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*Editor: The Rev. Dr. Brooks Schramm* bschramm@Ltsg.edu  
*Editorial Board Member: The Rev. Kathleen Reed* kreed@Ltsg.edu  
*Managing Editor: The Rev. John Spangler* jspangler@Ltsg.edu  
*Book Review Editor: The Rev. Dr. Maria Erling* merling@Ltsg.edu  
*Design & Production: Katy Giebenhain* kgiebenhain@Ltsg.edu

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# A Contextual Reading of the Parable of the Persisting Widow: An Indian Perspective

*Surekha Nelavala*

*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Luke 18:1-8*

I had difficulty in formulating this topic, whether it should be named "The Parable of the Unjust Judge" or "The Parable of the Persistent Widow." After I thought through the parable, I chose to call it "The Parable of the Persistent Widow," mainly for two reasons: first, we have plenty of unjust judges in the world, and very few persistent widows, and perhaps there is something important that Jesus wants us to learn from this character of the widow; and second, I wanted to be intentional in naming a lecture after a powerless widow, since I believe that intentionality is one of the tools towards ultimate justice.

What is the purpose of this parable? What does the parable convey to readers other than the notion of the prayerful life? What are the similari-

ties and the differences between prayer and seeking justice? What corrupts the powerful judge and denies justice for the widow? What makes him finally grant justice to the woman? How relevant are the first-century illustrations or parables to the post-modern era? To address the above questions, primarily inspired and informed by my own social location and by a real-life situation that brings a different perspective, I approach the text from a contextual, liberationist and praxiological perspective. In particular I will use a real story of a widow which provides a new window and lens to interpret the text from a liberationist point of view, while departing from the interpretations that emphasize the “prayer” aspect of the parable.

### *Description of the Context of Widowhood of Women in India*

Widowhood of a woman is regarded as a curse from God in the Indian context. It is considered as the most unfortunate situation in a woman's life. As much as the society is sympathetic to the woman, she is seen as a bad omen who may pass her curse on to others around her. Seeing a widow's face the first thing in the morning is believed to be a bad omen. In the patriarchal and traditional society which is India, widowhood is a great calamity at several levels. The widows generally face economic, social, cultural and emotional deprivation, and the first and foremost effect is the economic deprivation. The psyche of these widowed women is a construct based entirely upon internalization of the existing patriarchal system, which subsequently creates a level of extreme vulnerability that goes beyond grief and eternal loss. Along with economic deprivation, when a woman becomes a widow a stringent moral code is imposed on her. She is expected to remain inside the home and is forbidden to take part in any joyful occasions. The vulnerability of the widows is increased by the restrictions on their residence, inheritance, remarriage and employment opportunities, especially in situations where they were completely dependent as wives. The virtuous widow is expected to shun all desires and live only with basic needs. On the one hand she lives in a state of vulnerability; on the other hand, her single-woman status is seen as a threat to society, especially if a widow is younger, and thus she lives in the paradoxical conditions of vulnerability and power imposition. Moving from the general status of the widows in India to a specific story of a widow helps us understand how power dynamics work around the vulnerability and powerlessness of widows that were and are created by patriarchy.

### *Contextual, Liberationist, and Praxiological Reading*

How is my contextual approach to the text relevant to the contexts of others? How does a local context matter in a global context? In the post-modern era, increasingly, we hear the words ‘global village’, ‘globalization’, ‘multi-culturalism’, ‘plurality’, ‘cross-culturalism’, and expressions with similar meanings that communicate the global nature of the world. We know that these phrases are not merely some fancy words of the twenty-first century, rather they have emerged from the post-modern global context where there is constant interaction, connection and contact between individuals belonging to different communities, contexts, and cultures. Globalization, which includes a free market, but is not limited to economics, has made itself an inevitable element in the society and thus all of us participate in cross-cultural contact in all spheres of life. On the one hand, globalization seems to be a step towards integration and universal identity and thus implies a hopeful step forward, one that is seemingly capable of bringing human beings together on an even plane. But on the other hand, it has proven to be a threat to diversity and for appreciation of all cultures, as it is obvious that in globalization the dominant culture becomes the standard and forceful culture while the rest become the sub-standard or marginalized cultures.

This phenomenon is evident in all fields including religion, theology, and biblical studies. In resistance to the created standards which are a forceful aspect and consequence of globalization, cultural differences and high expressions of self-determination and uniqueness have emerged from these marginalized cultures. As a result, contextual perspectives were introduced to de-standardize the standards, and also to regain and retrieve cultural identities that are threatened in the face of globalization. Contextual hermeneutics primarily began in biblical hermeneutics in order to interpret a text that supposedly addresses a context in a particular situation. It is a method that allows readers to explore the meaning of the text using their contextual lens. Contextual hermeneutics is dangerously misconceived when it is viewed as having somehow created a binary opposition of “my context” versus “your context,” and with the resulting claim that contextual hermeneutics constitutes a narrow and exclusive approach to the text. On the contrary, it is important to note that any contextual interpretation, one that is interpreted through a particular contextual lens, does not necessarily remain appropriate only with regards to the specific context of its intention, rather a contextual interpretation in its encounter with other contexts becomes richer and provides a new window through which to interpret the text. Therefore, contextual interpretation does not limit the richness of bib-

lical interpretation but rather broadens its horizon in multiple ways and provides points of convergence and connection. Contextual interpretations are beneficial because they are based on the contexts of people in ordinary communities and connect with their life stories.

As a contextual reader, my interpretation of the text takes place on two levels: one from the narrative of the Bible and the other from the life pathos or the context of the interpreter. In the process of interpretation, narrative worlds both at the contextual level and at the literary level engage in critical conversation, while the interpreter's experience and context are used as a lens for reading the biblical text. Following Fernando Segovia's methodology of "cultural studies," I will make explicit use of my own social locus, conveyed through the genre of life narrative, to bring the ancient text and context into my own present.<sup>1</sup> Segovia argues that the personal voice of a "real reader" plays an active role in the construction and interpretation of the text. Therefore, the perspective of a reader in his/her social location is the most essential aspect for cultural studies. He claims that "all *exegesis* is ultimately *eisegesis*."<sup>2</sup> While agreeing with this perspective, my question, however, would be to ask: what should be the criteria for a real reader to interpret the text in his/her own complex social setting? If only the social location legitimizes the interpretation of the text, as Segovia insists, the text then can be abused to legitimize slavery, racism, patriarchy, colonialism and other such discriminatory institutions and values. In that case, can such an interpretation, based essentially only on one's context, be a valid one? It offers no liberation or legitimization for the marginalized.

A contextual, liberationist perspective sets a different agenda in the interpretation of the text. This approach not only insists upon the primacy of the reader, but also establishes the perspective through which one must approach the text. Liberationist hermeneutics affirms every interpretive endeavor as important, and advocates its own particular perspective of liberation as the most suitable and legitimate means by which to judge biblical texts or scholarly interpretation. Thus, my interpretive aim is unabashedly liberationist.

As a contextual reader, I am aware of the danger of romanticizing community, which sometimes justifies inadequacies of the contexts and refuses to be challenged and informed by both the texts and other perspectives. Therefore, contextual interpretations must aim not only at claiming the legitimacy of each context, but also be open to seeking in the text and from its interpretive tradition help to shape, reform, and inform the community.<sup>3</sup>

As a liberationist and praxiological reader, I deem it important to affirm that any contextual method of interpretation is not necessarily justified, legitimate, or appropriate, unless the readings qualify through an outcome

leading to peace, justice and liberation. *Therefore, context must be used as a tool for interpretation of a text rather than a goal.* Any interpretation has to maintain its task of accountability of being prophetic and liberating. A contextual approach will be a dangerous approach if it only uses its lens to support the status quo while eliminating its corrective stance that strives towards liberation and justice for all. Thus all contextual interpretations are potentially appropriate readings in all contexts, and therefore must refrain from creating borders and from limiting their insights as relevant only for one particular context. For instance, an Indian feminist reading is not necessarily limited in its relevance to Indian feminists, but is potentially open for all others as well. All are invited to be accountable and respectful of one another, especially in the sociological context of a global village, in a conceptual understanding of the unity of all and in an ecclesiological belief that comprehends all believers as one body of Christ. It is necessary for all to participate in learning the contexts of others. Therefore, when using contextual hermeneutics, which facilitates intentional reading responses, readers must avoid the danger of romanticizing cultures and contexts but instead seek out elements in the text that ultimately serve to liberate and transform the communities, while confessing its inadequacy. Thus a context must be used only as lens to interpret the text, while giving necessary focus to the text. Living in a global context as a contextual reader, I believe that the importance and necessity of being informed and educated about the contexts of the others is a crucial aspect of academic accountability. It is counter-productive to liberation-centered hermeneutics to have some contexts at the center of contextual studies and others situated on the margins.

As a contextual reader who believes in praxiological hermeneutics, that is, a methodology of biblical interpretation that reads the text while being mindful of the effect that the text has on people, I would use the text as it is in the language understood by the set of people. It is evident that the text is considered authentic through the effect and significance that it has on the faith communities. Tat-Siong Benny Liew states, "Interpretation or reception of text is not private and individual, but public and communal. Such public and communal reception also has a public effect or affect on communities."<sup>4</sup> Contextual readings carry both obligation and accountability to their communities. Therefore, contextual hermeneutics must be praxiological, as opposed to self-imposed, as a reader represents the people of a particular context. Similarly, each contextual reading has to be context-specific, and therefore it is important to describe the particular context in which the hermeneutical process happens. However, contextual description is subjective as there are sub-contexts in each context, and internal diversities. Thus in this paper my hermeneutical approach to the text comes from the con-

cerns and the questions arising from a specific context, and therefore, I depart from the readers and interpretations that discuss primarily the historical, narrative, and literary hermeneutical perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

### *Interpretation of the Parable of the Persistent Widow*

In this text, Jesus tells the disciples the parable of the persistent widow, which is often interpreted as Jesus' encouragement to the disciples to keep on praying and not to lose heart.<sup>6</sup> The story revolves around two starkly contrasting characters: a powerful judge and a powerless widow. The judge is introduced as a corrupt and unrighteous judge, who neither fears God nor regards the people. In contrast, the widow in the parable is totally powerless, being troubled by others. She goes to the judge, the only person who can offer her justice against the person who is troubling her. It is important to note that the widow is not asking for a favor, but seeking justice. The parable particularly accentuates this element, especially due to the power imbalance of society that is evident in the setting of the parable.

However, what is the purpose of this parable? Barbara Reid rightly asks, "Is it a comic parable meant to make us laugh at the ludicrous picture of a powerful judge cowering before a helpless old widow? Or is it a deadly serious portrait of one small victory for justice in the face of shameless systems of rampant injustice?"<sup>7</sup> If the parable is imagined to be realistic, using the hermeneutics of imagination, what may hinder the judge from doing injustice to the widow by not granting her the justice she seeks? Is it because the judge possesses an unjust personality? Is it because the judge thinks that it is not a good enough reason to take action? Or is it because the widow is actually complaining about an influential person with whom the judge wants to maintain a cordial relationship?

Jesus concludes the parable with a happy ending. Finally, the widow is granted justice. What makes the judge finally grant it? Is it that he couldn't say no to the poor woman? Is it that he finally saw the point? Is it that he repented and was transformed into a good judge? Some scholars interpret the judge's response along the lines of a mother who is on the phone, annoyed, and who grants the wish of her nagging child. For instance, Joachim Jeremias states that the judge "is tired of her perpetual nagging and wants to be left in peace."<sup>8</sup>

Is it that simple? Or, could one not argue that since the widow is seeking justice, and since she is being persistent, the judge is left with no choice?! Most justice movements in history have ended only after the fighters found justice through persistence, and when the powerful were left with no choice but to grant justice.

In a Bible study that I had conducted in India on this particular parable with these many lingering questions, a real story of a widow and her responses in the Bible study have opened up a perspective for interpreting the text. Based on the thoughts that she shared in the Bible study, on the recollection of the details of her own personal story that she shared orally, and in honor of the widow who was instrumental in this process, I wish to present her story and her responses in her voice.

### *A Story of a Widow*

Ever since I heard a sermon on the parable of the Persisting Widow, I have been reflecting on this text more closely because I could resonate with the parable on many levels. I felt that Jesus told my story in the form of a parable. Just like the widow in the parable, I am also a widow, in my mid 30s. I had never expected that I would be a widow one day, although I knew that my husband was much older than I. I have been a widow for three years, and I have seen a different world since then. Although my religion teaches that widows should be treated with kindness, I have had a different experience. I never had children, my parents are no more, and I am the only child and never had siblings. I was married when I was 18, and ever since my husband, his family, his relatives, his friends and acquaintances surrounded my life. But after the death of my husband, I am now left alone as some chose to distance themselves from me because they thought I would be needy and seek their help and support. Some people wanted to use me because I am single, and therefore can be manipulated. A few others, particularly men wanted to get close to make inappropriate advances, and exploit my single status. Through the wisdom that I gained by my age, I was aware of the responses of people to my widowed status.

However, recently, I have been facing an issue from the boss of my late husband, who is also a member of our congregation. He often wants to visit my house and tortures me to submit to him. I am very frightened. At first, I wanted to go to the police and lodge a complaint against him. I was afraid because, even though the police are in a place to affirm justice, I may be further ill-treated. Moreover, this man is quite an influential person. Therefore, I decided to speak to an elder of my congregation, as we both worship in the same place. When I spoke to the elder, to my shock and surprise I was told to be watchful and avoid him if possible, and the elder said that these things happen, and that it is not something about which one should overreact. He also said that I am still attractive, and so I can expect such moves from men in the society. I felt terrible, frustrated and threatened. I decided to go and speak to the pastor, so he could correct this man. I shared my ex-

perience with the pastor, and shared with him that I spoke to an elder as well, and what his response was. I literally broke into tears when I heard the response of the pastor. At first he affirmed what the elder said, and he said that the elder was wise for not confronting the boss. The pastor tried to create fear in my heart, that I am vulnerable, and that the man could attack me if we were to confront him and hurt his honor. He also said that it is not advisable to put him to shame, for my own well-being, as the pastor claims. The pastor advised me that it is wiser to just let it go. Later on I found out that this man is one of the biggest givers in the church, and therefore, the pastor decided, wisely, to safeguard the relationship with this man. I was unable to stop my late husband's boss's visits and torture, which increased every day. I thought about talking to his wife. But what will happen? She is a woman, who is also vulnerable just like me. Her inability to control and restrict her husband could in fact backfire on me, and she could see me as a single young widow who is a threat to the society and its honor. I do not want to invite an additional problem into my life, and, therefore, I decided to seek an appointment with the bishop to share my problem with him. I have been to his office at least ten times, but I have been unable to get an appointment to meet with him. But I am gaining my energy to seek justice in multiple ways and times, until I find justice. Just like the persistent widow, of Luke 18:1-8, I have decided to go to the bishop's office, and I will go over and over again. Hopefully, the bishop can help, before I become a victim of the desire of the boss. Hopefully, I would not be further victimized in the bishop's office through delay and denial. I am still continuing to seek justice, unlike the widow in the parable, who found justice at last.

As a widow, and as a person seeking justice, first, I resonate with the woman in the text at many levels. Jesus gives this parable to make the people understand the importance of asking and seeking for justice persistently and never to compromise on injustice done to the self or the other. And, second, most readers conveniently compare themselves with the widow in the text, who is the least powerful, irrespective of their own status in the society. As a widow, experiencing multiple discriminations, I challenge the interpretations that do not emphasize the power structures and possible corruption that is manifested through these very structures and their powerful brokers.

### *Conclusion*

Using the experience of the widow in India, I conclude my presentation reiterating mainly two points. First, traditionally the interpretations of this text emphasize and limit the reading to the prayerful life and stress trusting

God in faith and prayer, which is often translated in the minds of the people as asking God for favors and benefits. But then in this text, Jesus clearly portrays a system with existing power dynamics of a powerful judge, a victimizer, and a victim in the society. The victim in the parable is victimized by her widowed status, by her neighbors and the community who create trouble for her, and by the judge who denies her justice several times. A victim being re-victimized is a reality in the contemporary society of biblical times as well as in the society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus Jesus, in this text, not only emphasizes persistence but persistence for a cause. This cause is the cause of justice, precisely the thing that tends to be overlooked in interpretations that see "asking" as the center of the parable. Jesus, in other words, calls out to his listeners not to rest until justice is given. Yes, ensuring justice for self or another is not an easy task. Rules, regulations, law, lawyers, and judges are not the symbols of the existence of justice, but rather of a lack of justice. They serve as instruments to bring justice into a world that lacks justice otherwise. Justice is not offered generously, and in most cases in this society it is rather sought after with strength and persistence. An emphasis on "asking" rather than on "being persistent for finding justice" is jarring and thus loses the importance of the parable.

Secondly, an interpretation of this parable that does not accentuate justice neither points out nor challenges the people who are in the positions of the corrupt judge, who are denying or not ensuring justice, nor does it attack the people who cause discrimination, like the person in the parable who caused trouble for the widow.

Therefore, for further discussion, I would like us to ask through the text the following questions that are contextually applicable:

1. Identify the people who are in a similar status to that of the widow in the parable – a victimized status.
2. Identify the people or systems that could cause trouble for those on the list of people we have identified as victims.
3. Identify the people/systems who are capable of implementing justice but who often deny it, and those who do not ensure justice for the victims – the silent perpetrators of injustice.

### *Notes*

- 1 Fernando Segovia, "Cultural Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism: Ideological Criticism as Mode of Discourse," in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and*

- Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 1995) 7.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Inspired by the article of Archie C. C. Lee, "The Bible and Contextual Readings: Encountering Communities, Encountering Texts – A Response," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 56/1-2 (2002) 77-81.
- 4 Tat-siong Benny Liew, "More than Personal Encounters: Identity, Community and Interpretation," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 56/1-2 (2002) 42.
- 5 For literary, narrative, and redaction critical discussions of the parable, see e.g., Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant; and, Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables of Luke* (combined ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983) 137; Francois Bovon, "Apocalyptic Traditions in the Lukan Special Material: Reading Luke 18:1-8," *Harvard Theological Review* 90/4 (1997) 383-391; Stephen Curkpatrick, "Dissonance in Luke 18:1-8," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121/1 (2002) 107-121; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (AB 28A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 1177, 1180; G. W. Forbes, *God of the Old: The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke's Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 198-200; John Mark Hicks, "The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8)," *Restoration Quarterly* 33/4 (1991) 210-12; Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition* (trans. J. Sturdy; London: SPCK, 1966) 187-88; Robert M. Price, *The Widow Traditions in Luke-Acts: A Feminist-Critical Scrutiny* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997) 191-94. For scholars who use historical critical methods as tools for seeing the layers of tradition and redaction, see e.g., Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Volume 2: 9:51-24:53* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996) 1444-1456; Charles W. Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions: The Creative Voice of Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994) 187-207; John Mark Hicks, "The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8)," *Restoration Quarterly* 33/4 (1991) 209-223; Barbara Reid, "A Godly Widow Persistently Pursuing Justice: Luke 18:1-8," *Biblical Research* 45 (2000) 25-33; idem, "Beyond Petty Pursuits and Wearisome Widows: Three Lukan Parables," *Interpretation* 56/3 (2002) 284-294; C. W. F. Smith, *The Jesus of the Parables* (Philadelphia, PA: United Press, 1975) 186.
- 6 See Donald Penny, "Persistence in Prayer: Luke 18:1-8," *Review and Expositor* 104/4 (2007) 737-744; Dorothy Jean Weaver, "Luke 18:1-8" *Interpretation* 56/3 (2002) 317-319.
- 7 Barbara Reid, "A Godly Widow Persistently Pursuing Justice: Luke 18:1-8," 25-33.
- 8 Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (rev. ed.; trans. S. H. Hooke; New York, NY: Scribner's Sons, 1963) 154.

"A Contextual Reading of the Parable of the Persisting Widow: An Indian Perspective" was a 2011 Hein Fry Lecture.

Surekha Nelavala is currently an ELCA Mission Developer of Global Peace Lutheran Church/Frederick Indian Fellowship in Frederick, Md. She has a Ph.D. in Biblical Studies, NT, from Drew University, N.J. She taught as a visiting lecturer at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, and as an adjunct faculty at Hood College, Frederick, Md. and also at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai, India. Nelavala has authored two monographs, and several articles on contextual biblical interpretation, particularly from a Dalit feminist perspective.

## Keynote Address Spring Convocation 2011

*Christopher Hedges*

I have walked through the barren remains of Babylon in Iraq and the ancient Roman city of Antioch, the capital of Roman Syria, which now lies buried in silt deposits. I have visited the marble ruins of Leptis Magna, once one of the most important agricultural centers in the Roman Empire, now isolated in the desolate drifts of sand southeast of Tripoli. I have climbed at dawn up the ancient temples in Tikal, while flocks of brightly colored toucans leapt through the jungle foliage below. I have stood amid the remains of the ancient Egyptian city of Luxor along the Nile, looking at the statue of the great Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II lying broken on the ground, with Percy Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" running through my head:

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.  
Civilizations rise, decay and die."

Time, as the ancient Greeks argued, for individuals and for states is cyclical. As societies become more complex they become inevitably more precarious. They become increasingly vulnerable, burdened by vast bureaucracies, an increasingly rapacious and disconnected elite and a blind loyalty to ideological systems and ideas that do not correspond to reality. And as they begin to break down there is a strange retreat by a frightened and confused population from reality, an inability to confront the fragility and impending

collapse. The elites, who speak in phrases and jargon that do not correlate to reality, retreat into isolated compounds, whether at the court at Versailles, the Forbidden City or our own enclaves of wealth and privilege. The elites, from within these enclaves, indulge in unchecked hedonism, the accumulation of vaster wealth and extravagant consumption. They shut themselves off from the suffering of the masses that are repressed to extract wealth upwards with greater and greater ferocity. Resources are ruthlessly and thoughtlessly depleted until they are exhausted or destroyed. And then the hollowed-out edifice, which appears unassailable and solid, collapses. The Roman and Sumerian empires fell this way. The Mayan elites, after cutting down their forests and polluting their streams with silt and acids, retreated, like all dead empires, backward into primitivism.

As food and water shortages expand across the globe, as mounting poverty and misery, including rising food costs, trigger street protests in the Middle East, Africa and Europe, our elites are doing what all elites do. They launch more wars. They build grander monuments to themselves. They plunge their nations deeper into debt. And they take it out on the backs of workers and the poor. The collapse of the global economy, which wiped out a staggering \$40 trillion in wealth, was the first jolt. Our elites, after destroying our manufacturing base, sold massive quantities of fraudulent mortgage-backed securities to pension funds, small investors, banks, universities, state and foreign governments and shareholders. And when the speculative game imploded they looted the public treasury. They cried out that the nation had a deficit crisis – it doesn't, of course, it has a revenue crisis – and began dismantling basic social services, made war on the last vestiges of unions, slashed jobs, froze wages, threw 6,000,000 people out of their homes, and stood by idly as we created a permanent underclass of unemployed and underemployed which now sees one in six workers without jobs.

The Mayan elite became, at the end, as the anthropologist Ronald Wright notes in *A Short History of Progress*, "... extremists, or ultra-conservatives, squeezing the last drops of profit from nature and humanity." This is how all civilizations, including our own, ossify and die. The signs of imminent death, to those who can break free from our electronic hallucinations, may be undeniable. Common sense may cry out for a radical new response. But the race toward self-immolation only accelerates because of our intellectual and moral paralysis. As Sigmund Freud grasped in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, human societies are as intoxicated and blinded by their own headlong rush toward death and destruction as they are by the search for erotic fulfillment. We live in a nation where doctors destroy health, lawyers destroy justice, universities destroy knowl-

edge, government destroys freedom, the press destroys information, religion destroys morality and our banks destroy the economy.

The turmoil in the Middle East, the implosion of national economies such as those of Ireland and Greece, the collapse of states such as Somalia, Ivory Coast, the increasing anger of a beleaguered working class at home and abroad, the growing desperate human migrations and the refusal to halt our relentless destruction of the ecosystem on which human life depends are the harbingers of our own collapse. They are the consequences of the idiocy of our elite and the folly of globalization. Protests and movements that are not built around a complete reconfiguration of American society, including a rapid dismantling of empire and the corporate state, can at best forestall the inevitable. We will be saved only with the birth of a new and militant radicalism, one that defies all formal power structures, including the Democratic Party, which seeks to dethrone our corporate elite from power, not negotiate for better terms.

Human societies seem cursed to repeat cycles of exploitation and collapse. The greater the extent of the deterioration, the less these societies are able to comprehend what is happening around them. The Earth is littered with the physical remains of human folly, ignorance and hubris. There is a dark intoxication among our species with extinction, although this moment appears to be the denouement to the whole sad show of settled, civilized life that began some 5,000 years ago. There is nothing left, this time, on the planet to seize. We are now spending down the last remnants of our natural capital, including our forests, fossil fuel, air and water. This time when we go down it will be global. There will be no new lands to pillage, no new peoples to conquer and exploit. Technology, which has obliterated the constraints of time and space, has turned our global village into a global death trap. The fate of Easter Island will be writ large across the broad expanse of planet Earth.

The failure of the liberal class – whose role in society is designed to prevent unchecked assault by centralized power – is discovering what happens when you tolerate the intolerant. Let hate speech pollute the airways. Let corporations buy up your courts and state and federal legislative bodies. Let the Christian religion be manipulated by charlatans to demonize Muslims, gays and intellectuals, discredit science, sanctify greed and unfettered capitalism and become a source of personal enrichment. Let unions wither under corporate assault. Let social services and public education be gutted and stripped of funding. Let Wall Street carry out fraud, deception and plunder with impunity, and you roll out the welcome mat for fascism.

The liberal class and much of the left has busied itself with the toothless pursuits of inclusiveness, multiculturalism, identity politics and tolerance –

a word Martin Luther King never used – and forgotten about the primacy of justice. It naively sought to placate ideological and corporate forces bent on the destruction of the democratic state. The liberal class, like the misguided democrats in the former Yugoslavia or the hapless aristocrats in the Weimar Republic, invited the wolf into the henhouse. The liberal class forgot that, as Karl Popper wrote in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, “If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.” Financial regulation, largely put in place by the New Deal, not only protected us from the worst excesses of capitalism but was also the bulwark that made democracy possible.

Workers in this country fought long and hard for their rights. They suffered brutal beatings, mass expulsions from company housing and jobs, crippling strikes, targeted assassinations of union leaders and armed battles with hired gun thugs and state militias. The Rockefellers, the Mellons, the Carnegies and the Morgans – the Koch Brothers Industries, Goldman Sachs and Wal-Mart of their day – never gave a damn about workers. All they cared about was profit. The eight-hour workday, the minimum wage, Social Security, pensions, job safety, paid vacations, retirement benefits and health insurance were achieved because hundreds of thousands of workers physically fought a system of capitalist exploitation. They rallied around radicals such as “Mother” Jones, United Mine Workers’ President John L. Lewis and “Big” Bill Haywood and his Wobblies as well as the socialist presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs. They had no illusions that the bosses were their friends, much less celebrities to be admired and emulated.

It is they who made possible our middle class and opened up our democracy. The elite fought back viciously. Federal marshals, state militias, sheriff’s deputies and at times Army troops, along with the courts and legislative bodies, were used to crush and stymie worker revolts. Striking sugar cane workers were gunned down in Thibodaux, La., in 1887. Steel workers were shot to death in Homestead, Pa. Railroad workers in the Pullman strike of 1894 were murdered. Coal miners at Ludlow, Colo., in 1914 and at Matewan, W.Va., in 1920 were massacred. Our freedoms and rights were paid for with the blood of workers.

American democracy arose because those consciously locked out of the system put their bodies on the line and demanded justice. The exclusion of the poor and the working class from the systems of power in this country was, after all, deliberate. The Founding Fathers feared popular democracy. They rigged the system to protect the white, male elite from the start, something that has been largely whitewashed in public schools and by a

corporate media that has effectively substituted myth for history. Europe’s poor, fleeing to America from squalid slums and workhouses in the 17th and 18th centuries, were viewed by the elite as commodities to exploit. Slaves, Native Americans, indentured servants, women, and men without property were not represented at the Constitutional Conventions. And American history, as Howard Zinn pointed in *The People’s History of the United States*, has been one long fight by the marginalized and disenfranchised for dignity and freedom. Those who fought this battle understood the innate cruelty of capitalism.

“When you sell your product, you retain your person,” said a tract published in the 1880s during the Lowell, Ma., mill strikes. “But when you sell your labor, you sell yourself, losing the rights of free men and becoming vassals of mammoth establishments of a moneyed aristocracy that threatens annihilation to anyone who questions their right to enslave and oppress. Those who work in the mills ought to own them, not have the status of machines ruled by private despots who are entrenching monarchic principles on democratic soil as they drive downwards freedom and rights, civilization, health, morals and intellectuality in the new commercial feudalism.”

As Noam Chomsky points out, the sentiment expressed by the Lowell mill workers predated Marxism. Working for wages, 150 years ago, was considered a form of chattel slavery. The slogan of the Republican Party, the banner under which Northern workers went to fight in the Civil War, was: We’re against chattel slavery and wage slavery. Free people do not rent themselves to others. Freedom meant not taking orders from others. It took a long time, Chomsky argues, to drive into people’s heads the idea that it is legitimate to rent yourself. But once that was accomplished we began to internalize our own oppression.

We chatter mindlessly about something called the “American Dream.” And now that the oligarchic elite have regained control of all levers of power, and that dream is being exposed as a cruel hoax, we are being shoved back into the cage.

Slick public relations campaigns, the collapse of public education – nearly a third of the country is illiterate or semiliterate – and the rise of amoral politicians such as Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, who pose as liberals while betraying basic liberal and democratic principles and selling their souls for corporate money, have left us largely defenseless. The last vestiges of unionized workers in the public sector are reduced to protesting in Wisconsin for collective bargaining – in short, the right to ask employers for working conditions. That shows how far labor and the country have deteriorated. And it looks as though even this basic right to ask, as well as raise money through union dues, has been successfully revoked in Madison. The

Democratic Party and the remnants of organized labor steered passions in Wisconsin away from a general strike, where workers should have gone, to tepid attempts to recall legislators.

The public debate, meanwhile, dominated by corporate-controlled systems of information, ignores the steady impoverishment of the working class and absence of legal and regulatory mechanisms as we are reconfigured into a neo-feudal society. The airwaves are saturated with good looking and charming corporate apologists. They ask us why public-sector employees have benefits – sneeringly called “entitlements” – which non-unionized working- and middle-class people are denied. This argument is ingenious. It pits desperate worker against desperate worker in a mad scramble for scraps. It is, of course, the wrong question. Why, we should be asking, don't working men and women have health insurance, pension plans, job security and living wages? And until we again speak in the language of open class warfare, grasping, as those who went before us did, that the rich elite always protect themselves and promote their own interests at our expense, we are doomed to a 21st century serfdom.

The pillars of the liberal establishment, which once made incremental and piecemeal reform possible, no longer function. The liberal church, for example, forgot that heretics exist. It forgot that the scum of society – look at the new Newt Gingrich – always wrap themselves in the flag and clutch the Christian cross to promote programs that mock the core teachings of Jesus Christ. And, for all their years of seminary training and Bible study, these liberal clergy have stood by mutely as televangelists betrayed and exploited the Gospel to promote bigotry, hatred and greed. What was the point, I wonder, of ordination? Did they think the radical message of the Gospel was something they would never have to fight for?

Our schools and universities, on their knees for corporate dollars and their boards dominated by hedge fund and investment managers, have deformed education into the acquisition of narrow vocational skills that serve specialized corporate interests and create classes of drone-like systems managers. They make little attempt to equip students to make moral choices, to stand up for civic virtues, to seek a life of meaning, to actually think. The moral and ethical issues that should define education are no longer asked. Humanities departments, whose liberal arts curriculum once challenged structures and assumptions, are vanishing as swiftly as the ocean's fish stocks.

The electronic and much of the print press has become a shameless mouthpiece for the powerful, a shameless vehicle for spectacle and celebrity culture and a magnet for corporate advertising, as anyone watching the royal wedding – brought to us by J. P. Morgan Chase – grasped. It does not

give a platform to the poor or working men and women, but diverts us with celebrity meltdowns, lavish lifestyle programs, reality television and gossip. Artists, who once had something to say, have retreated into elite enclaves, preoccupied themselves with abstract, self-referential garbage and the frivolous. Advertising agencies and publicists flood the airwaves with lies on behalf of corporate sponsors.

The Democratic Party, most egregiously, sold out working men and women for corporate money. It permitted under Bill Clinton and now Barack Obama the state apparatus to be surrendered to corporate interests. There is no liberal institution left – the press, labor, culture, public education, the church or the Democratic Party – that makes any effort to hold back the corporate juggernaut. And the longer we are tricked into investing our faith in formal institutions of power and electoral politics the more easily we will be exploited.

We have been taught to tolerate the intolerant – from propaganda outlets such as Fox News to Christian fascists to lunatics and bigots in the Republican Party to a criminal class on Wall Street and within corporations – and we are paying the price. The only place left for us is on the street. We must occupy state and federal offices. We must foment general strikes. We must be willing to accept the discomfort of arrest and jail. The elite, with no check left on their greed and criminality, are slashing essential services – including budgets for schools, firefighters and basic assistance programs for children and the elderly – so we will pay for the fraud they committed when they wiped out \$14 trillion of housing wealth, wages and retirement savings.

We live now in Orwell's Oceania, not Huxley's *The World State*. Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda plays the role assumed by Emmanuel Goldstein in Orwell's novel *1984*. Goldstein, in the novel, is the public personification of terror. His evil machinations and clandestine acts of violence dominate the nightly news and political discourse. Goldstein's image appears each day on Oceania's television screens as part of the nation's “Two Minutes of Hate” daily ritual. And without surrendering all power and civil liberties to the state, Goldstein, like bin Laden and the Islamic terrorists, will kill you. All excesses are justified in the titanic fight against evil personified. This steady inculcation of fear, which justifies the pernicious ideology of permanent war, has left us clamoring for our own enslavement.

Like the residents of Oceania we forgot that terrorism is a tactic, one that has been with us since Sallust wrote about the Jugurthine War. And you cannot make war against a tactic. Terrorists are defeated by isolating themselves within their own societies. And after 9/11 we had garnered the empathy of not only the world, but the Muslim world where I was working at the

time as a reporter for *The New York Times*. Muslims were appalled at what had been carried out in the name of their religion. Sheikh Tantawi, the chief Islamic authority in the Sunni Muslim world, denounced the attacks of 9/11 as a crime against humanity, which they were, and Osama bin Laden as a fraud, someone who had no religious training or authority to issue religious edicts of fatwas. If we had had the courage to be vulnerable, to build on this empathy, rather than dropping iron fragmentation bombs all over the Middle East, we would be far safer and more secure today. But we drank deep from the very dark elixir of nationalism, that toxic brew of self-exaltation and racism, that elevation of ourselves and degeneration of others, and at that moment embraced the evil we set out to fight. We widened our occupation of Muslim land across the Middle East, unleashed proxy wars in Yemen and Pakistan and turned our backs on the brutal assaults by Israel on the Palestinians and Lebanese.

The attacks on the World Trade Center illustrate that those who oppose us, rather than coming from another moral universe, have been schooled well in modern warfare. The dramatic explosions, the fireballs, the victims plummeting to their deaths, the collapse of the towers in Manhattan were straight out of Hollywood. Where else, but from the industrialized world, did the suicide bombers learn that huge explosions and death above a city skyline are a peculiar and effective form of communication? They mastered the language we taught them. They understand that the use of disproportionate violence against innocents is a way to make a statement. We leave the same calling cards. It was Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense in the summer of 1965, who defined the bombing raids, which would eventually leave hundreds of thousands of civilians north of Saigon dead, as a means of communication to the Communist regime in Hanoi. The death spiral we have embraced is one where, as Nietzsche knew, we pit our monster against their monsters. Terrorism against us will not end until the state terrorism we have unleashed on Muslim soil ends. We began this cycle. Only we can end it.

The torture of Pvt. Bradley Manning mirrors the torture of the dissident Winston Smith at the end of *1984*. Manning, held as a “maximum custody detainee,” has spent 23 of every 24 hours alone. He was denied exercise. He could not have a pillow or sheets for his bed. Army doctors plied him with antidepressants. The cruder forms of torture of the Gestapo have been refined by Orwellian techniques, largely developed by government psychologists, to psychologically destroy human beings. We break souls as well as bodies. It is more effective. And by breaking dissidents like Manning – who exposed the war crimes we are committing in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, it sends a message to all who contemplate defying state power.

We can all be taken to Orwell’s dreaded Room 101 to become compliant and harmless. These “special administrative measures” are routinely imposed on dissidents, including Syed Fahad Hashmi, who was imprisoned under these conditions for three years before going to trial. Thousands of detainees in our black sites around the globe experience these forms of scientific torture as do those in our maximum security prisons where the state makes war on our most politically astute underclass – African-Americans. We once had Huxley’s World State, with its easy credit, consumerism and mass produced products, but that was only a temporary diversion as we were cleverly stripped of personal and political power. Now that the credit has dried up, the mass produced goods are no longer inexpensive, and our ability to make a decent standard of living has eroded, we get Orwell’s naked, iron fist.

The noose is tightening. The era of amusement is being replaced by the era of repression. Tens of millions of citizens have their e-mails and phone records turned over to the government. We are the most monitored and spied-on citizenry in human history. Our daily routines are recorded on dozens of security cameras. Our proclivities and habits are recorded on the Internet. Our profiles are electronically generated. Our bodies are patted down at airports and filmed by scanners. And public service announcements, car inspection stickers, and public transportation posters constantly urge us to report suspicious activity. Public space has been privatized by corporations who use their own security forces to prevent public expressions of discontent, to remind us that we are nothing more than consumers. The enemy, we are told, is everywhere.

Those who do not comply with the security dictates of the war on terror, a war which, as Orwell noted, is endless, are silenced. The draconian security measures used to cripple protests at the G-20 gatherings in Pittsburgh and Toronto were wildly disproportionate for the level of street activity. But they sent, like the torture of Manning, a clear message – DO NOT TRY THIS. The FBI’s targeting of antiwar and Palestinian activists, which saw agents raid homes in Minneapolis and Chicago, is a harbinger of what is to come for all who dare defy the state’s official Newspeak. The agents – our Thought Police – seized phones, computers, documents and other personal belongings. Subpoenas to appear before a grand jury have since been served on 26 people. The subpoenas cite federal law prohibiting “providing material support or resources to designated foreign terrorist organizations.” Terror, even for those who have nothing to do with terror, becomes the blunt instrument used by Big Brother to protect us from ourselves.

“Do you begin to see, then, what kind of world we are creating?” Orwell wrote. “It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic Utopias that the

old reformers imagined. A world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as it refines itself.”

Acts of resistance in the face of evil are moral acts. They are carried out because people of conscience can no longer tolerate abuse and despotism. They are carried out not because they are effective or even practical in a utilitarian sense but because they are right. Those who begin these acts are few in number. They are dismissed by the cynics who hide their fear behind their worldliness. Resistance, at its core, is about affirming life in a world dominated by corporate systems of death. It is the supreme act of faith, the highest form of spirituality. It is time for us to choose whose side we are on, who we will stand with as our empire unravels, as hunger and suffering – already the norm for half the world’s population – becomes familiar to our own underclass. It is time to accept that to live, in the fullest sense of the word, to exist as a free and independent human being, means open rebellion and a persistent defiance of all centers of established power – including the Democratic Party.

Those who recognize the injustice of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, who concede that these wars are not only a violation of international law but under the post-Nuremberg laws are defined as criminal wars of aggression, yet continue to support politicians, including Barack Obama, who fund and advance these wars, have forfeited their rights as citizens. By allowing the status quo to go unchallenged – from Wall Street to Baghdad – they become agents of injustice. To do nothing is to do something. And those who profess a love of democracy and justice, who continue to cooperate with these established centers of power, practice a faux morality. They vent against war and the corporate state on the Internet or among themselves but do not actually resist. They take refuge in the conception of themselves as practical men and women, as realists, as moderates. They stand on what they insist is the middle ground without realizing that the middle ground has shifted under us, that the old paradigm of left and right, liberal and conservative, is meaningless in a world where, to quote Immanuel Kant, all of our structures of power have embraced “a radical evil.”

This timidity, this failure to act, is the worst form of moral cowardice. It cripples and destroys us. When Dante enters the “city of woes” in the *Inferno* he hears the cries of “those whose lives earned neither honor nor bad fame,” those rejected by heaven and hell, those who dedicated their lives solely to the pursuit of happiness. These are all the “good” people, the ones who never made a fuss, who filled their lives with vain and empty pursuits, harmless no doubt, to amuse themselves, who never took a stand for anything, never risked anything, who went along. They never looked too hard at their lives, never felt the need, never wanted to look.

As long as we remain paralyzed by fear – and fear of the other is the only thing Obama and the Democratic Party intend to offer us – we will continue to be disempowered and impoverished. To resist, while there is still time, has become a moral imperative. It must be carried out not because it will work – I am not naïve enough to promise you that – but because it is right. We cannot use the word hope if we do not actively resist, if we are not willing to make hope visible. Courage, as Aristotle wrote, is the highest of human virtues because without it we are unlikely to practice any other virtue. And once we find this courage we find freedom.

Albert Camus argued that we are separated from each other. Our lives, he wrote, are meaningless. We cannot finally influence fate. We will all die. Our individual being will be obliterated. And yet Camus wrote that “one of the only coherent philosophical positions is revolt. It is a constant confrontation between man and his obscurity. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.”

“A living man can be enslaved and reduced to the historic condition of an object,” Camus warned. “But if he dies in refusing to be enslaved, he reaffirms the existence of another kind of human nature which refuses to be classified as an object.”

The rebel, for Camus, always stands with the oppressed – the unemployed, the sick, the homeless, the one out of four children in this county who depend on food stamps to eat, the Palestinians in Gaza, the civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan, the disappeared who are held in our global black sites, the legions of poor in our inner cities and depressed rural communities, undocumented workers and those locked away in our prison system. To stand with them does not permit us to collaborate with parties, such as the Democrats, who can mouth the words of justice while carrying out acts of oppression. It means open, direct defiance and lonely acts of rebellion.

The power structure and its liberal apologists dismiss the rebel as counterproductive. They condemn the rebel for refusing to compromise on justice. The elites and their apologists call for calm and patience. They use the hypocritical language of tolerance, compromise, generosity and compassion to argue that the only alternative is to accept and work with systems of power that practice none of these virtues. The rebel, however, is beholden to a moral commitment that makes it impossible to stand with the power elite. The rebel refuses to be bought off with foundation grants, invitations to the White House, television appearances, book contracts, academic appointments or empty rhetoric. The rebel is not concerned with self-promotion, a career or public opinion. The rebel knows that, as Augustine wrote, hope has two beautiful daughters, anger and courage – anger at the way things are

and the courage to see that they do not remain the way they are. The rebel is aware that virtue is not rewarded. The act of rebellion defines itself. And in these acts of rebellion – especially when they are carried out against monolithic forces of power – we see human majesty.

“You do not become a ‘dissident’ just because you decide one day to take up this most unusual career,” Vaclav Havel said when he battled the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. “You are thrown into it by your personal sense of responsibility, combined with a complex set of external circumstances. You are cast out of the existing structures and placed in a position of conflict with them. It begins as an attempt to do your work well, and ends with being branded an enemy of society. ... The dissident does not operate in the realm of genuine power at all. He is not seeking power. He has no desire for office and does not gather votes. He does not attempt to charm the public. He offers nothing and promises nothing. He can offer, if anything, only his own skin – and he offers it solely because he has no other way of affirming the truth he stands for. His actions simply articulate his dignity as a citizen, regardless of the cost.”

The capacity to exercise moral autonomy, the capacity to refuse to cooperate, offers us the only route left to personal freedom and a life with meaning. Rebellion is its own justification. Those of us who come out of the religious left have no quarrel with Camus. Camus is right about the absurdity of existence, right about finding worth in the act of rebellion rather than some bizarre dream of an afterlife or Sunday School fantasy that God rewards the just and the good. “Oh my soul,” the ancient Greek poet Pindar wrote, “do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible.” We differ with Camus only in that we have faith that rebellion is not ultimately meaningless. Rebellion allows us to be free and independent human beings, but rebellion also, I believe, chips away, however imperceptibly, at the edifice of the oppressor and sustains the dim flames of hope, empathy, justice and love. And in moments of profound human despair these flames are never insignificant. They keep alive the capacity to be human. We must become, as Camus said, so absolutely free that “existence is an act of rebellion.” Those who do not rebel in our age of totalitarian capitalism, those who convince themselves that there is no alternative to collaboration, commit spiritual and moral suicide.

Aleksandr Herzen, speaking a century ago to a group of anarchists about how to overthrow the czar, reminded his listeners that it was not their job to save a dying system but to replace it: “We think we are the doctors. We are the disease.” All resistance must recognize that the body politic and global capitalism are dead. We should stop wasting energy trying to reform or appeal to it. This does not mean the end of resistance, but it does mean

very different forms of resistance. It means turning our energies toward building sustainable communities to weather the coming crisis, since we will be unable to survive and resist without a cooperative effort. It means acceptance that this stance will outlive us, that all we fight for may be even further from our reach when our lives draw to a close. But external reality cannot be the yardstick for how we measure the moral life.

Our mediocre and bankrupt elite are desperately trying to save a system that cannot be saved. More importantly, they are trying to save themselves. All attempts to work within this decayed system and this class of power brokers will prove useless. And resistance must respond to the harsh new reality of a global, capitalist order that will cling to power through ever-mounting forms of brutal and overt repression. Once credit dries up for the average citizen, once massive joblessness creates a permanent and enraged underclass and the cheap manufactured goods that are the opiates of our commodity culture vanish, we will probably evolve into a system that more closely resembles classical totalitarianism. Cruder, more violent forms of repression will have to be employed as the softer mechanisms of control favored by what the philosopher Sheldon Wolin calls our “inverted totalitarianism” break down.

We cannot allow ourselves to surrender to the dehumanizing ideology of totalitarian capitalism. Acts of resistance which keep alive another narrative, empower others whom we may never meet to stand up and carry the flame we pass to them. And I know of what I speak. It was my father’s life of defiance, his fight as a Presbyterian minister for racial equality, against war and finally his outspoken defense of gay rights – positions that sabotaged his career and drove him from pulpit after pulpit – that set every single standard by which I measure my own life. It is my voice that you hear. But these are his words. And in the Christian faith we call this resurrection.

*Seminary Ridge Review is pleased to publish this oral presentation delivered May 4, 2011, by Christopher Hedges and Marty Steven’s “Scripts in Scripture” as a part of the Spring Convocation entitled, “We Tell to Love the Story.” While we were able to include Hedges’ text, the lively exchange during question and answers with the speaker are not included here. – Ed*

*Christopher Hedges, a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist for The New York Times and a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, is the author of several national best sellers including War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning, American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America, Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle, and Death of the Liberal Class. He is a senior fellow at The Nation Institute in New York City. Visit [www.truthdig.com/chris\\_hedges](http://www.truthdig.com/chris_hedges).*

## Scripts in Scripture: Varied Voices in the Greatest Story Ever Told

*Marty Stevens*

### *Introduction*

Spring Convocation this year is focused on the telling of stories, and what better story to consider than the Greatest Story Ever Told; or, perhaps more closely aligned with my particular interest and expertise, the Greatest Stories Ever Told in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> The stories of scripture are foundational in our lives as people of faith, worth reading and rereading because they speak to us when we study them.

Consider what some ancient witnesses said about the study of scripture. First, from Deuteronomy: “The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” Next, from a section of the Mishnah, the descriptive law compiled by rabbis around 200 CE: “Study it, study it – for everything is in it! Examine it diligently until you are worn out with old age by it, and do not be distracted from it; you could have no better measure than it.” And, from Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa at the end of the fourth century CE: “There are two things which all treatment of the scriptures is aiming at: a way to discover what needs to be understood, and a way to put across to others what has been understood.”

Augustine’s challenge to “discover what needs to be understood” has given rise to various methodologies of biblical interpretation down through the centuries. Arising in the second half of the nineteenth century, historical-critical methodology has been dominant in our reading of the Bible since at least the 1950s. All of us in this room are indebted to the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, whether we are formally educated in biblical studies or not.

The Bible has something to say to the reader, and that message is to be found primarily in the ancient world behind the text, and in the world of the ancient biblical author. The strange world of the Bible became more familiar to its students through the burgeoning discipline of archaeology and the discovery of treasure troves of ancient texts. We learned about ancient cultures – the way they lived and worked and worshiped and governed. We learned about ancient literary genres – the hymn, the war oracle, the folk tale, the law. We learned about ancient authors – folks we labeled J, E, D, and P, prophets we called First, Second, and Third. We could begin to answer the question, “What did it mean?” as we learned the history of Israel. The benefits of the historical-critical method are enormous.

And then we began to notice some of the drawbacks of this methodology. What had once been a grand narrative was divided into discrete parts, sometimes very small discrete parts. As interpreters, we were pulling individual threads of the biblical tapestry and examining each thread very carefully. Biblical narratives were stripped down to the bare basics, on the assumption that the reconstructed “original” story was the most accurate version of the truth. Later editors were dismissed as interlopers in the literary enterprise.

Some themes in the grand narrative were highlighted, for example covenant or law, while other themes were ignored, for example, creation or wisdom. Because the interpretation of the Bible depended on knowing so much about the ancient context, many non-scholars came to rely on the scholarly experts, abdicating their own role in the study of scripture. Perhaps most troubling, the quest for the ancient biblical writer ended up with an author that looked a lot like the contemporary interpreter. Turns out we weren’t so much discovering the world behind the text as we were choosing to read the parts of the text that looked and sounded like us.

In the last few decades, biblical interpreters have realized that scripture does not just speak to its students but that scripture and students speak to each other. Now it is widely recognized that each interpreter brings his/her own baggage to the interpretation enterprise, so that the meaning of the text is created in tandem. This became painfully obvious when we began to listen to the voices of non-First World, non-male readers of scripture.

We recognize now that the truth of the text is not limited to the historical accuracy of the text. When the benefits of the historical-critical method are coupled with a renewed sense of authoritative interaction with the reader, we move into a new paradigm of biblical interpretation. Rather than pulling specific threads of the narrative to create its meaning, we are stepping into the narrative world, imagining ourselves into the story, and finding meaning in the process.

My project for today is to explore with you some scripts in scripture, with the goal of teasing out some of the agendas that may be at work in the stories. You may know that the English word “agenda” comes from the Greek root *ago*, “to lead.” Agendas for meetings lead us toward particular tasks. Agendas for stories lead us toward particular points of view. Today I intend to explore two groups of scripts in scripture: interpretive double scripts and protest scripts. Each category has three examples from the Old Testament, which I will use to suggest possible agendas at work. I will end with some overall reflections on scripts in scripture.

### *Interpretive Double Scripts*

The first category of scripts I have called “interpretive double scripts.” By “double” I mean those places where the same story is told twice in different ways. By “interpretive” I mean to suggest we move beyond simply identifying stories as doublets and move toward some hunches as to why both versions of the story were included.

Let’s start with the premise that different versions arise from different authorial sources in different ancient contexts. Of course, we could debate the details of identified sources and their contexts: does that particular verse belong to the J source or the E source; where are the seams of the redactors or editors; and so forth. But these detailed questions drive us backward rather than propelling us forward. When we get too caught up in the ancient author’s context, we get stuck in the past and the Bible becomes an artifact rather than an artful expression of the divine word. I suggest we appreciate the scholarly work on sources and genres and cultural contexts, and also step into the tapestry of the text. Then we can begin to imagine what agendas are at work in the text, what the text is telling us about God and humanity, what questions the text is asking, and so forth. I have chosen three examples from the Old Testament to illustrate interpretive double scripts.

Readers of the Bible have long noted two different stories of creation in Genesis 1 and 2. In beginning, hovering over the deep, God speaks creation into being by separating and blessing. The account is structured so that days one, two, and three provide the framework for days four, five, and six to fill in with content. Day 1 provides day and night; Day 4 supplies sun and moon. Day 2 provides sky and seas; Day 5 supplies birds and fish. Day 3 provides earth; Day 6 supplies animals, including humanity. The climax is Day 7, the sanctification of the Sabbath. Genesis 1 is a well-done liturgy, with recurring refrains and orderly progression. God is majestic and regal. Scholars tell us Genesis 1 is from the priestly source, since this version of

creation sets the Sabbath as the crown of creation and employs liturgy as the divine way of relating to the world. Separation, the main job of the priests on earth is first done by the divine to create the world.

The ancient priests in the Babylonian exile tell to love the story of the regal God, who counters the Babylonian creation story where the gods do battle with dragons to create the world. The priests tell to love the story of order conquering chaos, simply by speaking the divine word. No battles, no dragons; just liturgy and order and Sabbath rest. And what of the dragons of chaos let loose in the world since the time of the Israelite priests? We know their threat. We tell to love the story of the power and majesty of God, a life-giving story to all who feel threatened by chaos.

On the other hand, Genesis 2 sounds like a story told around the campfire. The Lord God gets down and dirty, forming a mud pie in human form, captured exquisitely by a Hebrew pun, forming *'adamah* into *'adam*, something like “Earth into Earthling.” Then the Lord God breathes into it, and sets it in a garden to serve the land. When that one is lonely, God becomes a surgeon, sculpting a partner from the very flesh and bone of the human, forming the *'ish* into the *'ishah*, man into woman. God is intimate and compassionate.

Genesis 2, from the southern Israelite J source, sets farming as the divinely ordained vocation. Land, man, and woman are in an intimate partnership with the Lord God, who brings the rain as needed and watches over it all. The ancient authors tell to love the story of the farmer God, who counters the Canaanite fertility gods who claim to bring prosperity to the land. And what about our own relationship to the land? In the ecological and global multinational script we seem to be reading currently, what of our relationship to the land, to each other, and to the animals? We tell to love the story of the intimate partnership of God, land, man, and woman, a life-giving story to all who depend on farm and family for survival.

When we read the two creation stories in sequence, we encounter both the transcendence and the immanence of the divine. We tell to love the story of God who creates an abundance of all things simply by speaking. And we tell to love the story of God who fashions the human race from the very stuff of the earth and calls humanity into partnership with the land, forming the orderly framework of the world.

My second example is the story of the escape from Egypt by crossing the Red Sea in Exodus 14. Whereas Genesis 1 and 2 are two different scripts standing side-by-side as a doublet, many modern readers do not even notice that there appear to be two different scripts for the foundational event of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. The stories have become intertwined, one with another. Here is one of the scripts:

But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” And the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. The Egyptians said, “Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.” As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.

This story of deliverance depicts a pillar of cloud and fire representing the divine presence. The Israelites stand still while the Lord fights against the Egyptians in a kind of marshy setting. Scholars attribute this script to the J-source, and like the J-story of Genesis 2 we just looked at, it speaks to its original Canaanite setting. Here, the Lord as Divine Warrior uses natural phenomena to battle the enemy. The ancient authors tell to love the story of God who uses the ordinary stuff of life – clouds, fire, water, an east wind, marshes – to deliver God’s people. Many of us could tell stories of how we glimpse the power of the divine through the ordinary stuff of life. We tell to love the story of how God encounters us in ordinary events that turn out to be life-giving acts of deliverance.

Here is the other script:

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground.” The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.” So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea re-

turned to its normal depth. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

This is the familiar Cecil B. DeMille version: Moses lifts his staff and the waters form walls to the left and right as the Israelites cross on dry land. Scholars attribute this script to the Priestly source, and like the Priestly story of Genesis 1, it speaks to its original Babylonian context. This depiction of deliverance at the Red Sea closely parallels the Babylonian ritual when the cult statue of the chief god Marduk was brought out of the temple and through the Ishtar gate onto the great Processional Way. This script tells to love the story that the God of Israel is more powerful than the god of the Babylonians, despite Israel’s current situation of exile. And who of us doesn’t long for such a powerful God? We tell to love the story of God who will use whatever means necessary to rescue us from whatever threatens us.

My third example of interpretive scripts is the depiction of what is commonly called “the history of ancient Israel” but is probably better described as “historiography.” As many have noted, the Western, post-enlightenment notion of history as an accurate depiction of what really happened is a naïve concept, since there is no such thing as “an accurate depiction of what really happened.” All narration of history – ancient and modern – includes the selection of certain events rather than others, the development of certain storylines rather than others, and so forth. The history of the monarchy in ancient Israel is told on the one hand in the books of 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings and, on the other hand, in the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles.

Even a cursory reading of Chronicles reveals that this is a squeaky clean version of Israel’s history. To name some familiar examples: King Saul and David do not have an extended, contentious relationship; those pesky Philistines are routed easily; the entire sordid episode of David and Bathsheba is nowhere to be found; King David’s son Absalom does not revolt against his father in an attempt to claim the throne; David’s daughter Tamar is not raped by her half-brother; King Solomon does not have multiple foreign wives and myriads of concubines, nor does he conscript Israelites for forced labor to build the Temple or palace; King Hezekiah is depicted as a great reformer, almost equivalent to the great King Josiah; the prophets are 100% supportive of the kings, since the kings do nothing deserving prophetic rebuke.

Chronicles manifests an interest in portraying the monarchy of the Southern Kingdom as faithful servants of God, worthy models of what earthly kingship under the King of Kings ought to be. We tell to love the

story of our faithful ancestors who obeyed God in all their actions. Many would label Chronicles “revisionist” history because of the many divergences from the books of Samuel and Kings. But this label betrays a naïveté regarding the scripts embedded in Samuel and Kings. Who is to say that the episodes found in Kings and not in Chronicles are accurate reports of “real” episodes? The story of David and Bathsheba and the machinations surrounding her husband Uriah are so convoluted that they seem believable only in the literary sense.

Or perhaps ancient authors humanized their heroes for the same reason we prefer humanized heroes today – if God can use David with all his character flaws, then God can use someone like me. We tell to love the story of our ancestors who, despite their failures, strove to be faithful to God. Clearly, the authors of Samuel and Kings are interested in promoting the Deuteronomic law as the litmus test of good kingship. As the story is told, the law is followed only by the kings of the Southern Kingdom. In the books of Kings, the northerners are chastised for seceding from the United Monarchy of David and Solomon, for engaging in forbidden rituals with foreign gods, and for being so wicked that they were given over by God to the Assyrians. We tell to love the story of how our ancestors, the Southerners, were the true Israel!

### *Protest Scripts*

Next I want to explore some scripts in scripture that I have grouped together under the heading “Protest Scripts.” “Protest” may be too strong a word. I don’t mean protests like the ones currently sweeping across the Middle East or the ones that swept across college campuses in the late 1960s. In using the label “Protest” I mean to imply a kind of resistance much more subtle, more hidden, and more nuanced. I mean to say that Protest Scripts provide voices in opposition to other voices in scripture representing the Dominant or Majority Scripts. The Protest Scripts speak for the non-dominant and the minority.

My first example of a Protest Script is an obvious one, the book of Job. The book of Job is part of a broad category known as Wisdom literature, evidence for which exists for many ancient cultures. In the Bible, Wisdom literature includes Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Esther, and Job, and the Wisdom script can be traced in other books of the Bible as well. And what is the Wisdom script? In short, God has woven wisdom into the very fabric of the universe so that those who seek wisdom will find it. And in finding, the wise will act righteously and be blessed with long life, prosperity, and honor. Those who do not seek wisdom, or those who deliber-

ately reject wisdom, will be foolish, without the benefits of long life, prosperity, and honor.

We further note that these Wisdom books in the Old Testament follow the so-called Historical Books, primarily authored by the source known as the Deuteronomic Historian. And what is the script of the Deuteronomic Historian? In short, you get what you deserve. When you are righteous and obey the commandments, you are blessed with long life, prosperity, and honor. When you are wicked and do not walk in the way of the Lord, you do not enjoy long life, prosperity, and honor. In other words, we tell to love the story of seeking and finding wisdom, of obeying the commandments. We tell to love the story of our getting the reward we deserve and their getting the punishment they deserve.

Now, keeping in mind the Wisdom script and the Deuteronomic Historian’s script, we can explore how the book of Job functions both in favor of and against the dominant script. To illustrate the storyline of the book of Job, I draw from the series of 23 engravings done by William Blake in the 1800s. When we first meet Job, he is a wealthy man with the perfect family, 7 sons and 3 daughters. Blameless and upright, he obeys the ritual commandments, even sacrificing on behalf of his children just in case. Life is following the dominant script.

Then disaster strikes: his children and all their possessions are destroyed. Yet the text says Job “did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing” (1:22); he remained “a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil; he persisted in his integrity” (2:3). Disaster intensifies when Job’s health is affected and his previous honor dissipates. In the extended conversations that follow, Job’s three friends (and I use the term ‘friend’ loosely here) speak from the Wisdom and Deuteronomic Historian scripts. They insist on the tit-for-tat theology that describes a universe in which righteousness is rewarded and wickedness is punished. “You get what you deserve,” they insist. “If you were wise you would be rewarded, not punished.” Job’s voice is a protest script. “It ain’t necessarily so,” he protests. “Sure, it’s a great concept, especially if you’re the righteous, but it ain’t that simple. The dominant scripts, Wisdom and Deuteronomic Historian, do not stand up to the messiness of lived reality.”

And God seems to agree with Job’s assessment of the dominant scripts. God’s speech from the whirlwind has often been interpreted as the divine version of “who the heck are you, puny human, to question me?” Another way to hear God’s speech is as the divine version of “Job is right. Life is messy and doesn’t always turn out like you think it should. But that’s the way I created the world: with predator and prey, with jackals and sea monsters, with desert wastelands and diseases. Creation itself is messy, and since you’re part

of creation, life is messy. Job is right. You don't always get what you think you deserve. Even so, life with me is worth living." Job – and God – protest the easy theology that the righteous or the wise always get rewarded and the wicked or the foolish always get punished. It ain't necessarily so. Whoever among us has not yet learned this lesson will no doubt need to do so. Here, we tell to love the story of faith in God despite the messiness of life.

My second Protest Script is the book of Jonah. Jonah is one of those stories that almost everyone knows (well, at least the part about the whale). Calling Jonah a Protest Script probably calls to mind Jonah's own protest against God's call to be a prophet. When the word of the Lord said to go east, Jonah immediately set out to go west. For this rebellious behavior, Jonah has been called the 'anti-prophet.' But Jonah's action is actually part of the dominant Prophetic Script. Prophets called by God in the Bible regularly object to God's call; one could even say prophets are expected to object. When God tells Moses to go to Pharaoh and bring the people out of slavery in Egypt, Moses objects with a whole host of reasons why that's a bad idea. When Isaiah sees a vision of the Lord sitting on a throne surrounded by flying singing *seraphim*, he objects that he is a man of unclean lips. When the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah announcing his appointment as a prophet to the nations, Jeremiah objects because he is only a boy. And so forth.

Objection to God's call to be a prophet is part of the Prophetic Script in the Bible, probably because the script enhances the power of the divine word over against the weakness of the human messenger. So, while Jonah's protest against God's call to be a prophet seems extreme, and is certainly entertaining, it does follow the Prophetic Script. We tell to love the story of God's persistence in calling prophets, even against their will.

Where the book of Jonah departs from the Prophetic Script is in its stance toward foreign nations. An important part of the dominant Prophetic Script is the Oracle against a Foreign Nation. The prophets regularly vilify foreign nations for their actions against the chosen Israelite nation or for their rebellious attitudes toward the God of Israel or both. Prophets regularly convince us that foreign nations deserve utter destruction.

Granted, there are glimpses here and there of another script involving foreign nations. For example, we may think of Second Isaiah calling King Cyrus of Persia the 'messiah' (Isa 45:1) to be used by God as an instrument to save Israel. Or we may remember some of the eschatological prophecies of nations streaming to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel, as in Isaiah 2 or Micah 4. So yes, there are glimpses of a kinder, gentler attitude toward foreign nations, but always in relation to God's election of Israel. But the book of Jonah is something altogether different. The inclusion of a foreign

nation in God's dominion for the sake of the nation of Israel is completely absent. The salvation of Nineveh, the capital of the foreign enemy Assyria, is unrelated to the fate of Israel. And of course, that's what Jonah protests.

Why should this enemy of Israel, renowned for its military might and brutal cruelty, receive God's mercy rather than God's destruction? What has Assyria done to deserve God's mercy? Just because they repent after decades of brutality against Israel, that's enough to avoid destruction? Jonah actually voices the dominant Prophetic Script. God is the one who voices the Protest Script. We tell to love the story that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. We tell to love the story that God loves the peoples of the world: red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in God's sight.

The final Protest Script I want to consider with you is the book of Ruth. First, let's notice the placement of Ruth in the canon. In the ordering of the Hebrew Bible, Ruth is located in the third section of the canon known as the Writings. That is to say, the compilers of the Hebrew Bible recognized that the book of Ruth was not Torah, divine teaching, nor was it of the same genre as the books of the Prophets. Ancient Hebrew readers categorized Ruth as one of the Writings. From this placement and for other reasons, scholars believe Ruth was written in the post-exilic period, sometime after 500 BCE.

When the early Christians arranged the books of the Hebrew Bible, the inherited order was rearranged into a more or less chronological ordering based on when the events in the books were believed to have taken place. The Christian canon moves the book of Ruth to follow immediately after the book of Judges, since the book begins, "In the days of the judges." I want to suggest three ways in which the book of Ruth functions as a Protest Script.

The book of Ruth is a text primarily about women. Even a casual reader of the Bible quickly realizes that almost all the characters are men. Let's call this the Patriarchal Script, operating from a worldview that ascribes to men the power to manage all aspects of society. When we read the Patriarchal Script, we tell to love the story of a young, beautiful woman named Ruth who forsakes her own kin, goes to the land of Israel, gets married, bears a son, and lives happily ever after. That's the children's Sunday School version of the story, right? The Women's Protest Script tells to love the story of a bold, assertive woman who rebelled against the mores of society and went after what she needed. Let me explain.

The story opens with a familiar motif: a famine in the land of Israel forces a man and his wife and two sons to go south to find food. Within five verses the man has died, the two sons have both married and then died,

so that the wife is now left as a motherless widow in a foreign land without any visible means of economic support. Naomi instructs her two daughters-in-law according to the law in effect at that time; she tells them to return to their families of origin where they will be taken in and cared for. Ruth disobeys. Yes, she eloquently promises loyalty to her mother-in-law and her mother-in-law's God, but the fact remains that she disobeys.

In chapter 2, as she is gleaning in the field of Boaz, she conforms to the Patriarchal Script and acts like a proper young lady should. She politely asks permission to glean, she shows proper respect to Boaz after he addresses her, she works industriously all day, she reports meeting Boaz to her mother-in-law, and shares the bounty of her gleaning. Naomi realizes the implications of what has happened that day. Boaz, the owner of the field who has already noticed Ruth, is identified by Naomi as one of her nearest kin, a *go'el*. In Israelite law, the *go'el* is obligated to care for a motherless widow and to redeem property that has been transferred outside the immediate family, precisely the actions that Naomi needs in order to find economic security.

In chapter 3 the action picks up. Naomi instructs Ruth to take a bath, put on perfume, dress in her best clothes, go to the threshing floor that night, and wait until Boaz has finished eating and drinking. Then Naomi says Ruth should uncover his feet and lie down, awaiting further instructions. What kind of good Israelite woman sends her single daughter-in-law to a threshing floor at night where there will be a bunch of men carousing together? Now Naomi is the one who goes off the Patriarchal Script. Naomi is the bold one who sets out to get what she needs by using her daughter-in-law to seduce the *go'el*. Granted, the text doesn't actually say that Naomi instructs Ruth to seduce Boaz, but what else are we to think? C'mon... perfume, best clothes, let him get drunk, uncover his feet (a well-known euphemism for genitals in the Bible), and do what he tells you?

Ruth obeys, at least at first, going to the threshing floor and lying at his feet. But when Boaz notices her, she tells *him* what to do: "spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin." The Patriarchal Script has been shredded. Younger women do not speak to older men, especially to tell them what to do, not to mention lying down at his feet at night! We find out that Boaz sticks to the Patriarchal Script, acknowledging the presence of a closer kinsman than he, who, according to the law, must be given the first right of redemption.

Also, as would be prescribed by law, Boaz gives Ruth six measures of barley to take home with her the next morning so that she would not return to her mother-in-law empty-handed. We can only imagine what Naomi is thinking when she asks Ruth slyly, "So... how'd it go last night?" Ruth shows her the seed Boaz sent: seed for barley, but not seed for a son. Boaz has not

sent her home empty-handed, but apparently, has sent her home empty-bellied. Yet, the barley seed signals Boaz's commitment to provide 'belly-seed' once the legal issues are resolved. We tell to love the story of women who subvert the Patriarchal Script by going after what they need, and getting it.

The book of Ruth is also a text about a Moabite, a fact the narrator never lets us forget. Ruth is introduced as a Moabite just four verses into the story, and on six subsequent occasions in three of the story's four chapters we are reminded that she is "Ruth the Moabite" (1.22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10). Moabites have a really bad reputation in the Old Testament, primarily on the basis of three stories. Let me remind you.

In Gen 19:30-38, we find Abraham's nephew Lot with his two daughters living in a cave near the Dead Sea. His wife has been turned into a pillar of salt and Sodom and Gomorrah where they lived has been utterly destroyed by fire. Lot's daughters hatch a plan to seduce their father after he is drunk with wine, "so that we may preserve offspring through our father" (Gen 19:32, 34). They carry out their plan that night and the next. "Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day" (Gen 19:36-37). Ruth is a Moabite, a generational descendant of seduction and incest.

The second story about the Moabites begins in Numbers 22. The king of Moab sends messengers to hire Balaam, a Mesopotamian sorcerer, to come and curse the people of Israel encamped in Moab. From this story, we learn that Moabites are opposed to the God of Israel, willing to bribe a foreign holy man to bring a curse on the whole company of Israel. Then, Moabite women "invited the people [Israelites] to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods" (Num 25:2). One of the Israelite men even brought a Moabite woman into his tent, in the presence of Moses and the whole congregation. When an Israelite priest is able to pierce the man and the woman together through the belly with one sword-stroke, we understand what they were doing in the tent (Num 25:6-8). Ruth is a Moabite, a descendant of idolaters who seduce Israelite men.

The third story is recalled in Deut 23:3-4: "No Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt." Ruth is a Moabite, a descendant of ungenerous people who do not worthy to worship the God of Israel.

These three stories about Moabites give rise to three stereotypes in the Old Testament: Moabites are sexually suspect, idolatrous, and ungenerous. Ruth protests all three. Ironically, Naomi may have intended for Ruth the

Moabite to use her inherited sexual wiles to seduce a drunken, elder male relative, but Ruth resists that stereotypical Moabite tendency. And, as we have noted earlier, Ruth makes an eloquent, undying declaration of loyalty to her mother-in-law's god, so there's no way she could be called idolatrous. Ruth's devotion to Naomi leads to her generous labor in the fields, as well as her generosity in sharing. We tell to love the story of a Moabite woman who is sexually chaste, committed to the God of Israel, and generous. We tell to love the story of a Moabite woman who is an Israelite heroine.

And the book of Ruth is a text about post-exilic identity. We can certainly appreciate that the reestablishment of an Israelite identity after the exile would have been a daunting task. And like other peoples throughout history, some of the Israelite leaders wanted to establish identity by drawing clear boundaries around who's in and who's out. In the post-exilic books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, the reader is overwhelmed by the lists of names, all intended to establish a pure Israelite lineage. Even though the chapters of Ezra and Nehemiah as we currently have them are likely rearranged from the original scrolls, we can piece together the story.

Ezra, the priest and scribe, reads the Law of Moses publicly to the people, day after day. Then Ezra reports, "The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites." Ah, those Moabites again.

Ezra continues, "For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way" (Ezra 9:1-2). Ah, the issue of seed again, this time called "holy seed." The biological result of an Israelite man and a foreign woman will be that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of the land. Ezra gathers all the people to the Temple and commands, "You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the LORD the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives" (Ezra 10:10-11). There are so many men with foreign wives that they make appointments to come before the officials and renounce their foreign families, a process that takes two months.

The book of Ruth protests the letter of the law regarding foreign wives by recalling the spirit of the law: foreign wives are not bad in and of themselves, but only when they lead Israelites away from God. All seed given and used by God is holy. We tell to love the story of a Moabite woman who accepts the God of Israel, marries an Israelite man, and gives birth to the grandfather of King David.

The book of Ruth reacts against other identity issues in post-exilic Ezra-Nehemiah as well. Ezra-Nehemiah is about building walls, literally walls around Jerusalem and figuratively around Judean identity. The script of Ezra-Nehemiah is set in Jerusalem, the capital of the province, once the capital of an independent nation, the home of the temple, the place of the bureaucratic elite. The book of Ruth is set in Bethlehem, a rural village remembered in the literature as small and insignificant (Micah 5:2), a town in the hill country with no walls.

Ezra reads the law to people, who confess that they have not been keeping it. Likewise, Nehemiah acknowledges that they are not keeping laws since they are taking interest and foreclosing on property (Neh 5:10-11), not giving Levites their due portions (Neh 13:10), and conducting business on Sabbath (Neh 13:15-18). In the book of Ruth the characters act righteously even without the public reading of the law.

Ezra-Nehemiah is all about men, with long lists of names. In the book of Ruth, two of the three main actors are women with fully developed, three dimensional characters. We tell to love the story of an Israelite identity of openness, of justice born out of obedience to the law, and of women's important roles in society.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude, my project for today has been to explore with you some scripts in scripture, with the goal of teasing out some of the agendas that may be at work in the stories. I first talked about three examples of what I called 'interpretive double' scripts, where the same story is told twice in different ways. My claim in the examples was that each script advanced an agenda that addressed the ancient audience. The authors told the story in a particular way in order to address a particular ancient context, including the questions being asked and the issues being confronted by the audience. My claim is that for the biblical authors and compilers, the operative question is "How is God present and how does God relate to us in this story?" not, "What really happened?" If I am anywhere near being right, our lives as people of God are inextricably bound up with particular contexts. If the same event can be narrated in two different ways in the Bible, then we have permission from the Bible itself to think about our own stories differently. We tell to love the story of how God is present and how God relates to us in our particular context.

Then I talked about three examples of what I called "protest" scripts, texts that give attention to non-dominant voices. Protest scripts counter the dominant scripts in the culture. I believe this is a critical aspect of the Bible that needs to be recovered, because it reminds us that the Bible does not

speak with only one voice about most topics. Again, if I am anywhere near right about this, we have a lot to learn about listening to other scripts and learning how our script may be silencing others. We tell to love the story of how God is present in our own context, but also how God is present in other contexts, about which we need to learn.

My project today was to suggest ways in which scripts in scripture give us a glimpse into the varied voices in the Greatest Story Ever Told, the story we love to tell and the story we tell to love.

### *Notes*

- 1 Dr. Stevens' public lecture, for Spring Convocation 2011 was accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation, which we were unable to reproduce. – Ed

*Marty Stevens is Associate Professor in The Arthur L. Larson position of Stewardship and Parish Ministry, Chief Financial Officer and Registrar at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. Stevens holds a B.S. from University of North Carolina at Charlotte, an M.Div. from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary and a Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. She is also a CPA. Her most recent book is Theological Themes of the Old Testament: Creation, Covenant, Cultus, Character.*

## Daniel Alexander Payne: Venerable Preceptor for the African Methodist Episcopal Church

*Nelson T. Strobert*

*With Payne Theological Seminary, Gettysburg Seminary marked the 200th anniversary of Daniel Alexander Payne's birth this year with events at both schools, historical exhibits and lectures. The following biographical sketch by Nelson Strobert outlines Payne's life and distinguished accomplishments and notes the long term relationship with Samuel Schmucker.*

One of the most distinguished and illustrious pastors and teachers to attend Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg was Daniel Alexander Payne, a citizen of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first African American and person of color to study at a Lutheran seminary in America. Although his initial religious and educational experiences were formed in Charleston, South Carolina, Payne's formal theological education took place at Gettysburg Seminary. While he attended the Seminary for only two years (1835 – 1837), his encounter with President Schmucker, involvement with his cohorts, and immersion in theological studies helped to prepare him for his life as an ecclesial leader, university president, abolitionist, and historiographer. Payne accomplished all these in the midst of a country which was less than a century old and finding its own distinct identity away from the shores of Western Europe. In addition, Payne's accomplishments as a person of color emerged in a time when most Blacks in the United States were slaves and considered intellectually less able. He continued his work after a

war-torn nation's slaves were free and were attempting to find their niche in this strange land. As such, Payne was truly a student in the Gettysburg tradition of preparing students to encounter the community, nation, and world through their theological lenses.

### *Roots*

Daniel A. Payne was born to Martha and London Payne, free persons of color in Charleston, South Carolina on February 24, 1811. Payne recounted his earliest memories of his family life in his autobiography *Recollections of Seventy Years*.<sup>1</sup> These memories of family become a fundamental component for his development in later years. Payne recalled that his mother and father would sing hymns and pray aloud which often awakened Daniel early in the morning from sleep. In addition to these beginnings in religious education and nurture, Payne also recalled that London taught him the alphabet and simple spelling words. Thus his passion for education began from his early years.

Payne's formal education took place at the Minor's Moralist School in Charleston for two years and by private tutoring for three more. In 1828, Payne described his vocational conversion which occurred during a time of prayer upon hearing the words, "I have set thee apart to educate thyself in order that thou mayest be an educator to thy people" which he described as "irresistible and divine."

From these experiences and commitments, Payne opened his first school in 1829 in the home of a Caesar Wright with Wright's three children as his students. Payne also taught three slave adults at night and received from each a total of 50 cents. He had to find outside work but his school became quite successful, surprising the citizenry with the quality of the curriculum and the work done by its students. Then the school was abruptly closed in 1835 when a South Carolina law prohibited the education of slaves.

This seemed to Payne a deathblow to his aspiration to be a teacher for his brothers and sisters of color. Vocationally and religiously this was a different period. Overcoming anger and a questioning of God, Payne composed the poem, *The Mournful Lute, or the Preceptor's Farewell*. It expresses his agony and hope, as well as the culture and literary style he had learned.

Farewell! Farewell! Ye children of my love;  
 May joys abundant flow ye from above!  
 May peace celestial crown your useful days,  
 To bliss transported, sing eternal lays;  
 For sacred wisdom give a golden world,  
 And when foul vice his charming folds unfurl,

O Spurn the monster, though his crystal eyes  
 Be like bright sunbeams streaming from the skies!  
 And I! O whither shall your tutor fly?  
 Guide thou my feet, great Sovereign of the sky.  
*A useful life by sacred wisdom crowned,  
 Is all I ask, let weal and woe abound!*<sup>2</sup>

Payne's next step was indicated by a dream in which he traveled north dressed in a teaching garment. He received letters of recommendation from mentors and friends. One of these, Dr. John Bachman, pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Charleston.

### *The Road to Gettysburg*

With his letters of introduction, baggage, tears, emotional pangs, and deep regret, yet, simultaneously, trusting in God's promise to be with him, Payne sailed from Charleston in the late afternoon of May 9, 1835 for New York City.

In New York Payne used his letters of introduction. The last one took him to Pastor Daniel Strobel, a Lutheran to whom Payne showed a letter of introduction from Dr. Bachman. Strobel shared with Payne that he had arrived at a fortunate time for he himself had just been informed that there was a scholarship being offered by the student group, The Society of Inquiry on Missions, at Gettysburg Seminary. They intended to provide a scholarship for a young man of color who demonstrated talent and piety in order for that person to help with the social uplift of his people. Strobel urged Payne to respond. "Now, if you will go to Gettysburg and study theology there, you will be better fitted than you now are for usefulness among your people."

The Society of Inquiry on Missions was part of a student movement across the collegiate campuses in the United States that was popular during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its objectives included: cultivating the devotional life, informing students about mission issues, and sponsoring student activities such as providing education for a student for service in the church. The students at Andover Seminary were catalysts in promotion and correspondence of the Society with their peers at other institutions. The Evangelical Lutheran Society of Inquiry on Missions was established at Gettysburg Seminary in February 1827. The Society's objectives were to help prepare these men for the task of ministry upon leaving seminary and also to acquaint them with the various world religions. To this end, the students presented papers for discussion, reviewed works devoted to missions, and examined the lives of missionaries at their regular meetings. The call to

service was exemplified with their decision to support a person of color with a scholarship to study theology at their school. At a regular meeting of the society, (March 4, 1935) the membership pledged to support a free person of color for theological education:

Resolved that the members of this Society pledge themselves to afford a support to a suitable, free coloured man (if such a one can be obtained) sufficient to enable him to employ four years, in this seminary, in the prosecution of studies preparatory, to the sacred ministry, in the Lutheran Church...

Pastor Strobel offered Payne the scholarship. Payne pondered the proposal. He wanted to be a teacher for his people. He had not thought of theology as part of his training agenda. Nor had he contemplated the ordained ministry. To familiarize himself with Lutheran teaching he read *Popular Theology* by Samuel Simon Schmucker, president and chief professor of the Seminary. He was taken by Schmucker's writing and by his abolitionist thinking. These passionate words about slavery must have struck a chord within Payne (p. 252, first edition):

All should feel that crying injustice was inflicted by our ancestors on the poor African, by reducing him to slavery, and that we become partakers of their guilt, if we protract his degradation, and delay his restoration to the unalienable rights of man. Let the American patriot recollect the language of his fathers, "that all men are created equal," and have unalienable rights, among which is "liberty." let him remember, that with these words on their lips, they invoked the blessing of Heaven on their struggle, and that He who rules in the heaven of heavens heard their cry. Then let him look at the poor African, doomed to drag out his life in slavery amidst us.<sup>3</sup>

Payne had two more questions: would he be required to become a Lutheran, and would he be sent to Africa in a colonization program. Strobel assured him that neither of these was required. Then Payne was ready to go to Gettysburg.

### *The Gettysburg Experience*

After his short stay in what he called the "Quaker City," Payne took the train from Philadelphia to Columbia, Pennsylvania. From there he transferred to a stagecoach and arrived in the rural town of Gettysburg in the

southcentral part of the state. Arriving in the month of June of 1835, he was able to see the farmers and farmhands working in the fields. Exhausted from the trip, he was able to get a room in a local hotel where he rested until the next day when he arrived at the steps of the seminary.

Payne's life had been transformed in the space of four weeks. While he admired the beauty of the Blue Mountains and the flow of the hills from the point of the seminary, he could not get the image of his school and the students he taught out of his mind. On the one hand, he was experiencing beauty and peace, yet, on the other hand, this came through unjust actions on the part of the state government. He missed his home, his work, and the people. Payne's words express it best,

...O the parting scene in that schoolroom, those interesting children, and my sister, my only sister, whom I would never see again! But what made my thought almost agonizing was the recollection of the fact that this separation was the bitter product of unjust, cruel, and blasphemous laws – cruel and unjust to a defenseless race, blasphemous of that God who of one blood did make all the nations of the earth, all its races, all its families, every individual. Every night for many years after I left Charleston did I dream about it – wandering over its streets, bathing in its rivers, worshiping in its chapels, or teaching in my schoolroom, and sometimes I was sailing into it and sometimes flying out of it.

Payne's life at Gettysburg was in some ways like other students pursuing the study of theology for church leadership. He was enrolled that July session. The formal curriculum of the seminary for students beginning their theological studies included: Languages (Greek and Hebrew Philology), Sacred Geology, Sacred Chronology, Biblical and Profane History, and Biblical Antiquities.

In addition to his theological studies, Payne also participated in the extra-curricular activities of seminary students. He was an active member of the Evangelical Lutheran Society of Inquiry on Missions, the student group that awarded him the scholarship. It was not unusual for Dr. Schmucker to attend the meetings and listen to the presentations or share his particular concerns. Moreover, the students would correspond with their cohorts at other seminaries in the country.

Payne actively participated in the group, from presenting papers to his peers to saying the closing prayer at the conclusion of the meeting.<sup>4</sup> The members were not afraid to tackle the issue of slavery in the meetings. It would be interesting to note Payne's responses to their conversations but

there is no evidence of his comments about these discussions. Needless to say, the students were abolitionists in their thinking and questioned the issue on theological and political grounds.

In addition to this extracurricular activity, Payne also took the opportunity to preach in nearby churches and mission points, teach in Sunday schools, attend anti-slavery meetings within the community, and allow himself time for private devotions. In the midst of these activities Payne made several transformations. First, after being at the seminary for three months, he was confirmed into the Lutheran church and participated in the eucharist. Second, he made connections with the AME Church in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Third, he became introspective and developed a stronger devotional life than was exhibited prior to coming to the seminary. Payne gave no explanation for this denominational change or as to the method and scope of catechesis that was used. His only comment on his confirmation was in a diary entry, "O my God, I earnestly pray thee, to prepare my heart for the enjoyment of the same. O give me thy spirit." With such a statement and commitment, Payne must have felt he was theologically at home. The basis for Payne's at-homeness appears to have come from two sources: his formation in the Methodist church with its doctrine of perfectibility and the piety he experienced as a student at the seminary. These two motifs were wedded for Payne in his experience at the Seminary.

John Wesley insisted that Christians although baptized should strive for perfection in this life. This striving could be observed through the outward behavior. For Payne being perfect meant "flawless" behavior on the part of the Christian person. What he demanded and wanted to observe from others he demanded for himself. Throughout his diary entries and his autobiography Payne described his struggles, noted during his years at Gettysburg. Here he would differ with Schmucker who follows the classical Reformation and Lutheran understanding that human perfection cannot be attained in the human lifespan.

President Schmucker exemplified the other theological motif, that of Pietism. Payne also saw the integration of theological acuity and living the Christian life demonstrated in the Schmucker who was a vocal antislavery advocate. That was reflected in Schmucker's writings, as well as his influence on the thinking of the students under his care as President of Gettysburg Seminary.

Schmucker's inaugural address as President of Gettysburg Seminary entitled, "The Theological Education of Ministers" identified two prerequisites for the theological student of quality, "fervent piety and good natural talents." Piety was a requirement, for without it, the man could not be a faithful minister. In the case of natural talents, Schmucker was not requiring

an erudite student or one of superior intelligence but a student who would be able to have sound judgment. The ideal theological student demonstrated a love for God and for exhibiting that love in acts of mercy. In addition, the student would have those abilities that would benefit the future congregants. To all this, Schmucker also was emphatic about an educated, learned clergy in the church. To practice one's devotion and allegiance to God was not an excuse for anti-intellectual activity or neglect of continuing, on-going education by the student. Schmucker was emphatic when he stated, "...[A] religion that is from God, will not shrink from investigation, nor tremble before the intellectual attitude of friends or foes."

Payne was more than able to participate in and to be a member of the student body. His demonstrated piety can be documented in his diary entries. On one entry Payne resolved to go to bed early and rise by 4:00 a.m. in order to have personal prayer, read the Bible and have time for meditation. This would be repeated after dinner and before retiring for the evening.

Payne's attendance at Gettysburg would be short-lived. As a result of observing a solar eclipse while teaching in South Carolina, Payne sustained a weakened eye, which began to flair up again. Medical advice determined that Payne was not able to continue his studies. Now while that was difficult and a disappointment, it should be noted that it was not unusual for students to terminate their attendance at the seminary before completing the program. In fact, very few completed the full course of study. Again, it was a time of decision for Payne. Now what was left for this diligent student to do? Payne consulted with Schmucker who said in Payne's words that although the Lutheran church would be glad to have him serve in the denomination, he might find his usefulness fulfilled better in the AME church and advised him to join that body of Christians.

Although the best construction on Schmucker's response would seem to indicate that here he was exercising that for which he was an advocate i.e., an ecumenical spirit, his response also altered the rapprochement among African Americans and the Lutheran church on American soil. Apparently, Payne did not acknowledge any ambivalence or hesitancy on the part of Schmucker to continue to be the liberal churchman that was exhibited at the beginning of his stay. Payne noted a letter of recommendation, which Schmucker gave to him:

As you are about to leave the institution in which for about two years you have been pursuing a course of study preparatory to the holy ministry, it affords me unfeigned pleasure to testify that the effect of our daily intercourse during this time has been in unwavering confidence

in the integrity of your purposes and the excellence of our character, together with the conviction that the God who of one blood made all nations to dwell upon the face of the earth; will accompany you through life and crown with his blessing your labors in behalf of our oppressed kinsmen after the flesh.

This letter is significant for two important reasons. One, it asserts that Payne had frequent encounters with Schmucker while a student. Two, it indicates that although Payne pursued theological education to equip himself to be a better teacher, he had changed his vocation plans, he now saw himself called to the ministry as a pastor. From where and when the transformation came, Payne never discloses except upon his departure when he wrote,

I was lying upon my bed, lamenting and pondering over the future, when I felt a pressure from on high that constrained me to say with the Apostle Paul: "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel!" Though I had often spoken in the pulpit at Carlisle, yet not till then did I freely consent to devote myself to the work of the gospel ministry.

### *The Post-Gettysburg Years*

In the years following Payne's departure from the seminary, he developed and grew in his commitment to the life of the church and his responsibilities as a public figure in the church. His interests in church life, education, ecumenism, and abolitionism were borne out in his life as a pastor in the AME Church.

Following the advice of Schmucker, Payne sought to affiliate with the AME Church but postponed that decision when he learned that the church was not supportive of educated clergy. That being the case, he was licensed by the Frankean Synod of the Lutheran church (established in 1837 with strong anti-slavery sentiments) and ordained by the same synod in 1839. Although ordained, he did not serve a Lutheran congregation. However, with permission from the synodical president, he became the pastor of a Presbyterian church in East Troy, New York at the age of twenty-six. Again, illness forced Payne to make another transition. He returned to Carlisle and then to Philadelphia where he opened a school until he might be able to return to the pastoral ministry. As was the case previously as a teacher, Payne's school was a success, so much so, that two existing schools closed and he had their students. He was involved in this educational effort between 1839 and 1843. It is during this period that he wrote a letter (March 20, 1841) to Schmucker in which he described his effort. This letter indicated that Payne

had been in contact with Schmucker previously as Schmucker had made recommendations for agencies in which he might work in the mission field within the city. In addition we learn that Payne was a supporter of quality education for boys and girls. Moreover, Payne demonstrated that he continued to respect Schmucker, the "venerable preceptor" and his connection with Gettysburg Seminary.

While living in Philadelphia, Payne continued to be in contact with fellow clergy of the AME Church who encouraged him and urged him to affiliate with the denomination. Apparently in continued correspondence with Schmucker, Payne also received Schmucker's support for their requests. In 1841, Payne joined the Bethel Conference in Philadelphia and two years later, in 1843, he was brought onto their roster as itinerant minister. He began serving churches in Washington, D. C. and in Baltimore. Soon the denominational leaders and members gave him additional responsibilities undoubtedly due to his commanding leadership and intellectual abilities. In 1848, he was appointed historiographer of the AME Church and in 1852 he was elected bishop. From these two vocational changes in his life we are able to see his growth and development in church leadership as he performs his ecclesial duties, recreates the history of the denomination, ventures into educational leadership and encounters the global church.

As a bishop in the church, Payne covered many miles and encountered many people within and beyond the church. One of those encounters was with President Lincoln. In fact, he had two conversations with the president. The first conversation took place at the beginning of the year 1862 with the United States in the midst of the Civil War. The second conversation occurred a few months later on April 11, 1862, the day that congress passed the bill to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. Payne visited President Lincoln to inquire whether he intended to sign the bill. Payne further declared that at the time of his election people of color had the president in their prayers to assist him in overpowering the institution of slavery. Though the president did not respond to the question posed by Payne and others to the question, Lincoln approved the bill on April 16, 1862.

While engaged with the on-going issues of the bishop's office, Payne continued to be an advocate for the liberation of his black brothers and sisters. Although he was not part of the abolitionist speaking circuit like Frederick Douglass, Payne, nevertheless, took every opportunity available to speak on behalf of those who did not have the power or access to those with the power that could make a difference. His encounter with President Lincoln indicated the respect that Payne had acquired over the years. In addition, this encounter indicated that the president was mindful and respectful of the black church and its leadership.

As part of his responsibilities as historiographer of the AME Church, Payne wrote *The Semi-Centenary and the Retrospection of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. In this work, Payne asserted that the establishment of Black Methodism and its recent development was on equal footing with Anglo-Western Methodism that had far more members. This work is also important for it identified Payne's on-going sentiment for and connections with the seminary in Gettysburg. He dedicated this work to alumni of the Seminary whom he identifies by name and members of the Society for the Inquiry on Missions. He thanked them for their confidence and support of him while a student. Although they gave him food, clothes and shelter, he was equally thankful for culture that he received. He didn't define the term "culture," but one might venture to guess that his experience helped to broaden his worldview in light of the topics covered in the "Society on Missions." That experience, twenty-nine years before, he stated, prepared him for writing the short history of the denomination.

Throughout the post-Gettysburg years, Payne continued to be involved with issues and concerns that were similar to or attached to the Seminary or its leadership. Schmucker, for example, was intimately involved in the ecumenical movement and more precisely the formation of the Evangelical Alliance, a predecessor ecumenical body of the World Council of Churches. He was an advocate for church unity; Payne was involved with this area of church life as well. Schmucker's interest in ecumenical efforts spans about 35 years with several publications. Most notably during the Payne period were *Fraternal Appeal to the American Churches, with a Plan for Catholic Union, on Apostolic Principles* (1838) and *Overture for Christian Unity* in 1845. Schmucker was personally invited to the first meeting of what was then called the World's Evangelical Alliance in London in August and September of 1846. He departed from the United States in April of 1846 to take an extended tour of Europe before arriving at the meeting. His student and now a pastor in the AME Church, Daniel Payne, departed from Baltimore in July of 1846 for the same meeting.

Payne was a delegate to this initial meeting representing the AME Church. He set sail from Baltimore and the trip seemed to be going well. Payne even remarked to a fellow passenger just how remarkable the weather was after two days on the ocean. But his remarks were premature for on about the fifth day a storm developed and in the middle of the night passengers were awakened, sails were damaged, and some of the crew lost their lives. Passengers were ferried back to shore, as they were only about 500 miles from their point of departure. Although Payne's fellow colleague made the voyage on the next ship out, Payne decided not to go. One reason for his change of mind was presented to him in a dream in which he saw him-

self addressing delegates at the "Alliance" meeting against slavery so strongly that he could not return to the states for fear for his life. He concluded, "As I look back I can but feel that such a course was better, as I certainly should have denounced slavery in no measured terms, and in the excited state of the minds of the people for and against the system the whole current of my life's work would undoubtedly have been changed, if indeed I had not lost my life altogether."

Indeed, the issue of slavery had surfaced at the meeting. It became one of the sticking points for church unity at the meeting in terms of those people who could be members. Some wanted a qualifier for membership, indicating that slaveholders could not be members, while some others felt that it was not a part of the discussion. Schmucker, always the moderate, was not an advocate for their exclusion for that would be too divisive. At this point, the teacher and former student would likely be at other ends of the issue. Payne's next opportunity to attend the meeting of the "Alliance" groups did not occur until 1867.

As stated above, Payne was elected a bishop of the AME Church in 1852. During his tenure we are able to see the crowning achievement by Payne on behalf of the education of Blacks with the acquisition of Wilberforce University by the AME Church in 1863. Wilberforce University near Xenia, Ohio had been a school of the Methodist Episcopal Church that was established in 1856 for the education of the slave sons and daughters of southern slave-masters. With the outbreak of the Civil War, financial support by the founders rapidly declined and the Methodist Episcopal Church offered to sell the school to the AME Church. With the acquisition of Wilberforce, Payne became its first president and the first Black in the United States to be the educational leader of an institution of higher education.

The school's articles of incorporation describe its purpose as similar to other universities except that it was to provide "a thorough course of education to the colored race." The underlying hopes and dreams of an administrator like Payne are better caught in this statement from Paul Griffin's *The Struggle for a Black Theology of Education*:

Black theologians [including Daniel Payne]...believed that theology provided a justification for education which in turn could be used to help liberate and advance their race – spiritually and socially. Indeed, they thought that their notions of Christian perfection, the sanctified reason, and moral government and agency virtually entailed a commitment to learning that would aid Black people in both deepening their spirituality and combating racist social and political structures.<sup>5</sup>

While the dream of education for the liberation of people of color was an important aspect of pre and post civil war educational history, the actual reality of such an undertaking was very difficult. In the case of Wilberforce, Payne had risked his own word to purchase the school. Having received the initial approval, he and his church had to pay for the purchase and at the same time recruit students for on-going educational experience. In order to do this Payne was like any twenty-first century president of an educational institution, soliciting for funds wherever possible. One of the significant places for such money was in Europe following the Civil War. Payne ventured to Europe from the spring of 1867 to the spring of the following year 1868 traveling in England, France, Scotland, and the Netherlands. He made a favorable impression on all whom he encountered. For example, his comments to clergy at the annual meeting of English Methodists were reported in *L'Evangeliste* (8 August 1867), the newspaper of the French Methodist Church. In addition to working for the benefit of Wilberforce University, he also was able to attend a meeting of the Evangelical Alliance meeting in Amsterdam in August of 1867. While the visit was important for the university, the research also indicates that Payne continued his own educational liberation as a person of color.

The meeting of the Alliance from the 18 through 27 of August allowed Payne to encounter some of the most prominent people of his time. One gets the sense of the diversity and global flavor of this encounter when Payne writes that on the first evening of his arrival he and a family worshipped at the French Church. The formal meetings consisted of papers from denominational representatives, which Payne described as “interesting, elaborate, and valuable in an historic sense.” Payne addressed a meeting at the conference as well. He remarked that the format was formidable and that his frustration came for him by having a limited ability in French and no ability in Dutch or German. However arduous the experience, Payne felt that his attendance at the conference was of benefit to him. He stated, “Intellectually I was benefited, for I learned much of men and things which were new to me.”

Upon his return to the United States Payne continued as president of Wilberforce and made use of his European contacts who, when visiting the United States, included Wilberforce University in their itinerary. Payne also continued to have contact with his “Venerable Preceptor” Samuel Schmucker. Undoubtedly, Payne was able to share with and to receive advisement from Schmucker on some of the concerns and issues in higher education. In a letter to Schmucker (March 30, 1869), Payne thanked him for sending some catalogues, which had arrived and then asked some educational administrative questions. One sees in this letter a relationship that

continued to grow and be nurtured for thirty-two years. Initially, theirs was a relationship between student and professor, late developed as pastor and mentor; now at this communication, the two related as presidential colleagues. Both men valued the friendship.

Payne resigned from the presidency in 1876 but continued to teach there as well as fulfill his duties as a bishop in the church. As bishop he continued to travel to various parts of the United States, and Canada responding to issues and needs within the church. In addition, he published *The History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (1891), *Domestic Education* (1885), and his autobiography *Recollections of Seventy Years* (1888). Although much has been omitted from this brief survey of his life, one cannot forget this formidable figure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His commitment and service to the work of the church, to education, abolitionism, the church universal, and the global issues were the themes in his life. That theological experience helped to shape his career many years after his departure from the campus. Payne concluded his autobiography, published in 1888, with words of thanks to those Lutherans who supported his study at Gettysburg. It was his perception that the Gettysburg education prepared him for more than fifty-three years of service to the church, locally and globally.

Daniel Payne's story ends with his death on November 29, 1893 being the senior bishop of the A.M.E. Church. Few persons can duplicate the life of this educator, church leader, abolitionist, university president, historiographer, and gentleman whose life spans the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His education, and particularly his theological education prepared him not only for the local community but also for the nation and world; not only to work within his denomination but to work ecumenically. The words of a Lutheran clergyman at Payne's burial might say it best, “Had Daniel Alex. Payne been retained in the Lutheran Church, today she would have quite a large membership among the people of color. Be it as it may, she has given to Methodism, by way of education, one of the grandest scholars and noblest workers – one whom the world will miss for many generations to come.” (*The Lutheran Observer* 15 December 1893). He certainly can be called a “venerable preceptor!”

## Notes

- 1 Editor's note: Detailed notes and references for this chapter are available from the author, who has done extensive research on Payne. Publicly available is Payne's *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Nashville: Publishers House of the A.M.E. Sunday School

Union, 1888); reprint, New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968. Numerous quotes from Payne are drawn from that work. Another useful source is Josephus Roosevelt Coan, *Daniel Alexander Payne: Christian Educator*, (Philadelphia: the A.M.E. Book Concern, 1935).

- 2 Payne, *Recollections*, 28.
- 3 Samuel Simon Schmucker, *Elements of Popular Theology with Special Reference to the Doctrines of the Reformation, as avowed before the Diet at Augsburg in MDXXX* (1<sup>st</sup> ed; Andover: Gould and Newman, 1834). This is popularly entitled, *Popular Theology*.
- 4 Minutes of the Proceedings of the Society of the Inquiry on Missions, 6 January 1836 where he reports on his visit to a mission point in Carlisle; 2 March 1836 where he reads a paper entitled, On the Prospects of the Church of Christ in Heathen Lands; 1 March 1837. The title of this Society changed slightly from time to time.
- 5 Paul R. Griffin, *The Struggle For a Black Theology of Education* (Atlanta: ITC Press, 1993), 65.

*Nelson T. Strobert is Professor of Christian Education in the Paulssen-Hale Chair of Church and Society and Director of Multicultural Programs at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. An earlier version of this article appeared in Witness at the Crossroads: Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary Servants in the Public Life edited by Frederick K. Wentz. Strobert's book on Payne, Daniel Alexander Payne: The Venerable Preceptor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is forthcoming from University Press of America.*

## Emerging Lutherans: What the Emerging Church Movement Can Teach Lutherans About Church Renewal

*Johanna Johnson*

*“[A]bout every five hundred years the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale.... [W]e are living in and through one of those five-hundred-year sales.”<sup>1</sup>*

In the opening chapter of her book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, Phyllis Tickle outlines a cycle that has affected the Abrahamic religions – every 500 years or so, some major change occurs that alters the previously understood paradigm of that religion. In the case of Christianity, the cycle began of course with Jesus – his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Roughly five hundred years later came the fall of the Roman Empire, as well as the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which, to put it simply, defined orthodoxy against heresy. Another five hundred years passed, and the church experienced the Great Schism, the separation of the Eastern Church from the Western. Another 500 years found the church facing the radical changes of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation.

The end of another 500-year cycle is approaching. As we watch main-line churches dwindle in numbers and close their doors, as we hear a new generation define themselves as “spiritual but not religious” while shunning organized religion, and as we see an older generation gaze wistfully at “how it used to be,” it seems the time is ripe for another great transformation. How does – or will – the church look in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What Great

Change might we be enduring right now? As a Lutheran, I am particularly concerned about the present and future of the Lutheran Church. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has several programs in place to help renew some of these dying congregations and to plant new mission starts, continually trying to discern what the church needs to be in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America. How effective are these strategies? How can the ELCA keep being church, holding the integrity of our theological heritage, while also keeping an eye to the most effective way to spread the gospel to people now, today, in this time and place?

One movement being discussed in some circles, particularly among young adults, is that of the emerging church. The aim of this paper is to explore that movement: to understand why it exists and what it has to offer, and to find what its gifts and barriers might be when applied to Lutheran church renewal. Drawing on printed and online resources and personal interviews, I will first discuss some of the efforts already being made by the ELCA toward church renewal and new church starts. I will then define the main characteristics of the emerging church, including some of the main critiques of the movement. Finally, I will assess how effective the principles and work of the emerging church might be in ELCA church development. From this study, we will see that Lutheran church renewal can learn something from the emerging church movement in terms of worship, praxis, and missional awareness.

### *Lutheran Church Renewal*

Through the 1990s, the ELCA developed a churchwide evangelism strategy; in spite of the strategy, the church continued to shrink. But the study also revealed some common characteristics among vibrant and/or growing congregations. Such congregations are marked by two things: 1) a clear sense of mission and God's purpose for them, and 2) a willingness to change.<sup>2</sup> With these growth principles in mind, the ELCA has embarked on the work of renewing dying congregations and planting new ministries. As we begin this important task, however, Lutherans are protective of that which makes us Lutheran. What defines Lutherans and Lutheranism is perhaps most of all our rich theological heritage, defined in the Lutheran Confessions (*Book of Concord*) and in Martin Luther's own prolific writing. The book *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Perspective* gives a complete and honest assessment of some of these key Lutheran principles, including the centrality of Word and Sacrament, the "solas" (*sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus*, etc.), the paradoxical "simuls" (saint and sinner, law and gospel, divine and human, already and not yet, etc.), and of course, the doctrine of

justification. The authors of *The Evangelizing Church* would also argue that a missional character is essential to the life of Lutheranism.<sup>3</sup> While these principles have over time shaped Lutheran practices and identity, it is essentially the articulation and praxis of this theology that defines Lutheranism at its core.

Holding these principles, several approaches can be effective in renewing a church, with varying degrees of effectiveness depending on the congregation. This paper will discuss two of them: Natural Church Development, and *Unbinding the Gospel*.

Natural Church Development (NCD) first developed in Germany, and has gained international acclaim. Their website claims that NCD "is all about releasing the potential that God has already implanted in our lives."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the program is based not on product, numbers, or other outward goals, but on the roots and inherent potential of a congregation.<sup>5</sup> Based on research of growing churches, Christian A. Schwarz, head of the Institute for Natural Church Development, found that there were eight key principles (as distinguished from "models") that apply to growth in all churches. These principles are defined as: 1) empowering leadership, 2) gifts-oriented ministry, 3) passionate spirituality, 4) effective (functional) structures, 5) inspiring worship, 6) need-oriented (contextual) evangelism (that is, needs of non-Christians), 7) holistic small groups, and 8) loving relationships. All of these elements are important marks of a healthy, vibrant, and growing church.<sup>6</sup> With the help of a coach, a congregation works through an in-depth assessment of these eight areas, determining both where the congregation is strong and where it is weak. The assessment is repeated at the end of each cycle; a cycle takes about 18 months, and typically a congregation goes through three cycles before it sees noticeable success.

NCD is endorsed by the former Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission (EOCM) of the ELCA as an effective way to determine congregational health and to help congregations reach such health; however, it also has its weaknesses. While the program is effective, three 18-month cycles is nearly five years of hard work. A congregation must have significant patience and drive to keep up its momentum for that long.<sup>7</sup> Also over the course of five years, a pastor may leave, or he/she may leave shortly after the long process, which may set the congregation back in its progress or even change its make-up. This problem highlights another possible weakness: that NCD runs the risk of being too inward-looking. That is, its focus is primarily on the congregational unit and its particular cast of characters, without explicitly looking outward to the community in which the congregation does its ministry. NCD also, of course, has some benefits. It has great potential to satisfy both of the principles found by the ELCA's study: it ulti-

mately defines a clear mission (even if determined from the inside out) and demonstrates a willingness to change. Once a congregation is able to work through all eight of NCD's principles, it will be left with a greater sense of self and thus presumably a clearer sense of mission; and a willingness to undertake the multiple year process indicates also a willingness to change. These are two important elements to effective church renewal.

For some, Natural Church Development leaves something to be desired. David Fisher, Director for Evangelical Mission in the ELCA's Lower Susquehanna Synod prefers a different method: prayer and Bible study. While NCD names some effective markers of congregational health, its program is not explicitly rooted in the Word. When dealing with congregations looking for renewal, Pastor Fisher looks to Martha Grace Reese's *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*,<sup>8</sup> a book intended to be read and prayed through in small groups within mainline congregations. Before we can invite others into our community of faith, before we understand God's mission for us, we have to be conversant in God's Word. In a personal interview, Rev. Fisher stated that when he is called to help a dwindling church to revitalize, the first thing he suggests is to start a regular gathering of Bible study and prayer in the congregation, if they do not have one already. In his experience, when people dig into the Word of God, something moves in them, and sure enough they start inviting people to join the journey. *Unbinding the Gospel* has received considerable positive feedback from pastors and scholars, has been "enthusiastically endorsed by eight heads of denominations," and has sparked interest in mainline churches who thought they would never learn to do evangelism.<sup>9</sup> While these are ringing endorsements, and Bible study and prayer certainly are essential elements in a Christian life of faith, this method is also found lacking. A foundation in prayer and the Word would ideally lead the congregation into developing a strong understanding of its purpose in God's mission, but it may or may not instill in the congregation a willingness to change. It may or may not help them to look into their community and see what needs exist. It may or may not help them understand concretely how to be more hospitable to people who look and act differently from the majority of the congregation. To grow and thrive, in the end, a congregation must address how effectively it is functioning, and actively discern what particular purpose God has for them.

Lutheran church renewal needs to address all of the above areas and more if it wants to "be church" effectively to a post-modern world full of "spiritual but not religious" people. Being authentically Lutheran, authentically Christian, requires rootedness in the Word, love and service to God and neighbor, and a passion for sharing the gospel.<sup>10</sup> How do we hold onto

our essential Lutheran values while also moving into and speaking to the post-modern world around us? We must hold this question in mind as we begin a discussion about the emerging church.

### *The Emerging Church*

If they have heard of it at all, church leaders might have one of two reactions to the emerging church movement: either it is the death of denominations and church as we know it, or it is the only possible future for the church. Perhaps there is some truth in both of these statements. The task here is to draw out some of the essential principles of the emerging church movement, and to understand how these might be (or must be) compatible with a Lutheran understanding of church and the faith.

In their book *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Post-modern Culture*, Fuller Seminary professors Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger present the results of five years of research tracking faith practice in the first fully post-modern generation (ages 18-34).<sup>11</sup> The nine core practices Gibbs and Bolger finally determine are: 1) identifying with Jesus; 2) transforming secular space; 3) living as community; and because of this the movement also has interest in 4) welcoming the stranger; 5) serving with generosity; 6) participating as producers; 7) creating as created beings; 8) leading as a body; and 9) merging ancient and contemporary spiritualities. Other scholars of the emerging movement might group these differently or put them into broader categories, but these essential practices are reflected in some form in emerging churches everywhere. In short, the emerging church strives for holistic, experiential worship experiences and lives that follow the way of Jesus, such that participants *are* and *act as* the church at all times.

These principles are best understood when we see them in practice. In his article "Five Streams of the Emerging Church," Scot McKnight points to Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, Calif., as "one centrist expression of the emerging movement in the U.S."<sup>12</sup> Vintage Faith Church was born in 2004 with a goal of serving the Santa Cruz area, in which many people are not affiliated with any religious organization. The name alone points to a key element of the emerging church movement. In describing its history, the website states:

At Vintage Faith Church, we have gone back into the New Testament and looked at church history to see what the "vintage" early-church was like, and are attempting to translate those values of the early church vision into a church for today's culture in Santa Cruz. Though we are not living in the culture of the first century, we still strive to see

our values and biblical teachings hold true to the “vintage” values and teachings in Scripture.<sup>13</sup>

Here in this opening statement, we see the church modeling its faith on the Christians who lived closer to the time of Jesus, before church structures and a sometimes false Christian culture impeded the practice of the faith. We also see them striving to live in today’s world, not reflecting some unspoken wish that the church was located in some other time or place. This contemporary focus allows the congregation to be missional in its particular community. Other parts of the website reflect more of this emerging church’s values and culture. The website lists opportunities to learn about faith, an assortment of small groups to which to belong, and upcoming fellowship events. There are several ministries in which to get involved for different types of people (especially aimed at young adults and families), and various ways to be involved with different parts of the mind and body (experiential ministry). In many ways, the website has the type of content one would find in any vibrant church. One difference is the look of the website: it is artistic, hand drawn, and aesthetically attractive to a post-modern eye. The pleasing, earthy colors differ from the bold colors one might find on other church websites, and the pictures mix ancient and modern themes. The very look of the website points to the use and value of arts and creativity in the life and ministry of Vintage Faith Church.

Perhaps the biggest surprise for someone dubious about the emerging church movement is the “about us” section of the website. Their vision is clearly stated and would be hard for any mainline church to disagree with: “The vision of Vintage Faith Church is to see God transform us into a worshiping community of missional theologians.”<sup>14</sup> This mission statement clearly addresses the two principles the ELCA determined were essential for growing, vibrant churches. The word “transform” indicates a willingness to change, and they are explicitly missional. Vintage Church fits well into the model the ELCA is trying to follow in its church renewal efforts.

The five sub-points to this vision are also worth noting and can shed yet more light on the guiding principles for this and many emerging churches. First, Vintage Faith “strives to reflect the ancient roots and values of ancient Christianity.” As was stated before, emerging churches look back to early church practices, to a time before “organized religion” seemed to take precedence over practicing faith. The emerging church looks to reach especially the post-modern generation, a generation that tends to be skeptical of the institution of church. While Jesus and his teachings are appealing, the culture that has formed around “Christianity” does not look much like Christ. The emerging church aims to overcome this.

Next, Vintage Faith is “about ‘Being the Church’ vs. ‘Going to Church.’” Vintage Faith Pastor Dan Kimball, in his book *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, points out that the Bible never says, “They went to church.”<sup>15</sup> For the early Christians to *go* to church simply would not make sense; they *were* the church. I cannot say, “I go to Johanna,” because I *am* Johanna everywhere I go. This sense of being church everywhere we go has been lost in a church culture where, whether consciously or not, people “go to church” on Sunday morning and the rest of the week is church-free. This often leads to self-proclaimed Christians not practicing what they preach, not living their faith. Such double-talk is a turn-off for the post-modern generation, thus such a separation from Christian identity is what the emerging church tries to avoid.

The next two points belong together: Vintage Faith is “a multi-generational church, comprised of individuals and families,” and it is “a holistically designed, family based church.” Because of its very newness, as well as its freedom from “the way we’ve always done it,” younger generations are drawn to this model of church. Vintage Faith appeals to this younger crowd, offering many opportunities for growth and formation for all ages. Still, even some older generations are drawn to the freshness, a dynamic that enriches the church experience of all involved.

A part of catering to different generations in unique ways is doing so creatively and experientially. Vintage Faith “has the arts and creativity in [its] blood,” meaning they draw on the many different ways that people learn and experience faith: dance, music, visual art, poetry, etc. This creative approach is apparent in the style of the worship gatherings, which strive to engage the whole body. In the emerging church movement, worship is fully participatory for both leaders and the congregation. This is in fact why the emerging church shies away from using the term “worship *service*,” because “service” can sound as if congregants might be the ones served or entertained. Rather, we all *gather* to worship God together. As Dan Kimball writes, “The emerging church must value worship over the quality of the program or of the ‘goods and services’ we deliver.”<sup>16</sup> This effort responds to the more entertainment-focused model of worship so prevalent in seeker-service worship. For the emerging church, creating a space – especially using the arts and senses – that is conducive to focusing on God and the worship of God is of utmost importance.

Not all worship practices, then, are new. Using arts and creativity sometimes means using old practices in new ways. For instance, Vintage Faith is known for using copious amounts of candles and incense. One creative way they might use incense is to have it burning beside an offering plate on a table, with a verse from Revelation, “The smoke of the in-

cense together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God . . .” (Rev 5:8), or from Psalm 141, “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice” (Pss 141:2). Juxtaposing an offering plate with incense in this way symbolically shows that giving of our financial assets is a form of sacrificial worship before God and ties the practice of stewardship to that of prayer.<sup>17</sup> Other ways of using old practices in new ways might include tapping the ancient art of story-telling in preaching, or even preaching without (or beyond) words by utilizing images, congregational interaction, or even silence. God has always revealed Godself by varying means (burning bush, pillars of cloud and fire, a still, small voice, a dove, a man walking among us). Modeled on God’s own revelation, preaching God’s Word should creatively involve as many senses as possible; in doing so, we engage more of each person in experiencing the sermon.

Perhaps most notable is that the emerging church is missional. One of the biggest turn-offs for post-moderns, as was mentioned before, is the inconsistency with what Christians say and how they live. The emerging church is dedicated to living a life Jesus would have us live, all through the week. Thus it is attuned to the purpose to which God is calling us right here and now, and to how we can participate in God’s mission. Vintage Faith has six different categories of ministry on the website, from family ministry to global ministry. They define “missional” as “being outward and others-focused, with the goal of expressing and sharing the love of Jesus.” In other words, they look outward to their community, always with an eye toward sharing Christ with that particular community. They do this by experiencing physical community in a world where online communities are the norm, by training disciples of Jesus Christ, by studying Scripture, by focusing on family formation (as the family is essential in shaping society), and by looking for God’s work outside of their own church.<sup>18</sup> Each of these goals is directly in line with – or at the very least, compatible with – the essential theological principles of a Lutheran expression of faith.

### *Critiques of the Emerging Church*

Naturally, the emerging church is not without criticism. One significant concern is that the movement places culture as primary, catering to a time and culture instead of to the gospel message. Preaching post-modernism over Jesus, or unfaithfully tailoring the timeless gospel in order for it to reach a larger audience, or falling into the consumerist trap of simply giving the people what they want – these are all certainly risks. The movement, however, is explicitly biblical and Jesus-centered (*sola scriptura, solus*

*Christus*). Dan Kimball writes, “We can say this for sure about the worship of the early church: They came to worship the risen Jesus through song, prayer, the Lord’s Supper, and teaching. I think keeping this simple snapshot in mind helps us remember why we are gathered.”<sup>19</sup> One goal of the emerging church is to look to early practices of the faith, practices that took place closer to the time of Jesus. Thus emerging churches are inherently Jesus-centered, as well as biblical. As to speaking to a particular time and culture, the Apostle Paul did the same thing. In 1 Cor 9:20-23 he writes:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

Speaking in particular ways to particular people has been a part of evangelizing since the beginning of Christianity. The 21<sup>st</sup> century should be no exception. The message itself is still counter-cultural; only the means of sharing it have been influenced by today’s post-modern cultural language.

Another concern is that tending to a post-modern culture necessarily means affirming post-modernity’s insistence that there is no universal or absolute truth. Christians, however, believe in Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Therefore, post-modern mentality and Christian belief, it is believed, cannot jibe. Furthermore, this results in a wishy-washy faith, a lowest common denominator faith, a watered down faith, in order to pull all post-moderns into the fold. A look at Vintage Faith Church’s website, however, will show that the emerging church is nothing if not solid in its statement of faith. The website states explicitly, “We believe in the truths expressed in the Nicene Creed,” just as the Lutheran Church does, and it also elaborates on other orthodox theological points.<sup>20</sup> Some faith statements are quite Lutheran, such as the insistence on the priesthood of all believers. Rather than claiming that the emerging church preaches the lack of ultimate truth, a fairer and more accurate statement is that the emerging church allows room for questioning, recognizing that though we can know with our hearts the Truth, that does not mean we always understand. While sure in Christian faith, the emerging church is also attentive to pluralistic sensibilities in society. Paul Rajashekar, in his essay in *The Evangelizing*

*Church*, asserts: “Congregations that feel immune from the pressures of religious plurality and postmodernism, or are indifferent to them, are deluding themselves or setting themselves up for a rude awakening!”<sup>21</sup> He also concludes: “We need to engage with people of other faiths with Christian convictions through interreligious dialogue in our context of religious plurality.”<sup>22</sup> If Christians are interested in seeking peace and justice in the world, it is essential that we be open to communication in this pluralistic, post-modern culture.

One other criticism or concern about the emerging church is that it could lead to the death of tradition, the death of denominations, and the death of the liturgy. These are very real concerns. Rather than think about the emerging church as the death of tradition, however, we can think of it as a new conception of tradition, or, the death of *idolizing* tradition. Sometimes “the way we’ve always done it” can become something that takes away from the essence of our faith, which is to be servants of Christ and worshipers of the Triune God. The emerging church tries to grab hold of that essence and embody it not just at worship gatherings, but in all aspects of life. Some traditions help us to do this; the emerging church is by no means trying to do away with every tradition! It does, however, strive to open up some of those traditions to a population that has not been nurtured in them from birth – to “outsiders.”

In some ways, steering away from tradition could lead to the death of denominations; again, sometimes we run the risk of worshiping our denomination and the culture therein rather than God. That is not to say, however, that a theological heritage must be lost. Lutherans can still hold firm to their rich theology – again, it is more important that this heritage be opened up in new and, dare I say, post-modern ways. As we can see on the Vintage Faith website, emerging church is not without theology. Thus an emerging Lutheran church can still have a Lutheran theology. More likely than the death of denominational theology is the death of denominations as institutions. Given that the church is due for another five hundred year rummage sale, this may indeed be one of the aspects of “church” that goes.

The risk of losing traditional liturgy is worth addressing at length, as the worship style of the emerging church is one of its best-known marks. If we look back to early accounts of Christian worship, we can see the basic four-fold pattern, the *ordo*: gathering, Word, meal, sending. This is not lost in emerging worship; it is in fact very much preserved. It may, however, look different from what one experiences in a mainline liturgical church. One example of a church that comes out of the emerging church movement, but maintains strong ties to ancient liturgical order, is St. Lydia’s Dinner Church in Manhattan.<sup>23</sup> Initially conceived to feed a

hunger for a spiritual experience among many in the city, St. Lydia’s bases its life and practice on feeding both people’s souls and their bodies, drawing heavily from ancient sources for inspiration to do so. The worship gatherings are centered around a meal – not only of bread and wine, though certainly this as well, but a full dinner spread. The gathering begins in the kitchen, where everyone dons aprons and nametags and engages in fellowship while preparing a meal together. Once the tables are set in the sanctuary, people carry lit candles to the sanctuary while singing songs and prayers by heart.<sup>24</sup> After everyone lights the candles on the table, an ordained priest or pastor chants an ancient Eucharistic prayer to bless the meal, and everyone breaks bread together, passing it around the table and saying, “This is my body.”<sup>25</sup> After the meal is shared, Scripture is read, and a short sermon is shared, which ends with the opportunity for people to contribute their thoughts and reflections about how the text intersects with their lives. Prayers are offered, more songs are sung, and the cup of wine is blessed and shared. At the end of the evening, everyone helps clean up, a final song is sung, and everyone is sent on his or her way.<sup>26</sup> Gathering, Word, meal, sending: the main elements of an ancient and traditional liturgy are preserved, but the practice speaks to a particular need of a particular people.<sup>27</sup>

Another example of a church that identifies as both emerging and highly liturgical is St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, CA. In many ways, St. Gregory of Nyssa has a traditional liturgy, but with a twist. A 3,000 foot painting wraps around the sanctuary, comprised of colorful portrayals of the saints – from St. Francis of Assisi to Sojourner Truth, from Theresa of Avila to Malcom X, as well as animals, celestial bodies, and Christ himself.<sup>28</sup> Worship gatherings are rich with music, but there is no organ. The choir helps the people sing in four-part harmony.<sup>29</sup> As for the rest of worship, it is completely participatory; one member describes her first experience there this way: “Worship at St. Gregory’s . . . was deliberately physical and participatory, in the ancient Byzantine style; there was dancing, singing, smoke, candles, brightly-colored cloths, bells, a great bustle of people sweeping through the sunlit church and encircling the altar.”<sup>30</sup> Congregants participate in the sermon, engage in times of silence, sing with gusto, and even dance around the altar at communion. Worship at St. Gregory of Nyssa is certainly a sensory, full-body experience, while still using a decidedly traditional, even ancient liturgy. Both St. Lydia’s and St. Gregory of Nyssa push us to think about what is new and what is old, and how mixing the two might be exactly what will spark the interest of a post-modern generation eager for something spiritual, authentic, and substantial.

### *What Does This Mean For Us?*

In an article in *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, Robert D. Francis writes:

[T]he label or building or institution should never become primary or obscure our foundational identity as *a living, breathing community of ethical formation and action reaching out to the world beyond our doors*. The future looks bright if emerging churches and mainline congregations have eyes to see one another fully and sit at one another's feet.<sup>31</sup>

This observation sums up the important contributions of the emerging church to the project of mainline and particularly Lutheran church renewal. We as church should always have our sight set on Jesus Christ, and God's mission for us in the world. While institution is not itself a bad thing, and can in many cases be a good thing that helps form and enhance the life of faith, letting the institution of church or denomination interfere with the true intent of faith makes church or "going to church" into an idol. The primary goal of the emerging church is to get back to the core of the faith and find ways to express that core in ways that resonate with emerging generations today.

As the first section addresses, Lutheran church renewal has two growth principles – a clear sense of mission and a willingness to change – as well as several theological principles that must be sought or maintained. Emerging church has at least four core ideas that enhance or are compatible with a Lutheran expression of faith, and would contribute to the effort of Lutheran church renewal:

#### *1. The church is the church all the time, wherever we go.*

One of the biggest challenges facing many mainline churches is the mentality that church only happens one day a week. Whether consciously or not, this has become the approach of many Christians, and it creates a disconnect between belief and praxis. While churches try to overcome this by offering planning throughout the week, this alone is not enough. Christians, like those who identify with the emerging church, can achieve a deeper understanding of our identity as the church by incorporating such an ethic into our vision and culture. We do this by living worship everywhere we go, approaching faith as a whole body experience (especially via the arts), and doing everything with prayer, which "demonstrates our dependency on God."<sup>32</sup>

#### *2. Jesus Christ is the center of our faith.*

While this may seem obvious, all too often the life and teachings of Jesus Christ fall second to what *we* believe is the right way to do

church. We get caught up in the color of the carpet, where the choir stands, how many years so-and-so has served on council, where my offering is going . . . and we forget to look to, listen to, learn from, and follow Jesus. Sometimes the problems are bigger than these: sometimes people claiming "Christian" behave in decidedly un-Christ-like ways, resulting in hateful conversation and destructive acts that do anything but build up the church. This, too, is a disconnect that must be overcome. The emerging generation has low tolerance for double-talk and hypocrisy; if our churches "want more young people," they need to look more deeply at the life and way of Jesus, and intentionally practice what he taught.

#### *3. We worship experientially.*

The traditional Lutheran liturgy is well-loved by many, but to some who did not grow up with it (the very people with whom we would like to share the gospel!), it is inaccessible or even boring. While post-moderns are not necessarily looking to be entertained in worship (a perceived desire some seeker services and contemporary worship services try to satisfy), they are looking to be able to enter into a worship experience and connect with God. For some, this happens in a traditional liturgy. For many post-moderns, this happens through the arts, through ancient practices made new, and through an experience that involves more than seeing and hearing. The ELCA's *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* leaves room for more experiential elements to be incorporated into worship. It does not, however, instill in church leaders an inherent knowledge of how to incorporate this effectively, nor an ability to carry it out. Such training in planning worship that incorporates all the senses in new and interesting ways must happen in seminaries, as well as be encouraged in continuing education opportunities for pastors and lay leaders. A fine line often exists between effective and "cheesy," and worship leaders must develop a keen eye that can discern the difference. Sensory, experiential worship that incorporates the arts need not abandon the traditional liturgy; these can quite effectively work together.<sup>33</sup>

#### *4. We pay attention to the culture around us.*

Perhaps the characteristic for which the emerging church is most known is seen as both a positive and a negative: their attention to post-modern culture, and finding a way to speak to that culture. A previous section addressed the benefits and dangers of this interest in post-modern culture. The church always has been and always will be

counter-cultural and the emerging church affirms this. As was stated above, the message remains counter-cultural; only the language to express that message is in the cultural vernacular – itself a very Lutheran idea. Another aspect of paying attention to the culture around us is being attuned to the needs of the community. Especially in congregations that are dwindling or dying, the temptation becomes to look at internal needs and limit the ministry done outside the church walls. These decisions are due to lack of funds and lack of people-power. While this is practical thinking, it is not missional thinking. The emerging church urges us always to look outward into our community and see how to be a part of God's mission. This is one of the marks of a growing, vibrant church.

Each of these ideas is important for any congregation, but they are crucial for congregations in need of renewal. Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from the emerging church is one of the stated growth principles of the ELCA's study on evangelism: a willingness to change. The emerging church pays attention to what is going on around it, and from this learns how best to share the gospel.

### Conclusion

This paper has considered some current efforts toward renewal in Lutheran churches alongside the practices and principles of the emerging church, and has shown that the two are not inherently different. Many of the principles of Natural Church Development are exactly the same as those of the emerging church. The Word-centeredness of the *Unbinding the Gospel* approach is in line with the emerging church's interest in studying the Word and in going back to the practices of early Christians. Small groups, vibrant worship, Bible study, and a missional outlook are all present in both the current efforts of Lutheran church renewal and those of the emerging church.

Roadblocks still exist, of course. One roadblock, in fact, concerns one of the growth principles shown by the ELCA's evangelism study: a willingness to change. Most if not all churches are willing and able to define a strong sense of mission, and are even excited about the prospect of delving into that mission. Many churches, whether they articulate it or not, would like to achieve that mission without any significant change to the way things currently run in their church. This is why programs are so appealing to congregations looking to enhance some aspect of their ministry, but also why those programs often fall flat or leave people untransformed: a program does

not often require a change of perspective. In order for the Lutheran church really to learn from the work of the emerging church, we have to realize that some aspects of church that we have until now held dear might not look the same at the other end of the renewal process. That need not mean that they will be eliminated entirely. It does mean, however, that we must be open to the movement of the Spirit telling us how to minister to this world. Before anything can be gleaned from the emerging church's new look at practicing faith, we need to engage with open hearts in prayer and Bible study and discern how God is moving us to act. Some ideas discussed in this paper will be effective in many places; some will not. How a congregation responds cannot be determined by an academic study, but must be discerned through conversation and communion with each other and with God.

### Notes

- 1 Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How the Church is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008) 16.
- 2 Dave Daubert, *Living Lutheran: Renewing Your Congregation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007) 15.
- 3 For a thorough treatment of these points that goes beyond the scope of this paper, see *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).
- 4 NCD, "The Essence of NCD," <http://www.ncd-international.org/public/essence.html> (accessed Nov. 18, 2010).
- 5 Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities for Healthy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: Smart Church Resources, 1996) 10.
- 6 *Natural Church Development*, "The Essence of NCD," <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Discipleship/Natural-Church-Development.aspx> (accessed Nov. 18, 2010).
- 7 Description and assessment gleaned from an interview with Harvey Blomberg, Director for Evangelical Mission in the ELCA's Sierra Pacific Synod, on Nov. 8, 2010.
- 8 Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006).
- 9 Reviews found on amazon.com and Martha Grace Reese's website: *GraceNet*, "Unbinding the Gospel," [http://www.gracenet.info/unbinding\\_the\\_gospel.aspx](http://www.gracenet.info/unbinding_the_gospel.aspx) (accessed Nov. 18, 2010).
- 10 For a more comprehensive exploration of the intersection of Lutheran beliefs and values and evangelism, see *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution*.
- 11 Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Post-modern Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). Because of the publishing date of this book, the generation they are dealing with is more accurately ages 24-40.
- 12 This is the breakdown Scot McKnight uses in his article, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church" in *Christianity Today*, Feb. 2007.

- 13 *Vintage Faith Church*, <http://www.vintagechurch.org> (accessed Nov. 27, 2010).
- 14 *Vintage Faith Church*, "The Vision of Vintage Faith Church," <http://www.vintagechurch.org/about/vision> (accessed Nov. 27, 2010). All sub-points mentioned in the following pages also come from this webpage.
- 15 Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 91.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 128.
- 18 *Vintage Faith Church*, "Vintage Faith Church is Missional," <http://www.vintagechurch.org/about/vision/missional> (accessed Nov. 27, 2010).
- 19 Kimball, 114.
- 20 *Vintage Faith Church*, "The Theology and Doctrine of Vintage Faith Church," <http://www.vintagechurch.org/about/theology> (accessed Nov. 27, 2010).
- 21 Paul Rajashekar, "Navigating Difficult Questions," in *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution* (eds. Richard Bliese and Craig Van Gelder; Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 2005) 111.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 110.
- 23 In a personal email (dated June 26, 2011), co-founder of St. Lydia's, Emily Scott, said that St. Lydia's certainly comes out of the emerging church movement, though in some ways it has a different look or style. Further information on St. Lydia's, unless otherwise noted, is from Wendy Healy's article, "An Unusual Blend – St. Lydia's: Where the table is set for hospitality and worship," *The Lutheran* (November 2010) 30-31.
- 24 Scott has contributed to a book called *Music By Heart: Paperless Songs for Evening Worship* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2008). She also leads workshops around the country called "Music Makes Community," in which she teaches leaders and lay people how to lead congregations in singing paperless music.
- 25 Both the Eucharistic prayer and this practice of sharing first the bread, and then the wine at the end of the meal, are laid out in *The Didache*, our earliest record of Christian worship.
- 26 *St. Lydia's*, "Guided Tour," <http://www.stlydias.org/tour.html> (accessed Nov. 29, 2010).
- 27 Scott also points out that this is not meant as a replacement for a more traditional church; it is just another way of experiencing faith.
- 28 *St. Gregory of Nyssa – the Art of St. Gregory's*, "The Dancing Saints," [http://www.saintgregorys.org/worship/art\\_section/243/](http://www.saintgregorys.org/worship/art_section/243/) (accessed Nov. 30, 2010).
- 29 *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, "Music," <http://www.saintgregorys.org/worship/music> (accessed Nov. 30, 2010).
- 30 *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, "More About Our Services," [http://www.saintgregorys.org/worship/liturgy\\_section/240/](http://www.saintgregorys.org/worship/liturgy_section/240/) (accessed Nov. 30, 2010).
- 31 Robert D. Francis, "New Wine, Old Wineskins: The Emerging Church, Ethics, and the ELCA," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, October 2009, para. 9. Available online at <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/October-2009/New-Wine-4.aspx> (accessed Aug. 4, 2011). Italics mine.
- 32 *Vintage Faith Church*, "Worshipping," <http://www.vintagechurch.org/about/become/worshipping> (accessed Nov. 27, 2010).
- 33 Marquand Chapel at Yale Divinity School is an example of a seminary program that

shows well how to plan and execute such worship, drawing on historical, denominational, and cultural traditions and blending them into a very participatory worship experience, <http://www.yale.edu/ism/marquand/index.html> (accessed Dec. 2, 2010).

*Johanna K. Johnson holds a B.A. in music and religion from Gustavus Adolphus College, an M.Div. from Yale Divinity School, and an S.T.M. in practical theology from Lutheran Theology Seminary at Gettysburg. She is currently serving her first call at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Penfield, N.Y., and St. Martin Lutheran Church in Webster, N.Y.*

## “Openness to the World:” Some Suggestions for Its Pastoral Bearings

*Leonard M. Hummel*

In this article, I first will consider the concept of “Openness to the World” as something like a “red-thread” running throughout the fabric of the history of Gettysburg seminary. In doing so, I shall note some tensions – mostly creative, always lively – that I believe that this idea has both expressed and produced in that history.<sup>1</sup> Next, I will introduce another concept, *epigenesis* – or unpredicted and unpredictable changes within any organism, including religious bodies such as a seminary – and suggest how this concept may enrich the already common property of Gettysburg seminary’s call for openness to the world. Finally, I will conclude this paper with suggestions for how both the practical bearings of these ideas – openness to the world and *epigenesis* – may contribute to the seminary’s work for its future, especially the seminary’s involvement with all that has been, is now, and promises to be generated around the Gettysburg battlefield. In being open to the world of the marketplace and memorial of Gettysburg and thereby remaining open to epigenetic or novel developments, I conclude that the seminary faces opportunities for theological education around many important matters including war and peace, church and state, slavery and freedom, suffering and redemption.

I write this article as a pastoral theologian in explicating the pastoral significance of “openness to the world” and *epigenesis*. At its heart the field of pastoral theology is concerned with finding faithful ways of bringing the loving care of God to the church and the world. Throughout the history of Gettysburg Seminary, the practical effects of the idea of “openness to the world” have already brought about such care. I suggest that “openness to the world” – especially when partnered with *epigenesis*

– may yield fruitful pastoral bearings for a time of major transition at Gettysburg Seminary.

### *“Openness to the World” – Highlights of a Red Thread in the Seminary History*

Much has been written elsewhere about “Openness to the World” in relationship to the history of Gettysburg Seminary. Therefore, what follows is a something of a précis of research and presentations on this concept.

The key dimensions of this concept have been articulated by Fred Wentz in his article, “Our Heritage: Openness to the World.” They are the following: “‘Openness to the World’ is a phrase which describes the most distinctive feature of the Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary for its first 165 years. . . . The phrase involves at least three directions: openness to other Christians; openness to public life; and openness to the intellectual and social issues of the time.”<sup>2</sup> One might locate a wide variety of leaders and teachers from the history of Gettysburg Seminary within the frame of such openness – and that is precisely what the editors of the work in which Wentz’s article appears accomplish – and in doing so indicate how this “red-thread” of openness may be discerned throughout that history in the leadership of persons such as Samuel Simon Schmucker, Daniel Payne, and Milton Valentine.

A closer look at the history of seminary, however, reveals several tensions at work in its approach to being open to the world. The first tension is this: While the seminary has the tradition of being open to public life, it has often evidenced a concern about being too porous with that public. An example of this institution’s desire to maintain a strong reserve in its reach to the world may be found in Lawrence Folkemer’s description of President Baughman. According to Folkemer, Baughman was “conscious of the need for the application of that biblical, confessional truth to the conditions of each succeeding generation and the ever-changing state of society.”<sup>3</sup> Yet at the same time he also was “concerned about the deep inroads made by an all-consuming secularism and whether life shall be lived upon the assumption of the humanist or in relation to and by the power of God.”<sup>4</sup> Other examples of this tension run throughout the story of the seminary. Thus we have the powerful legacy of the interests of Professor John G. Morris and President Milton Valentine on matters of science and religion. On the other hand, we have the fact of their powerful reservations about evolution – during times when some other Christians were not so cautious about this matter.<sup>5</sup>

In surveying the history of Gettysburg Seminary another tension may be found in its trying to preserve a Lutheran identity in communication with other Christians and with the world. Again, Lawrence Folkemer has

had rich things to say about this. “Despite the fact that Gettysburg Seminary was sometimes considered a ‘maverick school’ by ‘other’ Lutherans, it tended to hue to a conservative theological position, albeit to the left of other orthodox Lutheran constituencies.”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the seminary’s being located anywhere along the Lutheran theological spectrum sometimes has been called into question. “Yes, But is it really Lutheran?” That is the title of Robert Fischer’s essay in the 1991 *Seminary Bulletin* in which he indicated that, throughout its history, that question has often been asked about the seminary.<sup>7</sup> Indeed some may wonder if, in being open to the world, whether Gettysburg Seminary has been a purveyor of lower-case Lutheranism. In fact, there is a legend of a Gettysburg Seminary professor who, while attending a church conference in the latter part of the last century, had it pointed out to him that he had a small “l” for the word “Lutheran” on his Gettysburg Lutheran name tag, and was told that perhaps that the lower-case was appropriate for Gettysburg.

On the whole, the tradition at Gettysburg has been a living one of innovative thinkers like Bertha Paulssen and the fact of her having been the first woman to be granted tenure at a Lutheran Seminary. Paulssen studied with the overtly secular, public greats of her time such as Wilhelm Wundt and Max Weber, and left a correspondingly great legacy of course offerings such as “Personality Development and Cultural Patterns” and “Sociology of Religion.”

In sum, one of the clearest indications of the thrust of the seminary’s red-thread of openness to the world may be found in President Stuempfle’s inaugural address:

Theological education today requires doorways opening out-ward. To reflect on a tradition, however hallowed, without reference to and engagement with the urgent issues which vex, threaten and stir humanity today is to lapse into heresy. It’s to deny the *worldly* reality.<sup>8</sup>

And a clear example of how the tradition of openness to the world informed one leader may be found in these words

With these three descriptive notes perhaps one comes as close as possible to identifying the man, Abdel Ross Wentz: living by widening horizons, ready to go out among them and well based in the tradition given to him.<sup>9</sup>

*Epigenesis: Handing Over to the World, Even at the Risk of Betrayal*  
I will now introduce a concept, *epigenesis*, that bears a resemblance to that of

“openness to the world.” Indeed, I suggest that the process of *epigenesis* demonstrates that in being opened to the world, all life – including religious life – may be transformed by such openness. Accordingly, I will conclude this section with the claim that, in being open to the world, Lutheranism itself calls for a handing over of its tradition, even at the risk of betraying it.

First, *epigenesis* – a term used in biology, anthropology, religion. Literally the term means birth/creation that goes on afterward – after the initial birth or creation. In his writings about anthropology, biology, and religion, Johann Gottfried Herder – the eighteenth-century German Lutheran pastor and philosopher – frequently explored the multiple meanings and uses of this term that had much currency in his time. Herder observed that there are novel phenomena that emerge in the world that we cannot predict from, and that we may even have a hard time predicating on that which has preceded. For example, Herder noted that seeds and soil are necessary for the growth of plants, but he delighted in the ways that, as they grew, plants took twists and turns that were not directly attributable to seeds or soil, themselves, but that had to do with their environment and with other chance occurrences.

In her reflections on the concept of tradition (*Bildung*) in Herder’s writings, one contemporary Lutheran theologian, Marcia Bunge, notes that “for Herder, no-one comes to be a human being alone.”<sup>10</sup> That is, for Herder, who we come to be as persons is very much a function of the persons from whom we have come. But tradition (that which has been handed on to us) is only the beginning, not the end – either in time or in purpose – of human development. As Bunge notes:

[For Herder, t]he process of *Bildung* has a second principle, ‘organic powers.’ These are the powers that human beings possess to receive and convert into their own natures what has been transmitted to them by tradition. These powers apply tradition to the needs of the present situation. Without such powers, history would be an endless imitation of what has already been.<sup>11</sup>

Persons, places, and things do develop in ways not governed by their origins or birth – so much so that the kind of epigenetic phenomena that Herder notes are very common-place occurrences. A powerful – and, sometimes, perplexing – example of this may be seen in the lives of adolescents, who often find novel and unpredictable ways of both disturbing and delighting their parents and others.

The concept of *epigenesis* can be stretched to suggest that what evolves over time may not clearly resemble what came before it. I see that sugges-

tion to be commensurable with the claims of Kathryn Tanner that tradition is not able to bind completely those to whom it has been handed – however much those who give or receive it might wish it to do so. Tanner has argued that “it is (difficult) to exempt any Christian belief and practice from substantial change across differences of time and place.”<sup>12</sup> Tanner even more pointedly notes that what is judged as traditional now may not have been the tradition in the past, and further submits that tradition is not so much a thing from the past as it is a currently constructed event: “We suggest that there is no essential, bounded tradition; tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present.”<sup>13</sup> In making these claims, Tanner is not only something of a post-modern thinker, but also very much a Barthian in her concern not completely to identify the gospel truth with any particular Christian beliefs or practices.

Employing Tanner as the major interlocutor of my book, *Clothed in Nothingness: Consolation for Suffering*, I depicted how the religious tradition of seven Lutherans did not bind all their religious beliefs and practices in certain times of great stress. For example, I described the life of a former Missouri-Synod, now ELCA, pastor who was so identified with Lutheran Orthodoxy that he claimed to carry a copy of the Augsburg Confession in his breast pocket so that, were he in a car accident, a Lutheran pastor would be summoned. I further described how, when he was suffering with several major illnesses, this pastor, despite himself, pulled on many traditions outside of Lutheranism – and some manifestly very much at odds with it – to make sense of his life as a Christian and Lutheran.<sup>14</sup>

Another example of the looseness of tradition may be seen in Lawrence Rast’s work, *Joseph A. Seiss and the American Lutheran Church*.<sup>15</sup> Rast, a professor of historical theology and Academic Dean at the LCMS Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, has puzzled over the many facets of the life of this mid-nineteenth century Lutheran. For Seiss, best known for having translated “Beautiful Savior,” and known to American Lutheran historians for his important work as a mediating theologian in the later part of the nineteenth century, is now renown to many – and thereby infamous to some – as a kind of prototype for new age religionists because of his proposal of a Christian Zodiac and of God’s revelation through forces allegedly emanating from the Great Pyramid in Egypt.

Tradition changes, the red-threads may become braided with other colors, and what emerges in religious life may not be easily recognizable when compared with religious life earlier. And in doing so, tradition may develop in ways that might seem to all like a betrayal. Might this evolution into new forms of religious being also be the will of God? It is arguable that handing over tradition at the risk of betrayal may be the very way the gospel gets out.

For the same Greek word, *paradidomi*, means both – handing over and betrayal – and words from this root are used in 1 Cor 11:23, arguably, to signify both:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on (*paredoka*) to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was handed over [betrayed] (*paredideto*) took a loaf of bread.

This scripture was the inspiration for the opening sentences to my application essay for the position in pastoral theology at Gettysburg Seminary:

I believe the Lutheran tradition exists for the sake of the entire Christian household and thereby is, in essence, ecumenical. I also believe that the church, in turn, exists for the sake of the world. That is, while the ultimate concern of believers is God, God’s ultimate concern is the well-being of the world. Therefore, the point and purpose of what is handed on in Lutheranism is that it be “handed over” to the church and world – even at the risk of being betrayed in doing so – so that living word may be brought to the church and world.

### *Open to the World/Overrun by the World: Some Suggestions of Pastoral Bearings*

In this next section I would like to explore some of the implications of such a “handing over” of the gospel. Above we have reviewed some of the ways that openness to the world has functioned like a red-thread discernable throughout the history of the seminary. Many examples of such openness may be discerned in the seminary’s present activities. Very obvious examples of the seminary’s reach toward the world may be found in its concentrations such as Public Theology, Town and Country Ministry, and in Youth and Family Ministry.

However, it is around the possibilities for developing new ways for the seminary to find ways of being open to the world within the boundaries of the Zipcode 17325 that I would like to focus my remarks and offer some suggestions. I do so first by noting that, 150 fifty years ago, this seminary was not so much “open to the world” as it was “overrun” by the world. Imagine, if you will, the morning of July 1, 1863, when the South Mountains to our west appeared to be not as a land-mass but more like a Tsunami of troops rolling toward this seminary. Even after the battle ended on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, the borough continued to be overrun with visitors – and has been up to the present time. A report recently commissioned by the Gettysburg

Convention and Visitor's Bureau asserted that about 1.5 million people visit the greater Gettysburg area annually. Of course this report did not note that that number included those who shop at outlet malls. I also have wondered if that reckoning includes the semi-truck drivers on Route 30 passing through the borough. Whatever the most accurate reckoning might be, it is certainly true that a lot of people from all over the world come to this crossroads of history and hope.

So, why do they come? In his wonderful Princeton University Press book, *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and an American Shrine*, the late Jim Weeks described Gettysburg since the battle as both the repository of our most revered national values and as a cash-cow – and argued that you can't have one without the other. So why did Weeks think people came and still come? Weeks suggested that they have come for many reasons – as spiritual and secular pilgrims, as American idealists and ideologues, as the American-pie, “Leave it to Beaver” Cleaver family, and, nowadays, as guys, mostly, looking for authentic artifacts and re-enactments here, since, elsewhere, they sense they lack of authenticity, in the Heideggerian sense, in many other aspects of their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Weeks and many others frame all such seeking and searching as part of the larger enduring human need for meaning making. Sometimes poetry expresses that human need more clearly than prose, and, I submit, the poetry of Helen Vendler, Porter University Professor at Harvard University, signifies how such meaning-making saturates the grounds of Gettysburg.

A vacant stretch of grass becomes humanly important when one reads the sign ‘Gettysburg.’ Over the silent grass hangs an extended canopy of meaning – struggle, corpses, tears, glory – created by a canopy of American words and works, from the Gettysburg Address to the Shaw Memorial.<sup>17</sup>

Visiting the battlefield in 2005, I was approached by a Gettysburg college student in a cultural anthropology course who was surveying tourists. “Why did you come to Gettysburg?” he asked me. I answered, “To conduct qualitative research – like you're doing. I want to find out what religious quests or search for meaning – motivated by high and low impulses – might be motivating two million plus people to drive to Gettysburg.” I had in mind trying to make sense of all the suffering and hope bound up with Gettysburg in light of Lutheran theology. Later that year I learned that Kent Gramm had been doing something like that – talking to people around here and bringing a Lutheran theological lens to bear on what has and does happen here – for some time and getting his ideas out to the world via Indiana University Press.

Let me offer three suggestions, then, for what openness to the world – an openness that means a handing over even at the risk of betrayal – might mean for Gettysburg seminary.

*1. Openness to the borough and battlefield as venues where we, at the seminary, might study matters of war and peace, church and state, freedom and slavery, suffering and consolation for, if not redemption of, suffering*

The ways in which the tensions of war and peace are marketed and memorialized at Gettysburg are somewhat obvious, so I will not dwell on them here. Those of church and state may be discerned not only in the vehicles that pass through our campus with labels such as “Christian Victory Bus Tours,” whose guides point to the seminary buildings and talk about a trinity of God, Christ, and America's victorious wars. In downtown Gettysburg, one may worship in a chapel with the recently revitalized U.S. Christian Commission<sup>18</sup> and, through its many tracts and sermons, learn about the Christian virtues of many military men. Certainly, questions of church and state – and the boundaries between the two and the blurrings of the two – are part of the daily life of this seminary with a road running through it serviced by the U.S. government and by the need for this seminary to be in conversation with various governmental agencies as it plans for the rehabilitation of Old Dorm.

Matters of slavery and freedom here at Gettysburg may not be part of the immediate consciousness or double-consciousness of us all, but they are brought to clear awareness in the work of Margaret S. Creighton, *The Colors of Courage*, in which she retells how a black man was “grinding his teeth and foaming at the mouth” subsequent to his castration by Confederate soldiers.<sup>19</sup> Adding to the issues of slavery and freedom around the battle itself are Lincoln's subsequent exhortation to strive for a new birth of freedom in response to the battle. And adding to the racism of events during the battle is the argument by LSU's Gaines Foster that, after the war, the hooded Ku Klux Klan portrayed themselves as the original ghosts of Gettysburg – that is, they dressed in a spooky fashion to play the part of Confederate soldiers returned from their deaths at Gettysburg who would wreak revenge on emancipated blacks.<sup>20</sup>

My suggestion in response to the above is sketchy, but it is this: immersion workshops in the borough and battlefield for our students, bona fide Clinical Pastoral Education units for students to engage in and reflect on public ministry to the borough and battlefield, field-based study on the varieties of religious and religious-like experiences around here – such as the now conservatively Christian occupied birthplace of Jennie Wade and the

Wiccanly overseen Jennie Wade deathhouse. In my 2007 sabbatical report, I wrote the following:

I suggest that Gettysburg Seminary has a call to develop and teach a local theology about Gettysburg for the sake of the church, academy, and the world. I also suggest, to liberally paraphrase a line from the movie, “Field of Dreams,” that, were the seminary to build infrastructures for theological education about Gettysburg, people would come.

Given encouraging developments for the Voices of History Campaign, I am more than optimistic that people will be coming to our campus, providing us opportunities for theological education for the church and the world.

## *2. Developing Infrastructures for Theological Education about Gettysburg around the Civil War-era structures on the Seminary Campus itself, including Old-Dorm*

Here I am building on many venerable traditions handed on to all of us from this hill where, as Elsie Singmaster Lewars noted, “the smoke of battle curled”<sup>21</sup> – and certainly, in her fiction about the battle, by Miss Lewars, herself. I am also indebted to Dr. Fred Wentz’s vision for these fifty-two acres to become a resource of theological education for Lutherans, and the current Voices of History Campaign with the Adams Country Historical Society to transform Old Dorm/Schmucker Hall into a world class museum. Some steps toward this goal may be found in the vision for a Walking Tour here. However, some concern has been expressed that, when all has been said and done with the walking tour and a more public Old-Dorm, the seminary finally might look more like a scene from Pickett’s Charge. If, at this time in history, the seminary is not being overrun by the world, it is, of course, bisected by the world in the incarnation of the National Park Service road running through it. Hence, the cannon and gun carriage that recently appeared on its campus – not at the seminary’s behest.

All of the above occurrences raise many questions for theological education here. For example, what are the boundaries between the public and private, the safe and secure, church and state? And given that Old Dorm and other buildings were hospitals on Seminary Ridge – also not at the seminary’s behest, and it seems, not with its complete pleasure – one may ask: what from this history of the care of souls might be found to inform the contemporary practices of consolation for suffering?

In sum, the seminary has been, is, and shall be transformed by forces without and within in ways that it cannot control – completely. But then, as

I have noted earlier, Kathryn Tanner has strongly argued – and I think, quite persuasively – that Christians never have been able to exercise such control over their traditions, over themselves or the world. Accordingly, the following question may be posed about forthcoming events associated with the transformation of Old Dorm and, thereby, the seminary itself: How may one be a Christian and live in such a post-modern world? And how may this very question about being a Christian and living in such a world itself be a question for theological education and preparation for public ministry?

The plaque in front of Schmucker Hall announces to all the world passing by that it is the oldest standing building for Lutheran theological education in the United States. I suggest that, even as it is re-purposed as a major visitors’ center, it should continue to stand for purposes of theological education. I suggest that one way of its doing so is to make the very process of the seminary’s negotiations with public and private interests about the renovation of that building into an interpretative center themselves the subject matter of its theological instruction. I also suggest that the proposed exhibits within the museum itself around war and peace, church and state, freedom and slavery, suffering and consolation for suffering become venues for preparation in leadership in public ministry for the church and the world. Finally, I suggest that the seminary faculty consider ways to integrate these themes related to the interpretative center within its current course offerings, as well as to consider new curricular offerings and degree programs in response to the repurposing of Old Dorm.

## *3. To use my first and second proposals as opportunities for theological research and publication*

The following is one book bearing directly on this seminary. In “*The Smoke of Battle: The Civil War and Gettysburg Seminary*,” I will look at the unique history, complex present and dynamic future of Gettysburg Seminary – located on the most famous and formative battleground in the United States. In particular, I will investigate the ways in which this location is both fertile territory for pastoral formation and turf of numerous private and public interests.

In *Increased Devotion: The Religious Meaning of Gettysburg*, I will examine the past, present, and possible future of Gettysburg – a site that has been called “the most American place in America” and that Kent Gramm has discerned to be “the most beautiful place in the world.” I will also analyze the powerful mix of things academic, commercial, religious, cultural, and literary throughout the history of Gettysburg. Through this work, I will suggest what an increased devotion to and meditation on the theologi-

cal significance of Gettysburg might mean for Gettysburg, the United States and the world.

### *Some Concluding Remarks*

To be open to the world, even at the risk of being overrun by the world. To hand over the Gospel to the world – even at the risk of its being betrayed. To hand over the gospel to the world – not for the sake of handing it over but for love of the world – that is what I suggest that the seminary is called to do. In doing so, the seminary would be acting in congruence with the concept that has guided so much of its history – that of openness to the world. In doing so, the seminary would open itself up, in an epigenetic fashion, to being transformed for the sake of the world and for the sake of the gospel. In doing so, the seminary may become a new creation which may be described, to paraphrase the earlier description of A. R. Wentz, accordingly: living by widening horizons, ready to go out among them and well-based in the tradition given to it.

### *Notes*

- 1 This paper is a transcription of my tenure induction address at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg on April 30, 2008. It has been updated to include information about the Voices of History Project.
- 2 Frederick K. Wentz, "Our Heritage: Openness to the World – Theme Introduction," *The Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 71/4 (1991) 2.
- 3 Lawrence D. Folkemer, "Interpretations of the Seminary's Distinctive Posture," *The Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 71/4 (1991) 8.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 On Morris, see Michael J. Kurtz, "John Gottlieb Morris: A Churchman Engaged with His World," in *Witness at the Crossroads: Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary Servants in the Public Life* (ed. Frederick K. Wentz; Gettysburg: The Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2001). On Valentine, see Stephen R. Herr, "Milton Valentine: A Theology Open and Mediating," in *Witness at the Crossroads: Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary Servants in the Public Life* (ed. Frederick K. Wentz; Gettysburg: The Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2001).
- 6 Folkemer, "Interpretations of the Seminary's Distinctive Posture," 5.
- 7 Robert H. Fischer, "Yes, But is it Really Lutheran?" *The Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 71/4 (1991) 26-36.
- 8 Cited in J. Russell Hale, "Worldly Commitment – Key Element in an Enduring Saga," *The Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 71/4 (1991) 24.
- 9 Frederick K. Wentz, *Expanding Horizons for America's Lutherans: The Story of Abdel Ross Wentz* (Gettysburg: Seminary Ridge Press, 2008) 176.

- 10 Marcia J. Bunge, "Herder and the Origins of a Historical View of Religion," in *Revisiting the Past: Prospects in Historical Theology* (ed. Mary Potter Engel and Walter E. Wyman, Jr.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992) 178.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 129.
- 13 Ibid., 163.
- 14 Leonard M. Hummel, *Clothed in Nothingness: Consolation for Suffering* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).
- 15 Lawrence R. Rast Jr., *Joseph A. Seiss and the American Lutheran Church* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 2003).
- 16 Jim Weeks, *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and an American Shrine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- 17 <http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2005/03.17/01-vendler.html>
- 18 Until it burned in late 2010.
- 19 Margaret S. Creighton, *The Colors of Courage: Gettysburg's Forgotten History: Immigrants, Women, and African Americans in the Civil War's Defining Battle* (New York: Basic Books, 2004) 132.
- 20 Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, The Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South: 1865 to 1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
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*Leonard M. Hummel is Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology and Care and Director of Clinical Pastoral Education, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. "Openness to the World: Some Suggestions for Its Pastoral Bearings" is from his tenure address. Recent publications include Pastoral Bearings: Lived Religion and Pastoral Theology, edited by Jane Maynard, Leonard Hummel and Mary Clark Moschella and "Bearing the Infinite: A Lutheran Approach to and from Pastoral Theology" in Lutherans and Theological Method: Perennial Questions and Contemporary Challenges, edited by David C. Ratke.*

## Excerpt from *The Blueberry Years: A Memoir of Farm and Family*

Jim Minick

*“Religious Moments” is a chapter from The Blueberry Years, which describes the creating and operating one of the mid-Atlantic’s first certified-organic, pick-your-own blueberry farms. For a decade, Minick and his wife Sarah opened the field to hundreds of people who came to harvest berries.*

Patty and Clara step out of their “Jesus Saves” bumper-stickered car. I know Clara as gentle-souled – she comes often, speaks quietly, always smiles. But she brings a friend this time, and soon I avoid pony-tailed Patty. Like her hair pulled so tightly, she has none of that gentleness. In the field I overhear her railing against the local school board for not allowing prayer in school, and I’m amazed by the sheer hatred in her voice. How can someone like this love thy neighbor? I wonder to myself.

At check-out time, just the three of us stand in the shed. They place their full buckets of berries on the table between us and say, “The Lord has blessed you with a bountiful crop.”

“Yes, indeed,” I agree, and then think, And you don’t know all the work the Lord required to get this bounty.

Patty senses an opening, proceeds to ask, “Are you a Christian?”

“Of sorts,” I reply.

“What sort?” She does not hesitate.

I move buckets, wonder what Jesus would’ve said with such an attack, wonder why I can’t just walk out that door. But instead, I measure my words: “More open and liberal than you.”

That doesn’t slow her as the well-oiled lines spill out. “Are you saved? Do you know Jesus as your personal friend? Have you gone to the altar to ask for his forgiveness?”

I say nothing for a long time and we all wait out the oxygen-depleting silence. I weigh their berries, calculate their totals, and I do not look up, do not make eye contact. I am both amazed at this lady’s gall and angry by her prying sanctimony. Clara says nothing, just watches me pour berries, while I can feel Patty staring hard into me, waiting.

Finally she asks again, “Do you know Jesus?”

I put the last bucket down, look at them both, and say, “I know him well enough.” Clara bends to the table to write the check, while Patty invites me to their church, into Jesus’ open arms, into this warm world of definite answers. I ignore her and watch Clara’s steady hand, the pen writing our name and her slow curving signature.

“Thanks for coming.” I watch them leave and hold in my disbelief.

In college, I studied New Testament Greek, which meant I committed myself to four semesters of 8:00 a.m. classes meeting four times a week. When I enrolled, I thought I might follow my previous mentor and become a minister, so the Greek would help me better understand God, Jesus, and their mysterious teachings.

But the closed bud of my life burst open in those first years away from home, away from a confined and confining existence I helped create. I had feared life then, or at least the wild aspects of it, like alcohol and women. College quickly cured this, helped me overcome this strait-jacketing fear.

Through those semesters of too-early classes, I struggled often with waking up and with understanding the New Testament’s original tongue. Christ’s words didn’t always translate as the King James Bible claimed. We bumped against words like *erchomai*, which means *coming or going*, or *pneuma* which means *breath or Spirit of God*. One word in this slippery language changed the meaning of a whole sacred passage.

As I parsed verb tenses, I also wrestled with creating a fresher identity, a more open idea of who I wanted to be. And re-translating the Bible actually helped. I found what became my favorite passage, Matthew 10:7: “*Aggiken a basileia ton ouranon.*” I worked through to the translation of “The Kingdom of Heaven has come,” and King James translated the Greek to “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Either way, my professor loved to challenge us by saying, “The Kingdom of God is here, now, among us all, not above, not in the heavens.” We spent a whole class exploring the ramifications of that one line.

And though I had read Matthew often, this was the first time I saw heaven in the palm of my hand.

“*Aggiken a basileia ton ouranon.*” The Kingdom of Heaven is among us. I still love this, love the sound of it on the tongue, how it makes me realize that this tongue is part of the very kingdom, that I *am in heaven* even now, here on this farm that demands so much sweat. That I am in and of the Kingdom with every breath, every *pneuma*. I joke about creating the Garden of Eden with our blueberry field, but God too is a jester, and maybe the joke is on me and Eden everywhere.

I sweep out the berry hut and work over my conversation with Patty, my answers to her jabs. “I know him well enough,” I repeat, but not really. No one does, not even those in the fold. I want to be open to this heaven, to the myriad possibilities of his teachings, of what God might be. To do so means for me to live outside of the strictures of organized religion. I almost smothered in those strictures as a child and cannot imagine going back. But I realize I’m as entrenched in trying to be open-minded as Patty is in being open only to Jesus.

I shake out the braided rug. “Are you saved?” I repeat. From fear of life and death, I hope so.

Restack the buckets inside the door. “Do you know Jesus as your personal friend?” Probably not, unless he exists in the lives around me, in Sarah and our pups, this field of living plants and all of these pickers.

And then I take a break and sit on the steps, back against the doorjamb while I look over the field. “Have you gone to the altar to ask for his forgiveness?” Not sure. I want to believe that there is more than a life of the Fallen, that maybe we have the whole story wrong. That maybe every time I kneel to pick a simple blueberry, I am praying for gratitude, for grace, and this is enough.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is among us,” I say again, aloud. And each time I say it, it takes on new meaning, and new mystery.

Two hours after Clara and Patty depart, Martha drives up, her straight black hair framing her smiling face. Her bumper sticker reads “Co-exist” and displays all the symbols of various religions. I know her as an out-spoken artist and agitator, hard-sticking to her liberal beliefs. She is the one school board member the Christians criticize most.

Not only is Martha against prayer in school, she just won re-election even after a controversial battle. She could no longer tolerate the local high school’s use of an old mascot, the “Indians.” “We don’t have the Cleveland Jews or the New York Spics, but we love those Braves and Indians,” she carped to me once. And when she came to have a little power, Martha organized her supporters, put the motion before her fellow board members, and had enough citizens there complaining. Now the cheerleaders all scream, “Go Wildcats!” thanks to Martha.

I’ve never discussed religion with Martha whose name makes me think she had a religious upbringing. I don’t even know if she attends a church. I would guess she follows the “religion” of her art, the spiritual path of creativity, but this is just a guess. When she steps out of her Jeep, I hug her and can’t stop laughing. I tell her about Patty and her crassness, and Martha says, “You’re kidding, right? I know her all too well and she drives me nuts.” When I assure her that it was indeed one of her loudest opponents, Martha too joins in my laughter.

If only Patty had stuck around, she too would’ve witnessed the cause of our laughter – Martha’s amazing t-shirt. She found it at Goodwill, she tells me, and just couldn’t resist touching it up a bit. In bright red, she painted on the letters “st.” Now instead of the slogan saying “Born Again,” her t-shirt reads, “Born Against.”

God the Jester, I think. Eden everywhere.

*Jim Minick teaches in the English Department at Radford University. He grew up in Newburg, Pa. He now lives in the mountains of Virginia with his wife. This excerpt was reprinted with permission of the author. The Blueberry Years won the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance’s Best Nonfiction Book award for 2010. It is published by Thomas Dunne Books, an imprint of St. Martin’s Press. Minick is also the author of the essay collection A Clear Path and two books of poetry: Burning Heaven and Her Secret Song. Visit [www.jim-minick.com/](http://www.jim-minick.com/).*

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Raising Up a Faithful Exegete: Essays in Honor of Richard D. Nelson

*Eds. K. L. Noll and Brooks Schramm (Winona Lake:  
Eisenbrauns, 2010)*

*Reviewed by Karla G. Bohmbach and Thomas W. Martin*

This festschrift honors the Rev. Dr. Richard D. Nelson – biblical studies scholar, Lutheran pastor, dynamic teacher and mentor, and valued colleague and friend. Consisting of twenty-three essays written by associates, friends, and former students, the essays are grouped into two loosely-organized categories – those dealing with the Bible’s relationship to ancient history and those focusing on the theological teachings of the Bible. Its editors are K. L. Noll and Brooks Schramm, both of whom worked with Richard Nelson during his twenty-year tenure at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Noll as a student and Schramm as a colleague. Hence, the festschrift may also serve as a poignant recognition of Nelson’s work and contributions especially at the seminary before moving (in 2001) to Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas where he currently holds the position of W. J. A. Power Professor of Biblical Hebrew and Old Testament Interpretation and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs.

Most of the essays in the book’s first section presuppose generally a historical-critical approach to the biblical text. In particular they play off of Martin Noth’s thesis of a Deuteronomistic (Dtr) History, one which Nelson affirmed and elaborated by arguing for its twofold redaction, the first under King Josiah (before 609 BCE) and the second during the Babylonian Exile (ca. 587-520 BCE). Since a number of the festschrift contributors come from the so-called “minimalist” school of biblical history (e.g., Niels Peter Lemche, Philip R. Davies), one finds here arguments expressing skepticism about the reliability of the history recorded in the Dtr History. Concomitantly, many

push down the final dating of the Dtr History's composition/redaction to the Persian and/or Hellenistic period. Indeed, taken as a whole the articles by Lemche, Davies, Ehud Ben Zvi, K.L. Noll, and Thomas Romer present a sort of snapshot of some of the major hypotheses and arguments being made by the minimalists in the early twenty-first century.

A number of other essays take up the issue of the relationship between the Dtr History and 1 and 2 Chronicles, especially in terms of their respective treatments of David and his reign. Did the Chronicler depend on, and revise, the material in Samuel-Kings (the regnant view, and one presupposed by Timothy Willis in his essay)? Or was Chronicles independent of the Dtr History, the two both drawing from another shared source, as argued variously by A. Graeme Auld and Raymond Person? Surely the questions and issues engaged with by the articles in this first section will contribute for years to come to discussions centered on who wrote the historical narratives of the Hebrew Bible, for what purposes, and how do they relate to actual events in ancient Israel and the Near East.

The festschrift's second section recognizes Richard Nelson's role as a theologian of the church by presenting essays on various theological topics, such as the theology of biblical books, authors and canonical themes. Comments here keep two audiences in mind. How do these essays speak to academic theologians and biblical scholars? What do they provide as resources for pastors, the church's theologians *in the trenches*? The majority of the essays hold the most obvious interest for academics. Space allows comment on only a few.

Two stand out as particularly cogent to current theological needs of the church. Terence Fretheim's essay on the concept of God in Genesis (creation stories and flood narrative) goes to the heart of contemporary concerns about creation and evolution and the problem of divine sovereignty and evil. Fretheim's take is that Genesis lays out a canonically normative view of God as self-limiting – that is, as less than sovereign. In relation to creation God backs away from micro-management to allow creation to make itself (e.g., "Let the waters bring forth; let the earth bring forth"). In the Flood, Fretheim sees a view of God in which God is surprised by the outcome of creation. God had not expected so much evil. And in changing God's mind, God has chosen to live with and in the pain of continued creation and continued evil. The resources here for both academics and pastors dealing with two preeminent questions for our time are excellent.

Walter Taylor, Jr.'s essay is a standard social science examination of the early church's practice of the Lord's Supper. It argues convincingly that the appropriate cultural backdrop for interpretation is not the Greek *symposium* or Roman banquet, but family sharing. The former produce a model imposing unequal exchanges of honor, the latter emphasizes egalitarian fraternity. Excel-

lent in every way, one might wish, nevertheless, for suggestions of how it might apply to *our* social systems which are not based on honor/shame values. Can Paul's alternative vision of meal exchange be made to speak to the intrusion of issues of status and class into our celebrations of the Lord's Supper?

Other essays worth particular mention include Rodney Hutton's exploration of the theological differences between the two divergent numberings of the Decalogue in Exodus and Deuteronomy. We read this article with environmental concerns in the back of our minds. In that light the Deuteronomist's prohibition against imaging *other* gods while images and representations of Yahweh are permitted offers a more favorable relationship to creation than the Exodus position that God must be wholly other than any representation in creation. The most challenging essay is that by Marty Stevens on the translation of Isaiah 55:1, 2. It demolishes a number of our sermons and theological lectures! No longer a gospel invitation, it pronounces sarcastic woe to those who are thirsty and wish to buy food with no money. Alejandro Botta's essay on biblical covenants and social justice challenges us to reexamine the relationship between the 'two kingdoms' each time we proclaim a new covenant in Christ. Biblical covenants require the enactment of a just social contract.

Two essays stand out as notably controversial. Richard Carlson uses communications theory (close to reader response criticism) to examine Ro. 1:17b, "the righteous will live by faith." He concludes that a reader following Paul's letter will most naturally understand this as "live by God's faithfulness." What is missing is some argument that communications theory can so easily set aside Paul's own intentions (for which we would need to use other of this 'communications') in this communicative act as Carlson does. Robert Foster's examination of 'testing' as a biblical theme needs some argument that we should take seriously a divine being who feels it necessary to 'test' us.

Overall, the essays gathered together in this second section are well worth the read. Each has a useful and enlightening theological application, even if pastors may need to do some work to uncover it. Some essays make their case more strongly than others and some communicate their relevance better than others. But they all stand as a fitting tribute to the theological career of Richard D. Nelson.

*Karla G. Bohmbach and Thomas W. Martin are Associate Professors of Religion in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pa. Bohmbach's work centers on the Hebrew Bible and feminist scholarship. Her B.A. is from Saint Olaf College. Her Ph.D. is from Duke University. Martin specializes in New Testament interpretation. His B.A. is from Oral Roberts University. His D.Phil is from Oxford University. He is a Lutheran pastor.*

## Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished

*Brigitte Kahl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010)*  
 Reviewed by *Gilson Waldkoenig*

*Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* by Brigitte Kahl, Professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary in New York, is a magisterial work that will receive attention from a variety of academic viewpoints. My review is from the perspective of environmental history of Christianity. Environmental history emerged out of social history, applying insights from geographical and environmental sciences, to include the landscape or nature as a real character in portraits of the past. Environmental history ranges from studies of location and the biotic communities in historical contexts, to religious patterns of interaction with nature and environmental thought. It is in the latter category that environmental historians should welcome Kahl's book.

Kahl argues that Paul's insistence on justification by grace apart from works of law overthrows complicity to empire. Ruthlessly enforced by violence and racism, the Roman social order was cloaked in religious and legal sanctity, and fed by deep fears about barbarians. The Galatians – also called Gauls by the Romans and historically identifiable with Celts – were mythically regarded to be dangerous people harboring threat to Roman society from its edges and lower strata. Through circumcision, Galatians could pass as Jews, escaping the suspicions and restrictions reserved for those of barbarian heritage. Justification offered equal membership in a new order of grace in Christ, under the one God of Abraham – a reality totally different than the Roman sense of order and salvation through conquest.

When Paul encouraged the Galatians not to submit to works of law including circumcision he was not contrasting Christian faith against Judaism, but asserting messianic Judaism against Roman domination. Since Jews also looked down on Galatian people, Paul's inclusivity was a challenge for any Jews resting in the compromised arrangement with Roman order. But that contrast was a byproduct of a larger radical vision of renewal and hope for the whole creation. It was never any basis, Kahl shows, for anti-Semitic and other-demonizing uses of Paul's doctrine of justification. Paul's language in

the epistle is coded dissent against empire while it proclaims liberation in Christ for systematically oppressed Galatians.

Finding a major portrayal of the Roman dominant order in the frieze on the Altar of Pergamon, Kahl contrasts it with Paul's inclusive and egalitarian vision. Exegesis of art was applied with similarly stunning conclusions by Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker in *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Beacon, 2009). Like Brock and Parker, Kahl uncovers an early church committed to non-violence and restoration of creation, rather than repetitions of blood ritual sacrifice. Both works affirm the early church's sense for the renewal of society and the material world, in conscious opposition to the Roman insistence on the inevitability of subjugation and destruction.

Environmental implications are clear when Kahl describes the plight of Gaia in the Pergamene panorama. The Roman gods have no pity for the Earth when she cries out for her slaughtered children. Both rebellion against the gods and Gaia's self-emptying nurture for her own were wasted in light of their fate. But the new creation in Paul's epistle is quite different. "In this new order not based on archetypal matricide, fratricide, and ecocide," Kahl writes, "self-giving is no longer a failure and a weakness." Kahl concludes, "combat, competition, and mindless consumption of the other – the human and the other of the Earth – in Paul's system are the 'works of the law' and the signature of the 'flesh' (*sarx*) in enslavement to sin, crying out for the liberating transformation of the spirit." (p.273)

Kahl shows that Paul's teaching on justification had a material, geographical and environmental stake in the world it addressed, and strong resistance to the powers that exploit both people and the natural world. In light of *Galatians Reimagined*, those who would treat justification cerebrally and immaterially, apart from its implications for environment, add a new level to the foolishness Paul set to dispel.

*Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig is Professor of Church in Society, B.B. Maurer Chair for Town and Country Church Ministry and Director of the Town and Country Church Institute (TCCI) at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. He was named a 2011 GreenFaith Fellow, joining the only comprehensive education and training program for religious environmental leadership.*

## Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World

*Bruce W. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010)*  
*Reviewed by Marty Stevens*

This book is an academic contribution to the ongoing debate within New Testament/Pauline scholarship regarding concern for the poor in ancient societies as reflected in Paul's theology. Longenecker intends to show that "care for the poor was thought by Paul to be a necessary hallmark of the corporate life of Jesus-followers who lived in conformity with the good news of the early Jesus-movement" (p.1). As he engages with scholars and texts, his argument is careful, detailed, nuanced, and well-referenced with over 700 footnotes. The book title is from Gal 2:10, "They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do," and Longenecker devotes chapters 7, 8, and 9 to a detailed exegesis of the verse in the context of Paul's theology. The chapters relating more specifically to the book's subtitle, "Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World," were more satisfying for my purposes, teaching Bible and stewardship in a seminary setting. Since most uses of the word "poor" are imprecise in ancient texts as well as modern scholarship, Longenecker suggests a multi-layered economic scale for the Greco-Roman urban world (ch.3). His economic scale runs 1 through 7, with about 3% of the population in the first three tiers (imperial, regional, and municipal elites) and about 55% "at or below subsistence level." One significant implication is that the typical binary understanding of ancient Greco-Roman societies as either elite rich or desperate poor is too simplistic; "middling groups" comprising over 40% of the population must be a part of the conversation. Later, he connects this scale with the likely Jesus-followers in Paul's communities, suggesting, "In general, then, Paul seems to address urban Jesus-groups as if they were comprised primarily of people belonging to [Economic Scale] ES5," stable near subsistence level, with reasonable hope of remaining above the minimum level to sustain life (p.258). By exploring Greco-Roman charitable initiatives (ch.4), Longenecker also debunks another common binary attitude that pits Christian charity against pagan disregard for anyone of lower status.

He deliberately chooses his language in two particular phrases that I find intriguing and helpful. As noted in the first quote above, the people

regularly referred to as "early Christians" in other books are called "Jesus-followers" by Longenecker, usually further qualified as "Gentile Jesus-followers" or "Jewish Jesus-followers." Also, rather than talking about "God" or "the Lord," he refers to "Israel's deity," reminding us that in the ancient context of Paul, Israel's deity was one among many. As we ponder how Longenecker's findings relate to the care of the poor in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are reminded that using the title "God" or "the Lord" or "Christ" is a faith claim made by all of us who are Jesus-followers. Longenecker's most compelling conclusion is that concern for the poor is an eschatological witness to the present reality of the kingdom of God, made real in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Support of the poor, therefore, is not an option, even for those who "cannot afford" it. Likewise, the debate over the effectiveness of "charity" versus "structural change" is important, but not the defining issue motivating Jesus-followers today to care for the poor. Jesus-followers know that love is the ultimate motivation, the divine love that first claimed us and now empowers us to share that love with others.

*Marty Stevens is Associate Professor in The Arthur L. Larson position of Stewardship and Parish Ministry, Chief Financial Officer and Registrar at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. Stevens holds a B.S. from University of North Carolina at Charlotte, an M.Div. from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary and a Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. She is also a CPA. Her most recent book is Theological Themes of the Old Testament: Creation, Covenant, Cultus, Character.*

## Earthbound: Created and Called to Care for Creation

*Directed by Hal and Kevin Dragseth (St. Paul: Seraphim Communications, 2009). Reviewed by Gilson Waldkoenig*

*Earthbound: Created and Called to Care for Creation* presents a theology of environmental stewardship in a study course suitable for a variety of educational settings. Two DVDs carry six episodes, most of which are around 27 minutes in length, while a CD-ROM delivers study guides and supplemental materials. Produced by Seraphim Communications in 2009, and funded by the Lutheran Lifelong Learning Network, ELCA World Hunger, two colleges and a seminary, the resource is among those offered by SELECT for continuing education of leaders [www.selectlearning.org/store/](http://www.selectlearning.org/store/). See the trailer at <http://lensnw.org/lens/resources.htm>.

*Earthbound* is clear, well-produced and interesting. High-definition imagery complements clips of excellent speakers: eco-theologians, environmentally-oriented biblical scholars and leaders in the growing field of environmental ministries. New Testament scholar David Rhoads and Pastor Megan Torgerson host the series, joined by Terence Fretheim, Walter Brueggemann, Barbara Rossing, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Diane Jacobsen and others from a variety of cultural, regional and economic contexts. Theologian Jessica Krey Duckworth wrote the fine study guides. The producers cut the videos with attention-holding strategies similar to popular documentaries. At least one practical example appears in each episode, to give concrete shape to the concepts that the speakers articulate. *Earthbound* has manageably-sized episodes that an educator may plan to supplement with other material and class discussion.

A theology of vocation or calling is the centerpiece of the series. *Earthbound* emphasizes that vocation stems from God's free grace, and therefore offers freedom and joy that foster sustained response. Salvation has geography, and the material earth has continuity with future paradise. The theologians distinguish "panentheism" from "pantheism" and profile God's everlasting devotion to creation. Viewers receive a reliable exegesis of Genesis 1-3, a primer in the relational world of the Bible in contrast to modern individualism, and hopeful eschatology to displace throw-away approaches to earth. Daily-ness and Sabbath informed by the abundance of God complete the thorough vision of joyful service in, with and for the world.

The design of *Earthbound* is deductive: concepts first, and then an example or two in each episode to embody those concepts. An educator using this series may want to create an inductive experience by showing more examples of environmental ministry in action prior to each episode of *Earthbound*. The DVD *Renewal* [www.renewalproject.net](http://www.renewalproject.net) is one resource that provides excellent case studies in short segments. After several examples evoke what is possible, then the theology and exegesis from *Earthbound* may help learners make sense of what they have seen. Also, an educator may want to provide strong case studies of environmental problems, so that learners can see what environmental ministries are working for and against. *Earthbound* shows a case of a toxic quarry in episode three; the speakers often mention that environmental problems exacerbate injustice for the marginalized; and voices from a poor urban neighborhood gain center stage in episode six. To add more, educators may consult GreenFaith [www.greenfaith.org](http://www.greenfaith.org), Earth Ministry [www.earthministry.org](http://www.earthministry.org), the National Religious Partnership for the Environment [www.nrpe.org/](http://www.nrpe.org/) and other groups who bring environmentally-assaulted voices into earshot.

If one teaches *Earthbound* in a church or community that is amenable to scientific findings, one may expect to move from viewing into discussion of the exciting theological insights brought forth in each episode. If, however, one teaches in a setting where people regularly reject the scientific consensus on climate change and are habituated to contrasting evolution to faith, one will need to prepare to guide people painstakingly through the nuances of the concepts presented. One will need to prepare for potential conflict. *Earthbound* has a very positive, non-confrontational tone, but entrenched conflict is daily being reinforced though the United States media. The grace-toned speakers in the episodes will not be in the room when the video is over. The face-to-face educator will field any and all emotion-laden responses, and referee any conflict that emerges.

Just prior to teaching *Earthbound*, one should teach a full-blown series on Christ, the cross, atonement theories, and the classical Lutheran Christology that affirms the earthly, bodily presence of the resurrected Christ throughout all creation. *Earthbound* certainly roots vocation in the free gift of justification in Christ, but its purpose is to move from that affirmation to the application and implications in vocation. A full view of Christ's work and presence in the here and now could unlock the subtle richness of the important and very helpful teaching that *Earthbound* capably broaches.

*Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig is Professor of Church in Society, B.B. Maurer Chair for Town and Country Church Ministry and Director of the Town and Country Church Institute (TCCI) at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. He was named a 2011 GreenFaith Fellow, joining the only comprehensive education and training program for religious environmental leadership.*

## POETRY + THEOLOGY

## Better Preaching Through Beowulf

*Katy Giebenhain*

Our cover image comes from Gabriele Guha's "Die Zehn Gebote" (The Ten Commandments). Eight of her pictograms are red, for the "thou shalt nots" and two are blue, for the "thou shalt." This is the one telling us not to steal. Check out the thief's pose. Doesn't this look like a split second of reflection before he flees? Stealing can be blatant and premeditated, or so subtle we hardly notice it. The loss of an identity, an idea or an opportunity can be more painful and destructive than a loss of property.

As with the pictograms illustrating The Ten Commandments, blogs can communicate old messages in new formats. I look forward to introducing you to such a blog, and to this issue's poems by Gary Fincke (Pennsylvania), Rachel Barenblat (Massachusetts), Anne Higgins (Maryland), Alistair Noon (Germany), Paul Steinke (New York), Thomas Alan Holmes (Tennessee), Margaret Atwood (Canada) and Kathleen Rogers (West Virginia). Whenever I read the poem "The Arrest of the Stockbroker" (page 112) I've got Martin Niemöller's "then they came for me / and there was no one left to speak out for me" ringing in my ears. The book recommendations are for *E-mails from Scheherazad* by Mohja Kahf, *And God Said: A Brief History of Creation* by Barbara Leff and *70 Faces: Torah Poems* by Rachel Barenblat.

### *Better Preaching Through Beowulf*

Right now my top recommendation for sermon inspiration is a literary blog named after that ur-hero Beowulf. The Old English poem about a Scandinavian warrior-prince who battles the monster Grendel, Grendel's mother and a dragon was originally told aloud in fire-lit halls in times when the dark of night was truly dark, and it raised higher goose bumps than any high-definition film experience today.<sup>1</sup>

Robin Bates is a Professor of English at St. Mary's College of Maryland. He started the blog "Better Living Through Beowulf" in the spring of 2009. Its subtitle is "How Great Literature Can Change Your Life." One of his goals in launching the blog was to "convince readers to give the classics a chance. Or a second chance if the first encounter was a bad one. I want people to think of the classics as stories," he says, "not as dusty artifacts in a museum."<sup>2</sup> The Bible has a similar reputation, does it not? It is worth giving scripture another chance, and another.

Bates is keen to hear readers' accounts of and reactions to the poems and stories they read. A lively dialog has sprung up through the comments section. Great texts do not wear out. We can keep coming back to learn from them, to be entertained by them and to be surprised by them.

One of the ways Bates cultivates enthusiasm for the classics is to constantly make connections between these texts and what's happening around us, and by introducing us to the work of living writers. "Literature is meant to mix it up with life."<sup>3</sup> He writes about politics, sports, visual art, film, holidays, death and cooking. He compares the situation facing the Indianapolis Colts after Peyton Manning's injury to Geatland after Beowulf's death.<sup>4</sup> He links Shakespeare's *King Lear* to Medicare politics, Hugh Heffner's latest engagement to Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* and the American Labor Day holiday with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

A reader who grew up in a house surrounded by books, a scholar and a committed teacher, Bates is a wellspring of great poems, short stories, novels and commentary. On Sundays he writes a "Spiritual Sunday" segment for the blog which I would especially like you to know about. "Literature and religion both 'attempt to find ways to express the inexpressible,'" he writes. "The divine is not something that can be pointed at. Language can only suggest it, and literature which is language used figuratively or symbolically, is language at its most suggestive."<sup>5</sup>

I asked Bates for some reading suggestions. He was kind enough to provide a list for *Seminary Ridge Review* readers, and also to have a conversation about some of the ways faith, literature, teaching and culture intersect. I recognized a kindred spirit in him when he said "A good sermon is a kind of poem – not too circumscribed, but not too vague. Poets are so aware of what language can do, and aware of its limitations."<sup>6</sup>

Bates is crazy about the 17<sup>th</sup>-century vicar George Herbert's poetry. "I keep coming back to George Herbert. He lets it all hang out there – exuberant and depressed. His poems are searches. He didn't want a cheap God. He wanted an authentic God. [It's] exemplary poetry."<sup>7</sup> When we talked about clinical pastoral education he said "when training clergy [for CPE] a discussion about George Herbert is the best you can do." Another thing Bates

remarked on rang true for me as well, even though I hadn't thought of it before. "The difference between great and lesser poetry," he said, "is that great poetry explores, lesser poetry preaches."<sup>8</sup>

When I think about the difference between a great and a lesser sermon, it often comes back to this, too. When I'm listening to a really fine sermon, I feel like I'm exploring the text, reminded of my living faith. I feel like I'm along for a ride of discovery rather than being overly aware of the preaching. Bates and I also talked about the human wish for certainty and how much we want it, but that isn't the point. "The desire to be self-sufficient is a blasphemous desire – to have God's certainty, to be God."<sup>9</sup> He mentioned Anne LaMott's well-known response "The opposite of faith is not doubt, it's certainty."

One of the Herbert poems Bates enjoys teaching is "The Windows." He takes students into the 18<sup>th</sup> century Trinity Episcopal Church on the St. Mary's College campus by St. Mary's River<sup>10</sup> to read the poem surrounded by backlit windows. "The poem is a rant," Bates emphasizes. Here are the last five lines which follow a beseeching inquiry on faith in the world and in the church:

Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one  
When they combine and mingle, bring  
A strong regard and aw: but speech alone  
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,  
And in the eare, not conscience ring.<sup>11</sup>

When teaching, Bates has observed an urgency in students' questions about faith. "When they say 'I'm not religious but I'm spiritual,' what does this mean? I do think you should be a part of a congregation, but I think what they're saying is that they're suspicious of institutions." That suspicion can be healthy, and is not undeserved. "I feel hopeful about the young. We often don't acknowledge them enough in mainline congregations. We have as many stereotypes about them as they do about older people."<sup>12</sup> Bates enjoys talking about teaching these works to younger people. He loves the energy of the discussions. "Poetry and short stories have a lovely way of jolting us out of our ruts." He finds something vivid about the way you feel when reading a really good poem. "You can always renew it . . . like a prayer. You have to keep going back."<sup>13</sup>

Bates does not back away from difficult topics, including grief. He writes openly about the death of his oldest son Justin in a freak drowning accident when he was 21 years old. Bates says people turn to poetry in response to love and death. "Poetry is language working overtime, words used

with maximum effect. In poetry's compression, more meaning can be hinted at or alluded to than we try to express ourselves more directly."<sup>14</sup>

Bates is very interested in the mystic Julian of Norwich in connection with suffering and the way she used language and images. "She had 17 revelations and spent the rest of her life meditating and out of that comes one of the great visions of God as love. Consolation is another way to think of her suffering. That is a dramatic example, of course."<sup>15</sup> When his students learn that the likes of George Herbert, John Donne or Milton wrestled with a lack of faith all the time, "it is such a relief to them."<sup>16</sup>

The ways that Bates picks up on grief in literature and revisits the ways we deal with it in our lives is tremendously helpful. I find it pastoral. "People can be suspicious of metaphor, and think language should be straightforward, but language trying to approach God you have to be as metaphoric as can be."<sup>17</sup> "The ultimate teaching tool was the crucifixion. But, parables were the other main way he [Jesus] himself used language to articulate what he wanted to say. He was dealing with the same limitations of language that we do."<sup>18</sup> In one of his Spiritual Sunday posts, Bates put it this way "When you think about it, all language issued in religious rituals is metaphor, and a powerful preacher will unpack these metaphors and run with them. This is necessary because some metaphors have become so commonplace that they have lost their power (Jesus as king, for instance)."<sup>19</sup>

Here are his reading suggestions followed by the web address for *Better Living through Beowulf*.

*When I am wrestling with religious doubt or spiritual angst, I find that certain literary works do more for me than more straightforward treatments of faith. That's because they reenact my struggles as I witness sensitive souls seeking to touch the divine. Reading and interpreting these works function as spiritual meditation. Here are some of my favorites:*

*Unknown, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight  
(c. 1375-1400)*

As a good Christian knight, Sir Gawain thinks that he has his faith figured out. When he learns he will die in a year's time, however, his easy assurance is shaken. Although the poet may have witnessed the Black Plague first hand, he has a remarkably good-humored vision of death and his lessons in humility are invaluable.

*George Herbert, The Temple (1633)*

George Herbert, my favorite religious poet, understands what it means to wrestle with doubt and his poems are never stable or predictable. If

Herbert occasionally rails at God, this only serves to make his spiritual breakthroughs that much more powerful. In both "The Collar" and "Love (3)," the disgruntled poet finds himself surprised by joy.

*Henry Vaughan, Silex Scintillans (1660, 1665)*

Like Herbert, who was a tremendous influence, Henry Vaughan undergoes periods of depression when he cannot hear God. Yet his intense search for the divine also uncovers instances of God's glory shining in the world, often in nature (a cock, a waterfall, a flower).

*Alfred, Lord Tennyson, In Memoriam (1849)*

For years following the drowning death of my oldest child, I found solace by randomly dipping into *In Memoriam*, a lengthy poem written over a period of 17 years in memory of the author's best friend. Tennyson demonstrates breathtaking range, sometimes looking inward at private grief and out-of-body epiphanies, sometimes looking outward at political revolution and scientific breakthrough. I recommend reading the poem in small doses.

*Denise Levertov, The Stream and the Sapphire (1997)*

In this collection which gathers together Levertov's religious poems, the poet describes miracles as occurring within the realm of the every day. Her saints are down-to-earth, and what is miraculous is their courage to open themselves to spirit. As Levertov writes of Mary in "The Annunciation," "She was free/to accept or refuse, choice/integral to humanness."

*Mary Oliver, American Primitive (1983)*

Oliver generally writes about nature rather than religious matters but Christians will recognize in her poetry the struggle between the profane and the spiritual. Sometimes she describes herself bogged down in a swamp or driving blind in a blizzard, only to find her despair punctuated by a moment of grace – whether in the form of a white egret, a mother doe with her fawn, or a lynx that appears in a flash and is then gone.

*Marilynne Robinson, Gilead (2004)*

Written as an extended letter by a dying minister to the son who will never know him, *Gilead* is a humble reflection by a religious man on life's biggest issues, including sin and regret. One feels one's moral sense expanding as one reads the novel.

“Better Living Through Beowulf” postings can be accessed by date or subject. Visit [www.betterlivingthroughbeowulf.com/](http://www.betterlivingthroughbeowulf.com/).

### Notes

- 1 Robin Bates emphasized that technology does not automatically trump oral storytelling. Listening to a live retelling of *Beowulf* would have been a hair-raising experience.
- 2 Robin Bates, “High Impact Literature,” Better Living With Beowulf Blog (St. Mary’s City: April 27, 2009), < <http://www.betterlivingthroughbeowulf.com/?p=41> >.
- 3 Robin Bates, “Touching the Divine Through Poetry,” Better Living Through Beowulf Blog (St. Mary’s City: June 19, 2011), < <http://www.betterlivingthroughbeowulf.com/?p=9794> >.
- 4 Robin Bates, “Après Peyton, le Déluge,” Better Living Through Beowulf Blog (St. Mary’s City: September 8, 2011), < <http://www.betterlivingthroughbeowulf.com/?p=11008> >.
- 5 Bates, “Touching the Divine Through Poetry.”
- 6 Robin Bates, interview by author, St. Mary’s City, Md., June 23 2011.
- 7 Bates interview.
- 8 Bates interview.
- 9 Bates interview.
- 10 This is a gorgeous spot near the water. If you have not visited the campus of St. Mary’s College of Maryland I highly recommend it.
- 11 Wilcox, Helen ed. *The English Poems of George Herbert*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press). 2007. p. 59.
- 12 Bates interview.
- 13 Bates interview.
- 14 Robin Bates, “Death and Language’s Limitations,” Better Living Through Beowulf Blog (St. Mary’s City: May 22, 2009), < <http://www.betterlivingthroughbeowulf.com/?p=222> >.
- 15 Bates interview.
- 16 Bates interview.
- 17 Bates interview.
- 18 Bates interview.
- 19 Bates, “Touching the Divine through Poetry.”

## Book Recommendations

### *E-mails From Scheherazad*

In this collection Mohja Kahf unpeels and lays bare stereotypes, one after the other. Moving between regions of the U.S. and her native Syria, she selects and places just the right details together so readers see and hear the contrasts. The narrator of “My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears,” for example, navigates a department store with her Arabic-speaking grandmother looking for a place for *wudu*, the ritual washing for prayer. Two lines resonate for older generations of any culture or subculture “My grandmother knows one culture – the right one, / as do these matrons of the Middle West.” (27) We are shown flashbacks of Iznik tile in Istanbul and a Kenmore appliance display. It’s a great setting for showing expectations “I can see / a clash of civilizations brewing in the Sears bathroom.” (26)

The bodies of Odalisques step out of paintings in “*Thawrah des Odalisques* at the Matisse Retrospective.” As if standing among them in the museum, we hear the conversation of Blue Nude, Hindu Pose, With Tambourine and Woman With Goldfish. “Everyone whose arms are numb from sleeping on them, / raise your hands.” (64) These women are tired of being viewed two-dimensionally. “It did no good to tell them we didn’t choose the poses / we were painted in.” (66)

Scheherazad is the central storyteller from *Thousand and One Nights*. In Kahf’s book, Scheherazad rises out of the stories and goes about her business on her own terms, like Matisses’s odalisques. None of them are passive in these pages.

Kahf has some razor-sharp poems about language. Pronunciation opens up a marvelous expatriate poem in “Fayetteville as in Fate.” The scenarios are limitless. I can certainly relate to pronunciation snafus. I’ve walked into plenty of those. The beginning of “Copulation in English” literally handles language: “We are going to dip English backward / by its Shakespearean tresses / arcing its spine like a crescent / We are going to rewrite English in Arabic.” (71)

One of my favorite poems in the book, and one that also takes snapshots from daily life to show how entrenched we are with cultural and religious expectations, is “Hijab Scene #3.” I love the way she brings *Star Trek*, public school and identity together in a short poem.

*Hijab Scene #3*

“Would you like to join the PTA?” she asked,  
tapping her clipboard with her pen.  
“I would,” I said, but it was no good,  
she wasn’t seeing me.  
“Would you like to join the PTA?” she repeated.  
“I would,” I said,  
but I could’ve been antimatter.  
A regular American mother next to me  
shrugged and shook her head.  
“I would, I would,” I sent up flares,  
beat on drums, waved navy flags,  
tried smoke signals, American Sign Language,  
Morse code, Western Union, telex, fax,  
Lt. Uhura tried hailing her  
for me on another frequency.  
“Dammit, Jim, I’m a Muslim woman, not a Klingon!”  
– but the positronic force field of hijab  
jammed all her cosmic coordinates.  
Can we save the ship we’re both on,  
can we save  
the dilithium crystals?

1993 (25)

In this poem and in others, Kahf includes a reference to being in the same space. “The ship we’re both on” reminds us of what we inhabit together. We cannot be reminded often enough

*“Hijab Scene #3” is reprinted courtesy of the University Press of Florida. E-mails from Scheherazad ©2003 by Mohja Kahf, Gainesville: University Press of Florida. Mohja Kahf is an associate professor in the Department of English at the University of Arkansas. Her teaching interests include comparative literature, Arabic literature, Post Colonialism, poetry, autobiography, love & eros, the Quran, critical theory and gender. Visit [www.upf.com/](http://www.upf.com/).*

*70 Faces: Torah Poems*

Also moving between the past and the present, between points of view, is Rabbi Rachel Barenblat’s collection of Torah poems. In her introduction she says “From classical midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah, a collection of midrash exploring the book of Numbers) comes from the Jewish saying that ‘Torah has 70 faces.’ I follow in well-trodden footsteps when I say that I believe that the Hebrew Scriptures, beloved by both Jews and Christians, can support an infinity of response. Each interpretation has the capacity to reveal a new spark of divinity.” (1)

We launch into the book with a strong opening poem about a tired and surprised God after creation: “Postpartum / *Bereshit*.” Many of these poems look at relationships and different perspectives of people and God in these relationships, such as in the ten-poem “Akedah Cycle / *Vayera*.” Here we follow Sarai’s desperation and a series of “afters” (after the name changing, after Hagar’s belly swells, “After Avraham argued with God”). (10) We land where God is about to test Avraham. The stepped stanza indentations emphasize the progression of decisions. It builds in a way that allows readers to arrive at the impending sacrifice of Yitzchak in a different state. The urgencies and misunderstandings come from different directions. The ninth poem in the cycle, “*D’var acher* / another interpretation” sets an alternate scene for Avraham and his family. What does not happen reframes what does.

“Secrets / *Nitzavim*” is a poem which articulates the presence of God in a strangely new yet familiar way to me. It has God “sorting the stories we don’t tell” and inhabiting our fantasies “like a cat curling up for a nap / in a pile of warm laundry,” hiding in plain sight. (78)

The book is infused with smoke, milk, blood, stars, curls of lemon, saddled donkeys, sinew, rafters hung with garlic, sand, apple skins, mountains. The scenes are well-set. The layout and forms support the narratives and the pacing for reading. The questions – and there are plenty of questions – are asked with the best sensitivity one could want in midrash explorations. These exegetical stories, Barenblat reminds us “come from the root *lidrosh*, to seek or inquire.” She is not shy about speaking out to God or expressing herself. Here are two stanzas from “The Psalm I Sing / B’shalach.” She brings it around to facing what we do, what we cause. Here are the second and third of eight stanzas.

I don’t want to say  
this is my God and I will enshrine him  
the God of my father, and I will exalt him

not if that means celebrating  
when the floodwaters or the bombs  
have left their bodies bent and bloodied (34)

The inquiry throughout *70 Faces* feels grounded in a consistently genuine place, a place that is respectful and fearless, ancient and brand-new. See page 115 for three new poems by Barenblat.

Visit the Velveteen Rabbi blog at <http://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/>. *70 Faces: Torah Poems* is available from Phoenicia Publishing. Visit [www.phoeniciapublishing.com/](http://www.phoeniciapublishing.com/).

### *And God Said: A Brief History of Creation*

Creation is not tidy. Ask an artist, a cook, a midwife. In *And God Said* Barbara Leff revisits The Book of Genesis. Her “what ifs” are the confronting and interested “what ifs” people of faith have. You can’t explore something with this much openness and intensity if you are utterly disinterested. They are thoughtful, exposing poems. They do shake many of our creation stories and characters upside down by the ankles. God can handle it. So can we.

In reading this calm, brilliant collection I made discoveries, which is the point of revisiting any familiar story. I was particularly taken by the voices coming out of these poems, some of them internal thoughts shared from the likes of Cain, Jacob, Esau, fire personified, Lot’s wife, the baker . . .

In “Thus Spake the Serpent” we hear the snake in the Garden of Eden following an epigraph from Genesis 3:1-6. This is no cunning creature with a plan. The snake is caught by surprise, scared for its life and startled into blurting something out. It is the self-preservation of crisis which any human being can relate to. The natural reaction to perceived danger is to get the heck away from wherever you are. It is a brief, adrenaline-laced poem. The snake simply explains:

The truth:  
I didn’t trick her into anything. (15)

What does a blessing cost? What does it mean? What’s in a name? What motivations might really have influenced decisions? Leff looks into it.  
The beginning of “Salt” has us running, pre-dawn with Lot’s wife:

When the wind warned me  
to focus on the future  
I thought I was dreaming,  
tried to pinch myself awake  
and felt not flesh  
but grit between my fingers  
fading fast into memory.  
I tried to scream  
through a throat  
clogged with sand,  
tried to run on legs  
that were no more.

We hear *from* the creator, too. It’s a creator with questions as well as promises. Post-flood, in “And God Thought” we hear “never again” (24) over and over. Even the voice of fire explains why it was created, why it exists as a messenger between heaven and earth, and as a tool for cooking, clearing land, providing light “without my consent.” (16) God is challenged.

Leff’s voices – I can’t emphasize the voices enough – will stay with you. I highly recommend this book.

Visit the Broadstone Books site <http://broadstonebooks.com/>.

# Vineyard Stories

*Anne M. Higgins*

One son was invited and he said yes  
 and he did not come.  
 the other one said no  
 and regretted it  
 and came.  
 Was that the same son  
 who was killed by all those  
 tenant farmers?  
 Were those farmers  
 the ones  
 who worked all day  
 and got the same pay  
 as the ones who came  
 at the last horn's blow?  
 Did all this happen  
 in the same vineyard  
 that glistens in the evening sun  
 where the lovely macramé of  
 green strings  
 reaches out  
 for the anchoring pole?  
 Grapes are heavy in the  
 September air.  
 Here is a place for  
 the liar and the rash.  
 Here is time to say no  
 and change your mind.  
 Here, also,  
 the jealous  
 and the killer.  
 Here, harvest.

Sr. Anne Higgins is a Daughter of Charity. She is a lecturer in the English Department at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Md. She is a graduate of Saint Joseph College, Johns Hopkins University, and Washington Theological Union. Higgins is the author of five poetry books and chapbooks. Her blog is called *Scattered Showers in a Clear Sky*. "Vineyard Stories" is reprinted from *Digging for God: Praying for Poetry*. Used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Visit [www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com).

## The Mermaid Cemetery

*Gary Fincke*

Someone tends these graves. Someone carries kelp  
And seaweed to vases brimmed with water  
We test with fingertips, learning the salt.

So damp, the pages of the brochure curl,  
Its history smeared across photographs  
Of the dead who are buried beneath us.

And yes, we find ourselves fools for longing,  
Following the mulch trail among headstones  
Shaped like fish, becoming witnesses who

Wish ourselves mourners, willing to accept  
A measure of loss in order to be  
Transformed, bodies returning to water,

Scales swallowing our skin until we fuse  
Into the elusive beauty of myth,  
Light and land abandoned to those in love

With the possibilities for language,  
So scattered below the surface, we would  
Be impossible enough for worship.

## The Year One

The attic window is so small  
I smother it with the Bible  
my father studies in its light,  
electricity not bleeding  
upstairs to the fierce, torrid cave  
of that room where he sleeps, waking  
sweat-soaked inside the clock of heat.  
Like piss, my mother says, his sweat,  
the way it stains, the sheets crusted  
as if his body becomes salt  
from looking back at the choices  
that have led to afternoon sleep.  
“It’s the year one up here,” she says,  
meaning the light, a cataract  
of grime upon the single pane,  
mentioning nothing about how,  
when she climbs the steps before dawn,  
the moon is down, the mill’s black smoke,  
as always, smothering the stars,  
all that she can possibly see  
is void, waiting for my father  
like waiting for the year one, when  
God created day, my father  
about to ascend to the light.

*Gary Fincke is the Charles B. Degenstein Chair of English and Creative Writing and director of The Writers Institute at Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pa. Born and raised in Pittsburgh, he is an award-winning writer of poetry, fiction and non-fiction. A few of Fincke’s books include The Fire Landscape, The Canals of Mars, Blood Ties: Working Class Poems and Emergency Calls. His latest book, The History of Permanence (2011), won the 2010 Stephen F. Austin University Press Poetry Prize.*

# The Arrest of the Stockbroker

*Margaret Atwood*

They broke the hands of the musician  
and when despite that he would not stop singing  
they shot him. That was expected.

You expected the poet hung upside down  
by one foot with clothesline: in your head  
you coloured his hair green. Art needs martyrs.

And the union leader with electrodes  
clipped to the more florid  
parts of his body, wired like  
an odd zoological diagram:  
if you don't keep your mouth shut  
they'll choose the noise  
you emit. Anyone knows that.  
In some way he wanted it.

Reading the papers, you've seen it all:  
the device for tearing out fingernails,  
the motors, the accessories,  
what can be done with the common pin.  
Not to mention the wives and children.

Who needs these stories  
that exist in the white spaces  
at the edges of the page,  
banal and without shape, like snow?

You flip to the travel ads; you're unable  
to shake the concept of tragedy,  
that what one gets  
is what's deserved, more  
or less; that there's a plot,  
and innocence is merely  
not to act.

Then suddenly you're in there,  
in this mistake, this stage, this box,  
this war grinding across  
your body. You can't believe it.

Not only that, he's in here with you,  
the man with the documents,  
the forms, the stamps, the ritual prayers, the seals,  
red & silver, and the keys, the signatures.

Those are his screams you hear,  
the man you were counting on  
to declare you legitimate:  
the man you were always counting on  
to get you out.

*"The Arrest of the Stockbroker" by Margaret Atwood, used by permission of the Author. Originally published in TRUE STORIES ©1981 Margaret Atwood. Canadian rights: from Atwood, Margaret. True Stories. © Oxford University Press Canada 1981. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. Margaret Atwood is the author of more than fifty volumes of poetry, children's literature, fiction, and non-fiction and is perhaps best known for her novels, which include The Edible Woman, The Handmaid's Tale, The Robber Bride, and The Blind Assassin, which won the Booker Prize in 2000. Her most recent volume of poetry, The Door, was published in 2007. Visit [www.margaretatwood.ca](http://www.margaretatwood.ca).*

## St. Luke in the Fields, NYC

*Paul David Steinke*

Angels on unicycles guard  
the entrance to the sanctuary.  
Acolytes scoot between mahogany  
pillars in a forest of totems.  
The thurifer swings a one-eighty,  
blazing charcoal draws the sun  
through the windows. We inhale  
the scent of prayers rising  
to heaven from the bottom  
of our lungs. We stand at  
the altar; the space between  
our shoulders is thin as skin.  
Priests glide by offering  
the slow substance of life  
to upturned hands and lips.  
A helicopter hovers over us  
ready to whisk us to eternity

in a New York minute.

*Paul David Steinke, a Lutheran pastor, has been a Supervisor of Clinical Pastoral Education for over thirty years. He has been at Bellevue Hospital in New York City for six years. His avocations are poetry, kayaking, bluegrass and fiddle lessons. His poetry has appeared in The Cresset, Journal of Pastoral Care, Artemis, and Small Pond. Steinke was the supervising partner for "Poetry Study: Imagination and Delight" at the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education Annual Conference in Kansas City, 2010.*

## Belief

*Rachel Barenblat*

The days will lengthen  
the voice of the veery thrush  
will be heard on our land

the tiny stars of crocuses  
well-rested from the long dark  
will adorn the icy mud of spring

the sap already rising  
will feed a million tiny banners  
unfurling across the hills

and this small blue pill  
will banish anxiety, restore to me  
the woman I only dimly remember

laughing in photographs  
with her hand on her round belly  
hope curled inside, waiting to unfold

## Cloud of Glory (B'ha-a lot'kha)

The cloud covers the mishkan like a prayer shawl.  
By night it burns like fire, a low crackling  
you can hear throughout the encampment.  
The children are used to it, though the goats  
still spook if they wander too close

when the cloud lifts we fold our tents  
and strap the babies to our backs  
as the men disassemble the mishkan  
stowing its pegs and tapestries  
the troops move out, tribe by tribe

all the desert looks the same to me  
sand and scrub, wadis and hills, though  
they promise somewhere ahead we'll find  
pasture to make the goats' milk rich  
and dates to pound into sweetness

footsore and hungry we make camp  
and I hold my breath, wondering  
whether the cloud will settle over the tent  
giving us time to do the laundry  
before our wandering God uproots us again

## Carry This in Your Pocket

For the sake  
of your sternum  
rising and falling,  
the deep folds  
in your thighs,  
your peach fuzz  
beneath my palm  
the whole world  
was created

every domino  
tipping the next:  
my young father  
playing the bugle  
and flirting with  
his movie star  
at summer camp,  
paper cigar ring  
on her finger –

every thing leads  
to you standing  
in the exersaucer  
on your tiptoes  
damp fists clenched  
humming to yourself  
in a language  
which only God  
can understand

*Rabbi Rachel Barenblat was ordained by ALEPH: the Alliance for Jewish Renewal in 2011. Author of four poetry chapbooks and of the blog Velveteen Rabbi, named in 2008 one of the internet's top 25 sites by TIME, she is most recently author of 70 faces (Phoenicia Publishing, 2011). She serves Congregation Beth Israel in North Adams, Mass., and lives in western Massachusetts with her husband and son. Visit the Phoenicia website at [www.phoeniciapublishing.com/](http://www.phoeniciapublishing.com/). Visit Velveteen Rabbi blog at <http://velveteenrabbi.blogspot.com/>.*

## 7

*Alistair Noon*

I seem so short of decent words for water,  
 my one good guide over the next three days.  
 It falls and flows, freezes, melts, forms a border,  
 then evaporates in the Dead Sea's haze.  
 No single terms will sing a pool's green hue,  
 the jellyfish-pirated Eastern Med,  
 dead coral off Kota Kinabalu,  
 scavengers' darkness at the ocean bed.  
 When I find a pond or meet the Pacific  
 it's not the light, the warmth, the taste or pressure,  
 but the fluid things that I make specific –  
 the place that I name and the shape I measure –  
 fingers doing their best to comprehend  
 this sentence we never hear to the end.

*Alistair Noon is a UK-born and bred poet who has lived in Berlin since the early nineties. His poems, essays, reviews and translations from German and Russian have appeared widely, including in several chapbooks from various small presses. His first full-length collection, Earth Records, is due in 2012 from Nine Arches Press. "7" is from Earth Records. This is its first publication. Visit [www.ninearchespress.com/](http://www.ninearchespress.com/) and [www.myspace.com/alistairnoon](http://www.myspace.com/alistairnoon).*

## On Making Vellum

*Kathleen Rogers*

The sheep is blessed,  
 scarlet rivers mark its spilled covenant.  
 Integument is lifted from flesh and shorn.

Wool falls silently to the floor.

Men mark dimensions on the warm skin,  
 unstretched,  
 far from parchment's translucence.

Submerged in limewater,  
 hair roots loosen and die.  
 Flesh-hooks stretch the hide.

The curved blade's wielder  
 scrapes and scrapes.  
 The hide thrums new life.

Hot lye melts fat and wool wax,  
 vestiges of flesh purged,  
 pores cleansed.

Workers scour the hide thin,  
 so it glows with golden light  
 and the blade's benediction

cuts the circle free.

## Elegy: Building a Fire on a Winter Morning

*When using heat fusion in the field,  
it is essential that foreign materials  
are prevented from entering the pipe.  
— Pipe joining process sheet*

The integrity of a man's life  
printed Monday, September 20;  
now yellowed paper kindling.

Obit on page 2d;  
a small fissure in the large left  
toe allowed a bacteria

to reeve its line through an  
open channel to his heart.  
Know the rectitude of this pipe fitter,

grilling family steaks on Friday nights,  
leaving just two empty beer bottles  
in the trash, never more.

The truth in his flux-  
pocked hands protects the house  
with few words, except

for Sunday,  
over pancakes and bacon.  
Then come groans

at the tight top button,  
firm above an eclipsed neck.  
He hums to the tune "Danny Boy"

(today's words: "I Can Not Tell.")  
The boy's new shoes squeak  
in rhythm on the way to the Ford.

Easter. Wife and daughter,  
pastel skirts petals in  
the breeze. In the vestibule,

he smooths their hair,  
lightly stroking arcs with both hands.  
His calluses catch on strands

he pats to fuse in place.  
At work, he solders joins to seal  
connections in sprays of light,

locking the vapor inside.  
Sometimes, he bends a pipe  
by packing it full of sand

so it won't crumple  
under pressure. After, the inside  
bore feels smooth

like his wife's leg behind  
the knee joint from thigh  
around the inside rise to calf.

The skin under his toes is  
often cracked and itchy,  
cotton socks compressing

sweat tightly against flesh.  
Hot summer, infection bubbles  
inside the steel-toed

boots. Venous  
tubes wash helical  
coils of cells, tumbling,

crashing into maroon  
disks, up the conduits, spilling  
into the heart's workshop.

By fall the walls are corrugated  
and joins fail until he is no more.  
Crumpling the newspaper tinder,

I kneel, shivering in my robe.  
It is 10 degrees outside.  
The writing flames up blue,

but his skills:  
curvature of couplings,  
bending true angles,

uniting of segments,  
prove he was most  
important among men.

*Kathleen Rogers has published poems in Poetica, Beltway Poetry Quarterly; Langston Hughes Issue, Backbone Mountain Review, Blueline, Relief, Anthology of Appalachian Writers, and The Ghazal Page. She is a former editor of Hampshire History and writes from Raven Ridge, West Virginia.*

## Tilling

*Thomas Alan Holmes*

When I reviewed the sheaf  
of poems you prepared,  
how you assured the trust  
of teachers trained to stay  
within confines of text,  
I wondered you'd compose  
a loving poem to  
my friend, your mentor, who  
has drawn a parallel  
between the plow-turned earth  
and ink-etched page. You write  
your farmland fantasy,  
communing souls, each bound  
responsibility  
an invitation made  
for intimacy.

Wait –  
we love the ones we teach  
as parents love until  
our students join our work,  
our discipline of words,  
like congregants who raise  
their voices up in song,  
participating word  
by word to replicate  
the never-ending task,  
creation from mere word.  
This unexpected love  
you feel is filial  
and natural and real.

*Thomas Alan Holmes, a member of the East Tennessee State University English faculty, lives and writes in Johnson City, Tenn. His work has appeared in The Appalachian Journal, The Florida Review, The Black Warrior Review, Motif: Writing by Ear, Motif: Come What May and The Southern Poetry Anthology Volume III: Contemporary Appalachia. Visit <http://faculty.etsu.edu/HOLMEST/Welcome.html>.*

## GETTYSBURG SEMINARY FINE ARTS

### Truth is in the Eye of the Believer: How Churches may use Art to Bring Life and Vitality to Conversations of Faith

*Nicolé Raddu Ferry  
with Emried Cole*

“I see Jesus holding his hand out to the church, asking for help.”

“I see a pastor/priest holding on for dear life to the church building.”

“I never saw Jesus. That guy on the left looks like a homeless person in really sad shape.”

“The guy on the right is saying: ‘You can’t have my church.’”

The brief quotations above are but a small sample of the many comments that were gathered from members of my congregation as two different Bible studies, the finance committee and the council were asked: “What do you see in this print?” Bringing the print before these groups was not only a new approach to Bible study but also initiated conversations that addressed, in a benign and non-judgmental manner, some difficult issues around congregational priorities. This print was borrowed from an impressive collection at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg when a member, observing the print on display, recognized the possibilities it presented for inspiring congregational reflection and decision.

The print, entitled “...For he had Great Possessions” (see page 128), by R.O. Hodgell, is inspired by the story of the rich man as found in Mark 10:17-27. The rich man approaches Jesus seeking to know what he had to do to gain eternal life and very eager to hear what Jesus offered. He was very clear in his conviction that he had kept the commandments faithfully throughout his life and, no doubt, was feeling a sense of worthiness in his



Above: "...For he Had Great Possessions," R.O. Hodgell, linoleum block print, 30 x 24 in.

righteous life. Then Jesus names the heart of the obstacle for this man. "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in have; then come, follow me. When the rich man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." (Mark 10: 21b-22)

The print brings the impact of Jesus' admonition powerfully to life in what appears to most to be a context highly relevant to congregational life. Two figures look toward one another. The figure on the left is thin, only partially dressed in ragged clothing, unkempt, perhaps in pain or discomfort and appears to have a crown of thorns or wild hair. This figure is holding out his right hand toward the second figure as if begging and with his left is holding his abdomen or perhaps holding up his ragged clothing. On closer inspection the viewer can see scars and holes in his hands and on his feet.

In dramatic contrast, the figure on the right is well-clothed, appears vigorous and healthy, and wearing a black ecclesiastical garment with the suggestion of a clerical collar. This person is tightly gripping a large, cathedral-

like design of a church building with both hands and seems to be moving resolutely away from the figure on the left as if to avoid his unwelcome and perhaps threatening supplications. The look on this person's face appears to manifest fear, denial, discomfort and even disgust.

This print was brought to an urban congregation approaching its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary which through a large and talented membership had been a pillar of its denomination. In recent years, its membership, attendance and financial condition have deteriorated dramatically. The property is gorgeous in design and very large and its furnishings are beautiful. As revenues declined, maintaining the property and congregational lifestyle became more and more difficult and consumed more and more of the congregation's human and other resources. The congregation is loving and faithful yet very small. It has wrestled with the reality of change but has so far been unable or unwilling to acknowledge that reality and make decisions about its future.

Some members liked the print; others did not. Some said looking at it was incredibly hard. But, presenting this print to congregational leaders and students of the Word engaged almost everyone involved in substantive conversations that may have otherwise been seen as offensive and simply too direct. It enabled consideration of decisions that had been avoided and broader reflection upon what God is calling the congregation to do and be. Whose church is it? Without change, will the congregation continue to be viable? Do the members see Jesus in all persons in need they encounter? Is the way the congregation has been "doing church" now obsolete? Where are we and where is God in the midst of this?

Art can provide congregations new and different ways to consider their call to mission. Art can serve, by its very nature, as a "window on God" for all of us – where we can encounter in new ways the Sacred – glimpsing into the Divine creative realm. The Russian novelist, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, noted in his Nobel Prize speech titled "The Gift of Art" that:

Some things lead us into the realm beyond words. Art thaws even the frozen, darkened soul, opening it to lofty spiritual experience. Through Art we are...sent...revelations not to be achieved by rational thought. ...It is like that small mirror in the fairy-tales...you glimpse the Inaccessible, [a realm forever beyond reach] where no horse or magic carpet can take you. And [your] soul cries out for it.

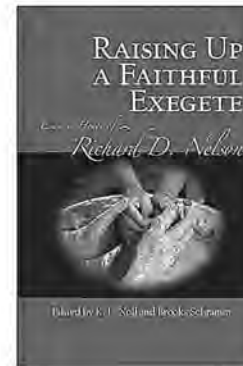
The journey of faith is a gradual illumination of the spiritual, of seeing the presence of God in one's life more and more clearly. It is about opening the eyes of our souls – or as St. Augustine put it, seeing with "the eyes of our heart." This happens when we open our eyes and our hearts to the beauty

that lies in the eye of the believer. Jesus often encouraged his listeners to “come and see.”

If you or anyone in your congregation is interested in exploring the opportunities of utilizing works of art for initiating rich conversations, you may contact CIVA (Christians in the Visual Arts, [www.civa.org](http://www.civa.org)). For information about the Fine Arts Council at Gettysburg visit [www.Ltsg.edu/Programs/Finearts](http://www.Ltsg.edu/Programs/Finearts).

*Nicolé Raddu Ferry is a senior M.Div. student at The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. She is working as the Family Ministry Coordinator at New Hope Lutheran Church, Columbia, Maryland and is a licensed clinical social worker. She has an incredible support team in her husband, Ray, and children Noah and Morgan.*

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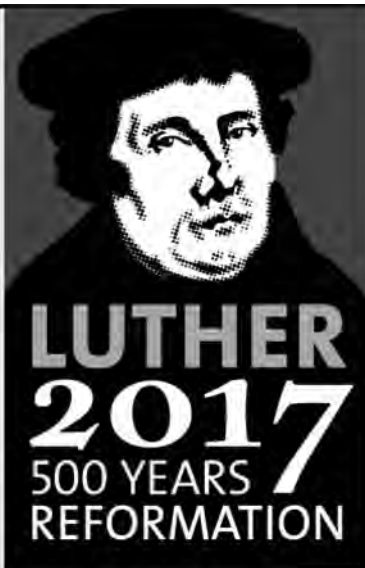
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