CONTENTS

COMMENCEMENT: FAREWELL TO THE GRADUATES
The Reverends Eldad and Medad  M. Craig Barnes

FALL OPENING COMMUNION
The Power of a Word  M. Craig Barnes

SPRING OPENING COMMUNION
Losing the Dream of Nazareth  Sonia E. Waters

LECTURES

Resurrection and Bodies  Dale C. Allison Jr.
Performing Prosperity, Promoting Pride!  Jonathan L. Walton
Homiletical Implications of Barth’s Doctrine of Election  William H. Willimon
Overcoming Justice Fatigue  Teresa Fry Brown
The Point of Exegesis is Exegeting Life  Luke Timothy Johnson
Love in Everything: A Brief Primer to Julian of Norwich  Amy Laura Hall
The Task of the Korean Church for Peace in the Time of Globalization: Seeking Ecumenical Social Ethics in the Context of Northeast Asia  Sungbihn Yim
Knowing in the Dark: Sin, Race, and the Quest for Salvation  Sarah Coakley
COMMENCEMENT: FAREWELL TO THE GRADUATES
The Reverends Eldad and Medad
M. Craig Barnes 1

FALL OPENING COMMUNION
The Power of a Word
M. Craig Barnes 4

SPRING OPENING COMMUNION
Losing the Dream of Nazareth
Sonia E. Waters 7

LECTURES
Resurrection and Bodies
Dale C. Allison Jr. 11

Performing Prosperity, Promoting Pride!
Jonathan L. Walton 36

Homiletical Implications of Barth’s Doctrine of Election
William H. Willimon 47

Overcoming Justice Fatigue
Teresa Fry Brown 59

The Point of Exegesis is Exegeting Life
Luke Timothy Johnson 72

Love in Everything: A Brief Primer to Julian of Norwich
Amy Laura Hall 83

The Task of the Korean Church for Peace in the Time of Globalization:
Seeking Ecumenical Social Ethics in the Context of Northeast Asia
Sungbihn Yim 96

Knowing in the Dark: Sin, Race, and the Quest for Salvation
Sarah Coakley 108
The Reverends Eldad and Medad
(Numbers 11:26–30)

M. Craig Barnes

President M. Craig Barnes delivered this farewell to the graduates at the Seminary Commencement service in the Princeton University Chapel on May 23, 2015.

When the Hebrews left Egypt to begin their difficult journey through the desert to the Promised Land, they brought with them a group of people that the Bible calls “the rabble.” The rabble were not true believers in this journey, or in the God who called them to it. The rabble’s toleration for discomfort was low, and their capacity for complaint was high.

Every ministry has a member of the rabble in it. They don’t put them on the search committee, but they are there—waiting for you.

In Numbers 11:4 we are told, “The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.’”

There are many ways in which manna was a metaphor for how God takes care of people. Everyone has to get their own portion because there is no group plan for the spiritual life. Everyone has to get it every day. You cannot store up faith. And the manna wasn’t much. It was just enough to help you take the next daily step of faith. But the best insights into manna come from its name which is translated, “What is it?”

Every morning the parents would go out and collect their bowl of “What Is It?” I am sure they prepared it as creatively as they could, but there was no “What Is it Helper” in those days. So the parents would place the manna on the table and their teenagers would say, “What is it?” And the parents would say “Yes.”

This means that everyday the people nurtured their faith by taking in the great question: “What is it, O God? What is it that is happening? What is it that you are asking of us? What is it that we are doing out here on the hard, desert journey?”

This question kept being asked for centuries, up to the sixth chapter of John when Jesus Christ revealed that he was the Bread of Heaven. This means that the answer to the old question, “What is it, God,” is actually another question. Only for Christians it is a more particular question—“What is it that Jesus is doing?”

Since the whole purpose of being on life’s journey is to learn faith, you don’t get a lot of answers. Mostly, you get better questions. And a choice still to believe in spite of those questions, which is how faith is formed.
But the rabble undermine our faith by getting us to stop asking “What is it that Jesus is doing?” and to focus on that terrible lament—“If only.” “If only we had meat. If only we were still back in Egypt. If only we didn’t have to keep settling for questions. If only we could have some certain answers…”

How many times are we also tempted to begin a sentence that begins with “If only?” Sometimes we use it because we are focused on the future. “If only I could get a job. If only I could find someone special in my life. If only, if only…then I would be okay.” Sometimes we use the phrase because we are focused on the past. “If only I had gone to veterinary school instead of seminary. Animals are so much easier to help. If only I had made better choices when I could. Now the good choices are all over, and all that is left are consequences.”

Speaking these “If only” words preoccupies you with the past or the future. Thus, the words “If only” are always a judgment upon the present day, which is the only day you have. And the only place manna is found. When the present tense disappears so does the manna. The mysterious, life-giving, blessed grace of God only comes a day at a time. Without the ability to ask what Jesus is doing today we are always anxious, and never joyful.

You see, the most dangerous rabble are not the complaining people around us, but the rabble that lives within each of our own hearts. You have to discipline your heart because there are too many voices coming from within it. This is why I have never understood that advice that says, “Just trust your heart.” If your heart is like mine, most days there’s a bad committee meeting going on in there. The meeting is filled with so many conflicting agendas. Everybody in the heart is trying to hijack the meeting. The whole thing goes into the ditch in a hurry. You have to make choices about what you are going to do with your heart today, or the rabble of anxiety will overwhelm you. There’s nothing that those whom you will be leading in ministry need more from you than your own spiritual health, your own ability to know how to find the manna everyday.

Up to this point in the journey out of slavery, Moses has been the model of patient leadership. When the people complained that Pharaoh was going to kill them, Moses stretched out his staff to open the waters of the Red Sea. When they complained about the lack of water, he found it in the desert. When they complained about the lack of food, he pointed to the manna. When they complained that he was gone too long on Sinai and turned to the idol of a golden calf, God told Moses he wanted to consume the people and then get Moses a new congregation. I would have been tempted to take this deal because these folks were complainers. But in perhaps his finest moment of leadership, Moses interceded on behalf of the people and talked God out of burning them away. In the first three verses of our text today the people complained again. This time God couldn’t resist sending down a little consuming fire and would have burned up all of them if Moses
hadn’t interceded again. But when the rabble got everyone to gripe about the manna thing, this time Moses snapped. In verse 11, Moses asks God, “Why have you treated your servant so badly, that you lay the burden of this people on me?” In verse 12, he asks, “Am I their mother?” In verse 13, he asks, “Where am I supposed to find meat for all these people?” In verse 14, he says, “I am not able to carry this people.” In verse 15, he says, “If this is the way you are going to treat me, just kill me now.” This is a leader who has gone over the edge and has finally flamed out trying to save the people.

God responds to his burned-out leader by saying, “I’ll take care of the meat thing. But right now I’m more worried about you.” Then God places some of the spirit on the elders to help Moses bear the burden of the people. Seventy of the elders came to the Tabernacle to receive the spirit. Then they started to prophesy.

For some reason two men, Eldad and Medad, missed the ordination service. They stayed behind in the camp. But the Spirit found them anyway, and so they started to prophesy as well. When Joshua heard of this, he was furious and demanded that Moses make them stop. “They did not follow the rules—they didn’t even go to seminary! There they are out in the camp, not even in the place of worship. There’s nothing in the Book of Order about this!” But Moses said, “No, would that all the Lord’s people were prophets.”

The goal of the church is not to organize all of the prophets of the Holy Spirit. The goal is to free everyone to speak God’s word in their part of the camp.

When you’re in leadership it is tempting to think your job is to get the people to the Promised Land, and you are on your own. But you are never on your own. There is always a Medad and Eldad. There is always prophecy coming up from another part of the camp. They are not the Rabble. They may not play by the rules, but they are on Team Holy Spirit. And your job is to say, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets.”

Thinking that leadership means it’s your sole responsibility to get people to the Promised Land is just another “If only” phrase that places your calling in the future. It’s God’s job to get your people, your students, your family, to the Promised Land. Your job is to bear their burdens in your heart today. We prefer just the opposite: Let God love the people, and we’ll just move them along. But your calling is to love even the rabble, today.

Here is the most frightening part of this text—God honors our choices. As Moses eventually discovered, if you keep asking God to get the people to the Promised Land without you, God will. Moses wasn’t with them when they finally crossed the Jordan River. And it didn’t make him as happy as he thought it would. Be careful with the rabble of your own heart.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.
The church was packed for the funeral of Linda Nercessian. She died at the age of forty after a valiant battle against breast cancer. I sat in the preacher’s chair looking at the first pew where I saw her husband Ray, her ten-year-old son George, her eight-year-old daughter Lulu, and both of her parents. We fought our way through the liturgy, defending our hearts against the grief.

I remember raising my eyebrow when we said the twenty-third Psalm. As we recited the line “I shall not want,” I wondered if this was correct. We were all in want of Linda. The church was filled with her friends, her family, brothers and sisters in Christ, who had worked beside her in the church most of her life.

Linda’s friends offered the first two eulogies. They said the kinds of things that we were expecting them to say—they talked about how successful she was in work, as well as at home, as wife and as mother and as a leader of the church. They expressed how much we would miss her.

But it was the third eulogy for which we were not prepared. It was given by her ten-year-old son George. I can still see him standing before the microphone with his weeping father standing behind him. George reached into his front pocket and pulled out a sheet of loose-leaf paper, and he began to read:

“Thank you all for being here today to wish my mother well on her way to heaven. I wanted you to know a couple of things that Lulu and I are going to miss about Mommy. In spite of the fact that she worked, she was somehow home when we would get there after school, and we would run into her arms and get a big hug. And we’re going to miss that. And at the end of the night we would race up the stairs and jump into one of our beds and have tickling contests, and then she would read us a story, and we’re going to miss that too.”

Then he folded up his loose-leaf piece of paper, stuffed it back in his front pocket and sat down.

The tenor soloist began to sing “Jesus, Lover of My Soul, let me to thy bosom fly.” As I remained in the preacher’s seat looking out over the congregation, I was amazed at how powerful music is to pierce through every wall we had built to defend around our hearts. “Safely to thy Haven guide,” he sang. “Oh receive me to my rest at last.”

Now it was my turn to speak. Only I couldn’t speak. And no one else was volunteering
to go to the microphone. So we just sat there in the silence for quite a while. Eventually I did have to walk to the pulpit because that was my job. I was the one who was supposed to proclaim a holy word, a word that could break in to the silence. But what I remember most of all about that funeral is the power of this silence.

We have seen the silence before. We all know it. It is the same kind of silence that you will find in cemeteries or in nursing homes late at night—one of the quietest places I've ever found. It is the silence that fills the house when the child has a dangerously high fever. Or when someone comes home and finds a note on the dresser that says I have left because I never loved you. It's the same kind of silence that you find when you discover the Christmas stocking of somebody who recently died. The silence that you feel when you hang up the phone and the doctor says the lab report has come in and it's not good.

To be clear, this silence is not the welcome respite from our noisy lives. This is the threatening silence, the one that rips away all of our cheap words, the one that dares us to say anything at all.

It's the silence born of news that stops our heart. A friend confides in you, “I had to tell someone about this. My brother committed suicide last weekend.” And you stammer, “I’m so sorry, I don’t know what to say.” In this moment, this is the only thing to say. You learned by now not to say, “but you have other siblings.” Or, “I knew somebody else who committed suicide.” These words would all be completely inane.

But about this I’m clear: there are no other human words that are really any better. No human words can adequately fill the silence. This is why we come to church to have funerals. It’s why people will call their pastor in the middle of the night and ask her to rush to the emergency room. That’s why when we finish reading the newspaper, we put our face in our hands, saying “My God we’re still shooting unarmed black men.” What we are all saying, is, “what about it, God? What about you? Do you have a word that can stand up to this threatening silence?”

The proclamation of the Gospel is absolutely yes. Yes, there is a word. But the word we need cannot be merely words on a piece of paper. This has to be the Word that was with God and was God, the Word from the beginning. The Word that had the ability to look out over the chaos and say *let there be*, sparking beauty and light. This has to be a Word that can enter in to the mess of our lives and take it on with us.

What Peter proclaims in our text today is “I know that Word.” Peter says, “I was with them on the Mount of Transfiguration when Heaven was so excited that we were surrounded by the holiness and heard heaven proclaim, this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am pleased.” This language echoes those magnificent words from Jesus’ baptism when he walked down into the waters, an image that is a spectacular metaphor of the incarnation, signifying Jesus walking down into the mess of human life. And God proclaims, *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am so pleased.*

This is what God is saying about you. Jesus identifies with us in his baptism in a way
that is so total and complete that heaven proclaims to each of us: you’re the beloved daughter, you’re the beloved son, with whom God is so pleased. Not because you’ve finally figured out how to get your life right or because you’ve finally figured out how to climb out of the mess yourself. But because God has climbed down into it with us.

God is pleased because you were lost and now you’ve been found. Peter reminds us to pay attention to this Word. “I was there. I saw it,” he affirms, and it will appear to you like the morning star that rises in your hearts. The morning star is the first star that pierces the darkness, signaling the coming of dawn.

The morning star that rises in your heart is the star that all humanity is yearning to see as we continue to bump our way through the dark. And that yearning is what brings us to this seminary at the start of another year. Frankly, the only reason for being here is to attend to that yearning for the morning star.

You may think you’ve come here primarily to be trained to be a pastor or a scholar. You may think you are here to be trained for public service. Or maybe you’ve come here to try to figure out why you’re here. All of those reasons are okay, but you have to know they are not the primary mission of this place. We are all here to attend to the yearning for the morning star. We’re all here to devote ourselves to the only Word we know that can fill the silence.

This is why we call you to study the text so carefully, why we want you to learn it even in the original languages. This is why we invite you to read the best and finest theological minds we know. This is why we call you to know the Christian tradition, our heritage. This is why we invite you to understand through practical theology what it means to handle the Word rightly.

All of this is not just a way of knowing about the Word. It would be the height of tragedies if when you graduate and I hand you your degree, you leave here thinking, “well, I know about the Word.” We want you to know the Word. Everything we do here is about an encounter with this one holy Word that can fill the silence, this Word for which our souls yearn, this Word for which we thirst, that a taste of this grace will persevere on our souls.

That’s why we’re here. That’s the true function of the study of theology: to encounter the Word, to see the morning star that pierces the darkness, to know how to proclaim the Word that can fill any silence that dares threaten us. And the Word’s name is the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.
Losing the Dream of Nazareth
(Mark 6:1–13)

Sonia E. Waters

Dr. Sonia E. Waters is Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. She delivered this sermon in Miller Chapel on January 27, 2015, at the opening communion service for the spring semester.

In the name of the one God: our Mother and Father, Savior and Sanctifier.

Welcome to your spring semester! I don’t know how your trip home for the January term was, but for Jesus, it didn’t seem to work out exactly as he had planned. Maybe you know how he felt.

The sixth chapter of Mark should have been a homecoming, but it led to a loss instead. And if Jesus is fully human and fully divine, I like to imagine that he must reckon with this loss.

He had some choices to make. And it is significant that he sends out his disciples now, after his failure in Nazareth, even though he had already commissioned them as his “preaching team.” But it’s only now, several chapters after that commissioning, that Jesus says, “Go out—without signs of security or provision—to be welcomed where they welcome you. If they reject you, shake off the dust as if you were standing on Gentile land.” So we assume that Jesus, so newly rejected himself, also had to shake off the dust of Nazareth and give up his home.

In pastoral care we know that every significant loss has a back-story, so maybe we should start at the beginning. In the Gospel of Mark, the first thing Jesus does is to leave Nazareth. He leaves his home to go and be baptized by John. He then hears those wonderful words from above, “you are my Son, you are Beloved.” Maybe he would have returned to Nazareth after that. But instead, God kicks him out into the desert to be tempted for forty days: the number that signifies a transition, a change.

After his trip to the desert, he still doesn’t go home to Nazareth. Instead, he settles in Capernaum with his disciples in tow. And it’s there in the synagogue that Jesus’ ministry first begins in earnest. Mark tells us in chapter 1, verse 21, “when the Sabbath came Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach” (NRSV). He teaches as one with authority, and they are amazed. He casts out an unclean spirit, and they are amazed again! The old guys in the synagogue turn to each other and ask, “What is this? A new teaching! And with authority!” And his fame quickly spreads abroad.

This first success in the synagogue ignites his ministry. Jesus can hardly go to Nazareth now, because by the evening, the whole town gathers at his door. By the end of chapter
1, they’re coming at him from all directions. Crowds are pressing upon him. Those with diseases are pushing their bodies forward to touch him.

By chapter 3, he appoints the twelve disciples to be his preaching and deliverance team. But he does not send them out immediately. By verse 20, he is back in the house, crowded with people’s needs.

And while he has still not returned to Nazareth, by now Nazareth has heard about him. His family wants to seize him, because they think he’s crazy. The religious authorities want to discredit him, saying he is possessed. And these responses are brought together in Mark, conflating family and religious loyalties—these two sources of belonging and identity.

His mother and brothers will not even come inside. They try to send someone in to bring him to them. But Jesus refuses. Instead he says to those pressing upon him in the house, “you are my family now, if you do the will of God.”

Now, we might think Jesus sounds bold or profound here. But really, this is a ridiculous thing to say. Try it out on your own family. See how well it works. But Jesus doesn’t seem to care—or at least Mark doesn’t tell us how Jesus feels about it.

Instead, what we see is how the distance between Jesus and his family and the religious establishment is contrasted to the nearness between Jesus and all the sick, demonic, broken people on the outside who come in towards him, who crowd around him, who push to get close to him.

What we see is the growing conflict, the growing choice between his calling to this need and the pressures and expectations of the places he once belonged.

Maybe you know something about these kinds of choices.

Jesus does not let his family seize him, forcibly stop him, arrest his movement forwards. Instead he continues teaching, delivering, and healing with the crowds gathering around him.

So why does he return home in chapter 6? By now Jesus is a rock star. Who needs any other family? This issue should be over now. Why does Jesus go home again? It’s not like the Gospel of Mark to belabor a point. In Mark, the end is near—cut your ties. But for some reason we are now at chapter 6, and Jesus decides to go home and try again.

He makes his triumphant return to his hometown, and the story parallels his first success in Capernaum. Again Mark says “When the Sabbath day came, he began to teach in the synagogue” and again many who heard him were amazed at his teaching. The old guys in the synagogue first turn to each other and say, “Where did he get all this? Look at this wisdom. Look at the miracles.” And then, surprisingly, they turn against him. “Wait a minute, who do you think you are? We know who you really are. We know your family.”

They are offended, scandalized by Jesus. He begins the day in his hometown as the golden child. But by the end, he’s just another idiot prophet.

Here again, family and religious loyalties are brought together. These are the places of
belonging. These are the contexts of our identity.

The conflicted separation that began all the way back in chapter 3, today finally breaks the dream that Jesus might belong somewhere. He will still be called Jesus of Nazareth at certain meaningful times in the future: when Peter betrays him; when the angels ask the women at the empty tomb if they are looking for him. But we will know that Nazareth signifies a displacement for Jesus, a loss, where there should have been belonging.

Everyone who is called by God, at some point faces the dream of Nazareth: the dream that we will find belonging and identity. It’s partly about having to grieve the fact that our families think we are crazy, that we must negotiate a growing rift of experience between ourselves and those we love from this point onwards.

But the dream of Nazareth also tell us that we will get a triumphant return home someday. It tells us that for all our work we will at least receive admiration and authority. We will become established. We will be embraced by a new church family. We will be crowded out by people longing to take part in our ministries. We will be honored by presbyteries and conferences, publishing companies, and Christian magazines.

Everyone has some version of this dream. (Mine currently has a neon sign above it that says “publish or perish.”) Because we are indeed fully human. And we want do well for our Savior. After all, we have the call. And we have those first successes in ministry that confirm our gifts and talents. We are ignited—we are on fire for Jesus.

But then, as our lives enter fully into the turning of this transition, we start encountering the losses. We are worn down by the pressures of so many people who claim power over our identities. We start feeling displaced. Successes don’t establish us without that slippage, that risk of rejection at their base.

And over time we feel more pressure to conform. To be admired. To pass. To silence the voice of the Spirit. To be the golden child—not the idiot prophet. To perform. And then comes the point when we’ve given over our calling into the hands of the old guys in the synagogue, seized still by our desire to belong.

And when that happens we have some choices to make. The growing choice between our calling to the world’s needs and the arresting expectations of the places we once belonged. Will our call turn us ever more inward into our own needs? Or will it send us further out?

The parallel between Capernaum and Nazareth sets us up to imagine Jesus’ expectations: he would be a success; his authority would be recognized. By chapter 6, he’s golden.

But Jesus fails. He is rejected. He loses Nazareth.

Yet by being homeless, by refusing the seizure of belonging, Jesus goes even further abroad. He expands his healing and deliverance outwards. It begins a new phase of Jesus’ ministry, as the twelve are called into action. More sick, more demonic, more broken people on the outside meet Jesus. More teaching, more deliverance, more healing for
those who long to touch his saving love. This ministry arises from the center of his loss. So this second rejection also ignites his ministry, sending Jesus and the disciples out ever further into the world.

In pastoral care we know that every significant loss also has a future story. And that future takes the shape of the choices that we make.

We begin here at seminary to face that tension between establishment ideas of success and God's ideas of service. And when we begin to slip on our secure identities, the question is, what will arise from the center of your losses?

If the dream of Nazareth should claim our loyalties, we might forget that today, crowded outside our doors, remain the same sick and broken bodies pushing forward for the healing touch of Jesus. We might forget that today the demonic remains in racialized violence in our streets and rape in our colleges and abuse in our homes. Yes, we still know something today about the longing for deliverance.

We might forget that God does not care if we are golden children, because at the end of the day we are no different than those we are called to serve, all of us a family bound by grace and salvation, bound by the one who taught us that the loss is the ignition to our calling.

So at the end of the day, who do you think you are?

Well I'll tell you. You are the beloved child of a displaced savior. Every square inch of you is broken and precious to the One who met you by the rivers of your baptism and has kicked you around from place to place ever since.

This One did not take away your pain and did not stop you from failing, but is a Savior whose character is to pour out loss and turn it into redemption, a Savior who lost everything on the cross to bring healing to this demonic world.

This is the Savior who calls us—broken as we are—into service. My sisters and brothers, there are enough golden children. In a world of sickness and demonic oppression, violence and heartache, the Church sure could use some idiot prophets.
Resurrection and Bodies

Dale C. Allison Jr.

Dr. Dale C. Allison Jr. delivered the Stone Lectures on October 6–9, 2014. The following lecture was Dr. Allison’s inaugural lecture as the Seminary’s Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament. “Resurrection and Bodies” is chapter two of Dale Allison, Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things (Eerdmans, 2015) and appears here by permission of the publisher.

“A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.”

—Hamlet

“Often in such cases it is possible to see that the idea which is no longer a current belief is yet a representation (a kind of picture) of a conviction that is still held—something we believe to be true at the core; and we are right in pointing to that conviction as the ‘religious value’ of the old belief that has died out and been discarded.”

—J. F. Bethune-Baker

“The enemy here is system.”

—Michael Wyschogrod

My students didn’t always fret about cannibalism. That changed a few years ago, when I began lecturing on the resurrection of the dead.

On rare occasions, someone in the last straits of starvation will eat another human being. The repugnant fact generates a notorious and once-famous conundrum. If the flesh of one becomes the flesh of another, and if, on the last day, both eater and eaten arise, what will become of the particles belonging to both? To which body will God assign them?

Although always new to my students, the puzzle of shared matter has, in its various forms, long vexed many, beginning with the church fathers. What if a sailor drowns at sea and is devoured by fish, and what if the fish are in turn caught, cooked, and eaten? Or what if a tree in a cemetery sends forth its roots and gathers nutrients from a decaying corpse, nutrients that go into a ripening apple, which a hungry passerby plucks for a snack? Or what if, when you die, some of the water that makes up so much of your body evaporates, becomes rain, and enters the water table, so that others drink you? Or what if a body returns to the dust and the dust becomes topsoil and the topsoil nurtures wheat
and the wheat is turned into bread and the bread is distributed through the Eucharist?

These aren’t, however, hypotheticals. They’re rather facts of life on earth. We’re all cannibals, feeding upon the remains of our ancestors.

Augustine solved the enigma of cannibalism by urging that consumed flesh, like many objects lost and found, will be returned to its first owners.¹ His verdict, however, hardly halted discussion. I once ran across a sermon preached before the king and queen of England in 1689, a sermon by Edward Stillingfleet, in which the Bishop contended that, when someone is eaten, only a smidgen of the devoured flesh becomes a permanent part of the diner’s bulk. To this consoling fact the Reverend added that God will make up for any consumed and so missing pieces by collecting matter that belonged to the victim in better days, matter sloughed off long before the hapless party was digested. The same divine action will, Stillingfleet observed, take care of those who die emaciated because of consumption.²

This of course resolves nothing. The longer the world continues, the less likely it is that elements constituting one human being haven’t belonged, at some earlier moment, to another human being. Worms and bacteria dissolve the dead, whose molecules re-enter the carbon cycle, the water cycle, and the nitrogen cycle, all of which supply our food and drink. Imagine, then, what would happen if, ten seconds from now, all the dead, beginning with those most ancient, were to rise and, like magnets, draw to themselves every atom they once possessed. The world as we know it would instantly be full of holes, and some things altogether gone, including lots of saints, for when God returns all matter to its original owners, how much will be left for the late-comers? It gets even more difficult if you want God to resurrect animals, because we eat them all the time. From conception on, all of us are recycled elements.

So what other solutions are on offer? It’s possible—or rather was at one time possible—to contend that human flesh can’t, by its nature, be assimilated, that it always passes, unaffected, through digestive systems. A few church fathers and medieval theologians imagined this, and the opinion wasn’t wholly extinguished until the early 19th century. A closely related view is that, although the human body could in principle be assimilated, God intervenes to make sure this never happens. The great Hugo Grotius (d. 1645) thought this a good guess. I’ve also run across the fantastic view, of a certain George Hodgson, in a book published in 1853, that nothing we eat or drink—not just human flesh—joins the human body. Everything rather passes through. Food and drink are for us like gas is to the hot air balloon: the gas makes the balloon rise but is no part of it. According to Hodgson, Scripture teaches this very thing, for Jesus says in Matthew 15:17: “Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes

¹ Augustine, City of God 22.20.
² Edward Stillingfleet, A Sermon Preached before the King and Queen of England (London: Henry Mortlock, 1670).
out into the sewer?”

There’s also the option, tentatively forwarded by Humphrey Hody (d. 1707), and to my knowledge never seconded, that maybe a cannibal doesn’t die until every particle of human flesh has, via Providence, exited one way or the other. This, to be sure, generates its own riddle. Might not a theologian who knows this, a theologian who loses his faith and turns evil, make human beings his only entree and so live forever?

* * * * *

At this point, my students, worrying that I might be serious, become incredulous and impatient. What does all this have to do with Christian faith? None of this is in the Bible, and none of this has troubled them before. Surely, they think, my introduction of obscure and irrelevant conjectures epitomizes the sort of unedifying, egg-headed nonsense they were warned about when they decided on ministerial studies. Didn’t Calvin wisely condemn the “superfluous investigation of useless matters?” God, moreover, can do anything, so why think it a thing incredible, that God should raise the dead? Let’s get on to something worthwhile.

I respond by asking my students what they’re thinking when they utter the Apostles’ Creed, which includes the line, “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” To be sure, it may be that, when they’re in church, they’re not thinking anything. Nonetheless, shouldn’t they hope that their recitation isn’t empty, that their faith is more than vague and dreamy imaginings? And if so, what can their profession mean given that nature inexorably recycles everything, even corpses full of formaldehyde and sealed in bronze caskets? Or do we just throw up our hands and call it a mystery, because faith is where reason goes to die? That Jesus’ tomb was empty may be good news. That so many other tombs are empty is a problem.

This settles them down for a bit, long enough for me to introduce more stuff that leaves them nonplussed. I inform them that some rabbis, recognizing that bodies inexorably disintegrate, posited that all we need for resurrection is the coccyx bone:

Hadrian—may his bones rot—asked R. Joshua b. Hananiah, “From what part in the body will the Holy One, blessed be he, make a person sprout up in the age to come?” He said to him, “He will make him sprout out of the nut of the spinal column.” He said to him, “How do you know this?” He said to him, “Bring one to me, and I will explain it to you.” He put it [the nut brought to him] into the fire, yet it did not burn up. He put it into water, yet it did not dissolve. He pulverized it between millstones, yet it was not crushed. He put it on a block and smashed it with a hammer. The

---

4 Humphrey Hody, *The Resurrection of the (Same) Body Asserted: from the Traditions of the Heathens, the Ancient Jews, and the Primitive Church, with An Answer to the Objections brought against It* (London: Awnsham and John Churchill, 1694).
5 Calvin, *Institutes* 3.25.11.
block split, the hammer was cleft, yet it remained undamaged.\footnote{Genesis Rabbah 28.3. Cf. Leviticus Rabbah 18.1; Ecclesiastes Rabba 12.5. I have read that some Jews instead contended that teeth never dissolve and so become the core for resurrection, but I have never run across this in a rabbinic text. Tertullian at one point, however, says something like this (On the Resurrection of the Flesh 34).}

Don’t gardeners harvest a new plant from a twig or cutting? Didn’t Eve come from one of Adam’s ribs?

Christian tradition has tried out related ideas. One of the more poetically pleasing appears in a nineteenth-century book written by a Presbyterian minister, George Scudder Mott. He believed that, despite appearances, the earth never extracts all that constitutes a human body, that neither sunshine nor frost nor vegetation nor any other agency utterly undoes the human frame: some small part ever endures, and resurrection will begin with that. It’s like a seed planted in the soil. The seed “sprouts, it grows, it blooms, it yields. Now where does it get material for all this? Not from the seed, for that was merely the starting point. Not alone from the soil, but also … from the air, the rain, and the sun. Surrounding nature furnishes the supply." And if God does this for a mere plant, surely those created in the divine image can expect no less.\footnote{George S. Mott, The Resurrection of the Dead (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1867), 112–14.}

Not as aesthetically pleasing is the well-known proposal of the modern Christian philosopher, Peter van Inwagen. Since he doesn’t believe in a traditional soul and holds that human identity resides in bodies alone, his philosophy leads him, like the rabbis and Mott, to posit some solid, physical nucleus that never dissolves. He suggests that, “perhaps at the moment of each man’s death, God removes his corpse and replaces it with a simulacrum which is what is burned or rots. Or perhaps God is not quite so wholesale as this: perhaps He removes for ‘safekeeping’ only the ‘core person’—the brain and central nervous system—or even some special part of it.”\footnote{Peter van Inwagen, “The Possibility of Resurrection,” International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion 9 (1978): 121.} In this scenario, God furtively snatches the body or parts thereof for storage until the last trump. This is just another way of denying that bodies in their entirety really disappear. Yet surely they do, and if Christians are compelled to deny this, if we’re obliged to hope that God runs something like a cryonics lab, which keeps heads in the deep-freeze for later revival, aren’t we in trouble?

Physical Bodies in the Resurrection

That bodies share matter and that they cease to be are just two of many puzzles occasioned by belief in resurrection. Here, however, I introduce only one more.

Natural selection has designed us for life on earth. Teeth are for chewing food, and lungs are for breathing air, and all for the purpose of keeping us alive. Christians hold, however, that, once we rise, death will be no more. The exegetical justification is 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul foresees an imperishable body, a spiritual body, a glorious
body. Mortality will put on immortality, so that death will be swallowed up in victory.

Why, then, with death passé, would resurrected saints need to eat? Or why would they need to breathe? If they’re invested with immortality, death won’t be able to touch them, so eating or not eating and breathing and or breathing should be matters of indifference. What could be the purpose, in an immortal state, of organs that evolved in the struggle for survival, organs designed to keep us alive on earth for a few decades?

Gregory of Nyssa inferred that, when Jesus rose, he didn’t take his intestines with him and that, in the world to come, we won’t need ours either. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:13: “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food—and God will destroy both one and the other.” Gregory, like so many after him, answered the obvious objection—Doesn’t Jesus, in Luke 24, eat a bit of fish after rising from the dead?—by arguing that the act was one of condescension, for the sake of the disciples, so that they’d know he wasn’t a ghost.

It takes only a little reflection to hollow out resurrected bodies entirely.\(^9\) If, as Jesus teaches, we’ll neither marry nor be given in marriage but will be like the angels in heaven, then we won’t require ovaries or fallopian tubes, prostate glands or seminal vesicles. And if, as 4 Ezra avows, illness will be banished, we won’t need white blood cells, antibodies, and the rest of the immune system. And if, as Revelation promises, we’ll neither hunger nor thirst any longer, then we won’t require kidneys to reabsorb water. Nor will we, if immortal, need blood, veins, arteries, and a pumping heart to circulate nutrients and remove waste products. One understands why Calvin proposed that plants in the world to come won’t be for food but for pleasantness in sight, and why the eighteenth-century preacher, Samuel Johnson, argued that Jesus, after he lost all his blood on the cross, didn’t need it back.\(^10\) The former things will pass away.

Everything about us has been fashioned for life on earth, so that we might grow, repair, and reproduce ourselves; but if, in the future, we no longer grow, repair, or reproduce, won’t stomachs, intestines, and the rest necessarily be vestigial, so that glorified bodies will be, in their entirety, akin to our irrelevant tailbone, that is, eternal relics of a one-time utility? Or should we look forward to something like what biologists call “exaptation,” the process by which a trait serving one function comes to serve another function, such as bird feathers evolving from temperature regulators into instruments for flight? Maybe teeth won’t be for chewing but, at least for those in hell, for gnashing.

That sounds a bit like Tertullian, who did in fact hazard that maybe old organs might take on new functions. He asked: “What will be the use of the entire body when the entire body will become useless?” He answered by observing that organs may have more than

---


one function—the mouth, for instance, not only chews food but makes speech—and by affirming, rather cryptically, that “in the presence of God there will be no idleness.”°

Despite conceding that, in the world to come, we won’t need what we need now, some nonetheless have, in their eschatological imaginations, refused to part with their current organs. One early apologist observed that, as celibates prove, one can have organs one doesn’t use. Others have insisted that, while our bodies may no longer serve biological purposes, they may nonetheless endure so that we’re able to behold and recognize one another. Matthias Earbery (d. 1740) averred that “Seeing is one branch of Coelestial Enjoyment,”°° for which he thought eyes necessary; yet eyes in turn require “an organical Brain to receive the Impressions from the optick Nerves.”°°° At least our heads won’t be empty.

There are, however, other options. You can distinguish, following the Book of Revelation, between the first and the second resurrection. In the first, at the beginning of the millennium, when Jesus comes to reign on earth, the righteous dead will arise, whereupon they will, like Adam in paradise, eat from the tree of life. To do so, they will need teeth, intestines, and so on. But then, after the millennium, there will be a second resurrection, when the rest of the dead will arise. Some will be thrown into the lake of fire. Others will become like angels and enter into the new heaven and the new earth. At that point people may finally abandon their corporal appliances with their animal functions. Maimonides, on the Jewish side, taught something like this.

The idea of a first resurrection to earthly life in the millennium neatly skirts all the indelicate questions about resurrected organs. It doesn’t, however, let anyone off the hook. We still have to wonder about the transition from the millennium to the eternal state. What will happen to human bodies once the first earth passes away and the sea is no more? The solution of two resurrections just punts the problem down the road.

There’s another difficulty, although we’ve learned of it only lately. The average human body harbors, according to recent estimates, at least ten thousand species of parasitic microbes. They’re about 46,000 of these tiny organisms under each fingernail. The total number of individual microbes in a human body is around one hundred trillion (which bests by a factor of ten the total number of cells we have). Many microbes, such as digestive flora, are required for healthy functioning. So if we’ll indeed need functioning intestines in the millennium, won’t our microbial ecosystems have to be resurrected, too? Without the bugs we host, the intestines won’t work.

---

11 Tertullian, On the Resurrection of the Flesh 60.
13 Ibid., 217.
Beliefs about the Resurrection of the Dead

Enough of that. It would be tedious to continue piling up the obtuse questions that people have worried about and the apologetical tales they’ve spun when pondering resurrection. After a while I sympathize with my students, who hope that deliberations about intestines can’t really have much to do with faith. So let’s ask a different question. How is belief in the resurrection of the dead now faring?

Many years ago I asked my father, a sometime Presbyterian, to read Wolfhart’s Pannenberg’s *What Is Man?* This book argues that modern science has shattered the old metaphysics and slain the soul. Pannenberg thought this not bad news but good, for he took the Bible to teach resurrection, not immortality. My father was of another mind. After a few weeks, he returned the book, saying that he preferred New Age guru Shirley MacLaine and reincarnation to theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg and resurrection.

My father represents many. Recent surveys show little belief in bodily resurrection among Protestants and Catholics in Western Europe and the United States, even among those who recite the old creeds. Indeed, in some polls of North Americans, Western Europeans, and Australians, belief in resurrection is less popular than belief in immortality of the soul, belief in reincarnation, and belief in extinction.

This shouldn’t be news. Here are three sentences from three nineteenth-century writers:

- From 1864: the resurrection of the dead “lingers in the minds of most people only as a dead letter.”
- From 1867: “The Resurrection of the Dead is a doctrine which has … fallen out of notice.”
- From 1872: the resurrection of the body “is very generally rejected by the most intelligent, thinking, and inquiring minds of the age, both in the Church and out of it.”

One suspects that the undeniable decline in belief is reflected on our grave markers. For although my personal sampling has necessarily been circumscribed, I’ve seen enough to surmise that, were one to gather statistics regarding the sentiments carved on tombstones in Europe and North America over the last four hundred years, one would discover that resurrection is mentioned less and less as the centuries move forward.

The waning of literal resurrection belief is likewise reflected in the general public’s growing acceptance, over the course of the last two centuries, of the dissection of the human body for anatomical instruction. (In nineteenth-century Britain the question

---

wasn’t whether dissection should be legal but whether the knife should carve executed murderers or the unmourned and “friendless poor.” Also telling is the phenomenon, which has increased dramatically since World War II, of people bequeathing their bodies to “science.” As our commodified corpses have become objects of physical study and items of medical utility, their traditional eschatological meaning has ebbed.

As illustration of the current moment, which includes unbelief even in conservative circles, consider the Roman Catholic theologian, John Michael Perry. Although at ease with the supernatural, he rejects resurrection. He believes that Jesus’ soul triumphed over death and communicated with the disciples. And yet, according to Perry, Jesus’ body, being unnecessary for life in the world to come, rotted in the tomb. In Jesus’ time and place, however, most people mistakenly believed that survival required a body. Thus for the disciples to embrace the truth of Jesus’ victory over death, God had to arrange things so that the tomb would be void. The deity worked this trick by hurrying up the natural processes of decay. The body remained where Joseph of Arimathea laid it, but its disintegration was so rapid that, when the tomb was entered shortly after Jesus’ interment, it appeared that its occupant had vanished. Now I think it would’ve been easier for God just to have told the angel who rolled away the stone to hide Jesus’ lifeless body behind the bushes. The point, however, is that while Perry is comfortable with miracles and life after death, resurrection is out.

These days, even many professing belief in resurrection don’t really believe. I’ve spoken with several pastors who hope that God will fashion for them new, heavenly bodies. They anticipate not repair but replacement. They may preach resurrection, but they don’t envisage bones being knit together in the graveyard.

This isn’t the dominant Christian tradition. Jerome was convinced that “it is this very flesh in which we live that rises again, without the loss of a single member.” According to Augustine, God will revive and restore “bodies that have been consumed by wild beasts, or by fire, or those parts that have been disintegrated into dust and ashes, or those parts that have dissolved into moisture, or have evaporated into the air.” Canon 1 of the Fourth Lateran Council declared that all “will rise with their own bodies which they now bear about here.” Sir Thomas Browne wrote: “Our estranged and divided ashes shall unite again … our separated dust, after so many pilgrimages and transformations into the parts of minerals, plants, animals, elements, shall at the voice of God return into their primitive shapes and join again to make up their primary and predestinate forms.”

18 For this miserable bit of history see Ruth Richardson, Death, Dissection and the Destitute (2d ed.; Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
20 Jerome, Apology against Rufinus 2.5.
21 Augustine, City of God 22.20.
Until recent times, most theologians and preachers taught this. The idea is reflected in our religious art, where bodies sometimes climb out from the ground, or in the old church cemeteries, where the feet of the dead are laid toward the rising sun, so that, when Christ returns, like lightning from the east, everyone will stand up facing the right direction.

Why did people believe such things? Why did some even wonder what happens to clipped hair and cut nails when the dead rise on the last day? Part of the answer is: the Bible. Jesus’ tomb, the gospels report, was empty. They also tell us that he displayed his scars to his disciples, presumably for the purpose of proving that the body which was buried was the same body which arose. John 5 says that “the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.” This is a prophecy about burial places. Matthew 27 purports that, when Jesus died, “the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many.” 2 Maccabees 14 tells of a certain Razis, an elder of Jerusalem, who died like this: “with his blood ... completely drained from him, he tore out his entrails, took them in both hands and hurled them at the crowd, calling upon the Lord of life and spirit to give them back to him again.” Such texts inevitably move minds in a certain direction. In short, the Bible itself occasioned the now unfashionable debates about entrails and cannibalism.

**Literalism and its Discontents**

When did the traditional doctrine begin to lose favor? Surely there was always some popular incredulity, maybe a lot of popular incredulity; but if we’re considering major theologians, the first large blips of doubt show up, as far as I’ve been able to learn, in the seventeenth century. John Locke, picking up on the work of Thomas Hobbes, stressed that personal identity lies in continuity of consciousness, not in physical stability. He may have been the first to speak of “resurrection of the person.” He in any case preferred that expression over “resurrection of the body.” Locke found support in Paul, who on his reading taught the reception of new heavenly bodies, not the gathering of dispersed particles.

In the century after Locke, literalism, although still loudly defended, was being revised. David Hartley (d. 1757), obviously influenced by the biological preformationism of his

---

23 See Julian of Toledo, *Prognosticum Futuri Saeculi* 3.31, with quotations from Augustine on the subject.

24 Already in the early seventeenth century, John Moore, *A Mappe of Mans Mortalitie* (London: T. S. for George Edwards, 1617), 246, refers to “natural incredulitie” respecting the resurrection, and Paul’s apology in 1 Corinthians 15 show that such incredulity goes back to earliest Christianity.

day, inferred that there may be “an elementary infinitesimal body in the embryo,” a body invulnerable to death, and just as it directs development in the womb, it will later be the “vegetating” power or organizing center of the resurrection body. Charles Bonnet (d. 1793) forwarded a related idea: within the visible brain is an invisible, indestructible brain, a “little ethereal machine” that will be the nucleus of glorified bodies. Variants of this notion—always supported by appeal to Paul’s remark that a sown body is like a bare seed—are all over the 18th-century literature.

It’s telling that, around this time, few any longer worry whether every human being who has ever lived could be raised and, in accord with Joel 3, squeezed together for judgment in the Valley of Jehoshaphat (identified with the Kidron Valley). The problem, once discussed by such luminaries as Aquinas and even, incredibly, Leibniz, just goes away.

By the middle of the nineteenth–century, books on resurrection with “same body” in their titles ceased to appear. Edward Hitchcock could then write: “If only a millionth part, or a ten thousand millionth part, of the matter deposited in the grave, shall be raised from thence, it justifies the representations of scripture, that there will be a resurrection of the dead.” A bit later, the influential Charles Gore insisted that belief in resurrection “does not mean that the particles of our former bodies, which were laid in the grave and which have decayed and passed into all sorts and forms of natural life, will be collected together again.” That was “the old view,” not “the new view.”

In 1911, William John Sparrow Simpson documented how theologians had, in the previous hundred years, steadily moved away from the literalism of Tertullian and Augustine toward the more ethereal understanding of Origen. The latter disbelieved in a millennium, stressed the radical otherness of transformed, eschatological bodies, and posited within us a life principle from which, as from a seed, future lives will sprout.

A decade after Sparrow Simpson, the Anglican H. D. A. Major, founder of The Modern Churchman, promoted personal survival unfettered by an earthly body. “I do not hold,” he wrote, “in the mode of the resurrection of the dead which has been held by the Catholic Church for eighteen centuries.” Although charges of heresy were brought against Major,
the Bishop of Oxford exonerated him: “I am satisfied that Mr. Major’s teaching does not conflict with what Holy Scripture reveals to us of the Resurrection of the Body.”  

Soon enough the Archbishop of Canterbury’s commission on doctrine declared that “we ought to reject quite frankly the literalistic belief in a future resuscitation of the actual physical frame which is laid in the tomb.” Embracing this view, Emil Brunner, not long thereafter, showed himself to be of the same mind: “The flesh will not rise again .... The resurrection has nothing to do with that drama of the graveyard pictured by medieval fantasy.”

The same opinion has been held by those Christian thinkers, such as B. H. Streeter, Ladislaus Boros, and Gerhard Lohfink, who’ve argued that resurrection takes place at the moment of death, when the body is still in plain sight.

The move away from literalism hasn’t been reversed. I remember a dinner with N. T. Wright. Given that he has been so insistent that Jesus’ tomb was empty and that God will raise the dead for life on a refurbished earth, I asked him what he makes of all the old riddles, such as the puzzle of shared matter. Unruffled, he opined that Origen long ago had solved most of the issues. So the great modern apologist for resurrection turned out to be less than a full literalist. His view wasn’t that of Jerome. He was rather closer to a church father who minimized material continuity and thereby secured for himself widespread condemnation.

Wright’s judgment stands for a dramatic change in Western Christianity. Locke has won, which means Origen has won. Even those who still defend resurrection no longer fret about diffused particles. There is, for example, the theory which posits that, at death, the so-called “simples” that make us up will fission into two spatially segregated sets of “simples” with different causal paths. One will be a corpse. The other will be a body in heaven. This is akin to splitting the planarian flatworm: if the worm is cut in two, the head half grows a tail and the tail half grows a head. In the resurrection, however, one half never makes it.

Then there’s the idea—sponsored recently by John Polkinghorne and, a century before

---

him, John Harvey Kellogg, the inventor of breakfast cereal— that the soul should be conceptualized as an information-bearing pattern. Someday God will remember you and will upload your pattern into a new environment. That’ll be your resurrection. This way of understanding resurrection is unsurprising in a world of computers, where information is conceived of as separate from the physical states that carry it.

I don’t like either of these theories, although they’re philosophically entertaining. I’m especially unconsolled by the idea of God implanting my memory pattern into some future frame. That won’t be me but a duplicate, so what do I care? God could’ve done the same thing five minutes ago, and I wouldn’t take the other guy to be me. Moreover, it’s not clear that it takes omnipotence to work this trick. Some modern transhumanists, such as Ray Kurzweil, already dream about future technology making us immortal by uploading cellular brain maps into supercomputers. The only point here, however, is that all such proposals leave our bodies in the ground, which is indeed and emphatically a “new view.”

A Doctrinal Revolution

What then happened? Doctrinal revolutions, like all other revolutions, have manifold causes. In the nineteenth century, some Jewish prayer books substituted language about immortality for language about resurrection; and in 1869 and 1885, in Philadelphia and in Pittsburgh respectively, liberal Jewish authorities issued statements that dismissed, as antiquated, belief in bodily resurrection. These developments had something to do with the desire to sunder religion from politics. Historically, resurrection was a collective event for the Jewish people. It was indeed to take place in the Land of Israel and to inaugurate the Messiah’s reign from Jerusalem. Many modern Jews, wanting to be good citizens in America and Europe, didn’t like the nationalistic associations. Immortality, by contrast, wasn’t sectarian. It was cosmopolitan.

As is obvious by now, however, unbelief in old-fashioned resurrection wasn’t confined to Judaism. Further, politics wasn’t everything. Of direct relevance for Christianity as well as Judaism was the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which generated in educated quarters so much suspicion about miracles. To hope for resurrection is to hope for a miracle, indeed a miracle beyond all others. This didn’t, as the old debates over the resurrection of Jesus show, suit a deistically-inclined age. The skeptics, such as Thomas Woolston (d. 1733), protested that bodies are law-governed, and that reanimation would break all the laws. Impossible.

---


While the deists gave up resurrection, which belonged exclusively to revealed religion—as Robert Boyle wrote: “If God had not in the scripture positively revealed his purpose of raising the dead, I confess I should not have thought of such a thing”—many of them retained immortality, which required neither the Bible nor divine intervention. Hadn’t Pythagoras and Plato, as well as Hindus, believed, without benefit of Scripture, in a self inherently immune to death? In addition, some thinkers, such as Moses Mendelssohn (d. 1786), thought immortality to be, unlike resurrection, the conclusion of a sound argument. Kant, eschewing all natural theology, disagreed, yet he nonetheless posited immortality on the basis of practical reason. He didn’t posit resurrection.

Deistic predilections worked their way into much of nineteenth-century German theology, so much so that major figures such as Ritschl, Harnack, and Bousset didn’t entertain resurrection for a second. Immortality, by contrast, was still on the table.

In addition to qualms about miracles, disbelief in the historicity of Genesis—a disbelief fostered in part by geological discoveries—had its effect. The end has always been correlated with the beginning, so when scholars began to question the literal sense of the Bible’s early chapters, second thoughts about the literal sense of its final chapters followed. If the opening is theological projection, maybe the conclusion is no different.

We should remember in this connection that comparative religion was arising when deism was thriving, and comparison of what the Bible teaches about the end with what other religious texts have to say raised tough questions. Charles Daubuz (d. 1717) found Egyptian and Chaldean materials in Revelation, and when the Zend Avesta—a collection of old Zoroastrian texts featuring a lot of eschatology—was translated into German in the eighteenth century, the parallels with the Bible were obvious. The eventual upshot of such discoveries was the conviction that resurrection stemmed not so much from the Old Testament but from later Judaism, and that Judaism in turn derived its hope from other cultures. In short, resurrection turned out to be like other ideas, that is, it had a human history. It wasn’t a doctrine invented by God and spoken from heaven.

More recently, cremation and organ donation have played their roles in distancing us from old-fashioned resurrection. Of course, the causation is bidirectional. On the one hand, the decline of the old doctrine emboldened some rationalists in the 18th century, some Protestants in the 19th century, and some Roman Catholics in the 20th century to tolerate or even promote cremation. On the other hand, the growing acceptance of cremation—the British Cremation Society was founded in 1874; Parliament officially allowed crematoria in 1902; the influential Charles Gore gave his blessing in 1924; and

the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, was cremated in 1944—must in turn have made the resurrection of the flesh seem less instinctively plausible to many. How important can our remains be if we scruple not to reduce them to ashes? The British sociologist Tony Walter has written that the crematorium may be a setting “in which the materialist belief that death is the end makes sense and in which reunion of the immortal souls of lovers makes sense, but any recognizably Christian belief in resurrection does not.” The psychology of organ donation must be similar: leaving our organs to others is proof that we won’t need them back.

I’ve wondered about another possible factor. It has to do with modern mobility. There was a time when most people died and were buried near their place of birth, so they lived out their lives not far from the graves of their beloved. In such a setting, attachment to physical remains was possible. One could, and people often did, reminisce and weep above bones. What’s happened, however, as more and more of us have failed to stay put for long? Today we often bury our dead, move away, then mourn and remember them from afar. In such a context, continuing ties must be unrelated to burial plots and tombstones. If we recall the dead, it’s because we carry them around in our hearts and minds, not because we visit their remains. Graves and bones are irrelevant. Might this not be another circumstance that has nudged us away from finding religious meaning in corpses?

To this point, I’ve discussed resurrection faith as though it were an isolated belief. It’s not. It’s rather part of a traditional complex, part of the web of Christian eschatological expectations. It’s only one event in a sequence of end-time events: Jesus returns, then the dead are raised, then they are judged, then they enter heaven or depart to hell. Now this entire scenario has, in the last two to three centuries, fared poorly—above all, perhaps, because the old-style hell has become, for reasons to be reviewed in a later chapter, about as unfashionable as any belief could be. One guesses, then, that insofar as resurrection has been associated with that beleaguered, widely-despised doctrine, to that extent its credibility has suffered. In other words, as hell has sunk, it’s dragged allied expectations, including resurrection, down with it.

42 For all of this see Peter C. Jupp, From Dust to Ashes: Cremation and the British Way of Death (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
44 Some sociologists have offered an analogous argument: the killing fields of World War I, which turned bodies into scraps, made attachment to and the memorialization of corpses impossible in countless cases, and in that situation resurrection of the body made less sense to many.
Resurrection and the New Testament

Notwithstanding everything said so far, resurrection hasn’t been banished; it isn’t universally held in low repute. It retains stout defenders, even if they don’t champion the old literalism. In the middle of the twentieth century, Oscar Cullmann famously urged that the Bible teaches not immortality of the soul, a Greek idea, but resurrection of the dead, a Jewish idea.\(^{45}\) More recently, philosopher Nancey Murphy and biblical scholar Joel Green, among others, have similarly advocated resurrection and depreciated immortality, or at least the traditional conception of an immortal soul.\(^{46}\)

This camp repeatedly makes two points. First, the Bible doesn’t sponsor a dualistic anthropology but is rather holistic. Second, modern science makes talk of immaterial souls obsolete.

At the risk of being both unbiblical and unscientific, I’m not on board.

In several important respects, to be sure, we should be sympathetic, or rather more than sympathetic. It’d be beyond inane to close our eyes to the irrefragable results of modern science, and it’d be thoughtless to sponsor an easygoing immortality that makes light of death, of the fear and pain that can attend the dying, and of the grief and loneliness that can afflict survivors. Furthermore, it’d be intolerable to say anything that denigrates material bodies or the physical world—although we should admit, when we take our perfunctory swipes at Platonism, that modern medicine makes it much easier to celebrate bodies. Our progenitors didn’t have Novocain, C-sections, or sodium pentothal. The burden of the flesh was much heavier upon them.

Still, I’m not on board.

One problem is the Bible, or at least the New Testament. Although a few have taken it to teach soul sleep, and although William Tyndale (d. 1536), long before Cullmann, held the biblical idea of resurrection and the Hellenistic idea of immortality to be mutually exclusive, the New Testament doesn’t anticipate modern physicalism. Matthew, Mark, the author of Luke–Acts, John, and Paul as well as the authors of Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Revelation all believed that the self or some part of it could leave the body and even survive without it.

When Jesus, in Matthew and Mark, walks on the water, his disciples fear that he may be a φάντασμα, a ghost; and when, risen from the dead, he appears to his own in Luke, he denies that he is a πνεῦμα, a spirit. The concept of a disembodied spirit wasn’t foreign to first-century Jews.

In accord with this, Matthew’s Jesus exhorts his followers not to “fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul (τὴν ψυχήν); rather fear him who can destroy both soul


and body in Gehenna." Implicit is the notion that body and soul are separated at death and joined later for the last judgment. Similarly, Luke's Jesus promises the so-called good thief, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Wherever this paradise is, it's not on Golgotha, and they're not going to get there on foot. (Incidentally, the old comeback, sponsored by, among others, Milton, that we should move the comma—"Truly, I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise"—so that the reunion might be put off until the end of time, is far-fetched. It's true that a few Byzantine manuscripts place the comma after "today," but the tendentious punctuation was likely designed to obviate the puzzle of how Jesus could be in heaven when he was supposed to be harrowing Hades.)

Paul's letters hold more of the same. Despite his hope to see the second coming and his insistence on resurrection, his true home is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), and he desires to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better than remaining in the flesh (Philippians 1:23–24). The apostle also relates that he was once caught up to the third heaven, to paradise, and that he may not have been in his body at the time (2 Corinthians 12:2–3). Paul even, at one point, sounds a bit Platonic: "we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

* * * * *

In more than one place, then, the New Testament takes for granted that the inner person or spirit is potentially independent of the body and isn’t inert after death. This shouldn’t surprise. By the first century, all of Judaism was Hellenized, and Greek ideas about immortal souls had been assimilated. This explains why some old Jewish texts plainly speak of souls being separated from bodies at death while others teach that, when the righteous die, they return to God and adore the divine glory. There’re even books in which souls exist before taking bodies. In accord with all this, one pseudepigraphon—the so-called Apocryphon of Ezekiel—features a story in which, at the great judgment, the soul excuses itself by blaming the body while the body excuses itself by blaming the soul. Although this book is all about resurrection, it’s thoroughly dualistic.

The old Jewish cemetery at Bet She’arim contains some inscriptions that speak of immortality, others that refer to resurrection. They’re all from the same community, and some of both kinds of inscriptions are from the same hand. It’s also telling that, unlike many moderns, the church fathers, with very few exceptions, didn’t take immortality of the soul to be pagan, resurrection of the body to be biblical. Nor, with the exception of Aphrahat, an early fourth century Syrian, did they countenance soul sleep.

* * * * *

Calvin wrote a short treatise entitled *Psychopannychia*, which is Greek for “falling asleep all night.” The splendid subtitle is: A Refutation of the Error Entertained by Some Unskillful Persons, who Ignorantly Imagine that in the Interval between Death and the Judgment the Soul Sleeps, together With an Explanation of the Condition and Life of the
Soul after this Present Life. In my judgment, Calvin—who reviews the same texts I’ve cited and more—got it right. The New Testament teaches neither the sleep of the soul (psychopannychism) nor the death of the soul (thnetopsychism), and it doesn’t hope only for resurrection. New Testament anthropology remains, in certain respects, dualistic.

For Calvin, this settled what we should think. I’m not like-minded. For me, things are more complicated. I doubt that the New Testament instructs us about brains and minds. Its dualism is naive and unreflective, not dogmatic. To think otherwise, to attempt to distill from the New Testament a metaphysical scheme that directly addresses the ongoing scientific and philosophical debates regarding human nature, human brains, and human consciousness, is like hunting for science in Genesis. We don’t do that anymore. Whether we should be monists or dualists or pluralists or idealists or whatever can’t be resolved by appeal to chapter and verse.

Materialism and its Alternatives

So how do we make a decision? Here’s where the Christian materialists are confident. Modern science, they believe, has established that human beings are physical objects. Neurobiology, for instance, demonstrates that everything once attributed to a soul is instead the product of complex brain organization. So the traditional soul is superfluous, a myth, and if Christians are to hold any credible hope for an afterlife, physical resurrection is the only option. To contend otherwise is to kick against the scientific goads.

The opinion is startling. Materialism was defended by ancient skeptics such as Democritus and Lucretius, and by modern rationalists such as Diderot and Feuerbach. The reduction of human beings to a contingent collection of atoms has typically been coupled with the view that our universe is a meaningless, mechanistic, apathetic drama, and that death is oblivion. In Wisdom 2:2, it’s the skeptics who proclaim that “reason is a spark kindled by the beating of our hearts.” Their modern counterparts are Owen Flanagan and Stephen Hawking. The former weds materialism to naturalism and deems belief in “non-natural things,” including souls and God, to “stand in the way of understanding our natures truthfully and locating what makes life meaningful in a nonillusory way.”47 For the latter, the brain is “a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.”48 It’s no wonder that Pope John Paul II declared materialism to be, for Catholic theology, out of bounds.

Observation about the company one keeps isn’t, however, an argument. Neither is

---

my suspicion that the new Christian physicalism is a way of making the best of a bad situation, a rationalization to reduce cognitive dissonance, a strategy which enables “climbing on the bandwagon of modern progress.”

Yet what if one has reasons for being ill at ease with the totalizing claims of scientific materialism, whether reductive or nonreductive? My personal library contains books with these titles: *After Physicalism*, *Beyond Physicalism*, *Objections to Physicalism*, *The Waning of Materialism*, and *Irreducible Mind*. Each is a volume of collected essays whose contributors—philosophers, neuroscientists, psychologists—contend that physics-based materialism is a simplification that doesn’t cover all the evidence. I also own books with less aggressive titles that nonetheless come to related conclusions. Some of their authors qualify as highly informed critics—Wilder Penfield, the neurosurgeon who first mapped the sensory and motor cortices; Sir Karl Popper, the great philosopher of science; Sir John Eccles, the Nobel Prize-winning brain scientist; Thomas Nagel, one of America’s most famous living philosophers; Alvin Plantinga, the eminent analytical philosopher; and Raymond Tallis, the distinguished polymath and Emeritus Professor of Geriatric Medicine at Manchester. In the cases of Popper, Nagel, and Tallis, one can’t attribute their views to religious sentiment. Popper was an agnostic. Nagel and Tallis are atheists.

One might respond that I’ve been reading the wrong books, and that equally prominent authorities, in far greater number, affirm that varied configurations of matter explain everything. But I have read what I have read. Some arguments, moreover, stay with me. This, of course, isn’t the place to introduce them. All I can do is insist upon this: not being a materialist doesn’t entail being philosophically or scientifically illiterate. It’s not like being a young-earth creationist. There’s a large literature on materialism, and not all of the erudite contributors come down on the same side.

Scientific materialism may be an extraordinarily productive working hypothesis, as far as it goes in the lab. That’s not far enough, however, to make it a metaphysical principle that decisively settles the truth about everything, including human nature.

---

49 James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 99: “Much in the turn against immortality of the soul was not a return to the fountain-head of biblical evidence but a climbing on the bandwagon of modern progress—the very thing that was at the same time being excoriated when it had been done in liberal theology.”


program—Newtonian mechanics, for instance—can reveal much without revealing everything.

* * * * *

But to deny isn’t to affirm, and although I’m dubious about materialism, I’ve nothing to offer in its place. Maybe there’s truth to the hypothesis of William James and neuroscientist Mario Beauregard, that flesh-and-blood brains don’t manufacture consciousness but rather regulate, limit, and restrain it—sort of like a TV deciphering electromagnetic waves.\(^{52}\) Or maybe some part of the self exists in a higher dimensional space, so that our world is like E. A. Abbott’s *Flatland*, and we’re four or five dimensional beings living in a three- or four-dimensional world.\(^{53}\) The neurobiologist, John Smythies, has defended an experimentally grounded version of this thesis, arguing that phenomenal space is ontologically distinct from physical space, and that conscious perception exists in a parallel slice of our multidimensional hyperspace.\(^{54}\)

But then maybe some part of the mind is, following physicist Henry Margenau, a nonmaterial field, analogous to a quantum probability field.\(^{55}\) Or maybe there’s something to the theory of Sir Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff, that consciousness is a quantum phenomenon, and that it could, theoretically, exist independently of its current biological home, as a collection of “entangled fluctuations” in quantum space-time geometry. Hameroff has even speculated about a “quantum soul.”\(^{56}\) Or maybe, as the late philosopher, C. J. Ducasses, insisted, some part of us is indeed an extraordinarily subtle, supersensible substance, more elusive than neutrinos, and we each “carry a future Ghost within” (Thomas Carlyle).\(^{57}\) One recalls that Hilary of Poitiers and other church fathers, like traditional Hindu metaphysicians, took the soul to be like an exceedingly very thin or diaphanous substance.

I neither believe nor disbelieve any of these hypotheses. I’m neither a dualist nor a pluralist nor a dual-aspect monist but rather, on this subject, an agnostic, intrigued by various possibilities, committed to none. For all I know, matter is congealed spirit. My only conviction is this: despite all our scientific progress, matter remains a profound mystery, consciousness remains a profound mystery, and the self remains a profound mystery.

---


so their relationship remains a profound mystery. One sympathizes with Colin McGinn who, although a naturalist, has argued that consciousness lies forever beyond human understanding.\textsuperscript{58} Whether or not he's too pessimistic, I haven’t a clue. In the meantime, however, I don’t feel compelled to cast my lot with the materialists.

* * * * *

This conclusion, I confess, comes as a relief, for if I were obliged to infer that my self is essentially what I’ve eaten—I’m a pure biological byproduct—I’m not sure what I’d do. The problem is this. If the strict materialists are right, I don’t see how, once dead, we can ever live again.

If you leave home and later return, those who welcome you back unthinkingly presume that you continued to exist during your absence. If instead they learn that, after you left, you ceased to be, then they’d regard the thing at the door as an imposter. The return of what doesn’t exist makes no sense.

This matters because resurrection is our return, the continuation of our lives. So must there not be continuing selves of some sort between death and resurrection? And if that’s so, don’t we have to be something more than what the undertaker handles? If you’re instead your body and only your body, and if that body disintegrates, aren’t you gone for good?

You might respond by waving the magic wand of divine Omnipotence: God can do what we can’t imagine. Yet who believes that God can do absolutely anything? Can God make $2 + 2 = 5$, or give Lee the victory at Gettysburg after the fact? Even if you hold that the deity can do such things, because with God all things are possible, should you be sanguine about contradictions between your faith and what you otherwise deem credible? If there are mysteries, there are also absurdities. Maybe believing that we’re nothing but matter and that we’ll nonetheless live despite death is simply nonsense.

What if I were to observe that, according to scientists, the world is about 4.5 billion years old, but that its age in Scripture is about 6,000 years, after which I urged assent to both estimates, because we have here a great mystery, beyond understanding—like Jesus being divine and human at the same time? You'd decline to go along. In like fashion, I decline to go along with the notion that, without a soul or some functional equivalent, eternal life is nonetheless possible. Some things just can’t be.\textsuperscript{59}

* * * * *

I’ve another reason for hoping that materialism isn’t compulsory. This one’s not philosophical but pastoral.


\textsuperscript{59} See further Mark Johnston, \textit{Surviving Death} (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1–125. His conclusion is that “Christian eschatology does stand or fall with the legacy of Plato, namely the immaterial soul, which could carry the identity of the deceased to the Last Judgment. The removal of the Platonic and Aristotelian legacy from Christianity … looks to be an operation the patient cannot survive.”
A Presbyterian minister once shared with me that, when he attended seminary in the 1950s, he was taught that immortality is unbiblical and bad, resurrection scriptural and good. Trusting his teachers, he took their claim to heart. So when, after getting his first church, a grieving widow asked him where her husband had gone, he told her: your beloved is in the ground, dead to himself and the world, awaiting resurrection. Other mourning parishioners received the same news. In each case, the pastor perceived, they took no comfort. On the contrary, their anguish was augmented. His people wanted to hear that their loved ones were in heaven, or with Jesus, or in a better place. Imagining them cold in the dirt didn’t console.

This occasioned much reflection on the pastor’s part. He eventually decided that, if the gospel is good news, and if his doctrine was bad news, something was amiss. Souls, heaven, and immortality returned to his ministerial vocabulary.

I’m with the pastor on this one. Shouldn’t we comfort those who mourn? Shouldn’t we tell the grieving that nothing can separate them or those they cherish from the love of God? Yet how does such encouragement comport with teaching that we all rot in the ground for ages untold?

There’s also a psychological issue. A recent experiment showed that, when you ask people whether they believe in an afterlife, there’s a bit of a falloff if the question comes with a foot massage. Now this seems silly to me, and I wonder how the researchers won funding. But they did, and when their work was finished, they inferred that, the more people are reminded of their embodiment, the harder it is for them to imagine a life beyond this one. If they’re right, won’t preaching materialism make it harder for pew-sitters to hope for more? Maybe we have here a recipe for the further decline of the mainline churches.

The Symbol and the Hope of Resurrection

Even if one agrees with me that Christian materialism is unnecessary and unattractive, our creeds speak of resurrection, so the question of meaning remains. What then, finally, given all that we know, might we think?

Interpretation is potentially unbounded. One can, for instance, turn resurrection into a political metaphor, as in Ezekiel 37. Or one can make it an effective symbol of personal, existential renewal, as in so many Easter sermons. It’d also make sense for a Christian who believes that God has given us only this life to construe resurrection as a symbol of the circumstance that our molecules will, after we’re gone, pass into the ecosystem and be resurrected as vital parts of other living things. What, however, might we make of resurrection if one hopes that death isn’t extinction?

Surely part of the answer is that the old literalism must be scrapped. As the convoluted debates attest, there’s no adequate solution to the problem of shared matter; and it’s mighty hard to fathom that bodies designed for earthly life are, with only modest revision, equally designed for life eternal. The discontinuity between now and then must be extreme.

The New Testament isn’t all against us here. Jesus, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, gets after the Sadducees for their slavishly literal and unimaginative critique of resurrection; and Paul, when defending resurrection in 1 Corinthians, doesn’t write about bones in the ground. He rather draws an analogy involving seeds and plants, after which he calls the whole thing a mystery. The Bible itself isn’t consistently literalistic here.

One can of course retort that Jesus’ tomb was empty, and that if our fate is akin to his, then our flesh must also be taken up. Since the body of Jesus that rose was the same that was spit upon and crucified, won’t we too rise in the same body in which we suffered and died?

The argument isn’t hollow. Nonetheless, substantial discontinuities between his resurrection and whatever awaits us are undeniable. His body, as Acts 2:31 puts it, saw no corruption. Our bodies will decay. He rose on the third day. We’ll be in the ground longer than that. And so it goes. Christ’s victory over death can’t be the blueprint for our victory. 1 John says that we’ll be like him, but that’s the end, the goal, and maybe there’s more than one means of getting there. As Aquinas put it, “Christ’s resurrection is the exemplar of ours as to the term ‘whereto’ but not as to the term ‘wherefrom.’”

* * * *

If we cast aside literalism, resurrection language must be a way of suggesting an eschatological future that transcends prosaic description, a future that can only be intimated through sacred metaphor and sanctified imagination. In other words, resurrection, like the parables of Jesus, characterizes God’s future for us via an analogy, in recognition of the fact that we can’t do any better. We see dimly.

But what might resurrection, understood as picture language, help us to fathom?

The beginning of an answer comes from considering the historical context in which Jews first embraced the doctrine. For them, resurrection wasn’t the antithesis of non-existence, as it might be for a modern materialist. It was rather the antithesis of being in Sheol, the Bible’s name for the land of the dead. This realm was thought of as wholly undesirable. Its wraith-like inhabitants were enfeebled shades, pale phantoms of their former selves, without hope of egress. Pathetically weak, they couldn’t even praise God. The miserable place was the Hebrew’s counterpart to the Greek Hades, which in Homer houses the “mindless” dead, who are nothing but images of mortals who’ve come undone. For the old Israelites, death meant Sheol, and Sheol meant existence without life.

---

61 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* supplement to the third part, question 78, article 2, answer to objection 1.
One guesses that ideas about Sheol grew out of human experience. Apparitions of the dead are a cross-cultural reality. Indeed, and however ones explains the fact, people frequently see the departed. Moreover, while many apparitions are life-like and comforting, others are transparent, mechanical, and inexpressive. Presumably it was this latter type that informed Jewish ideas about Sheol. To be in the Pit was to be like the stereotypical ghost—an insubstantial vestige, desolate and lost.

Resurrection, when it finally entered Jewish theology, was the negation of all this. It was the belief that God won’t permit Israel to pine away in hopeless misery. It was the faith that the bars of Sheol won’t ultimately prevail: the prisoners will be set free. It was the conviction that God isn’t the God of the dead—that is, of ghosts—but of the living, so what awaits the saints can be hoped for instead of dreaded.

We may, if we choose, share this conviction, even while jettisoning the old literalism. Of course, how such a future might come to pass, or what it might mean concretely, who knows? One could fantasize, on the basis of the stories where the risen Jesus appears and disappears and seems to be material and not material, that resurrected life will mean the ability to participate fully in whatever worlds or dimensions we find ourselves. What counts most, however, is the hope that what lies ahead is not less but more.

* * * * *

If resurrection effectually communicates the hope that life in the world to come is full rather than attenuated, it also effectually conveys that the fate of the one is bound up with the fate of the many. Bodily resurrection isn’t about the lone individual. It’s rather a public and communal event at one point in time. In Matthew 25, all the nations are gathered before the Son of man, and in Revelation 20, all the dead stand together before the great white throne. Here Christian art follows the Bible and gets it right. Scenes of the resurrection typically depict large crowds. Even Jesus, in the old icons of his resurrection, isn’t alone. As he departs from Hades and rises from the dead, he hauls others up with him, including Adam and Eve, representatives of fallen and redeemed humanity. His defeat of death is their defeat of death. His victory is their victory.

So resurrection is about the human collectivity. It puts everyone in the same story by giving us all the same ending. In this resurrection differs from and is superior to that other chief symbol of the afterlife, immortality. Resurrection isn’t about you or about me but about us, and about a kingdom. When, in the Revelation of John, the saints rise from the dead, they enter the New Jerusalem, with its twelve open gates. That means they enter a city, which by definition shelters a large collection of people.

That we will, if we continue to exist, be our true selves only in community is a sensible projection from life as we now know it, and it’s a projection encouraged by the image of bodily resurrection. For bodies are more than biological machines. They’re also the

---

vehicles by which we establish and maintain social relationships. Bodies make it possible for us to know others and for others to know us. So profession of the resurrection is a way of saying that the world to come will be, like this one, communal. Here I recall some words of A. E. Taylor: “to be in Heaven, as Christianity conceives of it, is to be a member of a society of persons who see God, themselves, and each other as all truly are, without confusion or illusion, and who love God, themselves and each other with the love of this true insight; what is more than this is imaginative mythology.”

Origen has a beautiful passage in which he ponders why Jesus took a vow not to drink again of the fruit of the vine until the coming of the kingdom. He proposes that, as long as others suffer or sin, the risen Jesus, even though he’s in heaven, can’t but grieve. So too, according to Origen, is it with the apostles: they can’t know perfect joy as long as earth’s miserable affairs continue as ever. They are like the saints of olden times: “Abraham is still waiting to obtain the perfect things. Isaac waits, and Jacob and all the prophets wait for us, that they may lay hold of the perfect blessedness with us.” Even after death we are members of one another.

* * * * *

However helpful resurrection may be as a symbol of life in its fullness and of a shared future, its chief service may lie elsewhere. For if one thing seems assured, it’s that we have no power in the face of death. We may, with diet and exercise or whatnot, fend off the sickle for a bit, but the hour comes when none of us will work; and if we aren’t to be vanquished utterly, it won’t be because we’ve got something up our sleeve.

Some modern theologians underline the point by insisting that to be dead means not to exist. God, they say, brings life out of things that are not. They’re like Milton and Thomas Hobbes, who thought that the death of the soul followed by resurrection would be the best way to preserve God’s grace and omnipotence.

I think of things a bit differently. It’s true that God is the subject of our sentences with “will raise” or “will resurrect” in them. Yet neither the New Testament nor the dominant Christian tradition teaches that to die is to cease to be. Resurrection isn’t the gift of existence as such but the end of being ghosts. It’s like Christ harrowing Hades. The dead who rise with the savior are already there when he shows up. They’re waiting, hoping to exchange the desolation of the underworld for the joys of heaven.

Nonetheless, death would indeed seem to be the utter end of all human effort, of any illusion that we’re masters of our fate. You can’t resolve either to be extinguished or to live on after brain death. And if you do somehow live on, you can’t choose which part of you does so, or where it goes, or how it gets there. If there’s an agent in death, it can only be God. We’re reduced to hope. Our incapacity makes us like Jesus on the cross. All he could do was close his eyes and commit his spirit to Another.

64 Origien, Hom. Lev. 7.2.
Maybe, once we become acclimatized to whatever ultimately awaits us, there'll be a place for our decisions and our efforts. But at the moment when we pass from here to there, it’ll be like our first coming into this world. When born, we were ignorant and passive, and we couldn’t provide for ourselves. All we could do was instinctively cry out for nourishment and comfort. And as it was in our beginning, so will it be at our end.

* * * * *

Some people feel that they’ve been thrown into this world. Although I don’t dispute their experience, mine is different. I feel that I was gently laid down here. Maybe that’s why so much of life has seemed to be a gift, including my body, which I didn’t design or build. As soon as I became aware, it was just there, going about its manifold business.

Furthermore, I don’t really understand much about it. I don’t know how to break down food or how to distribute nutrients. I don’t know how to heal cuts or how to battle infections. I don’t know how to manufacture saliva or how to contract muscles. All these things, and a million more of which I’m the beneficiary, just happen. I do none of them. Science, to be sure, helps me to understand some of what goes on, but it was all going on long before my teachers and my books taught me anything.

We’re all immersed in a great Wisdom that we didn’t invent and don’t control, a great Wisdom that’s been with us since birth. Hope in resurrection is the conviction that this Wisdom won’t abandon us as death approaches but will accompany us to whatever awaits us.
Performing Prosperity, Promoting Pride!

Jonathan L. Walton

Dr. Jonathan L. Walton is Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Professor of Religion and Society at Harvard Divinity School. He delivered the Geddes W. Hanson Lecture on October 21, 2014.

Let me begin by expressing my deepest appreciation to the “powers that be” here at Princeton Theological Seminary. To President Craig Barnes, Dean James Kay, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, esteemed alums, gifted students, hardworking staff, faithful grounds, operations, and security crew, and from the hands that prepare and serve food in McKay to all those invisible hands who do the heavy lifting of cleaning up after us, I say to you thank you. And, most importantly, I see you.

I want to thank you for affording me this opportunity to stand here today as the 2014 Geddes W. Hanson lecturer. This is an honor that I am hard pressed to describe. I’ve had the privilege and good pleasure of sharing my work in a lot of different places among what some might consider prestigious company. Yet nothing has ever compared to this feeling. I say this for a couple of reasons.

For one, I am home. This campus is home. Princeton Seminary provided the physical place and intellectual space to discern my vocation, as well as the intellectual tools to empower me to then pursue it. I will be forever indebted to this institution. I pray that the research that is presented in this lecture will reflect well on the wonderful professors, research librarians, and classmates who trained me on this campus.

Second, from my very first semester at the seminary as an MDiv student I was welcomed into the home of a seemingly grouchy, grumpy, cantankerous professor named Geddes Hanson. He was a mystery to me. Because I could not understand how somebody with such a bad attitude was married to somebody who was so beautiful, warm, and welcoming. Yet it did not take long to figure out that the grouchy, grumpy, cantankerous professor bit was all an act. In fact, I think it was revealed to me the first time I had dinner at the Hanson home. Doc Hanson was lecturing me about something with all the authority and grouch he could muster, when a seemingly exasperated Carrie looked at him and said, “Sit down and eat your food!”—to which Doc quickly replied, “Yes, Dear.”

And over the past two decades, Doc and Carrie Hanson, as well as his beloved big sister Avis Hanson, have become for me, my wife Cecily, and our three children, an additional set of parents and grandparents that we are bound to with the ties of love. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that we don’t earn good friends or family, God gives them to us. And there is not a day that goes by that I don’t thank God for giving me Doc and Carrie Hanson. Because of their service and personal sacrifices, it was possible
for someone like me to earn a PhD from this institution. And this endowed lecture is a testament and testimony of their profound contributions to theological education.

Pentecostal Made Pretty: A Picture Window of the Prosperity Gospel

In the second half of the twentieth century, one might argue that among evangelicals, all paths of ecclesiastical ingenuity and theological creativity extended out of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Evangelist Kenneth Hagin’s Rhema Bible Training College became the premier training ground of the Word of Faith Movement, also known as the health and wealth gospel. Oral Roberts University continued to produce students who would become major players in the world of evangelical media and publishing, such as Steve Strang, founder and CEO of Charisma Publishing. And when it came to hitting the “big time” in regards to the preaching or gospel music circuits, there was arguably none other as influential as evangelist and recording artist Carlton Pearson.

Each year throughout the 1990s, up to fifty-thousand evangelicals made their way to the campus of Oral Roberts University for a weeklong celebration which he dubbed, “the AZUSA Conference.” The title paid homage to what many consider the genesis of Pentecostalism in America, the AZUSA Street Revival of 1906 led by Holiness preacher William Seymour in Los Angeles. Like the original revival, Pearson’s meetings were multiracial, marked by singing and preaching, and embraced gifts of the Holy Spirit, most notably the gift of speaking in tongues. Both gatherings also welcomed worshippers from across the denominational spectrum—Holiness, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists came to AZUSA. One year Pearson even featured a gospel-singing, Jewish brother named Joshua Nelson. Like the original revival, Pearson’s AZUSA erected a big tent.

The similarities pretty much end here.

The luxurious Mabee Center auditorium was a far cry from the dilapidated church building at 312 Azusa Street. Prior to Seymour’s group securing the Azusa Street property as a rental, the sawdust-floor church house served as a storage warehouse and barn. Other differences set the events further apart than the span of the century. No musical instruments were used at the original revival. Pearson’s AZUSA gathered together the some of the best musicians in the nation. Seymour did not take up any collection, much less pay honoraria to speakers. Pearson collected an excess of $100,000 in offerings per night, and paid preachers and singers on average an honorarium of $10,000. And worshippers who made their way to the original AZUSA revival were known more for the ascetic aesthetic of sartorial simplicity. Those who strolled into Pearson’s gathering came decked out like a fashion show. Not only was everyone dressed to impress, you never knew what favorite televangelist or gospel singer you might see sitting in your

---

1 See the video and images that accompany this lecture here: ptsem.edu/waltonlecture2014.
row. Just as we saw how people were “shocked to discover” that Grammy-award winning gospel icon Walter Hawkins of the legendary Hawkins family “has been here all week long and has hardly missed a service,” Pearson was intentional about orchestrating such spontaneous moves of the spirit. At least one well-choreographed “impromptu” performance per night was enough to keep the auditorium full of suspense and anticipation.

You saw the footage. Pearson was a performer par excellence—gifts honed as a child leading the choir at the Jackson Memorial Church of God in Christ with Bishop J.A. Blake in San Diego, and then as a member of the World Action Singers as a student at Oral Roberts University. Some of you may also recognize another World Action Singer that went on to fame. Before joining forces with Regis, Kathie Lee Epstein accompanied Carlton Pearson and Oral Roberts!

Understanding both choreography and cinematography, and being sensitive to the timing as well as tempo of the service are what distinguished Pearson from the scores of other evangelists whom could sing and/or preach. Pearson was a student and innovator of the televised revival meeting.

The charisma on stage is as captivating and vibrant as the bold colors that adorn flesh. Royal blue suits, fire truck red blouses, and canary yellow dresses pop out from a pastel background. Colorful clothes constitute part of the kinetic energy impelled by rhythmic bodies of the choir. A Hammond B-3 organ catalyzed this spiritual pageant that fused the frenzy and fervor of black Protestantism with the showmanship and choreography of a Hollywood variety show. The result was an extravagant scene of hype and ballyhoo. When frozen, the visual frame looks like a showroom window that would have made late nineteenth century advertising guru and The Wonderful Wizard of Oz author L. Frank Baum proud. AZUSA footage charms and captivates.

The scene, in many ways, captures Pearson’s spiritual imagination and what he believed to be his divine call. Pearson conceived himself a bridge builder. He connected traditional and contemporary expressions of his faith—what scholars of religion now refer to as neo-Pentecostalism. He connected white Assemblies of God Pentecostals, African American Oneness Apostolics (T.D. Jakes), and other evangelical denominations such as Baptists and Methodists. And he sought to connect what he believed was the rich faith of a people mired in material lack and poverty to new possibilities characterized by material plenty and prosperity.

Having been raised a fourth-generation African American Pentecostal in what he often refers to as the “ghettoes of San Diego,” Pearson contends that Oral Roberts University in Tulsa provided him with another view of the faith of his foreparents—a Pentecostalism not characterized by compensatory claims to Holiness to obscure social marginalization, but a Pentecostalism that was mainstream, socially accepted, and, above all, desirable. In reflecting back on the moment he drove up to the campus of Oral Roberts University
(ORU) in 1971 as an eighteen year old freshmen, he says one of the first thoughts that came to his mind was, “How could a tongue-talking, bible-thumping Pentecostal preacher build this? And I compared it to the Church of God in Christ. I wanted my church to have ORU. And on that day I started to want to make Pentecostalism pretty. Oral and Kathryn (Kuhlman) brought dignity to Pentecostalism…. I wanted to mix her and Oral to bring that sort of dignity to my people.”

Prosperity Gospel as Social Capital and Spiritual Capital

To be sure, a few scholars over the past decade, including myself, have written about Pearson, the AZUSA conference, and the prominent televangelists such as Joyce Meyer and T.D. Jakes, who gained national followings at this conference. Shayne Lee and Phil Sinitiere’s Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and America’s Spiritual Marketplace and Scott Billingsley’s It’s A New Day: Race and Gender in the Modern Charismatic Movement introduce us to contemporary televangelists like T.D. Jakes and Paula White and the religious contexts from which their theology and ecclesiastical approaches developed. My Harvard colleague, anthropologist Marla Frederick’s Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith, as well as her forthcoming book Colored Television: Religion, Media, and Racial Uplift in the Black Atlantic World, move beyond production of messages to examine the many ways women of color consume and interpret religious broadcasting. Frederick examines women’s engagement with hyper-gendered, often masculinist, meaning-making and how everyday yet sophisticated female consumers decode such messages for personal empowerment.

Frederick’s monograph and articles modeled the shifts in religion and media studies that some members of the International Society for Religion, Media and Culture, have recently suggested was sorely needed. In the same way that gender has been a blind spot in the field of religion, media and culture, Marla Frederick’s important work on women of color throughout the diaspora is in the blind spot of the blind spot. We would all do better to pay closer attention to this important group: women of color who consume liberally but critically pervasive themes on what it means to be human along the binary of male and female.

What is more, up to this point, my engagement with Pearson and other televangelists of color has been primarily concerned with identifying theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural particularities toward underscoring difference. Evangelists like Rev. Ike, Carlton Pearson, and Creflo Dollar must be distinguished from their conservative, white contemporaries. Of course there are similarities. We are discussing a quintessentially American phenomenon. But to view these evangelists as Oral Roberts, Paul Crouch,

---

or Kenneth Copeland in blackface commits violence against the evangelists and communities under consideration.4

Nor have I ever felt comfortable reducing such displays of prosperity to innovative strategies toward cornering a religious market, as does the work of some sociologists writing on this topic. The “rational choice” theories that inform such conclusions are often substantiated by cherry-picked, after-the-fact evidence that ignore a whole host of cultural stimulants and affective responses to which we are often not privy. People gravitate toward messages of theological prosperity for a wide-range of reasons not evident to producers. Hence, I want to temper commendations of “spiritual genius” that we often ascribe to producers in order to leave room for intentional and innovative interpretive license on the part of participants—innovative interpretations that are located within multi-traditioned, historical frameworks and cultural structures of feeling that inform religious, racial, regional, and a whole host of other intersecting identities and communities.

And along this same vein, I also want to expand my own previous position that provided an account of crass displays of conspicuous consumption as a means of “Bourdieuian” distinction.5 In discussing figures like Rev. Ike and Prophet James F. Jones, who the New York Post dubbed the “Messiah in Mink,” I argued that the cultural performance of prosperity allows the faithful to distance themselves from the ordinary masses and thus garner both spiritual and social capital. Persons garner spiritual capital by demonstrating how their religion produces the same, if not better, material rewards as privileged members of a society that the faithful regard as inaccessible and, more often than not, immoral. This spiritual capital, then, is immediately transformed into social capital. Prosperity typifies power and influence.

I still affirm this position to a degree. Many believe that visible cultural markers of distinction such as fancy clothes and fine cars generate social advantage and establish class status. In a highly stratified and increasingly immobile society such as the United States, performances of prosperity provide a means for persons to seek prestige, at least, on a micro level. What I have not considered are the historical roots of such a belief in the dominant society that might give even greater credence to prosperity gospel proponents. This is to say, when we consider the ways consumerism and citizenship have been bound up in a symbiotic relationship in the United States of America since the late 19th century, the prosperity gospel might be viewed as an example of the structure of feeling which emerged in an insecure middle-class consciousness with the development of consumer capitalism.

Commodification and Citizenship

This is why I am trying to start a new conversation with the material. I want to use Pearson and his ministry to connect the dots between commodification and citizenship. Many of you understand the logic of religious commodification—the process by which a religious performer gives up their body as an object that is subsequently transformed into a market good. But what does it mean to situate this logic of religious commodification squarely within a larger landscape of mass consumption that establishes the boundaries and contours for being and belonging, humanity and citizenship?

I want to suggest that Pearson used his AZUSA conferences and the technologies of production and distribution to do more than offer himself up as a religious commodity to be marketed and sold. In examining the broad scope of his religious theatre, Pearson transformed participants into objects that modeled the spiritual goods he embodied; Pearson created a picture window of prosperity and empowered living by way of religious fidelity. By doing so, when considering his larger historical frame and particular cultural context, it could be that he was making a claim that surpassed pecuniary concern and theological claims—maybe, just maybe, Pearson was making a claim of African American citizenship.

This is why I have come to believe that when we drill down we see a more specific tradition of political response with Pearson. Carlton Pearson’s AZUSA conferences and associated video box sets function as a visual counter-narrative that challenges white supremacist assumptions about black Pentecostalism in particular, and African American citizenship in general. In creating this visual theatre of black Pentecostal opulence in the final quarter of the twentieth century, Pearson was unwittingly extending a form of antiracist resistance that dates back one hundred years—antiracist resistance that employs the tools of visual culture with the specific intent of disrupting prevailing ideological claims that locate certain racialized and religious bodies outside of the larger body politic. He is representing both blackness and Pentecostalism in a particular way insofar as the latter was perceived as a cultural anchor holding down bodies that were already fighting for inclusion—the marginalized of the minoritized.

In citing the relationship between consumerism and citizenship in American society, I am relying on the work of cultural historians William Leach and Lizabeth Cohen. Leach’s *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* argues convincingly that American corporate business and key institutions collaborated to create a future-oriented culture of desire in America that defined the good life according to the consumption of consumer goods. Acquisition and consumption were the key features of what Leach refers to as this “cult of the new,” which made American society seemingly more democratic, democratizing desire, while ignoring wealth, political access, and economic opportunities, which make access to this form of happiness possible. The glass showroom window that developed in the early twentieth century becomes the
synecdoche of this tantalizing and titillating visual culture. The glass is democratizing as everyone can see through it, even while it de-democratizes by denying access to the masses. The show window typifies the paradox of so-called empowered consumer culture. Consumerism is lauded as the great social leveler, even as the glass represents the unilateral power of access and denial of merchants.

Lizabeth Cohen’s *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* makes a similar historical argument, but she makes explicit how the often-isolated ideal types of citizen and consumer were in constant tension and overlap. This tension reveals the permeability of America’s political and economic spheres, making particular note of the protracted struggle of minoritized groups, such as women and African Americans, in the postwar era. The citizen-consumer ideal was embraced not only by New Deal policymakers but social groups on the political margins. In Cohen’s words, “identification as consumers offered a new opportunity to make claims on those wielding public and private power in American society.”

Now earlier I said that Pearson’s AZUSA conferences and associated video box sets are a part of a longstanding tradition of political response—a tradition of response that employs the tools of visual culture as a counter-narrative to challenge white supremacist representations of black life as well as racial cultural privilege of the gaze—a gaze that authorizes who has the power to look, as well as who has the power to determine what will be seen.

Representations in Visual Culture

One of the earliest examples of this takes place at the Paris Exposition in 1900. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois compiled a collection of 500 photographs for the “American Negro Exhibit.” Within this exhibit, Du Bois created the Georgia Negro albums filled with hundreds of photographs of blacks engaged in a wide range of activities. There are no names. Locations are not identified. Relationships among individuals in the photos are not made explicit. Yet they capture the aesthetic markers of middle-class prosperity—beautiful homes filled with bookshelves, a young lady playing the piano, and a serious and stern man sitting in his study—are just a few of the photos in the exhibit. One might assume that such a strategy puts interpretive pressure on the viewer with the intent of disrupting and dismantling negatively held assumptions that inform the gaze that views blackness as an *a priori* problem.

An international jury awarded Du Bois a gold medal for these images that clearly performed revolutionary political and countercultural work at the turn of the 20th century.

---


century. Part of the genius of projecting yet not commenting on these bodies was how it implicitly identifies the double bind of black prosperity, a concept that was viewed by many as an inherent contradiction.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, social Darwinists and neo-Lamarckian’s provided the “scientific” justification of Negro inferiority needed to not only end America’s short-lived experiment of a multiracial democracy during Reconstruction, but also justify the codification of political, social, and economic disenfranchisement of African Americans. Cultural denigration of black humanity did not just descend down from the “American School” of ethnography at University of Pennsylvania, the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard, Yale’s laissez-faire sociology, or Columbia’s Dunning school of history, it emerged in many different forms of mass culture.

Consider Harper’s, the premier national weekly newspaper in the late nineteenth century. For two decades they ran a series of cartoons lampooning a fictive “Blackville.” These sketches featured a large family named rather inappropriately “the Smallbreeds” and the prevailing theme of the series was to disparage African American elites, and all African Americans who demonstrated any level of social aspirations. This cartoon is entitled, “Decorative art has at last reached Blackville.” You can see the cacophonous clash of chintzy items that crowd the room, while there is a man clearly painting everything his paintbrush can touch. One of the hosts brags in a supposed Southern, black vernacular, “Dat small Japan jug cum from the ruins of Pompy.”

“The phrenologist at Blackville” stands before a crowd, adorning similar affluent affect, and declares over a cross-eyed young man with a guileless grin on his face, “Dis young gemmun am a born poet. Ideality consumes nearly de entire skull.” The joke being not only in the mocking of failed performances of intellect on the part of the scientist and crowd, but the manner in which the imbecilic young man becomes representative of the entire group. Ideality is confused for intelligence is the punchline. Platitudeous proclamations and performances of social desire are confused for the intellectual and artistic work of the poet.

Then there is the black bourgeois bridal party. The caption reads, “After doing Paris and the rest of Europe, the bridal party return to Blackville.” One notices the reason that the two couples did Paris and the rest of Europe. It is the two babies in the arms of an accompanying nanny that were clearly born of the newlyweds while the couples were away. In the mind of the famed nineteenth century artist and creator of Blackville, Sol Eytinge Jun, the couple’s proud posture serves as a source of amusement and mockery among other residents of Blackville, as demonstrated by the woman laughing behind the tree. This is not to mention how the fine wears and dandyism of the newlyweds clash against the rural and poverty stricken landscape that is Blackville.

There are so many other examples. In fact, just as the construction of toy departments within larger department stores were essential in creating sanctuaries of desire in early
twentieth-century America, the first mass marketing toy success in the United States was a mechanical tap dancing African American male figurine. The toy was named, “the Alabama Coon Jigger.” You will notice the spatted shoes, suit, and tie, as yet the caricature makes a not-so-subtle allusion to the rightful role of African Americans despite outward appearance—the servicing of the white middle class, either by domesticity or entertainment. According to Shawn Michelle Smith, in reference to these sorts of representations of blackness in mass culture, “the white middle classes naturalized their own social positions by lampooning the ‘unnatural’ aspirations of ‘unevolved’ African Americans.”

These are the naturalized social positions that Du Bois’s photo project sought to challenge—and he did so on the same ideological terrain of racial imagery. He provided data in the forms of charts and maps to show the distribution and development of African Americans over the four decades since Emancipation. But he supplements these figures with the work of African American photographer Thomas Askew in order to ask what he views as an inevitable question of “What are these people doing for themselves?” To this Du Bois replies, “there is in the whole building no more encouraging answer than that given by the American negroes, who are here shown to be studying, examining, and thinking of their own progress and prospects.”

Economic Prosperity and the Tulsa Race Riots

What does this brief history of the ideological contestation of the black middle-class have to do with Pearson? I am beginning to think everything. Particularly based on the specific context and history of Tulsa, Oklahoma—the location of one of the most horrific tragedies and acts of domestic terrorism in the twentieth century, the so-called Tulsa Race Riots of 1921. At this time, an estimated 10,000 African Americans lived in north Tulsa in a section known as Greenwood. Like the oil industry that spurred the city’s growth, north Tulsa was known as a center of opportunity and affluence for African Americans. The Greenwood section was widely referred to as Black Wall Street, as it was populated with business owners, lawyers, and domestics that earned higher than average wages inside the homes of wealthy oil barons in South Tulsa. The community also benefitted from a vibrant nightlife, as white laborers, both itinerants and locals, would frequent the saloons and after-hour spots that Greenwood provided. And while local white preachers sermonized about the impure and intemperate life of the Negro based predominantly on Greenwood’s multiracial nightlife, the money was flowing into large brick homes, minks, top of the line Vitrolas, and new automobiles among Greenwood’s black residents.

While I do not need to go into the specifics of the riot here, we know it to be a familiar

---

8 Ibid., 80.
story. White working class mobs wiped out the town, destroying over four million dollars in property (forty million dollars today) in less than twelve hours. Also when the National Guard was called in, airplanes flown in World War I flew overhead to drop explosives, making Tulsa the first city to endure an aerial assault in the United States. One couple for instance, lost an eight-room house, their car, and three hundred dollars in gold coins. In the months that followed, sixty to eighty percent of the population became literal wards of the state living in detention centers and forced to wear green tags on their clothing. Another ten percent left Tulsa altogether, never to return.

Yet due to the conspiracy of silence that surrounded these events throughout the twentieth century, including in Tulsa, performances of economic prosperity among African Americans always carried a heightened political meaning. You are talking about a group of people that literally had had a bomb dropped on them for being successful. At Mount Zion Baptist Church, middle class African Americans who broke free of the segregation of Tulsa’s First Baptist pooled their resources to build one of the most stately and distinguished churches in the city. They named themselves Mount Zion rather than Second Baptist at their founding because these African Americans of Greenwood said that there were not second to anyone. Yet within one month of completion, the entire edifice was reduced to rubble by the riots.

This is the context in which Carlton Pearson preached and performed his particular brand of prosperity. It should also not be lost on us that it was in the 1990s that South Tulsa and the nation began to break the silence around the riot, as lawyers Johnny Cochran and Charles Ogletree began a national campaign to secure reparations for survivors and direct descendants of survivors—including some names that you might recognize, such as the late historian John Hope Franklin and Professor Cornel West, whose grandfather was the pastor of Metropolitan Baptist Church in Greenwood.

Moreover, during this same period Carlton Pearson began publishing a lifestyle magazine entitled ExcellStyle: Excellence in Successful Living. Pearson hired Shari Horner-Tisdale, a Tulsa native to serve as publisher and editor-in-chief of the magazine. Before assuming this position, she was the Executive Administrator for the Greenwood Cultural Center, and her role was to raise awareness about the history of Greenwood and use a two-and-a-half-million-dollar grant supplied by the state to create programs to empower the North Tulsa community. The magazine was filled with articles on prosperity from a theological perspective, but also empowered living via civic engagement and entrepreneurial impulse. Articles offer advice on finance and home buying tips, and the magazine was replete with images of successful African American business owners and residents of Tulsa. Interestingly enough, many of the models pictured in these pages, like Du Bois’s exhibit, do not have captions. There sartorially sophisticated bodies, like those filmed inside of the Mabee Center, speak for themselves. They are present. They are prosperous. They are a part of the American project.
There is one additional reason that I want to consider Carlton Pearson’s televangelistic efforts and visual framing of prosperity within this tradition of political response—it is because I discovered that he was not even the first African American preacher in Tulsa to engage in this sort of activity. While researching the history of Tulsa, I came across the name Solomon Sir Jones, an African American Baptist minister who traveled throughout the state of Oklahoma in the 1920s in order to capture African American prosperity on film. In 2006, an Oklahoma state senator purchased the 29 vintage canisters of film from an antique dealer in Tulsa where he immediately had them digitized. Luckily, Yale purchased them in 2009 at auction and has since made them available to the public.

These silent films offer a window into the black middle class in Tulsa as it sought to rebuild after the riots. I have taken a few of the snippets to show here. They include members of the local chapter of the National Negro Business League, a black owned insurance company, clothing store, bottling company, and funeral home. Reverend Jones also films images of the rubble that remains, which was once Mount Zion Baptist’s new building. They serve as documented proof of black progress—progress that must be proven on the ideological terrain of visual imagery with evidence.

And when we consider the particularities of this history that take into consideration race and place, I do not feel as comfortable writing off Pearson as simply trying to sell a pie-in-the sky theology. We might be able to locate him within a much larger and longer tradition of political response wherein African Americans were making claims to citizenship through demonstrations of economic potential and power as consumers. Now we can debate the merits of this strategy at both the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For now, however, that is beside the point. Because what I see here is a prosperity gospel that is not just grounded in the tradition of spiritualism, New Thought philosophies, and postwar charismatic revivalism. But rather the prosperity gospel serves as a visual counter-narrative in order to empower perceived marginalized Protestant bodies in the vein of unapologetically ideological racial representation. In this context, then, the prosperity gospel becomes the picture window of black progress, success and American citizenship. Thus, like DuBois, when someone asks Carlton Pearson the question “what are black Pentecostals doing for themselves?” he, too, might answer, “there is in the whole building no more encouraging answer than that given by these largely African American Pentecostals, who are here at AZUSA shown to be studying, examining, and thinking of their own progress and prospects.”
Homiletical Implications of Barth’s Doctrine of Election

William H. Willimon

Dr. William H. Willimon is Professor of the Practice of Ministry at Duke Divinity School. He delivered the Donald Macleod/Short Hills Community Congregational Church Preaching Lectures on October 27–28, 2014. This article is excerpted from William H. Willimon, How Odd of God: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Election for Preachers (Westminster John Knox Press, 2015) and appears here by permission of the author.

Preaching’s great challenge came into focus for me during a rereading of Barth’s doctrine of election. Barth’s fourth volume (II/2) has been called by his student, Eberhard Busch, “the highlight of the Church Dogmatics.” Writing during 1940–1941, the apex of Hitler’s power, when the sky turned dark, “Barth believed that all our comfort and all our defiance depends on our understanding anew that … God bound himself to [humanity], and specifically to sinful [humanity]…. God determines himself free for fellowship with this [humanity] and thereby determines [humanity] to be in fellowship with him and with all whom [God] loves.” Barth could have spoken judgment and condemnation of Hitler; he chose instead not to mention Hitler and to speak with unreserved affirmation of the gracious divine determination radiantly revealed in Christ.

God’s election of grace is “the sum of Gospel…. [It is] the whole of the Gospel, the Gospel in nuce … the very essence of all good news.” All we preachers know for sure about God is that in Jesus Christ God is the one who has eternally determined to be for us and has elected us to be for God.

The knowledge of God’s gracious election has significant implications for preachers:

1. God is the primary agent of preaching.

   Election characterizes the work of an interventionist, active, initiating God. Our relationship with God is based upon God’s gracious choice to be for us and to speak with us through sermons of preachers. God’s eternal decision to elect is not only revelation’s substance but also its agent.

   Preaching is not established by method or rhetorical technique but by the grace

1 Eberhard Busch, Barth (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 17. Election is at the heart of Barth’s “revolution” as Bruce McCormack (our best interpreter of Barth on election) puts it. Bruce McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in John Webster, ed., The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 93–97. “I am confident that the greatest contribution of Karl Barth to the development of Church doctrine will be located in his doctrine of election.” Through his surprising reworking of election, Barth brought about “a revolution in the doctrine of God” (ibid., 223).
2 Busch, Barth, 17.
3 Ibid., 13–14.
and mercy of God. Homiletical obsession with rhetoric appears to be waning; the best recent books on preaching are unashamedly theological. Interesting sermons begin in the conviction that God is revealed to be other than we expected. God is Emmanuel, God reiterating God’s eternal, gracious choice to be for us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our proclamation is driven, not by our desire to be heard, but rather by God’s determination—testified throughout Scripture and fully revealed in Jesus Christ—to be God With Us.

Praise characterizes much of Christian worship because the Christian life is responsive to something good that God has done. One need not be able to report having had the experience of election to be elected. Pietism and liberalism find it tough to beat the rap that their theology is merely a subjective claim about us and only secondarily a claim about God. Election is so against our natural inclination that it is unlikely we could have thought it up ourselves.

Moralism, the bane of homiletics in my church family, is defeated by election as God’s act to which we make little contribution. When the gospel is reduced to something that we must think, feel, believe, or do, the gospel is warped beyond recognition. Election is a constant reminder to us preachers that we preach not in order to take our listeners somewhere they aren’t but to announce where, by God’s gracious election, they are and shall be.

2. Our listeners have been graciously elected by God to be for God.

After Judas, we preachers ought never to be surprised that some obstinately refuse to listen or that others startlingly hear. It’s easier to believe in our own election than to believe in that of others. Therefore a great challenge of ministry is indefatigably to believe that those to whom we speak are those whom God has elected to hear. They are not whom I would have called to be the Body of Christ were I doing the calling. They are God’s idea of a fit kingdom, not mine. Part of the challenge of loving God is to love those whom God loves.

However, a joy of the preaching life is delight when someone hears, someone who, by all accounts, should not. It’s then that we experience anew election, the inscrutable mystery of God’s gracious choice, and exclaim with our ecclesiastical ancestors, “Has God’s salvation gone even to the Gentiles?” (Acts 28:28). To be honest, it is frustrating when an untrained layperson is elected for some stunning insight that God has not given me, the preacher who thinks I ought to be the custodian of theological discernment!

Our listeners are a mixed bag, some of whom know the truth that, “God so loved the world that God gave …” (John 3:16), and others continue to assume that the contest between them and God continues. If God the Father must sacrifice God the Son or make life unpleasant for us preachers through the prodding of God the Holy Spirit, God will be their God and they will be God’s people, because God is determined to get back what by rights belongs to God. Let preachers pray for the courage to take our congregations’
rejection less seriously than we take God’s embrace of them in Jesus Christ. Their hostility to the truth who is Jesus Christ is no serious contender.

We preachers often complain that our hearers aren’t sincerely listening, or that they are biblically illiterate, or theologically malformed. All of this is true, of course. However, such disparagement of our congregations is beside the point in light of the doctrine that by the sheer grace of God they are elected: “Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6), not for those who are biblically informed and spiritually astute. Thus election disciplines our preaching to rejoice in what God has done and is doing rather than bemoan the inability and ineptitude of our congregations.

By implication, if people do not hear, it may be because God has not (yet) gotten to them or (yet) given them grace to hear. Barth taught that the only difference between the Christian and the non-Christian was noetic. If we believe, it’s grace, gift. We have received the news. When faced with rejection, we preachers will want to resist the temptation to lapse into apologetics—taking disbelief too seriously. We cannot manufacture more palatable revelation for those who have not (yet) received the real thing.

Rather than acting as if disbelief is decisive and conclusive, we will want to talk more of God’s gracious election than of the disbeliever’s rejection, humbly, patiently, expectantly to testify; convincing and converting them is God’s self-assignment.

Election is a tremendous shove toward truly evangelical preaching. The sweeping scope of God’s election could rescue evangelicals from the suffocating clutches of our culture’s subjectivity and conditional salvation. Mark Galli, chiding fellow evangelicals for dismissing Barth because of his alleged “universalism,” speaks of the evangelical joy arising from Barth because of his alleged “universalism,” speaks of the evangelical joy arising from Barth's thought on election:

Jeff McSwain was a Young Life leader for years before being forced to resign because of his Barthian views. But he remains in youth ministry, and continues to preach the gospel of God’s universal redemption and the need for a response of repentance and faith.

McSwain began rethinking his approach to ministry as a result of wrestling with the views of Arminians and Five-Point Calvinists…. For Calvinists, to say that it is our faith that makes Christ’s death effectual is to say that salvation rests on our shoulders. It also smacks of relativism: Salvation is not true until we believe it.

McSwain argues that like Arminians, Barthians believe that Jesus loves everyone he created and that he died on the cross for everyone. Like Calvinists, he says Barthians believe that the atoning work of Christ actually accomplished reconciliation and forgiveness for everyone for whom Christ died. He concludes:

Instead of dismissing Barth, it would behoove evangelicals to consider the possibility that Barth’s theology is the most evangelical of all…. With a dynamic theology of the Holy Spirit to go along with his robust theology of the cross, Barth knifes through the Gordian Knot of Arminianism and five-point Calvinism, and encourages evangelists to consider a
third way, a way of making bold and inclusive claims upon the life of every hearer....

3. Talk about the gospel tends to produce conflict.

We preachers like to think of ourselves as reconcilers and peacemakers. Many of our sermons seem designed to lessen the tension that is produced when a biblical text is dropped upon a defensive congregation. Even to stand and say, after an outrageous text has been read, “I have three things I want to say about today’s text,” is to risk defusing the explosive encounter between God’s chosen people and God’s chosen word.

Too bad for our self-image as peacemakers; we must preach Jesus Christ and him crucified. The good news of God’s gracious election is bad news for our cherished idolatries and self-deceptive ideals. God is not a dim, distant, unknowable, alien force hiding in heaven. God is a Jew from Nazareth who was tortured to death by a consortium of government and religious leaders, rejected by those whom he came to save, and then went right back to them.

Pastoral care for the congregation through our preaching is not enough. Faithful proclamation can never be merely parochial because God isn’t. Christian speech is public heralding rather than insider conversation, missional rather than congregational. Any congregation that is merely a warm-hearted group of caring friends who is not actively, daringly crossing cultural, racial, ideological, national boundaries (mission) is not faithful. Thus Newbigin speaks of the congregation as the “hermeneutic of the gospel,” God’s means of interpreting to the world the visible, public truth of what the world looks like when the Lamb rules. The congregation is God’s self-presentation. Pastors cannot hunker down with the few faithful handed to us by hard working pastors of a previous generation, those sweet older saints who have enough free time to hang out at church; election is inducement to mission.

My theory is that there is much conflict and quarreling in many congregations because they talk only to themselves. Boredom (and an uneasy sense that church is meant to be more than this cozy club) fosters congregational contentiousness. The conflict that validates a church as Christ’s is not that of squabbling, miffed church members but the conflict between Christ and the world.

A church that is not restlessly probing the boundaries between insiders and outsiders, not regularly surprised by the expansive reach of God’s saving actions is a church trying to be the elect of God without living the truth of election. God elects the church for the

---

5 Barth states: “We may believe that God can and must only be absolute in contrast to all that is relative, exalted in contrast to all that is lowly, active in contrast to all suffering, inviolable in contrast to all temptation, transcendent in contrast to all immanence.... But such beliefs are shown to be quite untenable, and corrupt and pagan by the fact that God does in fact be and do this in Jesus Christ” (CD IV/1, 186).
purpose of embodying God’s gracious intent beyond the bounds of the church. Others may be enemies of our country or adversaries of the American way of life, but God is not their enemy.

To criminals imprisoned in the Basel jail, Barth preached that the first Christian community was composed on Golgotha:

“They crucified him with the criminals.” Which is more amazing, to find Jesus in such bad company, or to find the criminals in such good company? ... Like Jesus, these two criminals had been arrested ...., locked up and sentenced.... And now they hang on their crosses with him and find themselves in solidarity and fellowship with him. They are linked in a common bondage never again to be broken ... a point of no return for them as for him. There remained only the shameful, pain stricken present and the future of their approaching death....

They crucified him with the criminals.... This was the first Christian fellowship, ... To live by this promise is to be a Christian community. The two criminals were the first certain Christian community.7

Criminals hanging out with Jesus are the new normal, the first church. God has called us together into a new family that cannot live except as a growing family.

Barth tells Christians that conflict comes with the territory; we cannot avoid the disturbance by “retreat into an island of inwardness.”8 Better that there be conflict in the congregation because it has been abruptly confronted with truth than for conflict to be in the preacher who is desperate to speak about Jesus without anyone discomfited. The “general religious self-consciousness” alleged by Schleiermacher’s apologetics (beware, contemporary “spirituality”!) fails to do justice to the contradictions (and conflict) between Christian and worldly thought. Christian preaching is “the aggressor.”9

4. Faithful preachers trust the God who has called us to preach.

“Is there any word from the Lord?” (Jeremiah 37:17) is the only good Sunday morning question, a question that is asked in trust that God speaks. Too much of contemporary preaching is anthropological, homespun wisdom for a purpose-driven life, common sense offered as if it were expert advice. Joel Osteen habitually ends many of his sentences with, “Right?” or “Okay?” thus signifying the hearer’s verdict as the final judge on the veracity of his sermons.

The odd doctrine of election is just one of the ways God helps the church not to disappear into the world. Pelagianism comes naturally; we have an innate propensity to try to effect our own salvation. In all its forms, Pelagianism is fed by anxiety about God.

---

8 Ibid., 616.
9 The oddity of divine election means that preachers “cannot translate the truth and reality of the divine command into a necessary element of [humanity’s] spiritual life” (ibid., 522).
10 Ibid., 521.
An anxious church morphs into a poorly funded welfare agency, a gregarious club to remedy American loneliness, a handmaid for politicians of the right or the left rather than stick to its primary vocation—to be a people who show God’s decision to be God for us and for us to be for God.

To preachers who rely on their subjective experiences rather than attaching themselves to the objectivity of revelation, Barth said, “Against boredom the only defense is … being biblical.” Scripture stokes, funds, and fuels our imaginations with thoughts we could not have come up with on our own. “For what we preach is not ourselves, but the Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Corinthians 4:5).

5. Our challenge, as preachers, is not to be true to ourselves, but true to the Elector, Jesus Christ.

News is not self-generated. Even as the Reformers used predestination as a bulwark against human contribution to our salvation, so Barth’s take on election is a wonderfully objective corrective to our rampant subjectivity.

Though we preachers naturally bring presuppositions to our reading of Scripture, the text also brings something to us, resists easy accommodation, and refuses to be completely malleable. In preparing to preach, the text unmask us, stands against us, comes to us, and embraces us when we think we are simply reading inert words on a page. We have the joy of being able to deliver an odd word we did not come up with ourselves to congregations who did not ask for this message. Thus, the objectivity of the biblical text becomes an everyday demonstration of the objective reality of the election of God.

Philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt notes the way we moved, in public discourse, from concern for “correctness” to a demand for “sincerity.” We no longer demand that speakers accurately represent the truth of our world; we ask them candidly to present themselves. Don’t talk facts, talk about you, revelation restricted to self-revelation.

Frankfurt says it is “preposterous” to believe that you know more truth about you than truth of the world. Nothing supports “the extraordinary judgment that it is the truth about himself that is the easiest for a person to know.” The truth about ourselves is elusive, “sincerity is bullshit.”

I am concerned that when many young adults say they value a preacher’s “authenticity” (sincerity), self-revelation trumps orthodox teaching, correct doctrine, or biblical fidelity. The sermon becomes a report on the preacher’s interiority, an autobiographical exposé delivered while fighting back tears.

In an article on preaching, Paul Tillich called for heartfelt expression of things

---

“transcendent” and “unconditional” in the pulpit. Barth responded that to think of preaching this way “can end only with its dissolution” and that “[p]roclamation as self-exposition must in the long run turn out to be a superfluous and impossible undertaking.”

The church is better served not by “sharing what’s on your heart,” or attempting to be “authentic” but rather by preachers praying for the courage to preach what we have heard God, through the Scriptures, tell us to preach, letting the chips fall where they may.

Sin, on the other hand, “great or small, conscious or unconscious, flagrant or refined, consists in the fact that we don’t believe, that we ignore in practice where we have our origin and what God has done in us and for us.” While unbelief is serious and sinful, because of the objective reality of God, unbelief never attains a higher status than “impotent action.”

“Conversion” (rarely mentioned by Barth) is discussed before he ends CD II/2 as that movement whereby “we confirm and accept the fact that we are placed before the divine fait accompli.” Preachers find comfort in this “objectivity.” Knowing that we preach, not in hopeful expectation of some potentially saving act, we can preach in confidence of a decisive, accomplished work. We “preach not ourselves”; we preach Christ, what God has done and what God is doing and will do in Christ. As Kierkegaard said, the Truth who is Jesus Christ “does not arise in any human heart.”

Change missionary to preacher in the passage below (in which Barth speaks of mission as arising from the peculiar truth who is Jesus Christ) and you will have a Barthian basis for proclamation:

The apostle of Jesus Christ not only can but must be a missionary…. It is not merely the formal necessity of proclaiming the Word of God, nor the humanitarian love which would rather not withhold this Word from others…. The determining factor is the concrete content of the Word itself. The truth … about Jesus Christ and human life compels … almost as if it were automatically to speak wherever it is not yet known. It is like air rushing into a vacuum, or water downhill, or fire to more fuel. [Human life] stands under the sign of God’s judgment. This is not just a religious opinion. It is a universal truth. It applies to all…. It leaps all frontiers. It is more urgent and binding than any human insight, however clear and

---

13 Barth, CD I/1, 64.
14 Barth says that the truth of the gospel is not dependent upon “whether we know and receive it or not…. The preaching of the Gospel can only proclaim and show that this is how things stand objectively … that our existence as characterized and modified and established by the judgment of God can be lived only in faith” (CD II/2, 766).
15 Ibid., 766.
16 Ibid., 767.
17 Ibid., 781.
compelling, or any convictions, however enthusiastically embraced. This truth is the driving power behind the Christian mission … it bursts all barriers. \(^\text{19}\)

6. Preachers need not worry much about being relevant to our listeners, but ought to concern ourselves with being true to the Elector, Jesus Christ.

Barth’s theology was called “kerygmatic”—theology as restating, repeating, and proclaiming the gospel. Paul Tillich, in contrast, devised a “method of correlation” in which the message being proclaimed was shaped in response to the preacher’s assessment of the existential situation of the listeners, correlating “the questions implied in the situation with the answers implied in the message. [Correlational preaching] does not derive the answers from the questions as a self-defying apologetic theology does. Nor does it elaborate answers without relating them to the questions as a self-defying kerygmatic [Barthian?] theology does. It correlates questions and answers, situations and message, human existence and divine manifestation.” \(^\text{20}\)

Among the dangers of this “method of correlation” are exaggerated confidence in the theologian’s ability to define the questions and the actual situation of human existence and the pitfall that the theologian allows the questions subtly to determine the answers, thereby controlling and limiting what is revealed in the “divine manifestation.”

North American mainline preachers seem to feel that the “human situation” is plagued by anxiety, stress, and personal concern. Sermons are full of reassuring, comforting words whereby Jesus helps us find more “balance” and less “stress” in life. (In my experience, people with big mortgages and inadequate governance on their acquisitiveness always feel stress. Jesus Christ may be more interested in relieving their sin than in ameliorating their anxiety.)

How do the sermons that I preach correlate with and take their cues from the median age, income, and social location of the aging “cultured despisers” of faith in my congregation rather than from the message of Jesus Christ?

“That preachers pay attention to the needs, interests, situation, and capacity of the public is no guarantee that they are really addressing [people]…. [The modern person] is arcane. Secret. Hidden. Sermons which should stir and edify and move … will probably leave this [person] empty, cold and untouched. By the high-angle fire of the heavy artillery directed above the head of the public, to the more distant entrenched position, this [listener] is perhaps better served in truth than by the all-too jealous pounding of the forward trenches, which [modern people have] long since derisively evacuated.” \(^\text{21}\)

---

\(^\text{19}\) Barth, \textit{CD} III/2, 607.


been conditioned to conceive of God as “Arcane. Secret. Hidden,” Barth challenges us to think of God as fully revealed in Christ and of modern humanity as obscure, baffling, and slyly concealed.

Against the rage for “culturally sensitive preaching,” Barth says, “Christian preaching … has met every culture, however supposedly rich and mature, with ultimate sharp skepticism.” The gospel need not be trimmed to the present cultural moment.

In 1933, as part of the Church Struggle, Barth founded a journal, Theological Existence Today, for “preachers and teachers of the church” in which he defined “theological existence” as life bound to Scripture. In the church, “God is nowhere present for us, nowhere present in the world, nowhere present in our realm and in our time as in [God’s] word; that this word has no other name and content than Jesus Christ and that Jesus Christ [is] for us nowhere in the world to be found as new every day except in the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.”

Barth says he began CD in reaction to the scandal of German preachers who had discovered “deep religious significance in the intoxication of Nordic blood and their political Führer.” Preachers today throw our voices into a culture that is extensively militarized, incarcerated, and consumptive. We ought to be cautious of demands to tailor the gospel to the desires of our listeners. The gospel does more than speak to people’s felt needs; the gospel is often judgment upon and rearrangement of needs. Election by God gives us needs we would never have had if not for election—obediently to testify, to witness.

I have preached dozens of sermons when thousands of Americans are quietly deserting the church because they can hear worldly wisdom elsewhere. I preached in an age when our government pursued expensive, fruitless wars while defending the use of torture and deadly drones, with millions of Americans imprisoned and thousands of children shot to death in the streets around our churches and child refugees pursued and deported from our borders. Why did I not practice a more urgent “emergency homiletic”? I have heard it said that the challenge is for pastors to “love your people.” A greater test (after all, my people pay my salary and look a great deal like me) is to love the truth about God in Jesus Christ.

Biblical narratives give scant attention to the historical, cultural, or geographical context where biblical characters are addressed. Why should we? The cultural context is the space in which we find ourselves addressed, but hypothesized context has less significance for our hearing than divine address.

---

24 Quoted in Dean G. Stroud, Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 33.
25 Barth, CD I/1, xiv.
The current rage for “Contextual Theology” is suspect. “Theologizing from experience,” even from the illuminating experience of the poor and the oppressed, is not revelation. When even the great Calvin tried to talk about election on the basis of human standards of justice, the God revealed resembled “far too closely the electing, and more particularly the rejecting theologian!” Election teaches that in whatever situation we find ourselves, culture is significant mainly as “the place of responsibility.”

7. Preaching is witnessing to the graciously electing God.

“It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt 10:20). Bonhoeffer said there is only one preacher, Jesus Christ. The best we can hope in our sermons is that God may graciously use them. Early on, Barth noted a definite “one sidedness” in regard to God’s Word. Any “control” is in God’s hands, not ours: “To have experience of God’s word is to yield to its supremacy.” Sermon preparation is practice of the arts of submission, of taking God more seriously and ourselves (as well as our congregations) less so.

“Jesus Christ is the one and only Word of God…. He alone is the light of God and the revelation of God. [He] … delimits all other words, lights, revelations, prophecies and apostolates, whether of the Bible, the Church or the world, … biblical prophets and apostles are his servants, ambassadors and witnesses, so that even in their humanity the words spoken by them cannot fail to be words of great seriousness, profound comfort and supreme wisdom. And if the Church follows the biblical prophets and apostles, similar words are surely to be expected of it.” “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making [God’s] appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Witness is not judged by social utility; the only Judge is Christ. There is no need to translate the biblical text into abstract terms, such as we once saw in the theology and preaching of Tillich and Bultmann and now in “Power Point Preachers” who render the gospel into principles for better living, timeless ideals, and helpful hints for homemakers. Witnesses require election; God’s impersonating choice of certain words and phrases as God’s revelation.

The metaphors for God in Scripture are self-depictions by a relentlessly self-revealing agent who elects to speak to us in ways that draw us more closely to the Elector. Much of modern theology stresses the dissimilarity of our words for God from the divine referent; for Barth, biblically given words for God are reliable depictions of the God to whom they refer because God elects to use these metaphors as self-offering. “God’s true revelation comes to meet us by taking our human words and electing them to be revelation

26 Barth, CD II/2, 41.
27 Barth, CD III/3, 607.
28 Barth, CD I/1, 181.
29 Ibid., 206.
30 Barth, CD IV/3.1, 97.
when we attach ourselves obediently to these words.”\(^3\) Biblical preachers can preach confidently because in the Incarnation God took definite form, located, and became concretely accessible though Israel and Church in a way that genuinely, accurately describes God.\(^2\)

Just as we are bound to receive our salvation through Israel and the Church, so witnesses are bound to the metaphors God has selected for us. Paul says that he forsook the lofty, pretty language of imperial rhetoric and instead said only “Cross” to the Corinthians. What Paul was compelled to preach could be said in no less scandalous and offensive way than the way the crucified God took toward us. When Barth says God is Wholly Other, he means that God is wholly incomprehensible in any way unfit to the God who is in Jesus Christ. The only way to God is provided by God, through the scandalous means of bread, wine, water, and the pitiful words of preachers.

The search for a way to translate Christian good news into more acceptable, easier to hear speech dead ends with the preacher saying other than the gospel, oftentimes what the world can hear without the inconvenience of sitting through a sermon. We have not said “salvation” when we say “transformation,” or “discipleship” when we say “purpose-driven life.” There is no adequate human analogical relation between human words and the divine referent; witnesses can only point to the mystery, speak as Scripture speaks, and enjoy revelation when it is given. “Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me” (Luke 10:16). It’s a miracle.

Our sermons can’t be bolstered apart from the revelation they seek to articulate. Barth says that when preaching rests on God-given analogies, “It will then have something definite to say, and that with a good conscience, with the promise of relevance, i.e. of standing in a real relationship to the reality proclaimed by it, and with the justified claim and well grounded prospect of obtaining a hearing.”\(^3\)

Our authority comes not from ourselves or even from our ordination by the church. We preach because of our odd, even embarrassing conviction that we have been elected by God to do so. Yet subservience to the Word can be liberating. When we encounter resistance, hostility, or zombie-like stares from our congregation, it is powerful freedom to know that our congregations are not the source of our authorization.

Election implies that, from the first, God has determined to be heard. As Kierkegaard said, “God did not assume the form of a servant to make a mockery of us,” so it cannot be God’s “intention to pass through the world in such a manner that no single human being becomes aware of [God’s] presence.”\(^4\) Election gives confidence that God’s word will not

\(^3\) Barth, CD II/1, 227.
\(^3\) CD II/1, 233.
return empty (Isaiah 55:11) and that our faith in God’s faith in our preaching is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:14).

8. God weaves even our sermons into God’s elective work.

The significance of our sermons is out of our control. All we know is that our future is determined by God’s eternal decision to be God for us and for us to be for God, forever. A sermon is a supremely contemporaneous form of communication, an event in the present that can never be redone or reclaimed, a fragile art that is either taken up by the Holy Spirit or else sinks into silent oblivion.

It’s up to God either to make a sermon “work” in the power of the Holy Spirit, or the sermon is stillborn. “[Preaching’s] sheer impossibility,” says Barth, “will always remain, but it has now pleased God to present himself in and in spite of this human action.”

Of course, our testimony to the truth who is Jesus Christ is partial, in process, incomplete, and sometimes wrong. We are sinners. And since the news we bear is not self-concocted but rather a gift, we never fully possess that of which we speak, nor are we fully possessed by it.

Barth’s “herald” image, his notion that the sermon should be just a polished pane of glass through which we see Christ, is not quite right. The witness is no disinterested courier. The truth preached is personal and personified. We are under a commission that we did not seek. Thus we witness with a tense mix of self-confidence and self-negation.

Why am I ambivalent about the significance of my own preaching? I doubt my difficulty is due to my humility. More than likely I am reluctant to take responsibility for the power of God working in me, in spite of me. It is scary that my sermons do more than I intend, unnerving to know that while I can construct a sermon, I cannot control or delimit the disruptive fecundity of the Word. Homiletical failure is easier to manage than success.

To be singled out for a message, when the news is meant not only for everyone but also aimed at you, a word that is death-dealing, life-giving, out of control gospel, well, that odd vocation elicits joy in the preacher and sometimes wrath. God only knows what good it does.

Ah, but what a wonderful vocation.

35 Barth, *Homiletics*, 69.
Overcoming Justice Fatigue

Teresa Fry Brown

Dr. Teresa Fry Brown is Professor of Homiletics and Director of Black Church Studies at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. She delivered the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lecture on February 5, 2015.

In honor of Theodore Sedgwick Wright (1797–1847), first African American graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, co-founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and part of Underground Railroad.

I enter this lecture from a social location as a 63-year-old black woman, the beneficiary of grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles who desegregated libraries, schools, stores, restaurants, and housing in the 1950s and 1960s. They proudly voted in every election they could. They taught their children to know and memorize history, poetry, literature, music, values, and inventions. They had faith that things would get better for black people. They believed that God would make a way for them to be treated as equals not just as domestics and things. They believed if they were good citizens, faithful Christians, and treated everybody with respect, they in turn would be respected, eventually. They believed freedom was worth dying for as long as their children and children's children lived better and had more opportunity than they did. All the while, they were called boys and gals, except on Sundays when they entered Ward Memorial Baptist Church in Sedalia, Missouri, on Pettis street. There, in that sacred space, janitors, chauffeurs, mechanics, road workers, farmers, maids, cooks, teachers, doctors, lawyers, were called Sir, Ma'am, Brother, and Sister.

Their lives mattered.

A child of the 50s and 60s, I grew up in Independence, Missouri. I grew up being called the Little Black thing, girl, gal, N-word, ridiculed for my skin color and texture of my hair, spat upon, threatened, excluded from activities, playgrounds, and swimming pools. I was in the first group to integrate Young and Benton Elementary School. I was told after my undergraduate degree, although I was on the Dean's List that I should just have babies instead of go to graduate school.

But my family continued to believe in the American Dream and all it had to offer even for black people if one simply got an education, worked twice as hard as others to be thought at least half as good. My paternal grandfather, Kerry Fry, a Pullman porter and chauffeur, would say “Act like you have parents and do not embarrass the family,” all the while telling the men how he would get his gun if the Klan ever darkened his door, having seen and experienced too much death and destruction in his life. My maternal
grandmother and namesake, Tessie Bernice Ray Parks would say “We all Aunt Haggie’s Children” (meaning we are all made in God’s image). “Hatred” was a word she never used.

I was the dream and hope of my enslaved, disenfranchised, abused, raped, and lynched ancestors.

I believed freedom was possible because they said so, they hoped so, they believed it was so.

So I too sang America as my brother went to Vietnam yet could not find a job when he came home after four tours of duty. I too sang America as my father drank himself to ill health because he was afforded no dignity in the world as a real man. I too sang America as I was told my engaged pedagogy and scholarship was not as valued as that of others because it was too organic and too involved with justice issues, that Black thing.

So I enter this discussion remembering how much I have cried lately. As I read, watched, and lived the denial of rights to persons based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, residence, education, and melanin, this seminary preaching professor, Womanist scholar, social activist, ordained itinerate clergy person and officer in the African Methodist Episcopal church has self- diagnosed justice fatigue.

I have justice fatigue as I read papers, skim blogs, converse with friends, listen to airport conversations, am ignored or followed through department stores. I have justice fatigue when flight attendants act as if I have no right to be in first class requesting to see my ticket as if I cannot write or read.

I have justice fatigue as I listen to academic and ecclesial colleagues describe students and politics, bemoaning the “Do we have to talk about race again? Isn’t it over? Is it February already?”

I have justice fatigue as I fear my daughter will complete her PhD program and be told that her research on ending the school-to-prison pipeline is irrelevant because not only is the Negro “mis-educated” but is not expected to read or write.

After all these years of justice work, I understand the reality that yes we have come a long way since the first twenty enslaved were brought to British North America in Jamestown in 1619, through the abolitionist era of Bishop Richard Allen, Maria Stewart, Rev. Theodore Sedgwick Wright, and Frederick Douglas.

Too many similarities exist today with the men and women who died in the Black Nadir after the Great Migration. Too many days, I relive the misgivings of my childhood, joining voices over the centuries asking, “How Long Lord?”

Why is my voice less exuberant this year when I sing “facing the rising sun of our new day begun. Let us march on `til victory is won”? When is that “someday” when we shall overcome?

I realize that many of us regardless of ethnicity have similar stories and struggles.
Overcoming Justice Fatigue

In my time tonight, I would like to briefly explore my understanding of the symptomatology, diagnosis, and a possible treatment or course for action for my phrase “justice fatigue.”

Can you see the news clip from that sweltering August day in 1963? The flickering black and white images will be replayed innumerable times today. Various counting agencies numbered the crowd at between 200,000 – 400,000 people representing all of God’s creation, gathered at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial. Some had walked and hitchhiked 700 miles just to be part of a protest for jobs and freedom. Some had been present since eight o’clock that morning, sitting around the shallow reflecting pool. Others came to represent “artistic expression,” singing protest songs, reading James Baldwin poetry, and offering monetary support. Asa Philip Randolph, a part of the nine-member planning meeting, had been waiting on promises made for equal government hiring since his postponed 1941 March on Washington.

Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin had worked for years behind the scenes for universal fellowship and human rights and now anxiously rejoiced that their dreams might be actualized. Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, John Lewis, and the only woman on the program, Josephine Baker, had already critiqued conflicts in the promise of the Declaration and Constitution that promoted equality on paper but oppression in practice. More than three thousand came to report the news to the world and more than one thousand militia and police personnel were armed and on alert to “insure the peace.” J Edgar Hoover and his wiretapped attendees promoted character assassination and breached privacy in the name of security and patriotism. Even more than one hundred politicians suspended their personal agenda to stand in the crowd. Preachers left the separatist sanctity of individual pulpits to stand in solidarity with the cause. The so-called “Camelot President” watched the proceedings as he deliberated on signing a piece of legislation that would be the first step in extending the collective civil rights.

Generations unborn on August 28, 1963, would come to know the words by heart of the average-size, well-educated, passionate man in a dark tie and white shirt delivering a closing address. We can envision Dr. Martin Luther King’s face as if it were originally captured in High Definition Plasma, Curved, LCD, Smart 72-inch screens, almost feeling the sweat run down his face. We can hear his poetic proclamation of freedom as if his voice was digitally enhanced and pulsing through Orb audio theater speakers instead of tinny microphones. Some say amen, cry, sing, hum, or recite the words of the challenging melodic rhetoric of that day, the camaraderie of that day. The urgency of that day seemingly has been frozen in time.

This was 187 years after John Hancock, Samuel Adams, John Adams, Robert Treat Paine, Elbridge Gerry, et al, penned the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, stating:
We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

A preacher/scholar stood at the precipice of an extraordinary prophetic mission. A man who learned the ethic of love in the crucible of faith in his father’s church was about to move a nation, a world. He had learned much through the teachings of seminary professors in Atlanta, Rochester, and Boston. His life intersected with the lived experience of countless freedom activists with names like Randolph, Young, Johns, Evers, Robinson, Hamer, Bates, Lewis, Clark, Laruzzo, and Gandhi. He had memorized the preamble of foundational document of the United States:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity

My family, even my cynical father, sat around our RCA cabinet television waiting for both the culminating message and the repercussions of this March on Washington. As an impressionable twelve year old, I could not believe someone had the courage to stand in front of all those people and say what he said. After all, there were still places in Missouri where people who looked like us had to enter backdoors, could not try on clothing in department stores, had to watch movies from balconies, had to be off the streets by sunset.

As Martin King took the platform he invoked the style of classical Black preachers—part newly researched and written, part re-filtering of old sermons and speeches, parts of conversations with other ministers (like the one he had with a SNCC worker named Prathia Hall who spoke of having a dream about a beloved community), part re-filtering of old sermons and speeches like an April 10, 1957 speech in St. Louis, Missouri called “I have a dream,” part extemporaneous call and response, parts emotion of the potential of the moment, parts enlivened by audience call and response, all anointed for such a time as this by God’s Spirit. A scheduled four-minute speech, prompted by Mahalia Jackson’s urgings to “Tell them Martin, tell them about the dream,” morphed into a seventeen-minute-twenty-seven-second mini prophetic proclamation.

So there he stood discarding his prepared notes and launching into his dream for reclaiming the soul of America, for all of God’s creation, all of God’s sons and daughters to live together in finely textured tapestry of love and unity. A dream of a time when people like us would be evaluated on internal character rather than external pigmentation. It was a dream of a time of transformation, a time of hope, an amazing time.

But here we stand in 2015, fifty-two years after that day in Washington. It often seems as though the promise of that moment—the impetus for a movement toward universal freedom, the prophetic urging toward a beloved community, the activist demonstration
of global liberty and justice for all, the prophetic call of the end to wars domestically and internationally, the countless selfless sacrifices, the depths of intellectual interrogations, the innumerable prophetic sermonic and written urgings to “Help Somebody” in order to participate in transforming the character of a nation—have been entombed in an annual dreamscape rather than an actualization of activism.

Somehow many of us have selectively deferred the call to act, to move, to work, to sacrifice in order to actualize the prophecy inherent in the very text of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Perhaps some are comfortable in the image, and they fear acting on it. Perhaps we have worked hopefully and are tired. Perhaps we have become numb. Some of us are worn out. Some of us, I imagine, are disappointed like the children of Israel because the dream is taking so long. Some have worked nonstop since then and experience every step forward as an eventual ten steps backward.

After all, we thought the inhumanity of those twenty landing in Jamestown, the half million Africans brought as slave labor under inhumane treatment was over. Maybe we thought chattel slavery—“cargo culture” of 1442–1863—would never be supplanted in contemporary sex trafficking, economic slavery, or immigrant labor forces evading border patrols. Perhaps we have accepted the essentialist media portrayals: all young Black men are thugs, threatening or violent; all young white men have youthful indiscretions; all black women are angry and ugly; all white women are beautiful and desired; all successful blacks are trying to be white; all whites steal black cultural makers; all Hispanics are illegal and do not speak English; all Asians are brilliant and hard working. Surely we thought the nooses and strange fruit on southern trees photographed and sold on postcards in the twentieth century would never be repeated as twenty-first-century bullets, leaving black bodies lying in streets, on porches, in parks, or in Wal-Mart parking lots.

What happened?
Did we skip class?
Did we forget to do our homework?
Did our technology lull us into a sense of complacency?
Are we so comfortable with our personal freedom that we are unaware of those millions who languish in despair, disappointment, and disenfranchisement?
Have we become tired, fatigued with the constant need to prove we too are human beings?
Are we waiting for the dream stage before action can take place?

According to the Mayo Clinic, sleeping too long is problematic. Dreaming uninterrupted is also problematic. There are specific stages of sleep: stage 1, transition to sleep; stage 2, light sleep; stage 3, deep sleep that renews the body; stage 4, Rapid Eye Movement (REM or dream sleep) that renews the mind. This cycle takes place two to three times per night, each over a two-hour period lasting two to twenty minutes. During REM sleep, the brain consolidates information and memory. The rest of the body, however, is
essentially paralyzed until we leave REM sleep. Paralysis could be nature’s way of making sure we don’t act out our dreams.

Maybe we who remember King’s dream are being externally paralyzed or anesthetized by the promise of change so that we do not hurt others or those things that we may seek to change.

While it is true a good night’s sleep is essential for health, oversleeping has been linked to a host of medical problems, including increased risk of death. Oversleeping can also lead to fatigue. Fatigue is reduced capacity for work or accomplishment following a period of mental or physical activity and decreased capacity or complete inability.¹

Perhaps we misinterpreted the speech and forgot it was a call to action, the doing of something; the state of being in motion or of working; an act or thing done, not oversleeping or eternal dreaming.

Seventeen days after King’s “I have a Dream” Speech (August 28, 1963) on Sunday, September 15, 1963, Bobby Frank Cherry, Thomas Blanton, Herman Frank Cash, Robert Chambliss, members of United Klans of America, a Ku Klux Klan group, planted a delayed detonated box of nineteen sticks of dynamite under the steps of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, near the basement. About 10:22 in the morning, as twenty-six children were walking into the basement assembly room, the bomb killed Addie Mae Collins (age 14), Denise McNair (age 11), Carole Robertson (age 14), Cynthia Wesley (age 14), and injured twenty more. The sermon that day was entitled “The Love That Forgives.”

Martin King, a father, eulogized the girls:

They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy that produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream....

And so I stand here to say this afternoon to all assembled here, that in spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair. We must not become bitter, nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. No, we must not lose faith in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and the worth of all human personality...

More distress followed. President John F. Kennedy was murdered in November 1963. In 1964, James Chaney, Michael Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner went missing, and when the government went looking for them they found countless bodies of black men whom

¹ mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/chronic-fatigue-syndrome/basics/symptom.
no one knew their names. But because there were two white men in the group, they went looking. At the 1964 Democratic Convention, King asked the Mississippi Delegation to compromise on being seated, and they accused him of being a sell out.

What would you do if in less than one month the hopes and dreams of that August day were shattered? What do we do when we have tried everything we know how to do yet justice is elusive for so many?

Do we keep trying or do we enter a cave existence? Pull the covers over our head and dream on?

Is the fatigue so great that justice is not on our list of possibilities?

Sixty-four years ago Harlem Renaissance poet, novelist, playwright, and columnist, Langston Hughes, in his dreamscape poetry collection “Harlem,” posited this inquiry:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

What is your dream doing right now?

In Book VII of The Republic, Plato tells a story entitled “The Allegory Of The Cave.” The setting is a dark underground cave where a group of people is sitting in one long row with their backs to the cave’s entrance. People are chained to their chairs from childhood, with their legs and necks shackled, braced, or fixed so they are unable to turn to their right or left only seeing what is directly in front of them. They face the wall of the cave and are unable to see even who is sitting beside them. This is their world. This is their reality. They do not know anything or anyone else. They hear what is in their sphere, their space. They know only what their limited sensory input teaches. Their view of reality is solely based upon this limited view of the cave. There are other people in the cave. Plato refers to them as the puppet-handlers. They control the others mentally, socially, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. They supply reality. They tell the chained people what to believe, who to trust, when to talk, what to say, how to say it, when to give, who to love, who to hate, and when to think. Knowing nothing else, the people follow their lead.

In Plato’s allegory the prisoners do not realize that they are being held captive since
this existence is all they have ever known. Walking behind the prisoners, the puppet-handlers hold up various objects found in the real world. There is a fire at the mouth of the cave so as the items are held up the captives only see shadows or distorted figures on the wall in front of them. As Plato explains, “the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.” The thieves and robbers, the puppet handlers, and false prophets will only do as much as people allow them to do. Their shadows and illusion of power is maintained not only through coercion but also through voluntary consent of those dominated. This was what King was trying to show people: you have it within you to be somebody, but if you listen to what everyone outside says, you continue to do exactly what they tell you to do. Finally, in Plato’s story the reality was that the people were sitting with their backs to the opening of the cave. Just behind them is light and air and newness, if they could only see it for themselves.

What if someone decided to risk becoming free, to resist control, to break the pattern, and to seek freedom? What if someone got up and moved toward an uncertain change in life? What if that he resolved to take everyone with him? What if she decided that enough was enough? What if someone initiated some metamorphic boldness and became strong enough to change things? What if those like King had other plans but God wanted them to lead others from the cave?

Dr. King was given a God ordained assignment to point us to a new reality, to rhetorically and physically lead us out of the bottom of the cave. Surely none on us desire to live there. A review of Dr. King’s speeches between August 28, 1963, and April 3, 1968, focuses our attention not on dreaming but on being wide awake, on engaging prejudices, oppressions, “isms,” and directives on how to change our lives. He emphatically spoke of and preached about universal human rights, economic equality, the end of an unjust war, and tolerance for religious difference. Surely he became tired sometimes.

We in this county like to have the one hero, the greatest, best-of-the-century, did-it-all-by-myself protagonist. But Martin King was clear that many individual sacrifices were a part of the Modern Civil Rights Movement.

King, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize on December 10, 1964 said,

I accept the Nobel Prize at a moment when 22 million Negroes of the United States of American are engaging in a creative battle to end the long night of racial injustice. I accept this award on behalf of a civil rights movement which is moving with determination and a majestic scorn for risk and danger to establish a reign of freedom and a rule of justice.

We must never forget that blacks, whites, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, children, young adults, seniors, rich, middle class, poor, entertainers, ditch diggers, retirees, unemployed, educated, uneducated, agnostics, atheists, humanists, heterosexuals, homosexuals, men and women were part of the modern movement for civil rights.

Society usually mentions men of the Civil Rights Movement. Sometime justice fatigue
comes when one’s contributions are ignored, nameless, or faceless. There is a tendency to forget Alberta King, Martin King’s mother who instilled values long before Dexter Avenue and Montgomery; Coretta Scott King, a civil rights activist in her own right; Joanne Robison, an Alabama State College English teacher who organized the bus boycott and whose home was also bombed right before she was fired; or Claudette Clovin, who refused to move off the bus nine months before Rosa Parks.

One of these forgotten women of the Civil Rights Movement is Ella Baker. Baker was a key strategist in the Civil Rights Movement and in the development of the Southern Christian Leadership Committee (SCLC). She was a nurturing founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Convention (SNCC) and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) yet is known by few in historical terms. During her speech as the keynote speaker of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Convention in August 1964, she stated:

*Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers’ sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a White mother’s son, we who believe in freedom cannot rest until this happens."

This quote is echoing in the bourgeoning street and online activism today.

How Might We Overcome Justice Fatigue?

There is an Akan word from Ghana, “Sankofa,” meaning to go back and snatch, to remember what came before. I would propose that contemporary tired, cave dwelling, justice-fatigued, still dreaming, cautiously hopeful people take time to seek the lesson of those who came before us. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Use your own tools to strategize in your particular context. No matter how much technology we use or how many studies say we live in a colorblind society (that means we have erased someone’s humanity or want everyone to be like whomever is in power today), the justice journey is fraught with difficulty and danger. Metamorphic boldness is needed to walk it.

Remember Martin King did not plan to be a national leader. He planned to be a pastor of a church, work on his PhD thesis, and raise a family. Later, perhaps he would also teach and write about theological and philosophical issues. His father Michael King Sr., having visited Germany in 1931, renamed himself and his son, two-year-old Martin Luther King, after the protestant reformer Martin Luther. Names are the essence of our being.

A twenty-five-year-old preacher who did not view himself as a reformer was called from Augusta, Georgia, to pastor Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery.² He was chosen by local African American leaders to serve as spokesman for the Montgomery Bus Boycott and was considered a leader from then on. He was arrested thirty times and jailed twenty-nine times—don’t you think he got tired? His home was bombed three times. His life was threatened repeatedly. He was wiretapped by the FBI, and his reputation was
attacked by Hoover. He was stabbed next to his aorta with a letter opener at a Harlem book signing on September 20, 1958. He was a son, husband, father, brother, friend. He served only twelve years and four months from his election as spokesman for the Montgomery Improvement Association in December of 1955 until he was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

Perhaps we neglected to view the reluctant “hero” as a human being with human sensibilities and frailties. Dr. King was tired also. He told one audience in Mississippi:

I’m sick and tired of violence. I’m tired of the war in Vietnam. I’m tired of war and conflict in the world. I’m tired of shooting. I’m tired of selfishness.

I’m tired of evil. I’m not going to use violence, no matter who says it.

The eternal struggle for justice is real, sometimes seemingly indelible. French philosopher Albert Camus once said that “change is a struggle to the death between the future and the past.”

Contemporary strategies for change vary, but we have to keep working. As a womanist scholar, my main Sankofa paradigm for overcoming justice fatigue includes doing faith work even in the face of resistance, denial and ostracism, speaking the truth in love even in the face of oppressor, and raising the consciousness of the listeners about the possibilities of liberation and justice for all persons—not only in word but also in deed, regardless of the individual or communal cost. Overcoming justice fatigue requires faith, redemptive self-love, critical engagement, appropriation, and reciprocity.

“Freedom Faith” is critically important. It is a belief that God intends us to be free, and assists us, and empowers us in the struggle for freedom (Prathia Hall). Our faith is made what it is in the crucible of struggle. We must proactively address the particularities of “webs of oppressions,” as homiletician Christine Smith has researched: systemic oppression; exploitation (systemic transfer of benefits from one person to advantage of another); marginalization (unwillingness or inability of economic system to use capabilities of a person or group of persons); powerlessness (recipient of directions of others but unable to give orders or exercise control over one’s situation); imperialism (universalization of one culture to the exclusion of others); and violence (dimension of institutionalization or social permissible violence against persons or groups.

Redemptive self-love is celebration and affirmation of self-care and love of humanity. It is a form of agency, carpe diem, responsible for one’s own healing, getting up off the mat and getting one’s own water, speaking one’s own mind without allowing others to put words in our mouths or hijack our thoughts or silence our beliefs. Survival and thriving in the world is possible through the practice of self-love, self-discipline, and self-determination. Self loves means knowledge of and appreciation for one’s personhood

3 Christine Smith, Risking the Terror-Resurrection in this Life (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 20–21.
5 Smith, Risking the Terror-Resurrection in this Life, 20–21.
regardless of outside critique or societal standards.

Critical engagement means one strives to learn from as many different people as one can. Critical engagement is a means to examine life as we know it in imaginative ways.

 Appropriation and Reciprocity means utilizing a form of spirit love, the wisdom of the elders. It involves identifying community sayings and lived moral wisdom that keep one grounded and filled with hope in the face of social constrictions. Harlem Renaissance anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston once recalled, “Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to “jump at de sun…We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.”

Whatever overcoming strategy works for an individual or group there is too much at stake to keep dreaming. Yes we may be tired, but someone worked diligently for us, even under duress. In one of his last speeches, Martin Luther King prophetically instructs us:

> There comes a time when one must take the position that is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but he must do it because conscience tells him it is right. I believe today that there is a need for all people of goodwill to come with a massive act of conscience and say in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “We ain’t goin’ study war no more.” This is the challenge facing modern man.

In his book The Inconvenient Hero, the late Vincent Gordon Harding, who was a historian, civil rights activist, speechwriter, nonviolent advocate, and friend of King, reminds us:

> For his greatness may rest not so much in the dream but in his willingness to continue to hope, to struggle, to develop new vision, to call others to a new American fight in the midst of nightmares, despair and brutally broken bodies. In the face of that nightmare, had to re-vision the dream.

In the end, my journey to overcome justice fatigue focuses on the lived, in spite of the experience of my grandparents, my parents, my aunts and uncles, my friends, my colleagues, and my hopes for my children and grandchildren to taste freedom. In Dr. King’s last Southern Christian Leadership Conference presidential address, “Where Do We Go From Here?” on August 16, 1967, he challenged us, even in the face of justice fatigue, to keep doing the work, putting in the justice time, and to move ahead with “divine dissatisfaction”.

---


8 Vincent Gordon Harding, Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008), 5.
Let us be dissatisfied until America will no longer have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds.
Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort and the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice.
Let us be dissatisfied until those that live on the outskirts of hope are brought into the metropolis of daily security.
Let us be dissatisfied until slums are cast into the junk heaps of history, and every family is living in a decent sanitary home.
Let us be dissatisfied until the dark yesterdays of segregated schools will be transformed into bright tomorrows of quality, integrated education.
Let us be dissatisfied until integration is not seen as a problem but as an opportunity to participate in the beauty of diversity.
Let us be dissatisfied until men and women, however black they may be, will be judged on the basis of the content of their character and not on the basis of the color of their skin.
Let us be dissatisfied.
Let us be dissatisfied until every state capitol houses a governor who will do justly, who will love mercy and who will walk humbly with his God.
Let us be dissatisfied until from every city hall, justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.
Let us be dissatisfied until that day when the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, and every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid. Let us be dissatisfied.
And men will recognize that out of one blood God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth.⁹

King remembered the resolve even when understanding the dream was on the edge of exploding.

In 1975 a social activist anthem written by MacFadden and Whitehead put it this way:

Wake up everybody no more sleepin’ in bed
No more backward thinkin’ time for thinkin’ ahead…
The world has changed
So very much
From what it used to be
There is so much hatred

⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where Do We Go From Here?” delivered at SCLC Headquarters, August 16, 1967. Printed in Washington, The Essential Writings and Speech of Martin Luther King, Jr., 251.
War and poverty,
The world won't get no better if we just let it be
The world won't get no better we gotta change it the world, just you and me.

Forty two years ago Dr. King proclaimed in his “I See the Promised Land” speech in Memphis, Tennessee (April 3, 1968):

Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness
Let us rise up tonight with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make America a better nation.¹⁰

There is too much at stake to just dream.

The Point of Exegesis is Exegeting Life

Luke Timothy Johnson


In the middle of a highly technical debate with Dionysius—about the relation of the soul to human blood—Origen of Alexandria suddenly interrupts himself to address the audience. Quoting Romans 12:1, he says, “I beseech you therefore, be transformed,” adding, “resolve to learn so that you can be transformed…. “ And he concludes, “What is it I really want? To treat the matter in a way that heals the souls of my listeners” (Dial 13.25–15.25). These statements perfectly summarize the attitude of Christianity’s first and arguably greatest biblical scholar and theologian.

As head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, Origen brought superb critical gifts to his study of Scripture. He established the basis for a critical text of the Old Testament and dealt with the inconsistencies and contradictions in both the Old and New Testament with intellectual integrity. In his First Principles, he virtually invented systematic theology, with a vision of God’s universal will to save so bold that it has never been equaled. Origen had a remarkable openness to the truth wherever it might appear, declaring,

If the doctrine be sound and the effect of it good, whether it was made known to the Greeks by Plato or any of the wise men of Greece, or whether it was delivered to the Jews by Moses or any of the prophets, or whether it was given to the Christians in the recorded teaching of Jesus Christ, or in the instructions of his apostles, that does not affect the value of the truth communicated (Celsus 7.59).

Origen’s freedom and boldness was that of a man whose heart was firmly fixed in the truth of the tradition to which he had committed himself from youth and for which he would suffer persecution and die as a confessor. He opposed the Gnostics vigorously and in his response to Celsus showed himself the greatest of all Christian apologists. He asserted the traditional canon of Scripture against movements to expand or contract it. His theological imagination worked within an explicit and profound commitment to the rule of faith. He was, in short, a scholar and theologian of the church. He gives expression to this commitment in two asides in his homilies:

I want to be a man of the church. I do not want to be called by the name of the founder of some heresy, but by the name of Christ, and to bear that name which is blessed on earth. It is my desire, indeed as in spirit, both to be and to be called a Christian (Luke 16.6).
And again,

I bear the title of a priest, and as you see, I preach the word of God. But if I do anything contrary to the discipline of the church or the rule laid down in the gospels—if I give offense to you and to the church—then I hope that the whole church will unite with one consent and cast me off (Josh 7.6).

Despite his great learning and his impressive critical skills, Origen had but one goal in his interpretation of Scripture, which for him was also the interpretation of the mystery of Christ, and that was the transformation of his hearers according to the Mind of Christ.

The State of Biblical Scholarship Today

I have opened my presentation with these remarks about Origen because he is a model for biblical scholars in every age in the way he combines the free exercise of critical intelligence, a grounding in the church, and the desire to interpret so as to transform his readers. His example has never been easy to follow, for few have ever had equivalent energy, genius, and passion. But his example appears to be especially difficult to follow in our generation. It is rare to find a biblical scholar who is also a theologian or apologist for the faith; it is equally rare to find a theologian who is adept at biblical interpretation, or a preacher who has either a scriptural or theological imagination. For biblical scholars, indeed, it seems almost as though the further removed they are from the taint of theology, the more prestige they enjoy as scholars. The ways of thinking that Origen so easily and lightly held together, we experience as separate realms that only occasionally and with great difficulty communicate.

The reasons for our present dismemberment are complex and not all recent. They include the shift within theology that privileged scientia more than sapientia, the subsequent division of theological sciences into separate specialties—“I'm not a theologian, I'm a biblical scholar”—and finally, the sociological shift from the church to the university as the prime locus for critical biblical interpretation. The church—and when I use the term I mean the church ecumenical—has become ever more dependent on the centers of advanced biblical scholarship in great universities at a point when those universities are becoming ever more aggressively secular in their outlook. A biblical scholar does not get tenure in the university because of piety or pastoral concern; in fact, just the opposite is the case: the freer one's scholarship is from the concerns of faith the more certainly it will be rewarded. Departments of religious studies in universities barely tolerate the subdiscipline called theology, and the study of the Bible is increasingly influenced by forms of ideological criticism that not only reduce it to a set of merely human compositions, but compositions so corrupted by oppressive ideologies that they do more harm than good to readers for whom appropriate ideological therapy is unavailable.
Seminaries and Schools of Theology ought to represent an exception to the rule, but in fact, they demonstrate it. Especially seminaries dedicated to genuine learning find it more difficult to recruit the best and brightest of biblical professors who have not been deeply, sometimes fatally, infected by the perspectives and approaches dominating the university and biblical guilds, which also form the standards by which they are evaluated by professional peers. Young professors of Bible also tend to have more loyalty to guild standards than to the desire of colleagues that they relax their critical guard a bit and join in a theological conversation. As a result, biblical faculty usually form the segment of seminary faculties most resistant to such conversation, and students often find the manner in which the Bible is taught not so much an open avenue to theological thinking as a roadblock. The gatekeepers, it often seems, want to let people in but not let them out again.

One partner is rarely totally responsible for a divorce, and the church has not been without fault in shaping the present situation as one in which the academy increasingly loses its heart and the church increasingly loses its mind. The church’s long-standing reluctance to take the critical study of the Bible seriously, and its increasing tendency to reject virtually all forms of critical inquiry as threats rather than gifts to the tradition, also play a role in splitting those elements that Origen and other patristic authors held together. Across the church ecumenical there is far less concern expressed for the ignorance or dullness of ministerial candidates than for their loyalty and piety. The church, it would seem, does not much need high intelligence or serious education, except in those areas where ecclesiastical advancement is involved. Biblical scholars and theologians who claim (and actually seek) to represent both a commitment to the highest standards of critical inquiry and a devotion to the tradition and teaching authority of the church find themselves in a small and increasingly vulnerable space, liable to be dismissed by fellow scholars as insufficiently critical and distrusted by fellow believers as insufficiently faithful.

Those of us who are, or want to be, faithful and imaginative theologians and interpreters of Scripture within the church cannot by ourselves close social and ideological gaps that are now centuries in the forming. Biblical scholars can, however, take some positive steps while not in the least stepping outside the bounds of their discipline, by widening their understanding of the range and goal of exegesis. The point of exegesis, my title suggests, is exegeting life. In the remainder of this presentation, I want to develop that simple declaration with specific reference to the New Testament.

Toward a More Adequate Exegesis

I begin by baldly stating and defining the premises for the thesis I seek to demonstrate. The main lines of my argument will be by way of a specific textual example. First, then, the bald assertion: if we approach the New Testament compositions as they
approach us, there are four distinct yet interrelated dimensions of the compositions that invite analysis: the anthropological, the historical, the literary, and the religious. Here's what I mean by the terms. Anthropological means not simply that the writings were composed by humans—inspiration is an ascription of authority not a theory of composition—but by humans who were seeking to interpret their lives in light of powerful experiences; historical means that these humans lived and wrote within cultures of the past only partially available to us; literary means that their interpretations of life were found in the shape of the compositions they wrote, and the conventions of ancient rhetoric are distinct from our own; religious means that the experiences and convictions forcing the reinterpretation of their symbolic world were those involving what they perceived as ultimate power.

The failure to engage any one of these dimensions means a diminishment of our ability to understand these ancient writings, and more significant, the ways in which they can speak to our lives today. The writings of the New Testament are historically conditioned, and the distance between their authors and present readers in terms of language, social circumstances, and specific circumstances must be assessed and (however partially) bridged. The exegete cannot pretend Paul wrote in English or that the Corinthians lived as do the Californians. They are written in literary and rhetorical forms quite distinct from those to which we are accustomed, and to the degree that meaning derives from form, their literary and rhetorical shaping is essential for responsible reading. The exegete cannot proceed as though the Gospel narratives were historical reportage lacking in literary sophistication, or Paul's letters simple outpourings of emotion without rhetorical crafting.

It is equally important, however, to recognize that the New Testament compositions emerged from the real-life experiences of the first believers, who were, like their fellows, shaped by the cultural matrices of Greco-Roman and especially Jewish symbolic worlds and were required, like people everywhere, to try to make sense of their experiences, positive and negative, within the social structures, processes, and metaphors, that constitute a symbolic world. The exegete can ignore neither the kinds of experiences that supported and challenged the social reality we call the symbolic world, nor the specific shape of the symbols that give shape to experience and are in turn reshaped by experiences sufficiently powerful to challenge them.

Finally, the exegete must take into account the specific character of the religious experiences that gave birth to and continued to enliven the movement out of which the New Testament was written. Certainly, experiences of power associated with prophecy and tongues, healings and visions, form part of this religious register. But of supreme importance is the most radical of all religious claims, that a human being executed as a criminal by Roman authority and designated as lone cursed by God by Torah, was raised from the dead and exalted to Lordship and cosmic dominion. The exegete cannot bracket
the most important cause of the New Testament’s coming into existence or the claim that alone makes sense of its distinctive shaping. Neither, I think, can the exegete of these ancient texts completely bracket the fact that these experiences and claims continue to occur among those for whom these writings are not of academic but existential concern.

Now of these four dimensions, two emphasize the distance between us and the writers of the New Testament, namely the historical and literary, and two allow a degree of intimacy between readers and those who wrote these texts, namely the anthropological and religious. Whereas the historical and literary can be learned only through knowledge of the past, the anthropological and religious can be known through appropriate contemporary analogies. The ways in which humans arrange and measure and assign status among themselves today does not differ absolutely but only relatively from the ways of the past (honor and shame are scarcely absent from contemporary life). The ways in which people experience the divine are likewise limited in their variety and capable of being understood across cultural differences.

It is safe to say, I think, that biblical interpretation at least since the enlightenment has almost exclusively cultivated the historical and literary dimensions of the New Testament, and with rare and less than satisfying exceptions, has almost completely neglected the anthropological and religious dimensions. As a result, the closer the ancient text is studied, the more it recedes into the past: its historical circumstances are singular, its rhetoric is time-conditioned. We may understand these dimensions of the composition, but the paradoxical and unintended result is that the composition remains alien to our own experience and convictions. There is little if any possibility for the exegesis of the text also to be an exegesis of our life or for the exegesis of present-day life to make the ancient text more intelligible.

There is, however, some reason to hope that if we can employ the same sort of critical intelligence and imagination with the other two dimensions of the New Testament compositions, they may appear, even to us, to have something to say not only to people long ago but also to us today, and biblical exegetes may be perceived by others has having something valuable to say for the transformation of life. In that hope I offer for your consideration a specific instance.

Reading Galatians Historically

Paul’s letter to the Galatians is among the New Testament writings most intensely scrutinized by scholars. As a historical source, it is both richly evocative and maddeningly elusive. On one side, it is a prime source for Paul’s biography, providing his invaluable first-hand account of his early life, call, early ministry, as well as his meetings with the Jerusalem leadership and his conflict with Peter in Jerusalem; all pure gold to the historian, especially since this data can be put into critical conversation with the account in Acts. On the other side, its own historical setting remains so obscure that the letter
cannot with confidence be located within Paul’s ministry: the location of “the churches through Galatia,” the time of Paul’s first visit to them, and even the time of his writing, have been debated endlessly but without firm conclusion.

The historian’s attention has been given primarily, however, to the conflict within the Galatian churches that Paul addresses. The letter yields some definite evidence: Paul founded the community among Gentiles and was now away from them. In his absence, certain agitators argued for the need to be circumcised and observe the Jewish law. In his letter Paul opposes that initiative and suggests banning those who advance it. If this much is clear, much else in the letter is not, which makes Galatians a well-trodden and frustrating arena for historical debate. The difficulties center on two interrelated questions: who exactly were Paul’s opponents, and why does he say the things he does about them? When Paul speaks not only of someone advancing “another gospel,” but of “bewitching” them and “disturbing them,” and not only of advocating circumcision but also the keeping of “new moons and festivals” and the worship of or with “the elemental powers of the universe,” how much should we attribute to Paul’s polemical posture and how much can we take as accurate indicators of the opponents’ views?

Lacking firm external controls, a certain amount of circularity is inevitably involved in reconstructing Paul’s “opponents.” Arguing from an assumed analogy between them and those “false brethren” who insinuated themselves in Jerusalem to spy out Paul’s freedom, scholars have usually taken the Galatian opponents to be outside agitators. An early and highly influential theory was that offered by F. C. Baur, who read Galatians as the centerpiece of the ideological battle in early Christianity between the Paul party, who held for the freedom of the Gospel in faith, and the Peter party, who under the leadership of James of Jerusalem, sought to “Judaize” Christianity by a return to law observance. Baur offered a unified field theory of Pauline opposition in which the opponents of all the letters (1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, Philippians) offered variations of the basically two-ideology conflict that led eventually to the historical resolution called early Catholicism. Not all have been convinced that the opponents were even Christian, and a variety of hypotheses have been advanced concerning possible Jewish opposition: Pharisees infiltrating diaspora synagogues, wandering Hellenistic Jewish missionaries, even Essenes.

The recovery of classical rhetoric in recent decades offers another approach to historical analysis. Impressed by what they take to be Paul’s defensiveness in this letter—as when he insists he has been appointed by God rather than humans—they see Paul’s impassioned language about himself and the agitators as a response to attacks made on his apostolic credentials by these same opponents. The influence of Paul’s polemic against the super apostles in 2 Corinthians 10–11 is obvious. The monument to this way of reading is found in H. D. Betz’s commentary on Galatians in the *Hermeneia* series, which interprets the letter as a form of forensic rhetoric and puts Paul’s apostolic self-defense
which is also a defense of the “truth of the gospel”) as the central issue. The possibility that there are no outside opponents but only ambitious insiders in the Galatian churches, or that the problem might be not the lack of Paul’s apostolic credentials but precisely his status as a Jew, has not captured the minds of many interpreters, but I will return to that possibility in a moment.

Here I want only the make the summary point that the effect of all this historical and rhetorical labor has been to keep Galatians more definitively in the past and less pertinent to the lives of present-day readers, for whom circumcision and keeping the law are not religious options, who struggle with Jew/Gentile identity not at all, and whose Gentile roots are long forgotten.

But I must also observe that such distancing was not at all the original intention of the historical-critical approach when, shaped by the fusion of British and German Lutheran theological commitments, it first flourished at the University of Tübingen in the mid-19th century. F. C. Baur and his colleagues saw the historian’s task as performing a theological role of immediate pertinence to Protestant Christianity. The battle between Paul and the Judaizers was still read as it was by Martin Luther as the template for the struggle between the legalism and sacramentalism of Roman Catholicism. The conflict then was seen as one between two distinct religious systems, one based on works, the other based on faith. The historian’s theological task was to recover the essence of a Christianity based on faith alone—to be found in the authentic Paul—in distinction from the encroachments of Jewish legalism that infiltrated the gospel already among Paul’s opponents. The value of isolating Paul’s opponents as foreign agents threatening the truth of the gospel was obvious: Galatians stood as the charter of Christian freedom, a constant warning to Protestants to resist the enticements of Judaeo-Catholicism.

Such a theological impetus to historical reconstruction has never made much sense for Catholic scholars, and is also long-gone among the majority of today’s biblical scholars whose interest in history is far less in service of the recovery of authentic Christianity than it is in service of pure research, or perhaps some ideological critique of precisely that form of Christianity championed by the reformers. Among such scholars—and those they teach—Galatians remains fixed in the past, with little to say for the transformation of the mind among present-day readers.

Reading Galatians Religiously

What light might be thrown on Galatians—and on our lives today—if we try to read Paul’s letter as a witness to actual human experience? We can begin by noting the complete absence of indicators that there are outsiders in the community at all; this is a conversation between Paul and those he converted. We can note next that the letter tells us three certain things about Paul’s readers: they were Gentiles, they experienced the power of the Holy Spirit when they heard with faith, and they were baptized into
Christ. Two further things are strongly suggested: some of these Gentiles not only sought circumcision but sought to exclude those who did not. About Paul, we know that he started as a Jew zealous for the law, encountered the risen Lord, and became his apostle. Knowing these things, we must ask the most obvious and pressing question: why would the Galatians want to undergo the painful ritual of circumcision and seek to take on the burden of observing Torah?

We find the beginning of an answer in the simple observation that humans are naturally competitive, natural seekers after status, and eager to achieve those levels of status that require great effort and even ordeals precisely as a way of marking them as superior to others. A second simple exegesis of life yields that religion is not in the least a domain free from such human competitiveness. It may, in fact, reveal the competitive impulse precisely in the drive toward perfection. These person-on-the-street insights—and what is social science but common sense and close observation given a technical vocabulary?—are supported by cross-cultural anthropological studies of what might be called “ritual imprinting and the politics of perfection.” Virtually without exception, religions, as all human associations, require not single but multiple initiations in order to become fully mature members.

Certainly, those in Galatia coming into the cult of Messiah Jesus from a background in the Greco-Roman mysteries would have expected to be initiated multiple times. Initiation into the most ancient Mystery at Eleusis required multiple stages before full membership; initiation into the cult of the goddess Isis led naturally to a second initiation into the cult of her consort Osiris. Such initiation moved devotees from one status level to another. The perilous passage, as Victor Turner has noted, was one in which initiands experienced a state of communio (fellowship, equality, sharing), but this state of liminality was always temporary. The point was moving from a lesser to a greater level. Initiation involves an ordeal of passage, the gaining of new knowledge, but above all, status elevation. Certainly, Gentile converts to the Jesus cult in Galatia would have expected initiations beyond the simple ritual of baptism that marked their entrance: where could they go from there?

The obvious answer was initiation into the children of Israel, the cult of Moses, through the ordeal of circumcision. And the obvious Mystagogue was Paul. The most likely source for the Galatians’ knowledge of Judaism was the man who continued to call himself “more advanced than any in his generation” in observance of the Law. It was not Paul’s lack of credentials as an apostle of Christ that would bother them; it was the fact that he was not willing to share his status as a Jew. They wanted to go where he was. Not least among the attractions of this second initiation was that it was available only to some: males could achieve this higher form of perfection and females could not. What use is perfection if it is available to all? Galatians whose ritual imprinting was that of the ancient mysteries would have been eager to hear, from Paul, from outside agitators, from
ambitious insiders who had drawn the obvious inferences from Paul’s Jewish status, of the opportunity to advance themselves in this new cult. When Paul asks them rhetorically, “Having begun in the spirit are you reaching cultic perfection in the flesh?” their answer would be, “well, yes, didn’t you?”

Reading from an anthropological and religious perspective, the true human drama of this ancient composition comes alive. We begin to appreciate, for example, Paul’s extreme frustration, for the Galatians want to move from the experience of Christ to the very spot from which Paul himself has been moved by his experience of Christ! We can see Paul’s long opening narrative in this light not as a stage of self-defense, but as the presentation of his own experience as exemplary: his adherence to the law led to the persecution of the church, but once he had experienced God’s Son, he held on to that experience even in the face of those who sought to impose circumcision or enforce Jewish rules for table-fellowship.

We see the importance of Paul’s emphasis on the Galatians’ own religious experience: when they heard the message of Christ crucified in faith, they received the Holy Spirit and powerful things were done among them. This appeal to their experience of divine power is the premise for the entire argument that follows. We see then in Paul’s elaborate midrashic argument in chapters 3 and 4 the essential point: the law is not the ultimate form of perfection but only a temporary and inferior form of instruction; the ultimate status is becoming children of God through the promise of the Holy Spirit made to Abraham and brought to them in the Son whom God sent into the world to make them adopted children.

We see that all of this leads to Paul’s insistence in 5:1–6 that those seeking circumcision are not moving forward, but cutting themselves off from the gift they had received. Wanting more, they are in danger of losing what they have been given. Maturity is not a matter of ritual initiations, but of growth in the life already given them: “In Christ is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, but faith working through love” (5:6). We understand as well why only here Paul uses the phrase “no longer male and female” in his statement of the koinonia in Christ brought about by baptism (4:29), for he knows the implications for higher status available to males through the initiation of circumcision.

We see that the true telos of Paul’s letter to the Galatians is not his discussion of faith and works in chapters 3–4, as though the issue were soteriological, but his argument concerning life in the Spirit in chapters 5–6, for the real issue is ecclesiological. Paul therefore opposes the works of the flesh, which are driven by envy, rivalry, and party spirit, and tear a community apart, and the fruits of the spirit, which manifest the dispositions consonant with faith working through love. If you live by the Spirit, he tells them, you should walk by the spirit. This means that their genuine maturity or perfection comes from their living out the model of pistis and agape demonstrated by “the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins” (1:4). Paul declares of himself, “I no longer live
myself. The one living in me is Christ. That which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith that belongs to the son of God, the one who loved me and handed himself over for me” (2:20). This same pattern of self-giving love is to be theirs: “bear on another’s burdens,” he tells them, “and in that way bring to full completion the pattern of the Messiah (the law of Christ)” (6:2).

Finally, we can appreciate what an uphill battle Paul was fighting. He wanted them to stay in the liminal condition given them by baptism, in which they were all one in Christ, with the status markers of ethnicity, gender, or social standing relativized by the greater gift of the Spirit that they all shared (3:28–29). They wanted to gain the status that they thought Paul had in the politics of perfection. He was in labor pains until “Christ be formed among [them]” (4:19), they wanted precisely the physical identity marker that would enable them to “make a good showing in the flesh” (6:11). He wishes for them the freedom that comes from the Holy Spirit (5:1); they prefer the slavery that comes from the same old ways of status measurement (5:13). Paul’s argument that in the Holy Spirit they gained a share in Jesus’ status as God’s Son and that living this out was the measure of maturity was theologically profound. But he was fighting the deep human instinct for competition, and the religious logic of ritual imprinting.

And, as we know, Paul did not ultimately carry the day. Gentile Christians were willing to abandon circumcision. But the logic of multiple initiations led shortly to the development of confirmation, and then ordination, which itself eventually distributed itself into minor and major clerical orders, as well as the status markers of monsignor, bishop, cardinal, and pope. Ultimately, the truly ambitious Christian had available almost as many stages of initiation (and therefore status enhancement) as the devotees of Mithras.

Conclusion

Can such a reading of Galatians that engages its anthropological and religious dimensions lead us at least a step closer to the sort of “reading for transformation” that marked the great Origen of Alexandria? First, it allows us to be addressed directly and freshly by Paul’s words. We also have been baptized in the one Spirit. But we are no freer than were the ancient Galatians from the bred-in-the-bone rivalry and competitiveness that can express itself religiously in any number of ways. Essential to the process of transformation in Christ is to see the ways in which we individually and communally fail to live out the spirit of love that fulfills the law of Christ. It does not require a particularly discerning eye, for example, to see that the church today has a clerical authority structure that privileges men and excludes women. This is an obvious and glaring way in which we continue to resist the implications of Paul’s challenge to live in a “new creation,” where neither circumcision nor non-circumcision count (6:15).

But the whole point of exegeting Scripture to exegete life is that we do not remain
content with such crude, if accurate, institutional indictments. Paul’s letter addresses each of us in our anthropological and religious lives, and invites us to examine the ways in which beginning in the Spirit, we may be seeking perfection in the flesh, the ways in which we may be making our own life-projects—however worthy in themselves—idolatrous, “serving things that are not gods” but “weak and beggarly elements of the world” (4:8–9) and by so doing are weakening the community that lives by the faith of Christ. Each of us needs to ask about the ways in which our competitive instinct, even within the religious life, works to weaken and destroy rather than build up the community.

Paul’s letter does not only challenge us, it also encourages us in the exegesis of life. We are invited to think about our life-story, as Paul did his, as a narrative with a capacity to witness to God’s power. We are encouraged to celebrate and also defend the freedom to which we have been called in Christ, and refuse to submit again to any slavery, not that of sin, nor that of any human tyranny. We are empowered to discern the power of the Holy Spirit at work among us with powerful deeds, and celebrate the gift of initiation into the Lord Jesus who has made all of us the new humanity of a new creation in which human status does not matter and in which human difference serves not to separate but rather to make possible a mutual sharing of gifts. And among the works of the Spirit among us, we are encouraged to discern above all the ways in which the faith of Jesus Christ continues to find expression in the lives of those among us who bear the burdens of others, and, as saints in every age demonstrate the truth of the resurrection.

Who knows? Perhaps even those of us overloaded with degrees and burdened with dubious knowledge may learn how to read our lives with the same energy and integrity that we like to believe we bring to the exegesis of ancient texts, and might ourselves be surprised at the way reading for transformation actually transforms.
Love in Everything: A Brief Primer to Julian of Norwich

Amy Laura Hall

Dr. Amy Laura Hall is Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at Duke Divinity School. She delivered the Women in Church and Ministry Lecture on February 26, 2015. This essay is part of a book manuscript entitled Laughing at the Devil: Seeing the World with Julian of Norwich, forthcoming.

Just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of God, when I saw at the same time both his goodness and his wish that it should be known? (ST: 6, 11)

Though the three persons of the Trinity are all equal in themselves, my soul understood love most clearly, yes, and God wants us to consider and enjoy love in everything. And this is the knowledge of which we are most ignorant; for some of us believe that God is all mighty and has power to do everything, and that he has wisdom and knows how to do everything, but that he is all love and is willing to do everything—there we stop. (LT: 73, 162)

Introduction

Julian looks the bloody truth in the eye and refuses to flinch. Sometime around 1373, when Julian was about thirty years old, she received a series of visions as an answer to prayer. Julian asked for “vivid perception of Christ’s Passion,” meaning, Jesus’ death on a cross. She asked for “bodily sickness.” And she asked for “three wounds” (ST: 1, 3).

This may sound bizarre today, but it was not odd during the Middle Ages for fervent Christians to ask God to possess their body. Julian interprets her prolonged battle with death as a gift from God. Focusing on a simple household crucifix, she sees everyone and everything that ever was and ever will be held safe by God.

Jesus Christ’s profligate gift of blood on the cross is the point in space and in time through which Julian begins to see everything and everyone. She writes “And after this I saw God in an instant, that is in my understanding, and in seeing this I saw that he is in everything” (ST, 8). Julian sees God’s disposition toward all that was, is, and will be fully disclosed through the cross as a gift of love. Through the blood of Jesus Christ, we

---

1 Most of my citations from Julian’s writings refer to the Penguin Classics edition of Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love. The translation into everyday English from Julian’s original Middle English is by Elizabeth Spearing. Julian wrote both a Short Text and a Long Text about the visions of love that she received from God. When I quote from Julian, I will note first whether the quote is from the ST (Short Text) or LT (Long Text), then give the chapter number, then give the page number from the Penguin Edition.
become “kinned” with Jesus and “kinned” with one another. This led her to see the lines marking who is saved and who is lost, for example, or who is royal and who is common, bled together through our being made familiar to God through the cross.

I believe Julian received her visions of love as a kind of inoculation against dread. A reasonable response to the many traumas around her would have been precisely to catch a contagion of division and terror. Instead, Julian changes the whole scene. God gave her the blood of Jesus, straight from Jesus’ own body, in a way that changed how she sees the entire universe—including God. Seeing God’s “familiar love,” she knows God as “hanging about us in tender love,” like “our clothing.” It takes Julian two decades to sort out and think through and pray through what she first saw when God granted her a series of visions of love and truth. Rather than viewing the world around her as filled to the brim with misery or drained of all significance, Julian sees the everyday world glittering with simple miracles and resilient safety. The visions she received are a gift and a testimony against a religion of fear.

Vernacular Theology

Nicholas Watson and Jacquelyn Jenkins edited a volume on Julian that provides her original writings, in the Middle English and bountiful notes on the particular words and historical context of her writings. In their introduction to the volume, they write:

A Revelation [meaning the Long Text] is a work with no real precedent: a speculative vernacular theology, not modeled on earlier texts but structured as a prolonged investigation into the divine, whose prophetic goal is to birth a new understanding of human living into the world and of the nature of God in his interactions with the world, not just for theologians but for everyone.²

What they mean by “a speculative vernacular theology” is this: Julian was willing to ask questions that a woman was not supposed to ask. In fact, only men trained in theology at Oxford or Cambridge University were qualified to ask the questions she asked. Julian wrote in the vernacular, meaning, she wrote in English—the language normal people who were not trained at Oxford or Cambridge spoke to one another about everyday things. Julian was a churchwoman and a prophet who wanted people to catch sight of what she saw, and to become curious about what it means that God tells her that God’s meaning is, always, for eternity, love.

The name that Julian of Norwich’s mother gave her is not available. Julian was not part of the people “to be recorded for posterity” in England at that time. She was not of the aristocracy. We cannot look up the given name of Julian before she came to be called “Julian of Norwich.” We refer to her by that name because in the early fourteenth century she became an anchorite serving at St. Julian’s Church in Norwich, England. Anchorites

² Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love (University Park, Penn.: Penn State Press, 2006), 3.
were a diverse group, but they had one thing in common: they were anchored to a particular church. At some point during their lives, they each dedicated their full-time existence to living in a small apartment attached to a church.

Julian was an anchorite in a busy city, at a busy church, and we know from historical records that she was a sought-after sage. So, while some anchorites were secluded, it is likely Julian was at least periodically busy. Catherynne M. Valente, a fantasy and science fiction writer who loves Julian and writes a blog about spirituality, describes the life of an anchorite this way: “She is an oracle, an academic, a hermit in the midst of life.” People might have come to see Julian after seeing a beheading or after having buried a husband or after having been accused of heresy.

We do know a few facts and dates about Julian of Norwich, but they almost entirely come from her own writings. She was born in 1342. She received a series of visions from God in 1373, while she was on what she and others around her thought would be her death bed. She wrote about these visions in what are often referred to as the Short Text (ST) and the Long Text (LT). Both texts, all told, make up a workable volume of fewer than 200 pages in the 1998 Penguin Books edition, Julian of Norwich Revelations of Divine Love, translated by Elizabeth Spearing, including helpful notes and an introduction by A.C. Spearing. Although they are brief, her writings are considered classics of English literature.

Norwich, England during Julian’s time was a swirling port city featuring what eventually came to be known as “Lollard’s Pit,” a place where heretics were burned alive. King Henry IV passed a statute in 1401 called De heretico comburendo, which ordered that anyone holding heretical views or books with heretical views would be burned in order to “strike fear” across the country. Heretics were burned to intimidate everyone around them to think inside the delineated box. At the turn of the fourteenth to the fifteenth century, the king and the Archbishop of Canterbury were entangled in constant conflict. When they were not fighting against one another, they were reinforcing their own power with every intertwined form of control they had available. People were publically tortured as examples of what not to read and how not to see the world around the time that a few copies of Julian’s writings were being cautiously circulated and read.

The century during which Julian grew up culminated in a royal decree to stop regular people from thinking about God. In 1409, the Archbishop of Canterbury issued a document known as the “Arundel Constitutions.” Nicholas Watson suggests this document was a response to a development in Christianity in England that had been growing for about sixty years. This was the period during which Julian was seeing, praying, and

---

4 Nicholas Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409,” Speculum 70.4 (October 1995), 837.
writing. By 1409, there were strict restrictions on what could be taught and by whom, and the matter of who could translate any part of the Bible into English, or own any part of the Bible translated into English, was to be carefully regulated. As Watson explains, while earlier documents had delineated the “minimum necessary for the laity to know if they are to be saved,” the Constitutions focused on “the maximum they may hear, read, or even discuss.”\(^5\) Watson continues, “No longer was it the ignorance of the laity and their priests that was a matter for concern; it was the laity’s too eager pursuit of knowledge.”\(^6\)

At the turn of the fourteenth to the fifteenth century people who were literally hungry from wheat shortages and feudal machinations were also hungry to read scripture in their own language, to hold a scrap of scriptural verse in their own hands. It was a time also laden with despair and sadistic repression. Julian wrote with temerity at this intersection. It is one of the reasons people return to her words, and to the church now known for her name. It is a reason I turn to her—in order to look the ugly truth in the eye and not only refuse to flinch, but “to consider and enjoy love in everything.”

Julian’s Norwich was not so different than any post-disaster, apocalyptic human world in Western history. She was about eight years old when a horrific plague, known at the time as the “Great Plague,” spread from Europe and the Middle East to England, killing half of the people in many towns and creating a sense of impending disaster that reverberated for generations, both through recurrence in England of the deadly disease itself and graphic memories of loved ones lost. She was seeing visions of Jesus’ blood coming to her and for her, with no intermediary, during the same decade when, customarily, only priests received the cup of blessing (the blood) and the bread (or body) was parcelled out by a strict division of who was above whom. With peasant uprisings throughout England, the rules that governed a system of feudalism were being challenged and violently reinforced.

English feudalism was similar to slavery in the United States, or apartheid in South Africa, only most people were born with skin that is “white.” Rules about who could speak to whom were kept in part by memory of who was whose child, by clothing, and by which language people spoke. If you spoke Latin, you were trained in theology and could talk about God. If you spoke French, you were part of the aristocracy. And if you spoke English, you were someone who mostly did not matter to the first two groups, unless you tried to change things. Then you were punished. Frederick Bauerschmidt quotes historian R. H. Tawney on this point:

> The gross facts of the social order are accepted in all their harshness and brutality. They are accepted with astonishing docility, and, except on rare occasions, there is no question of reconstruction.\(^7\)

---

\(^5\) Ibid., 828; emphasis in original.
\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 22.
Julian’s Long Text was written at a time of national and personal crisis. Common sense included also a dose of death. The dread of death may have been just a whiff if you were among the few people who lived above the fray. But it was palpable if you were a starving peasant, or were a commoner who wanted to talk about scripture or changes to the feudal system, or if your village had a recurrence of plague. Part of what I found fascinating even the first time I read Julian is how, as Bauerschmidt puts it, hers is “a particularly crucial period of transition.” The “docility” that Tawney described in his writings on medieval England is partly true. But there was resistance. I have come to read Julian right at the juncture of dread, docility, rebellion and hope. It was a time of holy mischief. Julian’s visions help me see signs of openness and resistance to despair and division today.

In the mix of all of this, Julian received visions of love, love, and more love. These visions left her asking complex questions for over fifteen years about the meaning of what she had seen. The answer she receives, after praying on her visions, is clear. The answer she receives from God is repetitive and blunt. She writes “my spiritual understanding received an answer, which was this”:

Do you want to know what your Lord meant? Know well that love was what he meant. Who showed you this? Love. What did he show? Love. Why did he show it to you? For love. Hold fast to this and you will know and understand more of the same; but you will never understand or know from it anything else for all eternity. (LT: 86, 179)

She continues that “I saw quite certainly in this and in everything that God loved us before he made us; and his love has never diminished and never shall” (LT: 86, 179). The last few pages of Julian’s book about her visions leave us knowing Love, Love, Love, and Love. Focusing on these visions of Love will, with grace, lead us back into an answer of Love. Bauerschmidt writes that, for Julian, “From creation to consummation in heavenly bliss, God sees all of humanity as enfolded within the humanity of Christ.” Focusing on the cross, Julian returns again and again to see God’s vision of love.

God’s Omniamity

A currently popular Christian writer and speaker in the United States named John Piper gave a short lecture in 2009 to the annual meeting of the Religious Newswriters Association about a movement and marketing scheme he calls “the New Calvinists.” Piper gives a helpful summary of the basic message of “New Calvinism.” By his explanation, the most important contribution of the group is its emphasis on human “insignificance.”
Using examples from a syndicated cartoon and a granola advertisement, Piper suggested to the reporters that there is a deep longing among people in the United States for an authoritative word about God’s power, particularly after September 11, 2001. As Piper describes it, people desire the truth that God is omnipotent (all powerful) and that, in contrast, humans and our bodies and daily concerns are like dust. When faced with an unimaginable tragedy like September 11, what people most want, according to Piper, is an affirmation that God controls everything and mere human beings control nothing.

As I write, the “New Calvinists” often still proclaim this Gospel of Austerity to generations of Christians and seekers who are trying to live with the aftermath of two wars, during an economic debacle, hearing about drone strikes in Pakistan, dealing with the militarization of police in cities across the country and learning about torture in prisons from Chicago to Cuba. It is fair to characterize the neo-Calvinist message John Piper summarized this way: “If you are still alive in this age of terror, thank God, and stop whining about government surveillance. If you still have any job of any kind during this, the Second Great Depression, pick up your broom, and stop complaining about minimum wage. Oh, and keep going to church every Sunday, because God deserves your obeisance.”

Julian of Norwich, who lived through a similarly tumultuous time in the Middle Ages in England, saw things differently. She asked a different sort of question, and she embodied a different answer. Julian assumed that God is all powerful. She did not have to prop up God’s potency by accentuating our own unimportance. That God was all powerful was a given. She also assumed God’s knowledge of all that is (God’s omniscience). She didn’t have to underscore God’s knowledge by making sure everyone knows human beings are senseless. Her primary question was about God’s love. The query that kept her going back again and again and again to the cross concerned neither God’s omnipotence nor God’s omniscience. Her query concerned God’s omniamity.

In her decades of writing and rewriting her one book, Julian returns to Jesus Christ on the cross like a dancer uses a focal point. When twirling in a circle, a dancer fixes on a point, to steady his balance and to avoid keeling over. Julian did the same with the image of Jesus on the cross. A metaphor that Julian uses is of a toddler who, when faced with danger, runs to her “mother’s bosom.” Christians seek the “Lord’s breast” in this way (LT: 74, 164). Using maternal language for God does not mean that Julian softens the real monsters of her world. Plagues, public hangings, forms of domination subtle and overt, in a drastically hierarchical country infused with Christianity—these were not figments of a fearful toddler’s nightmares. These cruelties were the bloody truth. But Jesus is also the truth. At a time when the language of faith was being used in multiple ways to reinforce

---

12 This is a word I made up. “Omni” means all, and “amity” means love.
power and order, Julian seeks to see the world truthfully through Jesus. Jesus is the reason Julian is able to see the micro-fissures and gaping ramifications of evil and go past doubt in God’s omniamity. As she explains in the quote with which I began this essay, God is “all love and is willing to do everything.” That is our focal point, our mother’s bosom, our question and our answer.

One of the earliest examples we have of someone reading Julian of Norwich is in the record of a nun named Margaret Gascoigne, from the seventeenth century in France. That was a long time ago, but Sister Margaret is not so far away. Margaret was writing about her struggles to believe that Jesus is actually for her. She was trying to believe in Jesus in a way that is more than just a required affirmation to which she says “YES” in order to be allowed into heaven. Margaret Gascoigne focused on a passage by Julian to help center herself. The passage Sister Margaret focused on is translated from the Middle English in this way. (God speaking): “Consider me alone my precious child, make me your object, I am enough for you” (LT: 36, 92). As Watson and Jenkins put it, Julian’s vision “speaks words of comfort across two and a half centuries to a dying woman still beset by the uncertainties of a theologically gloomier age.”

You may have had or may eventually have your own snowflake-of-arsenic difficulties and social torments that lead you to doubt or scorn God’s omniamity. If God is all knowing and all powerful—if both of those two things are true, then God may also be omni-cruel. Yet Julian of Norwich sees that God is all love and is willing to do everything. For us. For me. For you.

Julian’s understanding of providence is different than one I have heard often used by praying Christians around me. In her later reflection on “providence,” in the Long Text, she explains:

I saw God in an instant [or poynte], that is to say, in my understanding, and in seeing this I saw that he is in everything. I looked attentively, seeing and recognizing what I observed with quiet awe, and I thought, ‘What is sin’: For I saw truly that God does everything, no matter how small. And I saw that truly nothing happens by accident or luck, but everything by God’s wise providence. (LT: 11, 58)

“God’s wise providence” is not an affirmation pulled along toward resolution through a series of victories, whether minute or remarkable, private or public. “Accident,” from Julian’s perspective, is eliminated because she sees time itself through that small opening, that little camera lens, that reveals everything defined and situated by the cross. Her understanding of time is not that God works through discernable episodes wherein loss (tragic or slight) brings forth blessing (profound or precious).

I do not mean to be cruel toward people who tender-heartedly offer this perspective
to others or who try for solace to see the world this way themselves. In the midst of personal grief or large-scale tragedies, it seems to console some people to look for signs that pain is being transformed incrementally into blessing. These consolations can sometimes come in the “at least” form—as in, “at least” the pain was not worse, or the death-toll higher. This can be combined with the “silver lining” perspective, where one tries to find the arrow pointing upward out of pain. But this is not the way Julian has been given by God to see time. Julian pulls all that might be cast off as “accident or luck” through the central, focal point of the cross. She does not attest that there are clearly discernable arrows in our life moving up and away out of pain. Even more importantly, she does not tell a story that my pain results, ultimately, cumulatively, in God’s victory. The cross pulls all time inward toward Jesus.

Another way of describing God’s providence comes closer to Julian’s perspective, but is slightly and dangerously off-focus. This is the “we cannot know, but God knows” line. The person touting this view seems often to be trying to justify something most people would say is bad, but using a questionable version of “providence” as cover for their actions. This is not how Julian sees providence. I have heard devout church women say something similar when talking together about someone else’s pain. They seem to believe in their heart of hearts that they will end up on the right side of God’s holiness ledger. “We will see …” becomes an alliance with a deity who holds out wisdom and leaves the rest of us befuddled and beset by grief. Providence is not, for Julian, a ladder up which we can climb in order better to see what those little people on the ground cannot see. Julian does not say that “we will see.” We have seen.

This question of God’s real love, here and now and not someday in the land of “we will see,” is not an academic puzzle for Julian. The material import of what Julian sees and thinks about is in her own blood and bone, as she focuses on Jesus’ blood poured out for her on the cross. A. C. Spearing explains that Julian “apprehends” God’s way of seeing “not as theory but as experience.”

In his book on her period of England’s history, Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority, Nicholas Watson helpfully explains how Julian’s readers may be tempted to understand her visions as hagiography, “approaching the verbal surface of a text with a mixture of aesthetic and religious awe.” Hagiography is a term that technically means writings about a saint. Writing hagiography today, in my world, means turning a merely human writer into an angel. Julian might become worthy of awe and study, but, with this sort of hagiographic misreading, most of us become unworthy of reading her as writing for us. That is, if one views Julian as an otherworldly angel, her writings become mystical visions with little connection to real human life. Watson, however, recommends a way

14 Spearing and Spearing, Revelations of Divine Love, xxxi.
of reading that attends to the real political, social, and religious conflicts that animated these visions. He advises that when reading Julian’s visions:

... focus instead on what we can call a mystical writer’s “predicament” in formulating doctrinal positions, articulating an appropriately didactic discourse and describing mystical experience ... look at the specifically mundane pressures that beset a mystical text, impelling it toward complex and ambiguous claims for its own status as an embodiment of truth.16

In other words, think about this “mystical text” with the actual earth in mind. Watson is explaining to his own readers that it makes sense to read a writer like Julian as a person who was writing from a particular real life that involved “pressures” that are right here, on this ground, held by the same gravity that holds us today. Your “predicaments” will be unique, but to read Julian as a non-earth creature is to avoid not only her earthly challenges, but your own. Her claims to truth are “complex and ambiguous,” as Watson notes, but that may make her writing all the more fascinating as an “embodiment of truth.”

Julian’s visions have import for thinking, living, and loving today. Can you imagine being told you could not talk about theology until you learned Latin? Or that you had no right to learn French because your blood was not the right sort of blood? Julian sees all of humanity “kinned” with Jesus. Her vernacular theology involves holy miscegenation. The language of Christianity at Julian’s time was regimented to keep the social body—that is, the people who made up the daily life of reality—divided into layers. There were those allowed to read the holy words, handle the holy objects, be buried in the holiest places, and those who were not. And, there were gradations among the various layers. To be anachronistic to make a point, the Lords and Ladies went before the Ladies and Gentlemen went before the Doctors and Barristers went before the hotel heiresses and heirs went before the extended family of a once celebrated athlete and her third husband went before the common people who ride the bus because they can’t afford a car, and so on .... Can you imagine if you walked into a church that required people to line up for the Lord’s Supper that way?

The historic fact of the plague is also important for understanding how Julian’s visions resist division and fear. Grace Jantzen vividly explains the human misery and church crisis brought on by the Great Plague:

People died, horribly and suddenly and in great numbers. It was so contagious that one contemporary witness describes how anyone who touched the sick or the dead immediately caught the disease and died himself, so that priests who ministered to the dying were flung into the same grave with their penitents. It was impossible for the clergy to keep
up with all those who required last rites, and to die unshriven was seen as a catastrophe of eternal proportions. Nor could the people who died be buried with dignity ... The psychological impact on the survivors was incalculable, made worse in subsequent years by the further outbreaks which occurred at unpredictable intervals.¹⁷ Jantzen explains that more than a third of the people of Norwich died during this relatively short period of time, and around half of the priests died.

Not only were people dying at frightening rates, but many died “unshriven,” that is, without the last rites. Jantzen explains that this was a crisis of “eternal proportions” because not only were people losing their beloveds left and right, but they were losing their beloveds in a way that would separate them forever from one another. Priests who were not fleeing the deadly plague were dying quickly, and so people were dying without receiving the practice that everyone believed was necessary in order to secure one’s hope for eternal life with God and one another.

Julian grew up in the wake of this tragedy, and she asked, during a time of misery and division, to receive a bodily experience of Jesus’ suffering. She asked for the wounds of Jesus to take her away from a cycle of despair, shame, domination, and the violence of retribution that tempts at least some people during times of political tumult. Julian’s answer of God’s omniamity is a redirection away from an obsessive rotation of fear, shame, domination, and submission. God has not favored the survivors over the afflicted.

One response to seeing human beings reduced to worse than nothingness through plague or famine or brutal warfare is to submit to and inhabit that version of religious truth. We are dust. Deal with it. Another response, Julian’s response, is, eventually, after years of trying to understand what she had received from God, to discern a vision of redemption:

> At one time our good Lord said, ‘All manner of things shall be well’; and at another time he said, ‘You shall see for yourself that all manner of things shall be well’; and the soul understood these two sayings differently. On the one hand he wants us to know that he does not only concern himself with great and noble things, but also with small, humble, and simple things, with both one and the other; and this is what he means when he says, ‘All manner of things shall be well’: for he wants us to know that the smallest things shall not be forgotten. (LT: 32)

By the proper, analytically true reckoning of her time, a significant percentage of the population had been eternally lost through the crises of recurring plague and the tragedy of the unshriven. By the proper, political reckoning of her time the great and noble were the arbiters to restore proper order and win again God’s favor. And, I am willing to

wager that the proper, common-sense reckoning of many Christians during Julian’s time was that it would be foolhardy to re-commit to hope in the “smallest things” at such an apocalyptically scary time. But Julian receives visions that embolden the words of lived lives, making them stand out as not just not forgotten, but brought bit by bit into God’s goodness. She receives visions that underscore the holy significance of actual, daily, real people and our actual, daily, hopes and fears.

One way of sustaining faith in a classical conception of God during the crises that marked Julian’s early life was to view them as God’s punishment. No doubt many people in England decided the world was horribly random and cruel. They either did not have access to pen and parchment or were smart enough to keep their mouths and minds shut, because true atheism was, of course, punishable heresy. If you wanted to be mentally safe from state reprisal, or if you desired still to hold fast to Christian faith, the most reasonable explanation, and one with some scriptural warrant, was that God was, in a sense, culling the herd. The people who had perished were a macabre object lesson from God to remind everyone to be scared and grateful, so that the survivors would come closer to God, or at least become more obedient.

This theology that inspired fear of God was not unique to fourteenth-century England. Jonathan Edwards, a preacher in New England in the mid-eighteenth century, espoused a similar view in his classic sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards wrote all sorts of things about God’s love, but in this particular, well-known phrase, he emphasized the urgency of deciding to be a Christian. If not for God’s mercy in Jesus Christ, we would all be flung into the pit of hell.

Four hundred years earlier than Jonathan Edwards, Julian had a very different view about the nature of God’s love. She writes this about what she saw:

For this is what was shown: that our life is all grounded and rooted in love, and without love we cannot live; and therefore to the soul which through God’s special grace sees so much of his great and marvelous goodness, and sees that we are joined to him in love for ever, it is the greatest impossibility conceivably that God should be angry, for anger and friendship are two contraries. It must needs be that he who wears away and extinguishes our anger and makes us gentle and kind, which is the contrary of anger; for I saw quite clearly where our Lord appears, everything is peaceful and there is no place for anger; for I saw no kind of anger in God, neither for a short time nor for a long one; indeed, it seems to me that if God could be even slightly angry we could never have any life or place or being … (LT: 49, 112)

Julian receives a vision of God’s abundant blood given in a way that a remarkably adoring mother gives a child her favorite and best food. We are children in the hands of a loving God. And, just to be clear here, Julian makes a logical argument in addition to
describing a vision of God’s omniamity. She does not pose this as a form of debate, but there is an underlying challenge for her possible interlocutors. If you read between the lines in the long quote above, she basically says “So, dear survivors of the many disasters besetting our century, do you really think that you are around because you are better and more beloved by God than those beloveds who are no longer with us? No. I didn’t think so.” If God could be angry, none of us would be here. So, given we have “life” and “place” and “being,” God’s providence must be enfolded with God’s love. The tragic and terrorizing “accidents” of this world are redeemed and held by God.

Conclusion

The fact that Christianity is not a matter of “facts” makes Christian faith a potentially stupefying brew. Christianity can be used to distract people from what is really happening to them or around them. In fact, many people who believe in God avoid going to church because they have seen churches dope people into ignoring the truth of the world around them. Julian affirms the wholeness of “Holy Church,” and her unqualified confirmation that the blood of Jesus is truly there in the cup at the Lord’s Supper or Communion (or Mass), even during a time of deep divisions within Western Christianity and deadly disagreements within Christendom—these are examples of an avowal, an active affirmation of truth.

Its opposite, disavowal, can be destructive. Disavowal is a confirmation of an untruth by way of ignoring the real truth. In my fifteen years of working as a pastor, I have seen and I have experienced the danger of being a Christian who disavows the truth of really bad unreality in front of our eyes. The word disavowal is slightly different than the word denial. To deny is to face evil and to refuse to acknowledge it. To disavow is to face evil but not see that evil at all. To disavow is not only to deny but to have avoided the reality that would require the energy of denial. I have listened to people whose faith involves their disavowal of evil. I have seen this when a man needed to face and eventually celebrate that God created him beautifully and wonderfully gay. I have seen this when a woman needed to tell her lover that she is worth more than being used as an unpaid therapist under the covers. I have seen this when a man with a life sentence tries to endure with dignity the spectacle that is coercion and power in a high security prison. I have seen this when a woman has faced either leaving the sisters she loves or naming that the “community” they help legitimate is an elaborate, intricately beautiful and powerful cult of lies.

Disavowal can be deadly, and Christianity can become intertwined with an unreality that looks very close to the reality of faithful truth. In his recent book on Julian’s theology, Denys Turner thinks of Julian alongside the writings of an Italian poet named Dante Alighieri who lived and wrote about God shortly before Julian lived and wrote. Turner’s section on their similar understandings of sin is very helpful on what Julian avows and
how her visions are not an example of disavowal:

… if we are to say that sin is a refusal of reality, this does not mean that it is in any way an unreal refusal, for to say that to live in sin is to live within illusion is by no means the same as to say that sin is illusory. Refusing reality can have every sort of real consequence, can cause every sort of pain and suffering, can weave warps and webs of fantasy and illusion, can create and sustain whole regimes of deceit, can motivate personalities distorted by such fears and self-deceptions so as to generate all the world’s violence, all the world’s need for it, and all the world’s untold numbers of cruelties—all of which can join up into interlocked systems, into self-sustaining structures, which conspire to be a world made out of the material of its unreality … Of course, then, sin is real, and there is nothing in Julian’s theology that would suggest otherwise. But her saying that sin is ‘real’ is perfectly consistent with her also saying that sin has ‘no substance, no manner of being’ … Sin is real in the sense that an unreality can become the real substance of a person’s or of a society’s existence, a kind of really lived refusal of the real. 18

Sin, for Julian, can become a “really lived refusal of the real.” I would add, and I think Denys Turner would consider this compatible with his reading, that my “really lived refusal of the real” can be particularly tenacious if my naming this unreality as unreal requires me to question the faith that I have been taught. If the “self-sustaining structures” of a mendacious form of Christianity have been for me a splint against the impending chaos of life, I may find it almost impossible to release my desperate grasp on this form of faith. If my particular community or practice of Christianity is intertwined with untruth, I may find it unthinkable to think in any different way. Put simply, evil is particularly hard for some Christians to face if that evil is intertwined with what looks very much like the faith we have practiced.

Julian of Norwich looked the truth in the face. She received the grace not to disavow, and she trusted that grace and kept searching, investigating God with the trust that God would not be offended by her questions. She continued to ask God again and again and again what it means that there is “love in everything.” She returns actively to affirm—to avow—both the crises of her time and the omniamity of God. What chutzpah does such persistent inquisitiveness require of a woman, during a time when women were not supposed even to learn how to talk about theology in the language most people spoke and were able to hear? What does it mean to have such resilient moxie? I am still trying to learn.

The Task of the Korean Church for Peace in the Time of Globalization: Seeking Ecumenical Social Ethics in the Context of Northeast Asia

Sungbihn Yim

Dr. Sungbihn Yim is former dean and professor of Christianity and Culture at Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary in Seoul, Korea, and an advisor to the senior pastor of Somang Presbyterian Church in Seoul. He delivered the Sang Hyun Lee Lecture on Asian American Theology and Ministry on March 16, 2015. This lecture is excerpted from Sungbihn Yim, Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Realism, and Social Ethics (Seigakuin University Press, 2014) and appears with permission of Seigakuin University General Research Institute in Japan.

Elements that Threaten the Peace: Globalization and Militarization, the Clash of Civilizations and Terrorism

The twenty-first century has begun with the so-called “war on terror.” The initial point of “the war on terror” was the September 11th tragedy. The significance of 9/11 invites the Westerner, especially Americans, to seriously examine Samuel Huntington’s theory of “The Clash of Civilizations.” The people in Northeast Asia, however, cannot get rid of concern about its Western hegemony and bias toward other cultures. Even The Co-existence of Cultures by Harald Müller assumes Western-civilization-centered value systems. While Huntington distinguishes Westernization from modernization, Müller sees Westernization as the result of modernization. The common ground of the two scholars is that both are rejecting cultural pluralism. Huntington seems to accept cultural pluralism on a worldwide setting, but he refuses it within the context of America. Müller emphasizes the common characteristic of cultures, though he has a limited understanding about cultures other than the Western one.

While The Clash of Civilization by Huntington reflects a worldview based on the hegemony of the United States, The Co-existence of Cultures by Müller reveals a worldwide plan based on the hegemony of Europe. But these plans reveal a destructive force in the reality of globalization, especially when the reality of globalization turns out to be a neoliberalism that is based on the financial strength of the United States and European Union.

Fareed Zakaria pointed out the paradoxical relationship between globalization and terrorism. He argued, “Two factors made the attacks of September 11 possible:

1 Harald Müller, Das Zusammenleben der Kulturen (trans. Young Hee; Seoul: Pu Ren Soup, 1999), 138. In the book, The Co-existence of Cultures, Müller argues that the influence of Asia is limited to Japanese gameboys, walkmans, and computer games. But the influence of the Western world is the modern constitutional nation, human rights, and freedom.
globalization and human nature.”\(^3\) Both globalization and human nature are very difficult to change. Free trade and the technological revolution create a more open society, and this openness makes it easier for terrorists to penetrate and destroy a society. Therefore, according to Zakaria, the technological development of globalization is partially responsible for terrorism.\(^4\)

A Theological Search for Peace in Northeast Asia

Even though we do not fully accept the theory of “the clash of civilizations,”\(^5\) the theory proves that the understanding of culture and religion is an important factor in the settlement of global peace. The cultural differences based on religion require a search for ethical values that could be shared by the global community.\(^5\) UNESCO has suggested five components for the establishment of global ethics: (1) human rights and duty; (2) democracy and its elements of society; (3) the protection of minorities; (4) an equal negotiation for the peaceful resolution of a conflict; and (5) an equality between generations as well as within generations. In the same context, Hans Küng suggested five topics of global ethics: (1) the elimination of violence; (2) an economic happiness; (3) social justice; (4) ecological balance; and (5) overcoming of individual isolation.\(^6\)

To implement global ethics, Küng suggested that the following conditions should be required: (1) an establishment of science technology; (2) a political, economical, and educational standard of judgment for the necessary permission on science and technical actions; and (3) a society that could accommodate the conditions for the standard of judgment. According to Küng, since the technical experts have a tendency to concern only the area that they serve, we need to have a political structure that guarantees democratic participation.

Global ethics is based on the common ground that exists among diverse religions and cultures. We should note that it is an economical and utilitarian action to maximize the happiness for all people. Given the accelerating progress of globalization, we need an establishment of a kind of ethics making global scaled solidarity possible.

But the global ethics that was suggested by Hans Küng has not been well accepted by most theologians, who consider the nature of religion and the difference of faith structure seriously. Those theologians think that there should be another method to accommodate the social responsibility and identity of Christians. Especially with the challenge of Reinhold Niebuhr,\(^7\) many theologians think that global ethics lacks concepts

---


\(^4\) Ibid.


\(^7\) June Bingham, *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1972), 276–292. In 1936, the leaders of the Ecumenical Movement sent Niebuhr to help prepare for the World Conference on Church, Community, and State, to be held in Oxford the following year. At the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948, Niebuhr played a major role with Barth, Tillich, and Brunner in the formation of ecumenical social ethics, insisting that “there is nothing in the Christian faith which gives us a sudden freedom over these tragic ambiguities of the world politics.”
of sin and grace, which are the fundamental elements of Christian ethics. From this point, we argue for the ecumenical social ethics rooted in Christianity, which is based upon serious consideration of the reality of sin and grace.

Ecumenical social ethics is different from global ethics, which attempts to solve global problems without a serious concern of incommensurability among various religions. Ecumenical social ethics should respect the uniqueness of different religious traditions. That type of uniqueness provides a fundamental value structure for social actions. Therefore, it is impossible to execute ecumenical social ethics without a serious concern for the uniqueness of the context.

At the same time, ecumenical social ethics is based on biblical history and Jesus Christ, who is the cornerstone of the gospel and church tradition. Because of God’s creation and the faith rooted in salvation history, a realm of ethics is beyond the earth and is universal. Ecumenical social ethics is fundamentally sensitive to the need of social responsibility and unity that are based on biblical teachings.

Seeking Ecumenical Social Ethics for the 21st Century

Charles West once argued that “the Ecumenical Movement therefore is characterized by a continual direction of repentance which honest dialogue brings forth, responsibility of which it makes the Christian aware, and witness in action to the work of Christ in the world in both judgment and promise for Christian and non-Christian alike.” Compared to global ethics, which aims at problem solving without serious consideration of incommensurability between different religious traditions, ecumenical social ethics more seriously considers the distinctiveness of each tradition. Since such distinctiveness provides a value system as the basis of commitment to a certain social action, it is impossible to construe an ecumenical commitment without serious consideration of the distinctiveness of a particular religious tradition. Ecumenical social ethics should principally be based upon the biblical narrative and its culmination in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and church tradition. The scope of ethical concern, however, is universal, because of the faith in divine creation and redemption. At the same time, ecumenical social ethics is fundamentally sensitive to the need for accountability and solidarity with the marginalized according to the core of biblical teaching.

As Huntington rightly perceived, the acceleration of globalization could result in the clash of civilizations. To resolve the conflicts in this globalization, ecumenical social ethics has the following tasks:

(1) The first task of ecumenical social ethics vis-à-vis globalization is to describe, interpret, and analyze the globalizing political economy. This task requires asking the basic question: “what is going on and why?” This question probes the implications of
globalization—what are the power dynamics; what are the theological, ideological, and social theoretical underpinnings; what are the multiple long-term implications for human and other life; what are the historical precursors of corporate- and finance-driven globalization?

(2) A second task is to develop alternatives to the dominant paradigm in light of ethical criteria and to bring into public discourse alternatives that already are being crafted but remain largely ignored by powerful leaders. Here the question is not “what is,” but “what could be?”

(3) A third task is to assist in discerning which modes of global economic interaction are more consistent with the ways of God revealed in Jesus Christ and the Spirit. Here the following question should be answered: “what ought to be, and what norms guide discernment?” What ought to be the purpose of economic life, and what paradigms best serve that purpose?

(4) A fourth task is to identify obstacles curtailing the power to live toward more faithful alternatives. What disables moral agency? Here we will identify ways that Christian theologies have contributed to complicity with neo-liberal globalization.

(5) A fifth task is to recall and rekindle agency for overcoming those obstacles. What enables moral agency? While we agree with the postmodern critique of universalizing descriptive accounts of human reality, we distinguish between descriptive and normative accounts. Moral agency in theological terms is the power to embody a fundamental moral norm of Christian life as being demonstrated through the Trinitarian relationship in God. It is true that liberal notions of moral agency, until challenged by feminist theory, womanist theory, and postmodernist theory, referred to the power or potential of individuals to act freely, autonomously, and rationally—and hence responsibly—in accord with moral norms. In theological ethics, this became the power or potential to make free and rational choices in response to God’s invitation. However, with the help of Niebuhrian insights on human beings and power, we are able to recognize that agency is formed in a historical matrix of structural factors and power relationships. With the insights of an “ethics of conviction,” such as Liberation theology, we clearly realize that this agency is also shaped by continuing legacies of oppression and survival. Constraints to agency include the matrix of oppression and domination in which the agent is formed. Now agency is viewed through an interstructural lens. Memory, vision, imagination, and hope form and malformed agency. Practice shapes moral agency. The power to embody responsible ways of living is the purview of both community and individual where the latter is understood as being-in-relationship. We need to acknowledge the fact that moral agency is, by definition, political.


10 Ibid., 37.

11 Ibid., 38.
It is important to note that the task for ethicists is to propose and define practical steps toward what ought to be and could be. Ethics should respond to the question: What does this mean for everyday lives in terms of lifestyle, public policy, institutions, social systems, and belief systems? We should take the key step of ethical formation and policy making: to offer guidance about how we might form a valid ethos and develop those attitudes, institutions, habits, policies, and programs that are in accord with a more ethically viable ethos, rightly legitimated by a valid theological view of ultimate reality.12

Ecumenical social ethics needs to provide a worldview based on the kingdom of God and the Trinity so that a person or a local community could have a Christian lifestyle. We need to overcome the Western-centered hegemony, which was evident from the clash of civilizations. Ecumenical social ethics should demand a righteous responsibility of a nation to prevent an abuse from multinational cooperation. It also should encourage NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and other cultural institutions to make cultural policies that are not manipulated by consumerism. The goal of ecumenical social ethics is an establishment of ecumenical culture. The ecumenical culture that we pursue is based on the rejection of the idolatrous absolutism and, at the same time, the respect of each culture. It protects the uniqueness and diversity of each culture. Furthermore, the ecumenical social ethics pursues a more constructive hybridization among different cultures. It pursues an adventurous culture based upon the freedom.

The Role and Task of the Korean Church in Ecumenical Social Ethics

The world is getting smaller and more integrated due to the acceleration of globalization. But, on the other hand, individual persons and communities are being scattered. People and communities are degraded into producers and consumers. People no longer have the sovereignty over their own decisions. Due to labor market change, family members are being scattered to find work all over the world. Local communities are controlled by market values. People are at a point of losing their traditional culture by profit-oriented foreign cultures. In a situation like this, the church not only has to comfort the disconnected and isolated communities but also proclaim prophetic judgment on the economic and political powers that cause disconnection and isolation.

It needs to be pointed out that the production could freely move from one place to another, but laborers could not. Therefore the laborers became an easy target as an expandable variable. It is a paradoxical fact that the devastation of the labor market is the weakest factor, the Achilles heel, of globalization. The income shortage of the laborers will decrease their spending, and less spending will impact the market. But the more serious problem may be social violence by the devastated workers.

---

A careful study of the unpredictability of globalization teaches a social solidarity of people who lack political, economic, and cultural competitiveness. Christian social ethics should always be concerned first with the least ones. We must realize that the social dichotomy of the rich and poor is being globalized. A worldwide destruction in ecology is accelerated by the process of globalization. We need to pay more attention to maintain the ecosystem in the areas of the two-thirds nations. The environmental policies initiated by one-third nations and the few superpowers could lead to maintaining the status quo of the economic division between one-third and two-thirds nations. In a situation like this, we need to demand the one-third nations help the two-thirds nations with the environmental technology and economic aids. Globalization of the superpower nations also might destroy a local culture, with the thinking that the culture of the superpower nations supersedes the culture of other nations. Therefore we need to respect the regional culture and continue to discuss the global culture that protects all human rights and security.

Globalization might lead to a theological criticism of the trend of enforcing people to follow the image and life of superpower nations instead of following the image of God and the life of Jesus Christ. This is an opportunity for the church to fully function as the body of Jesus Christ. As a critical majority to bring a constructive transformation, it is a critical time (kairos) for believers to decide and to take practical actions. In just such a time as this, from the point of view of ecumenical social ethics the Korean church could execute the practical function and task for the establishment of peace and its values.

Values for the Settlement of Peace

(1) Human Dignity

God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen 1:26).

Human dignity, focused on the value of a human being, is the core of the Christian value system. Because a human being is created in the image of God (Imago Dei), we have received special value and importance compared with other creatures. The fact of being created in the image of God is divine evidence that we were born with natural dignity. The sacredness of human life also reflects how we should treat each other. All human relationship should be pursued with the goal of human dignity. Since Christian values are free from political ideology or consumer power, Christian values based on human dignity could contribute to a peaceful globalization process.
(2) Love and Justice

If a believer has an assurance of calling to serve the community and neighbors, love and justice are the necessary rules of Christian culture. What is the true meaning of love and justice in our culture? The meaning of Christian love and its application is rooted in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. The life of Jesus Christ shows us agape love, love that is sacrificial and beyond our selfishness. Love lets us give up our own needs and serve neighbors for their benefit. The realm of this love is unconditional, as Jesus Christ showed in his mercy and care for sinners, the ill, and those rejected by society. His life was the reflection of God’s infinite and unconditional love for humanity. Through his death on the cross for the salvation of humankind, Jesus embodied sacrificial love.

But is it possible to implement Christ’s love in our culture? Christian realists, including Reinhold Niebuhr, said that it is not possible to directly apply Christ’s love in our distorted society. Since the goal of love is to seek out a way to benefit our neighbor, they said it is possible to impact the culture indirectly through justice. Thus the love that unconditionally benefits one’s neighbors should be changed into another love, which benefits them conditionally. In the reality of the world, love clashes with sin, evil, and ideas that are incompatible with love. Therefore, living a life that benefits our neighbors requires us to live a life of justice.

These values, which are rooted in faithful love and justice, could help to build the community through cultural formation, and it could stop the destruction of local communities, which is a negative result of globalization. Love and justice also could help local people to expand their boundary of practicing love and justice by regulating nationalism and local exclusivism. The critical weakness of globalization is the negative impact caused by the combination of post-modern consumerism and self-fulfillment based on individualism. In this context, faith-based love and justice have the ability to overcome the critical weakness of globalization by emphasizing communal love and justice.

(3) Life-centered Ecology and the Common Good

Churches’ engagement in the world is centered on the concept of the “kingdom of God,” which was proclaimed by Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God is the realm controlled by God’s will, and it exists among us. The core of the kingdom of God is God’s continuous sovereignty over the created world and, at the end, God’s saving of the world in history. The kingdom of God should be established on this earth, as in heaven. Therefore the kingdom of God is related to a person and social peace, justice, freedom, and well-being.\(^\text{13}\)

To advance the kingdom of God is to glorify God and love our neighbors. The core of the movement is transforming a community into a mature and growing community. God

---

reveals himself through the Trinitarian being and in human history. Through revelation, God shows us the nature of the kingdom of God. Therefore the Trinitarian community consists of Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and God's sovereignty in history is a model for the kingdom of God community. God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, becomes one unity in fellowship and love. By learning from this Trinitarian relationship, we should overcome the difference and diversity in human community with love and fellowship to become one body. This kind of living should be actualized in our culture.

The concept of the kingdom of God guides the believers who want to participate in the peaceful unification process of North and South Korea. It teaches and guides justification, participation, and the attitude of our actions. But this theological concept is very difficult to apply to non-Christians who are also involved in the unification process. Therefore the concept we could substitute for the kingdom of God is the concept of "common good." According to this concept, people are ordained by God, who is the ultimate destiny. Each person is related to God who is the greatest common good. Therefore the goal of all our actions is to unite all human beings and God. The good that we pursue has both public and private dimensions. The common good is relational and social. It is naturally and intrinsically good. On the other hand, the private good is functionally good. It is good not in and of itself but insofar as it benefit others. The private good is good for the world and human beings only when it advances the common good. Money, service businesses, and most economic goods are categorized as private and functionally good.

The common good not only respects individual human rights but also teaches one to seek out the good for neighbors, society, the world, and God. The common good includes all of the social good that helps to accomplish and complete individual goals. The common good prioritizes not only the dignity of man and woman and the rights of a human being, but also the nature of our society and our destiny, the purpose that is bigger than us. A society is more than a unified body of individual goods, profits, and respected choices. It includes organizations that compete for their own interests and the unstable institutions working for special interests. In a well-organized society, or ecology, the partial thing exists and functions for the complete one. That is, the common good serves the bigger good of God.

14 David A. Krueger, Keeping Faith at Work: The Christian in the Workplace (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 65. Usually the concept of "common good" is known as an ethic of the Roman Catholic Church. The representative scholar of this idea is Thomas Aquinas. The concept is descended through the line of natural law and reached Jacques Maritain in the 20th century. In this context, however, I borrowed the concept for two reasons. It informs the church’s sociocultural ethics and contributes to the better relationship of North and South Korea. Although Thomas was a theologian before the time of the Reformation, his thought can inform not only the Roman Catholic Church but also the ecumenical church, broadly speaking.

15 Krueger, Keeping Faith at Work, 66–68.
To Christians, the concept of the common good provides a solution to overcome extreme individualism, which is based on radical ethnic exclusivism and postmodern consumerism. In a bigger sense, the common good benefits all creatures. Therefore the common good is not only for human lives, but also for the lives of all creatures. It has an ecological meaning. The purpose of the common good should be the harmony of human beings and nature. The common good teaches us to judge our actions based on how the action affects everything: us, others, other species, and the entire ecology. In this action, we find a solution to overcome the negative effects caused by globalization.

The Practical Task of the Korean Church for Peace Based on Ecumenical Social Ethics

(1) Providing a Vision for the Unification of North and South Korea

First of all, the church should lead the reformation of South Korean society as a pre-existing model for the unification community. The first project of this reformation is expanding the God-centered covenant community. The first task is to educate and sensitize Christians, who comprise about thirty percent of the total population of Korea, about the God-centered unification community before teaching about the ideology of division. One thing needs to be clear: in this setting, God-centered community does not mean Christianity should be the national religion of Korea. God-centered covenant community means that all members of the community are God’s creatures and descendants. It is a community based on the highest dignity of all members, regardless of their awareness of this dignity. Therefore, the covenant community does not favor a partial group, like Christians or South Koreans. It respects the dignity of all members who are created by the image of God. It seeks a way to be faithful to God who is the master of the universal community. Therefore the unification community could not be a nationalistic community. The vision of the unification community that the church should proclaim and educate is a peaceful community that reflects the dignity of all members. The vision must be theological as well as historical so that it embraces the global community.

(2) An Effort to Accommodate Inclusive Social Culture

Secondly, to serve the global society, the church should make a strong effort to accommodate and understand cultural diversity. The Korean Church should make the best effort to overcome the sociocultural difference of North and South Korea. To

---

16 We should not forget that the task of unification is not just for Christians but also for the seventy percent of Koreans who are non-Christians. Therefore the theological term that we use for the unification process should be inclusive rather than exclusive. The use of theological terms in an exclusive manner is only in reference to the discriminatory sacrifice of Christians.
overcome the difference by understanding of North Korean culture, the Korean Church should continue the systematic education of the “correct understanding of North Korea.” The church should pay more attention to the cultural exchange of North and South Korea. The Sunday school curriculum should include lessons that teach about North Korea and the peaceful unification process.

At the same time, the task of the Korean Church should be the transformation of South Korean social culture, which is predominantly a consumerized popular culture. From the North Korean point of view, the accommodation of such culture could be a moral embarrassment for them. In some sense, such a view could be a prophetic message to South Koreans and churches, which are contaminated by the consumer culture. Of course, the exclusive self-reliance ideology culture of North Korea should be reformed too, but it is a secondary task for South Korean churches. When South Korean society is reformed as the culture of respecting all human dignity and the harmonious relationship of freedom and justice, South Korea could enhance its capacity to invite North Koreans to the unification community.

The Korean church Church should also work hard for the cultural understanding of migrant workers and for their settlement in Korea. The church should encourage the members to lead healthy cultural engagement. Working with diverse NGOs, the church should build a healthy and inclusive culture, which embraces not just North Koreans but also the global community in Korea. The church needs to initiate the hope of peaceful global community.

(3) An Effort to Build Political and Economic Institutions for Human Beings

Thirdly, to guarantee freedom, the church should set up political and economic institutions for human beings. The church should lead in creating a righteous social structure to produce peace. The church should take an interest in shaping and executing the legal system, which protects human dignity, freedom, equality, and justice. In the global market system, the church should also take interest in building ethical values, such as a transparent cooperate culture and community ethics in a highly competitive society. If we think that these matters are not related to the church, then we are abandoning our responsibility as God’s children and denying God’s sovereignty. To build a more righteous political and economic system in South Korea, the church should educate people on the matters of political participation and economic justice. To live like “the chosen people, the holy nation, and the people of God,” the church should engrave the sense of Christian citizenship on the heart of Christians. The church should nurture authentic Christians so they can establish a righteous tax system. In considering the global location of Korea and the sociopolitical situation in Northeast Asia, the Korean church also needs to work with churches in China and Japan. The Korean church needs to participate in the formation of a righteous and peaceful regional community.
Globalization and Peace, the Korean Church and Ecumenical Social Ethics

There were times that people were very optimistic about globalization. But, as globalization is more institutionalized, no one optimistically praises globalization. Socioeconomically, there has been a collapse of the middle-income class, resulting in greater divergence of the rich and poor. Like the situation in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the identity and function of ethnic countries are now in question. The war in Iraq after September 11th proves that political globalization accompanies military globalization. Such political globalization forces nations to participate in highly competitive economic globalization. In a situation like this, each country is eager to strengthen its national competitiveness by neglecting the people who are in the weakest social class. This kind of phenomenon caused by globalization threatens the peace and stability of a society and the world. The clash of civilizations teaches us the cultural aspect of globalization but, on the other hand, it makes us realize that the process of globalization is far from the peace that we pursue.

Taking into the consideration the context of the Korean churches, we found that ecumenical social ethics could be the proper answer for us. The actualization of ecumenical social ethics of the Korean church should start from the Korean peninsula. It is akin to the saying “think globally and act locally.” That is why the peaceful unification of Korea is the primary task of the Korean church. To establish a peaceful unification community in Korea, South Korea must first reform its society to respect the dignity of all people, beyond cultural and racial diversity. Therefore, the actualization of the Korean church for the peaceful unification requires the social reformation of Korea.

We need to note that the positive role of the Korean church for peace begins and ends with the church being the church. Of course, it is necessary to understand and analyze the social context in which we work to be able to function more responsibly. In this sense, we need to encourage the work of the laity and acknowledge our position as a member of civil society. However, the church being the church rests on the basis of the individual citizen being a true Christian, and also the Christian being a true citizen. A citizen in this sense is a member of society who carries out his or her own social responsibilities. The criticism that the Korean church receives as not having fulfilled her social responsibility is, at the same time, pointing to the fact that the Korean Christian has not truly lived a life of faith. Therefore, we must first reaffirm the basics of what it means to be a Christian. The acknowledgement of the close relationship between faith and life, a new confession of the sovereignty of God, and a continuous self-renewal founded on the confession of deeply rooted sins are important prerequisites that need to be addressed in order for the Korean church to properly carry out her social responsibility. Such a life of re-evaluation and reassessment of the basic foundations of faith, allows us to have a more open attitude to the Gospel. Such an open attitude to the Gospel will help the Korean church to carry on the tradition of *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. It will also help the
individual Christian to live a more responsible life as a citizen, combining a life of loving God with a life of solidarity and journeying together with the weak and poor, which is the core of ecumenical social ethics. Ecumenical social ethics would play a more constructive role for making peace in the context of accelerated globalization through reinforcing Christian character formation as a global citizen as well as being more conscious of the core of the Gospel, “taking the side with the least.”
Knowing in the Dark: Sin, Race and the Quest for Salvation
Part 1: Transforming Theological Anthropology in a Théologie Totale

Sarah Coakley

Dr. Sarah Coakley is Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. The following lecture is the first in the six-lecture series of the Annie Kinkead Warfield lectures, delivered on March 23–26, 2015. A revised and expanded version of these lectures will be published as the second volume of Dr. Coakley’s systematic theology.

Introduction: The Legacy of Annie Pearce Kinkead Warfield

Let me start by offering my sincere thanks to President Barnes, to Professor Bruce McCormack, and to all the faculty and students of Princeton Theological Seminary for the gracious invitation to be with you this week, for this introduction, and for all your kind hospitality. The honour accorded to me in being invited to give the Warfield Lectures of 2015 is one that I accepted with huge delight, albeit tinged with a certain “fear and trembling,” as the apostle Paul would put it. For not only do I stand in a long tradition of distinguished speakers to this lectureship going back to the middle years of the last century, but also in the longer shadow of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield himself (1851–1921), one of the most celebrated and long-serving professors in the history of Calvinist thought at Princeton Theological Seminary (teaching here from 1887 to his death in 1921), and also one of the most multi-gifted, with rigorous academic skills reaching right across the theological curriculum, conjoined with a deep and affective piety. As you know, he is best remembered for his spirited defence of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, but always in the most sophisticated intellectual conversation with both European and American interlocutors in that exciting modern era of emerging historical-critical consciousness.

However, it is not Benjamin Warfield whose memory we serve in these lectures, but his more mysterious wife Annie Pearce Kinkead Warfield (1852–1915), whose so-called “neurasthenia” kept her a semi-invalid for much of their married lives. Being caught out in a dramatic thunderstorm in Germany soon after their wedding supposedly shattered Annie’s nerves for ever thereafter; but there is some reason to think that this account has been retroactively mythologized: it was only in the last years of her life that she became completely bed-ridden, it seems, her husband ministering to her tirelessly and turning down all invitations to spend any time away from Princeton. But Annie’s life clearly was, as we might say with contemporary feminist consciousness, “erased” by psychosomatic illness (her affliction was seemingly of the sort that Freud was to explore with such explosive insight, as the very notion of the “unconscious” was first worked out in this
same period by him—precisely in relation to prostrate women’s bodies). And perhaps that is one reason why what I am going to attempt in these lectures is not inappropriately offered in Annie Warfield’s memory, as we shall see: the complexities of gender and spiritual vulnerability will remain at the heart of my analysis of theological anthropology.

But secondly, the Warfields’ much younger lives (childhood and early adolescence) were also affected by the Civil War, in which their wealthy families—both from Kentucky—did not, as it happened, ecclesiastically line up with the same side of the correlated Presbyterian split, even though both the Warfield and Kinkead families personally supported emancipation. Since it is the remaining open sore of America’s past history of slavery that I shall also be attending to centrally in these lectures, this historic root of the Kinkeads and Warfields in divided Kentucky is equally apposite as background. “Race” is a shrouded backcloth in their history: they lived through those painful stages of Civil War and post-Civil War that Cornel West and Eddie Glaude have described as the eras of the “Problems of Emancipation,” first, and then (the early) “Challenge to Racism.”1 These could hardly have been more significant and problematic years for the American history of “race.” Finally, and thirdly, I cannot forebear to mention a remarkable comment on Paul’s epistle to the Romans, chapter 8, made by Benjamin Warfield in connection with the long-term sufferings of his marriage, and the illness and death of his wife: this has quite recently been unearthed by John Piper. “The fundamental thought is the universal government of God,” writes Warfield, commenting on Romans 8:28. “Though we are too weak to help ourselves and too blind to ask for what we need, we can only groan in unformed longings. He [God, the Spirit] is the author in us of these very longings … and He will so govern all things that we shall reap only good from all that befalls us.”2

The complex problems and sufferings of gender and race, then, and the inscrutable enigmas and longings of prayer in the Spirit: these are the themes and dilemmas that—by strange providence—I share with the Warfields in their own time, and now take forward in what I have to offer you this week.

Theological Anthropology, Théologie Totale and the Constellations of Desire

In this opening lecture tonight I want to lay out some of the main themes to be covered in this series on theological anthropology—to give you a vantage point on the whole—and to clarify the methodology which undergirds it.

In the first volume of my systematic theology, God, Sexuality and the Self, I ventured

---

1 See the historical periodization in Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., eds., African American Religious Thought: An Anthology (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2003).
near the beginning of the book a contentious remark that came to constitute a central lynchpin in the unfolding argument: “Desire... is the constellating category of selfhood, the ineradicable root of the human longing for God.” That anthropological supposition, however, became subservient in God, Sexuality and the Self to a newly-worked trinitarian vision of the Godhead, in which the “interruption” of the Holy Spirit in the inchoate human prayer of longing, such as Paul describes in Romans 8, became a fresh and transforming way to an understanding of God as ontological progenitor of desire. Ultimately, it is God’s desire for us (in God’s case, a desire uniquely without lack, as clarified later in the 6th century by Dionsyius the Areopagite) which originates and sustains our desire for God, in an eternal circle of outgoing and returning trinitarian love. Desire, on this view is the “precious clue” woven into our created existence that, I suggested, ever “tugs at the heart,” reminding us of our ultimate source in God and our fundamental dependence on God.

It was a central theme of God, Sexuality and the Self, that sustained, ascetic contemplative attention to this working of desire in us—the ongoing outworkings of the “eager longing” of Romans 8 — could not only regenerate our thinking about the Trinity but potentially also transform some of the most destructive and divisive contemporary dilemmas about “sex” and “gender.” Desire, I argued early in God, Sexuality and the Self, is more “fundamental than gender,” not because gender does not “matter” (clearly we remain deeply exercised with its enactments), but because deep, contemplative engagement with the triune God ultimately “ambushes” and transforms these anxieties about the gender binary, rendering them subservient, through the Spirit and in Christ, to the more labile and mysterious workings of divine desire. Indeed, according to a rendition of Galatians 3:28 (“there is no longer Jew or Greek, male and female”) that gained a hold in the ascetic circles of Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century, such was the vision of gender ultimately to be envisaged eschatologically, labile to desire.

So far (perhaps) so good. But there was something I quite intentionally did not mention in this analysis of the relation between gender and God in God, Sexuality and the Self, something I was deliberately and strategically keeping in my back pocket. Not only did I not claim to provide a fully-fledged understanding of how desire in the human relates to reason, consciousness, and freedom, and to the full dignity of what is called in Genesis 1 the “image of God”; but I manifestly failed to complicate this picture of human desire and its source in divine desire with any mention of that painfully contentious topic which we now call “race.” Was this an unconscious repression on my part? No, I can truly say it was not, although it was a conscious decision to delay. Did it imply that I regarded the divisions and contestations of “gender” as somehow more basic than so-called “racial” divisions? Again, no. Rather, my omission was the result of a strategic and intentional
suspension, an initial disentanglement of what is now called “gender” from what is now called “race” in order to give each of them (and “class” will duly follow in the third volume) a distinct, and distinctly different theological analysis. In practice, of course, these categories—each with its own increasingly secular modern history and attendant debates and contestations—meld confusingly together in painful reality in what has come to be called “intersectional” entanglement. As Vicky Spelman memorably put it in the late 1980s, race and gender and class are not like individual pop-beads that we variously thread onto our anthropological necklace, and then divide again (pop, pop) at will. They intersect all the way across and down. Yet the history of each of these categories, it must be acknowledged, is not the same; and in particular, the part that has been played by Christianity itself in producing these terms and modes of thinking, whether overtly or more covertly, is importantly different in each case.

“Sex class,” Shulamith Firestone once memorably averred, “is so deep as to be invisible.” Yet arguably today “race” is yet more inscrutable and “deep,” not because it is ontologically more fundamental, but because its multiple workings and forms are so profoundly hidden, yet so strangely evanescent. As Willie Jennings puts it, “race remains one of the most difficult areas to confront, discuss, and think through for Christians, and especially for theologians. The central reason for our difficulty is that the Western Church has yet to grasp fully its deep involvement in the formation of the modern racial condition.” Race, says Jennings, is fundamentally “a way of seeing the world” (my emphasis—we shall come back later to this insight about “race” as perceptual, epistemological); yet it remains a wholly “elusive” concept, Jennings goes on, especially for those who think it is entirely clear what it means—yet cannot, when pressed, supply any convincing definition. “The central tragedy of the racial condition,” Jennings concludes, “is how it has stolen from the Church its revolutionary power of belonging in Christ.”

Jennings’s prophetic theme will be crucially taken up in these lectures, albeit with a subtly new twist relating precisely to the special “darkness” of desiring contemplation. In particular, it will be a supposition of these lectures that “race” represents in our time the most hidden and unconsciously-rooted propulsion in our mutual human projections and negotiations—a “surd,” as I put it, that still seems to defy rational or analytic comprehension. For how else can we explain the manifest failure of the (seemingly entirely “liberal” and rational) civil “rights” movement, more than fifty years after it first...

---

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 284.
took hold? What has been unconsciously created here by Christian culture (“race” in modern, Christian mode) must somehow now be undone by Christianity; but to do so the problematic “white” consciousness within it must once again plumb the depths of its own “darkness,” both noetic and moral. It must confront that which shelters and condones hidden violence, even as it – paradoxically and curiously – also eroticizes that which it demeaned. Only a theological account of Christianity, which explores the unconscious depths, glories, deflections, and distortions of desire, I shall be arguing, can reach to the level of analysis that is required of us here. As with the modern construction of “gender,” so with the modern construction of “race”: desire, in all its ambiguity, is somehow more fundamental than either of them. This is not to suggest (as I must immediately insist, for fear of a serious misunderstanding) that “race” is somehow less significant, more epiphenomenal, than the more general cultural “commodifications of desire,” let alone to imply that the negative social, economic, and political implications of “race” are not disturbingly and demeaningly pervasive. The point is, rather, that these effects are so profound and occluded that only an “interruption” of the Spirit can destabilize what has, under the aegis of sin, come to appear as “normal.” It follows that divine desire is the purgative force that alone can change and transform what ails us. Or so I shall continue to urge in this lecture series.

But let me now remind you, if I may—though in very brief compass—of the distinctive methodological features of the systematic theology I began to unfurl in God, Sexuality and the Self, and which will also pervasively inform my lectures on theological anthropology, sin, and salvation this week. I called that method “théologie totale,” risking an obvious possible misunderstanding that this would be heard as “totalizing” in a hegemonic sense, but in fact alluding to the French Annales school of historiography, l’histoire totale, which sought in its distinctive investigation of every level and type of human evidences—textual, historical, archaeological, anthropological—to do richer justice than ever before to the complexity of historical remains and their contemporary reconstruction. The same multi-leveled and multi-disciplinary richness, I argued, could also attend “systematic theology” in new guise, yet without succumbing to any merely “correlational” vision of theology in which the world, rather than God, would supply the starting point. Thus, I give the primary emphasis on the practice of contemplation, on the one hand (as a principled refusal to false “mastery,” or false speculative ambition, in deference to the Spirit’s primary invitation), and on the other hand, desire for God as a constellating anthropological category. At the same time I urged that this new genre of writing should creatively straddle conversation with a number of different disciplines—both to enable spiritual and intellectual renewal within the Christian faith itself, and to draw into critical

---

10 See Coakley, God, Sexuality and the Self, 88–92, for a résumé of the key methodological features of my proposed théologie totale; and ibid., 340–343, for the related methodological questions left hanging at the end of volume 1 of the systematics.
conversation those who hover agonizingly at its edges or are even initially resistant to it. Interdisciplinary exchange is at the heart of my endeavour, both in *God, Sexuality and the Self* and even more pressingly in these lectures. As we shall see, contrapuntal insights from the social sciences, from evolutionary biology, and most significantly, from secular philosophy will be engaged at crucial apologetic moments in the discussion. In no way, however, is this in order to “found” my theological claims in these discourses, or to displace the primacy of pneumatological revelation in what I try to speak; but rather, as I put it in God, Sexuality and the Self, to illustrate how a theology in via (progressively en route to its goal through change and transformation) is able to risk the expansion even of its own presumed “rationality” by allowing the Spirit to “blow where it wills.”

In short, we cannot presume that the Spirit operates only within the Church, let alone only within the ecclesiastical academy. Hence, engagement with “fieldwork” investigation of any particular doctrine-at-issue becomes a key motif of my method. If théologie totale is to overcome various baleful divides in the theological curriculum (“practical” versus “systematic” theology, “spirituality” versus theology, Christian theology versus “religious studies,” philosophical versus historical theology), then it needs to touch down in earthed manifestations of religious thought and practice. Only here will the method find its particular validation as retriever of buried treasure in the extraordinary “ordinariness” of lived faith. Finally, théologie totale witnesses also to the irreducible contribution that the aesthetic realm brings to systematic theology. In *God, Sexuality and the Self* that involved an excursus into the art history of representations of the Trinity, without which a whole dimension of my argument about reclaiming a non-mimetic perception of the trinitarian persons would have been lost. Likewise, in these lectures I shall find myself unable to do justice to the painful paradoxes of Fall, sin, and salvation without the assistance of poetic expression, so appropriately attuned to the broken ambiguity of human sin and human glory; and in the later volumes the contributions of music and liturgy will also be brought to bear.

In sum, the hallmarks of my proposed “systematic” method are distinctive precisely in the sense that they paradoxically refuse the “closure” that the term “system” characteristically bespeaks: that is why I sometimes also playfully call this an “unsystematic systematics.” Because the undertaking is grounded in the ongoing practices of prayer (not “founded” in the modern philosophical sense of unquestionable epistemological certainties), it is intrinsically in via, as I put it, always being called “ecstatically” out of itself afresh by the lure of the Spirit. To what extent this is a novel contribution in the range of possible contemporary renditions of Christian “systematics” is doubtless open to debate. As you well know, the great Karl Barth dared to take to himself the task of “regular” (i.e., “complete” or “school”) dogmatics, but overall preferred the title of “Church dogmatics” for his own magisterial work (since he remarkably anticipated all the post-modern objections to the hubris of human speculative systems); and he made
it clear that no synthesizing Christian vision could rest on anything in human experience: the revelatory authority of Christ the Word could alone be the point of reference for theological renewal. Barth’s clash with the Catholic (and specifically Thomist and neo-Thomist) vision of revelation “perfecting reason” thus marked the most important divergent fork in 20th century accounts of human frailty and sin. Was the human to be regarded as essentially corrupted and altogether without any “capacity for God” [capax dei] (so Barth), or could there be a sense in which the human was naturally and existentially “absolutely open upwards” (so Rahner)? The problem, as I see it, is that this choice precluded a further and more subtle alternative, which I have already tried to begin to spell out in my account of trinitarian theology in God, Sexuality and the Self. This is the idea that divine “desire” is that which yet undergirds and sustains the world in which fallen human desires are at best jumbled and ill-directed, and at worst truly vicious and satanic. The work of redemption, then, is one of accepting again the lure of the Spirit into the purging crucible of divine desire. And this is an ongoing, diachronic undertaking. In it, the practised work of prayer and attention—also itself a gift of the Spirit—forms the painful locus of transformation as human desires are brought into slow conformity with God's desires. That process of assimilation also brings the practitioner, perhaps implicitly and inchoately, into what might be called the “space of Jesus.” If one makes room for the Spirit’s “interruption” then there are certain unavoidable consequences, including finding oneself inexorably drawn into the cosmic travails of which Paul speaks so eloquently in Romans 8.

Théologie Totale on Sin, Race, and the Quest for Salvation

So if what I have said so far provides a brief recapitulation of the central methodological underpinnings of God, Sexuality and the Self, let me now lay out for you the main systematic moves that will guide the cumulative reflections in the coming lectures on sin, race, and the question of salvation.

First, it rapidly came to me in planning these lectures that whereas in God, Sexuality and the Self I had left until fairly late in the unfolding of the textual argument the addition of the research from “fieldwork” and sociological analysis, here, in the case of sin, race, and atonement, the “fieldwork” dimension had to come, explosively, first. And this decision was in the first instance, I must confess, for autobiographical reasons: as I shall explain further in my second lecture, my own view of crime, sin and “race” in America was dramatically shattered and changed as a result of a period I spent ministering in a South Boston jail in 2000–2001. But in fact the autobiographical factor is not in itself

---

11 See Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics I/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God (tr. G.W. Bromiley; 2nd. ed.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 275–287, for Barth’s discussion of “regular” and “irregular” dogmatics and their contrapuntal relation. I am grateful to Bruce McCormack for a critical discussion of this theme in Barth.
determinative: the main reason for placing this “fieldwork” adventure in jail to the fore in this discussion of Christian anthropology is that it lifts the veil on what is for the most part so carefully hidden from the eyes of all good, law-abiding citizens (whether black or white) in contemporary America—something basic to the nature of human life in this country, something determinative to the possibilities, or lack thereof, for human flourishing. But, if we lift this particular veil, the theme of “darkness” is immediately given multiple competing echoes: hiddenness, political oppression, economic collusion, obscurity, “race,” sin, and (possibly) secret revelation. It will be the task of the next (second) lecture, then, to untangle these allusions afresh, and to demonstrate that the American prison system (and perhaps especially the short-term lock-up jail in the more cramped and deprived areas of our inner-cities, where such a large proportion of young black and Latino men are regularly held) is the acid test of this democracy’s failing or flourishing in terms of its human population. And although I shall need to draw creatively here on the insights of social science to illuminate what happens in such “totalizing” institutions—how their hierarchies work, or fail to work, to enforce and patrol subordination by persuasion or violence—my interests will of course be mainly theological.

For although “crime” is the category that takes one to jail, “race” is the category that most signally controls that passage in certain social conditions, such that the original “crime” becomes almost incidental to something else: a set of eventualities that are then played out along a more-or-less unconscious trajectory of repetitive ritual punishment. The trouble is that for the most part, the original theological (full reformatory and atoning) theory of the modern jail system has dropped by the wayside, giving way to a raw, secularized system of unmetabolized punitive violence. Thus, although “Houses of Correction” were originally spawned in Massachusetts out of a high-minded reformatory Calvinism, what remains today is a botched remnant of that original vision.

The theological thesis that will guide my analysis, then, is that “sin” is a basic theological notion which may unconsciously come to garner heavy “racial” baggage from its surrounding cultural arrangements, ones which are for the most part occluded from general public attention but build up all the associations of collective societal blame. (We might name this phenomenon, in shorthand, the problem of “whiteness”.) It follows that only a close analysis of what actually goes on in a jail, in the name of public order and justice, is capable of delivering insight into the veiled and distorted, but nonetheless still debased theological association of sin, punishment, “correction,” and atonement.

Yet the story I shall tell about the jail is also laced with hope of a most unexpected sort. Indeed, it is this aspect of what I discovered in the jail that transformed my own perspective as a theologian beyond anything I could have anticipated or imagined. What I encountered was a group of (mainly) young Afro-American men, who had been most manifestly submitted to a regime of continuing addiction, violence, and racist repression...
in the jail, yet many of whom were extraordinarily determined, nonetheless, to re-imagine their “doing time” as purposive struggle—struggle with their own inner demons and passions, with addiction itself, and finally with the strange transformative divine “darkness” encountered in the communal practice of silence. And this simple contemplative sitting that they did together was shared with a number of white participants—a tiny handful of rather frightened white prisoners, and an even smaller number, on any given day, of white chaplains, volunteers, or sympathetic social workers who chose to take on this task in solidarity. Yet something extraordinary here was being undone as a result of this simple, repeated act of attention: a specifically modern view of race as epistemic “otherness” (beyond the “pale,” literally) was somehow being eroded and transformed in shared engagement with a divine, luminous darkness; yet it was that very notion of “dazzling darkness” which the Enlightenment philosophy and theology of modern “liberalism” and modern punishment had notably eschewed. In the strangely powerful metabolism of shared mutual attention to divine “otherness,” the devastating cultural projection of racial otherness was seemingly shifting. A certain tangible self-respect became manifest in the members of the group, a certain carriage of body which bespoke poise and new courage, a certain notable resistance, in the unwonted mutual peace and solidarity of the group, to the ritualized degradations of the jail system. Men even began to re-imagine their cramped and dangerous cells as places of ascetic transformation, of patience, and of hope.

Of course, none of this was either predictable or strictly manipulable. Nor is there any naive suggestion here on my part of a quick, transformative “fix” of racial consciousness that might be achieved by widespread inter-racial contemplative practice. How practical that could ever be remains in any case something of an unknown, although I would not want to abandon all hope of that possibility. My point here is the more modest but unassailable one: that something was shifted in the capacity of all involved in that jail group to see—to see each other and to see what was going on. The practices of silence “interrupted” and “bucked” the repression of the prison system and the mutual blindness of prejudice. They shifted our perspective on the ritualized arrangements of “race” in that place, and subtly turned the kaleidoscope to a new setting. Moreover when reflecting on all this later “in tranquillity” I realized that there might be an important historical background to this story. Could it be that the Enlightenment (which itself of course also supplied the modern reformatory system of imprisonment) simultaneously created a new and disturbing vision of “race” and also repressed the idea that a quite different sort of divine darkness could ever be inherently transformative spiritually? After all, it was Immanuel Kant who played a vital role in concocting the Enlightenment (scientifically-inflected) view of “race”; but it was also Kant who denied, again in the name of modern science, that any direct revelatory contact with the divine was possible, given the necessary “boundaries” of human knowledge. Beyond those boundaries lay only black/blank nescience, according to Kant, not the alluring, transformative divine darkness of the
Christian “mystical” tradition. In short (I now asked myself), could the specifically modern category of “race” be insidiously connected to a resistance to embracing “darkness” of a transcendent sort in a prayer practice that cedes human authority to the divine?

The answers to these questions can only be worked out in what follows in these lectures. But the crucial and initial point I urge tonight is that no convincing account of sin and the Fall can be given today which does not face head-on the ways in which the “surd” modern concept of race has been insidiously and often unconsciously read into them. Thus, from this opening “fieldwork” discussion of prayer-practice in the jail, and its suggestive account of the unconscious modern entanglements of “race” and “sin,” I shall turn back next, in Lecture III, to a fresh analysis of the Genesis Fall stories themselves, with a special focus on how the crucial category of “desire” plays in them and leads to various aporiai, including the uncertain question of who, finally, is responsible for sin and death. Drawing contrapuntal insights from Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, my two main patristic interlocutors in God, Sexuality and the Self, I shall argue that the different ways that they interpret the effects of the Fall and the implications for human flourishing (especially in their rendition of gender) are seemingly profoundly divergent, yet in some ways the main theodicy issues they struggle with remain equally unresolved. The genius of an unashamedly “mythological” understanding of the Fall in Genesis 3, I urge, resides in its irreducible structure as narrative and its capacity to hold and endure what seem to be “unbearable contradictions” in the vision of a God who both desires freedom and happiness for God’s subjects and yet sets them on a course which is doomed to failure.

In interrogating patristic and rabbinic interpretations of the sin of the Fall, I shall argue that neither pride (Augustine) nor envy (Gregory of Nyssa) is obviously basic to sin, but rather the very act of desire going awry, missing its mark and thus implicitly engaging in idolatry. When the spotlight is again put on desire in the story of the Fall, it is found that this very ambiguity of desire is crucial to the irresolvable tensions of the narrative. The desire for the knowledge of good and evil is both the means of the human coming into its full stature as “image” of God, and yet also the propulsion of fundamental disobedience. The Genesis story, as such then, cannot resolve this difficulty. It simply holds it in a seemingly unbearable tension.

Ultimately, I shall argue, the resolution can only be found in the classic paradoxical idea of the felix culpa or “happy fault,” since out of the events of the Fall are ultimately brought the saving events of incarnation. However, once the Fall has occurred, and the punishment accrued has involved a distribution of ill effects according to a new “binary” of gender, Eve’s desire as woman takes on a different set of overtones from before, both further eroticized and tending to obsessive distortion. This again underscores the tensive ambiguity of desire in the Fall narrative, which Christians will finally resolve only in the figure of Christ as the true locus of (non-idolatrous) desire and the true prototype of the divine “image” in the human. Finally, written deeply into the story is a motif of
projective blaming—of the woman, of the serpent—as an integral part of the corruption of the same desire in the Fall. But is it Eve who attracts the greater blame for the Fall (as “the devil’s gateway,” so Tertullian) or the mysterious snake/devil himself? A further aporia lurks here, since God must ultimately be responsible too for the existence of this serpent and his deeds. It will be argued that the serpent may unconsciously be figured as anything or anyone who may be blamed for dark, creeping social “dis-ease”: as such, the serpent is implicitly a “raced” being in the modern sense, both cursed and simultaneously strangely seductive or erotic. As we shall show in Lecture III, the elusive problem of “race” has never been far from the surface in modern interpretations of the Fall, although this is a motif that contemporary exegetes have done their best to forget.

So the return to the Fall narratives in Lecture III is freshly negotiated through critical attention to the notion of desire; but the Genesis Fall narrative, as such, cannot effect a resolution to the theological tensions on desire it itself proffers. Moreover, when Augustine literally “historicizes” Adam and identifies him and Eve as personally responsible for inherited, “original” sin, handed on down the generations via the sex act, he charts a way forward which will both end up on a seeming collision course with modern evolutionary science, but also “freeze” gender attributes in a way that the deeper complexity of the original biblical narrative does not appear to condone. On these points Gregory of Nyssa’s reading appears both richer and more malleable. But neither Augustine nor Gregory (for all the complexity of their differently-modulated theories of desire) deliver the sustained diachronic analysis of fallen and progressively saved desire that can be found in the early modern works of John of the Cross and his mentor and friend, Teresa of Avila. Here the story of desire, human and divine, becomes, we might say, the equivalent of what Paul and the Reformation tradition would rather differently call justification and sanctification.

Thus, in the later lectures of this series (lectures IV–VI) I shall turn, as I also did in *God, Sexuality and the Self*, to a somewhat neglected set of textual resources (this time not from the patristic oeuvre, but from early modernity) in order to foreground the significance of sustained contemplative practice for the resolution of the riddles of desire, sin, and race that I have already laid out. In the writings of these great sixteenth-century Carmelites we see desire and contemplation brought to the foreground of reflections on an emerging modern selfhood of interiority and certitude, one destined for later “secularity,” yet strung out here along a dark diachronic path in which the individual must first submit to the purification of desires, both sensual and spiritual, before entering into full union with Christ. Here, I shall argue, is a model for salvific incorporation into the life of God which also, by slow and difficult degrees (in via, again), painfully removes all projective self-delusion and blaming of the “other.” In short, one is led on a dark journey

---

in which initial “not-seeing” becomes the condition for an eventual recovery of “sight” of a new and higher order: human darkness, both noetic and moral, is purged by dazzling divine darkness. Moreover, as we shall see in Teresa and John of the Cross, accounts of race, gender, eroticism, sin, and contemplative purgation coalesce in a way extraordinarily apposite to the complex of contemporary problems already sketched in this outline. The personal and political implications of their remarkable accounts of human darkness and its transformation en route to union with Christ thus deserve to be rescued systematically from the marginalization often accorded to so-called counter-Reformation “spirituality” or “mysticism.” Whereas John provides a unique account of the “night of sense,” so called, in which epistemic darkness is embraced for the sake of its transforming, purgative power, Teresa’s account of the spiritual journey is less consistently “dark,” more riddled with gendered erotic play, yet as cognizant as John of the transformative Dionysian tradition of “mystical theology.” I shall be urging that their particular understanding of metabolized darkness and ascetic endurance holds enormous promise for a new theological anthropology founded in contemplative practice. “Darkness” here is both epistemic and moral; yet it is capable of progressive transformation-in-God. This approach unlocks afresh an older patristic teaching on “spiritual sense,” and thus opens up a vista of “theology in via” in which human epistemological and moral responsiveness expands and ascends through the processes of the purgation of desire. The profound implications for modern “gender” and “race” will once more be considered in the light of this progressively “interruptive” grace of the Holy Spirit; for (yet again) this approach seems to provide a way of shifting some of our deepest contemporary anxieties, of exposing the projective unconscious forces at play in our attempts to “fix” gender and race as immovable categories.

The Carmelites were writing, of course, at a critical juncture for the renegotiation of European “racial” reflection, as the New World opened up to the West. Although the developments of thought on racial “otherness” at this stage were later superseded by the important “Enlightenment” discussions, already noted, it has been well said that the implications of that early modern expansion still haunts Atlantic culture. Moreover, both Teresa and John had part conversos (Jewish) blood, making them specially aware of the dangers and associations of certain kinds of racial identity in the period after the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian peninsula. Further, they were both subject to inquisitional investigation during their lifetime, and their remarkable reforming work within the Carmelite order led to active persecution and—in John’s case—actual imprisonment in a tiny (dark!) lavatory for fully nine months before he effected an escape. Their ascetic analysis of desire, moreover, and the truth claims associated with this analysis, raised in sharp form the key issues of the day about the relation of personal spiritual “certainty” (such as Luther, too, had claimed) both to ecclesial authority and to inherent philosophical cogency.
Since those questions of (philosophical) justification and warrant have not gone away in contemporary theology, and indeed have been intensified and refined yet further in recent secular epistemology, I shall conclude my discussion of the Carmelites’ spiritual programme with a critical, apologetic, and philosophical turn: under what epistemic conditions can the Carmelites reasonably claim such justifying “certainty” about their theological claims, given the various “darknesses” of their quest, both noetic and moral? How can these different darknesses be sorted and assessed? And how is human desire, specifically, motivated and changed in such a quest? Finally, what are the implications for human selfhood considered communally (in church and society) of an ascetic commitment to dispossessed desire? Why does such a project seem repulsive to many in an age of endlessly “commodified desire,” and how is this form of “asceticism” to be rescued from the characteristic Protestant charge of works righteousness?

By the end of these lectures, however, certain resolutions of these issues will have emerged, not least because the incipient christological undertow of my anthropological proposal will have gradually made its presence felt. Let me state this boldly: Christology for me represents the heart and climax of the mystery of the systematic endeavour, not its starting point. To enunciate a Christology on this view requires a progressive invitation first from the interruptive Holy Spirit into the life of God, to join the realm of those being conformed to Christ, to learn even how to recognize Christ non-idolatrously (a topic which I am saving for the last of these current lectures). It follows that a “purging” path of chastened desire such as that outlined by the Carmelites has precisely the trajectory of such a christological “conformation,” always undertaken in the Spirit’s grace. But this is what Ernst Troeltsch would undoubtedly have called a Christology of the “mystic” type. If Teresa’s and John’s testimony is true, actual “union” with Christ is possible even in this life, and technically for them it is only under those conditions that one may rightly enunciate what it is to speak of the mystery of the renewed “image” of God in the human, for that is what Christ is. To the Barthian of course all this is inside out: the revelation in Christ is the primary, and defining starting point; to the follower of théologie totale, however, contemplative pneumatology is in contrast primary, and only slowly do the full and pervasive christological implications of the “conforming” path emerge. In other words, only through repeated, attentive silence is a true response to the Word enabled.

The Authorities of Scripture, Tradition and “Reason”; Two Styles of Approach to Salvation: the Explanatory and the Existential/Poetic

And that brings me finally to some very short concluding remarks about what vision of Scriptural and other authorities governs my systematic undertaking. You may have been wondering! But in fact my systematic method is for the most part quite conventionally committed to the understanding of the relation of primary scriptural authority to tradition and reason as set forth by Richard Hooker at the very start of the
17th century on behalf of his new, Elizabethan reformed church in England. For Hooker, Scripture has and retains unequivocal and primary authority; yet its unfolding meaning is always creatively negotiated in relation to the views of the “rational saints” of earlier generations (that is what he means by “tradition”), and in conversation too with reason itself and natural law. The novum in Hooker, however, is that reason and natural law—unlike in Thomist scholasticism, which Hooker knew well—are themselves dynamic and developmental. The result for theological criteriology is a rich triadic negotiation that constantly remakes and extends its own “tradition” even as Scripture is ever returned to with the aid of a supple and pliant reason. It is really only in my additional stricture that progressively transformed “reason” is accessed and enlarged by contemplative activity in the Spirit, that I gloss or add to Hooker’s basic picture.\textsuperscript{13}

Finally, an admission of my special and continuing Scriptural focus in this second volume of systematics is in order. This matter may also seem a bit elusive, but is in fact strongly determinative for the project. Just as I returned repeatedly in God, Sexuality and the Self to the summation passages of Romans 8 as a fundamental guide to the encounter with the trinitarian God, so Romans will again, implicitly but pervasively, propel my project in these second and third volumes on theological anthropology. But I have been affected here by an insight that there are at least two different styles of reflection on the Christian life in Romans that need each other: that which explains the objective atoning achievements of Christ for us in a series of richly irreducible metaphors and explanatory models (justification and sanctification for the individual; satisfaction and sacrifice for the atoning work of Christ), and that which invites the Christian existentially into an indissoluble union with Christ through shared baptismal death and resurrection (Romans 6), the ongoing struggles with sin (Romans 7), shared prayer and travail (Romans 8), and shared interpenetration in the “mystical body” (Romans 12). The objective explanatory metaphors for salvation are of course impossible to dispense with, and I shall treat of them at some length in volume 3, on current plans, with deep engagement then with Calvin’s commentary on the Romans and his Institutes; for crucial there will be Calvin’s extraordinary vision, so important also for Hooker, of how the outworkings of this salvation play into the public institutions of the state—governments, prisons, hospitals. But the motif of existential “oneing” with Christ in Paul’s theology is arguably more fundamental still, and it is this with which I shall be primarily concerned in these first set of lectures on theological anthropology, even though, when we get to the jail, it will be immediately evident that we cannot avoid the public, political implications of any theory of salvation. Yet as we shall see, the mystery and suffering and glory of this underlying “oneness” motif is such that new poetic images are constantly needed to try and express it.

\textsuperscript{13} The influence of Hooker’s Ecclesiastical Polity on the discussion of theological criteria in chapter 1 of God, Sexuality and the Self is admittedly more implicit than explicit, since I am saving further discussion and reclamation of both Calvin and Hooker for volume 3 of the systematics.
in all its richness and agony. These may, as we shall see, be as various and paradoxical as
the pained, eschatological longings for “new bright robes” in heaven in a black spiritual,
or the equally passionate invocation by a 17th-century English poet, Henry Vaughan, for
that “deep, but dazzling darkness…where I in him might live invisible and dim.” Poetic
expression of this mystical oneness with Christ remains irreducible in this theological
exploration of sin and salvation, I shall argue, precisely because it is a journey fraught
with so many paradoxes and tensions. It is not for nothing that John of the Cross saw his
own poetry (both simple and sublime, tortured and ecstatic) as the irreducible matrix
from which to unfurl his own detailed theological commentary.

In my next lecture I shall attempt to show something of why and how modern “race”
came to have the role it does in pervasive projective cultural blaming, and how— for a
theological anthropology according to a théologie totale— the acknowledgement of this
state of affairs within Christianity itself is a crucial transitus to understanding what “sin”
fundamentally is. Learning how to see in and through the “dark” in a racist environment
becomes a painfully purgative journey for both oppressor and oppressed —though
differently—for along the way each individual slowly realizes all her own entanglement,
whether as oppressor or oppressed, in a hidden system of social ills, mutual projections
and collective blindness.