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First Corinthians 7 and the Role of Celibacy in the Mission of the Church

Historic Perspectives and Modern Application

JOSH BURDEN

How have Paul's teachings on marriage and celibacy been understood throughout history? What do those teachings have to say about the potential roles of single and married persons in the church today?

Paul's instructions on marital matters in 1 Cor 7 have accrued a history of interpretation marked by glaring and sometimes divisive contrasts. Given his strong emphasis on church unity in 1 Corinthians, one may well wonder if he would have clarified his thoughts in the seventh chapter of that letter had he foreseen the conflicting ways that they would be appropriated in future centuries. No other biblical text deals so directly or extensively with the choice between marrying and remaining unmarried; consequently, the role of this text in the history of the appraisal of celibacy versus marriage has been monumental. The question of whether clergy ought to be celibate (which was one of several factors that separated the Orthodox and Catholic traditions over time and was later one of many Protestant departures from Catholicism) is perhaps the most visible issue impacted by interpretation of 1 Cor 7, though clearly not the only one. Indeed, the comparative value of celibacy and marriage is itself at stake, and this comparison is a pertinent issue not only for a Catholic understanding of the mission of the church, but also for a Protestant one. Critical interaction with 1 Cor 7 is indispensable in forming any biblical view regarding whether marriage enhances or detracts from the ability of clergy and laypersons to effectively minister to the church and the world.

This article will aim to highlight defining interpretive tendencies and motivations in the work of various commentators on 1 Cor 7 since it was written, focusing on their understanding of Paul's apparent preference for singleness over marriage. Since this is not the only issue addressed in 1 Cor 7, the discussion here will have in view chiefly, though not exclusively, verses 1-2, 7-9, and 25-40. Extensively and adequately mapping the interpretation of these verses from the first century to the present would require a rather lengthy book, so a few key commentators will be briefly examined here as being illustrative of the interpretive shifts regarding this passage throughout the history of the church. First, interpretation in the patristic era will be considered, focusing on Augustine and Jerome as influential figures at the time when clerical celibacy was becoming normative in the Western church. Second, commentaries by Luther and Calvin will be examined for both continuities and discontinuities with their Catholic predecessors. Third and finally, this article will seek to compare the various interpretive principles used and to delineate the substance, extent, and application of Paul's pronouncements on marriage and singleness in the text, drawing on the work of more recent commentators and applying it to the issue of clerical celibacy and to the broader issue of the role of celibacy in Christian mission.

The lack of attention 1 Corinthians 7 received may indicate that lifelong celibacy was not a common practice in the early orthodox churches.

Two central sets of questions, which are connected but distinct, will guide this discussion: (1) Does Paul's preference for singleness over marriage imply that singleness is intrinsically better than marriage, or is his preference based only on pragmatic and circumstantial considerations? In particular, does Paul's contention that the attentions of the married person are divided between God and spouse, while the attention of the single person can be focused solely on God (7:32-35), relate specifically to Paul's eschatological apprehension (7:26-31), or does it have broader applicability? (2) Does Paul effectively reduce marriage to a concession for those who lack sexual self-control? Is Paul an ascetic who sees sexual renunciation as a more complete expression of the Christian life than marriage?

The Turn to Celibacy: Augustine and Jerome

In response to the last question, Jerome (c. 342-420) and Augustine (354-430) would have responded with a resounding "yes." Their views on sexuality, however, cannot be taken as being representative of the entire patristic period. Both are over three centuries removed from Paul, and it was not until Cyprian (c. 200-258) that entire Christian treatises began to be written on virginity. The relative lack of theological attention given to celibacy prior to the middle of the third century, and the attendant lack of attention 1 Cor 7 received, may indicate that lifelong celibacy was not a common practice in the early orthodox churches.[1] Marcionism, Montanism, and later Manichaeanism certainly emphasized sexual asceticism, but orthodox Christianity was constrained to recognize the divine mandate to procreate in Genesis 1:28 and hence could not condemn sexuality as inescapably evil.[2] Nevertheless, the strong body-soul dualism in the cultural 'air,' particularly in Platonism, influenced not only the Gnostics, but also the church fathers, and this consequently lent itself to a division "between the several urgings of the body and the soul's yearning for God."[3] Primary among these "urgings" was sexual desire, so Christians, and especially clergy, began to avoid engaging in sexual activity, possibly even while married.[4] Clerical celibacy was proposed as a rule at Nicea in 325, and though it was rejected there, it continued to be an issue of contention. Between 384 and 458, four bishops of Rome issued decrees on clerical celibacy, and while Augustine permitted married clerics, both Ambrose and Jerome were against such a practice.[5]

Augustine considers marriage a good, but his appraisal of it is hardly glowing. He sees human sexual relations as tainted, and accordingly, he sees Paul as merely conceding that the Corinthians may marry in order to engage in sexual relations.

The essence of Augustine's interaction with 1 Cor 7 stands in line with the consensus of his day. Ambrose, who played a key role in Augustine's journey towards conversion, expresses praise for virgin-

ity and mere lack of reproof for marriage in his comments on 1 Cor 7.[6] Similarly, Augustine considers marriage a good, but his appraisal of it is hardly glowing. He sees human sexual relations as tainted by concupiscence, or inordinate and perverted sexual desire, after the fall, and accordingly, he sees Paul as merely conceding that the Corinthians may marry in order to engage in sexual relations (7:6). This concession is made to prevent greater evil from occurring from one's lack of self-control, as is illustrated from Augustine's response to Paul's advice in 7:9: "'But if they do not have self-control, let them marry, for I prefer them to marry rather than to burn.' He [Paul] said this for the benefit of those whom the evil of unbridled lust might lead into criminal indulgence if it were not restrained by honorable marriage."[7] This makes marriage appear necessary but not commendable, as if it were only a lawful alternative to fornication, a refuge for the immoderate.

The Latin West, in line with Augustine and Jerome, tended throughout the Middle Ages to devalue sexuality as tainted, and it predictably moved towards a completely celibate priesthood and spawned numerous celibate religious orders.

Augustine, however, insists that marriage is still a good because of its natural end, which is procreation: "If the concupiscence of the flesh in wedlock exceeds to some extent the measure required for the procreation of children, this is not an evil of the married state, but is venial because of the good of marriage."[8] Concupiscence is thus unavoidable in marriage but is permitted because of procreation, which is the "good of marriage." The pursuit of this good was once mandatory for the Jews, but for Christians this requirement has been rescinded. "The good of marriage is always a good, but in former times among the people of God it was an act of obedience to the law; now, it is a remedy for infirmity and for some a solace for their human nature."[9] Because marriage is thus only a "remedy for infirmity," Augustine interprets 1 Cor 7:9b, "it is better to marry than to burn," as giving the only legitimate reason for marrying. "Only those who do not restrain

themselves ought to be married."[10] The reason for this is quite straightforward. Procreation is no longer required,[11] and sexual intercourse necessarily involves concupiscence, so it should be avoided if at all possible. Indeed, through celibacy is found not only greater freedom from concupiscence here on earth, but also "greater merit"[12] and greater rewards in heaven.[13] Thus, in Augustine's interpretation of 1 Cor 7, Paul is offering marriage as a good remedy for the immoderate. This remedy, however, is only meant for the immoderate since singleness is preferable, singleness in which sexual renunciation is the goal and not merely incidental.

Jerome is even less congenial to marriage than Augustine. A zealous advocate of celibacy, he essentially sets the spiritual life in opposition to sexual activity. Marriage is still allowable for Christians and acceptable because of procreation, but for Jerome it is far from ideal, as is evident in his clarification of 1 Cor 7:28: "'But if you marry, you have not sinned.' It is one thing not to sin, another to do good."[14] Marriage is thus viewed as the mere avoidance of sin, not as "doing good." To do good, one must be celibate, as is evident from his conception of prayer. Rosemary Radford Ruether notes, "For Jerome and others it is axiomatic that one cannot pray if one is living in carnal union. Either temporary or permanent vows of continence are prerequisite for prayer."[15] This could plausibly be connected with 1 Cor 7:5, where married couples were permitted to abstain from sex in order to pray, and with 7:32-35, where being married is seen as distracting a person from "the affairs of God." The implication of this, for Jerome, is that marriage is not even comparable to celibacy. "The former [marriage] we forsake, the latter [virginity] we follow. In the last lies perfection."[16] In Jerome's understanding of 1 Cor 7, Paul is a staunch advocate of the superiority of celibacy who grudgingly allows marriage as an inferior but not sinful alternative. Marriage is "inherently polluting" because of its sexual indulgence,[17] so only the celibate person can be truly spiritual, and hence priests need to be celibate.[18]

The Latin West, in line with Augustine and Jerome, tended throughout the Middle Ages to devalue sexuality as tainted, and it predictably moved towards a completely celibate priesthood and spawned numerous celibate religious orders. It was not, however, until the Second Lateran Council of 1139 that Catholic priests were officially not permitted to marry, and it was not until the Council of Trent (1545-1563) that an entirely celibate priesthood became canon law.[19] In the Greek East, a strong tradition of celibacy was also present, though less forceful and with different emphases. According to Ruether, "The Greeks are likely to stress more the transience of the goods of marriage than the defiling character of sex."[20] For instance,

Gregory of Nyssa, who was probably married,[21] "inveighs against marriage, not by making sex dirty, but by speaking sadly of the mutability of all worldly loves."[22] The Second Council of Trullo in 691 set the course for the Eastern churches by allowing sexual relations for married clergy, while married clergy in the Church of Rome were even then apparently not allowed to have sexual relations.[23]

The Reformers Respond: Luther and Calvin

Martin Luther, in his 1523 "Commentary on 1 Corinthians," breaks decisively with the standard Catholic interpretation of 1 Cor 7, which found some of its strongest roots in Jerome and Augustine.[24] This break is anticipated in his introductory letter: "This very chapter [1 Cor 7], more than all the other writings of the entire Bible, has been twisted back and forth to condemn the married state and at the same time to give a strong appearance of sanctity to the dangerous and peculiar state of celibacy."[25] Jerome and Augustine could hardly have described celibacy as "dangerous and peculiar," and yet Luther, in his attack on celibacy and especially on clerical celibacy, relies on the very same text that they had used. Augustine had maintained that only the immoderate should marry. Luther maintains that almost everyone should marry. He argues that marriage had been mandatory under the Mosaic law and that the Corinthians were wondering if they could be free from that law.[26] Paul affirms their freedom, intent in 7:1b to show that celibacy is not a sin.[27] He quickly qualifies this statement in 7:2, though, saying, "because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband." The "each" is indicative for Luther that Paul expects virtually everyone to marry. He concedes that some have the gift of chastity (7:7), but that for those who do not, Paul is commanding them to marry.[28] Moreover, Luther believes that this gift is incredibly rare: "For every chaste person there should be more than a hundred thousand married people."[29] He even argues, as a pointed example, that Jerome did not have the gift of chastity and thus ought to have married![30]

Luther is not ignorant of Paul's preference for celibacy in the text, but he is insistent that celibacy's only superiority is in its utility. Those fortunate enough to have the gift of celibacy have more freedom to pray and study the word (7:32-34).[31] Marriage is also attended by worldly troubles, though not by spiritual ones.[32] Also, Luther admits Paul's point that persecution is a good reason to remain single (7:26).[33] Despite these advantages, though, chastity is a gift and thus should not be seen as a work offered to God or as a virtue.[34] Consequently, it is foolish to make a vow of celibacy, as was done in the Catholic religious

orders and priesthood.[35] Luther's interpretation of 1 Cor 7 thus praises celibacy, but not as a higher state or as more spiritual than marriage, nor does he claim that sexual renunciation is inherently good. As for marriage, he praises it far more than Augustine and Jerome had.

Taking 7:2 and 7:9 as his points of departure, however, Luther relegates the reason to marry to a cure for the burning of the flesh.[36] People are to marry because of their neediness: "Necessity orders that you marry."[37] "For his [a Christian's] flesh rages, burns, and fructifies just like that of any other man, unless he helps and controls it with the proper medicine, which is marriage."[38] This medicine is not viewed as a necessary evil, as Jerome seems tempted to think, but is more the acceptable way of nature: "The spirit permits the body its ways and natural functions, so that it eats, drinks, sleeps, and eliminates like any other human body."[39] This is not exactly a flattering view of sexual relations, but it is certainly less negative than Augustine and Jerome's.

John Calvin's commentary on 1 Cor 7 is in many respects similar to Luther's. Calvin summarizes Paul's teaching on marriage in three succinct points: (1) Celibacy is preferable to marriage, because it gives us freedom, and, in consequence better opportunity for the service of God. (2) Yet no compulsion should be used to prevent individuals from marrying, if they want to do so. (3) Moreover marriage itself is the remedy which God has provided for our weakness; and everybody who is not blessed with the gift of continency ought to make use of it.[40]

Like Luther, Calvin sees the only advantages of celibacy as practical ones; it is a gift and not a virtue or "a means of giving service to God,"[41] so mandatory clerical vows of celibacy are impermissible. At various junctures throughout his commentary, Calvin takes issue directly with Jerome. Jerome had implied that anyone could have the gift of celibacy, but Calvin insists that it is a special gift for a few.[42] In response to Jerome's inference from Paul's statement in 7:9, "it is better to marry than to burn," that marriage is merely "a lesser evil than burning," Calvin maintains that "the remedy of marriage is good and makes for well-being."[43] Marriage, for Calvin, is connected with health. It is, however, also more than a necessary remedy against lust. If it were only a remedy, marriage would not have been instituted by God before the fall. Procreation is an additional good of marriage, and even those without need of the remedy are free to pursue marriage for

Luther maintains that almost everyone should marry.

its other goods.[44] In addition, against the accusation that Paul implies that marriage obstructs prayer, Calvin retorts, "if anyone objects that intercourse is a bad thing, because it comes in the way of prayer, the answer is easy: that does not make it worse than food and drink which hinder fasting."[45]

On the whole, Calvin's principles of interpretation are more cautious than those of his predecessors. He praises the benefits of celibacy, but only the practical benefits he perceives in the text and not any spiritual superiority. He does not wish for everyone to be celibate, as Jerome does, nor does he insist that virtually everyone should marry, as Luther is eager to do. He points to marriage as a remedy for lust, but he also claims that it brings health and the good of procreation. Admittedly, this is not as pleasant a description as one could imagine, but it does at least represent his attempt to take the given tensions in the text seriously.

First Corinthians 7 in Modern Scholarship

Modern biblical scholarship has made significant advances toward a better understanding of 1 Cor 7, though as one might expect, current perspectives on the text remain divided. A central and contested issue is whether Paul is an ascetic who prefers the unmarried state at least in part because of its sexual renunciation. Perhaps the most crucial verse for deciding this is 7:1: "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: it is good for a man not to touch a woman." The traditional interpretation of this, taken for granted by Luther and Calvin, is that Paul is expressing his own point of view in the latter half of the verse. Since "to touch" (*haptomai*) was a euphemism for sexual relations, especially in such a context, it would have been understood to mean that abstaining from sex was inherently good. Though Paul goes on to qualify this, urging married couples to continue in sexual relations (7:2-5) and those who lack self-control to marry (7:9), the negative valuation of sexuality is hardly thereby overcome. This reading has continued to have adherents, Conzelmann among them, though he notes that Paul does not give reasons for his asceticism.[46] The majority scholarly view today, however, is that the phrase in question, "it is good for a man not to touch a woman," was a Corinthian quote to which Paul was responding.[47] Two convincing considerations in support of this view are: (1) if this is a Pauline quote, then Paul seemingly contradicts himself in 7:2-5 by urging sexual relations within marriage, and (2) nowhere does Paul quickly follow the phrase "*peri de*" (signaling a response to a Corinthian concern) with a view of his own.[48] This absolves Paul of the charge of sexual asceticism, since nowhere else in 1 Cor 7 is depreca-

tion of sexuality as such evident.[49] Without the presence of asceticism in the text, the interpretations of Augustine and Jerome, if maintained, would have to draw their support from external sources.

A second issue is how Paul views marriage. Augustine, Jerome, Luther, and Calvin all understand Paul to be saying that the primary reason for someone to marry is to cure their lack of sexual self-control (7:9).[50] While Paul does offer that reason for why one might choose marriage over celibacy, for the interpreter to limit Paul's understanding of the choice of marriage to one of sexual neediness is unwarranted. If 7:1b is a quote expressing a Corinthian sentiment, then 7:9 provides a counter to that by presenting a situation in which sexual relations, through marriage, would be "good" (cf. 7:38). The context, however, limits the extent of Paul's discussion of marriage. Though a comprehensive examination of Paul's view of marriage cannot be conducted here, it should be noted that his opinion of the potentially powerful effects for good on an unbelieving spouse and children in 7:12-16 shows that he hardly treats marriage as something worthless beyond sexual satisfaction and procreation. Also, the image of the marriage of a husband and wife as an analogy for Christ and the church in Ephesians 5:21-33, whether Pauline or Deutero-Pauline,[51] confers great nobility on marriage.

The third and final issue that will be discussed here probes whether the preferability of the unmarried state was unique to the Corinthian situation or can be applied transculturally. The passage that bears most directly on this is 7:26-35. In 7:26-31, the "distress" that marriage can bring (7:28) is tied to eschatological expectation. Perhaps the only transcultural principle that can be drawn from this is that it is difficult to be married in difficult times. The rationale for the preferability of singleness in 7:32-35, however, that it is more conducive to single-minded attention to the service of the Lord, is less easily dismissed. Augustine, Jerome, Luther, and Calvin all took the transcultural application of this principle for granted, but some recent interpreters, such as Deming, argue that even this is purely situational.[52] Again, eschatological considerations may play a role. Someone who is expecting the eschaton shortly is less likely to consider the goods of childrearing and lifelong

For the interpreter to limit Paul's understanding of the choice of marriage to one of sexual neediness is unwarranted.

companionship in marriage, and thus the scales are weighted in preference of celibacy.[53] Nevertheless, though the weighting may change with differing situations, the principle behind Paul's preference applies not only in times of breathless eschatological anticipation. After all, as Garland notes, "marriage imposes demands and responsibilities that cannot be neglected,"[54] and these limit one's freedom to pursue "the affairs of the Lord" (7:32, 34). Such freedom was no doubt a benefit in Paul's ministry and one reason why he wished "that all were as I myself am [unmarried]" (7:7). C. K. Barrett's formulation is probably accurate in rendering Paul's basic perspective on celibacy versus marriage:

Among some Protestants, the glorification of abstinence that is followed by marital sex practically amounts to treating "pure" marital sex as salvific.

> In Paul's view, the most fortunate state is that of the unmarried person who is under no pressure to marry; less desirable is that of the person who must express his sexual nature and does so within marriage; least desirable is that of the person who needs marriage as a means of expression, but attempts (or possibly is compelled) to do without it.[55]

The status of marriage in comparison with celibacy might possibly be elevated if eschatological considerations were removed, as already noted. Any speculation regarding whether Paul might have adjusted his view had he known that Christians would still be waiting for the eschaton almost two millennia later, however, is destined to be ultimately inconclusive.

Should Church Leaders Be Celibate?

From even this brief interaction with the text, it can be seen that Augustine and Jerome's attraction towards sexual renunciation is nowhere supported in 1 Cor 7 and that, given due contextual considerations, Paul's view of marriage plausibly emerges much more highly than even Luther or Calvin seem to allow. Both marriage and singleness are good (7:38). Those who feel compelled to marry ought to do so without hesitation since it is what is best for them (7:9), while those who are blessed with the gift of celibacy (7:7) have the benefit of the

freedom to pursue the "affairs of the Lord" apart from the duties of marriage (7:32-34). However, their advantage is only a pragmatic one, not one of spiritual status. A distinction in spiritual status between the unmarried and the married would only be possible to draw from this text if Paul were supporting sexual renunciation for the sake of purity, and as has been shown, the text does not likely bear this out.

These conclusions cast serious doubt over whether 1 Cor 7 can be used to support mandatory clerical celibacy. If the freedom to do the Lord's service with undivided attention could be shown to be absolutely essential for pastoral ministry, a case could perhaps be made for clerical celibacy. This would entail that only those with the gift of celibacy are suited to be clerics. A concern, though, would be how to determine whether candidates for priesthood actually possess that gift. An even larger concern is that such a conjecture is tenable only if it is not contradicted by what Paul says elsewhere, as it seems to be in 9:5, where he insists that he has the right to take a wife, as the other apostles have done. If the apostles can be married as ministers, surely other ministers in any capacity can be married as well. The only hope for a position of strict clerical celibacy would be to claim that the apostles abstained from sexual relations even though married, a practice later attested to among Catholic clergy.[56] This would require that the context for Paul urging married couples to sexual relations in 7:2-5 is a situation where one spouse is withholding sex against the wishes of the other. This, however, is an argument hanging by a thread, holding on only through supposition, and it would need to find staunch outside support to merit enforcement.

Should All Christians Marry?

For Protestants, Paul's perspective in 1 Cor 7 presents a different sort of challenge. Probably not many Protestants would go as far as Luther in saying that celibacy is "dangerous and peculiar," but the sentiment that underlies Luther's judgment is alive and well in American Protestantism. In Augustine's day, celibacy was often thought to allow for a purer expression of the Christian life than marriage, so that Verecundus, a married friend of Augustine's, "declared that he was unwilling to be a Christian in any way other than that from which he was debarred"[57] (i.e., in any way other than being celibate). Among Protestants today, the pendulum has swung the other way, and marriage is often considered to be the only normal course for adult Christians. This is evident in the social pressure to marry that is applied to Christian singles, and it is even evident in the language that is used in encouraging premarital abstinence. The phrases "abstinence until marriage" and "saving yourself for marriage" both imply

that the central reason that unmarried Christians should remain abstinent is because they ought to be "pure" when they become married, as is almost invariably expected of them. This line of thinking fails to address lifelong celibacy as a legitimate Christian vocation, as Paul so clearly considered it, and it fails to provide much of a conceptual deterrent to sexual activity among Christians who feel called to be single or who have lost most hope of marriage. Fidelity to a possible future marriage partner certainly needs to be stressed in any Christian discussion of sexual abstinence, but it ought to be a secondary consideration. Among Christians, fidelity to a marriage partner ought to be seen as derivative and reflective of Christ's fidelity to the church and the church's fidelity to Christ. Human marriage, like all temporal goods, will pass away, but the union of Christ with the church will endure forever. Placing the good of this union with Christ above the good of marriage allows Christians to view sexual abstinence, whether in anticipation of marriage or in lifelong celibacy, as primarily an act of fidelity to Christ, who first gave himself wholly to the church.

Ironically, the treatment of "abstinence until marriage" as a form of spiritual heroism that culminates in the blessing of a "pure" marriage, far from standing in opposition to the current obsession with sex in American culture, in effect subscribes to it. Rodney Clapp points to the danger of this myth that sex is "utterly necessary to any full and happy life."[58] Among some Protestants, the glorification of abstinence that is followed by marital sex practically amounts to treating "pure" marital sex as salvific. This excessive focus on marriage illustrates the need for the church to celebrate healthy singleness.

Augustine may have thought that the church could ideally have done without married persons, and Luther may have thought that the church could have done without many singles, but Paul left room for both, and both are necessary for the church to fully express its relation to Christ and its eschatological hope in Christ. One reason for this can be seen in what Clapp calls the "complementary missionary advantages" of hospitality for married couples and mobility for singles.[59] The mobility of Christian singles is made possible by their potentially undivided interests, which Paul points to in 1 Cor 7:32-35 and without which the mission of the church would be impoverished. Another reason for the necessity of having both married persons and singles in the church is that both reflect a different aspect of the Christian hope. Christian marriage reflects the marriage of Christ and the church, and Christian singleness reflects the radical nature of placing hope in the resurrection of the dead. Christian singles are witnesses that salvation is not found either in sex or in having children to carry on one's line and memory.[60] Their singleness illustrates that their union with Christ

is more foundational to their identity than any sexual union could be and that they are staking their future on their hope of resurrection. Thus both Christian marriage and Christian singleness are necessary for a full expression of Christian mission and of Christian truth, and any church that denigrates either marriage or lifelong celibacy does so to its own detriment.

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Notes

1. J. Massingberd Ford, "St Paul, the Philogamist (I Cor. VII in Early Patristic Exegesis)," *New Testament Studies* 11 (1964-5): 326.
2. As early as the Shepherd of Hermas, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, however, celibacy receives praise as a higher vocation with greater rewards than marriage. See quotes in Gerald Bray, ed., *1-2 Corinthians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 7 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 62, 70, 73.
3. Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 83 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 222.
4. Stefan Heid, *Celibacy in the Early Church: The Beginnings of a Discipline of Obligatory Continence for Clerics in East and West*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 101-102. Heid argues for this tendency as being implicit even in Origen or earlier.
5. Roger Steven Evans, *Sex and Salvation: Virginity as a Soteriological Paradigm in Ancient Christianity* (Dallas: University Press of America, Inc., 2003), 91-92.
6. In commenting on 1 Corinthians 7:38, he says, "The one sins not if she marries, the other, if she marries not, it is for eternity. In the former is the remedy for weakness, in the latter the glory of chastity. The former is not reproved, the latter is praised." Ambrose, *Concerning Virginity*, quoted in Evans, 41.
7. Augustine, *The Excellence of Widowhood*, quoted in *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*, ed. Elizabeth Clark (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 81.
8. Ibid., 79.

9. Ibid., 82.
10. Augustine, *The Good of Marriage*, quoted in Clark, 53.
11. Augustine even thought it would be good if no one married, since "much more quickly would the City of God be filled and the end of time be hastened." Ibid., 52.
12. "The Christian soul, intent upon heavenly things attains greater merit by rising above this inclination [the desire to have offspring] and keeping it in subjection." Augustine, *The Excellence of Widowhood*, quoted in Clark, 82.
13. Augustine, *Holy Virginity*, in Clark, 67.
14. Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, quoted in Evans, 41.
15. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 167.
16. Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, quoted in Evans, 51.
17. Ruether, 173. Cf. Jerome, *Against Jovinian* 1.40: "All those who have not remained virgins, following the pattern of the pure chastity of angels and that of our Lord Jesus Christ himself, are polluted." Quoted in David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), 258.
18. Evans, 92.
19. Heid, 14. The Second barred priests from marrying but not married individuals from becoming priests.
20. Ruether, 176.
21. Ibid., 177.
22. Ibid., 176.
23. "As we have learned that in the Church of Rome the rule was established that candidates, before receiving ordination as a deacon or priest, make a public promise not to have relations any more with their wives; we, conforming ourselves to the ancient rule of strict observation and apostolic discipline, want the legitimate marriages of consecrated men to remain in effect even in the future, without dissolving the bond uniting these men to their wives, nor depriving them of mutual relations at the appropriate times." Canon 13 of the Council of Trullo c. 691, quoted in Heid, 311-312.
24. Luther had been an Augustinian monk, and he was still single when he wrote this commentary. He married in 1525.
25. Martin Luther, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7," trans. Edward Sittler. *Luther's Works*, vol. 28, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), 3.
26. Ibid., 9.
27. Ibid., 11.
28. Ibid., 9.
29. Ibid., 28.
30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 53.
32. Ibid., 51. In fact, Luther thinks that marriage can be an aid to faith since it involves dependence, while singleness is prone to the illusion of independence and thus can obstruct faith (18-19).
33. Ibid., 49.
34. Ibid., 11, 17.
35. Ibid., 9, 17.
36. Ibid., 26.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. John W. Fraser (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1960), 167. Calvin's first edition of this commentary was published in 1546. Calvin was married at that time.
41. Ibid., 141-42.
42. Ibid., 134, 141.
43. Ibid., 143-44.
44. Ibid., 136.
45. Ibid., 139.
46. Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 115.
47. Garland, 247. Garland dates the origin of this view to 1920, only within the last century.
48. Ibid., 248-49.
49. The one possible exception to this comes in 7:34: "the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit." Holiness in body here does not refer to sexual renunciation, though. Rather, the phrase "body and spirit" signal the totality of a person, which in this case seek holiness by single-minded devotion to the Lord (Garland, 335).
50. This need not be exhibited in fornication to be known. "Burning" is an inner disposition.
51. If written by a Pauline disciple, one would still expect it to be consonant with Paul's thought and certainly not directly opposed to it.
52. Deming, 219.
53. See Margaret E. Thrall, *The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 52.
54. Garland, 333.
55. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 161.
56. See note n. 23.
57. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (New York: Vintage Books,

1998), 173.

58. Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional & Modern Options* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 100.
59. Ibid., 107.
60. Ibid., 101.

"1 Corinthians 7 and the Role of Celibacy in the Mission of the Church" . . . **So What?**

Questions for Consideration:

1. How are single persons seen within your own congregation? Does your church in general expect everyone to marry or recognize lifelong celibacy as a gift?

2. What definition of "family" operates within your church?

3. What practical models could embrace both married and single persons, including the divorced and widowed, within a church?

4. How does your own view of the function of married and single persons within the church compare with Burden's discussion of hospitality and mobility?

5. What are some ways you could implement Burden's points in teaching youth about sexual purity?

Prepared by Derek Hatch and Kathryn Seay

A Catholic View of Celibacy

A Response to Josh Burden

FR. TIMOTHY V. VAVEREK, S.T.D.

JOSH BURDEN'S STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS 7 and the role of celibacy in the mission of the Church interests me on a number of levels. First, I am a Catholic priest who has chosen to serve God as a celibate. Second, contact with Truett students and faculty together with doctoral work on Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist ecclesiologies has made me eager to discover the illuminating ways these Christian traditions converge and diverge. Third, I have recently reviewed the draft of a dissertation at Baylor which examines Protestant theologies of celibacy in relation to John Paul II's "Theology of the Body." Who would have thought that in the twenty-first century, celibacy would be of mutual interest to Catholics and Baptists?

Before addressing the specifics of Burden's paper, I would like briefly to offer some clarifications on celibacy within the Catholic Church. This will help explain my own perspective and correct some misconceptions. An important starting point is to recognize that Catholics and Orthodox share an ancient custom: they ordain single and married men, but accept only those candidates who are willing to promise not to marry after ordination. Thus, lifelong celibacy is practiced by those who are single at ordination and by those whose wives die after ordination. This practice is common to Catholics and Orthodox and is not an issue that contributed to our schism in 1054. The earliest history of this custom is a matter of continued investigation and seems related to the spiritual practice of abstinence by Christian couples.[1]

The Catholic Church, like the Orthodox, has many married priests. It is only that part of the Catholic Church whose cultural origins are in Western Europe, called the Latin or Western Rite, which requires candidates for priestly ordination to be single (although since the 1970s married men are ordained deacons and since the 1950s permission has sometimes been given for married Protestant ministers to be ordained priests after becoming Catholic). Catholics of the numerous Eastern Rites, whose distinct cultural roots are in Eastern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, or parts of India, have retained

the ancient custom of allowing married men to be ordained as priests. Because exploration, immigration, and evangelization spread primarily from Western Europe, the Latin Rite expanded its territory and numbers far more than did the Eastern Rites. The Latin Rite is consequently much better known than the Eastern Rites, and people often mistakenly believe that the Catholic Church universally forbids married priests.

Having offered these clarifications regarding clerical celibacy, it is absolutely essential to note that in Catholic and Orthodox life the most significant celibate group is not the clergy. It is in the life of consecrated laypeople that this practice has had its most remarkable flourishing and offered its greatest inspiration. Such consecration, through a vow of perpetual chastity, is lived individually (hermitic life) or communally (cenobitic life). These souls place themselves at the service of God and neighbor either through a secluded ministry of prayer or through a life of prayer coupled with outreach ministries such as teaching, health care, evangelization, etc. Some consecrated men become priests and remain within hermitic or cenobitic life.

Examples of consecrated life may be found in the great religious orders such as the Benedictines, Dominicans, and Franciscans, or in the more recent Missionary Brothers and Sisters of Charity (founded by Mother Theresa of Calcutta). The contributions of these groups to the mission of the Church through prayer and work has been incalculable. Without them one could not imagine our great houses of prayer, our schools and universities, our hospitals and social services, or our historic missionary acheivements. Since Anthony entered the deserts of Egypt in the third century, the monastic movement has consistently inspired lives and writings that witness to the deep love of God motivating celibacy chosen for the sake of the kingdom.

The significance of the diversity of Catholic and Orthodox practices regarding celibacy, in clerical or consecrated life, should be evident. Celibacy is not seen as primarily related to the priesthood or as necessary for priestly ministry. Celibacy is not based on a utilitarian decision to provide greater availability for outreach. Celibacy is not forced on anyone. Celibacy is an act of love chosen as a particular way of giving oneself to God and neighbor in Christ. While this is a permanent committment expressed in a public promise or vow, the heart of the choice can be lived without such a public act. Because celibacy as a permanent state means foregoing marriage, the relation of the two states has been a matter of intense interest down the ages.

Josh Burden has presented a succint account of the difficulties arising from attempts to use 1 Corinthians 7 as a scriptural key for interpreting the relation between marriage and celibacy. His interpretive

method is well-considered and productive, even if limitations of space did not permit its full realization. He attempts to situate the commentators he has chosen, including Paul himself, within the specific social, philosophical, and ecclesial circumstances that shaped their thought and occasioned their writings. This opens the way to a more precise understanding of each writer. Notably, it allows Burden to suggest a context for 1 Corinthinans 7 that would avoid mistaken interpretations concerned with matters not actually discussed by Paul.

Celibacy is an act of love chosen as a particular way of giving oneself to God and neighbor in Christ.

I would like to see the method applied with more nuance regarding patristic teaching and more caution in accepting a reading of 1 Cor 7:1 first proposed at the astonishingly recent date of 1920. My concern is that modern philosophical, historical, and sexual biases may be obstructing the authentic views of the commentators and perhaps of Paul's intention. Nevertheless, these are questions which a more complete application of Burden's method could address. It is a solid method which, as he suggests, could give rise to an entire book.

Burden's research does not seem nearly as strong when he moves out of textual studies and ventures into historical assertions regarding the practice of celibacy. A careful study of Catholic and Orthodox experience, such as outlined in my prelimary remarks, would resolve a number of imprecise or erroneous statements in the text. His historical perspective would profit from a careful rereading of Heid's *Celibacy in the Early Church* which he cites, but does not seem to have accurately understood. For instance, Heid specifically considers the legend, put to rest by scholars, that an effort was made and defeated at Nicea to mandate celibacy.[2] Burden repeats this legend as a fact without averting to the problem. Burden cites Heid when speaking of an alleged dualistic taint in the church fathers that "began" to discourage sexual activity in marriage.[3]

Heid, however, is not affirming any dualism or "beginning" in the Patristic era; on the contrary, he is maintaining that periodic sexual abstinence within marriage always existed in the church as a positive approach to prayer. Finally, Burden cites Heid when presenting the canonical history of celibacy without noting that Heid thinks such discussions misleading unless they first examine the pre-existing spir-

itual practice of abstinence within Christian marriage—which Burden has not presented.[4] Burden need not agree with Heid, but having cited him, it is necessary to engage his claims.

Another historical problem, if I read Burden correctly, is the apparent assumption that because virginity or celibacy were not written about before c. 250, they may not have been a matter of importance or common practice. However, early church history repeatedly attests to the phenomena of vital issues leaving scant historical record until they became controversial and of novel attitudes facing widespread and vigorous reactions. If lifelong celibacy among clergy or monks was an innovation, one would expect to find a council or ecclesial movement reacting against it. Instead, one finds, as Burden notes, entire treatises beginning to be written on the topic. This would seem to suggest a situation in which an existing, accepted practice begins to be examined more deeply or defended in the face of misunderstanding, abuse, or attack. If this were the case, then interest in 1 Corinthians 7 could have increased at this period in support of the practice. Whether this is a proper use of the text is, as Burden ably demonstrates, a matter that requires careful examination.

Burden's concluding reflections on virginity, celibacy, and marriage are fascinating. Moving beyond textual and historical considerations, he examines singleness and marriage in a way that leads to the insight that abstinence should not be fundamentally understood as sexual purity in relation to marriage, but as reflective of Christ's and the church's fidelity. This viewpoint reveals marriage and celibacy as complimentary, not competitive, ways of living Christ's love for the church. It follows that celibates can see in marriage an image of their own union with Christ and spouses can see in celibacy the union with Christ which underlies their marriage. In this way, celibates and spouses can draw inspiration from one another's faithful love. Together, in distinct ways, celibacy and marriage provide the church with important means of witness and mission to the world. The implications, as Burden suggests, are profound for singles, spouses, and lifelong celibates, but they could also be particularly life-giving for the divorced,

Together, in distinct ways, celibacy and marriage provide the church with important means of witness and mission to the world.

widowed, and those unable to marry for physical or psychological reasons. It would be wonderful if Burden could show in detail how his vision is derived from Scripture.

I wholeheartedly concur with Burden's assertion that "placing the good of this union [of the church] with Christ above the good of marriage allows Christians to view sexual abstinence, whether in anticipation of marriage or in lifelong celibacy, as primarily an act of fidelity to Christ, who first gave himself wholly to the church." Abstinence is a unique way of sharing in Christ's fidelity that presupposes and affirms the sharing in Christ's fidelity expressed in conjugal union. Given this complimentarity, there would seem to be no inherent reason that abstinence could not also be practiced within marriage as a positive way of experiencing union with Christ, as suggested in 1 Cor 7:5.

This complementary view could put 1 Corinthians 7 in a new light. Paul could be affirming the good of abstinence, even within marriage, without allowing that good to be absolutized or used as an attack on the good of marriage. Against those who might falsely exalt abstinence or denigrate marriage by insisting that "it is good for a man (or husband) not to touch a woman (or wife)," Paul could be saying that while this statement is true, embracing abstinence permanently as a married couple or as a celibate should not be done if it leads to sin. The danger of sin would then be cited not as a grudging "justification" for conjugal union, but as a warning against attempting to live abstinently in marriage or in celibacy unless one has received a charism. Since marriage is also a charism, this call to live according to God's gifts (see 1 Cor 7:7)—and the danger of doing otherwise—would imply no negative valuation of sexuality.

Whatever the meaning of 1 Corinthians 7, Burden suggests a way past many old debates by orienting the discussion of celibacy and marriage to the common ground of Christ's own love. It seems to me that Burden has hit upon the heart of the history, practice, and theological reflection regarding celibacy: the imitation of Christ. This is a direction familiar to Catholics (and Orthodox) and hopefully one they would be willing to pursue with Baptists. Each of our traditions could hardly find a better way to prosper the mission of the church in the world today than by guiding believers to live the love of Christ more deeply in abstinence and marriage.

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Notes

1. In addition to the work of S. Heid cited by Burden, see R. Cholij, *Clerical Celibacy in East and West* (Herefordshire: Fowler-Wright, 1988) and C. Cochini, *The Apostolic Origins of Priestly Celibacy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990).
2. See Heid, 15-18.
3. See Burden, footnote 4.
4. See Burden, footnotes 19 and 23.

Celibacy: A Special Calling or a Spiritual Discipline?

A Response to Josh Burden

JENNIFER ADAMS

As I have recently joined the real world (by this I mean simply that I am no longer a full time student), I am constantly inquired about my marital status. Although I recognize that I am not allowed to label myself as an "old maid" at the tender age of twenty-seven, it is simply true that I have reached an age at which many ask the question, "Am I ever going to get married?" As a single woman in ministry, maybe I should answer all those questions with the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7: "the woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit."

In all seriousness, I have two major objections to those who believe this passage suggests celibacy is better than marriage. First, Paul's conviction of the imminence of Christ's second coming speaks to his appeal to the Corinthians to remain celibate. I firmly believe that Paul's call to remain single is solely based on his understanding of the imminence of Christ's return to earth. If Paul assumed Christ's return would be in the unseen future, he would not have been so adamant about celibacy. Perhaps with the knowledge of today's unfulfilled eschaton, Paul would have mandated marriage in order to secure the Christian faith and practice. Second, the phrase "*peri de*" (now concerning) suggests Paul is simply answering concerns of the Christian church in Corinth, not mandating celibacy as a better choice than marriage. Paul writes, then, specifically to this church in Corinth and not to those in Thessalonica, Philippi, or the church today.

Conceivably, Paul would have agreed with the ideas of Calvin. Josh Burden states that Calvin "praises the benefits of celibacy, but only of the practical benefits he perceives in the text and not of any spiritual superiority." While Calvin suggests the convenience of celibacy, he perceives the benefits of marriage. I resonate with this thought. I suppose celibacy is often viewed as the better option because a spouse may be posed as a distraction for a minister. Celibate ministers are able to completely devote their energies and time to their vocational calling without the worry of a spousal opinion or well-being. Thus, practically, celibacy seems to be a logical choice for a minister; however, marriage, according to Paul, is "good." Married ministers and their

spouse are able to serve alongside one another, drawing from each other's strengths and compensating for each other's weaknesses.

In my opinion, not only does our oversexed culture present an unhealthy view of relationships and marriage but our Christian ideology also perpetuates a delusion about marriage. As a Christian in modernity, I struggle with the recent campaigns promoting abstinence before marriage. Although I agree with the practice of encouraging chastity, I disagree with the recent abstinence crusade. Those teaching abstinence seem to promise the gift of a spouse if one abstains from premarital sex. Not only does this concept offer false hope to Christians, but ministers are failing to emphasize the importance of one's fidelity to Christ. Fidelity to a supposed future spouse has taken precedence over one's faithful devotion to Christ. Stressing abstinence with the promise of a spouse has caused those in the church to forget about Paul's image of marriage mentioned in Ephesians. When we as the church forget to focus on Christ's marriage to the church, we become a great detriment to ourselves and others. I believe this passage should not only speak to those committing to a marriage but should serve as our example to be committed to the church. This commitment to be faithful to the church is just as important as "saving one's self for a future spouse."

As Christians, we are to abstain from immorality not because of an earthy gift, such as a future spouse or the promise of success, but because of a heavenly gift of salvation. Lauren Winner's description of chastity is ideal: "chastity, too, is a spiritual discipline . . . it is not the mere absence of sex but an active conforming of one's body to the arc of the gospel." Just as prayer and scripture reading are disciplines of the Christian faith, chastity must be considered a Christian discipline. This discipline should be practiced with utter devotion and sacrifice, not only because our bodies are temples of God, but because sexual intercourse means that two bodies become one. As Christians, we are to be one with Christ, and as single Christians, we are one with the proclamation of the gospel. Therefore, abstaining from sex before marriage is not only the obvious absence of intercourse, but also the manifestation of a devoted Christian life.

Sex, according to my belief, is the consummation of a new marriage relationship. As the bodies of married individuals become one with sex, a church should be one in body. When a people experience conversion, they not only join the Christian faith but they also join a church body. In this joining, one must promise faithfulness just as a person does with a spouse.

Not only does Christianity today deemphasize celibacy as fidelity to Christ, but Christians have lost their perception of companionship.

Companionship is beyond conversation and sharing a meal; companionship is about sharing lives, about being in relationship with one another. I consider relationships significant when individuals are able not only to enjoy each other, but to confront one another lovingly and gracefully. Christians today believe they are able to live without the support and confrontation of a loving community. In recent years, I have been learning how to live more graciously as a Christian and as a woman in ministry through my community, both in my church and in my relationships.

Fidelity to a supposed future spouse has taken precedence over one's faithful devotion to Christ.

Not only is Christ our example of how to be companions to one another; he *is* our companion. Personally, I am realizing the significance of the companionship of Christ. Our Christian culture is increasingly fused with the societal concept of individualism. This destructive view has caused the church to lose its focus on community and, more importantly, companionship with Christ. Often it is difficult for Christians to consider Christ as a companion, perhaps, because Christ is not a tangible person in our present era. However, scripture allows today's Christians to have picture of how Christ related to others. He did not disregard the disciples every time they made a mistake or spoke out of turn. He forgave even when his companions did not recognize their mistakes. Christ still does this today for Christians. Although the relationship is not as tangible as when he was walking on earth, Christ as our companion is still present and real because he is living within each of us. He, even now, never leaves nor forsakes us. Because of this, I have found a companion in my relationship with Christ, stronger than any relationship with any living person today.

I agree with Josh Burden's belief that "any church that denigrates either marriage or lifelong celibacy does so to its own detriment." As ministers, we should enhance our community by embracing diversity, not only in marital status but also in life. Individuals in different life stages and choices can offer a church community different perspectives and gifts. Part of being called to the ministry is having the ability to see these gifts in other people. As a minister, one must encourage the development and use of different gifts by embracing the diversity in one's congregation. Those who are married may offer support and encouragement to those who are recently married, while those who

are single are able to encourage and strengthen young singles. It is through all people, both single and married, both young and old, both introverted and extraverted, that a church thrives and lives out the Kingdom of God with one another and in their community.

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Protestant and Catholic Perspectives on 1 Corinthians 7

A Response to Josh Burden

RUSS HOBBS

JOSH BURDEN'S THINKING ON 1 COR 7 represents the growing interest among Protestants in retrieving celibacy from beneath the hegemony of marriage. He believes celibacy gets short shrift in Protestant churches. In his article, "First Corinthians 7 and the Role of Celibacy in the Mission of the Church," he cites Augustine as representative of those who steered the church too far towards celibacy and cites Luther as representative of those who reactively over-steered away from it. Burden is convinced that, when properly understood, Paul in 1 Cor 7 struck a straighter path than either. In his article, he draws several important conclusions: 1) celibacy is a legitimate vocation; 2) marriage and celibacy illustrate complementary aspects of the Christian hope and mission; and interestingly, 3) that Protestant churches tend to promote abstinence by assuming it is temporary—until marriage—and thus they implicitly affirm the cultural myth that every full life must include sexual intercourse.

Such a study inevitably leaves many questions unanswered. Here are four. First, is celibacy superior to marriage? Second, did Luther really oppose celibacy? Third, in what key areas do Roman Catholics and Protestants agree on celibacy? Fourth, are celibacy and singleness interchangeable?

Is celibacy superior to marriage? In several parts of the article, Burden clearly declares that celibacy is only pragmatically and practically superior; that is, celibacy is neither essentially nor spiritually superior. Nonetheless, the problem of the superiority of celibacy remains tangled because such vocabulary is open to a variety of interpretations. The exact meaning of the terms such as "superior," "pragmatically," and "essentially" are elusive. Mixed with the vocabulary confusion is a significant difference of viewpoints regarding the nature of spirituality and hierarchy. Protestants want to avoid spiritual hierarchy and two-tier rankings of Christians—every believer is a priest and all are created equal. Roman Catholics, however are comfortable with official hierarchy and a system of saints, popes, and a magisterium.

In addition, Burden asserts that "a distinction in spiritual status between the unmarried and the married would only be possible to draw from this text if Paul were supporting sexual renunciation for the sake of purity." However, this will not do. The superiority of celibacy can exist separately from the idea that sexual contact pollutes. John Paul II, in his thought-provoking *Theology of the Body*, affirms the beauty and purity of the conjugal act rightly understood.[1] At the same time, commenting on 1 Cor 7, he affirms that celibacy is superior because the celibate is better able to concentrate on pleasing the Lord[2] and because marriage is part of the transient current age about which Paul advises: "those who use the things of the world [should live] as if not engrossed in them. For this world is passing away." Thus, following Paul's lead, John Paul II understands celibacy to be better because the celibate is free from "the necessity of being locked into this transiency."[3] John Paul II also affirmes the superiority of the imitation of Christ's celibacy and the special spiritual fecundity for the kingdom to which celibacy inclines.[4] Nonetheless, John Paul II affirms that charity is the true measure of spirituality[5] and that a married person may well excel in charity beyond a celibate.[6]

What becomes clear is that the terms of the superiority debate are unclear. Burden could have helped by probing the definitions of his terms. For example, it is possible that the discussion of superiority in 1 Cor 7 could receive light from 1 Cor 12-14. In those chapters on spiritual gifts, Paul recommends that the Corinthians strive for "the greater gifts" (1 Cor 12:31). In what sense are some gifts greater? Paul explains: Some gifts have practical advantages (1 Cor 14:1-12).

Did Luther really oppose celibacy? In a number of places, Burden's article fails to nuance the views of the authors cited. For example, Burden overplays one side of Luther's view on celibacy. In order to understand Luther's opinion of celibacy, it is of utmost importance to remember that he was reacting to the abuses of celibacy[7] and the deprecation of marriage in his day. "The wicked and impure practice of celibacy" scandalized Luther;[8] true continence, he said, forms a stark contrast with such "wretched, unchaste celibacy"[9] in which "many a poor priest is overburdened with wife and child, his conscience troubled."[10] Yet, Luther desired to honor the scriptures and the tradition, and so he reflected the ancient honor given to celibacy. He did not oppose celibacy per se; he honored it. "Chastity is better," he said, but if continence is impossible, one should marry.[11]

According to Luther, celibates "have a greater gift than the ordinary folk."[12] Celibacy is "a beautiful, delightful, and noble gift for him to whom it is given."[13] Indeed, "when one compares marriage and virginity, then of course chastity is a nobler gift than marriage."[14] Finally,

Luther does not balk at describing celibates as "those spiritually rich and exalted persons, bridled by the grace of God, who are equipped for marriage by nature and physical capacity and nevertheless voluntarily remain celibate . . . . Such persons are rare," he says, "for they are a special miracle of God."[15] As late as 1535, ten years after his marriage, he says that some can live chastely without marriage "because they have a greater gift than ordinary folk."[16] Thus, when he opposes celibacy, he does so in the service of refuting scandalous practices and lifting marriage out of its profane location onto the sacred plane beside or even above celibacy.[17]

John Paul II affirms that charity is the true measure of spirituality and that a married person may well excel in charity beyond a celibate.

In what key areas do Roman Catholics and Protestants agree on celibacy? Setting aside, for the moment, the history of the theology of celibacy in the church, Protestants and Roman Catholics today often agree on several issues, most of which appear in 1 Cor 7. First, celibacy is a gift and brings with it unique advantages that are often absent from marriage; likewise marriage is a gift with unique advantages often absent from celibacy. Second, it may happen that a particular celibate exists at a spiritual level far below a particular married person. Third, conjugal intercourse can be a holy act with no taint of sin. Fourth, Paul preferred celibacy and recommended that it be accepted by those who have the gift. Fifth, Jesus taught that some should accept celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Keeping these and other areas of agreement in the forefront helps Protestants draw from Roman Catholic thought both in relation to the interpretation of 1 Cor 7 and in relation to the theology of celibacy. For example, John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* and Max Thurian's crossover work, *Marriage and Celibacy*, written when he was an Anglican, both deal extensively with 1 Cor 7.

Are celibacy and singleness interchangeable ideas? In his conclusions, Burden seems to use them as synonyms. Nonetheless, it will not do to call all single persons celibates. There exists a Christian state, spoken of by Paul and Jesus, which consists of a commitment to life-long singleness for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. There exists another Christian state honored by God, which consists in faithfully serving God while hoping to marry someday or being uncer-

tain whether or not one will marry. Although these two states share features such as sexual abstinence, they are also decidedly distinct in orientation regarding decisiveness and permanence. It seems best to reserve the word "celibate" for the first, and "single person" for the second.

Burden does a good job of raising some key issues and attempting some answers. For celibacy to rise to a place of honor in Protestant churches, however, many more voices must join the chorus.

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Notes

1. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), 49, 51, 81, 168, 276, 318-21.
2. John Paul II, *Visible Signs of the Gospel: Messages of John Paul II on Consecrated Life* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1983), 202, 210. Also see, John Paul II, "Vita Consecrata," in T*he Church and the Consecrated Life*, ed. David L. Fleming and Elizabeth McDonough (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1996), 1, 21.
3. John Paul II, Theology of the Body, 296.
4. Ibid., 268-71.
5. Ibid., 258.
6. Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, Inc., 1981), 256.
7. He hints that this is his specific target when he says his attack is on "the religious orders over against the matrimonial order, and not about the state of chastity." Martin Luther, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7 [1523]," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Oswald C. Hilton (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), 28:21. .
8. Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis [1535]," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 1:135.
9. Martin Luther, "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate [1520]," in *Luther's Works*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 44:176.

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11. Martin Luther, "A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage [1522]," in *Luther's Works*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 44:9.
12. Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," 1:135.
13. Luther, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians," 28:11.
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16. Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," 1:135.
17. Thomas A. Fudge, "Incest and Lust in Luther's Marriage: Theology and Morality in Reformation Polemics," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 34, no. 2 (2003): 345; Luther, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians," 28:49; Philip C. Van Vleck, "The Chaste Heart: Martin Luther and the Discourse on Marriage and Celibate Practice in Christian Theology, 1521-1559" (Ph.D., Duke University, 1994), 56.

Religionless Christianity

And the Pastoral Call to Social Responsibility

DEREK HATCH

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was killed in a German extermination camp in April 1945. During his life he did not have a chance to construct a systematic theological framework. However, he left behind theological fragments that have intrigued many theologians and influenced various theological movements. Most of the influence from Bonhoeffer's work has been generated from a phrase that he put forth and pondered while in prison–religionless Christianity.

As one ponders Bonhoeffer's consideration of this term, one wonders how it might be used within the contemporary church, specifically in the realm of pastoral ministry. Further, within that context, what influence might Bonhoeffer's thoughts on this matter have on the pastoral and ecclesial role of social responsibility for the world?

Religionless Christianity

Bonhoeffer wrote the following from Tegel Prison on April 30, 1944, to his friend Eberhard Bethge:

> What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience—and that means the time of religion in general. We are moving towards a

> completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more. . . . If religion is only a garment of Christianity—and even this garment has looked very different at different times—then what is religionless Christianity?[1]

Here, Bonhoeffer introduces this phrase, religionless Christianity, as the term that led him to wrestle with the following question: "What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world?"[2] His honest struggle with how the church could move forward in a new world colored his musings.

Despite Bonhoeffer's struggle with the appearance of religionless Christianity, he knew what characterized the religion that he rejected so strongly. He saw religion as a human construct that consisted of two parts: an emphasis on metaphysics and a significant leaning toward inwardness.[3] He was disgusted with these ideas, and hence the idea of religion altogether. This is because Bonhoeffer described the modern world as one that had "come of age," meaning that "people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more."[4] In this new context, the maturity of the world had created a "God of the gaps," relegating God to any "gaps" that had not been filled by human reason and pushing God to the periphery of life. Consequently, the church, along with God, was moved to the boundaries of human existence. The church sought to counter this marginalized existence with a growing emphasis on religion, focusing on internality and metaphysics, which led Christians to concern themselves with self-preservation rather than the plight of others who were suffering in the world.[5] This concept of religion left Christianity in a corner, in a private realm. As Eberhard Bethge states, "'Religious Christianity' is made a partial province of life, its domain cut out from the relevant spheres of life by the secularization of even the last unenlightened provinces of individual life."[6]

Bonhoeffer also asserted that the religious *a priori* that religious Christianity embraced had detrimental consequences. This *a priori* involved a universal human capacity for religion. The resulting religious Christianity that Bonhoeffer observed created a drive within the church to maintain the status quo, which allowed for the maintenance of the church's relevance by keeping its secular power and ultimately led to sanctioning the state's power in defense of that status quo. Therefore, "religious Christianity" defends a form of Constantinianism, resulting in a church that acts in service to the state and to powerful persons who can ensure that "the way things are" will remain the same.[7] Consequently, the "edging" of Christianity into a private realm and the subservience of the church to the state left the church with

no public voice in the world, nor a concern to have such a voice since "religious Christians" did not have an eye for others and their circumstances.

Bonhoeffer cast off this religion in favor of a form of faith that could revive a concern for the other, giving the church a place within the world's struggles. He wrote, "It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in secular life."[8] The place and arena of the church's ministry and existence is the world. For Bonhoeffer, this was not an optional vocation but was a driving force behind his reconceptualization of Christianity in the "religionless" world.

Christology

The issue of christology cannot be ignored in addressing what Bonhoeffer may have meant by religionless Christianity. It is important to note one of the main issues that he posed in the April 1944 letter: what Christianity is and who Christ is for us today.[9] Here Bonhoeffer revealed his christocentric focus as he considered how the church is to be relevant within the world. He was convinced that Christ was the Lord of all.[10] He wrote in *Ethics*, "He [Jesus Christ] is the centre and the strength of the Bible, of the Church, and of theology, but also of humanity, of reason, of justice, and of culture."[11] This christocentric emphasis led Bonhoeffer to adopt a new title, among the others that he retained, for Jesus Christ: "the man for others." He elaborated on this in *Ethics*: "Christ died for the world, and it is only in the midst of the world that Christ is Christ."[12]

Furthermore, this "man for others" is also present within the church; thus, for Bonhoeffer, ecclesiology is bound up in christology, and an idea of the sociality of Christ is important.[13] Christ is encountered in relation to other human beings.[14] It is only in relationship that Christ is Christ, the one who brings about new social relations within the church where he is present. Therefore, Bonhoeffer's christology has implications for how a person addresses the "world come of age". Along these lines, Bethge writes, "Christology protects man come of age from deifying or demonizing his secularity again, and from falling into hopeless skepticism."[15]

Since Jesus is "the man for others," so the church, as the presence of Christ in the world, also ought to be for others.

Christology, then, through the judgment of the world, prevents the church from baptizing some aspect of the secular order, calling it *corpus Christianum*, and adapting every ecclesial practice and conviction to this 'new revelation.' At the same time, in Christology, the world is affirmed as an arena of God's work, a fact that prohibits the church from declaring that God is absent from the world altogether and from absolving the communion of saints for responsibility for the world. How then is the church to carve out space for existence in such a way that it can confront the "world come of age" through religionless Christianity?

Ecclesiology – Church for Others

The participation of the Christian in God's sufferings in the world was important for Bonhoeffer as he constructed an ecclesiology that corresponded to his concept of religionless Christianity. Jensen notes, "A 'religionless Christianity' might otherwise be expressed as 'being-for-others-in-Christ'—a commitment that involves the entire human life."[16] This "being for others" was crucial for Bonhoeffer's christocentric view of the church. Outward expressions of a life of faith, such as "a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life," were not discarded, but reexamined in light of religionless Christianity.[17] Because Christ is found in relationship with the other, the church must also be committed to relationship with the other. Further, since Jesus is "the man for others," so the church, as the presence of Christ in the world, also ought to be for others.[18]

Bonhoeffer's revisioning of the church in a "world come of age" led him to wonder, "How do we speak of God – without religion, i.e., without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, and so on?"[19] Later in this same letter, he discussed the Greek word *ekklesia* (church), inquiring about how this body can consist of "those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favoured, but rather as belonging to the whole world," which should result in Christ being viewed as "really the Lord of the world."[20] The emerging image is one of a church that is committed to following Christ's call into the world in order to share in God's sufferings in the world by being for others and accepting some level of responsibility for the circumstances of the world.

Religionless Christianity – What Does It Mean?

In light of this brief investigation, religionless Christianity is a form of Christianity that does not focus on the self nor metaphysi-

cal ideas that keep one and one's community of faith absent from the world. Instead, the church shuns the religious *a priori* and begins to consider what role it should accept within and for the sake of the world, rather than what role and power the world should ascribe to the church. Thus, in his expression of religionless Christianity, Bonhoeffer insisted on a church that has a substantial (and possibly prophetic) voice within the world. However, this is not a voice that relies on an appeal to power, even the power of God. Instead, as the presence of Christ within the world, the religionless church focuses on the weakness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, the suffering of whom compels the church to serve the world, not for its own ends, but for the sake of those suffering in the world. Further, by not appealing to power, the church is free to act apart from the umbrella of the state or any other power. Constantinianism loses its grip on the church, which can now follow Christ rather than its own concern for maintaining the status quo. Even more important is the fact that the church gains footing from which to address the "world come of age." Dependence upon those in power should never happen again because the church breaks free from the binding influences of power, prestige, and privilege by embracing religionless Christianity.

The emerging image is one of a church that is committed to following Christ's call into the world in order to share in God's sufferings in the world by being for others and accepting some level of responsibility for the circumstances of the world.

As religionless Christianity is considered, it cannot be evaluated in a vacuum. It must be assessed within the context of congregational life, where it offers resources for transforming the church and its ministry. Without the ecclesial environment, religionless Christianity would become a new variation on the inwardness that Bonhoeffer rejects. Thus, what role can religionless Christianity play in forming and reforming the church as it considers how to be faithful in a "world come of age?"

Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity and Pastoral Ministry

Pastoral ministry is essential to healthy and faithful congregational life. Many congregants look to the pastor as a leader, one who will blaze the trail for the future of the church. The form, shape, and direction of that trail and ministry often vary depending on the congregation. Some churches desire their pastor to lead them to become a numerically larger congregation, while others want their pastor to challenge their church to embrace practices of justice. Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity transforms the pastor's work within the congregation, and consequently, the church's work within the world. This transformation removes some obstacles to discovering and fulfilling the church's primary vocation. In short, Bonhoeffer would urge churches to find ways to become assemblies that exist for the sake of others.

Bonhoeffer insisted on a church that has a substantial voice within the world. However, this is not a voice that relies on an appeal to power, even the power of God.

Religionless Christianity opens doors to make the church more socially responsible. Jensen writes, "Emptied of individualism and inwardness, a religionless Christianity evokes a return to the earth, to its groaning for justice and pleas for healing."[21] To do so, the church must know what is occurring within the world, including from whence the groans and pleas are rising, and for whom they are spoken. However, this is not enough, for actions need to be joined to theology; these actions embody the role of responsibility. Bonhoeffer made this point when he linked the church with Christ, who is labeled "the man for others." As Christ suffered for the sake of humanity, existing as one who was responsible for the entire world, so the church ought to also lay itself down in order to live for others within the entire world.

Bonhoeffer's use of *ekklesia* underscores the importance of the "called forth" nature of the church.[22] This is a calling that Bonhoeffer had addressed previously in The *Cost of Discipleship* when he wrote, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."[23] A responsible church is one that renounces all claims to itself in order to exist for others. Bethge echoes these words when he writes, "political, criti-

cal responsibility in and for the world is part and parcel of Christian discipleship."[24] Learning to be the church means learning to exist for others. Bonhoeffer described the church as a community with two tasks: to sustain effective proclamation of the gospel and to exist for the world.[25] In light of these two tasks, pastoral ministry inside and outside the church must be different if religionless Christianity is to be taken seriously within congregational life.

Proclamation of the Gospel

The preaching of the gospel is the telling of the Christian story. William Willimon writes, "You might think of Sunday morning as a struggle over the question, Who tells the story of what is going on in the world?"[26] Understanding which story of the world is being told is important as the church finds a way to be socially responsible. If the church accepts the story that points to the "God of the gaps," then what role is left for the church to exist and to speak within the world at all? The only task remaining is for the church to find the gaps of human reason and let God exist there until rational human progress displaces God from that location as well. Instead of this, the church must "refuse to accept the present ordering of the world as a given, ordained by heavenly powers."[27] The story the church tells must provide an avenue to name, confront, and subvert the secular "world come of age" and its account of the world and the church. Bonhoeffer stated as much: "We shouldn't run man down in his worldliness, but confront him with God at his strongest point."[28] The church and its story should confront the world at the center of the village, not at the margins. The "God of the gaps" story, therefore, is insufficient in granting the resources for such a task. Only the story that declares Jesus Christ as Lord of all will provide the necessary narrative to be the church for others.

The church and its story should confront the world at the center of the village, not at the margins.

The transformation of the teaching role of the congregation is a challenging task, but one that is crucial to pastoral ministry and points toward social responsibility. Within the congregation, Bonhoeffer would have advocated for fostering faith through liturgy, sermons, and exhortation to Christian living. However, this will diverge slightly from traditional Christian worship. The ecclesial life is where the language of the faith is spoken and understood correctly.

It is here that the congregation learns about, and is reminded of, the story of Christ's messianic suffering for the sake of the world. The "inside" task of the church is to learn that it is to be the presence of Christ within the world, which gives rise to declaring the primary vocation of the church: to be the church within the world. This vocation pushes the church's concerns beyond self-centered issues and counteracts the situation where "attention to personal salvation and the survival of the Christian religion have replaced faithfulness to Jesus's call of being for others."[29] Thus, the teaching and preaching of the church moves the congregation outside its boundaries. Willimon notes that prophetic sermons that inform the congregation about the world will have farther reaching implications, including political, economic, and social.[30] Only by placing the church within the world through the preaching and proclamation of the gospel can the boundaries between church and world be blurred and the insider/outsider dichotomy that too often occurs within churches be broken. When this occurs, opportunities materialize for reaching those who are immersed in the world's suffering.

Relationships to power structures must also change; since pastoral ministry should be concerned with changing the world, this change includes all relationships.[31] This cannot happen, as Bonhoeffer rightly saw, when the church is dependent upon the state, or some other power structure, to maintain the status quo and the selfish, vested interests of the congregants. Changing the world will not come through a top-down model that utilizes power to enforce a particular moral and/or social position, even if sought with the most compassionate and altruistic of motives. Therefore, pastors must challenge congregations to divest themselves of their dependence upon the maintenance of power structures. This includes political loyalties, economic ties, and social groups that might hinder any congregant's ability to participate in God's sufferings within the world, and consequently, to be faithful to Christ's call to discipleship.

Bonhoeffer believed that Christians had distorted the image of Christ: "The patronizing, feudalistic character of Christian institutions and creeds had transformed the freeing majesty of the powerless servanthood of Christ into power-structures of sterilizing dependencies."[32] An alternative to this view of Christ comes from the proclamation of discipleship to the Christ who suffered within the world, rather than underwriting the regimes of those who "lord it over" others.[33] Beyond transforming the relationship between the church and world, even the way the church staff is organized should reflect this renouncement of power-seeking. In this way, a greater sense of community should exist between those on a particular

church's staff. Hierarchical ministerial models, while perhaps effective, may not be conducive to following Christ faithfully. It may be that, within religionless Christianity, efficiency should not be the primary concern. Moreover, the relationship between the staff and the laity might need revision. This is of particular interest for pastoral leadership. Willimon notes that the community of faith comes prior to any of its individual leaders.[34] Any system that places the clergy over and above the laity relies on power to maintain such a distinction, power that runs contrary to Bonhoeffer's views and his reading of Christ's call to discipleship. Ultimately, by choosing to embrace the suffering sociality of the Christ who was and is for the world, the church subverts the authority of the power structures that claim to tell the story of the world and seeks to tell an alternative story and embody an alternative way to living.

Existing for the World

A socially responsible church, according to Bonhoeffer, is a community that is committed to service. This service is more than helping those who approach the church, for Bonhoeffer wrote, "It is with the Christ who is persecuted and who suffers in His Church that justice, truth, humanity, and freedom now seek refuge."[35] Bonhoeffer's "non-religious" interpretation of theological language, therefore, becomes a political interpretation of that terminology.[36] Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*, "There is a certain 'political' character involved in the idea of sanctification."[37] Barry Harvey elaborates by noting that this means that the church cannot be confined as a religious association.[38] Rather than relying on social position, the church is to follow Christ in suffering for the sake of others. Indeed, Bonhoeffer's words seem akin to those of Jesus: "But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the great-

Changing the world will not come through a top-down model that utilizes power to enforce a particular moral and/or social position, even if sought with the most compassionate and altruistic of motives.

est among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves'" (Luke 22:25-26).[39]

Pastoral ministry must reclaim this task of service to the world. This service must be rendered to people rather than to issues and ideologies. Bonhoeffer wanted to bring the church out of the cave of provincialism and self-serving inwardness and into the light of serving human beings and existing for others. However, this cannot be service within the community of faith only. It must reach beyond the boundaries of the church, making the suffering service of the church part and parcel of its existence for the sake of the world. To be for the world requires the church to take active responsibility for the well-being of the world. It is not enough for the church to accept and help outsiders whenever they take initiative and darken the doors of one's church. Being socially responsible involves the pastoral care of the world by the community of faith. Hence, a widening of pastoral ministry must occur that requires all Christians to live as servants and includes the entire world as recipients.

The church cannot dialogue with these religious others in order to find parallels that justify the Christian story, for that is not existence for others, but existence fo oneself.

It is only by being socially responsible in this manner that the church becomes an alternative *polis*, constituted by distinctive societal practices that make it a publicly accessible community that freely chooses to exist for the sake of the world through Christ.[40] These practices include, but are not limited to, the sacraments. The Eucharist, as a symbol of economic equality at the table, places the church in solidarity with those who are marginalized in society, declaring to the world that all at the table are equal and welcome. Baptism, with its social significance of initiation, reorders the relationships within the church and without on the basis of egalitarianism. Rather than focusing on distinctions that divide people and create power structures, the church looks beyond these boundaries to the political reshuffling brought about by being initiated as a follower of the suffering Christ.[41] These sacramental acts, while internally focused, have outward societal ramifications as declarations of the identity of the church as a

community of equality, fairness, and suffering service in discipleship to Christ.

However, existing for the sake of the world has some obstacles that must be overcome in order for it to actually occur within the church. First, the church must know the world. In fact, within the "world come of age," the church must develop an account of this world so that it knows the world better than it knows itself, which points again to the significance of story in the life of the church and pastoral ministry.[42] Next, pastoral ministry must name those places in the world where suffering exists, those places where the church should stand with others, those places where the example of and discipleship to Christ draw the church out of its private corner. Oftentimes, congregations forget that suffering exists within the world, but pastors must constantly remind parishioners that suffering is a reality for many within the world, was a reality for Jesus Christ, and was promised by him to be characteristic of his church's existence. Then, they should encourage congregants to freely choose to stand with those who suffer.

Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity may also create opportunities for interreligious encounter and dialogue. In many ways, those of different religious groups are part of the other, for which the church is to exist. Thus, one must consider how pastoral ministry can encourage social responsibility for the sake of those of other religious faiths. First, Christ's claim upon Christians and the church requires the recognition of religious others.[43] At the same time, the church cannot dialogue with these religious others in order to find parallels that justify the Christian story, for that is not existence for others, but existence for oneself. Indeed, in a context where religious fundamentalism is a serious threat to the world, entire religious groups find themselves left on the margins without a voice. Religionless Christianity calls the church to serve those groups for their sake, not trying to salvage any sense of power that the church may have, whether implicit through political pressures or explicit through overt actions. For example, following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, many Arab-Americans and Muslims found themselves persecuted due to overgeneralizations about the Islamic faith and people of Arab descent. Religionless Christianity pushes the church into dialogue with and advocacy for such people, regardless of the church's theological agreement with them. Being for them takes priority over other options.

Any honest interfaith dialogue and encounter will not lead to relativism, but an embrace of diversity. This is because in Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity, Christ calls the church to face differences and to locate transcendence in the form of the other.[44] Jensen writes

that religionless Christianity leaves behind the "smug security of its own language, interpretations, and traditions as sufficient in themselves."[45] For Bonhoeffer then, it would seem that even interreligious encounters can be seen in light of his christocentric focus, seeking solidarity with those who are religious others as a part of discipleship to the suffering Christ. Pastoral ministry, therefore, would do well to encourage interfaith encounters as a way to find the transcendent God as one and one's congregation learns how to be for others.

Conclusion

Religionless Christianity seeks an approach to transform the way by which we name the church and the vocation of the church. By removing from the church that which focuses inward and keeps the church a private affair on the outside of society, Bonhoeffer freed a place for the church in the center of the village where the suffering of the marginalized can be embraced and subverted. Because transcendence comes close in the form and shape of the other, "God is beyond in the midst of our life."[46] Bonhoeffer would encourage pastors to foster a religionless Christianity that "will question anything—even the claims and traditions of the Christian religion—that blocks recognition of otherness."[47] Instead, being the church means that "the Christian life is characterized more accurately by face-to-face encounter and surprise than it is by familiarity and doctrinal defensiveness."[48] Otherness is crucial to the church's task within the world. Therefore, religionless Christianity reclaims prophetic pastoral ministry, enabling it to be faithful in proclaiming the gospel and urging congregations to embrace the other in genuine ways that offer avenues for accepting social responsibility and participating in God's sufferings in the world.

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30. Willimon, 256.
31. Ibid., 211; Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 300.
32. Bethge, "Bonhoeffer's Christology," 67.
33. See Luke 22:25.
34. Willimon, 33.
35. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 61.
36. Harvey, 53.
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40. Bethge, "Religionless Christianity," 24; Harvey, 52-3.
41. Harvey, 53-4.
42. Ibid., 49.
43. Jensen, 116.
44. Bethge, "Bonhoeffer's Christology," 66.
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“Religionless Christianity and the Pastoral Call to Social Responsibility”

Questions for Consideration:

1. How might practices and attitudes in the church have to be altered if the church is to “know the world better than it knows itself”? What would be the practical implications of these changes?

2. From the perspective of religionless Christianity, what is the church’s relationship to the state? In what ways do churches act politically in concert or in discord with this perspective?

3. What concrete steps do churches need to take if they are to embody the suffering love of Christ for the world?

4. From the perspective of religionless Christianity, what kind of language should the church use (and not use) in its mission to the world? How would this enhance communication with the world?

Prepared by Josh Burden

Karl Barth's Theology of Church Unity

A Baptist Perspective

DANIEL ROBINSON

While many Baptists think the ecumenical movement contradicts the autonomy of the local church, Barth's ideas offer a way for Baptists to critically reflect upon their own tradition and distinctives and take their place within the universal church.

In the opening paragraphs of his contribution to the 1996 book *Defining Baptist Convictions: Guidelines for the Twenty-First Century*, Baptist scholar John H. Y. Briggs seeks to define the sense in which Baptist congregations "belong" to the universal Church:[1]

> When Baptists emphasize the importance of the local church, they are not speaking of a restrictive, limiting factor, some kind of narrow parochialism; rather, they are affirming that Baptist ecclesiology flows out of experience within the local congregation. Such an emphasis upon the local must be balanced by an equal stress upon the need to work with others with a vision as wide as God's purposes themselves. Only so can effective global mission be properly pursued; only so does the local church become part of the worldwide church of Jesus Christ.[2]

The provocative title of Briggs's essay is "Allegiance to the Local Church Commits Baptists to Global Citizenship." This assertion implies that the title "Baptist ecumenist" is not a contradiction in terms, as many have supposed. Could it be that some form of ecumenism emerges naturally and necessarily from core Baptist principles themselves?

I have found this to be the case. In fact, it was by seeking to be a faithful Baptist that I became committed to the unity of the Church.

My Baptist heritage taught me to make Scripture the 'norming norm' for my theology, under the lordship of Christ and above tradition and experience. When I applied this principle to the questions of ecclesiology, I discovered in the words of Jesus a call to a unity both higher and deeper than anything I had ever experienced—a unity that has power in and of itself to teach the world that, out of his love, grace, and mercy, God the Father has sent them his Son. "May they be brought to complete unity," Jesus prays in John 17:23, "to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."[3] An 'invisible or 'spiritual' unity that is imperceptible apart from the help of the Holy Spirit cannot possibly teach the lost anything; it cannot be missional, a quality my Baptist heritage taught me to value. Only a visible, empirical unity has the power to proclaim to them the message of reconciliation. I found myself no longer willing to justify the current fractured state of the Church or acquiesce to it; rather, I felt compelled as a Baptist to work for a unity more faithful to that pictured in Scripture.

Yet, it is undeniable that the Baptist and ecumenical theological ideologies often compete with one another and occasionally seem to contradict one another outright. Thus, the first task of Baptists who would work toward a more united Church is to find ways that the two might be harmonized. Baptist ecumenists may be encouraged to learn that the German theologian Karl Barth devoted a great deal of critical, detailed theological reflection to the ecumenical question. Though he stands within the Reformed tradition, Barth's ecclesiology (undergirded by his classically neo-orthodox affirmation of the supremacy of Christ and the authority of Scripture) develops more along the lines of the free church, embracing the autonomy of the local church, the priesthood of all believers, the conviction that only believers should be baptized, and the separation of church and state. "It can legitimately be said that Barth's doctrine of the church anticipates and deepens the long tradition of . . . Believers' church ecclesiology."[4] Because it arises from this ecclesiological perspective, Barth's theology of unity offers a means whereby Baptist and ecumenical convictions can be better reconciled.

Barth encapsulates his vision for the unity of the Church in his pamphlet *The Church and the Churches*,[5] which he wrote in anticipation of the 1937 Edinburgh World Conference on Faith and Order. In it, he lays out a program for unity that has two foci: Christ and the local church. Existentially speaking, the unity of the Church is focused in the person of Christ. "The blessing of unity cannot be separated from Him who blesses," he writes, "for in Him it has its source and reality, through His Word and Spirit it is revealed to us, and only in faith in

Him can it become a reality among us."[6] Practically speaking, the unity of the Church is focused within the various churches. "Church work, and union work as a part of it, must be done within the churches, in its proper Christian home, or it will not be done at all."[7] These two foci determine the parameters of Barthian unity. Because it is Christ-focused and church-focused, it (1) is achieved theologically, as each church reflects critically on its identity in Christ, (2) is experienced visibly, taking its decisive form in a common confession of faith, and (3) acts missiologically, portraying the reality of the incarnation through the Church as the one body of Christ on earth.

Only a visible, empirical unity has the power to proclaim to them the message of reconciliation.

Even in this brief outline, the areas of conflict between Barth's theology of unity and historical Baptist doctrine and polity are obvious. Some might even seem so large as to be insurmountable. Yet, despite these theological differences, Karl Barth's theology of Church unity can help Baptists to seek a oneness with other churches that is more faithful to the Scriptures than that which most currently experience, while at the same time honoring historic Baptist distinctives.

The Theological Issue: Baptists and the "Unanimous Confession"[8]

In his lengthy discussion in *Church Dogmatics* of the New Testament expression *soma Christou*, Barth identifies the earthly believing community today with the eternal body of Christ: "There is only one Christ, and therefore there is only one body of Christ. . . . As His earthly-historical form of existence, the community is His body, [and] His body is the community."[9] As the now-body-of-Christ, then, the Church's oneness must be visible and empirical; Barth allows no recourse to an "invisible' unified Church above or behind the 'visible' churches to solve the problem presented by their multiplicity. "The [visible] is the form and the [invisible] the mystery of one and the self-same church. The mystery is hidden in the form, but represented and to be sought out in it."[10] While this marks a development from *The Church and the Churches*, in which he asserts the distinction between a visible, empirical church and an invisible, essential church to be Platonic and "foreign to the New Testament,"[11] both understandings lead to the same conclusion. The very nature of the church requires of the

various churches both practical interdependence and a certain level of theological consistency. For Barth, these two requirements find critical fulfillment in a shared confession of faith:

> "The union of the churches into the oneness of the Church would mean . . . as the decisive test of unity, that we should join in making confession of our faith and thus should unitedly proclaim it to the world, and so fulfill that commandment of Jesus on which the Church is based. . . . A union of the churches in the sense of that task which is so seriously laid upon the Church would mean a union of confessions into one unanimous Confession."[12]

The idea of a creed, which is imposed by some outside authority upon the churches and to which their assent (and that of their members) is continually compelled, is anathema to most Baptists. Baptist historian William R. Estep, in his 1966 book *Baptists and Christian Unity*, describes the point of contention: "No Baptist, acting in the Baptist tradition, is prepared to adopt a creed. In the historical legacy of Baptists, all creeds are man-made. They believe them to be only approximations of divine truth. To them one can never compel assent. All too easily the creeds usurp the place of Christ."[13]

These convictions, however, have not prevented Baptists from seeking common theological ground with one another, nor from developing shared statements of their beliefs—confessions which, in Estep's words, "do not attempt to absolutize for all time the Christian faith."[14] Such documents, he rightly asserts, "are both legitimate and necessary."[15] The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland's Advisory Committee for Church Relations, formed in 1966 to investigate the possibility of that union's entrance into the World Council of Churches, writes of the importance of shared confessions to the cause of Christian unity: "The Church of the Lord Jesus is constantly reminded of its unity, as its members make common confession of their faith. For this reason some sort of creedal affirmation seems inevitable, even though the creeds be viewed as confessions of the one faith, and not

Baptists could safely seek the same common ground and even develop the same kinds of confessions with Christians of other traditions as they have with one another.

tests for exclusion or shackles on interpretation."[16] Barth, sensitive to the crucial distinction between human words and the Word of God made incarnate in Christ, sets high standards for theological inquiry directed toward this kind of confessional unity. By adopting these standards, Baptists could safely seek the same common ground and even develop the same kinds of confessions with Christians of other traditions as they have with one another.

The multiplicity of churches is not merely an inconvenience or hindrance, but is nothing less than sin–as is acquiescing to that multiplicity in the name of tolerance.

In *The Church and the Churches*, Barth lays out four "essential conditions in which it would be possible to share in such a genuine effort of union." First, a church must feel itself "called, instructed, and summoned" to relinquish some portion of its confession for a shared statement "in the power of an enhanced, not of a diminished faith." Second, "no secular motive…should be allowed to prompt a church to surrender its individuality." Third, movement toward confessional unity "must not imply the abandonment, in one iota, of anything which a church believes it necessary to assert in a certain way and not otherwise." Finally, "only one thing must be abandoned, namely a failure in obedience to Christ, hitherto unrealized."[17]

Writing in the doctrinal section of a statement entitled "Pronouncement on Christian Unity and Denominational Efficiency," which was adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1914, E.Y. Mullins stated, "The interests of Christian unity cannot be best promoted by a policy of compromise."[18] Barth evidently agrees. The Christ-focused, Church-focused nature of Barth's unity allows Baptists to work toward theological harmony with Christians of other traditions without fear of compromising their historic doctrine and polity—unless, through such engagement, they find some aspect to represent "a failure in obedience to Christ," in which case they should be eager to surrender it. Hence, by honoring the authority of the local church and calling on the local church to honor its commitment to the authority of Christ, Barth's standards effectively remove any excuse for not engaging other churches over the theological issues that divide

us. Only a church that imagined its statement of faith corresponded perfectly to theological truth (a very un-Baptist attitude) would have a reason not to do so. As Baptist theologian Walter Shurden puts it, "Baptists need to hear what their sisters and brothers of other Christian communions have to say. Likewise, Baptists have something to say themselves. All Baptist groups, therefore, would be wise to break out of their self-imposed isolation from other Christian groups and enter into ecumenical dialogue and action."[19]

The Ecclesiological Issue: Baptists and the "One-ness" of the Church

In recent years, meaningful theological engagement of this nature has often been aborted by pointing to the old maxim, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." In Estep's concluding chapter, "Guidelines for Christian Unity," he implies that Baptists have particularly held this principle. "Fellowship with those in Christ and respect for the diversity which characterizes human discipleship are to Baptists inseparable qualities."[20] While Estep's "respectful fellowship" may represent the ideal for which Baptists strive, Barth's perspective on the matter is much closer to the reality in which most Baptist churches exist; to any one church, the others inevitably come to represent "a problem, a critic, a rival, possibly also a disturber and an enemy."[21]

For this reason, Barth allows no recourse to mere tolerance, which he considers to be in opposition to the gospel because it encourages confessional disunity rather than mitigating it.[22] He argues that the various churches exist by design in radical dependence on one another. Therefore, the multiplicity of churches is not merely an inconvenience or hindrance, but is nothing less than sin—as is acquiescing to that multiplicity in the name of tolerance. Interestingly, something of this same attitude is evidenced among the earliest Baptists, as seen in this excerpt from *Propositions and Conclusions concerning True Christian Religion* (1612), the confession of faith of John Smyth's congregation in Amsterdam:

> All penitent and faithful Christians are brethren in the communion of the outward church . . . and we salute them all with a holy kiss, being heartily grieved that we which follow after one faith, and one spirit, and one Lord, and one God, one body, and one baptism, should be rent into so many sects and schisms: and that only for matters of less moment.[23]

For Barth, then, the very idea of an "independent" church is alien to the New Testament: "the many have no need of an independence which indeed they do not possess and could only achieve by lapsing away from the unity."[24] Writing on the third "note" of the Church in *Church Dogmatics*, he makes an equivalent statement: "A Church is catholic or it is not the Church."[25] In other words, if a church is not spiritually and visibly connected in an intimate way with the greater Christian community, it is no longer correctly called a church. Baptist A.E. Payne makes a strikingly similar comment: "Associations, Synods, Unions and Assemblies of churches are not to be regarded as optional and secondary. They are the necessary expression of Christian fellowship, a necessary manifestation of the Church visible. The local congregation is not truly a church if it lives an entirely separate life."[26] The critique implied by Barth's ecclesiology points out the need for a revisioning of the Baptist understanding of the Church.

"Anyone who says 'Yes' to Christ must say 'No' to the division of the churches. It should not be possible for us to see without pain two churches standing side by side in the same street for years and years, for all the world like grocery stores."

Barth's understanding of the nature of the Church as one, and his corresponding characterization of multiplicity as sin, serve to correct certain radically independent ecclesiologies to which Baptists are susceptible. At its best, the Baptist understanding of the interrelatedness of the churches, focused around the principles of local church autonomy and voluntary cooperation, has led to cooperative para-church organizations—conventions, societies, and the like. While such organizations have done worthwhile ministry, by their very design they lack the ability to advance the cause of unity in any theologically significant way. At its worst, Baptist ecclesiology has spawned churches like those of the 'Independent Baptist' movement, which practice a doctrine of 'radical separation' and consider any significant connection with other churches to be a violation of God's intent for the Church. Furthermore, that we Baptists have a historically demonstrable tendency toward schism is a fact that few would deny.

Barth challenges Baptists to be more honest with themselves and their tradition. While he implicitly affirms the autonomy of the local congregation as a matter of its very nature, he realistically sees divisions among congregations in the same locality as leading necessarily to opposition—something contrary to the very commission under which the Church was established and continues to exist. As Barth said in one of his later sermons, "Anyone who says 'Yes' to Christ must say 'No' to the division of the churches. It should not be possible for us to see without pain two churches standing side by side in the same street for years and years, for all the world like grocery stores."[27] Roman Catholic commentator Colm O'Grady summarizes Barth's position in this way: "The Church's existence in dependence on Christ means . . . that its life is a common life, and those who live it are primarily and essentially and radically one community."[28] To deny the primacy, essentiality, or radicalness of this oneness, or to accept anything less, is to cut oneself off from the common life, and therefore, from Christ. In this aspect, Barth's ecclesiology is more christocentric than our own, and Baptist ecclesiology, with its almost overwhelming focus on local autonomy, shows itself to be anthropocentric in comparison. By integrating Barth's christocentric ecclesiology with our own, we Baptists could preserve the cherished principle of local church autonomy while achieving a more vibrant and biblical understanding of the interdependence of the local churches within the one body of Christ. In the aforementioned report on unity by the Advisory Committee for Church Relations of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, just such a Barthian christocentricity comes through: "Factions between the children of God are as incongruous as hostilities between the Father and the Son or between the Redeemer and the Redeemed. Accordingly the unity of God should be reflected in the unity of the Church."[29]

The Methodological Issue: Baptists and the Quest for Christ

Barth characterizes the unity of the Church as a deep and abiding concern in the heart of God: "If we listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, then the question of the unity of the Church will most surely become for us a burning question."[30] He asserts, however, that this question can only be pursued from within our particular churches and traditions. "If we would listen to Christ, as to Him who Himself is the Church's unity and in whom its union is already accomplished, then from the outset we must with humble but complete sincerity, endorse the confession of our own church."[31] Thus, Barth's Christ-focused, church-focused method of achieving authentic unity respects core

Baptist principles while it challenges Baptists to hold to them more faithfully.

As shown earlier, Barth recognizes the local congregation alone as having the right and authority to determine where it stands *vis-à-vis* the various churches, primarily because only the local congregation has the capability of making such determinations in a way that is authoritative for itself. Additionally, Barth holds that, because real unity is only achievable in Christ, through Christ, and by Christ, the local church must pursue Christ to find unity. "The quest for the unity of the Church must in fact be identical with the quest for Jesus Christ as the concrete Head and Lord of the Church."[32] Here he echoes words written by E. Y. Mullins and endorsed by the Southern Baptist Convention as part of the "Pronouncement on Christian Unity and Denominational Efficiency" some twenty-two years earlier: "We firmly believe that a way may be found through the maze of divided Christendom out into the open spaces of Christian union only as the people of Christ follow the golden thread of earnest desire to know and do his will."[33] Accordingly, Barthian unity is achieved as the local church reflects critically on its identity in Christ and seeks to bring itself more fully under the Lordship of Christ.

To assist in this reflection, Barth offers three questions concerning the church's life, order, and doctrine. First, "do we, as a Church, in our relation and attitude to the problems of the church's environment in the world, really listen to Christ in the terms of our own tradition and confession?"[34] In other words, does our Baptist faith really provide the most effective medium through which Christ can speak to us about being his Church in the world? Second, "are we really listening to Christ, as we in the spirit of our church and in accord with its direction deal thus with the congregations, their ministries and their worship?"[35] In other words, do the tenets of Baptist polity and practice as our congregation applies them respect in every way of the Lordship of Christ over our church? Third, Barth applies the same question to the church's doctrine. Have we tested the articles of our Baptist confessions of faith against the Christ of the Scriptures to ensure that at every point they honor him and not merely some representation we have created of him? With these questions, Barth helps us to draw a very clear line between Scripture and tradition as the sources of our theology. Asking these kinds of penetrating questions of ourselves can only serve to refine and perfect our Baptist churches if we make them the starting point for an honest appraisal of Baptist life, order, and doctrine. Barth acknowledges that this methodology will not produce immediate results, at least in terms of greater visible unity among the churches. "But to enquire into the truth of Christ is . . . always and in

all circumstances a service to the union of the churches, even when the first result is that no one moves an inch from his thesis."[36]

The Teleological Issue: Baptists and Missional Unity

Barthian unity addresses one other important facet of Baptist life—one so important, in fact, that it has often provided an organizing principle for unity among Baptists themselves and thereby has given Baptists what little empirical unity they do possess: the call to missions. For Barth, the unity of the church is closely tied to the mission of the church. Barth's linking of church unity with the task of proclaiming the gospel and the goal of world evangelization should serve to elevate issues of unity to greater prominence within Baptist congregations.

Adopting Barth's incarnational understanding of the church's missionary task could allow Baptist congregations to see unity in a missional light, that is, to see unity not only as essential to effective missions, but also as a way of proclaiming the gospel in and of itself.

For Barth, the Church's *raison d'être* is to proclaim the incarnation—a task that it can only complete as it lives out the reality of the incarnation as the one body of Christ on earth. "The task from which the church derives its being is to proclaim that this [event] has really happened and to summon men to believe in its reality. It has therefore no life of its own, but lives as the body of which the crucified and risen Christ is the Head; that is to say, it lives in and with this commission."[37] Consequently, he sees the multiplicity of the churches as an obstacle to the proclamation of the gospel and the fulfillment of the Church's commission. "The task as thus committed contemplates no multiplicity of churches. . . . It belongs to the Church's commission to be one Church."[38]

Missions work has long been a rallying point for unity among Baptists. The unity that has developed out of our cooperative mis-

sionary efforts, however, has frequently been a superficial unity or a unity of convenience. Adopting Barth's incarnational understanding of the Church's missionary task could allow Baptist congregations to see unity in a missional light, that is, to see unity not only as essential to effective missions, but also as a way of proclaiming the gospel in and of itself. The British Baptists in 1966 seem to have realized the integral relationship between unity and missions: "From the Biblical point of view, for the Church to engage in mission disunitedly, and even sometimes in mutual opposition, is to split the mission of God and to weaken the power of the Gospel."[39] If nothing else, the Barthian conception of the Church and its mission ought to make Baptists ask themselves, "How are our relationships with the other churches affecting our effectiveness at sharing the gospel with those in our sphere of influence?" The mere willingness to consider such questions would represent a great step forward for Baptists today.

Professor Barth Goes to Rome: A Theology in Practice

Barth himself took such a step in September 1966 when, at the age of eighty, he traveled to Rome. The final session of the Second Vatican Council had adjourned less than a year before, and Barth's study of the various Constitutions, Decrees, and Declarations that the Council had generated—many of which dealt with the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church to its "separated brethren," Christians of other traditions—left him with questions. He wrote to the Secretariat for Christian Unity in Rome: "Were they inclined to receive me, as it were, *post festum*, so that I could acquire firsthand information? It would be a purely private matter of instructing me in the way the decisions of the Council were understood and explained in the immediate vicinity of the center of the Catholic Church."[40]

After receiving an official invitation to visit, Barth began his preparations in earnest:

> Anyone who really wants to receive information must first of all be informed to some extent already," **he later wrote in his account of the visit, "so in the course** of the summer I undertook the serious study of the sixteen Latin texts worked out by the Council and of at least some of the wealth of material dealing with the Council. As a result, during my conversations in Rome some of my interlocutors praised me for having examined the texts at least as closely as they had, and in some details more closely.[41]

He developed ten sets of questions, one general set relating to the

work of the Council as a whole and the rest organized according to the conciliar document that generated them, and brought them with him to Rome that September. Barth's account of the general pattern that his meetings with various Catholic theologians followed is instructive and can be seen as the implementation of his theology of unity:

> Mimeographed copies of two or three of my sets of questions chosen for the particular occasion were placed in the hands of the Catholic theologians who were taking part. I explained the questions to them, if necessary, and then listened to their answers. This procedure often took up to three hours. . . . On both sides the atmosphere in which this took place was always characterized by brotherly trust, frankness, and relevance. If I encountered points that were hard, or points that were too soft, I took great care not to press further but hurried on to the next point. I had certainly not gone there to quarrel.[42]

In these remarkable events we see Barth's ecumenical methodology put into practice. When taken together with his writings on unity, three guiding principles come into focus. First, the foundational work of unity is critical self-reflection on the part of the local church in light of Christ. As we each in our churches seek to draw nearer to Christ, we will by necessity draw nearer to each other. Second, the starting point for engagement with other Christians is the unity we already possess. One Barth scholar summarized his method this way: "Proceeding from what unites us, [we] discuss what separates us in view of what unites us."[43] Joseph Harrison Jackson (then president of the National Baptist Convention, Inc.), after attending the first session of Vatican II himself, saw the wisdom in such an approach and thereafter "called for interconfessional dialogue and fellowship . . . on the basis of 'accepted areas of agreement.'"[44] Third, unity work that is theologically significant is by necessity a long-term project and necessitates great patience. We must therefore place a higher value on small steps sincerely taken in faith than on large-scale projects and unions that ultimately fail to address the theological issues that separate us.

"Proceeding from what unites us, [we] discuss what separates us in view of what unites us."

The unity Barth calls for is certainly not an easy or cheap unity but one which can only be gained by doing the hard theological work

of seeking to understand ourselves and our Christian brothers and sisters in the pure and undiminished light of Christ. What would happen if Baptists embraced these principles? What would happen if we regularly applied to our own doctrine and practice the critical eye we usually reserve for the doctrine and practice of others? What would happen if we studied the creeds and confessions of the church across the street or across town, formed thoughtful questions, and engaged our brothers and sisters over them, not trying to convince them of the truth of our position, but trying to better understand theirs?

This path to unity is fraught with obstacles and challenges, many of them formidable. After all, the movement to which Barth calls us is "a movement away from all ecclesiasticism towards Jesus Christ,"[45] and history shows that movement in that direction rarely happens smoothly. But in Christian faith and hope, perhaps it can be said that all obstacles to unity must prove to be merely temporary, that eventually the zeal of the Church for Christ will overcome all that oppose it, that ultimately he will increase and we will diminish to the point that we all arrive together at a singularity—a unity in which Christ is all and is in all. Perhaps Estep is right when he says that Baptists should not view unity as "a goal toward which the Christian world feverishly strives," but it is surely more than that which he offers instead, a spiritualized, docetic "reality which belongs to the new man in Christ, only to be recognized in order to be realized."[46] Barth reminds us that unity in its fullness is a divine gift and trust, one that we as God's stewards are expected to invest wisely. Perhaps if Baptists are good stewards of the small gift of unity we possess—if we invest it and reap from it some small profit—our Master will one day make us stewards of a deeper and more abiding one.

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Notes

1. For purposes of clarity, I have chosen to follow Barth's convention for capitalizing the word "church" throughout this paper. When it refers to the universal body of Christ, it is capitalized; when it refers to the local body of believers or to organizations such as conventions or denominations, it is not.
2. John H.Y. Briggs, "Allegiance to the Local Church Commits Baptists to Global Citizenship," in *Defining Baptist Convictions: Guidelines for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Charles W. Deweese (Franklin, Tenn.: Providence House, 1996), 214.
3. *NIV*.
4. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical, and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002), 56.
5. Karl Barth, *The Church and the Churches* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1936).
6. Ibid., 28.
7. Ibid., 81.
8. The categories under which I have chosen to examine these issues are taken from chapter 9 of William R. Estep, *Baptists and Christian Unity* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966). While I have adopted Estep's categories, I have in each instance pursued a much different line of engagement than he does. I am nevertheless indebted to his work for this basic structure.
9. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, pt. 1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 666.
10. Ibid., 669.
11. Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, 35-6.
12. Ibid., 66-7.
13. William R. Estep, *Baptists and Christian Unity* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), 170.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, Advisory Committee for Church Relations, *Baptists and Unity* (London: Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1967), 43.
17. Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, 67-70.
18. *Proceedings of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1914* (Atlanta: Franklin Printing House, 1914), 77, quoted in Glenn A. Igleheart, "Ecumenical Concerns among Southern Baptists," in *Baptists and Ecumenism*, eds. William Jerry Boney and Glenn A. Igleheart (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1980), 52.
19. Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 1993), 39.
20. Estep, 193.
21. Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, 20.
22. Ibid., 58.
23. William L. Lumpkin, ed., *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959), 137.

24. Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, 25-6.
25. Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 702. Barth deviates here from the convention noted above; in order to maintain consistency, the first "Church" in this quote should not be capitalized.
26. Quoted in Briggs, "Allegiance," in Deweese, *Baptist Convictions*, 214. Emphasis mine.
27. Quoted in W. A. Visser 't Hooft, "Karl Barth and the Ecumenical Movement," *The Ecumenical Review* 32 (April 1980): 150.
28. Colm O'Grady, *The Church in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Washington: Corpus Publications, 1968), 245-46.
29. Advisory Committee for Church Relations, *Baptists and Unity*, 42.
30. Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, 32.
31. Ibid., 81.
32. Ibid., 28.
33. *SBC Proceedings, 1914*, 77, quoted in Igleheart, "Ecumenical Concerns," in Boney and Igleheart, eds., *Baptists and Ecumenism*, 52.
34. Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, 83.
35. Ibid., 86.
36. Ibid., 91.
37. Ibid., 23.
38. Ibid., 24, 29.
39. Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, *Baptists and Unity*, 44.
40. Karl Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum: An Appraisal of Vatican II*, trans. Keith R. Crim (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1968), 10.
41. Ibid., 10-11.
42. Ibid., 12.
43. B. A. Willems, *Karl Barth: An Ecumenical Approach to His Theology*, (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1965), 88-9.
44. Quoted in James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Baptists and Roman Catholicism* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1965), 37.
45. Harding Meyer, "The Importance of Barth's Theology in the Ecumenical Movement," *Dialog* 20.1 (Winter 1981): 29.
46. Estep, *Baptists and Christian Unity*, 191.

"Karl Barth's Theology of Church Unity" . . . **So What?**

Questions for Consideration:

1. In drawing up a statement of faith in cooperation with other Christian denominations, what would be your non-negotiable points? Where would you likely find the most common ground?

2. Does you church practice inter-faith dialogue or study practices and beliefs of other Christian traditions? How would such practices help your church?

3. Do you agree that it is a travesty to have two churches standing side by side, "for all the world like grocery stores"? If so, what are some steps you can take personally to help unify local church bodies? If not, how do churches avoid competition with one another?

4. Where do worship and preaching styles, race, and ethnicity factor into this discussion?

5. Given the divisive nature of Baptist politics, what would be needed to help Baptists embrace the vision of Barthian unity and take their place within the universal church?

Prepared by Kathryn Seay

Ecclesiology and Eschatological Hope

On Why Baptists Should Read Rorty

DAMON MARTIN

He said, "A professor once told me that Rorty is the most dangerous man alive."

THIS PAPER BEGAN AS A DISCUSSION WITH A FRIEND who is a former graduate student. As we sat eating lunch one day, he spied a copy of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and Social Hope* lying on my kitchen table. The comment that followed indicated the degree to which Rorty has been vilified within certain circles. He said, "A professor once told me that Rorty is the most dangerous man alive." I assumed that he was referring to a professor of philosophy or religion given the context of our discussion. This view, it seems to me, is not uncommon, and Rorty has his critics, to be sure, especially within Christian circles. However, a careful reading of *Philosophy and Social Hope* reveals that while Rorty does have serious criticisms of much of traditional Christianity, there is—or at least should be—a great deal of agreement from the church regarding many of Rorty's views.

Thus, in this essay, I attempt to demonstrate what I see as some of the ways that Rorty gets it right, while acknowledging also those critical points at which Rorty gets it wrong. This project is not intended to be exhaustive. Indeed, it is intentionally narrow. I focus here exclusively on *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Furthermore, I point out a disproportionately small number of contrasts between what I take to be a faithful Christian position and what I take to be Rorty's position. Having said that, the reader is likely to find points at which he or she will question the faithfulness of the position I present, and I recognize that in certain respects some of the views I present will not find a comfortable home among many Christians. This is largely because Rorty is right! More precisely, this discomfort is due to the degree to which much of the church has bought into the post-Kantian, modern project and linked that project to the gospel in such a way that Chris-

tian faith has become, at least for many, simply another way of being truly modern in one's thinking.

Richard Who? And Why Is He So Bad?

Richard Rorty was born in New York on October 4, 1931. His early formative influences were primarily his parents, who were at one time active members of the American Communist Party but who broke from the party in 1932. Rorty cites the two most influential books in his early life as *The Case of Leon Trotsky* and *Not Guilty*,[1] yet he also admits that he was deeply influenced by the pragmatism of John Dewey.[2] He became convinced by his parents' political activities that the purpose of being human was to work against social injustice.[3]

He entered the Hutchins College at the University of Chicago at the age of 15, and coming under the influence of Aristotelians and then Platonists, both of whom were in stark contrast to the pragmatism of his parents, he essentially willed himself to be a Platonist.[4] Thus, he committed himself to what Dewey had called "the quest for certainty."[5] In remaining faithful to this quest, he also immersed himself in the analytical philosophical tradition popular in so much of the North American academy of the time. Rorty completed his B.A. and M.A. in philosophy at Chicago, after which he entered the Ph.D. program at Yale and earned his degree in 1956.

He then began an academic teaching career that took him to Wellesley, Princeton, the University of Virginia, and finally Stanford, where he currently serves as Professor of Comparative Literature. It was at Princeton that Rorty became disillusioned by the quest for certainty, rediscovering the philosophy of Dewey (and by extension, Heidegger and Wittgenstein) and other pragmatists such as W. V. O. Quine. This rediscovery was accompanied by Rorty's initial exposure to the work of Jacques Derrida and deconstructionism.

Over the course of his career, Rorty has become increasingly skeptical of the ability of academic philosophy to deliver on its promises—hence his current appointment, which is not in a Philosophy Department, but in a Department of Comparative Literature. He is suspicious of the attempt to solve the so-called perennial problems of philosophy. Rather, Rorty rejects the traditional conceptions of truth, the notion that things can have an essence or nature, and the notion that any talk about 'minds' will ultimately fall by the wayside as science is able to explain such phenomena in naturalistic terms. In place of the traditional conceptions of truth, Rorty insists that 'truth' simply refers to a statement's utility. There is no objective nor absolute truth. Instead, truth is always subjective and relative, at least within certain limits.[6] We can, therefore, describe Rorty as, among other things, a

subjectivist, relativist, pragmatist, atheist, and naturalist. Thus, many find substantial areas of disagreement with Rorty.

So Why Should We Even Bother With Rorty?

For Baptists, Rorty's attack on modernity may be especially troubling given the manner in which many Baptists have interpreted the so-called Baptist distinctives in essentially modern terms, and we might wonder what Rorty could possibly offer us. The focus, for example, on freedom and autonomy to the (near) exclusion of community strikes me as standing at the very heart of most Baptists'—at least most 'moderate' Baptists'—self-identity, yet our understanding of these principles, developed in a post-Kantian, post-Enlightenment intellectual culture, strikes me as being derived more from the modern project than the Christian tradition.[7] (Ironically—and this is one point on which I strongly disagree with Rorty—this provides the foundation for viewing religion as a purely internal, purely private matter, and this is precisely the manner in which Rorty would wish to perpetuate religion, as we will see below.)

Before I go further, I must point out what I see as a source of irony in Rorty's work, namely that he claims that he is not attempting to undermine the modern project. He sees his work as faithful to that project[8] (and this, in my analysis, is the reason that he continues to see the only valid expression of religion as purely internal and private), yet in the same way that Kuhn's work strikes at the very foundation of the modern project, Rorty also strikes at the heart of this same. Saying that Rorty is for the modern project is like saying that Kuhn is for modern science. It is right, but only in a limited respect. Kuhn is no more 'for' modern science than he is 'for' Aristotelian physics. Rather, he approves a quest for knowledge that has involved various conceptions of science and now requires a radical reconceptualization of science through an ongoing process of paradigm shifts. In the same way, Rorty may be 'for' the modern project, but only in the sense that he is in favor of the social and political outgrowth of the modern project. He is certainly not proposing a continuation of the quest for some form of autonomous, universal reason that can lead us to some objective truth.[9]

Thus, Rorty is for modernity only in the sense that he is for democracy—the political result of the modern project—and the modern conception of progress. The pragmatist, after all, relies on the (eventual) inevitability of progress. We may take steps backwards, regressing into activities that are less beneficial or practicing skills in less efficient ways, but eventually we will again take on more efficient, more

beneficial practices and beliefs.[10] This inheritance, the inevitability of progress and the supremacy of democracy, are the ways in which Rorty is for modernity.

At the same time, he stands against modernity, and he does so for reasons that Christians can and should appreciate. Rorty argues against the sort of universal reason commended to us by the Kantian project. Rorty thinks that such a view of reason is merely an attempt to replace the God of the middle ages with the reason of the Enlightenment.[11] That an atheist sees so clearly what so many Christians do not is especially striking. Rorty is precisely right. The view of reason developed in modernity makes reason a substitute for God. Thus, whereas for the Medievals, God was the ultimate source of morality, in the modern period, reason became the source of morality. The ethical theories that arose from this view of reason were still held to be universal, because reason itself was universal, and so long as it was applied equally well, it was thought autonomous agents could come to the same conclusions. In the end, however, God began to play a smaller and smaller role, and reason became more and more prominent. Thus, Rorty is able to write that "such attempts were disingenuous attempts to keep something like God alive in the midst of secular culture."[12]

Christians should utter a solemn "amen" at this point, convinced that indeed the Enlightenment view of reason is an attempt to replace God and that such a view of an autonomous, universal reason is a rejection of the biblical tradition with respect to human beings. Humans are more than just reason. We should reject Descartes's 'I' as simply a thinking thing just like we should reject materialism. Both do equal damage to the biblical conception of humanity by denying the integration of the person, by allowing the person to be dissected and some parts labeled 'essential' and others discarded as incidental.[13]

As Christians, we can–and should–insist that we have radically different reasons to behave in what we consider a morally upright manner.

This is important because acceptance of this point frees us from the imperative imposed on us by the modern project that would require us to couch our moral claims in universal terms, terms that anyone could accept. As Christians, we can—and should—insist that we have radically different reasons to behave in what we consider a

morally upright manner. Those who begin with different presuppositions may agree with us about some of our conclusions, but they will have different reasons for doing so. Thus, we should accept that our communities of faith will impose unique moral standards upon us, standards upon which other rational moral agents may not agree.

We believe that the most important kinds of truth are accessible–however strange the claim may sound to the modern world–only through the story of Jesus.

This is doubly important for those, such as Baptists, who are members of dissenting traditions; for if we remain committed to the modern view and if we believe that any rational person could reach the same conclusions that we have reached, we must somehow claim that the majority of people are irrational. Were it not so, they would agree with us. Thus, by accepting Rorty's point, we free ourselves from the obligation to enter certain kinds of debates, debates that rely solely on reason, for we believe that the most important kinds of truth are accessible—however strange the claim may sound to the modern world—only through the story of Jesus. This particularity is scandalous to the modern world in the same way that the cross was scandalous to the Jews of Paul's day.

In addition to simply rejecting the modern view of reason, Rorty also rejects the correspondence theory of truth.[14] We are prompted, therefore, to consider the epistemology he develops as it relates to the primary issues of concern for us. Most important among these considerations is a view that places a great deal of importance on the role of community. Rorty sees community as necessary to one's epistemic framework in that socialization into a community conveys with it the skills needed for that community's members to acquire and transmit language, artistic and technical skill, and the ability to provide justification within that community.[15] The community of the church plays this same role in Christianity. Within the church, we acquire the language of faith. We also learn that within this community there are different standards for what counts as justification, just as we learn that there are practices transmitted by this community, practices that influence not only our behavior but our other beliefs as well as our character. We acquire the habits of Christians. We are drawn into

the web of Christian beliefs and into the social matrix of the church. These beliefs and practices, in turn, are constantly checking themselves against the other beliefs and practices of the community so that aberrations either remain unexpressed, internal, and private, or the community prunes them away.[16]

In addition, the force that the community exerts on us cannot easily be negated. We cannot simply put down the convictions, beliefs, language, and skills of one community and pick up those of another community. We may be able to criticize the beliefs or practices of our community, but those criticisms are only intelligible to the members of that community if they are framed within the belief structure of that community. We may eventually be placed in a position where we are able to change our allegiance, but our communities are inevitably imprinted upon us. Their stories are still a part of ours, and our stories are still a part of theirs. It is impossible for us to reach a point at which we can stand on some neutral or objective ground.[17] Likewise, we are not able to "step outside language" or "grasp reality unmediated by linguistic description." Rorty writes that "our linguistic practices are so bound up with our other social practices that our descriptions of nature, as well as of ourselves, will always be a function of our social needs."[18] We may join new communities, but even if we do, we do so as members or former members of other communities.

The church is precisely this sort of community. As members of the church, the community of faith, we are socialized—or to use the Aristotelian term, habituated—into the practices, beliefs, and language of the church. We describe the world and ourselves just as the church describes the world and us along with it. This places a great deal more importance on community than many Baptists would choose to place. Indeed, this view requires our socialization in the community in order to make sense of the claims Christianity places upon us. We do not, in following this principle, read and interpret scripture as autonomous agents. We read and interpret scripture as members of a community in light of the community's practices and beliefs, and we make sense of what we read by employing the language and descriptions the community has endorsed. We do not pray in isolation, but using the language the community has taught us and in the manner the community practices. We are never autonomous agents of the Kantian sort any more than we are able to employ reason of the Kantian sort. Rather, we are always bound and, at the same time, empowered by our communities.

This means that we must pay special attention to the language and practices employed within the community of faith, for this language and these practices condition us to behave in certain ways. If, for example, we use violent language or employ practices that condition us

to violent behavior, we will invariably inculcate values associated with violence. If, on the other hand, we use language of peacemaking and employ practices associated with peacemaking, we will inculcate the virtues associated with peacemaking.[19] By the same token, public acts that we perform in worship condition us to behave in certain ways. The issue, then, becomes what sorts of behavior we wish to habituate in ourselves and our congregants. On the one hand, we might habituate people in the practices of contemplative prayer, of meditation, and of forgiveness. On the other hand, we can just as easily habituate people in a different set of practices if our corporate worship, for example, emphasizes passive viewing or divisiveness. The recognition that our language and our corporate practices shape the lives of the participants is crucial to the development of healthy communities of faith.

Moving deeper into Rorty's epistemology, Christians find another virtue they have in common with pragmatists of Rorty's sort—that of hope. For Rorty, hope is demonstrated by the delaying of truth judgments, for judgments about truth, in the pragmatist's view, amount to judgments about usefulness. As such, the actual—as opposed to the anticipated—usefulness of a belief, statement, or practice must be delayed until such a time as a retrospective account can be given. Thus, if there is such a thing as virtue for a pragmatist, that virtue is hope. Rorty writes that one of the beliefs of pragmatism "is a willingness to refer all questions of ultimate justification to the future, to the substance of things hoped for."[20] In Rorty's view, then, hope replaces knowledge.[21]

In the same way, as Christians, we take hope not merely to imply a sort of intellectual humility but an eschatological hope as well, for we recognize, with Saint Paul, that now we see dimly, but we will one day "know as we are known."[22] Knowledge is delayed until the future. Now, we have hope.

This hope exemplifies itself in another way in both Rorty's view and the Christian view. Rorty believes that in making judgments about truth, we are making comparative statements. We are not in a position to say that some act is wrong—as if to make a universal claim about all such acts—but we are in a position to make a claim about this one act and whether it is better or worse than some other acts. Rorty rejects the sort of relativism that Christians must reject. This form of relativism would hold that we have no way to adjudicate between conflicting moral views (and that we should not even try). Rorty, rather, believes that we can make claims about which view is better, or about which act is better in this case, but we cannot make such claims as if to apply equally to everyone for all time.[23]

This strikes me as quite similar to the description N.T. Wright

provides of the moral situation in which Christians find themselves. Wright describes the process of adjudication as being similar to the process we would use if we were to discover a previously unknown yet incomplete Shakespearean play. Wright indicates that we would not feel comfortable having even the most gifted Shakespeare scholar write a conclusion to the play. Rather, the way to go about performing the play would be to assemble the most gifted Shakespearean actors, actors who are familiar with many different plays and characters and who are well versed in Shakespeare's techniques. These actors would then improvise the conclusion of the play. We might be able to say that certain versions were better or worse than others, that certain versions were more or less faithful to Shakespeare's style than others, but we would never be able to say that any one of the possibilities was the right conclusion to the play.[24]

For both the pragmatist and the Christian, then, hope is necessary. In Rorty's case, we hope for progress. We hope for a better future, more efficient techniques, more productive capacity, more beneficial outcomes. In the Christian case, we also hope for improvement, but, this hope takes on an eschatological sense. We hope on the one hand that we are able to become more fully citizens of the kingdom of God, that we are able to more faithfully incarnate the virtues of God's kingdom; and on the other hand, we hope that this kingdom will eventually be fully consummated.

This hope is both eschatological and moral, for we hope not only for the eschatological consummation of the kingdom of God, but we hope for an ongoing, ever more faithful approximation in the immediate future. Thus, we hope that our moral acts tomorrow will be better than the acts of today. Rorty points out that it is possible that our descendents look back on our acts and judge them to be terrible mistakes, yet Rorty agrees with at least one aspect of the Christian ethic, that to love one's neighbor is the goal of ethics.[25] Rorty goes on to claim that there is a difference between what comes naturally to us based on our relationships and what traditional ethics tells us we have

The recognition that our language and our corporate practices shape the lives of the participants is crucial to the development of healthy communities of faith.

a moral obligation to do. He points out, for example, that when we speak of care for our children, 'moral obligation' does not capture what we sense regarding the situation, for caring for our children seems the most natural thing to do (at least for the vast majority of people). This contrasts sharply with our intuitions about people we do not know, for whom we do not sense these natural inclinations. On this point, Rorty agrees with the Christian view that our aim should be to expand what constitutes relationships of concern. Thus, the Christian claim that we are all sisters and brothers is the ultimate expression of the expansion of these relationships, and on this point, Rorty offers unequivocal praise for the Christian view.[26]

Whatever Christianity is good for, it is certainly not a device for predicting or controlling our environment. If the incarnation teaches us anything, it is that God is anything but predictable.

On a related matter, Rorty's view is consistent with at least one strain of the Christian tradition. In discussing the purpose of higher education, Rorty explains that ideally higher education should not focus on the teaching of historical facts, exposing students to the classics of literature, or any other like business. In the perfect world, these tasks would have already been completed in high school. In the real world, these important tasks have not been completed (indeed, often have not even begun) in high school, and colleges must pick up the slack. In Rorty's perfect world, then, the purpose of colleges and universities is a combination of "specialized vocational training and provocation to self-creation."[27] It is this latter point on which I want to focus the following comment, for Rorty sees this self-creation as a kind of personal moral formation. Professors who accomplish this sort of provocation will "make vivid and concrete the failure of the country of which we remain loyal citizens to live up to its own ideals—the failure of America to be what it knows it ought to become."[28]

This is precisely the same type of moral provocation in which the church is routinely engaged. To be sure, there is ample evidence within the Christian tradition that demonstrates the necessity of transformation, but within that tradition, the need for this transformation is

not couched in terms of becoming what we are not. Rather, these exhortations are often couched in terms that suggest we are to become what we already are. Saint Paul, for example, often phrases moral exhortations in the form "be/do X, for you are (already) Y." The Pauline exhortations are often structured in precisely the same way that Rorty's social provocations should be structured. From the Pauline corpus, stretching back to the prophets and forward to the catechetical instruction of the early church, the teaching of the church fathers and mothers, and on to the sermons of our own time,[29] this proclamation emphasizing the ideal toward which we are to strive and our comparative current situation has often been the substance of Christian (and even earlier, Jewish) proclamation. Thus, Rorty's account of education is quite similar to the Christian practice of moral (or even spiritual) formation—whether we call it 'catechism,' 'discipleship,' or by any other name.

Rorty is right on at least one more count. When writing about religious beliefs, he claims that religious doctrines must be demythologized in order to be intelligible to a pragmatist—and he may be right on this count too, but this is not where I want to focus my attention. One must either discard all doctrines that make claims about the way the world really is or interpret them symbolically.[30] What is fascinating is that all Christians should agree with Rorty about the reason underlying this view. He explains that this is because we recognize "that, whatever theism is good for, it is not a device for predicting or controlling our environment,"[31] and this point underlines the way in which many Christians (and many theists in general) have used religious beliefs merely as a tool, a means of attempting to exert control over their environment. We may not agree with Rorty's analysis of such doctrines, but we should certainly agree with his reason for it. Whatever Christianity is good for, it is certainly not a device for predicting or controlling our environment. (If the incarnation teaches us anything it, is that God is anything but predictable.)

One can easily understand why this is an important criterion for Rorty, for if the measure of a belief is its usefulness and theism is not useful for predicting or controlling our environment, then theistic beliefs should be discarded for more efficient, more beneficial beliefs. This conclusion, however, overlooks a critical point about some beliefs. There are those beliefs which are not beneficial in the sense that they help us predict or control our environment but which we find not only dear to us but almost impossible to escape. Rorty, when discussing the ethics of Christianity and the ideal of expanding relational concern to all people, points out just such a set of beliefs. Beliefs about family and the accompanying concern for family are, much like

theism, not such a set of beliefs. Likewise, the rest of our moral convictions do not allow us to predict or control our environment. Is Rorty, therefore, prepared to give up such beliefs as those, so that "Our moral view is…much better than any competing view?"[32] Surely not, yet this is not a belief that allows us to predict or control our environment. Rather, this is a belief that somehow, by virtue of holding the belief, makes one's life better, for this is a belief by which pragmatic progress is judged. Theistic beliefs fall into the same category. They do not allow us to make predictions about or otherwise control our environment, but they form—at least in part—the communal standards by which we measure the efficiency of other beliefs.

Theistic beliefs do not allow us to make predictions about or otherwise control our environment, but they form–at least in part–the communal standards by which we measure the efficiency of other beliefs.

Rorty states that pragmatists insist that 'truth judgments' are a matter of distinguishing between more and less useful beliefs or actions.[33] When the question "useful for what?" is pressed, they have nothing to say except "useful to create a better future." When they are asked, "Better by what criterion?", they have no detailed answer, any more than the first mammals could specify in what respects they were better than the dying dinosaurs. Pragmatists can only say something as vague as: Better in the sense of containing more of what we consider good and less of what we consider bad.[34]

This statement points out the manner in which theism functions apart from being a tool for predicting or control our environment. Religious beliefs—or at least some religious beliefs—function not as metaphysical claims (or, even the non-pragmatist could admit, not only metaphysical claims) but as the communal assumptions by which our other beliefs and actions are evaluated. These beliefs shape the definition of 'better' and 'useful' and inform our view of what is less useful. When pressed, then, on this account, we would say that belief in the incarnation or the Trinity is the sort of underlying belief that allows Christians to make determinations about our way of life. These

beliefs function much like 'growth' for Dewey (we could just as easily ask what distinguishes growth from change or even decay—we must make some assumptions in order to make such distinctions) or 'variety and freedom' for Whitman.[35]

These beliefs about 'growth' or 'variety and freedom' are not tools for predicting or controlling our environment. Rather, these beliefs are like the forges from which our tools are fashioned and the standards by which our predictions and manipulations are measured. Thus, Rorty is right about what theism does not (indeed, cannot) do—namely, predict or control our environment. Where Rorty goes wrong (and this seems to me to be the fundamental mistake in Rorty's understanding of religious belief) is in what he thinks religious beliefs do. He suggests that religious beliefs are merely tools for predicting or controlling our environment, whereas such religious beliefs are really the kind of beliefs that underlie claims like Rorty's that "Our moral view is…better than any competing view."[36] "Better for what?" is the question. For the Christian, we agree that our religious beliefs do not allow us to predict or control our environment, but our religious beliefs do, just like Rorty's assumptions about political and moral progress, shape the way we evaluate the predictions and manipulations of our environment. They shape what we think counts as moral progress. This is why, when Rorty claims that the purpose of ethics is ever widening sympathy, we can say that he is right. We are making similar assumptions—at least, we are making similar assumptions about what constitutes 'better' with respect to our relationships with other people.[37]

In the final analysis, Rorty offers a valuable service, one that Christians—and Baptists in particular—should consider carefully. Are there points at which we will disagree with Rorty? To be sure, for we must disagree with his analysis that religion should be merely private and internal. In the same way, we will disagree with his conclusions regarding the appropriateness of theistic belief in general. However, Rorty convincingly demonstrates the failure of the modern project and points us toward ways in which we as faithful Christians can respond, and he demonstrates equally as convincingly why we should (for modern reason is but a substitute for God). At the same time, he provides a model for the role of community in terms of epistemological and ethical considerations. He also offers a reasonable account for the role of hope in epistemology as well as ethics, a role for hope that we as Christians should seek to restore—on ethical as well as epistemological grounds. Rorty may be wrong—we certainly think he is on certain issues—but he still gets it right.

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Notes

1. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 5.
2. Ibid., 8.
3. Ibid., 6.
4. Ibid., 9.
5. Ibid., 10.
6. Rorty insists, for example, that ethical views of liberal humanitarianism is superior to all others, but this can only be proven comparatively by placing this theory alongside others and viewing the results of each. See Rorty, 15.
7. By referring to 'the modern project,' I have in mind the attempt to ground all knowledge in what is thought to be an indubitable truth claim. Examples of this in the early modern period include Descartes's rationalism, Locke's empiricism, and later Kant's attempt to synthesize the two. These epistemologies remove ultimate justification from the individual but also from the divine, placing it instead in the natural world.
8. Rorty, 168.
9. Rorty is a faithful student of Dewey on this point, agreeing with Dewey's criticisms of the 'quest for certainty.' On a somewhat tangential note, it is unclear how one can go about pursuing the modern political and economic project apart from the modern epistemological project or why we should accept Rorty's pronouncements about the privatization of religion on the grounds of his epistemology.
10. Or, at least, we will redefine 'beneficial' and 'efficient' in such a way as to justify our practices.
11. Rorty, xxix.
12. Ibid.
13. To be sure, Rorty thinks that there is something to materialism, but to his credit—and the credit of pragmatists in general—such metaphysical claims ultimately rest on their usefulness more than they rest on any correspondence to reality. Therefore, while we might have other reasons to think that Rorty is wrong on the related issue of materialism, on the matter of the modern view of reason, we must agree.

14. The correspondence theory of truth holds that a claim is true so long as it corresponds to some fact in the world. Thus, "there are tigers in India" is true if and only if there are such things as tigers and such a place as India and some tigers can be found in India. The facts correspond to the statement.
15. Ibid., 37.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 15.
18. Ibid., 48.
19. See, e.g., J. Denny Weaver's argument along this line in J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium* (Telford, Penn.: Pandora, 2000), 124-27. Weaver argues that theological conceptions implicit in the early creeds—creeds articulated under influence of and in varying degrees sanctioned by the state—make room for the practice of violence by Christians and for the separation of theology from ethics.
20. Ibid., 27.
21. Here, 'knowledge' refers to the classical definition that knowledge is justified true belief. See, e.g., Rorty, 34.
22. 1 Cor 13.12.
23. Rorty, 15.
24. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 140.
25. Rorty, 79-80.
26. Ibid., 78-9. Elsewhere, Rorty states that "Moral progress is a matter of wider and wider sympathy" (82).
27. Ibid., 123.
28. Ibid.
29. Those prophetic sermons often associated with particularly difficult social movements strike me as especially worthy of note in this respect. For example, this is precisely what King is doing in his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech.
30. He specifically mentions "personal immortality, providential intervention, the efficacy of sacraments, the Virgin Birth, the Risen Christ, the Covenant with Abraham, the authority of the Koran, and a lot of other things which many theists are loath to do without." Rorty, 156.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 15.
33. Ibid., 27.
34. Ibid., 27-8.
35. These are both examples that Rorty uses. See Rorty, 28.
36. Ibid., 15.
37. Rorty is also right on another count, at least partially. Often, certain theistic beliefs are foundational to our other political or moral beliefs (and consequently, our actions) in that they motivate these other beliefs and actions, yet there may not be a reason that these motivating beliefs must necessarily enter into

our public discourse in order to make that public discourse intelligible. At the same time, I have serious problems with the view of religion that Rorty offers to accompany this discussion about motivating beliefs because he seeks to limit religious beliefs to purely private, purely internal beliefs (beliefs exhibit no external consequences). For Rorty's discussion, see Rorty, 168-74.

"Ecclesiology and Eschatological Hope" . . . **So What?**

Questions for Consideration:

1. What are some ecclesial practices that could restore hope within the church?
2. Do you agree with Martin's claim that Christians should read Scripture as members of a community of faith?
3. How, and to what extent, does your church accept or reject the claims of the modern project?
4. In light of this article, do you see the role of religious beliefs within your congregations as predicting and controlling the environment or shaping evaluations of the environment?
5. To what language and behavior does your church habituate its congregants?

Prepared by Derek Hatch and Kathryn Seay

Pastor Katie

A Reflection on Mentoring in Hamilton, Texas

KATIE MCKOWN

Imagine Mayberry. Throw in a couple of gas stations, sale barns, a courthouse, and a Sonic Drive-In© and you can picture Hamilton, Texas. It is one of the few remaining places where everybody knows your name.

I met the mayor, the Methodist minister, and the belly dancing instructor within a week or so. It is the kind of place where young men still carry your groceries to the car at David's Supermarket. This was my home for the summer.

Now imagine a young Baptist female bursting into Hamilton to learn how to be a pastor. You can hear the proverbial arm of the record player scratch as a hush falls over the courthouse square (yes, there is one in Hamilton). I was worried, to say the least, about venturing to small town America to complete my semester of mentoring required by George W. Truett Theological Seminary. But at the end of the summer my worries were mostly unfounded and I fell in love with First Baptist Church and all things Hamilton, Texas.

Now this love was like most—not all moments were dripping with syrupy goodness. There were times when my feelings were bruised in the deepest shades of purple, and times when I was utterly disappointed in myself and with others. However, this experience birthed in me not only a more "real" nine-to-five appreciation of ministry, but a deeper understanding of God's vocational calling on my life. I learned how to lean into my calling with a little more trust, which is exciting but terrifying at the same time.

By far the most stretching event of the summer was preaching Sunday morning. My excellent pastoral mentor, Keith Felton, informed me I would be the first woman since the founding of First Baptist Hamilton to preach from the pulpit—133 years to be exact. No pressure, right? As Keith continued to speak, my mind raced with

pictures of Lottie Moon, my sisters at seminary, young Baptist girls, and even unborn babies resting upon my shoulders. I tend to overanalyze a bit, but these images continued to return to mind throughout the day. When I thought rationally, preaching one sermon on one particular Sunday morning didn't make me special or even Joan of Arc, but I certainly felt a weight of responsibility upon me. And apart from my gender identity, this would be my first time as a human being to preach in a church.

Toiling an entire day over a scripture passage from which to preach was not scheduled in my allotted preparation time, but alas, it happened. With nervousness and the women of the world on my shoulders, it seemed that I could find no narrative powerful enough or biblical character with whom I connected. I felt like I was going crazy—God had called me to this place and yet I was coming up with nothing. Throwing up my hands in frustration, I put my head down in defeat. I almost decided I was not cut out for the job.

It is funny what happens when we realize we cannot do ministry alone. After I sat completely still for a couple of moments, Lottie stopped tapping me on the shoulder, the women of the world left my study, and I finally opened my ears to God's voice. When reading the text with a fresh perspective and God's guidance, a passage jumped out to me. I feverishly began to "brood over the text," research, and write my sermon. It literally poured out of me.

Sunday came whether I liked it or not. I was nervous, but felt a strange peace cover me as I woke up that morning. Just before my friends from seminary arrived at the church, Keith prayed, thanking God for calling God's daughters to preach. His eloquent prayer asked God to help more of God's daughters to respond to God's calling. Though I was the preacher that morning, in that moment Keith was more than a pastor to me—his prayer covered me during that nerve-wracking Sunday service like a comfortable blanket on a cold December day.

And surprise of all surprises—the sermon went better than I expected. Certainly I am no Julie Pennington-Russell, Fred Craddock, or Barbara Brown Taylor, but I felt at peace with my words, myself, and God. It feels trite to say, but I had a really great time preaching. I had poured hours of study and passion into what I said. The sermon felt real—it felt like me. Though my upper lip was sweating like nobody's business, preaching felt "right" to me. It felt like trying on a glove I never knew I had...and, to my surprise, the glove fit really well.

I could use a multitude of adjectives to describe my summer. It was affirming, wonderful, scary, freeing, and difficult all at the same time. I was pressed and challenged, convicted and changed. As I con-

cluded my time at First Baptist Hamilton, the pastoral nudges I felt from God at the beginning of the summer resurfaced as polite shoves.

God's calling on each of our lives is a scary and wonderful thing, which requires a great deal of faith. When push comes to shove, I have trouble trusting what I cannot see and having faith in the outcome. I like having control and knowing what's going on. I want to have things my way and of my choosing—the unknown is not my friend. And though my spiritual rhetoric may champion the unknown, if I am honest with myself, it scares me. Having the opportunity at First Baptist Hamilton to be comfortable in my calling has pushed me to embrace the beauty of faith and trust in the unknown ahead of me.

The pastoral nudges I felt from God at the beginning of the summer resurfaced as polite shoves.

Near the end of the summer, I stumbled upon a prayer by Ted Loder, which served as a beautiful benediction of my mentoring experience at First Baptist Hamilton:

In this moment
Draw me to yourself, Lord,
And make me aware
Not so much of what I've given
As of all I have received
And so have yet to share.
Send me forth
In power and gladness
And with great courage
To live out in the world
What I pray and profess,
That, in sharing
I may do justice,
Make peace,
Grow in love,
Enjoy myself,
Other people,
And your world now,
And you forever. Amen.

I am thankful for the God-given opportunity to serve alongside the people of First Baptist Hamilton. My life was touched, my heart softened, and my mind opened wider because of these saints in central Texas. I thank God for using this experience to challenge and grow me, and pray that the memories of what I learned will continue to help mold me into the minister God has called me to be.

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Into the Silent Canyon

A Reflection on a Week at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert

VERNON BOWEN

From St. Benedict's Rule:

All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, who said, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt. 25:35). Proper honor must be shown "to all, especially those who share our faith" (Gal. 6:10) and to pilgrims.[1]

You would not suspect it by the road in: this treacherous, winding mountain road that seems to bushwhack its way deeper into the New Mexico National Forest than the forest would like it to go. Because of the nervous lurch of your vehicle upon the rugged path and the extreme seclusion of the place, hospitality is a virtue you do not expect will embrace you when the winding dirt road coughs you out at its end. But the first word of the welcome sign stands receptively before every traveler that enters: PEACE. The Monastery of Christ in the Desert. This small Benedictine community greets you with silence, solemnity, and a peaceful fullness. These grand mountains, the drifting river, and a magnificent expanse of sky joyfully welcome you.

The Mountains – The Silence

In my lifetime I have seen mountains, but then I have also *experienced* mountains. Skiing the Rockies of Colorado, driving the Kancamagus Highway through New Hampshire's grand wilderness, passing on a ferry between the British Columbian shoreline crags spotted with conifer—these sights were incredible to behold. However, as I and my fellow students in Truett's Wilderness Spirituality class settled ourselves within the Chama River canyon in New Mexico, an

immediate feeling took hold within me that these mountains enveloping the tiny monastery were more than just a grand sight to see. Most impressive about them was not their intimidating size or the manner in which the daily arch of the sun progressively illumined them and then drew away all light. The most impressive thing about them was nothing that makes a mountain a mountain, as far as the rest of the world would be concerned. What struck me with awe was the sheer silence of these glorious, surrounding shapes, the fact that they never moved, never spoke—at least not audibly—and always seemed to have their complete being cast upward to the heavens. Everything—every play of light, bend of the river, or gust of wind—was subject to the stillness of these mountains.

I describe this personification of "silent" mountains for one purpose, to more fully understand the importance of silence as I experienced it while worshipping and working at the monastery. Silence pervaded each aspect of every day, plaguing me at first because I was not used to it, but embracing me like a friend toward the end of my time there. One of the first questions I asked—ever the seminary student in study of the universal church—was, "Why have so many evangelical traditions turned their backs on silence as an element, even a standard, of worship?" I have remained silent in my apartment before, as well as in my car, at school, and even at church. But I have never experienced a silence like the silence in which I was washed at the monastery. Silence before this trip was merely the absence of sound, of me making noise. The silence within the Chama River canyon, however, was not simply an absence of sound. This was a silence that was alive. Behind the fullness of quiet, I could sense a presence as real as the mountains towering before me. I was not in a place that seemed to have something removed from it, but rather something added: the blessing of quiet worship.

Of quiet worship Frederick Buechner writes, "Silence is a given, quiet a gift. Silence is the absence of sound and quiet the stilling of sound. Silence can't be anything but silent. Quiet chooses to be silent. It holds its breath to listen. It waits and is still."[2] The canyon was made silent by its Creator, and both monks and mountains were quiet in the midst of this creation. By the end of the week, I had come to the conclusion that there could be no better way to express my reverence for both the nature in which I was surrounded and the worship in which I had come to cherish participation. Scripture ignited in my mind little bursts of recollection here and there as I remembered verses and stories: "Be still and know that I am God," reads Psalm 46:10; "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and confidence is your strength," declares Isaiah 30:15; and when Elijah hid in the moun-

tain, Yahweh's presence came not in a resounding crash or blaze, but only in "a sound of sheer silence."[3]

The wilderness tradition of the church finds deep significance in the recognition and practice of silence. Though at first I felt hindered during prayer when there was no noise whatsoever, as time moved on I began to sense the open freedom existing within silent worship. I could not mistake the presence of Christ, for there was no noise to serve as an obstacle between him and me. I realized it is awkward to step out of our loud lives into quiet worship, but once we allow the silence to settle into our souls, the peace and tranquility found within it is the stuff of matchless wonder. Our normal activities, especially within our churches today, are tragically rushed and often loud for the sake of attention-grabbing. We kick the beat of praise choruses with vociferous drumset beats; we attempt to double and triple-strum our guitars to make our worship songs more lavish, if only to keep worship energetic and engaging. We think we are adding to our worship, intensifying it, when in reality we are only subtracting from it, dulling our senses. If we would only seek to do the opposite, to be silent before our holy God, I believe we would recognize more of what he is tellings us. What would it be like to enter into your church's sanctuary on Sunday morning and, instead of being greeted by a talkative, jovial usher and the chattering of a hundred different congregants about a hundred different things, your eyes beheld a sanctuary full of worshippers sitting or kneeling in silence, quietly preparing their hearts, minds, and souls for communion with a holy God? The announcement screens are off, the piano is momentarily covered, the drumsticks are down, the microphones are not even turned on yet. You find that the body of believers has determined to begin its collective worship time by listening instead of broadcasting. To enter such a stilled, contemplative atmosphere would engage your devotion in a way you might have never before experienced.

I could not mistake the presence of Christ, for there was no noise to serve as an obstacle between him and me.

The only thing the mountains broadcasted in their magnificent silence was the glory of God. My senses became alive to that marvelous reality. Perhaps that is why St. Benedict wrote in his Rule, "Monas-

tics should cultivate silence at all times."[4] To be slow to move, slow to speak, with our selves cast toward heaven and our eyes open to view all that God has laid before us—this is the essence of quiet worship. If we choose to do this, we shall see and experience extraordinary things. I practiced quiet worship one evening after Compline, the final prayer of the day. Sitting out on the guesthouse porch, my journal and pen in hand, I witnessed silence at play before me. This is what I wrote in that moment:

> I look up from my journal and ... I see the slightest of red hues resting upon the valley, as if a small red star has leapt up in the south. It is the sunset behind these mountains, igniting the sky with soft fire, pink, orange, and colors still that I have no name for, do not want one. The sandstone cliffs drink of this brief red hue as if at table with a brother, and even in their red roughness they are glowing. There is glorious flame upon the western ridges, burning cirrus clouds, and they open their arms and barrel out their chests to God and canyon.

The River – The Solemnity

The Chama River is not the grandest of flows, nor the quickest, the longest, or the oldest. As merely a visitor to this canyon, I recognized this as I took an hour one afternoon and walked along the bank and down the road that wound along the river below the cliffs and the outcroppings. It is brown, but with light, as if God has placed a kind of illuming glow beneath the soft choppiness of the rapids. It cannot be boasted against most other rivers, save perhaps in its beauty. It was clear to me, however, that the Chama adorned the canyon in both appearance and sound as it meandered through and around the mountains, hills, rocks, and trees. The river is a humble one, alone, and beautiful. The monks described to me how it freezes in the winter and surges during the thaw, as it had been doing for about a month or so before my class and I arrived. It flows with determination, not too fast, not slow. It heads with purpose southeast to a greater source, the Rio Grande, and to a final destination of completion, the Gulf of Mexico. It flows into them; the Chama is not selfish—it takes no compliments for itself.

> Sisters and Brothers, divine Scripture calls to us saying: "Whoever exalt themselves shall be humbled, and whoever humble themselves shall be exalted" (Luke 14:11; 18:14). In saying this, therefore, it shows us that every exaltation is a kind of pride, which the prophet indicates has been shunned,

> saying: "O God, my heart is not exalted; my eyes are not lifted up and I have not walked in the ways of the great nor gone after marvels beyond me" (Ps 13:1).[5]

There is solemnity in humility. There is humility in solemnity. In not being quick to assert ourselves (by way of thought, word or deed) before God, we by our lives are testifying that his thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways. Such is the jewel of worship—the very heart of it—that few find, and even fewer understand its great worth. There is a pace to solemn worship, and I am referring to *worship* not just as the activities we participate in during "service times" but also as our all-encompassing lifestyle. The pace is slow; awareness is crucial. This was another discipline I began to wrap my mind around while worshipping with the monks of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert.

A picture of solemnity: at every hour of prayer, the monks would enter, robed in whatever specific garb was considered appropriate to the hour, in no rush to begin nor with any desire to pass the moments leading up to prayer by chatting with their fellow monastics or the guests. Silence settled upon the chapel like a falling veil. What was utmost in importance during these moments was the condition of the heart and the manner in which each person prepared him- or herself to come before Almighty God. The monks would pad in softly, kneel obediently to the Tabernacle (wherein is kept the sacrament), and then bow humbly to the altar as they made their way to their chairs. Likewise, as we, the guests, entered, we bowed respectfully to the altar and took our seats. Once seated, I sensed an almost involuntary draw within myself toward clarity. This allowed a melting away of the thoughts and concerns that normally join together in an all-day jitterbug inside my head. It was as if the solemnity in the chapel summoned my mind to take its own deep, calming breaths, preparing my whole being for worship. With the deliberate act of calming myself before God, comprehending the psalms, hymns, and prayers being chanted in worship to God was never a problem. Distraction was not a factor.

There is solemnity in humility. There is humility in solemnity.

I understand something now at a level slightly closer to certainty than I did before visiting the canyon. That is that the will of God cannot be discerned—at least not *properly* discerned—if we are existing

in the grip of our human concerns, our emotional cravings. That is not to say that such concerns are not essential to life, for a man or woman without concerns or emotion is not fully alive—how could he or she be? However, the *domination* that our human concerns wield over us is what must be laid aside if we are to choose the path that aligns with the will of our Master. Once removed from our mental sight, the road to walk becomes easier to see because the voice of our Guide is easier to hear.

The musician and writer, Rich Mullins, has described both the struggle and freedom in letting go of our human concerns:

> It is easy in the frantic, task-driven "day to day" for us to lose our "centers"—our souls—our sense of who we are and what is really important. We are haunted by the ghosts of the "what ifs" who live in the shadows of the "if onlys." They accuse us, torment us, tempt us to abandon the freedom we have in Christ. But, if we still ourselves, if we let Him calm us, focus us, equip us for the day, He will remind us of our Father's prodigal generosity and about the pitiful weakness of greedy men. He will remind us (as He reminded the devil) that "Man does not live by bread alone," though He may call us (as he called His first disciples) to give bread to the hungry (presumably because man cannot live long without bread). He will remind us about the cares that burden common people, the illusions that blind those the world calls "lucky," and the crippling effects of worry. Then He will give us hope—hope that stretches us (where worry bent us) and faith—faith that sustains us (where greed smothered us) and love—love that is at the bottom of our deepest desires, the loss of which is at the root of all our fears.[6]

The presence of Christ is a wondrous thing, but those who will truly marvel at it will be the ones who have exerted the faith and trust to lay aside everything from the grocery list to the dying relative in exchange for experiencing the call of Christ. It is a call that comes often, like the tender reminder from a friend much wiser than you.

You find yourself, having spent the preliminary moments before the service in quiet contemplation, now relishing the calmness of this Sunday morning worship service. The volume and surging of the praise choruses or the dramatic choral arrangement are not devoid of meaning in the worship experience. On this particular morning, however, what seems to stay with you and resonate deep within is the peace

upon your soul. This morning the service, in all its music and spectacle, is not merely therapeutic as you normally find it. It has not simply relaxed you so that you can hopefully get a better mental handle on the dozens of concerns raging inside your forward-thinking mind, which is the measure by which you normally judge the quality of the Sunday morning service. Instead, the peace you experience filling you from the inside out has caused all your usual concerns to melt away, so that, in these moments, you cannot remember any details of the coming week's schedule. All you know is that there is clarity to worship like you've never known. It is as if you have been lifted beyond yourself into something much greater

The will of God cannot be discerned–at least not properly discerned–if we are existing in the grip of our human concerns, our emotional cravings.

The Chama is the picture of solemnity. It never ceases to flow—it never slows. It adjusts with the seasons. It does not assert itself over the wonder of the canyon in which it is set. It does not second-guess its destination. It goes about its life with minimal sound of its own. It gives a soft trickle and laugh as it sweeps softly through the reeds and tumbles over the stones. And above all, it keeps determinedly seeking the Rio Grande, which will lead it gently home to that grand ocean.

The Sky – The Fullness

The most striking of sights while in the canyon was nothing in the canyon, but that which was above it.

I find it highly plausible that Yahweh, when calling Abraham, was waiting to pull out his most fantastic metaphor until Abraham was well away from anything even remotely resembling civilization. And so, drawing him into the deep, dark wilderness of Canaan, the Creator spoke to Abraham and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be."[7] It was a phenomenal promise, requiring phenomenal faith to even begin to believe. But spurred on with hope, how could Abraham's jaw not have dropped in bewildered expectation as he gazed up into that phenomenal sky?

Never have I seen a sky more full with stars than I did in the can-

yon, but then again, never have I been so far from twenty-first century civilization, rescued from our fluorescent, gaudily electric world. The wonder of it all is not that, as one grows up, the constellations he or she comes to know are still recognizable. It is that the images do not appear as we normally see them, resting starkly against nothingness (as they look when corrupted by made-made illumination far below). On the contrary, they are flung against a background of smaller stars whose light has not reached earth in as piercing a brightness as the others. The Big Dipper stands out like a kingly alignment in the midst of a million pinpricks of light. And yet the irony is that they have always been there, this sea of stars, but we in the Western culture have unintentionally blocked them out. And it has been this way for so long that we have forgotten they are even there; we have forgotten the privilege of their light traveling across eons of cosmic distance to blink down upon our tiny world. The sky is so full, yet we rarely, if ever, appreciate it in its fullness.

On the wall of the monastery chapel is fixed an exquisitely carved crucifix with a bleeding Christ hanging reservedly and compassionately on a simple wooden cross. As the daylight travels over the canyon, it casts rays through the tall ceiling windows, and as the sun begins its retreat behind the western mountains, the last thing to be bathed in light is the crucifix. It is a dying, evening light, and there is the unmistakable reminder that, years ago on Calvary, the light did seemingly go out, both for the teacher from Nazareth and his devoted followers. But there would be light again, much grander than before.

I have grown up in a cultural faith that places emphasis on our Savior and pays little attention to the other members of the Trinity–the Father and the Spirit.

The monastery experience taught me about finding fullness, but it was certainly not the easiest of lessons. I have grown up in a cultural faith that places emphasis on our Savior and pays little attention to the other members of the Trinity—the Father and the Spirit. I believe God does indeed manifest in three distinct persons, but rarely in my church tradition will anyone hear a prayer addressed to the Holy Spirit or a discussion of relationship to the Father God without specific mention of the Son, the Savior. We are

a Christ-centered people in evangelical America, and that is good. But I suspect that many people in the church fear the more mysterious side of our glorious God, the forms not expressed in what we can understand, that is, humanity. After all, we can fathom Jesus Christ: he was born, he grew up, he worked, he sweated, he laughed, he cried, he suffered in pain, he died. These are concepts with which we are familiar—images that can be portrayed on film or easily described in books. But when it comes to the ways of the Holy Spirit of God, or the distinct characteristics of "our Father who art in heaven," such familiarity is not present, and any assurance seems shrouded in mystery. So we build our faith to solely recognize Christ. We address our prayers to the Savior, we preach only the biblical books referring to his gospel, and we encapsulate our 'God-talk' in him ("Jesus showed me such and such this morning; Jesus is so good to me.").

In the silence, the solemnity, and the recognition of the Creator's fullness, it seems as if the cosmos has bent near, and beyond it, stooping closer as well, a holy God gracefully condescends to his beloved.

Frederick Buechner writes, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery. Thus the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God."[8]

Worshipping in fullness is worshipping with an understanding that while Jesus Christ is the pinnacle of our relationship with God, he is also to be understood as part of a God who will, almost always on cue, surprise us with just how much greater than our imaginations he truly is. If we try to strip the Triune God down to our inferior understandings, we rob ourselves of real worship. Rich Mullins wrote, "He came from that beyond that no human mind has visited. When we try to squeeze Him into our systems of thought, He vanishes—He slips through our grasp and then reappears and (in so many words) says, 'No man takes My life from Me. No man forces his will on Me. I am not yours to handle and cheapen. You are Mine to love and make holy.'"[9] Just like humbling ourselves brings clarity to worship, focus-

ing on God's fullness (which is also the "fullness of Christ") reveals to us a proper subject upon which to cast our cares and offer up our prayers—a subject that will continually enrapture us with awe.

The service you have participated in is closing, and the benediction is prayed with the utmost of solemnity by a congregant who seems to choose her words with the greatest of care. It is not spoken quickly and half-heartedly by someone whom you always suspect is really more consumed with anticipation over the Cowboys game that afternoon rather than voicing a genuine prayer to God. But this gentle congregant concludes her prayer with a sentence you have not heard outside of the Catholic church your grandmother attends back home: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." In this simple, closing statement you realize *that* has been the very sentiment of your whole worship that morning. In the depths of your heart, you begin to understand, through the contemplative patience and the consuming peace, that you have indeed communed with the fullness of the Trinity; you have adored the loving nature of the Father, attributed glory to his Son, and given heed to the movement of the Spirit within your soul. You wonder at this new direction in your worship. You begin to suspect that, in the minimizing of the production aspect of the worship service, as well as the refocusing of its purpose (bouncing off of mere congregant concerns and into the infinite glory of the Creator), you have, for perhaps the first time, experienced the fullness of God.

When I step outside of my apartment and look up through the hazy city sky of Waco, gazing at the constellations I have known for so long, I am also viewing so much more. The Big Dipper is only those stars which are closest to me, but it rests upon a greater collection of celestial lights that, if all electricity in Waco suddenly went out, I would be stricken by in an instant. And the Big Dipper, still marvelous in itself, would be wrapped up in a magnificent collection of stars more powerful and more splendid than I have ever known in my creatural intellect. And they have always been there. They were present in the canyon, and they are present now. It just takes more than mere human eyes to see them.

> From St. Benedict's Rule:
>
> Whenever we want to ask a favor of someone powerful, we do it humbly and respectfully, for fear of presumption. How much more important, then, to lay our petitions before the God of all with the utmost humility and sincere devotion. We must know that God regards our purity of heart and tears of compunction, not our many words.[10]

Standing in the canyon, immersed in the Benedictine way of life, time does indeed slow down, and so does one's worship. In the silence, the solemnity, and the recognition of the Creator's fullness, it seems as if the cosmos has bent near, and beyond it, stooping closer as well, a holy God gracefully condescends to his beloved. This is a reality I shall seek to grasp, both when I find myself in the silent canyon, and when I have stepped out to encounter all that awaits me beyond it. The stars wink at me in assurance. The river trickles a confiding laugh. Jesus said my faith could move mountains, but in these moments, it seems the mountains are moving me.

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Notes

1 Joan Chittister. *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages*. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 140.

2. Frederick Buechner. *Whistling in the Dark*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 107-08.

3. 1st Kings 19:12, *New Revised Standard Version*.

4. Chittister, 124.

5. Ibid., 61.

6. Rich Mullins. *The World as I Remember It: Through the Eyes of a Ragamuffin*. (Sister, Oreg.: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2004), 105.

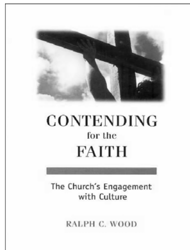
7. Genesis 15:5, *New International Version*.

8. Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 114.

9. Mullins, 88.

10. Chittister, 90.

Book Reviews



Wood, Ralph. CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH: THE CHURCH'S ENGAGEMENT WITH CULTURE. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003. 218 pgs.

Ralph Wood's choice of the title *Contending for the Faith* does not, he is quick to point out, indicate that this work is an exercise in traditional apologetics; it is not a defense of God.[1] The contention to which Wood is calling the church is rather a struggle to critically engage the world with the scandalous claims of the gospel. This engagement does involve argumentation, but not the sort of argumentation that would seek to establish the truth of the gospel by beginning from universally discernible principles. Such foundationalist enterprises begin from the modernist assumption that there are metanarratives that are accessible by unaided human reason, but postmodernism has rightly revealed that, apart from belief in a transcendent source of such narratives, no common foundation for them can be established. The church's claim that its narrative is grounded in the self-revelation of God to humanity, a revelation that is focused in the person of Jesus Christ, thus cannot sway secularists by logical argumentation from observable truths alone. The church's witness to the world must instead take the form of an embodiment of God's revealed truth. In Western society, where the loss of metanarratives has effectively undermined any stable basis for a common culture, Wood's call is for the church to provide an alternative culture, "a realm where the most fundamental practices and doctrines of the church can be inculcated."[2] The capability of such an alternative culture to provide a holistic and transformative way of life that points to something transcendent is itself an argument, albeit not a nakedly logical one, for the truth of the gospel.

Before attempting to give definition to the contours of his vision of the church as an alternative culture, Wood seriously sizes

up possible challengers. The neo-conservativism of Russell Kirk, the neo-liberalism of Peter Berger, and current evangelicalism all provide different ways of conceiving of the role of Christianity in the world. All three ways have their merits, but in Wood's final estimation, each of them compromises the gospel by making it subservient to lesser "goods," whether they be the upbuilding of western civilization, the freedom of the individual before God, or adaptation to the perceived needs of the surrounding culture(s). To measure the value of the gospel by its utility in meeting certain goals is idolatrous. The gospel's relevance to such considerations is secondary; the gospel points the believer's loyalty not to self or society, but first and foremost to the God who has been revealed in Jesus Christ, to whom the church bears witness.

At the center of *Contending for the Faith* lies Wood's central vocational concern as a Christian scholar and educator: the cultivation of a Christian educational culture. The two primary ways in which he thinks that such a culture can be achieved are by emphasizing Christian tradition and Christian particularity.[3] By mining the depth and breadth of the Christian textual tradition in their courses, Christian educators can provide their students with the resources to understand and align themselves with a Christian culture that transcends the preferences of their surrounding society. By stressing the differences between the Christian tradition and other traditions, Christian educators can take seriously both the truth claims of the gospel and opposing truth claims of others. The contest between these truth claims needs to occur in a dialogue that is constructive rather than destructive: "We do not enter the tournament of narratives in order to win so much as to engage others in life-giving conversation."[4] One of the great strengths of Wood's presentation throughout *Contending for the Faith* is that his work exemplifies what he propounds: (1) an almost continuous insistence on the radical otherness of the gospel in a way that contends with but does not demean other traditions and (2) interaction with a tapestry of sources from across the Christian tradition. Wood illustrates and supports his arguments with ideas and images drawn from an array of theologians, poets, novelists, and others from Augustine and Dante to Garrison Keillor. Whatever one's convictions, no reader of this book can dismiss lightly the creative and intellectual resources of the Christian tradition that Wood's writing evinces.

In the final portion of *Contending for the Faith*, Wood seeks to diagnose prevalent maladies in the church's current engagement with culture and to delineate traditional Christian responses to such ills. He argues for the necessity of doubt rather than religious sentimentality, of the grotesque—as in the cross—in a Christian understanding of beauty in worship, of a distinctively Christian perspective on sexuality and

romance, of the outward expressions of inward piety, and of a deeply theological and communal understanding of the church's culture. Wood thus attempts to begin to provide a vision for how the church as an alternative culture might look. His conclusions are likely to prompt discussion on a number of issues. Must Christians have "a high doctrine of Baptism and the Supper"[5] in order to take seriously the role of these practices in the life of the church? Does "the distinction between first and second causes"[6] really provide an adequate response to human suffering, even when coupled with God's identification with that suffering through Christ? How is the church to reconcile the attempt to take seriously the holiness of God by dressing well for worship with the fact that such practices often effectively marginalize the urban poor, who cannot dress so well? What elements of Christian practice are really transcultural, and which ones can be adapted to effectively communicate with surrounding cultures? Whether one agrees with Wood's positions on such questions or not, his discussion of them lays the groundwork for future dialogue as the church seeks to forge an alternative culture that will most faithfully witness to the life-giving truth of the gospel.

The application to Baptist churches of Wood's vision of the church as an alternative culture would, in most cases, require a serious overhaul. Though Baptist churches vary widely in their practices, many have an understanding of the Christian tradition that is dangerously myopic. Concerted educational efforts are needed in order for congregants to gain an appreciation of the interconnectedness of theology, liturgy, and piety. Only with such education and consequent realignment can Baptists hope to represent the revelation of Jesus Christ rather than be defined to a large extent by the desires of the surrounding society. For example, the typical Baptist neglect of church discipline reflects a concession to individual freedom that is alien to the gospel. Wood lists "church discipline regularly practiced"[7] as one of the three marks of the church. Given the pervasive understanding in Baptist churches that becoming a member in a particular church is analogous to picking an entrée off a restaurant menu, many Baptists are likely to leave a church and go to another rather than submit to church discipline. Many Baptist churches, in response, avoid church discipline in fear of losing congregants and in mistaken respect for their "individual freedom." Only when the interdependence of the body of Christ is recognized by congregants, who submit themselves to loving discipline that aims at reconciliation and sanctification, can church discipline be effectively administered among a significant portion of Baptists. For this and other reasons, the perspective Wood forwards in *Contending for the Faith* is a much-needed remedy for the many Christian

churches and colleges that are in danger of forgetting what they are called to be.

Notes

1. Ralph C. Wood, *Contending for the Faith: The Church's Engagement with Culture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 6.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., 105.
4. Ibid., 121.
5. Ibid., 194. Wood's understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper is likely to be too sacramental for most Baptists to accept.
6. Ibid., 133.
7. Ibid., 187.

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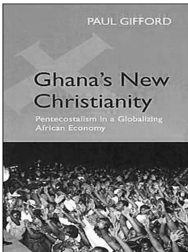

Gifford, Paul. GHANA'S NEW CHRISTIANITY: PENTACOSTALISM IN A GLOBALISING AFRICAN ECONOMY. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 216 pgs.

Over the past twenty-five years, there has been a rapid decline of mainline church membership in Ghana.[1] Mainline churches ("orthodox" is their label in Ghana) have been overshadowed by something new: Neo-Pentecostalism. These new charismatic churches are not growing by direct evangelism, but by rapidly attracting members from the mainline and African Independent/Initiated Churches. Some suggest that in order to survive, the traditional churches must experience a "charismatization" if they are to retain their active membership.[2] Only by adopting similar new charismatic church practices (including large evangelical crusades, conventions, and prayer meetings) have the mainline churches been able to stabilize their membership during the

past two decades. This radical shift in the traditional and paradigmatic Christianity of Ghana begs the questions: what is the nature of this explosive charismatic movement, and what is its effect on Ghana?

Paul Gifford investigates those questions in his highly critical investigation, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*. Gifford, Professor of African Christianity at London University, is an expert in the recent developments in African Christianity, the socio-political role of religion in Africa, and Africa's new charismatic churches. Gifford has been contributing to the field of African religion and society for over fifteen years and has written a number of texts which illuminate his particular interest in Ghana. Gifford systematically outlines the aim of his text to establish "what this Christianity is" and its religious vision, as well as a discussion of the nature of the socio-political role of this new Christianity.[3] In establishing the validity of his investigation, Gifford points to the prophetic words of Philip Jenkins in his work, *The Next Christendom: the Coming of Global Christianity*. Gifford is motivated by the timely task of defining Christianity within the neo-Pentecostal churches in Ghana as Jenkins remarks that Africa will be Christianity's spiritual center within a few decades. Jenkins insists that "Southern Christianity, the third Church, is not just a transplanted version of the familiar religion of the older Christian states; the New Christendom is no mirror image of the old. It is a truly new and developing entity. Just how different from its predecessor remains to be seen."[4]

The reality of the dramatic change in the form and function of Christianity in what Jenkins refers to as "the third Church," inspires Gifford's analytical mission of defining the nature and effects of the new churches of Ghana. His study began through a personal immersion into the charismatic culture of Greater Accra, the capital city, which holds 5 million of the 18 million inhabitants of the country. He frames this investigation within an African neo-patrimonial government (of which Gifford states Ghana is a textbook example), and sets forth the political and economic climate of Ghana during Jerry Rawlings's governance. He characterizes the country as a region steeped in economic failure, personalized rule, and an inescapable patrimonial politic. Gifford contends that his economic and political assessment of the country is a vital foundation for his investigation of the ways in which Ghana's "new Christianity might have helped, or currently be helping, to bring Ghana into the world's modern political and economic system."[5]

The characteristics of the churches are not defined in terms of demand, but rather in terms of the supply. From July 2000 through September 2001 (with additional visits in 2002 in March, April, Au-

gust, and September), Gifford immersed himself in the charismatic culture of Greater Accra. From the innumerable new churches in the Greater Accra area, he chose three mega-churches to represent the movement within the area and refers to them by their founders: Nicholas Duncan-Williams, Mensa Otabil, and Dag Heward-Mills. Studying also the practices of the Winners' Chapel as well as the church of a well known prophet-type figure, Elisha Salifu Amoako, Gifford established the scope of his study as an appropriate representation of the new Christianity of Ghana.

This movement is most acutely characterized by its lavish diversity. Gifford states that he "cast the net as widely as possible," and is careful to note that "generalizations about 'charismatic Christianity' are rapidly becoming rather unhelpful."[6] One side of the spectrum is illuminated by the influence of traditional African religion, steeped in the notion that society and personal circumstance are manipulated by the demonic. The other side of the spectrum reverses the indigenous religious thought and emphasizes the role of personal responsibility and education as a means of bringing success and wealth to both the country and the believer. Gifford attempts to allow for the differences between the congregational bodies and their tendency to change rapidly, while still attempting to describe something definable as the "charismatic scene in Ghana." Denying the necessity to paint an illustrative broad stroke of Ghana's Chrisitianity and instead illuminating the diversity of the movement within its context, Gifford seems to fail in this endeavor in his consistent and subtle championing of Mensa Otabil. Known for his harsh criticism of traditional African religious and political practices, Otabil encourages his followers to become educated and begin to impact the failing economic system through hard work and criticism of the patrimonial governing system, as opposed to praying against the demons which plight the current socio-economic and religious system. Gifford notes that the "Otabilization" of these charismatic churches will serve as an effective and transformative medium through greater social awareness in Ghana's social, economic, and political future.[7]

Gifford's general analysis of this new charismatic ecclesiastical scene is predominately characterized by the motifs of success, wealth, and status. Gifford offers a scathing critique of the Ghanaian charismatic implementation of the faith gospel (also referred to as the Gospel of Prosperity or the Health-Wealth Gospel).[8] This particular 'gospel' insists that God "has met all of the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Christ, and every Christian should now have victory over sin, sickness, and poverty."[9] A believer has a right to these blessings, won by Christ, and can access them through a simple

positive affirmation of faith. Gifford argues that the seeds of the faith gospel fall on receptive soil that is familiar with the traditional African religion, which concerns itself with the achievement of material well-being. The success, and the nature of the believer's entitlement to that success and material well-being, is illustrated by the theological vision of El Shaddai: the Provider. Gifford notes that it is "almost unthinkable" for a view other than divine provision and/or entitlement to be proclaimed in a charismatic church.[10]

Gifford seeks to prove the validity of his study within both a global and a Ghanaian context. He asks, given the protean nature of charismatic Christianity, how helpful it is to write about it as one reality. First, Gifford clarifies the question's parameters by stating that the charismatic Christianity that he investigates in this book is considered as a broad spectrum rather than two or more separate things. He refuses to convey a unity between the charismatic churches in Ghana, but rather insists upon identifying them through characteristic emphases. He further contends:

> [All] charismatic churches highlight success, victory, and wealth. The stress on victory is constitutive and indispensable, and provides the real appeal of this Christianity. These Christians are generally those whom the world has marginalized, and as globalization gathers pace they risk being marginalized farther. This contextualized Christianity claims that it has the answer to the marginalization of Ghanaians, and can redeem the lack, the poverty, the desperation; it will change you from a nobody into somebody.[11]

Gifford also points to the nature of the charismatic growth. He enumerates the positive aspects of the charismatic influence on its members (which seems to be the first time he does so in the text) and the surrounding cultural environment. Gifford notes that the worship is "participative and exhilarating," while the personal testimonies enable the voiceless to be heard within their own communities and nation. Where cell groups exist, solidarity within the community is infused and received by its members. The churches provide roles for people to play (usher, deacon, security officer, etc.) while allowing those with leadership skills to exercise those skills effectively within their own communities. The churches provide employment in a country where it is scarce due to lack of employment opportunities. Additionally, the educational opportunities provided by fledgling Bible schools offer opportunities for those who do not qualify for study at the nation's universities. In short, the charismatic churches have the answers to Ghana's real problems, expressed in a vernacular to which

they can respond. Gifford contends that this vernacular describes the ills of Ghanaian culture as resulting from spiritual forces, and the religious leaders claim the power to control these forces.[12]

Gifford's investigation of the socio-political role of these churches in Ghana's society concludes with the reality that there is no simple link between religion and public effects. He contends that religions provide ideas and values that seek to order lives. Therefore, though there is no proof of Ghana's new Christianity having a direct effect on the economy (i.e., a new work ethic), Gifford contends that no influence could change the economic climate without changing the current governing system. Gifford states that if "Ghana is to join the modern world economy, the greatest need is the development of transparent and accountable structures, systems, procedures and institutions to regulate all aspects of society."[13] If the charismatic churches were to influence Ghana's entrance into the modern world economy, it would have to do so by speaking against the current governing system, and there is no evidence of this activity within the charismatic movement.

Notes

1. Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentacostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 38.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., vii-xi.
4. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 75, 214.
5. Gifford, *Christianity*, ix.
6. Ibid., viii.
7. Ibid., 197-98.
8. Ibid., 48.
9. Ibid.
10. Gifford does note that Mensa Otabil is an exception to this rule in that he teaches that God might test the believer through chastising., 50.
11. Ibid., 195.
12. Ibid., 196.
13. Ibid., 197.

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Winner, Lauren F. Girl Meets God: A Memoir. New York: Random House, 2003. 320 pgs.

It should have been obvious from the beginning: “Sometimes, as in a great novel, you cannot see until you get to the end that God was leaving clues for you all along.”[1] With the candor and humility of Augustine’s *Confessions*, Winner retraces the beckoning of God and her own struggles with religion in her life so far.

Lauren Winner’s parents, a Reformed Jewish father and a lapsed Southern Baptist mother, divorce when she is a child. Her mother stays true to promises she had made when they first married, and raises both Lauren and her sister as Jews. As Winner enters college, she begins to be drawn to Orthodox Judaism and goes through the process of full conversion.

All along she is increasingly drawn to Christ, though. At first Winner is interested in the incarnation as a literary device, considering it quite appropriate that the anthropomorphisms of the Hebrew Bible be developed into the character of Jesus. She later has a bizarre dream about mermaids and wakes up certain that the dream is from God and is about the truth of Jesus as God.

Winner seeks counsel from both Jews and Christians about the meaning of her dream and her attraction to Christ. Her Orthodox roommate is convinced that the savior figure Winner has seen is the prophet Elijah. One of Winner’s high school teachers agrees that it is certainly Christ. A Christian minister on her college campus with whom she is friends tells her to talk to her rabbi and discourages her from leaving Judaism. Later on she attends a learning service at a church in her town at which the speaker describes Christ as “our cultural expression of the divine truth that all people yearn for.”[2] Winner leaves the service furious: “‘That church,’ I fumed to a friend later that night, ‘should be embarrassed that so many Christians are running from Christ.’ Then I thought: Maybe I should stop running.”[3]

Winner does not speak to anyone in her Jewish community about her new faith in Christ. She decides to get baptized when she moves to England for two years of graduate study. Disappointingly, she dis-

covers the same ailments of materialism, anti-intellectualism, and hypocrisy in the church that she had found insufferable in Judaism. The church is, though, the body of Christ, and her faith in Christ cannot be isolated from the people and rituals and places of the church.

As she moves back to the United States and continues to grow in her faith, she begins a journey of reconciliation with her Jewish past. Winner restores some friendships that she broke off when she converted. She also rebuilds her Jewish library. Winner ends the book with a visit to shul.[4] The scripture reading that morning is from Obadiah and tells of the punishment that awaits the Edomites, who had once converted to Judaism, and then later betrayed the Jews. Winner grieves as she wonders if she has become an Edomite in the eyes of her old Jewish friends.

Winner rests secure in her faith in Christ as the promised Messiah and her own Lord and Savior, but she continues to struggle with her religious identity. She feels guilt over breaking her baptismal vows to live as a faithful Jew. She also feels guilt for cowardly abandoning her Jewish friends upon her conversion. She is angry that no one in her Jewish community kept up with her struggles or tried to hold her accountable to her baptismal vows.

Winner's journey toward God is admittedly bumpy and awkward. She, as a historian of religion, recognizes the complex mixing of social, political, geographic, economic, liturgical, and psychological factors that affect conversion. Ultimately, though, God plays the key role in conversion. *Girl Meets God* shows the beckoning hand of God gently drawing Winner closer through her life events. Lauren Winner's memoir is both encouraging and thought-provoking. It is a must-read for all who are struggling with their faith or with sharing their faith.

Notes

1. Lauren Winner, *Girl Meets God: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2003), 57.
2. Ibid., 60.
3. Italics in the original; Ibid., 60.
4. I.e., a synagogue service.

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