection. When John Wesley put this hymnbook together he made quite clear, in his famous preface, what were the explicit principles of his arrangement:

It is large enough to contain all the important truths of our most holy religion, whether speculative or practical; yea, to illustrate them all, and to prove them both by scripture and reason. And this is done in a regular order. The hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians. So that this book is in effect a little body of experimental and practical divinity. (emphasis added)

The first and obvious thing to notice, in this preface, is that Wesley's conception of the place of hymns in worship was geared to a pattern of experience. What this pattern amounts to can be discerned in more detail by having a look at the hymnbook's table of contents (see appendix A).

The more one studies the 1780 table of contents, I am convinced, the more one will discover connections with what has come to be known generally in Wesley studies as the ordino
We would not have to look very far in the 1780 hymnbook to find headings intrinsically connected with the themes of original sin, prevenient grace, repentance, justification, regeneration, sanctification, and perfection. Rather than drawing these connections out in a formal way, however, the hymns embody and dramatize what it means to be persons who have these experiences.

Always, in the Wesley hymns, when people come to the activity of worship, they do so as persons at some place in experience between the poles of fallenness and glory. The initial point of departure is that of repentance, where an awareness of the need for God’s prevenient grace—even to begin—is an essential Wesleyan element:

O That I could repent,
O that I could believe!
Thou, by thy voice, the marble rent,
The rock in sunder cleave!
(WJW p. 115, cf. BOH #94)

A distinct milestone is reached in the hymns “for believers rejoicing,” where the experience of justification, pardon, and acceptance becomes the central focus:

No condemnation now I dread,
Jesus, and all in him, is mine.
Alive in him, my living head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th’ eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.
(WJW p. 322, BOH #527)

Turning the experiential focus in another direction, there are hymns concerned specifically with the process of sanctification—for example, this one from the section entitled “For Believers Watching”:

I want a principle within
Of jealous, godly fear,
A sensibility of sin,
A pain to feel it near.
(WJW p. 454, BOH #279)
And, shifting the focus from sanctification, we also find hymns of intercession, where believers are trained to see themselves as participants in Christ's ministry to the world. Here, for example, is an intercession written originally for the opening of the Kingswood School in 1748, a school for the children of the coal miners:

Thy wisdom in their lives be shown,
Thy name confessed and glorified;
Thy power and love diffused abroad,
Till all the earth is filled with God.

(WJW p. 643, BOH #344)

In every case, when Wesley considered the place of a hymn in his Collection, he never lost sight of the fact that the people of the worshiping community are not all at the same place and point in their experiences at the same time. And so he created a hymnbook which targeted and elicited a range of experiences pertinent to the full development of the Christian life.

Why is this significant in the process of hymn selection and arrangement today? In the first place, we might reflect upon the fact that it is possible to nurture representations of the Christian life which are nowhere near as rich and full as this. This basic feature in the structure of the Wesley hymns reminds us—when selecting hymns—to think of the hymn singers, and to remember that people come to the event of worship from a variety and range of circumstances. As a result, there are a variety of dispositions and states of religious awareness which must be touched. In the singing of hymns, furthermore, the singers find their own experiences shaped, formed, and constituted. By attending to the ordo salutis, a hymnal can give congregations an opportunity to be formed in the key aspects of Wesleyan spirituality, including, of course, the full range of convincing, justifying, and sanctifying grace.

But now a critical question arises: Is this Wesleyan concern with the stages of experience merely a concern with experience per se? That is, do we find in the Wesley hymns a kind of introspective and anthropocentric “experientialism”? Some have thought so. Even in recent scholarship the view has been
put forward that the Wesley hymns place too much emphasis on feeling, and not enough on doctrine. This view fails to see, however, the way in which the language of 'affection,' or feeling, and experience is grounded on a foundation of theological and christological imagery in the hymns.

A PATTERN OF IMAGERY

The second factor we need to explore has to do with the question of pattern in the theological and christological imagery of the hymns. Above all it must not escape our attention that, when the early Methodist hymns evoke and elicit a range of experience, they do so on the basis of a rich and complex framework of biblical imagery. The imagery employed, furthermore, is embedded in a broad narrative structure which itself has many implications for the Christian life. In this connection it is significant that Wesley's prefatory remarks included not only the reference to experience, but also that to "all the important truths of our most holy religion."

To begin with, we must recognize just how rich in imagery the Wesley hymns are. In the 1780 hymnbook, for example, there are more than two hundred different images (figures, names, titles, etc.) that bear upon the portrayal of Christ, his person and work, and his relationships to the other persons of the Trinity. We find everything from the familiar titles and names—e.g., Christ, Lord, Jesus, Savior, etc.—to an almost endless array of biblical figures and living metaphors—e.g., Advocate, Armorer, Bridegroom, Brother, Bread, Captain, Cornerstone, Creator, Defender, Friend, Judge, King, Man of sorrows, Morning Star, Physician, Rock, Servant, Shepherd, Traveler, Victim, Vine, Wisdom, etc.

There is not space here to go into a full analysis of all of this imagery. We may, however, mark some of the more outstanding concentrations which undergird the overall framework of the 1780 hymnbook. By doing so, we gain a deeper insight into the meaning of the experiential pattern itself.

One of the clearest and most pronounced concentrations of christological imagery in the 1780 hymnbook has to do with the portrayal of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Here we
EARLY METHODIST HYMNODY

find a key example of the influence of the Reformation on the theological structure of the hymns. This christological focus shows up in the hymns in a number of ways. It appears, for example, in the hymns of repentance (see the first three parts of the table of contents, appendix A); and there it often serves as an intentionally shocking reflection on the character of God:

O Love divine! What hast thou done!
The Father's co-eternal Son
Bore all my sins upon the tree:
My Lord, my Love is crucified.

(WJW p. 114, BOH #420)

In the context of repentance, the focus on the cross is not, need it be said, accidental nor merely illustrative. The affective connection is, nonetheless, made quite explicit at certain points:

Vouchsafe us eyes of faith to see
The Man transfixed on Calvary,
To know thee, who thou art—
The One eternal God and true;
And let the sight affect subdue,
And break my stubborn heart.

(WJW p. 228)

The imagery of the cross also appears frequently in other contexts, e.g., in the sanctification hymns "for believers fighting," "praying," "watching," and "working"; and in the hymns for the "Society." But in these contexts, clearly, the reference to the cross functions in an augmented way: less strictly as the objective basis of the atonement, and far more prominently as the example or standard of discipleship for Christians themselves:

O may we ever walk in him,
And nothing know beside,
Nothing desire, nothing esteem,
But Jesus crucified!

(WJW p. 715, BOH #338)
Another major concentration of christological imagery, statistically quite as impressive as the first, though not as fully recognized in much of the secondary literature, is that focused upon Christ as the creator, re-creator, and restorer of human life in the image of God. Here, it should be noted, we find evidence for the theological influence of the early church in the hymns. Once again, the imagery appears in a variety of experiential contexts, e.g., as a motive for repentance in the introductory hymns: “Bid me in thy image rise, / A saint, a creature new.” But the central attraction for this range of imagery almost always has to do with the goal of sanctification. In keeping with what we have already seen, this connection between imagery and experiential location seems quite intentional.

Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in thee.
(WJW pp. 545-47, BOH #283)

Starting from these two christological foci we really should go on to comment on a second major dimension in the pattern of imagery. To put the matter concisely, the early Methodist hymns are trinitarian in character, not simply christocentric. The focus upon the Son is pervasive and pivotal, but in order to express the full range of Jesus’ ministry, the hymns invoke very naturally the Father and the Spirit as well. The singers of these hymns rehearse not only the history of the Son but also the origin and goal of this history in the purposes of the Trinity. Only by keeping this full range of trinitarian “story” in mind, in fact, can one finally account for the full range of Christian experience which the hymns evoke.

Come Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
Whom one all-perfect God we own,
Restorer of thine image lost,
Thy various offices make known;
Display, our fallen souls to raise,
Thy whole economy of grace.
(WJW p. 394)
The reason for marking these major features in the pattern of christological and theological imagery is, in the first place, to head off the charge of experientialism. The evidence cited strongly suggests that the anthropocentric reading of the hymns is highly misinformed. On the contrary, in view of the systemic connections, it would be far more accurate to say that the pattern of christological and theological imagery is precisely what provides descriptive access to the range of experience that is articulated.

In the second place, however, and perhaps more importantly, the reason for marking the pattern of imagery in the 1780 *Collection* is precisely because there is a *full range*, a "whole economy of grace," with which to reckon. Hymn selection and arrangement, in the tradition of these hymns, will have to take into account not only the full range of Christian experience, but also the full story of biblical and trinitarian imagery—from creation to eschaton—in which the experiences are grounded.

To do otherwise would be to suppress the whole economy of grace. This is not, moreover, a merely academic point in the history of hymn interpretation; for it finally relates, as the 1780 hymns show, to the actual shaping of Christian life and community.

**A PATTERN OF ADDRESS**

The final feature deserving of our attention, then, has to do with what I shall call the pattern of "address" in the 1780 hymnbook. The hymns of this source present a remarkably sensitive pattern of personal and communal prayer, involving the community of faith and the persons of the Trinity in a rich and complex drama of dialogue in worship. Within this dialogical pattern there are a variety of "speakers" and "addressees" that (it should come as no surprise) recall and reflect the patterns of imagery and experience we have outlined above. These "modes of address" are themselves, furthermore, a key to the continuing relevance of early Methodist patterns of worship.

To begin with, we can observe that there are places in the 1780 hymnbook where the pattern of address shows a particular
attraction for the recitation of historical facts and events. In the opening hymns of the section, "For Believers Rejoicing," for example, there is a notable concentration of language recounting the finished acts of God in Christ. In these hymns, furthermore, where justification is the key experiential focus, the pattern of address tends to revolve around a mode of self-address: the person(s) speaking and the person(s) addressed are the same.

Now I have found the ground, wherein
Sure my soul's anchor may remain;
The wounds of Jesus, for my sin
Before the world's foundation slain.
(WJW p. 308)

And can it be, that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
(WJW p. 322, BOH #527)

Arise, my soul, arise,
Shake off thy guilty fears;
The bleeding Sacrifice
In my behalf appears;
Before the throne my surety stands;
My name is written on his hands.
(WJW p. 324, BOH #122)

Such a mode of address makes perfect sense at this juncture in the hymnbook because what is taking place is a report of the facts and events upon which justification is grounded. In Wesleyan worship, the "once-for-all" character of the atonement provides the primary foundation for Christian assurance and joy; and this is a report that the community can recite with confidence for itself.

A very different mode of address is audible in those hymns where Wesley has the individual or the community in direct dialogue with God in prayer. This mode of address can move in one of two directions. In the first place, by a device of dramatic impersonation, the speaker in a hymn may be Jesus himself, so that the community hears itself addressed by Christ in the course of singing. This happens most frequently, note, in the
introductory hymns, where Jesus is recognized again and again as the "host" who invites all who hear him to come to the table of salvation:

If any man thirst, And happy would be,
The vilest and worst May come unto me;
May drink of my spirit (Excepted is none),
Lay claim to my merit, And take for his own.

(WJW p. 83, cf., BOH #112)

The constellation here of imagery, experience, and mode of address is full of theological and existential implications. Most important is that the Christian life is grounded in the prevenient grace and initiative of God in Christ. In the way of salvation, we begin more with listening than with speaking.

It is also significant, however, that the speaker in many of the introductory hymns is the community of faith: the people of God, who see themselves as speaking on Christ's behalf ("My message as from God receive"); and who also recognize their shared responsibility with Christ for the growth in grace of those who respond:

Furnished out of thy treasury,
O may we always ready stand
To help the souls redeemed by thee
In what their various states demand;
To teach, convince, correct, reprove,
And build them up in holiest love.

(WJW p. 187)

In addition to this, it is important to consider the other direction in which the mode of direct address can move: where the people of the community are speaking, and Christ (or the Father, or the Spirit) is addressed. This becomes audible, first of all, in the hymns of repentance. With great sensitivity Wesley distinguished the modes of address in hymns which call people to repentance, from those which give people an actual occasion for the existential activity of repenting. Of the first type is the following hymn, in which, technically, it is the believing community who speaks, addressing the Spirit on behalf of those who are being exhorted to repent:

23
O that the world might know
The all-atoning Lamb!
Spirit of faith, descend, and show
The virtue of his name.
(WJW p. 183, BOH #137)

Of the second type is a hymn from the section, “For Mourners Brought to the Birth.” In this case, the mourners are not being told about the promise and operation of grace; they are given an occasion for calling upon grace directly, in a thoroughly existential mode of speech:

Come, O thou Traveler unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with thee;
With thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.
(WJW p. 250, BOH #529)

This mode of address, moreover, where people call out in supplication for help or strength, becomes the dominant mode in many of the sanctification hymns in part four of the hymnbook. Again, this hardly seems accidental; for this mode of address is peculiarly suited to the nature of “unfinished business.” Here, the temporal relation has less to do with the link between past and present, or even with the present in relation to the eternal. Rather, the temporal emphasis tends to be on the valence between the present and the historical future toward which the community is drawn. It is, moreover, informative that the early Methodist vision of a world without war occurs so frequently in precisely this mode of address:

O might the universal Friend
This havoc of his creatures see!
Bid our unnatural discord end;
Declare us reconciled in thee!
Write kindness on our inward parts
And chase the murderer from our hearts!
(WJW p. 607)
CONCLUSION

The culminating focus of our reflections, on the patterns of worship in the 1780 hymnbook, is fortunate. For here, in the living matrix of dialogue, we are simultaneously reminded of the other patterns as well. There would be no pattern of address, as we have it in the 1780 hymns, were it not for the co-inhering patterns of imagery and experience. Otherwise, who should be speaking, and who should be addressed? And what would be the point of the dialogue? Nonetheless, as we have come to see, on the basis of these hymns, the patterns of imagery and experience are more than reflections on mere inward states, or formal descriptions of theological doctrines. Clearly, there are systemic implications in both of these areas. But the significance of a hymnbook does not stop there.

What the pattern of address shows above all is how a hymnbook can be and become a “means of grace” for those who use it. A means, that is, of receiving and participating in the presence and activity of the triune God. At the very best a hymnbook can be what Wesley called, in his preface, “a little body of experimental and practical divinity,” a means of putting ourselves in the way of God’s gracious activity and intention toward us. With this as a goal, the patterns of imagery, experience, and address, which we have discovered in the 1780 hymnbook, should provide major clues concerning how to proceed with and evaluate the present task of hymnal revision.

APPENDIX A

All evidence indicates that John Wesley took great pains in the arrangement and preparation of the 1780 hymnbook for publication. The original table of contents, of which the following is a facsimile, was the product of a long process of deliberation, stretching back several years, and remaining the outline for six subsequent editions of the hymnbook published during Wesley’s lifetime. The arrangement of the five parts and twenty-nine sections seems to have been completely original to Wesley, though one other hymnbook of the period (the Olney Hymns of 1779) had a similar arrangement, apparently arrived at independently. A full explanation of textual history and transmission can be found in volume 7 of the Oxford edition of Wesley’s works (see 25
suggested readings). For our purposes, of course, the main import of this table of contents has to do with its use as evidence for the theological and experiential patterns of worship in early Methodist hymnody.

THE CONTENTS

Part I
Containing Introductory Hymns

Sect. I. Exhorting and Beseeching to Return to God

II. Describing,
1. The Pleasantness of Religion
2. The Goodness of God
3. Death
4. Judgement
5. Heaven
6. Hell

III. Praying for a Blessing

Part II

Sect. I. Describing Formal Religion

II. Inward Religion

Part III

Sect. I. Praying for Repentance

II. For Mourners Convinced of Sin

III. Brought to the Birth

IV. Convinced of Backsliding

V. Recovered

Part IV

Sect. I. For Believers Rejoicing

II. Fighting

III. Praying

IV. Watching

V. Working

VI. Suffering

VII. Groaning for Full Redemption

VIII. Brought to the Birth

IX. Saved

X. Interceding for the World
EARLY METHODIST HYMNODY

Part V

Sect. I. For the Society, Meeting
II. Giving Thanks
III. Praying
IV. Parting

NOTES

1. The current article is a revision of an address which was delivered to the Wesley Consultation of the Hymnal Revision Committee of the United Methodist Church, meeting at Emory University, February 1986. The article also springs from the author's current dissertation work on the Wesley hymns, under the direction of Prof. Don Saliers at Emory.

2. References to the hymns of the 1780 Collection will be made on the basis of the text given in volume 7 of The Works of John Wesley, ed., Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), hereafter WJW. I will also, where appropriate, refer to the same or to similar Wesley hymn(s) in The Book of Hymns, ed. Carlton R. Young (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1966), hereafter BOH.

3. WJW pp. 73-74.


6. The rich range of this imagery, it should be noted, combined with the fact that many of the Wesley hymns use the “second-person” language of direct address (see below), moves us a move away from excessively masculine tendencies in the portrayal of God.

7. The Lutheran background, for example, is emphasized by J. Ernest Rattenbury, The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley’s Hymns (London: Epworth, 1941), p. 157.


9. For an extended discussion of this far more positive reading of the relation between theology and experience or affection, see the work of Don Saliers, The Soul in Paraphrase: Prayer and the Religious Affections (New York: Seabury, 1980).

10. The full trinitarian and eschatological implications of early Methodist hymnody have also been discovered in the Wesley’s eucharistic hymns. See the fine presentation in Geoffrey Wainwright, Eucharist and Eschatology (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1981).

SUGGESTED READINGS

Allchin, A. M. (ed.). We Belong to One Another: Methodist, Anglican, and Orthodox Essays. London: Epworth, 1968. A collection of essays highlighting a number of themes that connect the Wesleys to the early church (e.g., trinitarian structure, fulfillment of the law, emphasis on the Holy Spirit, communal as opposed to individualistic vision, and the restoration of creation as a basic soteriological
motif), all of which have tended to be underemphasized in Wesley studies, according to the editor.

Frost, Brian. Living in Tension Between East & West. London: New World Publications, 1984. Similar in purpose to the volume noted above. Though not technical in an academic sense, these highly readable essays offer a fine taste of the distinctive significance of early church paradigms in Wesleyan thought, with special attention to the hymns.

Nuelsen, J. L. John Wesley and the German Hymn: A Detailed Study of John Wesley's Translations of Thirty-three German Hymns. Trans. T. Parry, et. al. Calverley: Holbrook, 1972. Shows how the tradition of German hymnody, in particular that of the Moravians, had an impact on the Wesleys' approach to hymn singing. Emphasis on positive comparisons (e.g., doctrine of justification, the importance of "experience"), with some attention to differences. Includes German texts and John Wesley's translations.

Outler, Albert. Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit. Nashville: Tidings, 1975. This little volume remains one of the best short introductions to Wesleyan theology available. Balanced with respect to the range of the Wesleys' sources, and highly sensitive to the nuance of distinctive influences.


Wainwright, Geoffrey. Eucharist and Eschatology. New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1981. An important study of major eschatological images in the tradition (e.g., the messianic feast, the advent of Christ, and the first fruits of the kingdom), drawing on the Wesleys' eucharistic hymns as positive examples; and arguing that these images have not always been adequately recognized or appreciated (especially in the West).
THE BIRTHDAY VISIT

JAMES E. SARGENT

Ministry is much more effective when the person to whom we minister is not a stranger to us.

Pastors have always been called upon to perform the customary crisis ministries in response to life’s emergencies. And nearly every pastor knows the importance of contact during transitions—change in educational level, graduation from college, a job change, marriage, the birth of a first child, a child going off to school. The list could go on almost indefinitely.

These occasions present the minister with an opportunity to inquire into the state of spiritual health of the person(s) receiving ministry and to find a way to affirm the presence of Christ in the situation at hand. But to insist “Jesus is the answer!” without first making the effort to discover what the person’s questions are, is almost certainly a futile exercise. Ministry is much more effective when it rests on a personal relationship. I offer the following suggestion: the birthday visit is one good way to build that personal relationship.

Birthdays are times of reflection. Some years ago a young man sat in my study during the initial hour’s conversation in preparation for marriage. When I asked him the usual “When is your birthday?” his response intrigued me. He gave me a date, then his age (twenty-six) with the following addition, “It makes you wonder, doesn’t it?” “Wonder what?” “What I’ve done and where I’m going.” He had voluntarily though unconsciously tendered the fundamental religious question. We were ready to

James E. Sargent is an ordained elder in the West Ohio Conference. At present he serves the Amelia United Methodist Church in Amelia, Ohio.
BIRTHDAY VISIT

explore his life. He had begun reflection. During the birthday visit the minister can ask questions that will open up the person's life, revealing values, hopes, dreams, aspirations and dreads, hurts, agonies.

The setting ideally will include just the two people: pastor and the individual. I recall one incident during which a man in his second marriage, facing his fortieth birthday, sat next to the fireplace hearth, gently stroking his dog's neck. He leaned back, saying that he and his dog had seen a lot and survived much. Then his wife, younger than he by some years, entered the room. His tone changed immediately. He stated facts and made some rather trite observations. But the real stuff of his life—aspirations, shattered hopes, frustrated loyalties, anxiety in the face of the encroachment of the years—were all lost in the need to appear to the third party as he wanted to appear. I make it a point now to work only one-to-one.

Because the process of intense listening makes large demands on one's emotional energy, two visits conducted on the same day should not be scheduled in consecutive hours. It is also wise to avoid making appointments for the hour immediately following the visit. One reason is simply weariness. A second reason is that the visit may need to continue for a while and you will not want to interrupt the moment.

The visit itself consists of three parts: the interview, reflection, and close. I find it useful to divide the interview into three sets of questions dealing with the past, present, and future.

_The Past._ I usually begin by asking for the person's full name, including the name usually covered by a middle initial. Many times I have found that people's names have been a source of discomfort or courage. I remember one man—husky, handsome, obviously athletic. With all the characteristics of young machismo he resented the fact that his parents had named him Elmer. Needless to say, I used his preferred name "Butch" for the balance of my work.

I make it a point to keep notes, including names of parents, brothers, and sisters, and noting whether any family members have died. I assure the individuals that the information will be kept in confidence. Notes are very important because, with many visits, information and insights can easily get lost. One
Point needs to be added here. If during the visit something especially revealing or intensely uncomfortable emerges, I put the pen down on the desk and purposely do not take notes. I can make notes later about those particularly poignant incidents or reflections.

Since openness requires trust I begin with very nonthreatening questions. What is the person's earliest memory? This can evoke either pleasurable memories of the warmth of Grandpa's lap, an hour with Mom; or moments of pain—an illness, chastisement by an angry alcoholic father. What was a favorite childhood toy? These two questions encourage the person to reflect and to remember long-lost details.

After the initial questions I invite the person to relate to me his or her "story": "Tell me about your life; bring me up to today." Now I always listen for the first comment that follows this invitation. Most people cannot believe that anyone would want to listen to and know of their life. Not a few begin with a disclaimer—"It's not much really" or "Nothing spectacular"—but my experience has been that every life is filled with dreams and excitement. Then I listen. The narrative may come hard at first: after all, this may be the first time the person has ever told the entire story. If the story is told as thumbnail sketches, then appropriate questions might be asked to evoke further exploration. For instance, the junior and senior high years are a time when people consider what they would like to do or be. When asked about being and doing, the person's response reveals much, especially if the original dream was that of "being" but the current reality is a mere "doing" something quite different. The tension between the dream once held and the current reality is a part of the great drama to which I alluded earlier. And everyone has a measure of this drama.

During the narrative the listener must avoid body language or facial expressions that express rejection or condemnation. Over
the course of years I have lost the capacity of shock (I still can be and enjoy being surprised). One must, at this juncture, however, accept the narrative as given. There will be time later on to ask for clarification or to evaluate.

The Present. At the conclusion of the life story we are ready to examine the present. This is done through a reflection on the past and a culling out of significant events or people who have contributed to who this person perceives himself or herself to be. The question I ask is, "What are three key events in your life and how have they affected you?" More than any other element in the visit, this question tends to catch people off guard. Relatively few people have ever reflected on their pasts in search of key events or significant people. During these moments one hears a long-forgotten or seldom-mentioned moment of pain or strength, encouragement or condemnation, victory or dismal failure. Our present is not in some mysterious sense dis-

Our present is not in some mysterious sense disembodied from our past.

...
indicated, dreams described, anxieties alluded to. It is time to consider the future. Seven questions complete this work:

1. What do you see in your future?
2. What travel would you like to do?
3. When do you feel best?
4. What growth would you like to experience?
5. If you could change anything at all, what would you change?
6. How long would you like to live?
7. How do you want to be remembered?

A few words about these questions might be helpful. Many of the people I have interviewed could not comprehend the fact that these are entirely open-ended questions. No specific answer is being sought. Therefore, be aware of the need to encourage personal statements and reflections. Question number two regarding travel often evokes dreams or fantasies not only alluding to actual possibilities but frequently to escape or change of venue. With both questions number three and five, regarding feeling best and change, I find people wondering what I am looking for.

Question four regarding personal growth has afforded at least one memorable incident. I shall not soon forget the interview I had with one woman who had a real problem with weight control. She must have tipped the scales well towards three hundred pounds. When I asked her what growth she would like to experience, she burst out with a loud guffaw, "None!" After an explanation that physical size was not the intention of the question we were able to continue with the visit. I find also that older people, prior to the baby-boom generation, did not learn of "growth" as they went through educational careers and employment. Quite frequently I have to explain what "personal growth" means—for instance, getting rid of an attitude with which the individual is uncomfortable, or acquiring a skill that has defied mastery for years. More often than not such brief descriptions help evoke soul-searching answers.

Question five, "What would you change?" has proven to be one of the more revealing questions. The responses have ranged from the anguish of one troubled young man whose wife had only recently been released from the psychiatric ward of the
BIRTHDAY VISIT

local hospital—for him, his wife’s condition was all that he would change—to the selfish whim of a disgruntled office worker who would change only the amount of work the person at the next desk produced every day. One man whose Christian commitment had been evident throughout the visit stated that he would reverse the dreadful effects of sin in the world. Another man of lesser vision would not change anything because, for him, life had been pretty good and there was no real need to change much: after all, he had a good job, made good money, and felt quite comfortable.

I listen very intently during the answer to this question because this question more than any other shows the breadth of a person’s horizon as well as hope for significant change.

I have encountered a staggering number of young people for whom change means only a change in their economic status.

Unfortunately, I have encountered a staggering number of young people for whom change means only a change in their economic status. This, I suspect, is endemic to our time. The answer to this question reveals the individual’s hope, and indicates the goals toward which he or she is working.

At the conclusion of the seven questions I then tell the person, “This concludes the first third of the birthday visit.” This always brings a moment’s surprise. The second third of the birthday visit is a period of private reflection. I frequently excuse myself, go to a separate room (often the sanctuary), review my notes, and pray. Then, upon returning, I respond to what I have heard. This is time-consuming but very important. Years ago I would merely repeat the facts and incidents; now, however, I find a much more effective use of information in reflecting what I heard in the “story,” the key events, and the pondering of the future.

In everyone’s life there is a central “up-against-it” or an “agon.” Somewhere in the narrative is a hope that has been
shattered and remained in pieces, refusing even the best efforts to reassemble it. For nearly everyone there is something in the larger moral realm that has defied resolution, or that has appeared absolutely irredeemable. If the visit has gone well, this central struggle will have manifested itself—even if not to the person speaking, surely to the caring, sensitive pastor. In naming the haunting inability, the moral dilemma, the long-cherished dream, one speaks now to the soul of the person. Without any mention of religion or the church, one has begun to know where the individual really lives. The pastor can now more effectively speak a word of God, perhaps the promise of Christ, that holds eternal significance.

It goes almost without saying that the critical dynamic during the interview is trust. If trust is present, then something almost magical happens. I remember an especially profound visit. After revealing a life of debauchery, experimentation with drugs, and unsuccessful attempts at getting life back on the right track, a young man told me that he had been scared of the visit. He was not certain that he could talk with me. When I asked why, his answer held the hope of grace; he said that it was not so much that I would hear about him, as that he would have to hear himself speak his own confession in his own words. The hope of grace is that in the speaking and hearing is forgiveness, acceptance, and a measure of resolution.

Since trust is so central, some comments about confidentiality are in order. I never use information from a birthday visit in sermons or workshops unless they are general enough to be part of nearly everyone's story. When speaking with colleagues, names and specific information are never divulged. However, for the purpose of teaching other ministers the technique, I will occasionally give a typical answer or general indication of what we might hear. By the same token we must also realize that in any workshop or sermon, mention of a generic anyone runs a risk of sounding like no one in particular and thus loses much of its poignant humanity. The preacher always walks a tightrope with respect to how much from private ministry finds its way into public statement. I always guard very carefully against any suggestion that would make anyone feel as though their life will become public information. I have asked specific individuals
BIRTHDAY VISIT

whether I could use part of their stories when those parts have been particularly hopeful, revealing, or helpful. I have yet to be refused permission.

Thus ends the second third of the visit. For the final third of the visit an appropriate closure is most necessary. These have been rich and intimate moments. I always like to close with a prayer giving thanks for the hour, the blessing of life, and the person (by name) with whom I have lived now for an hour or so. In the prayer specific mention of the gifts of trust and insight are made. If a special concern has been identified, a request for the special presence of God is included. And then finally I ask for continued blessing on this person. Thus ends the final third of the visit.

In the span of something like an hour or as much as three hours a life story has been rehearsed, in some cases for the first time. Now, if I have visited with prospective bride and groom, I will not stand as a stranger before them. Now, since I have visited with a church member, the preparation for preaching and praying takes different intensity and purposefulness. The pastoral relationship has been deepened immeasurably.
PASTORAL CARE AND
THE HEALING OF GUILT

LEROY T. HOWE

We believe that, in Christ, God has forgiven us. But sometimes we have trouble experiencing that forgiveness.

Though there have been, and are, human beings who live their lives as though they are utterly without conscience, for most of us the distress of guilt and the felt urgency to make amends creep into our waking moments to pressure us incessantly, and transform our sleep into a fitfulness we greet with dread: "... To sleep, perchance to dream. . . ." When made sufficiently aware of appropriate ways to repair the damage we all too frequently bring upon our neighbors, we may be able to quell somewhat the torments of conscience in our daily rounds, and to free the dreams of the night to guide other phases of our development. But not all guilt submits to such treatment. Some would discuss this haunting residue as evidence only of pathology. The wiser of the human race have known better; they have perceived the awesomely destructive power of the human spirit and have realized that only in the healing from the divine spirit within us can we find a solution to the problem of living with a guilt too great to be borne.

This essay seeks to enhance the ministry of pastoral care to persons who are struggling to heal the broken relationships in their lives to which their guilt points. I will begin by discussing

Leroy T. Howe is professor of pastoral theology at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, and pastoral counselor for the First United Methodist Church in Richardson, Texas. His primary professional interest is to bring faith resources to bear upon the tasks of life and growth.
guilt as anxiety and remorse over actions that have proved harmful to ourselves and to others, guilt with which we ordinarily deal by making reparation. Then I will focus our attention on the deeper dimension of the condition of guilt, that for which reparation proves impossible, and on its healing through forgiveness. The essay concludes with a discussion of the role of penance in our coming to live as persons who are forgiven and reconciled.

WHAT HAVE I DONE?

Consciously experienced, guilt is a feeling of anxiety mixed with remorse, and it usually comes over us when we have done something offensive or harmful either to ourselves or to someone who matters to us. In our anxiety, we are alarmed that there may be retaliation, or punishment, or even a loss of the relationship altogether. If our anxiety is too intense to be tolerated, we might attempt amends-making even before the offended person is ready to let us do anything. Pressing hard to dissipate our own anxiety, we anger, hurt, or confuse the other person, who now is not certain what to make of our overtures. Then we ourselves may get angry: "I said, I'm sorry; what more do you want?" This is typically the way the confession of adultery goes: "Well, I've already apologized; why won't you forgive me? Let's just put it all behind us and get on with our lives."

The less self-serving element in our guilt feelings is remorse: genuine regret and sorrow for our wrongdoing, which comes from genuinely caring about one's own well-being or the well-being of the one offended. Remorse can lead to careful and caring attempts to make amends that are respectful of the rights of the other. We reach out, partly of course to get rid of the remorse, but more importantly, to restore to the one harmed, if we can, the condition which prevailed prior to our harmful act. Further, remorse can lead to real changes in how we live, a turning away from the kind of action that did the harm in the first place and a turning toward other kinds of action. Nothing less than our whole being may be turned, because what we did may have come out of a whole style of living that we are now willing to change.
Guilt feelings arise, properly, in response to acts, to something tangible that we have done. Our capacity for feeling guilt, often called "conscience," serves the purpose of helping us to act less selfishly toward those who matter to us. Thus guilt feelings are not the appropriate response to either feelings or thoughts. While it is appropriate to feel guilty, anxious, and remorseful over the things we have done that are offensive or harmful, conscience misleads us when we chastise ourselves for what we may be only thinking about doing, or for harboring hostility which makes us only want to offend or harm. Most especially, when we become anxious or remorseful for feeling a certain way, for instance, out of a notion that "Christian people should never feel angry toward each other," conscience is not serving its proper function. It has become "dis-eased," and so have we, until we learn again to assign our guilt to the realm of our actions only. In spiritual terms, carrying inappropriate guilt feelings verges upon the sin of pride; I magnify my own guilt beyond my Creator's own judgment on me when I blame myself for more than my disrespectful and faithless acts. God does not ask that we put away all feelings and thoughts of how we might like to act toward each other every now and then. God does hold us accountable for our acts, however, and it is for this reason that we must sift through many unseemly thoughts and outrageous feelings to ask ourselves what in fact we may have done, for which we now feel the guilt we do feel.

Some of our actions are primarily acts of disrespect; we act as though it does not matter to us that the other person has integrity and rights as a creature of God. These kinds of acts I deem "offenses"; in committing them we treat people with less dignity and value than people deserve. Disrespect is a serious violation of another's rights and dignity, but some actions are not only disrespectful; they are emotionally and physically abusive and do serious injury to another's body, psyche, or both. But in both cases, of offensive and harmful acts, it is finally the effect of our action that is at issue, whatever its intent may or may not have been. Thus, even though we may not have meant to offend or harm someone, we remain responsible for the offense or the harm we have brought about. To be sure, there are many hypersensitive people in the world who live in almost
eager anticipation of being offended, and there are indeed masochists looking to be harmed. But "looking for it" and "asking for it" never entail "deserving it." There are many ways to rationalize our actions, but no excuse overrides the fundamental fact: if we have offended or harmed, we have done so.

To this point, I have been discussing guilt feelings aroused by actions that offend or harm either ourselves or others, whether the effect was intended or not, and I have characterized these feelings as a mixture of anxiety and remorse. If we are to appreciate fully the remorseful quality of guilt feelings, we must attend explicitly now to a consideration heretofore merely presupposed in the discussion, namely, that guilt feelings arise in the context of relationships with persons who matter to us in some way, beyond our merely needing them. If our relationship with another is based primarily on our own need, all that we are likely to experience when we offend that person is anxiety: we fear that they will retaliate in kind, or that we will lose her or him as a friend, supporter, or lover. Remorse, however, is a sign that the other is someone we genuinely care about and not merely someone we need for our own security or satisfaction. Remorse is a response to our violation of a relationship with someone who we believe to be worthy of our respect and love. It is possible only when there is genuine self-giving, when there is respectful love. People who frequently parade their thoughts and feelings are usually preoccupied only with their own condition; they show little caring about what they might have done to someone else and, indeed, very little caring about anyone else. Guilt feelings, by contrast, are "re-lative"; they arise when significant relationships are threatened through our heedless actions.

A postscript to this discussion: Sometimes we are not aware in advance that the one we are about to offend or harm in fact matters to us; only the cry from the wounded makes us aware of how important that person is to us. "War guilt" can be looked at profitably from this vantage point. It is always the most humane among us who come out of wartime the most deeply scarred, because these are the ones who have acquired the capacity to care empathically for other human beings, as human beings.
wherever they may be: to such persons, "neighbor" has no boundaries. It is these who are the most vulnerable to the ravages of war; it is to their spirits that war is most destructive. Correspondingly, many who get out of war without soul-wounds are those who have less capacity to care for people who are different from themselves. If there is no love for the faceless enemy, harming them may lead to anxiety: "We've made these guys so angry, they're really going to get us." But remorse without love is not possible. Surely this is a major argument against war as an instrument of national social policy. War has the most destructive effect on precisely the most empathic members of the warring populations.

I AM THE MAN? THE DEVIL YOU SAY . . .

In the previous section I focused on the experience of guilt at a conscious level. But, as modern psychology has helped us to understand, we can also experience guilt without being conscious of it. Sometimes feelings of anxiety and remorse become too difficult for us to deal with consciously. They threaten to overwhelm us; and so we repress them. Then we try to deal with our guilt in ways that do not work: e.g., by denying responsibility, by blaming others, etc. But while we can repress guilt feelings, we cannot thereby prevent them from influencing our lives. In my view, there are at least four reasons why we push guilt feelings into our unconscious.

The first is that we may have been made to feel guilty as young children, long before we were able to take an objective look at ourselves with adult powers of independent evaluation. In a position of relative vulnerability and dependence, children simply have to take the judgments passed on them by the powerful caregiving figures in their lives. Some are blessed with caregivers who delight in them "just the way they are," and who tell them of their delight. Others, however, grow up with parents who have difficulty being pleased at all or expressing pleasure with their children; they keep telling their children that "it isn't enough," or "you can do better than that." These children gradually come to believe such pronouncements as if they were their own; they lack sufficient experience and
judgment to test whether their parents' evaluations are correct or not, and they want, above all, their parents' approval. The possibility that the evaluation might be incorrect does not occur to most children. When inordinate demands are imposed before the child has the capacity to test their appropriateness, and when the child begins to feel herself or himself nothing but a disappointment to the ones he or she loves the most, guilt feelings approach an intolerable level, and go underground.

A second reason why some people repress guilt feelings is that the love they feel for the injured party has been made more unconscious than it is conscious. Sometimes vulnerability in a close relationship is experienced as unwanted dependency; defending against dependency, a person drives the feelings of attachment into the unconscious: ‘I don’t need her!’ In fact, he may care genuinely about her but refuse to admit to himself just how much she matters to him. Then, when he offends or harms her, he cannot feel consciously guilty; he has not let himself consciously deal with the importance she actually has in his life. I believe that this is why many people handle extramarital affairs so badly; too frequently, they simply want to get the affair behind them, rather than face their real feelings. But such a “solution” only worsens the problem. For the healing process to take place, not only must the offending spouse face consciously the pain he or she has caused the other, and how very much the other does, in fact, mean to him or her; the offended spouse must also have an opportunity to get her or his own feelings out: feelings of betrayal, anger, hurt, and inadequacy. Processing such feelings takes time, and, unfortunately, those who want to “put it all behind us” are not likely to be willing to give enough time for the wounds to heal.

A third reason is that we do not want to take responsibility for having hurt someone. Sometimes, it wounds our self-image, particularly if that image is of an unfailingly caring and just person, who would never hurt anybody or anything. We do not like to think badly of ourselves or to be thought of badly by another. Still further, we may not take responsibility for hurting another because we do not want to pay the price that it would take to make an appropriate reparation. In cases of wife abuse, for instance, some men become overwhelmed by their growing
feeling not only that there really is something fundamentally wrong with them, but that "it would take too much to make up for what I've done." The reaction can be at a merely self-regarding level: "She'll take me for all I've got if I ever admit this." Or it can be agonizingly sensitive: "I know there is something terribly wrong about what I've done to this person, and I can't make it up to her in any way." When this thought becomes overwhelming, the abuser may simply choose to defend against it: "Well, maybe it wasn't that bad after all," a rationalization. But the guilt will remain, if the abuser cares at all for the other person. It is simply kept out of awareness, expressed primarily as irritation and anger toward the very one offended or harmed in the first place: "Why do you keep looking at me that way? What are you trying to do to me? What do you want from me?" The anger may become even greater if some effort to make amends is attempted, only to be rejected. It becomes too painful to remain aware of our obligations to the other when we are not permitted to atone for our offense in any way.

This example suggests a final reason why we push guilt feelings into the unconscious. Sometimes we are forced to recognize that we can never fully make amends for something that we have done, no matter what we do.

Sometimes we are forced to recognize that we can never fully make amends for something that we have done, no matter what we do. A two-year-old runs into the street in front of your car. You do not see him until it is too late. He dies under the wheels. What can you possibly do to make amends? That you were not drinking, that you jammed on your brakes, that you swerved as sharply as you could, makes no difference: you killed the child, and there is no way you can bring the child back. This may prove so painful to contemplate that you decide it will be easier to stop thinking about it altogether. In this case, it may be.

Whatever may be the reason for refusing to deal at a conscious level with guilt feelings, guilt is not disordered simply because it
HEALING OF GUILT

is unconscious. If it remains unconscious, it likely will contribute to other disorders, and for this reason alone it is helpful to bring it into awareness. But that we carry with us unconscious guilt is a sign not only of disorder; it is also a sign, recognizable by others if not by ourselves, of damaged relationships needing action, conscious action, on our part. The capacity to feel guilt, both consciously and unconsciously, is a God-given capacity, analogous to the threshold of pain; as pain makes us aware of danger to our bodies, guilt warns of danger to our relationships, both to ourselves and to others. Heeding the warning, we can learn to explore that to which our guilt feelings are pointing; we can learn to make realistic determinations of whether it is appropriate for us to feel guilty in the particular situation; and we can learn to recognize those occasions when our conscience is pushing us into a "guilt trip." Whenever we discover that we do in fact have something to feel guilty about, we can begin the arduous process of making amends, at least in those situations which permit atoning for our actions in tangible ways. To be sure, making amends does not itself effect reconciliation; for the wrongs we do to our neighbor, we need both the neighbor's forgiveness and God's.

Making amends does not itself effect reconciliation; for the wrongs we do to our neighbor, we need both the neighbor's forgiveness and God's. And this is especially so when our guilt points to offenses or harmful actions for which reparation is impossible.

Feelings of guilt for which there is no appeasement run deep in the psyche, especially in the psyches of the most morally and spiritually admired of the human race. And it is just those "saints" who illumine for the rest of us not only the saving power of guilt-riddenness, but also the means of its transformation. They have learned that the healing of broken relationships, and the guilt which signals them, is not always found in making reparations, but in offering and receiving...
forgiveness, and in letting reparation be an expression of 
gratitude for forgiveness already received. Let us explore this 
view more fully.

"AND THERE IS NO HEALTH IN US . . . "

According to the Scriptures, guilt is a sense of unworthiness in 
the sight of God, an unworthiness that makes us all deserving of 
God’s condemnation. It is not so much a feeling as it is a mode of 
being: of being in alienation from God, and correlative, from 
others. This state is expressed at a feeling level as a miserable 
loneliness, a sense of being cut off from God and the future, and 
of being utterly helpless to alter our condition ourselves.

But how did we become so unworthy of God’s acceptance of 
us? The Scriptures answer in two ways. One answer is that our 
unworthiness has come about from our having persistently 
violated the known commands of God. Because we cannot now 
make up for our own misdeeds, much less those of humanity 
through its history since the Fall, our obligation to be obedient to 
God totally surpasses our capacity to fulfill that obligation. So 
large a claim on us, to atone for past unrighteousness, has 
accrued as to be utterly impossible for any of us to satisfy.

The other way of expressing our unworthiness in the sight of 
God is to say that we have so degraded the divine image in us 
that we no longer have the power to bear that image faithfully. 
No matter how much we now may want to be acceptable to God, 
we no longer find within ourselves the power to sustain being 
“in” God’s image. The first answer tends to externalize the 
poignancy of the human situation and to picture our plight as 
one of overburdened debtors whose wellsprings of action are 
choked by past obligations. The second answer tends to 
internalize human fallenness and to accentuate the nastiness of 
our state of being more than the inefficacy of even our 
best-intentioned actions.

Both answers point toward the fundamental biblical affirma-
tion that our state of unworthiness, which we cannot ourselves 
transform, is in fact transformed by the very God from whom we 
have every reason to expect rejection and everlasting alienation. 
The fundamental concepts expressing this startling affirmation
are the concepts of grace and forgiveness. Under no constraint of any kind, God chose, mercifully, to forgive us. “Forgiveness” means that God lets go of all just claims upon us for violating divine commands and defacing our divine image, and welcomes us to fellowship in spite of our unworthiness of it. God’s choice to forgive us is the solution to our overwhelming burden of guilt. God does not demand payment from us of just claims against us; God refrains from condemning us as we deserve to be condemned.

Central to this faith-affirmation is the notion of violating the honor and respect due someone who is important to us: The unworthiness we feel in the sight of God comes about when we realize how many are the ways we have violated our relationship with God by refusing to live according to the clear expressions of the divine will; in dishonoring our Creator, we have dishonored ourselves. Our acts demand atoning for, and yet, we repeat doing what we have been doing, seeking our own good at the expense of our neighbors and God.

This biblical understanding is especially helpful in gaining a perspective on that guilt which arises from our having done irreparable harm to another of God’s creatures. Precisely because the harm is irreparable, further efforts on our part cannot alleviate the guilt which at the same time threatens to crush our soul. Overwhelmed by both anxiety and remorse, and in the inescapable presence of the one for whom we care and whom we have wrongfully and permanently wounded, and not even our own life an adequate atonement, we experience spiritual desolation. If, in addition, we can see this state of affairs as a sign of our true condition before God our Creator, our spiritual desolation may become inconsolable.

Scripture’s call to faith, however, is the call to affirm that our guilt-ridden condition is in fact overcome by an utterly transforming and reconciling act of divine forgiveness. God’s act is the expression of God’s choice not to hold against us the offenses we have committed, and to offer, once again, transforming love to us. But this is a choice on God’s part; nothing in us or in God requires it or merits it. And, as God freely forgives, so are we called to forgive. For whether in our relation to God or to one another, the only resolution of the
pervasiveness of guilt for which we cannot atone is forgiveness from the one offended, who in forgiving chooses reconciliation and love, rather than justice and alienation. Happily, for us, there are those among us willing to offer, freely, their forgiveness when our own efforts at reparation, of necessity, fail.

Our most profound spiritual problem, however, is how to experience such forgiveness and reconciliation from God. Merely believing that God has forgiven us, that Christ has atoned for all humankind’s sins, does not in itself transform us. Our spiritual growth depends upon our replacing vices with virtues in our actual living, guided by God’s own Spirit and power, and not upon merely proclaiming to ourselves and others correct belief. But unless we experience such divine guidance, how can we begin? From whence comes the energy to live as Christ’s and no longer to self?

PENANCE AND THE FORGIVEN SINNER

In general, our Protestant traditions have handled poorly the question of how to experience divine forgiveness and guidance, primarily because of the importance given by the Reformers to the doctrine of election. Whether proclaimed by Luther, Calvin, or Zwingli, the doctrine maintains that God elects those who will be saved and, therefore, by definition, those to whom the very faith is imputed through which they receive the benefits to which they are elected. Grace alone, transmitted by inscrutable divine decree, sanctifies the otherwise condemned among us. “Comfortable” as the Reformers themselves found this announcement, most Protestants have continued to live under an omnipresent and unassuageable guilt, precisely because no one can rightly claim with certainty that she or he is indeed of the elect.
The classical Christian tradition, by contrast, dealt much more constructively with the problem of how to experience forgiveness as a life-changing power. Prior to Augustine it was widely held that through Christ, our capacity to live reconciled with God is restored, and that if we are to experience reconciliation with God, a specific kind of response to what we have heard about Christ's work is required of us: repentance, confession, and, sometimes, penance. Our response completes the reconciliation both to God and to our neighbors which God's forgiveness of our offenses has initiated but not wholly determined in advance.

I am especially interested in recovering the long-lost penitential dimension of this response. Once, it was better known in the church than it is today that we are to act upon the forgiveness freely offered by God. We are to do this by confessing our offensive and harmful acts, bringing before our minds (re-collection) with unflinching honesty, however painful the experience may be, all that we have done, regardless of our intent, which has violated another's integrity and rights, whether God, the neighbor, or ourselves. In the midst of our remorse, we are to assess as concretely as possible the degree of offense and harm which attaches to our action. This alone makes it possible to test the appropriateness of deeming ourselves guilty, and to discover the ways in which we are and are not guilty. In the medieval confessional, persons sometimes discovered that what they most needed was corrective pastoral judgment upon their overly punitive self-judgments (upon their "scrupulosity," for instance). But when the guilt was deemed appropriate, the search began for ways of making adequate restitution. By medieval times, the pattern was for the confessor to direct the process, even to the point of prescribing actions. More recently, the one who listens to the confession functions in a more indirect way, guiding the penitent to work out for herself or himself the appropriate acts of restitution. But restitution, in some sense of the word, was considered essential to the reception of forgiveness.

In the development of the sacrament of penance, two different views emerged of the process of replacing remorse with a sense of genuine forgiveness through penitential, that is,
reparative, action. According to one view, the motivation for opening ourselves to remorse in the first place, and then to confession and penance, is fear of punishment; in terror we either receive absolution and then perform our penance, or "do" penance and then receive absolution. In this view, it is the acts of penance that make possible the experience of forgiveness. In the other view, our motivation to confess is remorse brought about by direct experience of God's love, of God's own absolution. "When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride." Here, since confession is our response to forgiveness already experienced, penance seems unnecessary.

Protestantism as a whole has tended toward this latter view, construing the life of faith itself as occasioned by direct reception of divine grace; "experience" of forgiveness is something made to happen in us by God and not something we bring about in part through responsive acts of our own. But when sola gratia combines with the doctrine of election, only the limited number of the elect can possibly experience forgiveness at all. And the evidence suggests that the "experience" of the elect only rarely bound the guilt which God's reconciling love intends to heal. The lack of a secure sense of self-worth, so frequently evident among the so-called elect of God, appears strikingly incongruous with the certitude accompanying theological pronouncements of their redeemed condition. The route of the incongruity lies in the failure to discern the indispensable connection between enacting God's forgiveness and experiencing it in its enlivening power for living. Traditional "penitential disciplines" have eloquently articulated cogent pathways of enacting the forgiveness received from God; they have insisted that the offending person take full responsibility for his or her offenses, seeking, out of gratitude to God for their own forgiveness, to make whatever amends can be made by reparative acts on their own part.

In the one pattern of penitential discipline, what motivates confession and penance is primal fear, analogous to annihilation fears in infancy; and in the earning of absolution through penance, such fears are quelled. In the second pattern of penitential discipline, the motivation is shame; in learning the
deepest truths about God's mercy, the penitent is shamed into contrition about that for which he or she already has been forgiven. In my view, although shame may appear to some to be a higher order of motivation for action than fear of annihilation, insufficient credence has been given to the first pattern of penitential discipline, in the Protestant traditions especially, and when we are hesitant to speak of God in the midst of a person's most primal fears, these fears constellate a region of experience which God does not reach. God must be responsive to terror as well as to shame and gratitude, if God can be truly said to love people as they are. The point here is not that a spiritual guide should motivate another by deliberately seeking to arouse terror, but rather that he or she can help someone already fearful of condemnation grow into God by means of that very fear.

Even those whose hearts have been "strangely warmed" by the Spirit's assurance of God's grace and pardon will find the discipline of penance a constructive way of sustaining their experience of forgiveness. In a penitential attitude, searching self-examination will steer honestly between the denial and the inflation of our faults.Restitution for offense and harm should be made, wherever possible. And when restitution is impossible, substitutionary acts may become appropriate. Consider the possibility, for example, that one who once loved us both carries to her grave a lie I told that caused her to reject you during her lifetime. I cannot repair that damage to you now. With your help, I may be able to do something "in its place." But when not even a substitutionary act can alone, then I can only wait, prayerfully, for your forgiveness. In this situation, if I as penitent am to be forgiven, I have to depend on you to initiate the process of forgiveness, as I am always dependent upon God to initiate the process of divine forgiveness for my offenses. Throughout, however, penitential discipline can provide a suitable "holding environment" for me as I come to terms ever more fully with my need for grace and forgiveness.

For the healing of guilt and broken relationships to become a concrete reality in our experience, it would be helpful if the churches would reclaim their authority to forgive sins in God's name. Strengthened by this kind of absolution, guilt-ridden
persons then may be able to discover means of reparation by which to reconcile the relationships broken by their offensive and harmful acts toward others. If today's churches continue to remain uncomfortable ministering in the region of absolution, at least they could continue to use their very considerable powers of consolation, to be present to persons despairing of their own abilities to heal the results of their sins, awaiting mercy beyond themselves. Further, ministers and laypersons alike can encourage more "soul friendships" in the church, reviving the centuries-old practice of entering into that peculiar relationship which enables each to confess sins to the other, and to counsel one another about the appropriate ways to seek reconciliation with those they have offended or harmed. Penance still can be a rich spiritual discipline, for both the guilt-ridden and the piously naive.

SUMMARY

However well-intentioned toward our fellow human beings we may be, there are times in which our actions wound, even and especially those about whom we care the most. When we accept responsibility for the offenses and the hurts we inflict, resisting the temptation to escape into the rosy-hued world of sincerity and self-absolution, or to wallow in excessive self-blame, it is usually possible to make amends. But there are times when the realization dawns that we have offended and harmed another in ways beyond restitution. Then there must dawn another possibility, that, rather than making amends, we are to open ourselves to forgiveness. Actualizing the reality of forgiveness, in the form of a forgiven life, brings us to the very center of spiritual existence, the "pure unbounded love" of our Creator, whose own grace and mercy are everlasting.

FOR FURTHER READING

Clebsch, William A. and Charles R. Jaekle. Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective. New York: Jacob Aronson, 1975. See especially the introductory essay (pp. 1-82), which still remains the best single overview of pastoral care practice currently available.
HEALING OF GUILT


TO THE END OF TIME:
PREACHING FROM MATTHEW
IN PENTECOST

Preaching from the Gospel of Matthew at the end of the season of Pentecost will mean for most preachers a revisit to an old friend. The lectionary cycle calls for the series from Matthew at this time every third year. In addition, Matthew is given a part of the cycle earlier in the year: many will have preached from the Sermon on the Mount during Epiphany. This earlier use of Matthew may obviate the need to re-read the entire Gospel, and, like airplane passengers who have heard the flight attendants' spiel hundreds of times, many preachers will also be tempted to go right to the lections and see what can be done with them.

Yet Matthew keeps undergoing revision in the work of scholars, and much of this work emphasizes the careful structure of the Gospel. The lections to be considered here in the last days of the Christian year need to be placed in the context of the whole book. One way of understanding that context is to re-read the whole Gospel, a task which takes only a couple of hours, unless one does it in Greek, Latin, French, German, or Spanish and comes to those languages secondarily. Reading a biblical book in another language can be very stimulating, however, and should not be overlooked as a way of gaining a fresh perspective on familiar texts.

Lections in these homiletical resources originate in Common Lectionary: The Lections Proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1983).

Scripture quotations unless otherwise noted are from the Revised Standard Version Common Bible, copyrighted © 1973 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission.
Whether one re-reads the whole Gospel or not, for sure the preacher will want to be reminded of the structure and themes of the whole Gospel. This overall survey can be gained by reviewing the general articles on Matthew in one of the good comprehensive biblical commentaries:


Many introductions to the New Testament give an overview of Matthew, but a more helpful volume for understanding the scholarship of the last two decades is *The Interpretation of Matthew*, ed. Graham Stanton (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). Stanton’s introductory essay includes a discussion of the various source hypotheses, the titles that Matthew accords to Jesus, the infancy narratives, the problem of epochs and salvation-history, law and the relation to Judaism, and other matters. Reprinted here is the influential essay by Ernst von Dobschütz from 1928, “Matthew as Rabbi and Catechist.” Georg Strecker considers the concept of history in the Gospel, Nils Dahl the passion narrative, and Eduard Schweizer the church. Günther Bornkamm’s essay, “The Authority to ‘Bind’ and ‘Loose’ in the Church in Matthew’s Gospel,” which receives many references in the literature, is also reprinted here.

readable and frank discussion of the major questions and problems presented in each passage.

Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), writes from a literary-critical perspective and in a more condensed, no-nonsense style. Kingsbury is Aubrey Lee Brooks Professor of Biblical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond and has made a career out of the study of Matthew. This volume begins with a brief introduction that explains Kingsbury’s method and his theological bias, then proceeds through the Gospel in three major sections. Kingsbury also contributes three essays on Jesus as Son of man, the disciples, and the community of Matthew. The book could be used as a commentary in preparing sermons but its condensed format means that most preachers will also want to consult a more detailed work like that of Patte or Eduard Schweizer (see following note).

Kingsbury has also written *Matthew* in the *Proclamation Commentaries* series. The book has been republished in a second edition that is revised and enlarged (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). The revision is significant, since Kingsbury has surveyed the whole issue of biography and recent redaction criticism. The book is a model of clear survey writing and is worth study for its summary of recent scholarly methods, the specific study of Matthew aside. The book is compact (133 pp.) like *Matthew as Story* (149 pp.), but both are studded with textual references in relation to outline and theme, so that careful study of a given passage is as rewarding as a standard commentary.

The standard commentary is Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975). Schweizer and his translator have provided a readable text, and on each passage the author gives an introduction discussing the history of tradition, then a detailed exegesis, and finally a conclusion that recapitulates the theological context in summary.

The series, *Preaching from the New Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), the authors of which include Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, provides brief interpretations of lections from the Hebrew Bible historical, prophetic, legal, or wisdom section; the
Psalm; the Epistle; and the Gospel. Craddock's ideas are insightful and the writing clear, although the series does not allow for expository suggestions of any length.

Reginald H. Fuller, Preaching the New Common Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1974) also provides short interpretations of each lection, although some changes have been made in the lectionary since this edition. The interpretation is conservative but there is value in having one volume for reference to all the lections in the cycle.

A more up-to-date bibliography than is given in any of these books appears in The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation, by Luke T. Johnson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), including material on Matthew as well as socio-historical and other studies.


SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 21:28-32

Action not words constitutes worthiness.

One of the better resources for understanding this lection is Daniel Patte, The Gospel According to Matthew (292-97). Patte sees this passage as part of a longer section that begins in 21:18 and concludes in 22:14. The theme of this section is Jesus' authority. (Jack Dean Kingsbury, in Matthew as Story, also sees the passage as set in the context of Jesus' authority, but Kingsbury places the brackets at 16:21, where Jesus turns toward Jerusalem, and the end of the Gospel.) Patte understands Jesus' authority as being attached to the act rather than to the person. Jesus does not speak of John's authority but that of his baptism. The parable of the two sons then develops this point. Action, and not words, constitutes worthiness.
Matthew depicts Jesus' opponents as failing to recognize this point. Clearly this is a human and not just a Jewish problem. But the Jewish leaders had an opportunity to repent when they heard John the Baptist and did not. The text speaks of “believing” John the Baptist, and Patte views believing as part of acting. Tax collectors and harlots believed and repented and therefore will enter the kingdom before those who rely on their speaking as the sole sign of worthiness.

If we interpret the parable of the two sons as the authority of action over against the authority of persons, we could consider those life-situations in which people receive respect for their actions rather than their status or their credentials. This view of “worthiness” is sometimes affirmed in our culture and sometimes not. For example, the whole emphasis on achievement in our culture emphasizes action and results. A person who enters on a job with a great record must still produce in order to be given respect. As the saying goes in baseball, a player may have a great pitching or batting average, but the owner and the fans will always ask: “What have you done for me today?”

We can read this emphasis on action two ways, then. On the one hand, the Christian who “produces” good results is the Christian who counts. Being able to speak well, to look impressive, or to be pious are not critical. The deed done for the neighbor is. Let us think, then, of those in our church and our community who have achieved these kinds of results. Who has broadened the community spirit? Who has worked for the outcasts? Who has been the quiet but steady worker behind the scenes? Some examples that the congregation will recognize might help to make this point.

The other side of the emphasis on action is less admirable. In our society only the producer counts. We tend to depreciate those who can no longer work or earn money or get the job done. Therefore we may need to pay attention to the emphasis in the passage on repentance. It is not just the ability to produce results that matters but doing it in the right spirit. For example, some of our best citizens and our most valuable church members are those who can admit they are wrong. Or to take repentance in its most profound sense of metanoia, a turning again, they are people who know how to orient (and re-orient) themselves to
the real center of value. One example is Abraham Lincoln, who unlike other presidents saw God’s judgment on the nation for the Civil War and called for repentance. The macho image and public relations do not allow for such repentance.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 21:33-43

In the coming kingdom there will be love and joy and peace.

One of the better resources for use with this passage is not a commentary in the true sense but an extended exposition on the themes of Matthew. In Matthew, Proclamation Commentaries, Jack Dean Kingsbury does not give a verse-by-verse treatment of the text. He has the book divided into topics or themes—Jesus, kingdom of heaven, and disciples. But it is the very compactness of this treatment that makes Kingsbury’s work valuable. The book can be read quickly. Once the reader grasps the understanding of Matthew that Kingsbury sets forth, each passage can be fitted into context. It allows preachers to interpret texts in the context of the whole Gospel. If preachers pursue texts from the Gospel over a period of weeks or months and interpret them with greater self-understanding, listeners could then become more familiar with the Gospel writer’s themes and understand the dynamics of the Gospel better.

Kingsbury uses a form of redaction criticism known as “composition criticism.” It allows the biblical interpreter to use devices from literary criticism like narrative, author, and characters. Kingsbury sees the structure of Matthew as very intentional and divided into two parts: the “time of Israel” and “the time of Jesus.” Matthew is clear that Jesus is the Son of God who inaugurates the kingdom. In this history of salvation, the “time of the church” is not separate from the “time of Jesus”—it is an extension of it. “In Matthew’s scheme of things, therefore, Israel has been decisively confronted with the news that saves or condemns, and this news is furthermore being proclaimed to the gentiles” (31).
In Matthew 21:33-43, then, the critical verse is 43: The kingdom is taken away from Israel and given to the church. Or is that the meaning? The text does not say the allegory applies to Israel and the church. The mention of “nations” suggests the mission to the gentiles.

Kingsbury believes that Matthew does not “identify” the kingdom with the church but “associates” the two. By association he apparently means that the church is caught up in the throes of the kingdom’s coming. He points out that Matthew has many stories of the mixed composition of the church.

We could also say that in opposing Judaism, Matthew seems to have shaped a Christianity very much like it. The authority of the rabbi and messiah is central. The law becomes the norm. The day of the Lord is approaching. Even the emphasis on teaching and missionary work in the church are themes present in Judaism, which was to enlighten the gentiles. Here lies one clue for interpreting the allegory of the householder and the vineyard.

We sometimes feel the strongest toward those who are nearest to us and most like us. The expression of this ambivalence can be healthy, as in the case of youths who need to express their individuality by rebellion. Ambivalence can become destructive hatred, however, unless we are willing to recognize our common roots. Today as never before there is need for Christians to affirm Jews as part of the same family. And there is increasing evidence this can be done with integrity without trying to reach the “lowest common denominator.” Many Jews, for example, can accept a public declaration that a Christian believes in Christ and in fact they welcome it as a frank statement of one’s belief. Christians should be able to do the same and let Jews have the freedom to express their faith in their own terms.

Another more somber interpretation of the allegory is the theme of conflict and suffering. Early Christians would have heard two things here: Jesus was the son who was killed, and the disciples are those who are beaten and stoned and also killed. What do we say in the church about religious conflicts and wars? In America our very obsession with tolerance, which has been ridiculed as a terrible superficiality, derived from the time when some Christians defined true faith and persecuted others—Christians, Jews, and unbelievers. Do we want to
HOMILETICAL RESOURCES

return to those days? Can we be self-righteous in pointing at conflicts in Islam, religious sects, and countries like Ireland? We do not have to have the answers to these questions to raise them. Neither do we need a pat answer—"Christ is the answer"—although we can say with Matthew that the coming kingdom will be one where the fruits will be love and joy and peace.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 22:1-14

We are called to prepare ourselves for joyful participation in God's kingdom.

An older but very serviceable commentary is Eduard Schweizer, The Good News According to Matthew. Schweizer says that in 22:1-14 "we are dealing with the Last Judgment and with the time of salvation, which will be missed by everyone who does not prepare himself for it (cf. Matt. 25:10)" (417). This unremarkable statement is followed by the observations that verses 6-7 are an interpolation and that verses 11-14 probably came from an independent parable added later. Schweizer does not think the references to the king and his troops help very much: "The parable [rightly understood?] deals with ordinary citizens, who buy fields and use oxen, not with men who rule entire cities" (418). But when Schweizer gets to the interpretation of verses 11-14 he makes a more pregnant suggestion:

But we can also say ... "You can gain someone's love and still not have it," because love must be lived and realized afresh each day. Thus Matthew is trying to say that one can sit in the banquet hall without joining in the feast because he is sitting there "without wedding clothes"; in other words, he is not totally there in his heart. (421)

Schweizer believes that this appendage in 11-14 means that the parable is more than a condemnation of Israel's apostasy (and this condemnation is one that Kingsbury emphasizes perhaps too many times). It is a message, he says, to the disciples about their calling.
Patte gives us three long pages on this parable and ends up saying, "Acknowledging the goodness of God is not sufficient. One also needs to acknowledge the authority of God" to participate in the kingdom (304; italics in the original). Perhaps so, but how does this apply to the context of ancient Jewish-Christian relations, since no one doubted that Jews also believed in God's authority?

Schweizer's comments about being "totally there in his heart" give us something to preach about. For example: A couple joins the church. A layperson calls and invites them to an adult class. The wife says that actually they will only be at church for a short time in the winter. The rest of the time they will be traveling. The layperson thinks: What then was the point of joining this congregation? How can we arouse people to be in the church "totally there" in their hearts? And how can we in a profound way be "totally there" while being obedient to Christ in our families, our work, our service?

Schweizer's point about gaining and winning love also provides a prod to the imagination. Real faith must be renewed each day. Real love for God must be constantly renewed. Real hope must be defined anew in the face of new problems and depressing circumstances. None of these realities can be stored up forever without renewal. That is why we have worship: to revive our faith and love in God. That is why husbands and wives constantly tell each other they love one another. That is why leaders always act confident before their followers—to keep hope alive. We could also apply this interpretation to the metaphor of the feast of the kingdom. It seems unrealistic that all humankind could ever sit down together in the kingdom, but the vision may help bring it to pass.

**NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

Matthew 22:15-22

How do we express our final loyalty to God?

This text illustrates one of the limitations of Scripture. It does not provide a clear insight into the complexities and dilemmas of
our own situation. We know this rationally; but we tend to
assume that because of the wisdom and discernment of Jesus
and the genius of early Christians (like Matthew), we can always
find a resolution to contemporary problems by turning to the
Bible.

This seeming frustration may become an opportunity if we
ask our listeners to put themselves in the place of the early
Christians. They, too, were often asked to decide in situations
that were not anticipated in Jesus' day. For example, Jesus had
to decide between loyalty to God and loyalty to the religious
tradition. But no one asked him, as they did ask early Christians,
to worship Caesar. This unprecedented test forced early
Christians to turn to their admittedly recent tradition for
answers. Basically the answer was: you decide. And this is the
very essence of faith.

Fatte calls Jesus' teaching "ironical" (309). Let us accept this
judgment for purposes of argument. Where then does it lead us?
We must assume that when Jesus said, "Render therefore to
Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that
are God's," he meant that all things really belong to God. Faith
in God is the ultimate loyalty. Then the question is: How do
Christians express this final loyalty?

Few commentators (none consulted for this writing) offer
specific suggestions. Herein lies a limitation of commentaries.
Possibly the paucity of thought in interpreting this passage hints
at a fundamental weakness in Christian theology. No satisfac­
tory way has ever been devised for showing Christians how to
be simultaneously loyal to God and to provisional authorities
like the state. We have several options in exploiting this
weakness for homiletical purposes:

1. Christian faith wages an unrelenting struggle against
provisional structures like the state. God's justice can never be
made concrete in sinful human structures. Not only have all
sinned and fallen short of God's glory; no conceivable historical
reality can ever satisfy the canons of divine righteousness. The
advantage of this essentially neo-orthodox position is that it
resonates with Matthew's "higher righteousness" (5:20).

According to Kingsbury, obeying this righteousness accords
with doing the will of God and producing fruit, which can be
defined as love, or serving the neighbor (Matthew, Proclamation Commentaries, 90-93). The disadvantage of this view is that it can never say precisely what human structures would ever satisfy the canons of divine righteousness. Ultimately it leads to a radical position—that all states are idolatrous.

2. Christians may work to make human structures more nearly accord with divine justice. This view gives great credence to the belief that God is “with us,” a Matthean term that has great significance (1:23, 18:20, 28:20). In Matthew the emphasis falls on the functions of the post-Easter church: baptizing, preaching, praying, exercising church discipline, and carrying out the mission to the gentiles. (See Kingsbury, Matthew, Proclamation Commentaries, 105-106.) But the intra-ecclesiastical disciplines eventually have an effect extra-ecclesiastically, as was shown in the rise of early Christianity. In this view God overcomes Caesar by working from within human structures.

3. An eschatological interpretation would see God bringing about new realities. The eschatological approach concurs with Matthew (see Kingsbury, Matthew as Story, 60-61). Perhaps we can conceive of this view as being in accord with H. Richard Niebuhr’s category of Christ transforming culture (Christ and Culture). For example, the early Christians had to decide whether Caesar was divine. We have to decide whether to pay a large portion of our taxes to support a military machine and perhaps many other forced decisions of which we do not approve. But God is never absent from these stressful decisions.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 22:34-46

If loving God is not to be reduced to loving our neighbor, then what does it mean to love God?

This passage also illustrates the limits of contemporary New Testament scholarship. Very little insight comes from the commentaries that an astute reader could not adduce on his or her own. For example, Patte says that the question of the lawyer is a “wrong view” because it implies that one commandment is
greater than another. He notes that the commandment to love God comes from Deut. 6:5 and the commandment to love the neighbor from Lev. 19:18. And he comments: “Yet these two commandments remain distinct. They should not be identified with each other. Loving God should not be reduced to loving one’s neighbor! Loving God is an act of love distinct from loving one’s neighbor, and vice versa” (314). Exactly how, though, is God to be loved if not through neighbor-love? Patte does not say, and his additional comment remains equally abstract: “The twofold commandment demands that they acknowledge the participation of God and of their neighbor in their life and that they participate in this relationship with their whole being by loving both God and their neighbor” (315).

Kingsbury says: “The idea is that they [the commandments] reveal the ground, or the intention, of all the precepts of the law or, indeed, of the entire will of God as set forth in the whole of the OT... Keeping the injunctions of the law, or doing the will of God, is always, in essence, an exercise in love” (Matthew, Proclamation Commentaries, 89).

Since the preacher is really left on his or her own with regard to exposition, it might be excusable to formulate one’s own interpretation. For example, we are familiar with moralizing about idolatry, but how would we state in positive terms what it means to love God?

To love God means to love God’s creation, to care for animals and plants, and to preserve and relish the water, the woods, the air that God has given us.

To love God means to love the best parts of the past, to preserve in memory those moments when our forefathers and foremothers responded faithfully to God’s command.

To love God means to love the future, to preserve a future for human life by limiting pollution, laying a groundwork for a just social order, by working against the threat of war and for peace.

To love God means to ensure the sacredness of every human life by being sure that every person—child, older adult, minority, poor person, person with a disabling condition—has access to health care.

To love God means to affirm and support parents in nurturing a
family where no one is abused and every person respected and loved.

To love God is to love the world of work where persons have a chance to labor with their minds, their hands, their whole beings in meaningful ways.

To love God is to affirm the value of all races and ethnic minorities, not only working against discrimination but searching for positive ways to show the value of every person and every group.

To love God is to love ourselves in the right way—acknowledging to ourselves that we are important, relieving stress in healthy recreation, giving ourselves time for relaxation and renewal.

To love God is to meditate on God's power and grace in moments of solitude, in prayer, and in contemplation.

To love God is to express that love in words when the community of faith worships, placing God consciously at the center of our attention.

To love God is to build the community of faith in disciplining ourselves to give ourselves to it, to study the texts of that community, and to steep ourselves in its traditions.

Take one or more of these thoughts, give them flesh by personal testimony, the retelling of stories from reading or the media, and be clear and concrete in proclaiming this word.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 23:1-12

Pride of place and false humility are destructive of the community of believers.

The treatment of this passage in the resources shows just how hard preachers must work when trying to be faithful to the text and also attempting to proclaim a positive gospel. Kingsbury, for example, very accurately describes Matthew's antipathy to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day: "Although the Matthean picture of these several groups does not always square with what is known of them historically, the rhetorical effect of
the way they are presented is to make of them a monolithic front opposed to Jesus.” The root trait of these leaders is “evilness,” and Kingsbury cites 3:7, 12:34, and 13:38-39 as examples (Matthew as Story, 17-19). Unfortunately, the real historical situation is not given by Kingsbury—it lies outside the purview of the literary composition method, apparently, which reveals one of its shortcomings.

Patte is more forthright in attacking the problem of anti-Semitism. The theme here is “essentially negative,” but “the use of this chapter as the basis for an anti-Semitic attitude, which involves a rejection of Judaism as a whole, runs contrary to the convictions Matthew attempts to convey to his readers. Matthew also wants to affirm the validity of Jewish authorities (23:2-3)” (320). The real point of the passage is the true authority of Christ and his followers, Patte says, citing 23:10-11.

Possibly the best resource on the lection is the one written by Fred Craddock in Preaching from the New Common Lectionary. Craddock notes the passage is directed to the disciples, that Jesus endorses the scribes and Pharisees as skilled interpreters of the Mosaic tradition, and that Matthew shows Jesus as attacking “the love of place and preference among the servants of God” (261).

Even so, the preacher must still interpret the text to the congregation. Unless one has dealt with the problem of anti-Semitism in earlier passages from Matthew in this season, this could be an opportunity to do so. There are several ways to do this. One is to emphasize the conflict in the early church and to extrapolate how we inevitably get carried away in conflicts in making caricatures of our opponents. Some comic strips will provide useful fodder here: Doonesbury, Kauzu, and Tank McNamara. Jews and Christians are kith and kin, and intramural feuds inevitably become bitter. One could spin out the way verses 10 and 11 help us in conflicts of ambivalence. Parents and children, workers and bosses, consumers and corporate executives—all could be helped by remembering the importance of this “reversal of values.”

The anti-Semitic issue aside, one could also deal here with the problem mentioned by Craddock. He adds that “until the model of Jesus’ ministry is embraced, games such as prizes for
the most humble will continue’” (261). We could discuss the way this problem emerges in the church. It is possible to be very pious about how one person loves another, or how limited one is (“I’m just a country preacher,” or “I’m just a layman”), and then effectively wield power through personal manipulation or shrewdness in parliamentary procedure. Is not Jesus calling us to be more honest and open, to have more integrity? There are also cultural forms of this dumb-but-cunning tactic, such as an educated person who pretends to be folksy or an affluent person who dresses like a worker. We could ask how all these pretenses for reverse snobbery are valid. Someone has said that today there is a cult of being “sensitive,” so that those who say they are “vulnerable” thereby become “invincible.” Is this Jesus’ ethic?

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 25:1-13

“Watching” means living in the present, living toward the future, knowing that we are between Easter and the Parousia.

The lections skip chapter 24, but that section needs to be taken into account as part of the context of this passage. And looking ahead, preachers need to be aware that the problems and possibilities of interpreting the next lection are similar to this one. Fuller sees the point of both parables—the wise and foolish virgins, and the talents—as the same (272 ff.). That point is that those who hear Jesus’ message and respond will be accepted, but for the others it will be too late. Kingsbury also sees the passages as related. They are about ethics during the eschaton (Matthew, Proclamation Commentaries, 95, nn. 62, 63).

Here we will treat the parables as making two related but separate points. Schweizer touches on Kingsbury’s emphasis on ethics and eschatology. Christians were and are being called to “remain faithful for decades or even centuries” (468). Kingsbury is also helpful in placing this and other passages in the context of the whole Gospel. Using the approach of literary composition,
he discusses the theory of the “implied reader,” who is “that imaginary person in whom the intention of the text is to be thought of as always reaching its fulfillment.” This implied reader “has a position of his or her own which lies between the resurrection and the Parousia” (Matthew as Story, 36-37).

If we place 25:1-13 in this context it allows us to open up the parable for some fruitful explorations. One way of reading the parable is that it concerns preparation. The wise virgins had taken action ahead of time. They were ready when the cry came. How do we translate this preparation, this readiness, into living as Christians? It would be wrong to stress the wisdom aspect here: Always be preparing, always think ahead, always conserve. That could lead to the kind of comic figure we encounter in the person who brings food and first aid in a bag on a day’s outing “just in case,” or the proverbial middle-class stereotype of delayed gratification, never enjoying life because of what may happen later. The trick of the wise virgins lay in doing the right thing at the right time. The translation might be more practical—seeing what needs to be done and taking steps to see that it is done. Is this not the mythical realistic and mature person all of us like to think of ourselves as being? But in terms of ethics it means preparation for a purpose, not just preparation. And in religion it means following spiritual disciplines because we know demands will be made on us and we will need strength. We might also explore the way that taking the right action at the right time requires a certain amount of forgiveness and patience. I have prepared; but you have not, and I let you know what a drag you are. Included in getting ready would seem to be doing it in a spirit of cooperation and understanding. For who is always fully prepared?

The other way of reading the parable is that it depends on expectation. “Watch therefore” means looking ahead, knowing that the Lord will come, but being uncertain when it will be. Here there may be a tendency to compare the Parousia with death or the destruction of civilization, as if Jesus will zap everyone on arrival. Although the parable does say “the door was shut,” it also says the wise virgins went into the marriage feast. So perhaps an appropriate theme is the difficulty in looking ahead to the Parousia without falling into total anxiety.
or total complacency. How many experiences are not what we expect! Desserts always look great but they rarely come up to our expectations. Sports fans regularly look forward to the World Series, the Super Bowl, the NCAA championship basketball game, and although some games are better than others, few live up to their advance billing. We enter on a new job with great hopes but before long we look under the furniture and find the worms have been at work. And the reverse: we are often surprised at what we can do, at the beautiful Monday we experienced, at the compliment given by a tough critic. “Watching” means living, living in the present, living toward the future, knowing where we are between Easter and the Second Coming, living in faith.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 25:14-30

The church has been given many “talents”—tradition, faith, the lives of its members—requiring careful nurture and stewardship.

Some misreadings should be avoided: making the parable into an allegory, emphasizing reward and punishment, interpreting it as capitalism in the kingdom of God, translating “talent” to mean personal ability. All of the commentators throw some light on the parable, but perhaps the most productive approach is once again to see it in the context of all of Matthew, particularly chapter 24, with its eschatological teachings and the allusions to the Parousia in the master’s coming. Verse 29 is critical in the parable, which was given in similar form in Matthew 13:12.

Matthew was concerned with relating two traditions. Is Christianity the completion of Judaism, the “fulfillment of the law”? Or is it something radically new, and has the Son of God come to usher in this new age? One way to interpret this ongoing discussion among scholars is to consider how we treat tradition in the community of faith. Do we preserve tradition by keeping its original forms intact or by adding to it and adapting
it? Is the tradition a repository of faith, practice, and truth, or is it an ongoing believing, practicing, and truth-telling? Perhaps a way of illustrating the problem is to take a doctrine—the Incarnation, say, or the Second Coming, both important in Matthew. Do we discern the essence of such a doctrine by studying texts, trying to grasp what the councils and the great theologians have said? Or does its essence become clear as we find its meaning right here in 1987, in this community, in this congregation, in our very life? We do not need to downgrade scholarship or popular interpretations of these doctrines to help our listeners rediscover the value of traditions as living realities. “Keeping the faith” means both understanding past tradition and keeping it alive in our own day, and some concrete examples from the life of the congregation and the community would be helpful. (Robert N. Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, also has some relevant material on traditions in communities.)

Another perspective: If faith is a relationship of trust in God, how can we consider it as something that by being absent could be taken away? As Patte points out, the parable depends as much on the relationship between the servants and the master as the act of investing money. It is not just unbelievers who have this problem, which is dislike of religion or fear of the constraints of believing in God. Regular church members also often seem to have faith while not actually having it. That is, faith gets to be an accumulation of our experience, our having been members a long time, our being totally familiar with the church and its ways, so that we are no longer living and growing with our relationship to God. We live toward the Parousia, and that means uncertainty, risk, our knowing that what God is going to do may involve surprise.

What is given and taken away is giving and taking away itself. We are like God, as bosses, parents, friends, volunteers. We feel we are free to give or not to give. And we know how to remove ourselves too, in passive aggression, withdrawal, remaining silent. In doing so are we not burying the talent by playing God? God gives and takes away, not us. When we go too far, when we presume to be the givers and takers, God just might take that privilege from us. This is judgment and promise—promise being that we give and take with fear and trembling.
To invoke guilt may get action, but does it bring the whole person along?

All the resources have something to say about this passage, although for many the problem is how to say anything fresh or new, given the tremendous popularity of this text in the church. Kingsbury's books are the most helpful, even though he has no extended treatment of the story. By noting its relation to broader themes in Matthew, he lets us see how we might interpret it with a fresh perspective. (Another resource is a paraphrase of the parable for persons with handicapping conditions done by Ann Berney and Carol Raugust, and reprinted in the health column in *New World Outlook*, January, 1987, p. 41.)

Fuller's criticism that the sayings in this text "are commonly used by church preachers and by secular humanitarians as a piece of ethical teaching, inculcating concern for the victims of famine and oppression" (280) should be a caution that we ought not to harp on texts like this too much. We do not have to accept Fuller's view that the text concerns Christ's judgment on the nations of the world, "who will be judged by the reception they have given to the church's proclamation of the gospel" (281). In fact, Kingsbury seems closer to the truth when he points out "the righteous" are not the followers of Jesus but contemporaries of the early Christians who have done the will of God (*Matthew, Proclamation Commentaries*, 93).

We can, however, preach from this text on judgment. Judgment is done by the king—when it seems too many interpreters want to be the judges themselves. Like the text "vengeance is mine," the real meaning is that we must wait for God to decide. In the meantime, just as the early church was very much a mixed body, so we must understand that good and evil reside in each of us. Each of us has a sheep side and a goat side. To believe otherwise is to ignore our real nature as both human beings and Christians. Strangely enough, judgment in this situation has a bracing and constructive effect. There are
standards, there are norms, and we can carry them out. To know that we are judged is to sense our capacity for doing, for changing, for growing. Even if we have been real goats, we can recover by beginning to act like sheep. We might contrast this strong Christian belief with views of fatalism, or the perverse satisfaction some get out of thinking they can never change. The king invites us to consider a new future, a new script.

Another interpretation of the ethical import of the text might grow out of what both Craddock (289) and Kingsbury (Matthew as Story, 122-24) say is the “Jewishness” of the story. Concepts like the “right and the left,” “inherit the kingdom,” and “from the foundation of the world” draw on Jewish traditions. But the import of this dependence is not only that Christians and Jews have something in common. The Jewishness of the story implies that ethical or moral life is not just a matter of legality, of checking off good deeds, of complying with regulations. Rather, one is to act with compassion. The story thus has a strange twist that prevents us from moralizing to parishioners about what they ought to do or must do. To invoke guilt may get action, but does it bring the whole person along? Here we need to proclaim the good news in a way that invites obedience.

Two other possibilities may be mentioned briefly. The story has a cosmic dimension. It is a story about the nations and thus about the course of the world, of history. The metaphor here is that of God as the ruler of the universe and of history. We could preach on understanding the possibility of creation or of history as rooted in God’s purpose. We are part of the cosmos, even though we sense our smallness. But given the pessimism prevalent these days, preaching on God’s purpose for the world might provide some necessary hope.

We should also note that this parable was a teaching parable in the life of the early church. The mention of the “nations” means that Matthew was pointing here to the larger role of the church as it moved beyond its Jewish roots. This mission meant preaching, teaching, baptizing, as 28:19-20 will make clear, but it also meant common moral activity with “the nations.” What is the point of the preaching, teaching, and baptizing? To encourage the kind of human community where people in prison are visited and so on.

C. E. C.
THE PRESENT CRISIS:  
THE IMPACT OF THE  
MEMBERSHIP DECLINE  
IN THE MAINLINE CHURCHES  
WILLIAM H. WILLIMON  
AND  
ROBERT L. WILSON

What does the future hold for the mainline churches?

When the story is told of church life in the United States during the past decade and a half, for many of our churches it will be a story of constant decline. We are living in a period when several Protestant denominations, which have traditionally been among the strongest and most prominent in America, have been experiencing a substantial and steady erosion of membership. Decline is already having a significant effect upon these mainline churches and their role in the larger society. Do we now call these churches “mainline,” “oldline,” or “sideline”? We are witnessing a movement that could result in a major reordering of the denominations in the United States.

During the decade of the seventies and early eighties the percentage decrease in membership was: The Episcopal Church, 17 percent; the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 29 percent; the newly created Presbyterian Church (USA), 25 percent when compared to the combined membership of the predecessor denominations; the United Church of Christ, 16 percent; and The United Methodist Church, 13 percent. It is

difficult to conceptualize the extent of such a decline. Every week for a decade and a half these denominations had a net loss of more than five thousand persons per week. This is equivalent to closing one local church of almost seven hundred members every day for fifteen years.

Of course, the Christian faith does not measure success in quantitative terms. Defensive church leaders in these denominations condemn those who play “the numbers game.” Nevertheless, a long-term membership decline is having several significant effects on these mainline denominations that will become more evident if the downward trends continue.

THE CHURCH’S SELF-IMAGE

The continued decrease in membership is having an impact on the image both clergy and laity have of their church. In a society that places a premium on growth, any institution that has declined steadily for more than a decade is bound to have a serious case of self-doubt. Much of the New Testament gauges faithfulness in terms of the church’s ability to grow and to evangelize. For churches which historically have interpreted winning converts as one of their primary purposes, failure to grow can be interpreted as a failure of mission. Honest church leaders and increasingly the laity are aware that all is not well. Many of us now live within congregations that appear to have accepted continuous decline as a way of life. Unfortunately, in human organizations, stability is rarely an option. We either grow or we die. Decline is not a way of life but a way of death.

How does it affect pastors and laity to be part of a church that experiences unrelenting decline? The Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren Churches merged in 1968. Even though their merger initially obscured their decline, the membership loss in each denomination actually began several years earlier and has continued to the present. Slightly more than 40 percent of the United Methodist clergy has been ordained since the Methodist-EUB merger in 1968. Thus, two out of five of United Methodist ministers have never been part of a growing church. For many, there is the assumption, not supported by the data, that “Americans aren’t religious anymore,” or “We are too
These are rationalizations for decline in a denomination where growth and outreach are no longer integral aspects of church life.

**EMPHASIS ON SURVIVAL**

When decline began in the sixties, people would sometimes say, “We’re not declining, we are losing some of the dead wood we acquired in the fifties. We’re tightening our ranks for service.” Things do not work that way. We were not becoming “lean and mean,” we were becoming even more closed and defensive.

When an institution declines, increased emphasis is placed on maintenance and survival. One knowledgeable denominational leader commented, “Our church is in a maintenance mode.” When an institution feels threatened, its energies flow into self-preservation. In the church this takes the form of extreme defensiveness of the status quo. Any criticisms or questioning of the organizational procedures or programs evokes a defensive and negative response. Critics are quickly labeled as disloyal troublemakers. When leaders are selected, creativity, courage, and vision are valued less than institutional loyalty. The impression is conveyed that the church is a fragile institution that will suffer irreparable damage if even its most loyal supporters raise any disturbing questions.

A declining organization falls into the hands of managers. Many mainline Protestant denominations are now being led by persons who have always thought of themselves as “liberals”—open and accepting, concerned for the outcast, challengers of the establishment, and rebels against the status quo. But we are now learning that such persons, once they are placed in authority, react with the same hostility and defensiveness as the more traditionalist bureaucrats and functionaries who preceded them. A declining organization falls into the
hands of managers. In fact, it is more comfortable with managers than leaders, with people who write and interpret rules, persons who protect the institutional status quo (despite their anti-establishment rhetoric) and defend conventional values against maverick critics or reformers. Anyone in their church, conservative or liberal, evangelical or social activist, who dares to point out the decline which has occurred while they were at the helm, will be driven from the discussion.

Throughout historically liberal denominations, the emphasis is now on survival at the expense of mission, protecting and administering yesterday’s decisions and programs instead of boldly coming to grips with the present crisis. The air of anxiety does not win persons but may have the effect of turning them away. In its better moments, the church knows that its purpose is not to survive but to witness and to serve.

INFLUENCE IN THE LARGER SOCIETY

A decrease in membership will decrease the influence of churches in the larger society. The mainline denominations have been involved in every reform movement from the anti-slavery campaign of the pre–Civil War period to the civil rights movement of the second half of the twentieth century. Institutional vitality fostered missional fervor. These denominations continue to take stands on public issues. A variety of special agencies have been created to deal with such issues as temperance, world peace, race relations, and a variety of other social and economic issues. These urge the members to attempt to influence governmental officials in order to bring about specific changes. While these bodies have always enjoyed thinking of themselves as culturally significant organizations, denominations with political clout, this self-perception appears to have lingered long after their true effectiveness in the larger society has waned.

Organizations that are in decline are not able to mobilize their resources to focus on a particular issue. The churches will continue to raise the ethical and moral issues, but they will have fewer constituents to influence public policy.
A DECREASE IN INCOME

Over the long term the decline in membership will result in a decrease in income both for many of the congregations and for the church agencies. To date the income of the mainline denominations has been holding up despite the decrease in contributors. "We're losing members, but thank God, the members we have are contributing more," one leader was heard to say. To take The United Methodist Church as an example, the total expenditures over the past decade and a half increased by 11 percent when inflation is held constant. Fewer members are contributing more money, but how long will this last? Eventually, the numbers catch up with us. As more and more of the faithful long-term church members pass from the scene with the steady "graying" of mainline Protestantism, there will be drastic decline in giving.

The "numbers game," in terms of numbers of dollars for mission, had caught up with us.

Two shifts in the allocation of funds can already be noted. First, benevolent and mission causes tend to be sharing an increasingly smaller portion of the funds. Second, a greater share of the mission and benevolent contributions are being retained by the regional judicatories with less being forwarded on to the national agencies. In a period of financial stringency the needs closest to home will be met first. The local congregation will receive priority over the denominational causes. The regional judiciary will receive funds ahead of the national and world agencies. It is not that church people have become more selfish or concerned with local issues, but that there is less money left over after meeting local maintenance needs. It is ironic that, in the decades when mainline Protestants were espousing much rhetoric concerning the need of the church to "serve the world" and to "reach out beyond the church," our actual expenditures for service and outreach were
declining. The "numbers game," in terms of numbers of dollars for mission, had caught up with us.

The mainline churches are still strong institutions and are likely to remain so for some time. The culture remains mainline Protestant long after the actual demographic composition of the country is much less so. However, unless the present prolonged membership loss is addressed and reversed, the role of these churches in American society will be greatly different in the future than it has been in the past. The religious makeup of the nation could be drastically and permanently altered. There are, for example, more members now in the Assemblies of God than in the United Church of Christ. Anyone concerned with the religious life of the nation needs to ponder such questions as: Can and should the downward membership trends be reversed? How should the denominations react to their changing circumstances? What sort of leaders do we need? What will be their role in the American society in the period ahead? To what are they being called in the remaining years of the twentieth century?

When the story is told of church life, theological trends, and cultural shifts in the latter part of this century, we believe that the response, or lack thereof, of mainline Protestant churches to their decline in membership will be the single most important part of the story.
BOOK REVIEWS:
WORKS IN AUGUSTINIAN STUDIES
EUGENE TESEILLE

Of the making of books about Augustine, it has been said more than once (with apologies to Francis Bacon), there is no end. Cassiodorus commented that anyone who claimed to have read all of Augustine's writings was lying; the same could be said about anyone who claims to have read all the writings about him. And the steady flow of writings becomes a flood in anniversary years. One such year was 1930, commemorating Augustine's death in 430; another was 1954, commemorating his birth in 354. Recently we had other significant anniversaries—of Augustine's conversion in 386 and his baptism at Easter, April 25, 387. There have already been special lectures, conferences, and issues of periodicals; more are doubtless to come. What can be said here will necessarily have the character of an interim report. But we can highlight the books currently in print, some recent, some farther back.

TRANSLATIONS

There are many translations of Augustine's works. The most complete set is in the nineteenth-century Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series, reprinted by Eerdmans. More recent volumes are in the Fathers of the Church series (Catholic University of America Press) and Ancient Christian Writers series (Newman Press). For paperback translations of the Confessions most people are choosing either the one by R. S.

Eugene TeSelle is professor of church history and theology and chairperson of the graduate department of religion at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. He is the author of Augustine the Theologian (1970).
Pine-Coffin (Penguin, 1961), which is highly readable, sometimes even colloquial, but often roundabout, or another by Rex Warner (New American Library, 1963), which is much closer in its style to Augustine’s terse and vivid Latin. The City of God is available in the stately Victorian translation of Marcus Dods (Modern Library, 1983), and in a smoother-flowing new translation by Henry Bettenson (Penguin, 1984).

Two Library of Christian Classics volumes, which Westminster Press first published in the fifties, are now available in paperback (still from Westminster, as Ichthus Edition, 1979). Augustine: Earlier Writings, edited by John H. S. Burleigh, includes his Soliloquies, On True Religion, and On Free Will, all of them marking important stages in his intellectual development. Augustine: Later Works, edited by John Burnaby (1980), contains the most important books of his work on the Trinity, as well as his most graceful anti-Pelagian work, On the Spirit and the Letter, and his readable homilies on the First Epistle of John. Mention should be made, finally, of his Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love, edited by Henry Paolucci (Regnery paperback, 1961). It is a brief summary (literally a “manual”) containing Augustine’s ripened views near the end of his life (including his theories of the Fall, predestination, and purgatory). It was a major influence on “catechesis” or Christian education in the West, building instruction around the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Decalogue which is fulfilled in love.

GENERAL WORKS

The most often cited survey of Augustine’s life and thought is Peter Brown’s Augustine of Hippo: A Biography (Univ. of Calif. Pr., 1967, paperback). It gives a number of helpful hints—chronological tables, bibliographies of works in translation, and several maps. More important is the content—and the style of writing, which is densely packed and suggestive. Brown sets the scene and gives us our bearings as he looks at Augustine’s life and the changing contours of his thought. It is primarily a biography, not an analysis of his theology. But for that reason it helps us to understand Augustinian theology in its social, cultural, and
psychological setting. Many features of Augustine’s thought which may seem strange to us are shown to fit into the intellectual heritage of the ancient world.

But we are also shown how he came to new ideas—especially about the bondage of the will, original sin, and predestination—which were out of step with his age. His own views on these and other questions have influenced most Catholic and Protestant thought down to our own day. But we also need to be reminded that these views, influential though they are, were not the only alternatives available at the time. His contemporaries may have had good reason to be puzzled about them or raise objections to them. We may even want to raise objections to them in our own day!

Another survey—shorter, more introductory, but probably more accessible to the busy minister or the motivated lay person—is *Augustine: His Life and Thought*, by Warren Thomas Smith (John Knox Pr., 1980). This also has a biographical interest, and raises suggestive questions. What, for example, does Augustine’s gregariousness mean? He sought friendships, and he treasured them; yet one cannot avoid the impression that he was always the dominant partner. Or what about his ceaseless literary activity? He thought by writing, and he tried to be provocative—sometimes in order to arouse dialogue, or even to have his own views corrected, but sometimes, it is clear, to demolish and silence opponents. Or what about his Puritanism? Total commitment was important from his conversion on; he was demanding of himself as well as others, and his tendency was to struggle with human shortcomings, not to accept them. Smith is concerned to trace Augustine’s works in their chronological sequence and understand their setting. The writings are frequently quoted to illustrate his basic doctrines.


In speaking of biographies we should not overlook Rebecca
West's *St. Augustine*, first published in 1933 and recently reprinted (Thomas More Pr., 1982). This is definitely not a religious book, and Augustine is depicted in a basically unflattering light (at one point she comments that he never did *anything* that could be held up for ethical imitation). Still it is a stimulating book. For one thing, she has looked closely at Augustine's activities as a bishop, especially as reflected in his letters. For another she reflects on the nature of life in a provincial area (which North Africa was) under the domination of a large empire, and she sees Augustine, in spite of himself, as a kind of cultural rebel. It is well known that he distrusted the seductive power of poetry and the theater, and felt that they involved a useless agonizing over the human condition when people should be motivated to action instead. Dame Rebecca suggests that a subject people will tend to reject art and to choose the language of moral earnestness instead—a role that was played by Christianity in his day, but can be played by other cultural or political movements as well.

For quick reference to Augustine's theology, but usually without any attention to the time or the occasion, Norman L. Geisler has edited *What Augustine Says* (Baker Book House, 1982). The excerpts from Augustine's works are usually to the point, and they help us to see why and how he influenced subsequent theologians. But the format may be misleading, since the excerpts are classified according to the topics of systematic theology. The result is that Augustine's thought appears more fixed than it really was, and an awareness of his spirit of constant inquiry is in danger of being lost.

In the opposite direction there is Robert Meagher's *Augustine: An Introduction* (Harper & Row, 1979). This does not attempt to give a balanced presentation of Augustine's life and thought. Rather it is an imitation of his own mode of inquiry. The book invites the reader to take part in the process and thereby to be initiated into the same insights. It is an exercise in meditation on themes such as "Conversion," "Person," "Nature," "Will," "Faith," and "Sight." There are many excerpts from Augustine's own writings, but a book like this is more a stimulus to reflection than a textbook in the history of theology.
Augustine's Confessions poses a whole set of problems of its own. The work has been much studied and commented on. But at what distance should one focus one's eyes? Sometimes attention is directed to the text itself—its masterful style and intricate literary texture, its innovative use of prayer in seeking self-understanding (it must be the longest prayer ever written!), its mosaic of biblical citations, philosophical terms, autobiographical reminiscences, and the language of spirituality, all blended together. But the focus can also be upon the sequence of events in the narrative; one can seek the "historical Augustine" in the past, prior to the time of writing—which may also be a time of reinterpretation. There is a recurring suspicion that Augustine's narrative may not tell the story exactly as it occurred, or that he is emphasizing some features, and underplaying others, because of the theological convictions he held at the time of writing. And finally, it is possible to look at the "background," the society in which Augustine lived and the intellectual currents which influenced him. At each "focal length" there are problems that continue to puzzle the scholars. Peter Brown's book will trace some of them, but the research still goes on, often in French or German. One classic study, still in print, is John J. O'Meara's The Young Augustine: The Growth of St. Augustine's Mind up to His Conversion (Longmans, Green, 1954, paperback; also Alba House, 1965).

SPIRITUALITY

In a very different vein, Augustine is well known as a writer in what we have come to call "spirituality." And at last we have a representative collection of the most influential writings—a recent volume in The Classics of Western Spirituality series. It is Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings, ed. and trans. Mary T. Clark (Paulist Pr., 1984). The writings included in this volume deal with topics such as the human quest for happiness, the "images of the Trinity" in the human self, and how God can be said to be "seen" at all.

Augustine's spirituality can be perplexing. On the one hand,
he has much to say about the human aspiration for God as the only basis of human happiness, the only fulfillment that can truly satisfy the strivings of the heart and mind. On the other hand, he is cautious in the claims he makes. There has been much debate about the nature of his mysticism, since it is quite different from that of a St. Teresa or a St. John of the Cross. Still, he had much to say about the joys of contemplation, which he was able to fit into a busy life; and he reflected as a theologian on what it means to speak of the presence of God and “seeing” God. All of this is included in the Clark book, along with his homilies on the Psalms of Ascent (which he interpreted as an ascent through contemplation) and his monastic rule, which was widely influential in the Middle Ages.

The contemplative experience most fully described by Augustine, and most fully analyzed by scholars, is narrated in the Confessions (Book IX, chapter 23). This is the so-called “vision at Ostia,” the port city near Rome, where Augustine and his mother, awaiting a ship back to Africa, spoke of the everlasting contemplation of God as they leaned from a window. A classic study of this passage was published in 1938 by a Belgian Jesuit, Paul Henry (pronounced On-REE). It has now appeared in English under the title The Path to Transcendence: From Philosophy to Mysticism in Saint Augustine (Pickwick Press, 1981). The book is a combination of poetic paraphrase, scholarly investigation of Augustine’s debt to Plotinus (the neo-Platonist philosopher of more than a century earlier), and reflection on the import of Augustine’s approach to mysticism.

Barry Ulanov, in editing The Prayers of St. Augustine (Seabury Pr., 1983), has selected especially eloquent passages—from the early Soliloquies, from the Confessions, and from many other writings. Not all are literally prayers. Some express wishes or desires, some are outbursts of anger or perplexity, some are the closing passages of theological works in which Augustine asks for sympathy and correction. Some are meditative passages on Scripture; some are prayers uttered parenthetically in the midst of sermons, seeking the right insight and the right word; some are expositions of passages in the Psalms, paraphrasing their prayer with words of the preacher’s own. Most of these will not turn out to be usable for the Sunday morning service, but they
will be stimulating for the study—or the private devotional. Ulanov overlooks, by the way, one of Augustine's prayers, the only hymn which he wrote for worship (*City of God*, Book XV, chapter 22):

These are yours, and they are good, for you are good who made them. Nothing in them is from us, except for sin, when we, Neglectful of order, love what you have created instead of you.

*THE CITY OF GOD*

Augustine's last major work is intimidating in its size. The task of reading is not helped by its rather meandering discussion of topics (a famous scholar once said that Augustine "composed badly," and then had to spend the rest of his career explaining and apologizing). It does have a basic structure. The first ten books are a defense of the city of God against pagan critics—five books dealing with political issues, five more with religious ones. Then come twelve books dealing with the "two cities," making much use of biblical materials—four on their origins, four on their course through history, and four on their divergent ends. But readers may want to look at the work with more particular interests. For Augustine's political theory (or at least his approach to politics) the most pertinent sections are Books II, V, and XIX. It is usually advisable to use the index—or consult secondary works for guidance.

Augustine felt that law should be the expression of eternal law in order to be valid. At the same time he was aware that human law must deal with the harsh realities of sin—and may also reflect those harsh realities. Even in the Bible, Augustine had to take account of changing modes of life and justify questionable morals. He had to move from the patriarchs, with their polygamy, to the nation of Israel, with such diverse phenomena as the law of Moses, the tribal confederacy, the kingdom, exile, and life as a subject people under the Persians and Greeks and Romans; then to Jesus the Messiah, proclaiming a kingdom not of this world, and the church of the martyrs, defying emperors and eventually converting them to their own faith. And in his own day he saw that "Christian times" were not unambiguously
good; he had to reinterpret the millennium to mean the present age, in which the only reign of Christ is in the community of believers, confronting internal temptation as well as outward opposition. In all of this he had to find an application of the eternal and unchanging law of God, which accommodates itself to changing conditions and leads even the disorderly affections of a sinful humanity to political order and a semblance of virtue. The picture is a complex one!

The most accessible study is still Herbert A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (Columbia Univ. Pr., 1963). It puts in order Augustine's scattered observations on political life, not only in *The City of God* but in many other writings and sermons. Deane interprets Augustine as a "political realist," very much in line with Reinhold Niebuhr. There is much to be said for this interpretation, since Augustine did not have high expectations for political life. A perfectly harmonious society, based on true justice, could be found only in the city of God in the heavens, to which the church is in pilgrimage, living as strangers and sojourners in the earthly city. But realism is not simply pessimism. Another part of Augustine's realism, as Deane reminds us, is a sober, clear-headed, factual stance, without the bitterness or disgust for contemporary life that was expressed by many Christian ascetics in their flight from the world. Realism is, after all, an acceptance of the social world and a willingness to work within it. The question is whether realism acquiesces too much in the unlovely realities of the social world, with too little criticism, too little defiance.

**POLITICAL REFLECTIONS**

One part of Augustine's realism was his gradual move toward the coercion of the Donatists, a schismatic movement in North Africa. At first he advised freedom of conscience; then he went along with restraint of their external acts of violence; and finally he justified compulsion, convinced in part by the testimony of ex-Donatists who claimed to be grateful for being jarred loose from their error. Thus Augustine is in a way the father of the Inquisition. His oft-misused dictum, "Love and do as you will," was uttered in this connection. The point is that harsh means
may be necessary in disciplining a child—or a wayward citizen—but that one cannot go wrong if one’s actions are motivated by love. In one sense Augustine anticipates a point made later by others, notably Luther and Tillich, that power and justice may be the long arm of love. It is a point that may be valid in thinking about the role of force in maintaining outward peace within society or in international affairs. But it may also lead to battered children, a militarized foreign policy, or domestic repression. It can certainly lead to attempts to control people’s beliefs.

Those who feel reluctant to go the whole way with Augustine in compelling belief still owe much to his defense of political power. He is often mentioned these days as the channel through whom the doctrine of “just war” entered medieval and modern thought, and for perspective on this topic one should look at a work like Louis J. Swift, *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service* (Michael Glazier, 1983), where the whole spectrum of early Christian thinking is summarized.

Augustine was not a pacifist. But neither did he champion the crusade or holy war, which too easily gets out of control. The just war tradition has often been attacked as a way of justifying nearly any war that people want to undertake. But we have also seen it used, in recent statements by the Catholic bishops and now the United Methodist bishops, as a way of asking probing questions about nuclear war—whether nuclear weapons can ever be appropriate means for waging war, or whether their deterrent effect is legitimate if one does not intend to use them, or use them first. The concept still seems pertinent.

It should be remembered, furthermore, that Augustine’s approval of police or military power was the other side of a firm prohibition: the private Christian is not to use force, even in self-defense against violent attack. Augustine was not as far from pacifism as many suppose. But in giving the state a monopoly on the use of force, he may have made too sharp a division between private and public life, handing over too much power to the generals and the law enforcement officials. At least that would be the conclusion of a sizable segment of opinion in the United States, which champions the “right to bear arms.” It would also be the conclusion of many Third World people, who
see the state’s monopoly on force as an instrument of oppression. Their goal would be popular control over the military and the police, or, failing that, an armed populace rising up against them. Augustine’s questions are still with us.

ECONOMIC ETHICS

If Augustine handed over to the state a monopoly on legislation and its enforcement, the same was not true of property. Property was what belonged to private persons, and Augustine, like other early Christians, took this personal responsibility seriously. Patristic thinking about wealth and poverty is only beginning to be examined. The best survey thus far is Charles Avila’s Ownershijp: Early Christian Teaching (Orbis, 1983). Avila’s work is not dispassionate. He is an angry man, who has seen the effects of private property—and the lack of it among wage laborers and the unemployed—in his native Philippines. He draws out the emphasis that the earth was given to the human race for the use of all, the demand that all wealth be used in stewardship for the benefit of those in need, and the notion of “property” as a diminution, an isolation from the whole through concentration upon one’s own. What Avila fails to discuss is the shadow side of the patristic attitude to property—the possibility of self-deception through almsgiving and the spiritual posture of detachment, enabling people to have their wealth “as though they had it not.” The heritage of Christianity in economic ethics was, and remains, ambiguous.

The most evident economic impact of the Christian ethic was through the monastic movement, which caught up most of the major Christian thinkers of the fourth century—including Augustine, who wrote an influential rule. It was characterized not only by celibacy but by simplicity of life and shared property. As the Roman Empire broke up and gave way to a multiplicity of national kingdoms in Western Europe, the monastic way of life continued and was a major force through the Middle Ages. It represented an attempt to give more adequate institutional expression to Christian commitments, and it took such forms as the “common property” of the Benedictines, based on Acts 4:32, and the “apostolic poverty” of the Franciscans, based on
Matthew 10:9. But the monastic system was not the last such attempt at institutional expression, and disputes over community, economic inequality, and forms of ownership cannot be avoided by the Christian church any more today than in the past.

The issues dealt with by Augustine and by our own generation are often the same. At times the commonality is the result of his direct influence upon Christian life and thought in the West. But even where we are the spiritual children of Augustine, there is some advantage in our being at a distance of 1600 years. He is farther from us than Wesley, or Barth, or Gutiérrez, and we will not be so readily tempted to make his ideas our own. When the hermeneutical circle has a wider orbit, it should stimulate us to serious reflection. Let us hope that this will indeed be the result.
My aim in this article is to offer the reader a reasonably coherent account of some significant recent developments in theological hermeneutics. "Theological hermeneutics" is here taken to mean theological reflection upon the practice of interpreting texts, and more particularly upon the interpretation of Scripture. Theological hermeneutics, as reflection, is thus to be distinguished from interpretation itself, which is the practice upon whose aims, conditions, and criteria it reflects. It can also be distinguished from other sorts of reflection upon interpretation, whether of a more general sort (for example, the various kinds of philosophical hermeneutics) or of a more specific sort (for example, the various exegetical methods used in current biblical scholarship). Though distinct from all these, theological hermeneutics can also be related to them in a number of ways—borrowing from, and criticizing, philosophical hermeneutics; informing, and learning from, developments in exegetical method.

At first glance, recent work in theological hermeneutics appears to be as irreducibly pluralistic as recent theology generally: options abound, and their differences may seem so profound that one may easily despair of sorting them out on any intelligible scheme or of having any basis for making reasoned judgments among them. My own conviction, however, is that beneath the profound differences among some of the more significant lines of development there are still deeper affinities which may draw these lines together into fruitful conversation, if not convergence, in the years just ahead.
concentrating on these lines of development, I will of course neglect some other recent contributions to the field that may well be important in their own right, even though they are on the periphery of this account. That may say more about the limits of my account than about the quality of these contributions. My account will be selective even with respect to works representing the developments under discussion; that is, I will deal with some representative figures and texts, but make no attempt to be exhaustive. Finally, it should be acknowledged that over the last few decades the term “hermeneutics” has come to be used in connection with a great variety of enterprises, within and outside theology, which are beyond the scope of this article. The reader seeking a brief and clear orientation in this broader range of meanings can find it in Van A. Harvey’s article, “Hermeneutics,” in The Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. Mircea Eliade, (Macmillan, 1987), 6:279-287.

BACKGROUND

In order to see what is distinctive about those developments in theological hermeneutics which I am to discuss, it may be helpful to view them against the common background of that long-standing, fairly stable working arrangement between critical historical inquiry and hermeneutical reflection which has characterized liberal theology, broadly conceived. The rise of modern hermeneutics roughly coincided with the rise of historical criticism. Friedrich Schleiermacher’s manuscripts on hermeneutics, developed through several courses of lectures between 1805 and 1833, are commonly taken as the charter documents of modern hermeneutical reflection. (See F.D.E. Schleiermacher, Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman, Scholars Press, 1977.) When Schleiermacher began to lecture on this subject, the available textbooks were mainly compendia of rules for interpretation—some of them stemming from the Christian tradition of biblical interpretation (and particularly from Protestant sources, which insisted that biblical interpretation has its own unique rules in view of the uniqueness of Scripture), and some from the tradition of classical philology, whose relevance for the interpretation of Christian texts had been recently reasserted. Naturally, these rules frequently clashed, and it was increasingly evident that responsible biblical interpretation in the modern age demanded something more. Schleiermacher’s response to this demand was to dig beneath rules and principles, and to try to clarify what it was that the rules and principles existed to
serve: understanding. What is it to understand a text? What must we know about the nature of texts, and of language, and of ourselves as interpreters, and of the phenomenon of understanding as such, in order to do a proper job of interpretation? These are the questions that Schleiermacher saw as fundamental, and that came to be the directing questions of modern hermeneutics.

This hermeneutical agenda, as well as the way it was handled by Schleiermacher and his successors, fitted in very well with the rising critical historical study of the Bible. It shared the latter’s rejection of “sacred hermeneutics”: the Bible is to be studied and interpreted like any other text. (There may be a “special”—or, as later writers would say, a “regional”—hermeneutics appropriate to Scripture in the light of its distinctive character as a religious text with a particular historical context, but any such special treatment would be founded upon more general considerations pertinent to the interpretation of any text whatsoever.) Further, the notion of “understanding” was developed in a way quite congenial to the procedures and results of historical criticism. The aim of interpretation is finally to understand the author of the text: to understand (i.e., to make present to oneself, to reproduce in one’s own consciousness) the unique individuality or personhood or consciousness that has come to expression in the text. The historical-critical search for the original form and original meaning of a biblical text—peeling away the layers of ecclesiastical interpretation, and then penetrating beneath several strata of tradition within the canonical text in order to reach an original utterance—seemed ideally suited to this aim. Hermeneutics shared the historical critic’s concern for identifying and appreciating the Sitz im Leben of a text, since that sheds important light upon both text and author. Not least, the hermeneutical view of texts as expressions of their authors’ consciousness meant that the adherents of this view had little stake in the historical accuracy or literal truth of biblical texts; they could accommodate readily to understandings of biblical language as mythic or poetic, or at any rate as something other than historically descriptive.

In one version or another, this alliance of modern hermeneutics and historical criticism characterized liberal theology for many decades, and is still reasonably vigorous, despite various challenges and adjustments. One of the most significant challenges it has faced, of course, came from Karl Barth. In different ways over the course of a long career, Barth called both partners into question. He criticized the historical critics, calling them to be still more critical, not less: more critical, that is, of their own theological and hermeneutical assumptions.
And he rejected the “totalitarian claim” of general hermeneutics in the Schleiermacherian tradition—not because he wished to return to a sacred hermeneutics which regarded the Bible as having its own unique rules of interpretation, but because he regarded some of the principal elements of that general hermeneutics as mistaken and misleading, no matter what text is being interpreted. (He actually voiced the hope that, from a properly conceived biblical hermeneutics, people might once again learn how to interpret texts of other sorts, and a proper general hermeneutics might eventually be developed.)

Barth particularly rejected the notion that the aim of interpretation is to understand the author; the aim is rather to see what the author wants us to see, to be confronted with what the author wishes to describe to us—which may be something quite different from the author’s own self. Likewise, he opposed the popular theory that sees language (religious language, or language in general) as essentially expressive; as he saw it, language has a great variety of functions, among which depiction is not by any means the least important.

In Barth’s own biblical exegesis, which incidentally implies a great many things not fully explicit in his hermeneutical observations, this depictive use of language is celebrated at length. The biblical writers are seen as pointing away from themselves, toward something that concerns both them and us; furthermore, this “pointing” frequently takes the form of depiction, that is, of a rich and complex description of things and events in their particularity, which invests them with reality. In Barth’s exegesis, attention is drawn once more to the verbal sense of the texts and to the world they depict. Many of Barth’s readers found this turn profoundly unsettling, partly because of its apparent disregard for the results of critical historical scholarship, and partly because it was never very clear what sorts of claims Barth was making concerning the reality of this biblically depicted world. Conservatives who thought at first to have found a powerful advocate in Barth soon discovered that he was not interested in subscribing to the straightforward historical referentiality of the texts; liberals saw his insistence on the depicted world of the text, his persistence in taking the biblical canon as an interpretative context, and his revival of typological exegesis as unfortunate lapses into precritical thinking. One of Barth’s more perceptive readers, the Hebrew Bible scholar Rudolf Smend, may have seen more clearly than most when he described Barth’s effort as postcritical exegesis; but, for many, the problems associated with the endeavor seemed to outweigh its promise.
A second major challenge to the liberal program in hermeneutics came from Rudolf Bultmann. Like Barth’s, this challenge came from within, that is, from one schooled in the liberal tradition. Unlike Barth’s, this one essentially remained within, affecting that tradition in important ways but never abandoning it. Bultmann’s principal hermeneutical writings—collected now in a new translation: Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, selected, edited, and translated by Schubert M. Ogden (Fortress, 1984)—display his continuity with Schleiermacher’s program, as developed by Wilhelm Dilthey and, more radically, by Martin Heidegger. Like Barth, Bultmann rejected the Schleiermacherian view of the aim of understanding as a grasp of the author’s individuality: we understand the biblical text only when we are confronted, through it, with something radically transcendent—indeed, with the Word of God, in whose service the author stands. But unlike Barth, Bultmann sought to preserve this function of the text by deepening, rather than leaving aside, the hermeneutical tradition’s concept of understanding. Understanding (as elements of that tradition had long affirmed) is ultimately self-understanding. Thus, for me to encounter the Word of God through the text is to encounter the truth about my own existence. The text of Scripture functions not as depiction but as address. Its *apparent* depictions, misleading in their objectivity, must be rightly understood (demythologized), so that its existential meaning may be realized.

As with the earlier liberal hermeneutics, Bultmann’s was developed in close conjunction with contemporary historical criticism, which he helped to advance both methodologically and materially. The quest for the earliest, most “kerygmatic” elements of the New Testament material, and an existentialist hermeneutics which emphasized our being called by this proclamation to a decision about our existence, went hand in hand.

Some of Bultmann’s students, particularly Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs, carried the “understanding” tradition still further, with the help of their colleague, the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. In what was for a time known as “the new hermeneutic,” these post-Bultmannian thinkers stressed the “linguisticality” of human existence: language is the medium in which distinctively human life is lived. We are, in a way, the creatures and servants of language more than we are its creators and masters. Interpretation is not so much a matter of our understanding a text, taking stock of its content, and then making a decision about it, as it is a matter of our *being interpreted* by the text, and finding ourselves already affected by it. Understanding
is not the reproduction of a past meaning, but the production of a new one, which is, one might say, at once the meaning of the text and the meaning of the interpreter.

This post-Bultmannian approach has proved attractive both to Protestants, who find it a useful model for thinking of the transformative power of the Word of God (in Scripture and in preaching), and to Roman Catholics, to whom it offers resources for thinking of the way Christian tradition develops through an ongoing process of productive interpretation. For both, it provides an alternative to literalism (whether biblical or traditional) and at the same time permits a way of affirming and accounting for the priority and power of the authoritative text. The "hermeneutics of understanding" founded by Schleiermacher thus lives on; in one or another of its specific forms, it underlies a great deal of contemporary theology and exegesis. It is against this background that some more recent developments can best be understood.

RECENT ALTERNATIVES

Karl Barth's call for a still more critical biblical exegesis than that practiced by his contemporaries might well be echoed by the representatives of several current lines of hermeneutical reflection. One such line is that associated with the theologies of liberation. One of the principal objections to the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer was voiced some time ago by critics such as Jurgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, who saw it as commending a dangerous sort of passivity: Gadamer's rejection of objectivity, his stress upon understanding as a "happening" in which the interpreter is taken up and carried along by the text, seemed to them to give tradition an unwarranted authority and to downplay our capacity and responsibility to exercise critical judgment in our appropriation of tradition. That objection is shared on the theological side by many liberation theologians. For some, what is most needed is a critique of the interpreter's standpoint; others stress the need for a critique of the standpoint of the text. Gustavo Gutierrez, in several essays in a collection entitled The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings, trans. Robert R. Barr (Orbis, 1983), is typical of Latin American liberation theologians in his focus upon the first of these. Interpreters must become aware of those factors in their own socio-political situation that help or hinder their hearing of the message of the Bible. Scripture is always interpreted from a particular location, and that location makes a difference. Merely becoming aware of these factors,
of course, is not sufficient: a new decision about one's relation to one's socio-political circumstances is required. Ultimately, a fully adequate exegesis is possible only "from the underside of history," from the position of, or in solidarity with, those to whom the good news of Scripture is directed.

This general line is also pursued in J. Severino Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (Orbis, 1981), who makes explicit use of the work of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur in outlining an account of the way in which important events generate new meaning when they are remembered later in different situations. The meaning of the Exodus was not exhausted by its meaning for the participants; as it is remembered through Scripture by the oppressed of Latin America, in the light of their own questions, its "surplus of meaning" is activated. Most of Croatto's brief and suggestive book is devoted to broad illustrative exegesis of this point; the hermeneutical substance is far from fully developed. Unfortunately, the English edition is marred by numerous errors and infelicities.

The most penetrating discussion of hermeneutics in liberation theology to date is undoubtedly that of Clodovis Boff, in *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Orbis, 1987). The entire book—a sort of prolegomena to a "theology of the political"—is pertinent, but hermeneutics is taken up explicitly in chapter 8. Boff criticizes such simplistic hermeneutical strategies as the "correspondence of terms" model, in which one tries to draw a parallel between, e.g., Jesus' attitude toward the political structures of his day and the proper Christian attitude toward contemporary political structures. He sketches an alternative, "correspondence of relationships" model, which calls for a much more serious consideration of the relationship of message to context at both ends. But he is even more concerned with what he calls "hermeneutic competency": with the formation, through a sustained discipline of reading Scripture in its entirety in a Christian community, of a sense of its content which enables one to interpret the historical present "according to the scriptures." The development of this "hermeneutical habitus" in the community is far more important than immediate "applications" of Scripture to particular problems.

Recent feminist hermeneutics, while not at all ignoring the need for a thoroughgoing critique of the interpreter's standpoint, has devoted considerable attention to the need for a critique of the standpoint of the text. That is, the question of the authority of Scripture tends to loom larger in feminist hermeneutics than in some other currents of liberation theology. A good representative collection of the range of positions here is *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell
The essays by Margaret A. Farley and Katherine Doob Sakenfeld are especially helpful in identifying the major options being explored. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s contribution makes clear her own rejection of the normative authority of the Bible, her preference for a view of Scripture as “prototype” rather than “archetype,” and the ways in which these decisions inform interpretation. (The hermeneutical position is worked out more extensively in her *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Beacon, 1984, and is both discussed and illustrated in her *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Crossroad, 1983.) Other contributors, e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether and Letty Russell, represent other alternatives on the question of Scripture’s canonicity and correspondingly different hermeneutical approaches. In addition to its importance in its own right, the feminist discussion in hermeneutics has served to make clear the strong connection between hermeneutical questions and questions of theological authority.

That connection was prominently displayed in another way in a work that has given impetus to another line of hermeneutical developments: Hans W. Frei’s *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (Yale Univ. Pr., 1974). Part of Frei’s thesis in that work was that during that period when the course of contemporary biblical scholarship was being set, the prior commitment of many leading interpreters to the authority and truth of Scripture in effect prevented them from exploring some options for its interpretation, and led to our present taken-for-granted standoff between “supernaturalists” who take the Bible as a historically factual record, and liberals who opt for one version or another of the “hermeneutics of understanding.” Frei’s own hermeneutical proposal for taking the narrative character of Scripture seriously has not been systematically worked out, though it has been inferred with more or less success from his writings. Lynn M. Poland, in her *Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critique of Formalist Approaches* (Scholars Pr., 1985), criticizes Frei’s reliance upon a “New Critical,” formalist model of interpretation, and attempts to develop an alternative approach to biblical narrative with the help of Paul Ricoeur. Frei’s colleague George Lindbeck, in *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Westminster, 1984), develops a “cultural-linguistic” approach to interpretation that has broad hermeneutical relevance. Using the resources of cultural anthropology and analytical philosophy, Lindbeck stresses the need to pay close attention to the way in which particular religious affirmations, and the texts in which they are
grounded, are bound up with the lives of their adherents and gain their sense from those connections. A religious tradition is in some ways like a natural language, or like a culture: understanding it requires a kind of immersion in its particularities, in which one learns to take on (at least provisionally) that sense of self, world, etc., that its way of organizing experience yields. Lindbeck's approach is meant as an alternative to the Schleiermacherian hermeneutical tradition (which he characterizes, memorably but too simply, as the "experiential-expressive" model). The book has generated a good deal of discussion, not least because of the implications of Lindbeck's argument for what it might mean to understand biblical texts as the Scripture of a religious community.

My own *The Formation of Christian Understanding: An Essay in Theological Hermeneutics* (Westminster, 1981) shares Lindbeck's stress on the importance of conceptual growth to understanding, and on the corresponding importance of training and practice in the ways of the community for which a given text is Scripture. One theme of the book is that it is important to identify the aims that a given interpretation is to serve, since what it means to understand a text varies a great deal with one's aims. Historical understanding, literary understanding, and theological understanding (to mention three possibilities) are not identical. I attempt to work out an account of the distinctive aims and conditions of what I call the "Christian understanding" of biblical texts— that is, an understanding that is appropriate to their use as Christian Scripture. This involves, among other things, some attention to what it means to regard the Bible as the canon; because while it is clear that the biblical writings, and the earlier traditions embedded in many of them, can be studied simply "as tradition," on a par with other writings which this community of faith has inherited or produced, it is also the case that this collection of writings also has a distinctive function as the criterion by which tradition is to be judged. Appropriately distinguishing and relating these two uses of Scripture is an important task.

Two other writers have shown a particular interest in the hermeneutical relevance of the canon: In a series of books, Brevard S. Childs has developed his own stimulating and controversial approach to canonical exegesis. A compact, yet reasonably thorough, statement of his approach, which also gives the reader an idea of the scope of the critical discussion, can be found in Part One of his *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Fortress, 1985). James A. Sanders's quite different approach, which he calls "canonical criticism" (and of which "canonical hermeneutics" is a component), is handily presented in his
Before the publication of Childs's more recent work, it was relatively simple to state the main difference between these two: Childs is more concerned with understanding the final (canonical) form of the text, taking it as theologically normative; while Sanders is more concerned with understanding the "canonical process," the dynamic of tradition through which the canon has been formed and reformed in a "monotheizing" dialectic of affirmation and critique. That characterization may have to be qualified now, inasmuch as Childs also declares an interest in the "canonical shaping" of the text, that is, in the process through which the text attained its canonical form, and takes that to be relevant to a determination of its canonical significance. There is no question, however, that the final form has a normative force for Childs (for reasons not yet entirely clear) that it does not for Sanders. In any event, both projects are still underway, and the intentions and results of both may find a place in the theological hermeneutics of the future.

It may be sanguine to hope that not only these, but also such other quite distinct projects as have been reviewed here, might be ingredients in some slowly emerging synthesis in which—not without a great deal of testing and winnowing—the valid claims and substantial values of each are honored and realized; but it is by some such hope that a genuinely fruitful conversation is nourished. The point of theological hermeneutics, after all, is a practical one. It is to equip us for the task of interpreting faithfully the word which we have received, and thus for that vocation of bearing witness to the word which is the general ministry of all Christians. If that is indeed our common vocation, then it behooves us in all our diversity to learn all that we can from each other about that task of interpretation, and to assist each other toward the responsible exercise of the ministry we share.
In their book, *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Scholars Pr., 1985), Joseph E. Hough, Jr., and John B. Cobb, Jr., offer us a proposal "for revising of theological curricula" (vii), but, as the title suggests, this is done in terms of defining what "Christian identity" should be and has been. Their theme is that, as the perception of what Christian identity means has changed, the curriculum of theological education has changed correspondingly. However, explicitly underlying their historical review is their premise that today’s setting, both for Christian identity and theological education, should be "sensitive to the global context of our work" (viii). Of course, in some sense Christianity since it beginning has been internationally oriented, due to its strong missionary impulse. However, as we shall see, Hough and Cobb have certain special meanings for "global context" which color both their view of what "Christianity" means and what theological education should be like. Except for those with fixed dogmatic prescriptions, there is of course no problem with new definitions, except that they need a critical evaluation, which I shall try to offer.

They begin with the premise that there is today “widespread discontent with the schools providing the education” (1), and they propose to provide a “theological unity of all theological studies.” Early on they state their own premise: “The global crisis in which we live must be the context of Christian understanding today” (4). In a certain sense, Christianity (and perhaps every religion) addresses a crisis, but the issue presented is: is this internal or external primarily, and is it significantly altered today so that Christianity must be changed to reflect it? Then they state the nature of the crisis as they see it: “Theologie must draw believers into the indivisible salvation of people and societies suffering from hunger, oppression, and despair.”

Frederick Sontag is a professor in the department of philosophy at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif.
as a result of the demonic political, economic and social forces now at work.” Having thus begun, Hough and Cobb proceed to a historical review of the ways “Christianity” has been conceived in our (primarily Protestant) past.

I will omit a review of the account of the various ways the image of Christianity has been defined and the resultant style of theological education, since this seems to me relatively factual, clearly stated, and not particularly controversial. What is controversial, and therefore important to examine carefully, are the assumptions they outline as undergirding today’s Christianity and thus how ministerial education should be undertaken. The Builder, the Master, the Pastoral Director, the Manager: these are some of the types our authors outline as having dominated pastoral roles and set theological education. They suggest the need for “clarification of Christian identity as the basis for Christian practice” (18). This is innocent enough, but is there some underlying, unspoken premise that these rules change and are determined by some historical dialectic thus determining what must be in our day?

Hough and Cobb tell us they have chosen to take “the world-historical approach” (20), since placing the church in this context is placing it “in the context of God’s creative and redemptive activity.” But is that true, or is it even our best option today? It leads our authors, for instance, to “call on Christians to give up Christocentrism” (30), a really rather amazing claim when one considers it. A new Christian identity will result, they say, which surely would be true, but is such demanded by our day or even desirable? They argue for the necessity of change because in traditional Christianity they see as an obstacle to the use of violent revolutions as the means to liberate people (39). And using Martin Luther King, Jr.’s preaching of non-violence as an example, that certainly seems to have been true. But then we have to ask whether the move to authorize violent revolutions ought to be or must be the direction in which Christianity should move. To clarify this important issue, let us compare the Hough-Cobb thesis to an earlier book predicting vast cultural change.

In 1970, Charles A. Reich wrote a book called The Greening of America. It spoke to the mood of the day and was instantly heralded as announcing a coming decisive change in the cultural ethos of America. I was fortunate in being asked to review a pre-publication copy and so had a chance to consider the thesis of the book before it became popularly acclaimed as a sign of impending change in American life. Yet something different actually happened; America was not “greened” as predicted. If there were signs of profound change in the
air at that time—and there were—something transpired to prevent these from becoming a wave that would sweep away the past. Why did this predicted "greening" not take place and what happened to break Reich's thesis and stop the decisive change? If we can answer this question, it may help us evaluate the future of the Hough-Cobb proposals.

Let us consider the "greening of the seminary," the offering of a program for profound change in seminary education which Hough and Cobb have given us. With *The Greening of America* in mind, I want to ask what we might learn from the earlier example that might indicate what forces are at work which could prevent this proposed change, this greening of seminary education, whether we accept or reject it, from taking place.

Hough and Cobb, as we said, state their initial thesis: that we must "be sensitive to the global context of our work" (viii). In today's ethos, this sounds innocent enough. But is it as innocent and obvious as it seems? We shall see. That is, if the greening of theological education depends on each of us accepting that premise, will that move prove debatable and decisive and thus an obstacle to change, rather than a means to it? In this regard we must ask the more general question whether any proposal for change, unless it can be imposed by authoritarian means, which the Marxist knows must be used, becomes itself not a means to unity but instead an item of contention and further divisiveness. My conclusion will be that, unfortunately for it, this is likely to be the case with Hough and Cobb's proposal.

"The global crisis in which we live must be the context of Christian understanding today," Hough and Cobb tell us (4). That statement is not so innocent and obvious. What is the crisis, and do we agree that it has changed the context for the Christian message? Hough and Cobb treat this primarily in terms of nuclear warfare and economic poverty. Few would disagree that some aspects of the human situation have changed, but should that really alter the form taken by theological education, or, if we all allow it to do so, are we chasing the winds of fashion only to be forced to reverse our course when fashions change? Does Christianity, or should Christianity, change as its context changes?

It would be hard to imagine a thesis more full of hidden premises than this: "Theologians must draw believers into the service of the indivisible salvation of people and societies suffering from hunger, oppression and despair as the result of the demonic political, economic and social forces now at work" (4). As philosophers know, our most important terms are also those we most disagree about and thus are
prime sources of contention. Rather than simply accepting this premise as the basis on which to revive theological education, it will itself become an item of contention. Further, as we know from the example of the disappearance of The Greening of America, trends popular on the horizon of a time do not always grow and dominate but instead can recede and give way to something quite unlike that trend.

Granted that some in "liberal" theological circles would accept such a premise, is it likely to meet wide agreement, particularly in the churches of this country—which the authors agree seminaries must serve? It was said of Reich's The Greening of America that he mistook the atmosphere in the Yale dining halls for the coming mood of the whole nation. So our decisive question for Hough and Cobb is: Are the premises you assume really those of any majority in the pew? And if not, and if you realize this, what likelihood is there that a change in seminary curriculum is likely to flow out to the churches any more than the ebullient mood of the Yale dining halls swept out to alter the culture of the whole country? Seminaries should not simply reflect but rather attempt to remain free from cultural forms.

In tracing the history of seminary education, Hough and Cobb recognize that in one era "the fundamental preparation for the ministry was a classical education" (7). In projecting their change of focus toward "world problems and social change," the central issue becomes liberal arts education versus the specifics of contemporary problems. Classical education assumed it would outlast fads and thus provide a basis for later adaptation to any new problem. Thus, in shifting to present issues as the center of education, two problems arise: (1) We risk an outmoding of theological education as fashions shift; (2) If any student or the seminary does not agree with the authors' proposal, we end by arguing over education rather than educating. Different eras do demand different skills. As an example, Hough and Cobb point to the "Builder" age of the past. But if we move to greater emphasis on the social sciences, as they argue (14), we may be following an educational fad after its time has already passed. More fundamentally, there will never be a single image of the minister in any era that we can consciously educate for. We should keep the curriculum classical and let a variety of individual interests develop from it. Documenting the shifts in popular images of the minister, as Hough and Cobb do, we can in fact argue that we should not shift education to follow fashion, but should shape it to fit cultural change, as the authors propose.
What are “the real needs of the church” (18), and can we shape a curriculum to meet these? If, as Hough and Cobb suggest, “the clarification of Christian identity” must be the basis for Christian practice, history would surely indicate that this locks us into a theological debate of endless proportions, rather than to accept one definition and then get on to meet these needs by an agreed-upon educational program. For instance, it will be difficult for churches to prepare congregations to accept “a world-historical approach” (20) based on an awareness of the current global situation. The authors seem to think that to do so would place us in the context of God’s creative and redemptive activity. But in the end we and others will not agree that this is the stage of God’s primary activity.

Has God “always and everywhere been creatively and redemptively present and working” (20)? That is a nineteenth-century thesis, but we do not all see God present in history’s course. More important, is not just the church, as Hough and Cobb argue, “the community that keeps alive the memory of Jesus” (25)? Many think God’s activity is more than simply preserving a memory. To treat the Christian message as preserving a memory is to tone down God’s work considerably, which will prejudice theological education rather than lead to agreement. Perhaps Christians should “give up Christocentrism”? No thesis could be more controversial.

Hough and Cobb oppose the interest in spirituality as reinforcing “pervasive individualism” (36). But individual spirituality is likely to remain the core of the majority religious interest. The issue is: We cannot really make the church social rather than individual by basing seminary education on a social theory. True, as the authors point out, the Christian emphasis on love of enemies discourages revolutionary fervor, but that does not simply mean that Christianity should become a doctrine of social revolution. That fact does not in itself argue for changing the Christian image, as Hough and Cobb advocate. Revolutions are not “the only path to liberation” (39). To accept that premise involves amazing assumptions concerning the meaning of “liberation.”

Has “God’s activity . . . become manifest in the world here and now” (55)? Perhaps that is not really true and God’s activity is instead projected toward a final restructuring of the world and is little evidenced now, except perhaps spiritually. God may be the “God for the poor,” and the people of God be the people for the poor (89), but we have to ask: who are the poor—the poor in spirit or the economically poor? There may be a promise of liberation directed to the powerless (60), but perhaps that liberation will not come by the
social-political revolution of economic systems, but as God's later action. Few issues could be more important or less agreed upon. Is the proposed new seminary greening to be one of social activism?

The authors' view, which condemns parochialism, ironically may simply invoke a new parochialism, the assumption of its agreed righteousness. Can Hough and Cobb envision a different view of Christianity that is as "right" as theirs? If not, their program will divide more than unite the church. New proposals for unity in practice often bring disunity. "The church" as it exists in divided Protestant circles may not really be a good candidate to spearhead the religious-social redirection these authors envisage. Their vision of being for the poor may "work great joy and expectation" (61), or it may merely create greater division.

They say "the possibilities of the future [are] . . . already present" (72). But they may only exist at present as God's promise for the future, requiring faith precisely because this cannot yet be seen. If "the greening of the church" Hough and Cobb envisage does not materialize, the disappointment may be greater than the excitement of projecting the ideal vision, like the Messiah's coming, once more delayed. The issue is this: the function of the church may not be really just to preserve "the memory of Jesus" (77). The church should proclaim God's resurrection activity in the future, transforming the world and raising the dead by his decisive power—at the hour of his choice, not ours.

One example of how potential controversy may be generated is the authors' holding up the World Council of Churches as model (104). As many would argue, that council's activity is not agreed upon by all but is the subject of considerable controversy among the churches. Another example of a source of controversy is the way that Hough and Cobb propose to bring about the "abolition of disciplinary boundaries" in seminary education (107). This now old pedagogical suggestion does not seem very obvious. For instance, one proposal to radicalize the seminary is to merge theology and ethics, which, to say the least, seems to run against the conservative and evangelical turn of Christian churches. And the greatest church and seminary growth is not to be found today among "liberal" seminaries. Hough and Cobb must ask themselves if some of the recent loss in church membership in old-line denominations is not due precisely to the kind of view of "Christian self-awareness" they propose.

In summary, we return to the lesson of "the greening of America." Reich's vision was an appealing one of a new dawn in America. But the forces operative outside Yale's ivy-covered walls conspired to make
Reich's vision inoperable. Hough and Cobb must look at the forces working in American religious life at this time and ask if the powers in "the real religious world" do not make it unlikely that their vision will become operable. To project a program which the powerful forces in religious life either reject, or at least render controversial, is to doom their proposal to following *The Greening of America* into a noble ineffectiveness.
Coming in QR
WINTER 1987

Focus on the Ministry and Business Ethics
Henry Clark, Consulting Editor

Transnational Corporations, Global Development, and the Church
Norman J. Faramelli

The Political Economy, Moral Leadership, and Public Policy
Arthur I. Blaustein

Bureaucracy and Moral Casuistry: A Sociological Perspective
Robert Jackall

Americanizing Catholic Social Teaching
Drew Christiansen, S. J.

Corporate Management and Social Issues
Douglas Wallace

Homiletical Resources for the Season after Epiphany
Janice Riggle Huie

Quarterly Review is indexed with abstracts in Religion Index One: Periodicals, American Theological Library Association, Chicago, available online through BRS (Bibliographic Retrieval Services), Latham, New York, and DIALOG, Palo Alto, California.

Issues of Quarterly Review are available on Microfilm and microfiche. For those desiring this service, order from University Microfilms International
300 North Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106