Christian Studies

A Publication of the Faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology

Volume 21 / 2005–2006

Christian Studies (ISSN 1050–4125) is a publication of the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology (formerly the Institute for Christian Studies). *Christian Studies* is funded by gifts from readers and friends of the graduate school. Subscription is free upon request. Back issues are available for $3.00 each, plus postage. Address correspondence to Michael R. Weed, Editor, *Christian Studies*, Austin Graduate School of Theology, 1909 University Avenue, Austin, Texas 78705. *Christian Studies* is indexed in *Religion Index One*. FAX: (512) 476–3919. Web Site: www.austingrad.edu. E-mail: christianstudiespress@austingrad.edu.

Christian Studies

Volume 21 Fall 2006

FOREWORD 4

ARTICLES

TRADITION: A STRANGER TO THE MODERN WORLD AND CHURCH 5
Michael R. Weed

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR THE CHURCH 15
J. J. M. Roberts

LORD'S SUPPER AND LOVE FEAST 27
Everett Ferguson

ALL THINGS NEW 39
Allan J. McNicol

A CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATION, 2005 57

A CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATION, 2005 AN EXCHANGE OF VIEWS 63
Leroy Garrett and Jeffrey Peterson

AN ECCLESIOLOGY FOR THE BELIEVERS' CHURCH: CAN RESTORATIONISTS CLAIM THE TIME? 79
Allan J. McNicol

OBITER DICTA 87

CONTRIBUTORS 91

Foreword

American political discussions are commonly criticized as lacking substance and failing to engage issues, often containing little more than sound bites. The same could be said of many discussions being carried on among American churches. If clarity and substance are important for political discussions, how much more is this true for discussions of our faith?

Fifty years ago, Jacques Barzun introduced the term "thought clichés"—widely used phrases that foster the impression of insight while becoming substitutes for clear thinking. Barzun cautioned that discussions based on thought clichés blur our vision and weaken our ability to understand complex matters. For our culture and our churches, the present is a time for clear thinking. Current discussions designating various beliefs or practices as not being "salvation issues" remind one of Barzun's thought clichés. However unintentionally, "salvation issues" gives the impression that there are lists of such issues directly applicable to churches and to individual believers. Such phrases predispose us to minimalist approaches to Christian faith and life. They invite the question, "What are the minimal beliefs and practices required for recognizing a person or community as 'Christian'?"

This is not unlike asking the requirements for persons to be legally married. A very different question is, "What are the commitments, conditions, and practices that sustain lasting and healthy marriages and families?" Identifying minimal beliefs and practices required to designate a person or community as "Christian" is not the same as identifying beliefs, commitments, practices—even traditions—necessary to sustain faithful lives and churches over generations. Failing to make this distinction may do lasting harm. *Christian Studies* is published to encourage reflection on the beliefs, commitments, and practices that sustain faithful churches.

Special thanks are owed to guest contributors, longtime friends of Austin Graduate School of Theology, Drs. Everett Ferguson, Leroy Garrett, and J. J. M. Roberts; all have made lasting contributions to the church's ongoing conversation for many years.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

Tradition: A Stranger to the Modern World and Church

Michael R. Weed

> [W]e find within the operating domain of Christian tradition the joint imperatives of preservation and renewal. The former requires that the tradition be immune to the attrition of time, whereas the latter declares that its use is subject to abuse and corruption as well as recovery and correction.
>
> D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*

> Those who are liberated from tradition generally become slaves to fashion.
>
> Basil Mitchell, *How to Play Theological Ping Pong*

Paradosis/Tradition in the New Testament

In its New Testament usage, tradition (Greek: *paradosis*) commonly designates an authoritative body of teachings, often including customs and practices, which a given group receives from its past, consciously follows, and passes on to future members of the community.[1] An incident frequently referenced by Christians to minimize, dismiss, or even discredit the importance

[1]See Oscar Cullman's "The Tradition: The Exegetical, Historical and Theological Problem," *The Early Church* (London: SCM, 1956), 55–99. See also Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) and "Tradition in Contemporary Life: A Symposium," *Modern Age* 36 (Spring 1994).

Austin Graduate School of Theology
CHRISTIAN STUDIES
Number 21 2005/2006 ©

of tradition is Jesus' familiar indictment of the Pharisees: "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition (*paradosin*)?" (Matt 15:3; cf. Mk 7:8–9). This text, however, is hardly grounds for dismissing all tradition. Jesus criticizes the Pharisees and scribes for allowing their tradition to circumvent the clear commandments of God. The issue is not tradition *per se*, but the nature of particular traditions.[2]

The apostle Paul uses the identical word to refer to the message received and handed on by him to his churches as "tradition." In 1 Corinthians 11:2, for example, Paul commends the Corinthian Christians for "maintaining the traditions" (*paradoseis*) he delivered to them. In 11:23 he reminds them of the tradition of the Lord's supper and in 15:3–7 of the Lord's resurrection. Elsewhere, in Romans 6:17 Paul gives thanks to God that the Roman Christians obeyed the form of teaching in which they were "traditioned" (*paredothete*). And he encourages the Thessalonians to "keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition (*paradosin*) that you received from us" (2 Thess 3:6). Clearly, that which Paul "received" and "passed on" as tradition (*paradosis*) consisted not only of the message and teachings of the Gospel (e.g., 1 Cor 15:1–3), but also included instructions about the Lord's supper (1 Cor 11:2, 23–25), baptismal and moral instructions (e.g., 1 Thess 4:1–2 and Col 3:1–15), and even church polity —"keep away from any brother who . . ." (2 Thess 3:6).

---

[2] The traditions of the scribes and Pharisees did not honor and pass on God's revealed will. For a community to exist over time as an "anti-tradition community" it would have to develop effective practices to ensure that no traditions were developing. Ironically, such anti-tradition practices would become, in effect, anti-tradition traditions. The alternative to weak or distorted traditions is responsible and faithful traditions, not attempting to exist in history without traditions.

For Paul, these traditions (teachings and practices) were authoritative; they were received (or had their origin) "from the Lord" (1 Cor 11:23). Significantly, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to "stand firm and hold to the traditions (*paradoseis*) which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thess 2:15). It is important to notice that Paul does not tell his readers precisely how to hold—to protect and pass on—the traditions. That is, Paul does not specify the means by which the church should preserve the teachings and practices entrusted to it, nor does he specify the manner in which it should convey the faith to subsequent generations. Obviously, however, procedures and practices that enabled the church to preserve the faith also became part of the wisdom which the church handed down.[3]

It is important to note that although the developing traditions and practices reflected the social and cultural environments of the church, they also developed directly out of the church honoring its commission to embody, protect, and faithfully pass on the apostolic teachings and instructions with which it had been entrusted.

Tradition in the Church

For the first Christians, the decisive act of God's revelation in Christ was witnessed and reported by the apostles and embodied in the life of the church. As the early church made its way in the Hellenistic world, it faced difficulties and challenges both from outside the church and from within. In a relatively short time, the church self-consciously began identifying, collect-

---

[3]In the second century, for example, we see Christians being encouraged to say the Lord's Prayer three times a day (*Didache*), drawing up summaries of central beliefs, or "rules of faith" (Justin Martyr, Tertullian), and being instructed not to engage in arguments about scripture with heretics (Tertullian). Toward the end of the second century, church buildings began to appear. Over the centuries, other practices and traditions would develop, including baptisteries, collections of scripture, catechetical/educational materials, hymns and hymn collections, and so on.

ing, and protecting the received (authoritative) traditions as recorded in the writings of the apostles and their associates. In order to protect itself and carry out its commission, the church also began developing traditions (wise practices) necessary to ensure its faithfulness in teaching, protecting, and passing on that which it had received. Drawing upon various sources (synagogue, etc.), including its own experience, the early church organized its life in a manner that would enable it to survive without compromising the message and way of life entrusted to it in the Gospel. Under the apostolic charge to "hold the traditions" (2 Thess 2:15), "entrust to faithful men what you have heard" (2 Tim 2:2), and "continue in what you have learned" (2 Tim 3:14), the early church consciously developed and adopted traditions appropriate to and consistent with carrying out its commission.

The active presence of God in the life of the early church, however, was not understood as having ceased with the apostles and the apostolic church. Rather, as the church continued to make its way through history—facing challenges and opportunities—it understood itself as living in the presence of the risen Lord and the Holy Spirit, and equipped with the witness of scripture. The apostolic exhortation of 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22 well captures the dynamics of the post-apostolic church's stance as it makes its way through the ebb and flow of history: "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil." Paul's injunctions, "test, hold fast . . ." and "do not quench the Spirit" stand in tension.

Either injunction, taken alone, may lead the church into disaster. To "hold fast" without being open to new possibilities and opportunities leads to a petrified church, mimicking a receding past, irrelevant to the present and future. Contrariwise, a church that—however innocently—embraces everything new as "the work of God's Spirit" is a church whose identity soon

becomes overwhelmed by the shifting forces of its surrounding culture and the caprice of human hearts.

The apostolic instructions, collected in Christian scripture, provided the church with fixed points by which to navigate its way through the challenges, opportunities, and uncertainties it encountered in its unfolding history. The church charts its course under the guidance of the unrepeatable and indispensable record of apostolic teachings and instructions incorporated in scripture. Succinctly, all subsequent ecclesiastical, or church tradition is continually subordinated to apostolic tradition. For the post-apostolic church, the New Testament provides "the essential norm against which the Church of every age has to measure itself."[4]

And yet, recourse to scripture does not relieve the church from having to make difficult decisions. Clearly, scripture can be and has been used to underwrite and legitimate ventures that are in fact not consistent with its underlying meaning and intent. It is wise to remember the advice that we more nearly hear the voice of the apostolic tradition when we are open to it challenging us and standing against our desires and aspirations—especially our religious aspirations.[5] Hendrikus Berkhof reminds us:

> [T]he history of the church is full of indications that Scripture has again and again acted as a guiding, correcting, and liberating counter-authority. There is a subtle but profound difference between usurping Scripture for our own views and desires and the willingness to be guided by what it really says.[6]

Tradition Today

Today, modern Americans tend to approach the idea of religious tradition with apprehension. Reasons for this attitude are not difficult to identify.

---

[4]Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1976; German orig., 1967), 46.

[5]See Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 94f.

[6]Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 96.

Deep roots go back at least to the Enlightenment when traditions, especially religious traditions, were viewed as the residue of centuries of superstition, ignorance, and authoritarian religion. This ignorance needed to be dispelled by the light of human reason, thought to be especially evidenced in the sciences and emerging technologies.

Similarly, the American experience was one of establishing a new order and breaking free from Old World customs and traditions.[7] For Protestants, significantly Restorationists, the burden of Christendom had been the accumulation of denominational traditions which were seen to distort biblical faith and divide Christians. Lastly, the modern outlook, shaped by head-spinning social changes and the accelerated appearance of ever-advancing technologies in the form of entertainment devices, automobiles, microwaves, etc., is characterized by impatience and almost an addiction to what is new and different.

Tradition at Twin Pines Church of Christ

Twin Pines Church of Christ stands in tradition (Protestant, Restoration) and has itself initiated several traditions ("wise practices") in carrying out its apostolic commission to "stand firm and hold the tradition" (2 Thess 2:15) as Christ's church.[8] For example, from the sixteenth-century

---

[7]See David Steinmetz, *Memory and Mission: Theological Reflections on the Christian Past* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 17ff. See also D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 17f.

[8] For discussion of tradition in Churches of Christ, see Michael R. Weed, "A Tradition at Risk," *Christian Studies* 11.2 (1991): 41–56; "Guest Editorial: Tradition Provides Continuity for Church," *Christian Chronicle*, June 1991; Michael R. Weed, "The Church Today: A Call for Wisdom in an Uncertain Future," *Leaven* 2 no. 3 (1993): 29–31; and Gary Holloway and Michael R. Weed, "The Gospel in Urban Vessels: Churches of Christ Face the Twenty-first Century," *Discipliana* 55 (1995): 109–121.

Reformation and the Reformed tradition, Twin Pines Church places a communion table in front of the pulpit to convey that the church is a community called into existence by the covenant symbolized by the bread, cup, and open Bible displayed on the table. No clergyman or ordinand stands between the congregation and access to communion. Particular to its own tradition of returning to the beliefs and practices of the early church, its hymn service is *a cappella*. Twin Pines periodically sings metrical arrangements of the Psalms and occasionally reads scripture responsively in worship. Further, Twin Pines' elders have chosen, when projecting hymns or texts, to make paper copies available to all those present. This practice reflects concern for those with impaired vision and also for children who, although learning to read, cannot see over adults. This also enables all worshipers to re-read and reflect on the meaning of hymns and texts. The church also commonly offers an invitation after the Sunday morning sermon, and it practices believer's baptism—immersion for the remission of sins—as entry into the body of Christ.

Twin Pines Church has been innovative in adapting and developing a number of traditions such as concluding weekly communion meditations with the words of Jesus, reading select Old and New Testament texts in Sunday morning worship, and having the baptizer pray with the newly baptized immediately after a baptism. Other traditions at Twin Pines include requiring marriage counseling of those married by Twin Pines ministers, giving no attention to anonymous communications, and not considering persons for service as elders/presbyters until they have been members at Twin Pines for at least two years. All of the above traditions have been developed with a view toward enabling Twin Pines Church members to know the Christian faith, live faithful lives, and pass on the faith to coming generations already present in the congregation as children and grandchildren.

Conclusion

To dismiss the importance of wise practices and traditions that we have received from generations that have gone before us is a recipe for unstable churches and superficial faith. To alter or dismiss a practice because "it's merely a tradition," or to promote an innovation simply because "there's no verse against it"—much less, "other churches are doing it"—is an invitation to make the church vulnerable to the shifting winds of the surrounding culture and to discard centuries of Christian wisdom. While we often need a better understanding of the meaning and purpose of existing traditions, lack of understanding is no basis for discarding a tradition.

To revise or replace a tradition wisely is to do so with a *better* tradition, i.e., a practice that better accomplishes the tasks of guarding that which has been entrusted to the church and of passing on the faith. One should ask, "Does the proposed practice/tradition better enable the church to 'hold the traditions' (2 Thess 2:15), to 'entrust to faithful men what you have heard' (2 Tim 2:2), to 'continue in what you have learned' (2 Tim 3:13), and to guard the church against threats from both within and without?" Or, does the new practice, however unintentionally, yield to pressures of the surrounding culture—and perhaps especially the emerging "church culture"? Unless such considerations have been carefully weighed, received traditions should not be abandoned.

***

One hundred years from now, if baseball is still being played, baseball players will practice fielding grounders and flies, take batting practice, run wind sprints, honor a curfew, and submit to weight checks. None of these disciplines is required by the rules of the game. They are, however, extremely important for fielding a team capable of playing the game of baseball well and for developing a "winning tradition." Over time, some training prac-

tices/traditions change (e.g., many trainers no longer encourage athletes to run stadium steps due to indications this may damage knee cartilage), and new training methods replace older ones because they better accomplish the task of equipping baseball players to play the game of baseball well.

One thing is certain–one hundred years from now, if baseball is still being played, successful baseball teams—whether Little League or the Cleveland Indians—will rigorously practice the disciplines necessary for playing baseball well.

Would anyone expect less of churches entrusted with equipping children and adults to live faithful lives?

The Importance of the Old Testament for the Church

J. J. M. Roberts

The emphasis in the Restoration tradition on "rightly dividing the Word," on recognizing the different dispensations reflected in scripture, on seeing a clear distinction between the old and new covenant was a correct and important insight, but even correct insights drag in their wake unintended, incorrect, and harmful consequences. In the Restoration tradition the emphasis on being under the new covenant has led to a serious neglect and even disparagement of the Old Testament as of no relevance for modern believers. Patently false dichotomies between Law in the Old Testament versus Grace in the New, a God of Wrath in the Old Testament versus a God of Love in the New Testament, harsh punishment in the Old Testament versus forgiveness in the New, etc., have been widely passed off as true largely because the Old Testament has been little read and seldom seriously studied in our tradition. One does not need to listen long in a typical Bible class to hear such negative, uninformed stereotypes about the Old Testament scriptures, and it is not unusual to hear the complaint that classes on an Old Testament book or sermons on an Old Testament text are a waste of time. After all, as New Testament Christians, of what relevance is the Old Testament to our lives?

Such a negative and disparaging view of the Old Testament did not originate with the Restoration tradition. It has a long and sad history in the Christian church. Almost from the beginning there were Christian teachers who were offended by the Old Testament and who played down its impor-

Austin Graduate School of Theology
CHRISTIAN STUDIES
Number 21

tance for Christian believers. Yet, despite all its shortcomings, the great church rejected the most outspoken of these teachers as heretics. One of the earliest and best known of these heretics was Marcion, who died around 160 A.D.[1] He was a wealthy ship owner from Sinope in Pontus, who moved to Rome around 140 A.D. He was the son of a bishop who had excommunicated him, supposedly on the grounds of immorality, but nonetheless he joined the orthodox church in Rome where he worked out his theological system and began to organize his followers as a separate community. He was officially excommunicated as a heretic in 144 A.D., but he continued to organize his communities over a large part of the empire, and these Marcionites were a major doctrinal threat to the church throughout the last half of the second century.

Marcion argued that the Christian message was a Gospel of Love to the exclusion of Law, and therefore he totally rejected the Old Testament. According to Marcion, the God of the Old Testament and creator of the physical world was a demiurge, not the true God and father of Jesus Christ. This Jewish God, as revealed in the Old Testament, was capricious, ignorant, despotic, and cruel. Jesus came to reveal the good God of Love and overthrow the demiurge of the Old Testament. Of the New Testament writers, only Paul understood the truth completely, so Marcion's canon was limited to ten heavily edited epistles of Paul and a severely edited recension of the Gospel of Luke. The rest of the New Testament was rejected as corrupted by Jewish influence.

Marcionism gained most of its converts from the great church, not from Paganism, and it lived by conversion, since marriage and sexual inter-

---

[1] "Marcion," in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston, eds. (3rd ed.; Oxford University Press, 1997), 1033-1034.

course, mired as they were in the filth and obscenity of the physical world created by the demiurge, were strictly prohibited. This inherent animosity to the physical world left Marcionism susceptible to dualistic tendencies in Gnosticism. By the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century, most of the Marcionite communities in the West had been absorbed into the Manichean heresy.[2] It continued longer in the East, but under pressure from both the great church and Manichaeanism, Marcionism eventually died out there as well.

In more recent times, a similar rejection of the Old Testament was seriously proposed by German adherents of classical liberal Christianity. The distinguished church historian, Adolph von Harnack, argued that in Marcion's time the church was right in rejecting Marcion's views, and in the time of the Reformation it was not possible to dismiss the Old Testament, but that for Protestantism to retain the Old Testament in its canon in the late nineteenth century was a result of religious and ecclesiastical paralysis.[3] Harnack's major historical treatment of Marcion had portrayed Marcion as the precursor of classical liberal Christianity, so the explicit anti-Semitism of Marcion's views was at least implicit in Harnack's view of the essence of Christianity. He argued that the Old Testament should be removed from the Christian canon because one cannot perceive from it what is Christian, yet

---

[2] "Mani (or Manes) and Manichaeism," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1027–1028.

[3] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (2nd ed.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1969), 386. Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God (*John E. Steely and Lyle D. Biuerma, trans.; Durham: Labyrinth, 1990), 134. For the full text of the appendices it is necessary to go to the German edition, *Marcion, Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott: Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der grundlegung der katholicichen Kirche.* (Leipzig: schaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996).

this removal from the canon would not be a rejection, since once removed from the Christian canon, the Old Testament would everywhere be esteemed and treasured in its distinctiveness.[4] Harnack's own view of the Old Testament was hardly one of "esteem," however, so his argument seems disingenuous. Moreover, his theological hostility to the Old Testament was taken up by a significant portion of German Old Testament scholarship, providing ready-made weapons for the anti-Semitism of the Third Reich.[5]

Because many leading representatives of the "German Christians" bought into the same views, it is not surprising that by and large the German church failed to protest the rabid anti-Semitism of the Third Reich. Dismiss the Old Testament, and before long Jesus is no longer a Jew, but a good Aryan, and the Jews are seen as nothing but a hindrance and a threat to the development of pure Aryan Christianity. There is no question that the new Marcionism of the "German Christians" removed the restraints of real history and paved the way for the horrible atrocities committed against the Jews.

Few Christians today would take as extreme a negative view of the Old Testament as Marcion, Harnack, or the Nazis, but one need not officially and explicitly decanonize the Old Testament in order to achieve practically the same effect. A relatively benign neglect of the Old Testament in the church can accomplish much the same purpose without provoking as strong a counter-reaction. Nor does one need to look far to see such benign neglect. It is endemic in our churches and hardly less pervasive in most other American denominations.

This is evident even to a casual observer by the relative infrequency with which our weekly sermons are based on Old Testament texts. Even on

---

[4] Harnack, *Marcion*, 138.

[5] Harnack, *Marcion*, 432.

those infrequent occasions when an Old Testament text is the purported basis of the sermon, one often finds that the text is a pretext to jump to some New Testament passage. Preachers seldom take the time to exegete the Old Testament text in its own context and to explore what that text might have to contribute to contemporary Christian reflection. Instead one moves precipitously to a supposedly related New Testament text, with which the preacher feels more comfortable, in order to extricate the theological message of an Old Testament text. The result is that the Old Testament text is cited and then ignored, or worse, treated as a negative foil, while exegetical and theological reflection is actually based on the "related" New Testament text.

It is true that most of our preachers and many of our members would claim that one cannot understand the New Testament without the Old, but this claim has little bearing on the point being discussed. As usually stated, the claim simply acknowledges the historical priority of the Old Testament and its literary influence on the themes and motifs taken up in the New Testament. Just as a literary knowledge of the Bible is helpful in understanding English literature, so a literary knowledge of the Old Testament is helpful in understanding the New Testament. Often this claim is joined with a treatment of the Old Testament abstracted from the book of Hebrews in which the Old Testament provides the type or the shadow, while the New Testament provides the substance, the reality only foreshadowed in the Old. Such a view is not congenial to allowing an Old Testament text an independent voice. Yet it is precisely such an independent theological voice for which I am arguing. If the Old Testament has canonical status, the modern Christian should be able to take the theological claims of its texts as grist for theological reflection without first filtering them through New Testament lenses.

That is not to suggest that the preacher or church member should pre-

tend to be an ancient Israelite when reading the Old Testament. I am a Christian, and I should never forget the good news of the Gospel, not even when reading or preaching from the Old Testament. Nevertheless, that should not prevent me from hearing an earlier text in its own integrity. After all, the Old Testament was the Bible of the church before the New Testament was written, and Paul claims that the things written there "were written down to instruct us, on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11). One can attempt to understand an ancient text in its own historical, political, theological, and cultural context, while at the same time, in the light of the Gospel, reflecting on the relevance of that text for contemporary Christian life. It requires some effort, but such effort will be repaid by a depth of insight that only such disciplined reflection can provide.

Perhaps it would be useful to cite some concrete ways in which more disciplined reflection on the Old Testament would be helpful to modern Christian thought. One such advantage would be to protect the church from "over-spiritualizing" the Gospel and the life of the Christian disciple. There is a very strong tendency in our churches to reduce salvation to "saving souls" from eternal damnation and to focus almost exclusively on "forgiveness of sins." The more "earthly" aspects of salvation as portrayed in the Old Testament—deliverance from political oppression, just and fair government, physical and economic well-being, freedom for abundant and joyous living within functional family units and larger community structures—are largely ignored as irrelevant for the evangelistic task of the church.

Such spiritualization cannot be justified even from the New Testament. Jesus healed the sick as well as forgiving sinners. According to John, he came that his people "might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:11). The early church was concerned with helping its poor economically

(Acts 7:34–35; 6:1–7; Gal 2:9–10; 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8–9; 1 Tim 6:17–19) and with treating them with dignity and impartiality (James 2:1–9), not just with saving their souls. The recurring Old Testament emphasis on an active concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger is a helpful reminder to overly "spiritual" Christians that the quality of life in this world, in the here and now, cannot be ignored without threatening the quality of the life to come.

The Old Testament's emphasis on the physicality of the present world is also a healthy corrective to the religious disparagement of physical reality. Ecclesiastes stresses the importance of humans enjoying life in the here and now with the everyday pleasures God has provided—with food and drink, cosmetics and clothes, human companionship and meaningful labor (Eccl 2:24–25; 3:12–13; 6:18–20; 9:7–10). The Song of Songs' celebration of human sexuality should remind us that sex is a gift of God to be received and enjoyed, within the appropriate context, with thanksgiving (Heb 13:4). Food and drink, including meat and wine, are treated by scripture as the gift of God to be received with thanksgiving. The Old Testament speaks of wine as "cheering both gods and humans" (Judg 9:14), and it includes both rich, marrow-filled meat and well-aged wine in its portrayal of God's future banquet for all people on Mt. Zion (Isa 25:6). Jesus' first miracle was to turn water into wine (John 2:1–11), and his opponents accused him of being a glutton and drunkard (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). This is a charge that would be hard to understand had Jesus lived among them as a teetotaler vegetarian. It is worth reminding those Christians who want to impose on other Christians a religiously motivated demand for sexual abstinence, vegetarianism, or abstinence from all alcoholic beverages, that these were the demands of the ancient Christian heretics, not of Jesus and his apostles (1 Tim 4:1–5; Heb

13:9).

This Old Testament emphasis on the enjoyment and experience of the full dimensions of human life now could also be an antidote to a very one-sided portrayal of discipleship that sometimes arises from the new theological emphasis on "missional" churches. Whatever the broader theological intent behind this movement, it has sometimes come to focus almost exclusively on the disciple's obligation to share his or her faith with others. One might get the impression that the whole of the Christian life could be reduced to making converts. Moreover, such a distortion would appear to erase the New Testament distinctions between evangelists, preachers, teachers, and ordinary members—everyone is to do the work of an evangelist and bring others to Christ. Not only does this ignore what the New Testament says about the varieties of gifts in the church, it ignores what the New Testament also says about the life of discipleship. If one looks at the letters of Paul and the other epistles written to the churches, one can only be struck by the disconnect between the canonical instructions given to the churches and this modern fixation on evangelism in the "missional" church movement. The New Testament epistles have relatively little to say about the need of the average church members to be converting their neighbors; they have far more to say about the way the church members are to live their lives. That might suggest that relevant preaching for the church should focus more on how its members should live a life of genuine discipleship in all its fulness, rather than confusing their task with that of the evangelist.

Finally, one should note an inherent limitation of the New Testament witness that could be alleviated by attention to the larger canon. All of the New Testament documents were written in a relatively short time span—at the most from about 50–150 A.D., and probably in an even more compressed

period. Moreover, the communities that produced these writings were all minority communities without significant political power within societies dominated politically, culturally, and economically by other groups. The same is also true of Jesus and the apostles about whom writers in these Christian communities wrote. Neither the founders of Christianity nor its adherents during the composition of the New Testament occupied positions of power. Moreover, the political organization of the state during this period did not allow ordinary citizens any significant influence over state policies.

Thus the New Testament witness provides very good instruction for Christian communities that exist under similar political and cultural constraints. One may question how adequately it addresses the questions that arise for Christian communities who find themselves in positions of power and responsible for the governance of larger political communities

The issue of a Christian's attitude toward coercive power as exercised by a legitimate government for the protection of its people is one issue that arises in this context. Here, the witness of the Old Testament canon can assist the Christian in his or her reflections over Christian duty within a radically different political setting. Unlike that of the New Testament, the composition of the Old Testament extended over a period of a thousand years, and during a portion of this period the communities that produced these writings were not only politically independent, but sometimes even dominant over surrounding vassal states and thus responsible for a broader rule. Their context, as different as it may be, is certainly more analogous to that of the modern Christian living in the United States or Europe than the politically powerless context of the New Testament Christian under the *Pax Romana*. Thus the relevance of the Old Testament witness for modern Western Christians, struggling with political issues regarding the use of governmental

power, cannot be overemphasized.

This has obvious significance for the contemporary Christian debate on the appropriateness of a thoroughgoing pacifism as the only legitimate position with regard to legitimate use of coercive power. The repeated Old Testament demand for just rulers, who, by lethal force if necessary, will prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, is so damaging to the argument of pacifists like the contemporary Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas that he effectively dismisses the Old Testament as thoroughly as Marcion did. He does so by reading the Old Testament through the lenses of a select group of New Testament texts. Hauerwas never seriously considers the contexts of his select texts as the witness of a minority group, dominated by foreign powers, with extremely limited freedom of political action.[6]

Moreover, to maintain his views, he must ignore other New Testament texts that seem to admit the legitimacy of coercive power as exercised by the state. In the gospel of Luke for instance, when soldiers come to John the Baptist asking them what they should do to live out their repentance, John does not demand they resign from the military nor does he urge them not to take part in battle. He says, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages" (Luke 3:14). Paul's admonition to the Christian communities to be subject to the governing political authorities also recognizes the legitimacy of coercive governmental power (Rom 13:1-7). He even says, "But if you do what is wrong,

---

[6]These reflections arise out of exchanges that took place in a panel discussion sponsored by the "Character Ethics and Biblical Interpretation Group" at the SBL annual meeting in Toronto in 2002, in which Professor Hauerwas and this writer were participants. Cf. my "The End of the War in the Zion Tradition: The Imperialistic Background of an Old Testament Vision of World Peace," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 26 (2004): 2–22.

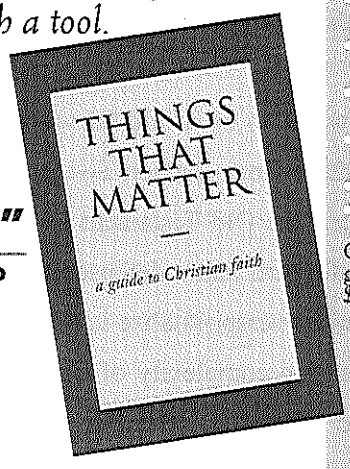
you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:4). To ignore the historical, political, and cultural contexts of the key pacifistic texts, to read the contradictory Old Testament texts only through the lenses of these highly selected New Testament proof texts, and to dismiss other New Testament texts that relativize the pacifistic interpretation of these selective texts, hardly differs in character from Marcion's similar reduction of the canon.

A church that wants to be a faithful witness in the real world, the world created by the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—needs the whole canon of scripture, the Old Testament as well as the New. The Old Testament remains a safeguard and a defense against those readings of the New Testament that would overspiritualize it, disparage the physical realities of our lives, and reduce the complexity of Christian existence to a single imperative—whether to witness to others or not to resist evil. The whole canon is like a treasure from which the Christian disciple brings forth both what is old and what is new (cf. Matt 13:52) as the actual context of his or her life calls for it. It would be the height of folly for the church either intentionally or unintentionally to throw away the greater portion of that treasure.

"Simple, yet Substantive."

I have often wished for an introductory guide to Christian faith to share with an earnest inquirer or a new Christian. Things That Matter is such a tool. It's excellent! Simple, yet substantive. I heartily recommend it!"

Harold Hazelip
Lipscomb University



Written by the faculty of the *Institute for Christian Studies* for:

- Small Groups
- Evangelism and Outreach
- Campus and Youth Ministry
- Teen and Adult Bible Classes
- Baptismal and Graduation Gifts
- New Member's Classes
- Hospital Visitation
- Prison Ministry

Order 20 books for group studies for only $2.75 per copy.

Also available from Christian Studies Press:

For I Am Holy
by Pat Harrell

AUSTIN
GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF
THEOLOGY

Order from:
Christian Studies Press
1909 University Avenue
Austin, Texas 78705
512-476-2772
866-AUS-GRAD
www.austingrad.edu

Lord's Supper and Love Feast

Everett Ferguson

I begin with the accounts of the institution of the Lord's supper, so that this material is fresh in our minds. The earliest written account is by Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:23–25:

> For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

This was written within about twenty-five years after Jesus' last supper with his disciples. Already there was a fixed account of what was relevant for the practice of the church that was being handed down. Paul says it came from the Lord himself and was transmitted through others to him, and he delivered it to the churches. The tradition identifies the setting when this occurred as "supper," but otherwise there was nothing about the meal in the account that was passed on to the churches, and no significance was attached to it.

> [Jesus] took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, say-

Austin Graduate School of Theology
CHRISTIAN STUDIES
Number 21 2005/2006 ©

> ing, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:14–20).

This account is similar to Paul's with the difference that Luke gives more of the meal setting. This is particularly evident in Luke's mention, according to the long text, of a cup at the beginning as well as at the end of the meal. Rabbinic descriptions of the Passover meal mention four times during the meal when a cup of wine was passed around. Luke probably does not represent an alternative order of observing the cup before the bread, but gives a fuller account of events at the meal in order to preserve the saying connecting the events to the kingdom of God. Otherwise, the interpretation of the first cup is given no significance for future observance. It is the bread and the cup after the supper that are given a new meaning.

Mark's account preserves a different tradition about the last supper, but agrees in essentials with the accounts in Paul and Luke. Mark 14:22–24 reads:

> While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take, this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Mark and Matthew make nothing of the meal setting, except to mention it as the occasion when Jesus gave a special meaning to the bread and the cup. They focus attention on what was important for the continuing practice of the church.

In all the accounts the bread is associated with the body of Christ, Paul and Luke adding that this body was (given) for you. The accounts vary in the meaning given to the cup, but the explanations converge. Paul and

Luke identify the cup with the new covenant that is in the blood of Jesus; whereas Mark and Matthew say the cup is the blood of the covenant, with Matthew elaborating that the blood brought forgiveness of sins (which was the heart of the meaning of the new covenant). Thus the accounts point to Jesus' death and its atoning significance that establishes a new relationship (or covenant) between God and human beings. Paul and Luke explain that the significance of repeating what Jesus did and said at the last supper is to make a memorial or a remembrance of the redemptive act and its consequences.

It is true that references to the Lord's supper in the New Testament continue to refer to the context of a meal, which was the setting when the remembrance of the death of Jesus was instituted. A meal was the occasion for the abuses at Corinth that Paul had to correct: 1 Corinthians 11:21, "When the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk."

The same setting applies to the meeting at Troas in Acts 20:7–11.

> On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them" (v 7). Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them (v 11).

Here, a word of explanation is in order with reference to the phrase, "break bread." It did not mean "to eat a meal," but rather referred to the action that preceded the meal. It was a specific action that was part of the ordinary way to begin a Jewish meal. The host took the bread in his hands, said a prayer of thanks (a blessing), broke the bread, and gave it to the persons at table. In doing this, Jesus was doing nothing different from what was customary. (Note the description in the accounts of Jesus' feeding miracles: Jesus "blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples to set

before the people" [Mark 6:41, 8:6, and parallels], wording that was probably preserved because of the actions at the last supper and the continuing observance in the churches.) What was new was not what Jesus did but the significance he gave to the familiar action as a representation of his body given for others. The phrase, "break bread," referring to a general custom, could refer to beginning a meal or to the specific remembrance of the death of Jesus. The context must decide which is meant in each case, and that is not always conclusive. Breaking bread precedes an ordinary meal in Acts 27:33–36, when Paul eats with the people on the ship carrying him to Rome. The same may be true for Acts 20:11, as distinct from verse 7. Acts 2:46 is ambiguous, occurring so close to 2:42, where a church act is indicated, but seemingly referring to regular meals at home. The possibility that verse 46 is the Lord's supper has led to the speculation of a daily Lord's supper in the early church, but the phrase for "daily" is construed grammatically with the meetings in the temple and not necessarily with the breaking of bread at home. And in either case the act is not necessarily the Lord's supper.

The Lord's supper and the meal sometimes accompanying it had a different significance from the beginning. Hence, they are separable in time and place. Only to the Lord's supper is a special significance given in the New Testament—the representation and remembrance of the body and blood of Jesus.

The restoration of New Testament faith and practice does not include the restoration of historical context, social setting, cultural setting, or the like. For instance, the accounts of the Lord's supper place its institution and observance in an upper room. Mark 14:15 identifies the place of the last supper as a "large room upstairs." The events of Acts 20:7ff occurred in a "room upstairs" (v 8), indeed on the third floor (v 9). There have been those (such

as the Sandemanians) who thought that following apostolic example required taking communion in an upstairs room. But there is no historical evidence supporting the idea that this was normal practice, and no doctrinal meaning is given in the New Testament to the place of observance. As a parallel, we may note that where information is given on baptisms in the New Testament, they occurred in natural bodies of water—the Jordan River (Mark 1:5) or springs or pools (John 3:23; Acts 8:36). But no theological significance is given to the water of baptism, unlike in the *Didache* 7, where importance is attached to "living" or running water. Nor is any theological significance given in the New Testament to the meal. Of course, one can baptize in a natural body of water, can take the Lord's supper in an upper room, or have a meal in close proximity to it. But the point is that those things are not part of the apostolic instructions or apostolic precedent for the continuing practice of the churches.

At some point the Lord's supper and the meal were separated in time of observance. I think that occurred quite early. Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians may have been the occasion. The tradition that he passes on and the accounts of the institution in Matthew and Mark seem to reflect an observance apart from a meal context.

A special problem of interpretation attaches to the *Didache* chapters 9–10. The *Didache* is commonly dated to the end of the first or beginning of the second century. Its instructions about the Lord's supper seem to me to come from a Jewish-Christian community and to preserve practices that could be quite early. They are quite unlike what we know from any other source. The text as we now have it begins this way:

> Concerning the eucharist [meaning "thanksgiving" and the common second-century name for what we call the Lord's supper], give thanks in this

> way: first concerning the cup. [There follows a short prayer.] Concerning the broken bread, [followed by a longer prayer]. No one is to eat or drink of your eucharist except those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord. . . . After you are filled, give thanks in this way. . . . [After a long prayer, the text says] . . . Allow the prophets to give thanks as they wish. (*Didache* 9–10)

Some have understood the whole account to refer to the eucharist; others understand it as a love feast. I rather think we have both included and so a situation where the Lord's supper was part of a meal setting.[1]

The report that the Roman governor of Bithynia, Pliny, sent to the Emperor Trajan at the beginning of the second century may reflect a separation of the meal from the Lord's supper.

> [The Christians] affirmed that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds . . . ; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict. (*Letters*, 108:46)

Pliny's sources of information were apostates from Christianity from several years earlier; he may not fully or accurately report what he was told; and he may not have understood what he was told; so we have to be cautioned about putting too much credence in his report. Where the Lord's supper fits into his information is not completely clear, but it probably belongs in the morning meeting, for it may be reflected in Pliny's word for an "oath" and it seems unlikely that Christians would have abandoned the Lord's supper as readily as they did a common meal together.

---

[1]To explore the interpretive options further would take us away from the main concerns of this presentation, but for a fuller discussion of this point see my *Early Christians Speak* (3rd ed.; Abilene: ACU Press, 1999), text on 91–92 and commentary on 95–98.

The first full and orderly account of Christian assemblies that we have comes from Justin Martyr's *First Apology* 67, dated about 150. Justin's word for what we call the Lord's supper is "eucharist." He includes the bread and cup as part of this service, but he says nothing about a meal as part of the assembly. Justin had earlier in the *First Apology* summarized the Gospel narratives of the institution, recalling Jesus' words about the bread, "Do this for my memorial; this is my body" and about the cup, "This is my blood" (*I Apology* 66). In another work Justin spoke of the eucharist as "a memorial of the passion which our Lord Jesus Christ suffered on behalf of the people who are being purified in their souls from all evil" (*Dialogue with Trypho* 41).

I say that Justin gives the first intentional account of Christian assemblies, but it may be noted that Justin's four items—scripture reading and preaching, prayer, bread and cup, and contribution—are remarkably close, although in a different order, to Acts 2:42—the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers.

We have another early account of the eucharist in the *Apostolic Tradition* 4, attributed to Hippolytus of Rome from the early third century. The *Apostolic Tradition* is a community document with layers of material included; hence, as it has been reconstructed from documents derived from it, there is some later material as well as some that may be quite early. The prayer of thanksgiving for the bread and cup includes the statement, "Remembering therefore his death and resurrection we offer to you the bread and the cup giving thanks to you" (*Apostolic Tradition* 4).[2] The second-century texts, therefore, as would be expected, connect the eucharist or Lord's supper with the passion and resurrection of Jesus.

---

[2] This text is in my *Early Christians Speak*, 92–93.

Quite different is what is said about the love feast. The love feast, or *agape*, is mentioned for certain only once in the New Testament—Jude 12, "These are blemishes on your love feasts." The teachings and conduct of certain persons discredited the love feasts, even as our later sources show these meals to have been occasions of unruly conduct that had to be closely supervised by church authorities. The parallel text of 2 Peter 2:13, "They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation while they feast with you," in some manuscripts reads "love feasts" instead of "dissipation."

Apart from such bare mention, the love feast is known from three sources near the year 200. The earliest, Clement of Alexandria, rebukes those interested only in the meal and those "who expect to buy the promise of God" by providing dinners for others. The word for "love feast" was the word "love," and Clement wants to direct attention to the spiritual reality of love. "The meal occurs because of love, not love because of the meal, which is a proof of a generous and shared good will" *(Instructor* 2.4.3–4; 2.6.1–7.1).

Tertullian gives an orderly account of the proceedings:

> Our feast shows its motive by its name. It is called by the Greek word for love [*agape*]. Whatever is reckoned the cost, money spent in the name of piety is gain, since with that refreshment we benefit the needy. We do not recline at the table before prayer to God is first tasted. We eat the amount that satisfies the hungry; we drink as much as is beneficial to the modest. We satisfy ourselves as those who remember that even during the night we must worship God; we converse as those who know that the Lord listens. After the washing of hands and lighting of lamps, each one who is able is called into the center to chant praise to God either from the holy Scriptures or from his own talents. This is a proof of how much is drunk. Prayer in like manner concludes the meal. (*Apology* 39.16–18)

This is the only text before the fourth-century monastic movement to speak of solos in Christian meetings, and this is in the context of the love feast, not the other assemblies.

Documents dependent on the *Apostolic Tradition* give the most

detailed regulations. The meal was provided by a person of means; a bishop, presbyter, or deacon presided; widows especially were to be invited; the bread and cup are carefully distinguished from the eucharist; there was to be no disorderly conduct or loud talking (25–27).[3]

These accounts show the love feast as distinct from the eucharist or Lord's supper. It was primarily an expression of charity and an occasion of fellowship. It had a separate development from the Lord's supper and served a different purpose, but it was likely derived from or a continuation of the common meals of the early disciples.

An association in origin of the love feast with the Lord's supper is shown by a certain fluidity in the terminology. Thus the *Apostolic Tradition* calls the love feast a "Lord's supper" (27.1); love feast can refer to the eucharist (or at least include it—*Epistle of the Apostles* 15); and Ignatius closely associated the eucharist and the love feast *(Smyrnaeans* 8). The Lord's supper and the love feast were two distinct activities—the one a remembrance and proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the other an act of benevolence and fellowship. It took some time before a distinct and fixed terminology prevailed, even as some time passed before the functions were separated in time, but the activities themselves had discreet meanings from the beginning.

One difference between the love feast and the Lord's supper is that the love feast could be celebrated on any day, whereas the Lord's supper was closely connected with Sunday. Two linguistic points make the latter association. The Greek adjective "Lord's *(kuriakon)*, lordly, of or pertaining to the

---

[3]*Early Christians Speak,* 125–127.

Lord," occurs twice in the New Testament: once in reference to the Lord's supper (1 Cor 11:20) and once in reference to the Lord's day (Rev 1:10).

Paul's use of "Lord" in 1 Corinthians points to the significance of his term, "Lord's supper." As there is one God, so there is "one Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 8:6). What is done in the breaking of bread and drinking the fruit of the vine goes back to what the "Lord Jesus" did on the night of his betrayal (1 Cor 11:23). What makes the "supper" distinctly the Lord's is that it is done as a memorial to him, as we read from 1 Corinthians 11:24 and 25. The cup is a communion or participation in the blood of Christ and the bread is a communion or participation in the body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16). Hence, it is the "cup of the Lord" and the "table of the Lord" (1 Cor 10:21). What Jesus did for human salvation made him Lord.

What makes a particular day the "Lord's day" is that on that day he was raised from the dead. The resurrection meant his crowning as king (Acts 2:30–31) with all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18) and exaltation over all rule, authority, and power as "head over the church" (Eph 1:20–22). The resurrection made him "Lord." Hence the day of the resurrection is peculiarly "his." The designation of the supper and the day by the same adjective as being the "Lord's" and only these two things, ties the two inseparably together.

Another linguistic connection is to be noted. The phrase "first day of the week" occurs in the New Testament in two contexts—as the designation of the day of the resurrection and as the day of Christian meeting. All four Gospels have a rare time reference and a rare linguistic agreement among themselves in designating the day of the resurrection as the "first day of the week" (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). This is the Jewish designation for the day we call Sunday and early Christians called the Lord's

day. The Jews had a special name for the seventh day, the Sabbath, and for the day before it, the day of preparation. The other five days were simply numbered as "day one, day two," and so forth between the Sabbaths. Hence, "day one of the Sabbaths" (the literal meaning of the Greek phrase) meant the first day between the Sabbaths or "first day of the week."

The other setting in which this time designation occurs is in reference to the day of Christian meeting—Acts 20:7 ("On the first day of the week when we met to break bread") and 1 Corinthians 16:2 ("On the first day of every week each of you is to set aside and put in the treasury from what you earn"). The Gospels make a point of Jesus' appearances that occurred on the day of the resurrection. Thus Luke puts the appearances on the day of the resurrection. These include the appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, "on that same day" (Luke 24:13), when Jesus "was made known to them in the breaking of bread" (Luke 24:35), to Simon Peter (Luke 24:34), and to the eleven and their companions (Luke 24:33, 36–43). John especially underlines the connection between the day of the resurrection and Jesus' meeting with his disciples. After recounting the appearance to Mary Magdalene, he repeats the time designation, "When it was evening on that day [that is, the day of the resurrection], the first day of the week," Jesus appeared to the disciples (John 20:19). Thomas was not present on that occasion. The next appearance recorded by John was one week later, when Thomas was present. "And after eight days his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them" (John 20:26). On the usual method of inclusive counting that eighth day was the next first day of the week, and one form of the Syriac version so translates the verse.

The Gospels, therefore, seem to be anticipating church practice in associating the day of the resurrection with Jesus meeting with his assembled

disciples. It was the resurrection that gave a special day of meeting to Jesus' disciples, different from the Jewish practice of meeting in synagogue on the Sabbath. Of course, believers met on other occasions as well, but this was the day when they broke bread in the special knowledge of the presence of the resurrected Lord in their midst. We remember Jesus' death in the Lord's supper, but we also come together to meet the risen Lord, so we meet on the Lord's day, the day of the resurrection.

The association of the Lord's supper with the Lord's day and the association of the day of the resurrection with the day of meeting should not be weakened or broken by another practice. Nor should the significance of the Lord's supper as a memorial of the death and resurrection of Jesus made by the gathered community of disciples be turned to other purposes. To make the Lord's supper a sacrament that brings a blessing just by doing it says too much about the Lord's supper. To treat it as a general religious act of personal piety so that it can be taken on other occasions than the assembly of the church says too little about the Lord's supper.

All Things New

Allan J. McNicol

If we have been found faithful . . .
In the after-while . . .
Give us a home with thee . . .

The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors cometh rest,
Sweet is the calm of Paradise the blest:
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Whether the words are a prayer in a twentieth-century rural church or a Victorian English hymn, the sentiments are strikingly familiar. Harbored deep within our breasts as we contemplate the eternal world are intimations of "going home." We know that time will come for all of us. We often wonder what it will be like. When the traveler visits Jerusalem the sights and smells of the Old City fascinate; equally impressive are the massive number of tombs encircling the area. Seeking to be the first at the door of God's new world on resurrection day, countless pilgrims have made Jerusalem their final resting place! When we live within the story of the Bible, questions about death and the afterlife are never far away.

But as central as hope for an afterlife in God's new world is for Christians, today such talk frequently exudes an aura of quaintness. Let us face the facts. In Western culture the power of the Christian story to compel

allegiance on the basis of its promise of an eternal home continues to weaken. This Christian legacy faces widespread opposition and has been branded a "literalistic, doctrinal, moralistic, exclusivistic, and afterlife-oriented" version of the faith.[1] Other visions of Christianity are put forward in its place. Massive numbers of our fellow urban dwellers presuppose that all religions are human creations. While many continue to claim interest in what all great world religions share in common, few are willing to commit their lives to a particular tradition for support and guidance. Given this worldview, the Dalai Lama counts as much, if not more, than Billy Graham or Benedict XVI. Moreover, since different religions send different signals about the soul and the afterlife, beliefs in this area are considered surplus baggage and are tossed overboard.

The Impact of Science

The view that science must be given the last word on any truth claim is also widespread. This is another reality that Christianity must confront. In the past, Christians and scientists have clashed over views of creation. But since the advent of the Big Bang Theory, it is generally accepted that nuanced theological views of the origins of the universe can be compatible with science.

But it is another matter on questions about the future of the creation.[2] Here there is no sign of a truce. Science offers three options for the future of the cosmos: stasis (the universe remains in a steady state), collapse, or eternal expansion. Among scientists the latter options appear more viable than

---

[1]This is Marcus Borg's pejorative description of traditional Christianity in Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000), 231.

[2] Philip Clayton, "The Theology-Science Debate's Last Frontier," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 30, no. 4 (2002): 33.

the first—the universe will move either to a fiery implosion or gradually disperse into a frigid twilight. While some theologians engage physicists to discuss these matters, it is fair to say that theologians usually end up with reductionist conclusions that are hardly compatible with any traditional view of the resurrection of the dead and the life to come.[3] Weighing the evidence, a philosopher of science judiciously concludes:

> The truth is that [the traditional Christian] eschatological hope is not made probable by science, nor is it consistent with current scientific knowledge.[4]

This is intended as a cautionary comment. Modern science has a record of great achievements. Quite rightly it has won both respect and financial support among the most influential segments of our society. But Christians are obliged to say that it is not in the halls and laboratories of scientists that God chose to reveal himself definitively. At the end of the day, valuable and persuasive as it is, science is only representative of the accumulated human wisdom of modernity.[5] As it develops, that body of wisdom will change. We have other sources of knowledge and ways of viewing the world that have stood the test of time and nourish conviction. Our contention is that the revelation of the Eternal is found decisively in the story of the people of God in history, which culminates in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is in this story that we find an entirely different vision of the future.

Biblical Story as Revelation

Along with many others over the years, I have been impressed with

---

[3]See John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, eds., *The End of the World and the Ends of God* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000).

[4]Clayton, "The Theology-Science Debate's Last Frontier," 34.

[5]Clayton, "The Theology-Science Debate's Last Frontier," 34.

the insights of Eric Auerbach.[6] He was able to discern that certain stories have a marvelously persuasive capacity for those who live within their parameters. We need not go far to see this. On almost a banal level, consider the attraction of our children to the Simpsons or Harry Potter! Auerbach argued that the great literary works impose upon us a consistent and sometimes dominant view of reality. By submitting to them we acknowledge the claim of the reality they articulate. We are compelled to fit our vision of life into their reality. Such was the power of Homer for the Greeks and the Bible for much of the West in the long march of Christian history. The story of creation, fall, divine rescue and ultimate redemption through resurrection in a new world constitutes the dominant narrative for Christians. Quite appropriately, to the believer, this story, received as divine revelation, gives formal structure to our lives, both for the present and the future.

The Christian Hope

Our focus in this essay is the Christian hope for the future. Formally, the biblical story has the power and function of a great literary work. Materially, various features of that story (i.e., the Christian hope) are grounded in the fortunes and destinies of God's people in history. With respect to our hope for a new world, it begins centuries before the birth of Jesus when the people of God were in exile in Babylon. There God raises a prophet who announces that God will create a "new thing" in the future (Isa 43:19; cf. 51:6, 65:17).

Although the immediate concern in Isaiah was the return of the peo-

---

[6]See my article, "The Akedah: A Root Experience as Authority for the People of God," *Institute for Christian Studies Faculty Bulletin* 2 (April 1981): 15–17. Auerbach's great work is titled, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (trans. Willard Trask; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

ple of God to Jerusalem, this act is housed in the language of a new creation. Worthy of note is that the resurrection of God's people begins to be envisioned (Isa 26:19; cf. Dan 12:1–2). From Zion the Lord will rule his people and the nations (Isa 52:7). Although most of this did not come to pass in Old Testament times, the hope for this outcome persists among the people of God.

With the mission of Jesus the hope deepens. Jesus' followers understood themselves to be the ones commissioned to gather and prepare the people of God to be ready for this new world. No one held this conviction more tenaciously than the apostle Paul. As Peter Stuhlmacher has pointed out, Paul places the Christ-event into a grand scenario of three stages (cf. 1 Cor 15:23–28).[7] The first is the resurrection of Christ, where God declares decisively that Jesus is the Messiah. On the basis of the resurrection he is designated as the one initiating the process of the rectification of the creation (Rom 1:3–4). Then comes the second stage (the return or *parousia* of Christ), when the faithful will be raised and the people of God will participate in the rule of Christ (1 Thess 4:13–18; 1 Cor 6:2; Rev 1:6; 5:10). Finally, in the stage Paul calls the end (Greek *telos*), God's purposes will be brought to complete fruition in the fully renewed creation including the final righteous judgment of the wicked (Rom 8:18–39; Phil 2:10–11). Inherent in this vision is a central idea: God will complete his redemption of the world with a new creation. This is the essence of the Christian hope. Contrary to the common opinion that hope is always intermingled with some skepticism, one can cultivate this hope with full assurance,[8] for hope is based on the honor and rectitude of God. To accept less is to credit God with less than he can do.

---

[7]Peter Stuhlmacher, "Eschatology and Hope in Paul," *EQ* 72 (2000): 319.
[8]Stuhlmacher, "Eschatology and Hope in Paul," 327.

A Proposal

Nevertheless, we cannot escape the fact that the acids of contemporary culture continue to eat away this hope held by the faithful. Curiously, in Churches of Christ, there is another factor contributing to its erosion. Partly in reaction to bygone arguments over eschatological expectations, many have given up reflecting on these matters. What is even more startling is that, unlike the Father above, they appear to have given up on this creation altogether. The view is widespread that this world will be burned up after the return of Christ. The destiny of the faithful is reckoned to be a place called heaven. All that matters is getting to heaven. Heaven is imagined as the ultimate destination of the soul with only the loosest of connections to any concept of a future resurrection in space and time.

This essay examines this belief. We focus on two key texts: Revelation 21:1–8 and 2 Peter 3:4–13. The latter is often used as the basic evidence for the idea of the complete annihilation of the physical universe, while the former is regularly used in funeral services as a description of the place of the final rest for the soul. We believe clarification is in order.

Based on an analysis of these two texts, we wish to argue that a key element of biblical faith is the claim that God has not given up on his creation. A vital part of biblical teaching is that the capstone of God's redeeming activity will be the establishment of a new heaven and earth (Rev 21:1–5; 2 Pet 3:13). The present world, burdened with the consequences of sin, will be renovated and transformed. Integrated into this hope is the expectation that the final destiny of the people of God, transformed like the resurrected Jesus, is life in this restored creation.

Since God has begun his active work of restoration of the world with the resurrection of Christ, as co-workers with him, we can claim that stew-

ardship in enhancing this present creation is worthwhile. God created humanity to care for his creation (Gen 2:5, 15). Consistent with this observation, we understand that the new creation involves not only the church, but also has implications for the creation itself. Such a belief can provide a rationale for loving stewardship of creation in full keeping with biblical revelation.

The New Heaven and the New Earth

Revelation 21:1–8

These verses come at a critical stage in John's message as he moves to bring the narration of his heavenly visions to a grand finale. Since Revelation 17:1, John has concentrated on the fate of the evil woman/city, Babylon. In his sphere of vision, this is a reference to Rome and her allies. Today, by extension, we see this as an image for all idolatrous powers that set themselves as sources of ultimacy in opposition to the Son of God. Now, in counterpoint, John introduces another woman/city, the New Jerusalem.

The New Jerusalem coming down from heaven (Rev 21:9; cf. 21:1–2) clearly refers to the ultimate presence of God resting with his people.[9] In any ordinary reading of the text, "coming down from heaven" implies that the city will be situated on a new earth (Rev 21:1). Revelation 21:1–8 is a transitional passage indicating that the old order, where Babylon dominates, is finished. Something new, at its center, the New Jerusalem, will replace it.

While it is evident that the New Jerusalem will be on earth, it is clear

---

[9]Notice especially the article by Robert H. Gundry, "The New Jerusalem: People as Place, Not Place for People," *Novum Testamentum* 29 (1987): 254-64. In the words of Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Proclamation Commentaries, ed. G. Krodel; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 111, "John dreams of the New Jerusalem as the anti-image of the great city Babylon/Rome."

that John envisions a different order for this earth than what we experience at present. Already in Revelation 20:11 we learn about the disappearance of the (old) earth and sky. In 21:1 John adds, after the passing of the first heaven and earth, that the sea is no more. Afterward, in 21:5, for the first time since the beginning of the book, God speaks directly: "Behold, I make all things new."

Countless readers have failed to appreciate the literary context in which these words occur. To many, this brings to mind the complete disintegration of this universe. God has finished with this world. Only heaven remains. But we need to probe deeper into the thought-world that houses this terminology.

The fact that the divine words of Revelation 21:5 echo Isaiah 43:19 and 65:17 should govern the conclusions of every careful reader. The words from Isaiah occur in the framework and thought of Jewish prophetic thinking that predicts a coming period when the creation will work in keeping with the original intent of the Creator. Noteworthy is that the main objects of Isaiah's vision of the renewed order (heaven, earth, Jerusalem, and the nations) all reappear in the new creation in Revelation 21.[10] In both Isaiah and Revelation the new creation has a strong correlation with the old.

From the time of the Babylonian exile, future salvation was very much on the minds of the people of God (Isa 43:16–21). Sometimes the rhetoric soared to heights that stretched the imagination to its limits. To describe "the new," the prophets mined the language of creation (Isa 51:6; 65:17–18; 66:22); and the writings of intertestamental Judaism as well as some early Christian literature describe "the new" in terms of cosmic destruction and

---

[10]See Isaiah 65–66. Cf. Roy A. Harrisville, *The Concept of Newness in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960), 100.

renewal.[11] Nevertheless, what a careful interpreter must keep in mind is the function of this language. The bottom line in Judaism with respect to the future can be found in Isaiah 52:7–10; the people yearn for Zion to be redeemed and all the earth to see the salvation of God. That is what they mean by new!

The torch of hope for a new creation was kindled in the exile. With the coming of Jesus it finally bursts into flame.[12] This is especially true with respect to the raising of the dead—an emphasis that comes rather late in Judaism. In principle, the destiny of Israel is embodied in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Believers like Paul ventured to speak of Jesus' resurrection as a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). From this time, those rising from the watery grave of baptism drew from the power of Jesus' resurrection and saw themselves living in a new order (Rom 6:1–6). It was equally evident that the created order still awaited full redemption (Rom 8:18–25). Still, death had not lost its sting. Through the testing of occasional persecution and regular cultural marginalization the flame sometimes flickered. But the hope for our bodily transformation and renewal of the creation remained firm.

This is the context in which we should understand Revelation 21:1–8. Thus, when John sees the new heaven and new earth, this, like the earlier images of the woman clothed with the sun (12:1), or the beast with seven heads (17:3), should not be read as a literal statement. The vision of the

---

[11]Such texts may be found in the tradition commencing as early as the Jewish Enoch Literature: 1 Enoch 10:2 and especially 91:16. See David Aune, *Revelation 17–22* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1117-1119 for a comprehensive account. It is well to keep in mind that an impressive list could also be assembled of ancient writers arguing that the destiny of the creation is renewable.

[12] I am indebted to Peter Stuhlmacher for the image, in "Behold, I Make All Things New," *Lutheran World* 15 (1968): 4.

new heaven and new earth is not meant to be a cosmological prediction of total replacement of the cosmos. In 20:11, at the time of the last judgment, earth and heaven flee away. Yet, in 20:13 the sea gives up its dead—something impossible to comprehend if one is reading the text in a literal, chronological sequence.[13] It is clear that the emphasis in Revelation 21:1 is not on giving up on earth, but on the qualitative difference between the regimen of this age and that of the age to come.[14] In terms of our discussion the emphasis is on a renovated creation, not something totally new after the complete destruction of the universe.

This interpretation is reinforced by the reference to the disappearance of the sea (Rev 21:1b; cf. 20:11). The sea is often a figure for chaos or the abyss (Rev 11:7; 13:1).[15] With Satan defeated, this old order of the dominion of sin in the creation will be no more.

The visionary aspect of this unit comes to a climax when the New Jerusalem comes into view (Rev 21:2). Once again the reference is clearly symbolic. Echoing Isaiah 65:17–20, ideal Jerusalem emerges in the new heavens and new earth. While some have argued that John distinguishes between the people and the city (Rev 21:7, 24–26), it is probable that the image is multivalent and refers to the glorification and vindication of the people of God. This is confirmed by Revelation 3:12, where, in the promise of the New Jerusalem, people and place are intermingled. After passing through the fires of persecution the people of God are now at rest. Not only are they

---

[13]Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of John* (trans. Wendy Parcels; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 591.

[14]G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 1040, probably goes too far in differentiating between *kainos* as "newness in quality" and *neos* as "newness in time." Harrisville, *The Concept of Newness in the New Testament*, 107–108 is an appropriate corrective.

[15] Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1119–1120.

at rest, as the bride of Christ they participate in the end-time banquet (Rev 19:7–9; 21:2, 9).

An auditory dimension in 21:3–4 corresponds to John's vision in 21:1–2. John hears a loud voice coming from the throne of God (Rev 21:3–4; cf. 19:5). While the voice echoes terminology widespread in scripture (cf. Isa 25:6–8), the organizing image is the Feast of Tabernacles. John used this image, in an anticipatory sense, in Revelation 7:15–17 to describe the vindication of the faithful. Now, in the narrative sequence of the book, the real time of rest has come. The voice announces that God now "tents" or dwells with his peoples in his renewed world (Lev 26:11).[16] It is a time of absolute bliss. Death, tears, and pain, signatures of the old order, are gone.

In Revelation 21:5 the auditory aspect of the text is deepened. It is no longer a voice from the area of the throne (Rev 19:5): God himself pronounces "all things new" (cf. Isa 43:18–19). In Revelation 16:17 a voice announced the end of the apostate woman-city, Babylon, "It is finished." Now in counterpoint, God announces that with the coming of the New Jerusalem his work of redemption is complete.[17] The old world (Babylon) has been replaced by the New Jerusalem. A great divide exists between the two (Rev 19:7–8). While the faithful enjoy the benefits of the redemption of this creation (21:6–7), those who gave allegiance to Babylon endure the sec-

---

[16] Textual witnesses are divided in Rev 21:3 between the reading, "peoples" or "people." It is more likely that the singular *people* (= people of God) would enter into the text through scribal editing. We prefer the plural *peoples* as the correct reading. Presumably John is referring to the total complement of those from all nations who will share in the messianic banquet (Rev 5:9, 7:9; 15:3–4).

[17] In both cases the second perfect of *gignesthai* "to be finished" is used. Along with lengthy repetition of the same Greek phraseology in 17:1 and 21:9, this indicates clearly the importance of the contrast between the two woman-cities as a major structural feature of the book of Revelation.

ond death (21:8).

Perhaps, surprisingly, analysis shows that there is nothing in this text claiming that this present earth is marked for fiery destruction. (Indeed, even in the symbolic and impressionistic terminology of Revelation, such an idea is absent in the entire book.) Rather, in keeping with the tenor of the New Testament, this text anticipates the ultimate redemption of the people of God in a renewed creation. Heaven and earth are joined in this new creation when the Lord God and the Lamb make their abiding presence among the redeemed people of God (Rev 21:22; 22:3).

2 Peter 3:3–13

Likewise, in 2 Peter the author brings a lengthy argument to a climax by claiming a promise that righteousness will dwell in new heavens and a new earth (2 Pet 3:13). But unlike Revelation, where the dominant theme is the contrast between idolatrous Rome and the people of God, in 2 Peter the major concern is to offer a series of rebukes to skeptics and deceivers, some of whom appear to be in the church. We learn in 2 Peter 3:3–4 that, on the basis of the stable course of the universe, even in the first century, scoffers were questioning the idea of the return of Christ. The writer responds that they do not understand the operation of the word of God (2 Pet 3:5–7). The world was created by the word of God (3:5); yet, subsequently it perished with the flood (3:6). In keeping with this same word, the present world will suffer a similar destruction by fire.[18] The fact that this destruction has not already taken place is due to the forbearance of the Lord, who patiently waits for repentance (3:8–10). But the day of accounting will come. In light of this

[18]The parallelism between the two destructions by flood and fire is striking. The Greek text of 2 Peter uses the same word groups for the parallel references to "word (of God)" in 3:5, 7 and 3:6, 7. Although the parallels clearly indicate that the created order suffers, even here the parallel focuses on the destruction of evil men in

promise, based on the word of God, one should heed the challenge to live a godly life (3:4–13).

In the course of making his argument about the destruction of the wicked, the author of 2 Peter makes strong statements about the end of the present order. While the translation of the NIV of 3:10b "and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare," is perhaps preferable to earlier renderings of the Greek text into English, a liberal amount of conflagration terminology remains.[19] In 3:7 we learn that the heavens and earth are stored up for fire. In 3:10 we are told that the heavens will pass away with a loud hissing and the elements will be dissolved by fire (cf. 3:12). One may well inquire about the scope and force of these descriptions.

The Bible often uses the image of a raging fire to describe God's judgment. The idea that this consuming fire may affect the creation itself emerges in texts as old as Genesis 19:24–28. Deuteronomy 32:22 speaks

---

the flood and in the last day (cf. 3:7). Tord Fornberg, *An Early Church in a Pluralistic Society: A Study of 2 Peter* (*ConBNT* 9; Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1977), 67, also notes a close parallel with 1 Clement 27:4. Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (*WBC* 50; Waco: Word Books, 1983), 284–285 thinks that both 1 and 2 Clement draw from the same Jewish apocalypse used as a source by the author of 2 Pet 3:4–13. But we need not go this far. As Carsten Thiede, "A Pagan Reader of 2 Peter: Cosmic Conflagration in 2 Peter 3 and the Octavius of Minucius Felix," *JSNT* 26 (1986): 93 shows, the order of dependence and literary borrowing remains a very open question. What is clear is that the idea of cosmic conflagration was a much-discussed topic both in apocalyptic and pagan philosophical sources.

[19] The latter part of 2 Pet 3:10 quoted from the NIV conceals a classic *crux interpretum* of textual criticism. At issue is whether the Greek word in some manuscripts, translated "burned up" in the RSV, is the correct reading. Even my old teacher J.W. Roberts, "A Note on the Meaning of II Peter 3:10d," *RestQ* 6 (1962): 32–33, felt obliged to take up this question. The reading of the NIV has the advantage of underscoring an ironical point. Many biblical texts highlight the attempts of the wicked to conceal themselves from wrath on the Day of the Lord (Hosea 10:8; Rev 6:15–16). However, with the dissolving of the heavens everything that is done on earth will be open and visible for all to see. Cf. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 316–321. There is no place to hide.

metaphorically of God's anger against the faithlessness of his people consuming the earth to its very foundations. Similar terminology in Isaiah 34:4, 66:15–16; Zephaniah 1:18, 3:8–13, and Malachi 4:1–3 extends the metaphor to a cosmic level. Nevertheless, it is clear that the language in these passages is poetic, and it is generally recognized that there is no clear Old Testament prophecy of the annihilation of the cosmos.[20] However, when we come to the era that roughly overlaps the time of the New Testament, many systems of thought ranging from Persian religion, Stoic philosophy, and Jewish apocalyptic incorporated some version of cosmic conflagration.[21]

The issue for us is whether 2 Peter adopts a similar perspective. Although there are some linguistic overlaps, we believe that it is more likely that the author views himself in continuity with the Old Testament prophets. The old order will be radically renovated (as if purged by fire), but the earth will not be annihilated. This is in keeping with other texts in the New Testament. Matthew 3:11, 5:18, Hebrews 1:10–12, 12:18–29, 1 Peter 1:7 and 1 John 2:17 speak metaphorically of a coming end to the present order, but never of an annihilation of the creation. The two texts coming closest to the idea of destruction of the creation by fire are 1 Corinthians 3:13–16 and 2 Thessalonians 1:7–8. However, the former text teaches that the works of some believers will be consumed as by a refiner's fire, while the latter reference to the coming of Christ "with flaming fire" seems to be primarily a metaphor for his revelatory presence at the *parousia*.[22] Our analysis of 2 Peter 3 also casts doubt as to whether, even here, the language of conflagra-

---

[20]Anton Vögtle, *Das Neue Testament und die Zukunft des Kosmos* (Dusseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1970), 133.

[21]Vögtle, *Die Zukunft des Kosmos* 133; cf. Aune, *Revelation* 17–22, 1117–1119.

[22] Abraham Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (Anchor Bible; New

tion should be taken literally.

Interpretation of the opaque language of 2 Peter 3 requires us to keep in mind its transparent parallel. God interrupted his benevolent creative sustenance of the world in Noah's day and the scoffers were destroyed by water. The scoffers of this age will perish likewise, this time by fire. While not central to the argument of 2 Peter 3, it is noteworthy that the flood did not annihilate the planet. We suggest that similarly the coming destruction by fire is not a direct reference to annihilation, but a metaphor for judgment (cf. 2 Pet 3:7d). The rhetoric, couched in Old Testament images of judgment, is sweeping and lofty. Isaiah even envisions the disappearance of the old order in cosmic terms. He sees the host of heaven rotting away and skies "rolled up like a scroll" (Isa 34:4). In this same world of thought 2 Peter speaks of the "heavenly bodies," *stoicheia*, finally dissolving in fire (2 Pet 3:10, 12). When it is all over the earth is still there. Only, the created order is transformed and renovated into something new.[23] This is not a statement about the physics of cosmology. It is language about the difference between the old order of this age and what will transpire at the return of Christ.[24] When it is all said and done we believe that 2 Peter is consistent with Revelation 21 and Romans 8. It claims that God's kingdom will one day come to full fruition in a restored creation. Then the scoffers and enemies will be routed.

York: Doubleday, 2000), 399–400. The Greek word *palingenesia,* "regeneration," in Matt 19:28 describes the restoration at the end of the age. It was used by the Stoics to describe the rebirth of the world following its conflagration in the cosmic cycle, but the Matthean context is strongly Jewish, focusing on the vindication of Israel.

[23]Gale Z. Heide. "What is New about the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Ttheology of Creation from Revelation and 2 Peter 3," *JETS* 40 (1997): 50–54.

[24]Irenaeus saw this point clearly. See his work, *Against Heresies* 1.71 and 5.35.2–6.36.1. Others, like Justin Martyr, for philosophical reasons were more wary. For a discussion sympathetic towards the acceptance of ancient philosophical views on the cosmos by these apologists, see Thiede, "A Pagan Reader of 2 Peter," 79–96.

Refocusing Our View of Heaven

Our study shows that the hope for the new creation, first nourished in Israel, comes to light in Jesus Christ and reaches its apex at the last day. A central element of the new creation—the raising of the dead ones—has already begun in Jesus' death and resurrection.[25] After tasting the first-fruits of this new creation, Christians, the people of God of the last days, wait in joyful expectation for the full realization of God's new world. As is often pointed out, one of the best proofs of this hope is in the transformed life of the believer.

For Christians today, living in expectation of the new creation may well invite us to reevaluate some well-entrenched concepts about the life to come. Nowhere is this so evident as in our language about heaven. Encouraged by popular hymns, many Christian believers conceive of heaven as a place to which our souls, in the form of some material-like essence, retreat after we die. In this world we are foreigners. Death is the "blessed event" allowing us to return to the homeland. N. T. Wright wistfully notes that the language of "going to heaven" is so much a part of our culture (read the obituaries in your local newspaper) that it can be a counsel of despair to entertain hope for theological correction.[26]

Although this is not the place for detailed exposition on the afterlife, it may be helpful to note that the biblical idea of heaven is closer to the notion of a dimension of reality now partly hidden, only to be revealed fully at the appropriate time. In a brilliant image, Wright likens heaven to a parent in the

---

[25]Stuhlmacher, "Behold . . . All Things New," 7, correctly stresses that although Christian hope stands in continuity with Israel's hope, the resurrection of Jesus decisively changes that hope.

[26]N. T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999), 23.

days before Christmas assuring the child that his gift is in a safe place and it will come to light at the appropriate time.[27] Theologically speaking, heaven refers not to a sanctuary beyond the cosmos, but to God's present dimension of reality, which he will bring to full realization with the renewal of all things in the resurrection at the last day (1 Thess 4:13–18; 1 Cor 15:51–56; Phil 3:20). In the meanwhile, believers who die in the Lord, given the gift of immortality, are in a state of peace with Christ as co-present (Phil 1:20–24).[28] But this is only a stepping-stone on the way to our ultimate transformation on the last day (2 Cor 5:1–10).

Thus, we return to Revelation 21:5. Corresponding with Romans 8:18–34, this text reminds us that God is "one who makes all things new." While always realizing that we are still creatures, we take heart that we are graced with the dignity of being partners with the Creator in the preparation of the creation for the blessed day when the kingdom incorporates and transforms the best of the present creation.[29] As we await that day we visibly manifest our faith by honoring God in both bodily service and nurturing of the created order. Thus in concert with another stanza of the Victorian hymn noted at the outset, we proclaim:

> But lo! There breaks a yet more glorious day;
> The Saints triumphant rise in bright array
> The King of glory passes on his way. Alleluia.

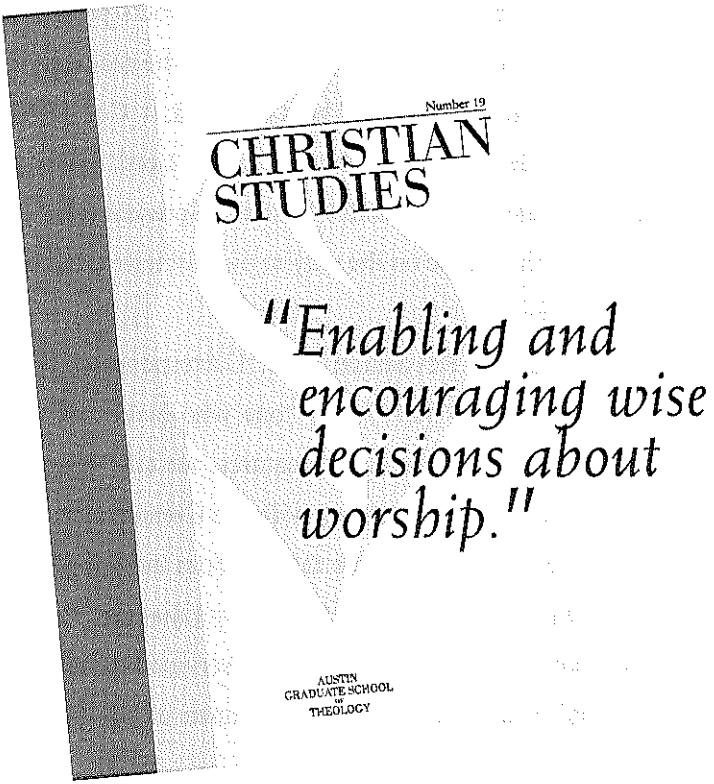
---

[27] Wright, *New Heavens*, 7. See 1 Peter 1:4.

[28] Some may wish to be dismissive and correlate this argument with claims of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Contrary to biblical teaching, Jehovah's Witnesses understand there are two groups to be saved. They claim that one group, the 144,000, will be taken up to a place called heaven and reign eternally with God.

[29] Ted Peters, "Eschatology Full Strength," *Dialog* 40 (2001): 130.

REPRINTED BY POPULAR DEMAND
Christian Studies 19



"I believe that all of our denominational traditions are in deep crisis about the same issues. . . . I quite agree with the sympathy and tone of the articles in the issue (Christian Studies 19)."

Walter Brueggemann
Columbia Theological Seminary
Decatur, Georgia

Contact Renee at christianstudiespress@austingrad.edu or phone 512-476-2772 ext. 214

A Christian Affirmation 2005

Christian Chronicle, May 2005

The history of Restoration churches has been marred by its share of legalism, sectarianism, and divisiveness. An unexamined flight from these tendencies, however, may lead to embracing an almost shapeless Evangelicalism, which Evangelicals themselves are questioning (e.g., Mark Noll, David Wells). *A Christian Affirmation 2005* was an attempt to encourage reflection about the Restoration tradition. Rushing into a shallow ecumenicity offers little hope for serious discipleship or meaningful unity among churches.

The signers of *A Christian Affirmation* are persons who have pursued academic study with believers from other traditions. Several are faculty members at institutions where their Restoration orientation is respected (e.g., Princeton Theological Seminary, and Notre Dame and Emory Universities). The signers commend a biblical and theological approach to ecumenicity.

A Christian Affirmation has evoked considerable discussion. Readers should note that *A Christian Affirmation* makes no attempt to identify who is not a Christian.

Editor, *Christian Studies*

A Christian Affirmation 2005

It is our intention to clarify our Christian identity in a time of increasing uncertainties. Churches of Christ are part of the American Restoration Movement, which sought to overcome the divisions of Christendom by returning to the faith and practice of the earliest Christians. While we believe that disunity and division among Christians are not according to God's will, we also believe that unity cannot be grounded in minimal agreements among Christian traditions. The path to substantive Christian unity is found in returning to the clear teachings of Scripture and practices of the early church, commonly acknowledged and respected by all Christian traditions. In this light, beliefs and practices characteristic of Churches of Christ are neither novel nor idiosyncratic, nor should they be easily abandoned.

The Original Design

The compelling rationale for this commonsense approach to ecumenical reformation is well stated by Roman Catholic scholar Hans Küng. Recognizing "errors and false developments" in the church's history, Küng states,

> The New Testament message, as the original testimony, is the highest court to which appeal must be made in all the changes of history. It is the essential norm against which the church of every age has to measure itself. The New Testament Church, which, beginning with its origins in Jesus Christ, is already the Church in the fullness of its nature, is therefore the original design; we cannot copy it today, but we can and must translate it into modern terms. The Church of the New Testament alone can show us what that original design was (*The Early Church*).

It is the early church that, in Küng's words, provides "the essential norm" by which the church in every age and culture measures its message, beliefs, and practices. It is to this "original design" (Küng) that we turn both for substantive guidance and for the common faith to be shared by and to unite all Christians.

According to the New Testament message, the Church of Jesus Christ exists to bear witness to the central truth that the Creator of all things "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" for us and our salvation (John 3:16). This salvation embraces the whole of creation in its scope; God's saving will is "to reconcile all things to himself" through Christ's incarnate life, death, and resurrection (Col 1:20). God's saving purpose shapes the whole of the church's life.

Baptism: The New Birth

Foundational to our response to the saving work of Christ is our faithful submission to his lordship in baptism. In baptism we enter the new creation inaugurated by Christ's death and resurrection, which create a new humanity (2 Cor 5:14–15). As we once shared the destiny of Adam, God now grants us a share in the life and destiny of Christ, the new Adam, incorporating us into his body in baptism (Rom 6:3–6; 1 Cor 15:45; Gal 3:26–28; Col 3:10–11). In the ancient church there were no unbaptized Christians. The New Testament assumes that every Christian is baptized and has become a member of the body of Christ through the one baptism of water and of the spirit (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:5; John 3:5). God does not save individuals apart from the body of Christ; he saves us by making us members of Christ's body through baptism and transforming us into his likeness (Rom 8:29–30).

The early church practiced baptism as the immersion of believers in water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Those baptized received as benefits of Christ's death the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Baptism is the Christian's new birth into the people of God. Washed clean of sins and sealed by the Spirit of God, believers begin their transformation into the image of Christ (1 Cor 6:11) and to "walk in newness of life," "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:4, 11).

The Lord's Supper and the New Fellowship

Baptized believers gather each week around the table of the Lord. There, united as one body in Christ, we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26) as the "expiation for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:2). As Israel remembered God's deliverance in the Passover, Christians meet on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day (the day of Christ's resurrection) to remember and celebrate the salvation brought by Christ.

At the Lord's table we are drawn together through Christ's death and resurrection as members of his body. "Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body" (1 Cor 10:17). Moved by the memory that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper "on the night when he was betrayed" (1 Cor 11:23), members of the body of Christ are stirred to examine ourselves and recommit to serving Christ, one another, and the world (1 Cor 11:28–29).

We also remember that the risen Lord was "made known" to his disciples on the first day of the week "in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35) and graciously invited his disciples to "come and eat" (John 21:12). Thus we not only remember Jesus' death, but also celebrate his presence at table with his people today; and until he comes, we joyfully anticipate being together with him.

The Lord instituted this observance, and he sets the conditions for participation at his table (Rev 3:20). All who acknowledge Christ's lordship and demonstrate this faith in their character and conduct are welcome at the Lord's table.

Worship and the New Life

For centuries Christians have recognized that as we worship, so we believe, and so we live. Worship stands at the center of the church's existence and the formation of Christian identity. In worship, the people of God remember and rehearse God's great acts of disclosure and deliverance in our history. We praise and adore

God for the gifts of creation and redemption in Christ.

The center of Christian worship is the Lord's supper, which unites us in remembering the sacrificial death of Jesus and encourages us to offer ourselves to the Lord as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1–2). Christian proclamation, prayer, and singing in the New Testament and early church were characteristically Christ-centered. In content, Christian song is an instrument of teaching enabling the word of Christ to dwell richly in God's people as we teach and admonish one another in wisdom with thankfulness (Col 3:16).

In manner, Christian singing from the very first and for nearly a thousand years was "a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Heb 13:15), without accompanying instruments. Singing *a cappella* ("in the manner of the chapel") was encouraged by reformers such as John Calvin and the Puritans in England and America and remains the practice of some 300,000,000 members of Eastern Orthodox churches. The practice of *a cappella* singing recovers both the "original design" of the early church and the common practice of the whole church for centuries.

Christian worship delivers us from the illusions, distortions, and distractions of the world. Worship releases us from preoccupation with our limited thoughts, abilities, and feelings. Our worship reminds us, as Paul says, that our ultimate hope and confidence reside not in ourselves—not in our possessions, our feelings, our intellect, or anything we can measure and manage—but in "God who raises the dead" (2 Cor 1:9).

A Word of Concern

While the work of restoration is difficult and has often been done poorly, neither the difficulty of the task nor our failures justify abandoning the attempt to recover biblical faith and practice. Many in Churches of Christ today are rightly concerned to overcome a legacy of legalism, sectarianism, and divisiveness. It is easy to suppose that opposition to these scandalous realities means that we must relax our commitment to practices that have been characteristic of our churches.

We commend an alternative vision. The restoration vision is to unite with the earliest Christians, to take as the indispensable guide to life in Christ their common faith and practice, which Christians in every age respect and honor. In the twen-

tieth century, early Christian practice was rediscovered as a norm and a basis for seeking unity by leaders, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. It would be a sad irony, now that others in the religious world are recognizing the value of a return to Christian beginnings, if our own churches were to abandon the quest.

The undersigned prayerfully commend these considerations, this 18th day of April in the year of our Lord 2005.

Jim Baird
Professor of Bible
College of Biblical Studies
Oklahoma Christian University

Terry Briley
Dean, College of Bible and Ministry
Lipscomb University

Everett Ferguson
Professor Emeritus of Church History
Abilene Christian University

Hugh Gainey, Elder
University Avenue Church of Christ
Austin, Texas

John Mark Hicks
Professor of Theology
Lipscomb University

Carl R. Holladay
Candler School of Theology
Emory University

Evertt W. Huffard
Dean, Harding Graduate School
of Religion

Lynn McMillon
Dean, College of Biblical Studies
Oklahoma Christian University

Allan J. McNicol
Professor of New Testament
Austin Graduate School of Theology

Mike Moss
Associate Dean, College of Bible
and Ministry, Lipscomb University

Curt Niccum
Associate Professor of Bible
Oklahoma Christian University

Howard Norton*
College of Bible and Religion
Harding University

Tom Olbricht
Professor Emeritus of Religion
Pepperdine University

Jeff Peterson
Associate Professor of New
Testament
Austin Graduate School of Thelogy

---

*Although one of the original signers, Howard Norton's name was omitted in the initial publication of the Affirmation.

A Christian Affirmation, 2005:
An Exchange of Views

Leroy Garrett and Jeffrey Peterson

The following exchange took place online in spring 2005 concerning *A Christian Affirmation 2005*, the text of which can be found at www.christianaffirmation.org. We are grateful to Dr. Leroy Garrett for his permission to republish his response to the *Affirmation*. We suggest that the preceding *Affirmation* be carefully read prior to the Garrett-Peterson exchange.

Editor, *Christian Studies*

Response to *A Christian Affirmation, 2005*

Leroy Garrett

In the May, 2005 issue of *The Christian Chronicle* there appeared "A Christian Affirmation 2005" signed by 24 leaders of Churches of Christ—professors, deans, pulpit ministers, elders. The intention of the document is "to clarify our Christian identity in a time of increasing uncertainties." The document expresses "A Word of Concern" that recent efforts to overcome a legacy of legalism and division has led us "to relax our commitment to practices that have been characteristic of our churches." In doing this these leaders have placed issues on the table worthy of critical discussion.

I would like to join the conversation by questioning some of the affirmations set forth. In appealing to our heritage of unity in the American Restoration Movement, the leaders state that "we believe that unity cannot be grounded in minimal agreements among Christian traditions." They go on to say that substantive Christian unity is found "in returning to the clear teaching and practices of the early church."

That unity can be realized only by minimizing the essentials, while at the same time allowing liberty in a wide variety of opinions, is the hallmark of our Stone-Campbell heritage. Alexander Campbell often referred to "the seven facts" of Eph 4:4–5 as the grounds of unity, and sometimes he reduced them to three—"one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Barton W. Stone was equally minimal when he defined a Christian as one who acknowledges "the leading truths of Christianity, and conforms his life to that acknowledgement." They saw the "core gospel" as the basis of unity, not an extended list of dogmas and practices.

This gave rise to an axiom that goes far in identifying who we are or should be:

> In essentials (as few as possible), unity;
> In opinions (as broad as possible without compromisng essentials), liberty;
> In all things, love.

W. T. Moore, one of our earliest historians, identified this unique appeal of our heritage in mathematical terms: "The Disciples have always contended for the greatest possible numerator with the least possible denominator." He meant by this the greatest possible liberty of opinion (numerator) with the fewest possible essentials (denominator). Robert Richardson, an associate of Campbell and our earliest historian, stated it even more succinctly: "That alone which saves men can unite them."

All this conforms to the consensus of modern New Testament scholarship, that the early Christians had but one creed or one essential—Jesus is Lord! This is what they lived for and died for. All else was marginal. What believers live and die for is what unites them. "Multiplying the essentials" has sometimes been named as the cause of our divisions. Campbell called it "the tyranny of opinionism."

When the Affirmation argues for unity by "returning to the clear teachings of Scripture and practices of the early church," it is preserving the illusion

of restorationism that has been an albatross about our necks in Churches of Christ all these years. If what these leaders call "The Original Design" of the early church is all that "clear," why have we divided into numerous factions over what that design or pattern is? Are the "clear teachings of Scripture" all that clear about whether we have Sunday schools, instrumental music, cooperation, societies, communion cups, etc. Are they clear about the millennium, glossolalia, predestination, election, the Trinity, inspiration, interpretation, etc.?

We differ on all these things—and even baptism. Stone and Campbell differed on baptism. Our own people have never been of one mind about baptism, much more the church at large. We can no more see everything alike than we can look alike. But we don't have to! That is the genius of the Stone-Campbell heritage. We can differ on opinions—and all the above are opinions —while we unite upon the essentials, which are centered in the core gospel, Jesus Christ and him crucified.

This is a weighty flaw in the Affirmation— it has little place for unity in diversity, which is the only kind of unity there is. We can have churches that sing *a cappella* and those that use instruments, and still be united. We can have congregations that have Sunday schools and join in cooperative efforts, and those that do not, and still be one in Christ. We are united in Christ, not by agreement on opinions or methods. It is a Person who unites us, not theories or theology about the Person.

Another questionable affirmation in the document is that "God does not save individuals apart from the body of Christ." Who is this that knows the mind of Him who said, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Rom. 9:15)? God will save whom He will, in the church or out. Only God knows the heart, and only He knows how many Rahabs there are out there.

This exclusive view of God's grace is the offspring of "the only true church" fallacy that has long made us sectarians. It goes this way: the saved are all in the church. We are that church; so, if one doesn't belong to the Church of Christ, he is not saved.

The document rightly urges that we preserve such practices as weekly communion and baptism by immersion for remission of sins, and we may urge these as reflective of "the common faith and practice of the earliest Christians." But even here we cannot make our interpretation and practice tests of fellowship. We must recognize—as these 24 leaders appear reluctant to do—that there are multitudes of sincere, intelligent Christians who do not see "the common faith and practice of the earliest Christians" the same way we do. We can stand firmly for what we believe about baptism, and still accept as equals in Christ those who differ with us.

This is consistent with our heritage in Stone-Campbell. No one was more zealous for baptism by immersion than Alexander Campbell—debating it as he did—and yet he accepted as Christians those referred to as "the pious unimmersed." He was himself an example of his own definition of a Christian: "A Christian is one who believes that Jesus is the Christ, repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his understanding." After a prolonged study of baptism, he was immersed, but he believed he had been a Christian all along. One is responsible only for such light as he has at any given time, he held.

In defense of our singing without instruments, the 24 leaders point out that *a cappella* music has been the position of numerous reformers and churches through the centuries, such as John Calvin and the Puritans, and 300 million in Eastern Orthodox churches. But that is not the issue. No case has to be made for *a cappella* music. All churches sometimes sing *a cappella*. The issue is making instrumental music a test of fellowship. John Calvin did

not make *a cappella* music "catholic," and the Orthodox churches do not make it an essential to fellowship, as we in Churches of Christ have done.

A number of our congregations have recently gone public in stating they will no longer make instrumental music a test of fellowship—not that they will no longer sing *a cappell*a. That is the issue. Do the 24 signers of the Affirmation agree with those churches, or are they saying that we should keep on making a test of what is but our opinion or preference?

The Affirmation errs as much in what it does not say as in what it does say. In any effort to identify ourselves we should recognize that Churches of Christ are part of a movement "to unite the Christians in all the sects," and that we must get back on track as a unity people. We must reaffirm such mottoes as, "We are Christians only, but not the only Christians." In doing this we must confess our sins—that we have claimed to be the only Christians and the only true church, that we have often been sectarian about the nature of the church and legalistic about baptism. And that we have been wrong about instrumental music—not in singing *a cappella*, but in making the instrument a test for accepting other believers as equals in Christ. We must go on to affirm our intention to become a Christ-centered, Spirit-filled people desirous of enjoying fellowship with all other Christians, and to join them in labors of love for Christ's sake.

A Reply to Leroy Garrett

Jeffrey Peterson

It's been my pleasure to hear Leroy Garrett lecture and then sit down for discussion with him on two occasions, once at the Liberty Street Church in Trenton, New Jersey, and once at Austin Graduate School of Theology. Both times I was impressed with his passionate commitment to opposing sectarian-

ism in Churches of Christ. Reading his comments on "A Christian Affirmation," however, I was led to wonder whether his passion sometimes leads him to see sectarianism where it isn't present. Anyone familiar with the work of such teachers as Tom Olbricht, Jerry Rushford, Carl Holladay, Jim Roberts, and John Mark Hicks will recognize how implausible it is to charge them with a sectarian spirit, which is in fact explicitly repudiated in the Affirmation's closing paragraphs.[1]

---

[1] After our public exchange, Dr. Garrett indicated that it was not his intent to charge the signers of the Affirmation with sectarianism; he stated regarding his published response, "I said nothing about [the Affirmation] being sectarian, and I certainly did not accuse the brothers you listed as being sectarians. Of course, they are not sectarians" (email of 2 June 2005, quoted by permission).

Here is the relevant portion of my reply to Dr. Garrett (email of 4 June 2005): "I appreciate your clarification of your intentions in commenting on the Affirmation, and I appreciated your noting our repudiation of sectarianism. I responded as I did because I saw no other way to construe the following than as an imputation of sectarianism to the signers:

> Another questionable affirmation in the document is that 'God does not save individuals apart from the body of Christ.' Who is this that knows the mind of Him who said, 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion' (Rom. 9:15)? God will save whom He will, in the church or out. Only God knows the heart, and only He knows how many Rahabs there are out there.
>
> This exclusive view of God's grace is the offspring of 'the only true church' fallacy that has long made us sectarians. It goes this way: the saved are all in the church; we are that church; so, if one doesn't belong to the Church of Christ he is not saved.

In any case, other readers have reacted to the Affirmation as a sectarian manifesto, so even if I misunderstood the force of those paragraphs, I think there was some value in more explicitly saying that the Affirmation isn't intended that way. I am glad to see that the agreement between us is more extensive than (e.g.) my friend Mike Cope appears to think. (Nobody ever said beneficial brotherly controversy would be easy!)" [This last was in reference to comments on Mike Cope's blog, archived at http://www.preachermike.com/2005/05/12/111589762986387502.]

In fact, Dr. Garrett embraces the substance of the Affirmation when he says that it "rightly urges that we [Churches of Christ] preserve such practices as weekly Communion and baptism by immersion for remission of sins, and we may urge these as reflective of 'the common faith and practice of the earliest Christians'." That is precisely what I understand the Affirmation to urge, and I regret any faults in its wording that would lead a reader to think otherwise; by the same token, I would ask Dr. Garrett and other readers who find sectarianism endorsed by the Affirmation to consider whether they have not read this into the statement rather than out of it.

If he endorses its fundamental appeal, to what does Dr. Garrett object? He protests that the signers "make our interpretation and practice tests of fellowship" and so deny salvation to all those who do not share our interpretation of early Christian faith and practice. But the Affirmation does not address the question, "Who is a Christian?" The question it addresses (as I understand it) is what the orientation and practice of Churches of Christ should be as we emerge from a century of relative isolation from other Christian communions and enter into meaningful conversation with them. The signers appeal to Churches of Christ to retain a broadly restorationist frame of reference and specifically to maintain certain characteristic beliefs and practices— the Gospel of God's grace intended for all, extended through Christ, and experienced in the formation of the church; believers' baptism by immersion as the initial means of saving grace and our entry into Christian fellowship; weekly observance of the Lord's Supper as constitutive of the Christian community and as a continuing means of grace; and *a cappella* singing as an element of the church's worship. The statement pronounces no anathemas on those who conclude or practice differently, nor does it excommunicate anyone; it simply commends the convictions expressed to the conscience of other Christians.

The crucial line that Dr. Garrett quotes to show the statement's sectarian bent—"God does not save individuals apart from the body of Christ" —only does so if "body of Christ" means what it did in (say) Leroy Brownlow's *Why I Am a Member of the Church of Christ*. In the context of the Affirmation, which summarizes Paul's teaching on the significance of baptism, the term naturally refers instead to the risen body of Christ, the last Adam, of which we are made members by God's saving grace. That is, the background to the Affirmation's statements about the body of Christ is supplied by the New Testament's teaching that "by one Spirit we all were baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13); that "we, though many, are one body in Christ" (Rom 12:5); that in his death and resurrection Christ embraced all people (Jew and Gentile) and "created one new person in him" (Eph 2:15), "the [universal] church, which is [Christ's] body" (Eph 1:22–23). Indeed, the word "church" finds its logically primary sense in a passage like Heb 12:23; the first full gathering of God's universal church will be the "the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven," and all meetings of the church before that time are only partial and hopeful anticipations of that eschatological congregation. Paul and Hebrews treat the earthly church as the proleptic gathering of all those whom God will ultimately redeem from human history, and they present baptism as the normative way in which God admits people to this gathering; if Paul and Hebrews aren't sectarian in this, it is difficult to see how the Affirmation is. Dr. Garrett's suggestion that "Jesus is Lord" is the sum total of apostolic proclamation and a sufficient basis for Christian communion today needs some qualification. "Jesus [Christ] is Lord" is one very early summary of the Gospel (Rom 10:9–10; 2 Cor 4:5; 1 Cor 12:3; Col 2:6), but in the Pauline letters alone, the basic claims of the gospel which converts accept upon entering the Christian community are said also to include the following:

1) the one true and living God, whom we must forsake idols to serve and whose risen Son we await to deliver us from God's coming wrath (1 Thess 1:9–10);

2) Jesus' birth as David's heir to the title Messiah and his resurrection as the Son of God in fulfillment of Old Testament promise (Rom 1:3–5; cf. 2 Cor 1:19–20);

3) the Messiah's death for our sins, burial, resurrection on the third day, and appearances to disciples, whom he commissioned as his apostles (1 Cor 15:1–11; cf. 1 Thess 4:14; Rom 8:34);

4) baptism in Christ's name into his one crucified and resurrected body as the means by which God initially bestows his saving grace (Rom. 6:3–4, 1 Cor 1:13, Gal 3:27–28);

5) fellowship at Christ's table as an ongoing communion in the life of his resurrected body and a continuing proclamation of the risen Lord's death (1 Cor 11:23–26; 10:16–17);

6) the obligation of baptized persons to shun the various vices they once practiced and to be led by the Spirit in the virtues of Christ (1 Cor 6:9–11; Gal 5:16–25; Eph 4:20–24; Col 2:6–7; 1 Thess 4:1–2) so as to be kept blameless for the day of the Lord (1 Cor 1:8; 1 Thess 3:12–13).

None of these passages presents new instruction offered for the first time in Paul's letters; they rather remind Christians of the basics of the Gospel as they had previously learned and embraced it. All of this teaching can be understood as unpacking what's involved in the confession "Jesus Christ is Lord," but it also shows that that bare formula wasn't sufficient to constitute and sustain the church in its first generation. Indeed, within the pages of the New Testament the confession, "Jesus is Lord," is itself more precisely defined to guard against misunderstanding that arose a generation after Paul's time. In 1 John 4:2–3 and 2 John 7, John explains that true confession of Jesus includes his appearance in the flesh, and he maintains that any other interpretation of the term "Jesus" (e.g., as a being who appeared to be human but didn't have a body subject to physical death) is a spiritually

fatal misunderstanding of the faith. If we were to insist on nothing beyond "Jesus is Lord" as the entire basis for Christian communion, we would find ourselves obliged to embrace the Docetist heresy should it reappear in modern dress.

I have no quarrel with the definition of a Christian that Dr. Garrett quotes from Alexander Campbell: "one who believes that Jesus is the Christ, repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his understanding." This definition would include the Society of Friends, which offers an interesting test case for the question of fellowship that Dr. Garrett presses. Friends (Quakers) confess Jesus as Lord but reject all outward forms of worship, including baptism, the Lord's Supper, and congregational singing. They are noteworthy for their simplicity, egalitarianism, rejection of violence, and willingness to suffer for the sake of justice. Will there be any Quakers in God's eschatological assembly? It is not ours to "judge the servant of another" (Rom 14:4), but it would be surprising indeed if the God who declares "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" should deny so graced a life as John Woolman's an abode among the saints because of a misunderstanding of baptism and the supper.[2] It is regrettable that Woolman and other Quakers have denied themselves the visible means of grace and neglected to proclaim the death of the risen Lord at his table; but then, we who have benefited from baptism and the table yet have done so much less than Woolman to oppose injustice have more reason for regret.

Thankfully, we may be content to leave final judgment (our own and others') in the hands of our gracious God, but in the meantime Christians who

---

[2]See David Sox, *John Woolman: Quintessential Quaker, 1720-1772* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press ; York, England: Sessions Book Trust, 1999).

baptize and celebrate the supper and who think it important to do so must decide how we will relate to any Quakers that cross our path. Dr. Garrett counsels "unity in diversity" and criticizes our statement for failing to pursue this aim, but what would this formula mean when applied to Quakers? Should Churches of Christ receive Quakers as members without requesting that they receive baptism, or seek to hold joint services with them, or abandon our forms of worship for their services of silent waiting on God? Should we not rather recognize that while we both claim Jesus as Lord, our understanding of how best to honor God in public worship differs so much from the Quakers' that the integrity of our discipleship (and of theirs) is best preserved by meeting apart, by praying for one another, by discussing what we share and where we differ as opportunity presents itself, and by co-operating in such good works as we feel we can? (I would suppose this means, for example, yes to joint benevolence but no to common mission.) Should we not trust God to lead us to unity in the life of his Son, when we stand before his throne if not sooner, rather than insisting on visible unity now in ways that violate our own limited understanding of the obligations of discipleship, and the limited understanding of Quaker disciples as well?

There are, of course, far fewer Quakers than evangelicals or Catholics, and only a few Churches of Christ in a handful of states face the practical question of how to relate to them, but the same issues are involved when churches decide whether and how to relate to any other communion, whether Baptist or Presbyterian or Orthodox. The Affirmation does not specifically address that question but deals with a more elementary one. Every congregation of God's people, no matter how open and irenic, must decide what beliefs it will regard as central and what practices it will regularly observe. The Restoration tradition encourages us to look to the churches that the apostles established as our primary models for the life of the church today, and

the Affirmation reaffirms this orientation with specific reference to a few contested beliefs and practices. It is my conviction that Churches of Christ can best engage other Christian churches (and the unchurched as well) by embodying the Restorationist way of being Christian to the best of our ability rather than abandoning it at the first sign that not everyone agrees.

Like some other readers, Dr. Garrett is especially critical of our affirmation of *a cappella* singing as an element of the church's worship worthy of cultivating and preserving, but his sketch of the present situation is incomplete. While it is true, as he writes, that some churches are resolving that music should not be made a test of fellowship, he fails to note that some churches are also making the decision to abandon the *a cappella* practice. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that within the next decade every urban and suburban Church of Christ will face a decision whether to continue worshiping *a cappella* or adopt instruments. If one applauds current efforts to recognize that, as Jeff Walling put it at Pepperdine University recently, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ are brothers and sisters in Christ who worship differently, but one also thinks that singing *a cappella* is a more appropriate way for the church to honor God and edify one another, then it's not clear what one would say to commend the practice except just what the Affirmation says. It's unclear how a person of such convictions could satisfy Dr. Garrett's concern except by keeping silent about the music of the church altogether.

We might usefully compare *a cappella* singing as treated in the Affirmation with the practice of reading scripture in public worship. No New Testament passage definitely requires scripture reading in church, but 1 Tim 4:13 encourages it, and Christian churches have practiced it since at least the second century; today several Protestant denominations as well as the Roman Catholic Church prescribe four different Scripture passages to be read every

Sunday, following this ancient practice.[3] If one of our congregations adopts an explicit policy of reading Scripture in every worship service (or even of following a lectionary, as some now do), would we say that by that act they have condemned churches that have not adopted this practice? If a ministry staff or eldership becomes convinced that the lectionary is the best way to edify the church and advocates its use at regional gatherings and lectureships, would we think of charging them with fostering a sectarian spirit? If not, it seems unjustified to charge the signers of the Affirmation with sectarianism for commending a longstanding practice that is not explicitly required by any New Testament passage but is encouraged in several (e.g., Eph 5:19; Col 3:16) and remained for centuries the practice of the ancient church.

Dr. Garrett criticizes such an approach to evaluating our faith and practice as "preserving the illusion of Restorationism that has been an albatross about our necks in Churches of Christ all these years." Like some other readers, he seems to find the "Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery" a more adequate charter for our movement than Thomas Campbell's "Declaration and Address." The irony, noted in the Affirmation, is that this surrender comes just as leaders in many other churches have begun to take an approach to seeking increased unity that has much in common with Restorationism. In recent years, Lutherans and Roman Catholics have come to agreement on justification by faith through common study of scripture;[4] a number of communions have found common ground on baptism, eucharist,

---

[3]See *The Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), available online at http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary.

[4]See the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* by The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). 2000 (online at http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/romancatholic/jddj/).

and ministry (including recognition that "baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested pattern in the New Testament documents" and that the Lord's Supper "should take place at least every Sunday")[5]; evangelicals and Catholics have begun a substantive unofficial dialogue on issues including soteriology, scripture, fellowship, and sanctification[6]; and Thomas Oden has discerned a new, popular ecumenism taking its bearings from the New Testament and ancient teaching and practice.[7] It is a new day for conversation between different churches, and viewed within this context, Dr. Garrett's concerns about communion cups and Sunday schools may seem a bit parochial.

Churches of the Restoration tradition have much to learn from conversation with evangelical Christians and with others, but our heritage also gives us valuable insights to contribute to that discussion. I signed the Affirmation because I understand it as an appeal not to throw out the Restorationist baby along with the legalist/sectarian bathwater when our re-engagement with other Christian traditions has scarcely begun. Leroy Garrett's opposition to sectarianism and his determination not to introduce

---

[5]See the "Lima Report" of the World Council of Churches, published as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva : World Council of Churches, 1982), as well as the useful evangelical response by David F. Wright, *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry (The "Lima Report"): An Evangelical Assessment* (Edinburgh : Rutherford House, 1984).

[6]See the statements "Evangelicals & Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," *First Things* 43 (May 1994): 15-22; "The Gift of Salvation," *First Things* 79 (January 1998): 20-23; "Your Word Is Truth," *First Things* 125 (August/September 2002): 38-42; "The Communion of Saints," *First Things* 131 (March 2003): 26-33; and "The Call to Holiness," *First Things* 151 (March 2005): 23–26. All of these are available online at www.firstthings.com.

[7]See Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), and also my review in *The Christian Chronicle* 61/8 (August 2004): 32 (online at www.austingrad.edu/peterson.html).

unnecessary impediments to fellowship with other Christians are exemplary, but I respectfully suggest that he has not yet heard what the Affirmation commends to Churches of Christ. I look forward to the prospect of further conversation with him and other reflective readers.

26th Annual Sermon Seminar

Austin Graduate School of Theology

Austin, Texas

May 21-24, 2007

Presenters and Topics

Bruce McLarty
Preaching from Philippians and Philemon

Curt Niccum
Preaching from Mark

Tom Olbricht
Preaching from the Confessions of Jeremiah

Glenn Pemberton
Preaching from the Call Narratives

Special Afternoon Sessions

Jim Roberts
Using Lamentations and Selected Psalms of Lament in Preaching and Ministry

Allan McNicol
From Text to Sermon: Matthew 16:13-23

Michael Weed
A Christian Affirmation 2005: Background and Foreground

Luncheon Speakers

John Harp
"Now On the Inside Looking Out"

Bruce McLarty
"Now on the Outside Looking In"

For information call 1.866.287.4723 or see our website at www.austingrad.edu/sermon seminar/topics.html.

Austin Graduate School of Theology
CHRISTIAN STUDIES
Number 21 2005/2006 ©

An Ecclesiology for the Believers' Church: *Can Restorationists Claim the Time?*

Allan J. McNicol

Miroslav Volf, in his well-received book on ecclesiology, tells an interesting story from his childhood which resonates for many. He talks about growing up in a Pentecostal minister's home in Tito's Yugoslavia.[1] Although at the time he resented it, what happened in that little believers' church community totally consumed the life of this family. Volf states it this way: "It would not be quite accurate to say that my parents worked for the church; they lived for that small community of believers entrusted to their care."[2]

Many of us can relate to this. I can think of dozens of people that I have come across in my journey, who gave themselves to small Christian communities. I think of my own congregation in Australia; a church of about fifty members. We were without a preacher for a while. A brother in another congregation over a hundred miles away for years drove over to our town for the weekend. There he did pastoral work, preached twice on Sunday, and drove back to his hometown that night. After a couple of hours sleep, he would then start his regular work baking cakes at four A.M. on Monday morning. In this life he will never know it, but his commitment made a deep

---

*An earlier version of this paper was presented orally at Pepperdine University, May 2005.

[1]Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), ix.

[2]Volf, *After Our Likeness*, ix.

impression upon me. It was a major factor in my decision to choose a Christian vocation.

I recite these stories because I wish to use them to provide the foundation for a theological point about ecclesiology. Historically, many theologians look askance at small churches. They question whether small churches have the right to call themselves a church. Let us return to Volf's world. Anyone who knows about what was once Yugoslavia will recall two religious traditions have been dominant in that part of the world for centuries: Orthodox and Roman Catholic. In fact, the boundaries between the old Eastern and Western Roman Empires pass through the Balkans. The Catholic and Orthodox traditions question the legitimacy of believers' congregations to be authentic representations of the Christian faith.

If one were to go out among the people nourished by the Balkan versions of Orthodoxy and Catholicism, it would not be a pretty sight. The hierarchies of those traditions may have put together elegant doctrines of the church, including appropriate nods to apostolic succession; yet we may ask, "What makes them better?" or to put it theologically, "on what grounds does magisterial ecclesial identity nullify the many congregations outside those traditions?" Believers' churches preserved the faith, often through the crucible of persecution. They continue to produce generations of devout persons who manifest godly virtues.[3]

Let us come closer to home and say a word about Churches of Christ. We wish to touch on three general areas. First, I wish to comment on Volf's theological case for the nature of the church. In the fast-changing post-

---

[3]Curtis Freeman, "Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Communion Ecclesiology in the Free Church," *PRSt* 31 (2004): 260–261; cf. Volf, *After Our Likeness,* 133–134.

denominational religious world in which we live this task is an essential beginning point for a responsible discussion about ecclesiology. Second, we wish to identify an emerging theological challenge that presently threatens our fellowship with the loss of its identity. Finally, we wish to say a word about how scholars and teachers can contribute to this ongoing discussion. My central point will be to affirm that, although our fellowship rests on good theological grounds, it is facing rapid fragmentation. Only a recovery of key confessional commitments can stop the current march toward disintegration.

The Basis for a Legitimate Fellowship

In his book, Volf makes a strong case for celebrating the value of "free church" fellowships. Although he dialogues with Catholic and Orthodox theologians, his proposal is clear. Following Jürgen Moltmann, Volf begins with the Trinity. He envisions a model of the Godhead characterized by mutual giving and receiving. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit not only are independent, but also are intrinsically dependent upon one another.[4] Volf quotes Moltmann:

> By the power of their eternal love, the divine persons exist so intimately-with, for, and in one another that they themselves constitute themselves in their unique, incomparable and complete union.[5]

According to Volf, this relationship within the eternal triune life of God has a direct corollary in his actions in history. The appropriate model, when applied to the life of God's people, is not that of Catholicism or of Orthodoxy, but the local congregation of a believers' church. Following 1 Corinthians 12–14, Volf views the mutual interactions and exchanges within the life of the congregation as the appropriate model for any ecclesiology

---

[4]Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 196.

[5]Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 210, quoting Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 174f.

built on the Trinity. Its culmination is the vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1–22:5 which describes God's people in his new world. Volf states, "The future of the church in God's new creation is the mutual personal indwelling of the triune God and of his glorified people."[6]

It is important to note that Volf argues that the network of interconnected relationships includes not only community life (thus undercutting a strong clergy/laity model), but also hearing the word, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. The faith of a community of believers cannot be nourished apart from body life within the church. When we are baptized it is not only the answer of an individual's good conscience toward God (1 Peter 3:21). Baptism also incorporates us into the web of relationships within the body (Acts 2:47). In Churches of Christ, we understand that at the Lord's table there are distinctive horizontal as well as vertical dimensions.

I believe Volf has provided a strong theological basis for the legitimacy of a fellowship that finds its ecclesiastical expression primarily in the life of the local congregation. On the grounds of this proposal, we can rest assured that we in Churches of Christ need not hang our heads in any ecumenical conversation on ecclesiology.

Indeed, when we consult the New Testament such a proposal is compatible with its vision of the church as the end-time community of the people of God. Spread across the Roman Empire, these small, struggling communities had fragile connections. They were bound together, not by a top-down structure, but the confession that "Jesus is Lord."[7] Ephesians 4:1–16 sets forth the ideal image for the body of Christ; but 1 Corinthians 12–14 reminds us that this rhetoric is useless unless it is instantiated in the local

---

[6]Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 128.

[7]See Oscar Cullmann, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (2nd ed., J. K. S. Reid, trans.; London: Lutterworth, 1949).

congregation.

Nevertheless, there exists one major hole in Volf's proposal, as some have noticed.[8] In many congregations we find a common pattern reflecting the dominance of the model of personal autonomy of American culture. Here spirituality is conceived in strictly individualistic terms: a personal relationship with Jesus, direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, and an understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper as meeting private needs. In this context, the local church appears to be merely another voluntary association, rather than a covenant community. Often, the church functions as no more than a filling station designed to provide resources for individuals to cope with the world.

Volf has a wonderful description of the local church as a legitimate fellowship of the people of God. But how do we get it down on the ground?

Theological Challenge to Churches of Christ

This observation is especially germane to Churches of Christ. Several years ago, writing about the increasing difficulties many have with the Restoration heritage, Richard Hughes gave us this insightful word:

> To many participants and observers, there seem to be only two places where restorationists might migrate should they drift from their own roots: mainline Protestantism or evangelicalism. For most primitivists the mainline is not a serious option. Thus the tendency has been for [the] restoration churches to act as perpetual feeders of the evangelical establishment as they lose touch with their originating visions.[9]

This observation is incontestable. In urban areas stretching from Atlanta to Los Angeles, large numbers of our people have moved into Bible Churches or nondenominational fellowships. We need to understand this journey into evangelicalism will not be the end—especially for those seeking

---

[8]Freeman, "Where Two or Three Are Gathered," 267.

[9]Richard T. Hughes, "Restorationists, Churches of Christ, and the Evangelical Mold," *Reforming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present*, Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, Jr., eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 207.

a substantive theological tradition. At the other end of the spectrum, evangelicals regularly lament the loss of many of their most thoughtful people to liturgical traditions. Graduates of Wheaton, Calvin, and Fuller have worn a well-beaten path to Canterbury, Rome, or to points further East. What is the problem? Is it not that a growing number of thoughtful people find evangelical theology a mile wide and an inch deep?[10] Mark Noll, evangelical historian, pointed this out ten years ago in his *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind.*[11] Recently, a review of Noll's book, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, made the observation that, after a study of evangelicalism's heyday, Noll could not find one theological mind (with the possible exception of Lincoln—no evangelical) worthy of emulation. This leads to the plaintive comment:

> The unspoken conclusion—not only of this book but also of Noll's oeuvre generally—seems to be that, for thinking people Evangelicalism is a lost cause. The Exodus of Evangelical graduate students from Bible churches to Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Anglicanism suggests that others have come to a similar conclusion.[12]

This is not because evangelicals lack intellectual resources. Among evangelicals these exist in abundance. Analysis suggests the problem lies with evangelical ecclesiology. When the high points of spiritual life are viewed in terms of a closer walk with Jesus and a more intense prayer life,

---

[10] For additional points, see my two review essays, "Churches of Christ Meet the Evangelicals," *Christian Studies* 19 (2003): 71–78; and "A Confessional Community: The Seedbed of Spiritual Formation," *Christian Studies* 20 (2004): 66–71; see also the many works of David F. Wells on this issue, including his recent *Above all Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

[11] Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

[12] Preston Jones, "Whence the Evangelical Mind?" *Touchstone* 16 (May, 2003): 46.

personal freedom wins over life in community. In my judgment it is not so much that thoughtful evangelicals gravitate to liturgical communities for "the smells and bells." Rather it is that they long to anchor their lives in a covenant community that takes seriously maintaining connections with Christ through the disciplines of word, liturgy, and sacrament. If I am anywhere near correct with this conclusion, this gives us in Churches of Christ an opening to go back and dust off the resources of our own tradition, which are considerable in this area. We are in an excellent position to offer a way out of the evangelical dead end into which so many gravitate.

Christian Scholars and the Current Ferment in Ecclesiology

Recently at a meeting of the evangelical faculty at the University of Texas, I sat through a talk by a nationally known scholar starting his journey from evangelicalism to Catholicism. During the presentation this scholar talked about his persistent search for a covenantal community that believed the historical doctrines of the faith and sought to practice them seriously. He listed a number of area churches that he visited before settling upon Catholicism. I almost raised my hand to ask, "Have you tried Churches of Christ?" Aside from issues of propriety, I also had a mental reservation. If he went to a Church of Christ, what would he find?

I have suggested that our current fascination with evangelicalism is spiritually and theologically a dead end. The desire of many ministers to embrace the practices of evangelicalism, and increasingly its theology, is producing confusion and fragmentation among our people. I believe our teachers may play a constructive role in several ways.

First, I would suggest that we can work in our local communities to build at least one congregation where church is not done in the default setting. In studying the New Testament, we realize that congregations were not perfect in the first century. Nor should we expect perfection today. But if our

Restoration vision is to maintain plausibility within our constituency it must operate with integrity somewhere. Consequently, we must work to build congregations that live by this vision. This should be our starting point.

Second, wherever there is opportunity, we ought to direct our teaching and research into areas that are valuable for the church. Administrators in Christian colleges and seminaries can help by encouraging church-related scholarship. Also, It would be of considerable value to the church if one or several of our colleges engaged in a vigorous conversation with ecumenical Christianity from the perspective of the Restoration Movement.

Third, let me urge that we think about how we may engage anti-intellectualism in society and churches today. Note how many have accepted the *The Da Vinci Code* as historically accurate! Teachers and scholars are needed to provide resources for recovering and maintaining our identity.

Summary

By example and argument, Miroslav Volf has shown that the vision of a believers' church is biblically and theologically compatible with traditional Restoration emphases. Unfortunately, in recent years these perspectives have suffered under the cultural influences of autonomy and individualism. Now that others are re-discovering these truths, it would be tragic if we ourselves let them slip. Above all, teachers and scholars have resources to remind our churches of the value of our Restoration heritage and theology. We also have obligations to our churches. The hour is late.

Obiter Dicta

This issue of *Christian Studies* excerpts from David Wells's *No Place for Truth*. Wells's comments remind one of earlier observers of America's democratic culture. French jurist Alexis de Tocqueville, visiting the US in 1835, noticed that the individual freedoms offered by democracy were countered by "the tyranny of the majority." A century later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed American ministerial students to be more interested in fairness than truth and that divisions among American churches owed more to individual tastes than concern for doctrine.

In similar fashion, David Wells provides timely reminders of the challenges a democratic ethos poses for churches and particularly for church leaders.

Editor, *Christian Studies*

Servant Leaders

In the evangelical world, there are many organizers and many managers but only a very few leaders. . . .

In a democracy, every person's vote has the same weight, regardless of how well or badly informed it is. And in a democratized faith . . . every person's intuitions are likewise granted equal value . . . it is assumed that they are all equally valid, equally true, and equally useful. At the very least, it has become awkward to suggest that the intuitions someone has found to be valid, true, and useful might be nothing of the kind. . . .

[A]s politicians hold office only by consent of the sovereign electorate, so Church leaders should fulfill their responsibilities within the limits of popularly held ideas. When the religious audience is thus sovereign, its leadership is appropriately refined. The best pollster now makes the best

leader, for all ideas must find their sanction, even their legitimacy, in the audience, and who knows the audience better than a pollster?

[T]his is not a flattering way of describing those leaders who have succumbed to popular evangelical sentiment. It is more flattering to talk instead of "servant leadership." That has the ring of piety about it. But it is a false piety, for it plays on an understanding of servanthood that is antithetical to the biblical understanding. Contemporary servant leaders are . . . people whose convictions shift with the opinion to which they assiduously attune themselves, people who bow to the wishes of "the body" from whom their direction and standing derive. They lead by holding aloft moist fingers to sense the changes in the wind. In all this they show themselves to be different indeed from the One who embodied what servanthood was intended to be and who never once tailored his teaching to what he judged the popular reception of it would be—unless he was an exceedingly poor judge of what the crowds and religious leaders had in mind. . . . And to suppose that he derived the legitimacy to teach from the implied permission of those who heard him . . . is a supposition that also leads to the misunderstanding of Christian faith and why God provides the teachers that it and the Church needs.

The fundamental requirement of the Christian leader is not a knowledge of where the stream of popular opinion is flowing but a knowledge of where the stream of God's truth lies. There can be no leadership without a vision of both what the Church has become and what, under God, it should be. Only a genuine leader has such a vision. Those . . . who are the servants merely of popular opinion, seldom amount to more than blind leaders of the blind that Jesus castigated. How so? . . . In the modem context at least, popular opinion frequently carries within itself the corruptions of popular culture. And simply because it is so broadly endorsed, popular opinion conveys a sort of legitimacy to this corruption. The preference of our video culture for intuition over reason and feeling over truth have been transferred to the realm of faith. Faith that appeals to reason—even reason exercised through biblical exposition—is doomed to failure; faith that appeals to feelings . . . seems for

that reason to be assured of success. So it is that democratized faith, faith driven by the urge to conform, settles into its niche in the world. And that is precisely what, in biblical terms, it has settled into *the world.* For worldliness is the system of values which in any culture has the fallen sinner at its center, which takes no account of God or his Word, and which therefore views sin as normal and righteousness as abnormal.

[G]enuine leadership in the Church . . . is not, therefore, finding out what everyone wants and already knows and articulating it; genuine leadership is a matter of teaching and explaining what has not been so well grasped, where the demands of God's truth and the habits of the culture pull in opposite directions. . . .

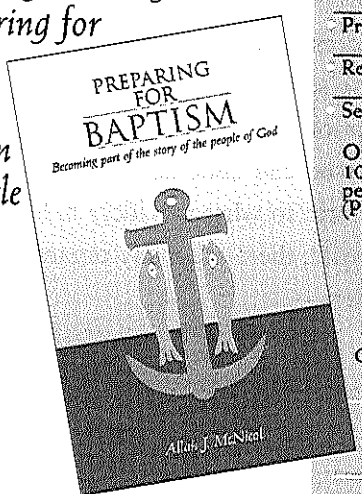
Genuine leaders often have to be different. They often have to articulate the truth of God's Word among those who do not fully understand its demands and implications. . . . The evangelical world does not have an overabundance of those who can undertake such a responsibility and withstand the pressures to conform to what is widely held, no matter how incorrectly. In the evangelical world, there are many organizers and many managers but only a very few leaders.

David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 214–217.

"An engaging style... in simple language.

The time is past that we could assume that our children would learn the basics of the Christian faith simply by osmosis. We must be more intentional about grounding them in the faith. Preparing for Baptism will make this task easier. Written in an engaging style and in simple language. I recommend it highly."

Ron Highfield
Pepperdine University



AUSTIN
GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF
THEOLOGY

Written by
Dr. Allan J. McNicol,
Professor of New Testament,
Austin Graduate School of Theology.

- Adult Bible Classes
- Youth Ministry
- Baptismal Gifts
- Family Bible Study
- New Member's Classes
- Prison Ministry
- Recent Converts
- Seekers

Order 1 copy for $6.50,
10 copies for $5.50
per copy.
(Postage not included)

Also available from
Christian Studies Press

Things That Matter
edited by,
M. Weed & J. Peterson

For I am Holy
by Pat Harrell

Order from:
Christian Studies Press
1909 University Avenue
Austin, Texas 78705
512-476-2772
866-AUS-GRAD
www.austingrad.edu

Contributors

Everett Ferguson is Professor Emeritus of Church History at Abilene Christian University

Leroy Garrett is retired editor of *The Restoration Review*

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Jeffrey Peterson is Jack and Ruth Wright Associate Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

J. J. M. Roberts is William Henry Green Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary and Adjunct Professor of Old Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Michael R. Weed is Billy Gunn Hocott Professor of Theology and Ethics at Austin Graduate School of Theology