

The Stromata



Volume 43 Issue 1 Winter 2002

A Student publication of
Calvin Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, MI

The Stromata is published semi-annually and is funded by Student Senate and CTS. Submissions are by the announced date. Anyone may submit an article, but members of the CTS community are given first priority. Submission does not guarantee publication. Editors reserve the right to edit submissions for content and propriety. Anonymous submissions will not be published. There is no remuneration for submissions.

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By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations, by understanding He set the heavens in place.

Proverbs 3:19

Editing and Layout—Joshua S. Benton!



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Three Secrets of a Deep Universe

By Mark Roeda

A sermon on 2 Kings 6:8-22

In late spring, the campus ministry organization I used to work for sends its first year staff on ten-day wilderness trip. The year I went we canoed down rivers and rapids running through the mountains of West Virginia. Since it was “white water canoeing” we didn’t immediately jump in the boats and head downstream. We had to learn voice commands and various strokes for navigating rapids and avoiding rocks. By the time, they’d finished drilling us I felt pretty confident.

The first mile or so of canoeing went well for my partner John and I. Then we came upon some fast moving water which pulled us quickly around a bend in the river. The river straightened and John yelled, “Watch for that big one in the middle!” It was a case of pointing out the obvious. “The big one in the middle” loomed as large as the Prudential rock.

Up until that point, I had had a pretty good handle on the strokes we went over in orientation. I should also note that today, six years later, I could recall for you the various strokes and techniques. But in that critical moment, as the rapids sucked us toward what appeared certain doom, my brain just blew a fuse. I’m surprised I even stuck the right end of the paddle into the water.

John chopped at the water like a piston in a V-8 engine and shouted, “Portside! Portside! Portside!” But at that point, “portside” did not even register in my brain as a word with any meaning. I not only paddled backwards but on the wrong side of the boat. As a result, we began to head downriver—sideways.

Our canoe was still pointing to the shore when we careened into the rock. The current pinned us against it and held us there. Though John and I paddled like a couple of

spastic five-year olds, the canoe did not budge. Water cascaded over the side and soaked us. It was hopeless. Climbing out of the canoe, we sat on the rock and shivered until rescued.

My little breakdown there illustrates what occurs when one panics. The latest brain research shows that when you panic your brain gets tunnel vision. Reason and memory get tossed aside as the mind fixates on immediate survival. Panic is an ironic and unfortunate response however. For without reason and memory we are, in fact, likely to act in ways which undermine our survival.

All of us, to varying degrees, live much of our lives in a state of panic. It is not so much that we go about daily life without memory or reason, but we remain utterly fixated on our survival. The reality of God and the possibility of his activity, we resort to selfish and cynical actions. Or we simply despair. It is no wonder we often feel as though we are riding life’s rapids turned sideways. No wonder we get pinned against so many rocks.

Today’s passage offers us an opportunity to move beyond panic. It presents us with a deep universe. This story from 2 Kings presents us with a multi-layered reality in which God is in the mix and, therefore, things are not as they appear. Before we are through, it will let us in on three secrets of a deep universe.

The story begins in with the king of Syria—or Aram as its referred to in your Bible. This frustrated monarch has it in for God’s people. Look with me at verses eight through ten:

“Now the king of Syria is at war with Israel. After conferring with his officers, he says, ‘I will set up my camp in such and such a place.’”

The man of God sends word to the king of Israel: 'Beware of passing that place, because the Syrians are going down there.' So the king of Israel checks on the place indicated by the man of God. Time and again Elisha warns the king, so that he was on his guard in such a place."

I had said at the outset that this story would present a deep universe, a multi-layered reality. We begin to see this here already. First of all, there is Elisha, a guy whom the story refers to twice as "the man of God." In this story he will be a tour guide of sorts into the deep universe, the reality in which God is in the mix. Elisha keeps his ear attuned to the voice of God and keeps his eyes focused on God's activity. That's why he's called "the man of God." Even the name his mom and dad gave him attests to a deeper reality. His very name is a reminder not to panic. Elisha means "God saves."

Certainly, he keeps the king of Israel from panicking. He is one lucky king to have Elisha on his side. Think about. Some enemy king hatches plan after plan to ambush you, to catch you off guard and slaughter your troops, and every time Elisha tips you off. He is one good man to have around.

Of course, not everyone is happy with the situation. Beginning in verse eleven, we hear from the king of Syria. For him, this war has become a fiasco. One scheme after another has gone up in smoke. Syria's Operation: Desert Storm amounted to a Desert Drizzle. Not only did their D-day Invasion flop, so did A-day through C-day. To the king's officers, he's looking less and less like a George S. Patton, more and more like a Homer J. Simpson. In verse eleven, it appears he has just received news of another ambush come up empty.

"This enrages the king"—causing him to exclaim "Doh!"—that's part of the Hebrew your Bibles left untranslated. "He summons his officers and demands of them, 'Will you not tell me which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?'"

For the king, this whole situation

smacks of a conspiracy. He suspects that there's a mole in his ranks, one of his own must be slipping Israel classified information. Now, at his wit's end, he assembles his officers and demands the Benedict Arnold fess up.

"None of us, my lord the king,," says one of his officers, "but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom."

Do you sense the sarcasm here? Apparently, his commanders have lost some respect for their king. This officer does not simply name Elisha as the culprit. He responds in such a way as to fuel his ruler's paranoia. "This Elisha, king, he's wiretapped the phones; he's bugged every room in the palace—even your own bedroom."

Such news calls for immediate action. "Go, find out where he is," the king orders, "so I can send men and capture him." The report comes back: "He is in Dothan." Then he sends horses and chariots and a strong force there. They go by night and surround the city."

"Horses and chariots and a strong force." The king, in other words, declares full-scale war on the pesky holy man in Dothan. So: "When the servant of the man of God gets up and goes out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. 'Oh, my lord, what shall we do?' the servant asked."

Imagine yourself in the position of this servant stepping into the cool morning air. Picture him stopping midway into his morning stretch and yawn. Through eyes still puffy with sleep, he notices strange movement on the horizon. He rubs his eyes and looks again. Soldiers. And not his nation's own. Walking around the house, he discovers the line of troops completely surrounds the city. The servant scrambles back into the house to wake his master. The servant panics. Elisha, however, is unfazed by the news. Walking to the front door, he scans the horizon. "Do not be afraid," the prophet answers, "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

This fails to free the servant from his

panic. At best, his eyes change from communicating terror to bafflement. At this point, the parameter of his reality extends no farther than the circle of enemy troops. He inhabits a shallow universe.

Verse seventeen, “‘O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.’ Then the Lord opens the servant’s eyes, and he looks and sees the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”

As the servant’s eyes focus beyond the Syrians, he discovers these hills are aflame with the heavenly forces. Here is the first great secret of the deep universe: prayer counters the effects of panic. Panic flattens the universe, reducing it to the desperate present. Prayer deepens it, restores volume. In short, Elisha’s prayer enables his servant to see the truth which lies beyond the circumstances of the moment. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”

By sending an entire army, the king of Syria had appeared to be going to rather extreme measures. Elisha is but one man. A couple of thugs could knock him off, no sweat. After all, Elisha has amassed no troops, unless you count his one servant, a man who possesses all the steely fortitude of a Woody Allen. On a surface level, it’s overkill; the king grossly overestimates Syria’s public enemy number one. On the surface.

On the other hand, Elisha, as a man of God, invites us to see things beyond the surface. Our eyes must see deeper, discover God in the mix. Seeing this, we realize that the Syrian king has grossly *underestimated* his opponent. If God has made his claim on Elisha, no amount of troops will ever offer even the slightest hope of victory. Here, our tour guide draws the servant’s attention as well as our own to a second great truth: God’s protection and nothing else can have final say over the lives of his own. They are not up for grabs. God’s protection has final say over their fate.

Apparently the Syrians fail to realize they are outgunned. “As the enemy comes down toward him, Elisha prays to the LORD,

‘Strike these people with blindness.’ So he strikes them with blindness, as Elisha had asked.”

Elisha’s first prayer gives sight to his servant. His second blinds his attackers. Imagine this circle of troops charging, the deafening sound of their battle cry, the cloud of dust they raise. Then suddenly blindness strikes. It is silent, but for the anxious “Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!” of the sightless charioteers. Their circle formation breaks down as the men wander aimlessly, feeling the air with their arms.

“Elisha tells them, ‘This is not the road and this not the city. Follow me, and I will lead you to the man you are looking for.’ And he leads them to Samaria.”

Certainly, there is something comical about this. It is a scene which would almost seem more appropriate for an Abbot and Castillo picture than 2 Kings. Even so, this scene is not all high jinks and shenanigans. We mustn’t picture Elisha nudging his servant and giving him a wink. Elisha, after all, leads them to Samaria, to the capital city of their enemy.

“After they enter the city, Elisha says, ‘LORD, open the eyes of these men so they can see.’ Then the LORD opens their eyes and they look, and there they are, inside Samaria.”

“There they are,” says the writer of 2 Kings, “inside Samaria.” There they were trapped and surrounded by their enemy. Palestinian guerrillas surrounded by Israeli troops. Serbs who discover themselves fenced inside an Albanian compound. Certainly, they must have been feeling something close to panic.

This fact makes the king giddy with bloodlust “When he sees them, he asks Elisha, “Shall I kill them, my father? Shall I kill them?”

In this story, Elisha’s king bears a striking resemblance to Elisha’s servant in this story. Both speak deferentially to him. The king calls him “my father;” the servant, “my lord.” Both look to him for how to respond to the presence of the Syrians. Of course, with the servant, the Syrians appeared to be in

charge. With the king, Israel is. As you recall, the servant responds with panic. The king's response illustrates what amounts to the flip-side of panic: euphoria. As with panic, it causes one to fixate on survival and present circumstances. As a result, the king does not recognize the activity of God before him; instead, he sees nothing but an opportunity to unburden himself of a nuisance. He inhabits a shallow universe. When euphoric, we don't see the universe as out of control—rather we see it as completely under our control. One suspects he has his sword already drawn as he asks Elisha his question. "Shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?"

'Do not kill them,' he answers, 'Would you kill men you have captured with your own sword or bow?'"

If it's not a killing spree that Elisha's after, why'd he bring them here? Did he just want to see them quake in their boots? No, if that's what he wanted he could have prayed that their eyes be opened back in Dothan, right? Weren't they just as surrounded back there? My guess is that realizing that the hills were filled with an army of supernatural beings on fiery chariots might induce serious fits of panic.

Understanding Elisha requires remembering who he is—"a man of God," he's our tour guide to the deep universe. Now in order to find our home in the deep universe we must first recognize the lie of a shallow one. The fact that the Syrians thought they could take care of their problems by knocking off the man of God reveals just how shallow their universe is. They have no idea who they're dealing with. Elisha's job is show them the truth. Here's how he does it:

"Set food and water before them," Elisha tells Israel's king, "'so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master.' So he prepares a great feast for them, and after they finish eating and drinking, he sends them away, and they return to their master. So the bands from Syria stop raiding Israel's territory."

By bringing them to Samaria, Elisha has essentially ripped the roof of the Syrian's shallow universe. Yet rather than slaying them, he calls for a feast, for an act of kindness, not vengeance. Why? Because if you're going to experience the deep universe you have to realize something about the God who rules it. You have to know the third secret: The God of the deep universe is full of mercy. Profound mercy. It's not a mercy that gives you a crust of bread, a swig of lukewarm water and sends you packing. It's the kind of mercy that invites enemies to a feast. The hoard who just that morning had sought Elisha's death now sits down at table with him to enjoy a fine meal.

This story ends by telling us that the raids ceased after this. And we may wonder whether Syria abandoned its pagan religions and followed Israel's God. But such speculation can lead us astray. Whoever recorded this story all those years ago did not have Syrian readers in mind. This is a story for Israel. It is a story that exposes them to what living in the deep universe is all about. God's protection has final say over their fate—the second great secret. This protection does not insulate them from other nations. Nor does it give them permission oppress other nations. Rather, it means that when God presents them with those whose flat universes have come undone, they will act as people at home in the deep universe. They will be expressions of God's mercy. They will be the people that God promised to Abraham back in Genesis. A people blessed to be a blessing.

As Christians the story does not conclude here. For we must read this story in light of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God himself takes human flesh. He is the ultimate tour guide to the deep universe. "Follow me," says this tour guide. In the story of Jesus, the Gospel, we will find the most profound expressions of the great secrets. There will be a cross, which will expose our vulnerability, our helplessness. But don't panic. Don't flatten the universe to the events of Good Friday. Because, following crucifixion is resurrection. In the resurrected

body of Jesus, we see that no enemy controls the fate of God's own—even the most powerful enemies: sin and death. Finally, in Jesus, we discover that wonders of the deep universe are not just for the tour guide. They are ours as well.

How do we know this? Jesus, our tour guide to the deep universe, invites us to a meal. As guests at the table of the Lord's Supper, we are able to taste the profound mercy of God.

Therefore, in this week, let us all try to remember that we reside within a deep universe. Pray that God keep you from squeezing yourself into a shallow one, save you from the kind of panic that causes us to act selfishly or without hope. May we remember who is for us, so that we express love and mercy even to those against us.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.



The Role of Deacons

By Harold Winter

In most CRC congregations there is an annual worship service in the church when those who have been elected to office are ordained or installed to the offices of the church. In my experience these are occasions where much attention is given to the responsibilities of the church, where the forms explaining the offices are read and where a collection of unwilling and eager, tentative and seasoned people are given the responsibility of leadership within the church. This is the one occasion each year when the congregation's attention is focussed on what the elders and deacons are responsible for doing within the life of the church. As part of the installation, the duties of office bearers are explained and the office bearers are given a formal charge to their office. In the case of deacons, their responsibilities are given with these instructions:

I charge you, deacons, to inspire faithful stewardship in this congregation. Remind us that "from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" (Luke 12:48b). Teach us to be merciful. Prompt us to seize new opportunities to worship God with offerings of wealth, time, and ability. Realize that benevolence is a quality of our life in Christ and not merely a matter of financial assistance. Therefore, minister to rich and poor alike, both within and outside the church. Weigh the needs of causes and use the church's resources discerningly. Be compassionate to the needy. Encourage them with words that create hope in their hearts and with deeds that bring joy into their lives. Be prophetic critics

of the waste, injustice, and selfishness in our society, and be sensitive counselors to the victims of such evils. Let your lives be above reproach; live as examples of Christ Jesus; look to the interests of others.¹

This charge defines the role and responsibilities entrusted to the deacons within the CRC, and therefore ought to shape the work of the diaconate. However, to explore every element of this charge would take a great deal more time, expertise, and space than I am able to expend in writing a term paper. Therefore, I will focus on the attitudes which deacons are responsible for fostering within each congregation: inspiring faithful stewardship and teaching congregations to be merciful.

Deacons are specifically charged with inspiring stewardship and teaching their congregation to be merciful. While this task is entrusted to the deacons, they do not act in a vacuum. All the members of the church have a responsibility to reflect these attributes as part of their response to God, and to partner with their fellow believers to hold each other accountable to do likewise.² So also elders, particularly pastors have the responsibility of exhorting congregations to put these biblical principles into practice. Yet, the deacons are given the significant responsibility and freedom in fulfilling their charge, particularly in giving wise direction to the way this stewardship and mercy are expressed in the local congregation, by making contacts to serve those in need, and by planning the distribution of gifts and volunteer service. They are given opportunity to shape their congregation's response to needs within and outside the membership, in

the local community and as part of larger organizations, including the classis or denomination.

What does it mean that the diaconate is responsibility for inspiring faithful stewardship? Stewardship can be defined as an attitude of grateful and responsible use of resources. In his book Becoming a Firstfruits Congregation: a Stewardship Guide for Leaders, Robert Heerspink writes, “Stewardship is popularly defined as a concern for time, talents, treasure, and trees.”³ Thus, stewardship encompasses a broad range of issues. In my experience, the church’s message about stewardship has predominantly focussed on the need to tithe financially, bringing the full tithe for the work of the church. Deacons should be encouraged to broaden the understanding of stewardship within the church by exploring how they can “be prophetic critics of the waste, injustice, and selfishness in our society, and be sensitive counsellors to the victims of such evils.”⁴ By developing a broad view of stewardship within the church, deacons can help their congregations in understanding what it means to imitate God in caring for creation, particularly, as God’s image bearers in creation.

This vision of stewardship on a broad scale and resulting excitement about the need to be stalwartly with a wide variety of resources cannot rest solely on the diaconate’s agenda. It needs to spread throughout the congregation. Deacons can present their broad vision of stewardship within a congregation by making presentations at congregational meetings or workshops, by writing articles for a church newsletter, and by visiting members of the congregation. Thus, through presentations and discussion, deacons can raise the issue of stewardship so that it is discussed and practised throughout the congregation.

While stewardship is very broad, it is necessary to address the way deacons encourage financial stewardship, specifically tithing, in order to finance the proclamation, ministry,

and benevolence of the church. Like all questions of stewardship, it is helpful to put the discussion of church collections and believers’ financial obligations to the church into the context of God’s sovereignty and generosity. If God owns everything on the grounds that he is the creator, then our possessions are no longer our own, but things which God has entrusted to us. Therefore, as stewards using and enjoying God’s property, we have an obligation to care for it and to use it with care, primarily for the glory of God and secondarily to benefit our neighbours and ourselves. Thus, all who earn a living must respond to the reasoning given in the instructions of Ephesians 4:28, “Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, *so as to have something to share with the needy.*” Sharing with those in need is understood as a responsibility of those who are entrusted with possessions; we see this taught consistently throughout the Bible.

In the Old Testament, giving usually takes the form of tithing. A gift of a tithe is seen in the example of Abram, who gave ten percent of everything to Melchizedek the priest-king of Salem (Gen. 14: 20b). Tithing arises again in the instructions of the Torah (Lev. 27:32; Num. 18:8-32; Deut. 14:22-29; 26:1-15), and in examples from the books of history and the books of the prophets where God’s people are seen giving a tenth of one’s income to support the Levites and priests in their service of the LORD, to raise the capital to build the tabernacle and the temple, and to help the widows, the fatherless, and foreigners (II Chron. 31: 2-21; Neh.13:12,13; Mal. 3:6-12). Thus, in the Jewish tripartite view of the Old Testament, there was unanimity from the Torah, Historical books, and the Prophets, regarding the necessity of tithing. From these Old Testament examples, Christians likewise face the challenge to give a tenth of everything with which they have been entrusted.

The New Testament provides several models of generous help for fellow believers

who were in need. These examples include the church in Antioch when they sent money to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Saul, (Acts 11:29, 30), and Paul's encouragement to the Corinthian church, (I Cor. 16:1-4, II Cor. 8:1-15), and Paul's instructions to the Ephesian church (Eph. 4:28). In Paul's instructions, there is freedom in deciding how much to give. The giver is allowed to decide what they will give but is encouraged to, "set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income" (I Cor. 16:2 ^{NIV5}). Legalism regarding tithing is strongly discouraged in the church (cf. Jesus' teaching regarding Pharisaical tithing in Mt. 23:23, 24), yet it is clear that Christians still have an obligation to support the ministry of word and deed in the church.

By raising these biblical concepts in meetings, discussions, and personal visits with both affluent and impoverished people of the congregation, the deacons can respond to their responsibility to inspire faithful stewardship, by teaching stewardship and tithing "to rich and poor alike," as the church has charged them. Teaching these biblical concepts is a responsibility that deacons share with pastors and elders as together the office bearers demonstrate, teach, and preach the full counsel of God. However, by virtue of their responsibilities and charge, deacons are given a leading role in this aspect of the congregation's life.

In my experience within several Christian Reformed Churches, many members are quite generous in their financial giving, or in those cases where they are not, they feel guilty or defensive for failing to tithe. Thus, this part of the deacons' message is relatively well known. Yet, deacons' encouragement for members of the congregation does not and cannot stop with the need to give financially. It is important to note that the charge to the deacons does not stop at this point. Rather, it goes on to charge the deacons to "teach us to be merciful." Mercy is more difficult to instill in people than financial tithing, because the latter is susceptible to becoming legalistic, while the

former must engage each member's compassion and heart.

I submit that mercy is more than just pity. Pity merely sees people in difficult circumstances, sighs, and feels bad that an individual or group of people can have such a hard lot in life. Mercy is pity mixed with hopefulness and commitment. Mercy feels pity's sadness about the circumstances but believes that there is a way to relieve the situation, and is determined to participate. How can deacons foster a sense of mercy within a congregation?

First and foremost, deacons can remind believers of their identity. Christians are defined as people who have experienced God's mercy. This identity is worded clearly in Ephesians 2:4 and 5, "because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved." As Jesus' parable about the unforgiving servant demonstrates (Matt. 18: 23-34), we who have experienced mercy and forgiveness are expected to extend the same to those around us. As people loved by God, Christians are instructed to respond with love to God and to our neighbour. As people committed to imitating God, we are committed to reflecting God's mercy to our neighbours. In fact, as the body of Christ, the church is often the means by which God chooses to extend relief to those in need.

Second, deacons can present needs before the congregation to stimulate them to compassion. Many churchgoing people are unaware of people in situations of hardship or suffering. Van Groningen betrays some frustration when he critiques unmerciful church memberships:

Unfortunately, Christians often live in isolation from poor people. Too many Christians have become consumers of God's gifts of discretionary time, talents, and resources. They have turned his gifts into personal assets and cut themselves off from opportunities to be

his blessing to others.⁶

By drawing attention to the needs within the congregation and community, the diaconate shatters this segregation between content, complacent Christians and the needy around them. Awareness of need is not sufficient. When they demonstrate the needs, deacons will do well to provide an avenue for their congregation to respond to the needs or to participate in creating a response, otherwise the reaction will be restricted to stunted pity, rather than blossoming into mercy. Deacons ought to solicit a response, being suggestive, but not always prescriptive, as they encourage the congregation to interact with those who have needs.

Finally, deacons need to make use of the congregation's resource of time, expertise, and compassion in order that the church body can extend Christian mercy to those in need. Once the feelings of compassion have been aroused, there needs to be avenues for them to express their mercy. As a student with little experience it is difficult for me to demonstrate the broad range of avenues which are available to assist those in need. Nor is it appropriate to propose blanket solutions. Each community is different, each congregation has unique gifts, therefore no response to the needs of the congregation or community will be identical. Each diaconate faces the challenge of determining what is appropriate in their unique situation, drawing on the expertise of those who have participated in successful ministry elsewhere and encouraging those with vision and determination from within their own ranks and congregation.

When developing the avenues with which deacons will lead their congregations into extending mercy to needy people inside and outside their congregation, it is important that the ministry is tailored for the needs of the community. Authors Don Posterski and Gary Nelson differentiate between "ministry models" and "prototypes" when they examined the ministry of 14 flourishing churches in Canada, which they designate "Future Faith Churches."

They write, "Prototype churches tend to copy slavishly what has happened elsewhere. Ministry models, by contrast, allow a church to develop its own personality and style."⁷ They also compiled a list of community ministries within their 14 Future Faith Churches:

- Youth drop in centres,
- Food banks,
- Programs for senior citizens,
- Prison ministries,
- Camp programs,
- Parenting skills classes,
- Twelve step programs,
- Street shelters,
- Soup kitchens,
- Cooking classes,
- Habitat for humanity projects,
- Service mission trips,
- Refugee sponsorships,
- Telecare – a congregational check-up program,
- Facilities in support of AA meetings,
- Single parent support programs,
- Crisis pregnancy centres,
- Programs for youth,
- Counseling centres,
- English as a second language,
- Tutoring,
- Housing units for low income families,
- AIDS hospice,
- 30 hour famine,
- NeighbourLink,
- Low interest community development loans,
- Personal emergency loans,
- Small business assistance.⁸

What is most remarkable about the list, is the degree of overlap between Posterski and Nelson's list and the programs mentioned in Van Groningen's handbook.⁹ However, Posterski and Nelson also distinguish between churches which are program-centred rather than people-centered. They note that leaders in their selected churches, "seek the passions that people feel for particular issues and liberate them toward and opportunity to serve. Programs are not absent but they are filled with

people energized about what they are doing.” Thus, deacons are encouraged to examine and appropriate what is effective within another context and adapt the ideas to their local community. But deacons should also examine the ministries in their own congregations to discern if the dangers Posterski and Nelson identify are present: either slavish imitation of another church’s successful ministry or programs that are not led by people passionate about the needs they are striving to meet, yet are perpetuated for their own sake or because the church has always done things that way. Thus, diaconates and congregations are encouraged to develop ministries that utilize the resources they have available and meet the needs that are present in their community.

Neither programs, nor financial assistance are the greatest assets a local congregation has to offer the needy among its membership and community. In his class presentation,¹⁰ and in his book, Van Groningen described personal contact as the single biggest resource that the church possesses. When discussing cooperation with existing community programs, Van Groningen notes,

Church members have one commodity that these institutions cannot offer and most professionals are unwilling to give. The core ingredient missing in today’s recovery schemes, the primary agent for sustainable change, is a long-term loving relationship characterized by honesty and care.¹¹

In order to make judicious use of a congregation’s resources of time and caring relationships, Van Groningen suggests that the diaconate pair those whom they are helping with a member of the congregation who is willing to commit to walking alongside them. Van Groningen says that deacons may

- Expect the volunteers to pray daily for their new friend;
- Spend a minimum of one hour per week with their new friend until God closes the door on the relationship – the new

friend may be a friend for life;

- Use their personal resources as God directs them to help their new friend – Aid is only helpful when it is directed toward a goal;
- Share their faith, philosophy of life, and values at appropriate times with their friend¹²

Encouraging gifted members to make such a commitment to assist those in need, deacons can enable believers representing Christ to connect with individuals or families from the congregation or community, promoting assistance and discipleship, while enfolding people into the church of Christ.

A diaconate has opportunity to expand its ministry according to the resources and expertise of its congregation and the needs of the community. It must be remembered that the goal is not so much to establish programs, but to develop relevant and effective means for ministry within the congregation and community. The goal is to be a blessing to others in order to shine brightly as a beacon of hope grounded in the mercy of God and the hope that Christ brings.

From the charge they receive as they begin their duties, deacons are entrusted with the tremendous, far-ranging task of leading their congregations into stewardship and teaching their congregations to be merciful. Within a culture that is characterized by individualism and “the American Dream” deacons must lead their congregations in being radically counter-cultural, yet are challenged to demonstrate these characteristics in a manner which is engaging and inviting rather than confrontational. In achieving these goals, deacons are encouraged to work in cooperation with the elders and pastor(s) of their congregation, whose responsibilities are closely related to those of the deacons. Alongside the teaching about stewardship and mercy, diaconates and congregations ought to develop flexible programs and open opportunities to exercise these ideals.

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End Notes

¹"Ordination of Elders and Deacons," Psalter Hymnal, (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987). p. 1005.

²"Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church in North America," Church Order and Rules for Synodical Procedure, (Grand Rapids: Office of the General Secretary of the CRCNA, 2001). Art. 79a. p. 21.

³Robert C. Heerspink, Becoming a Firstfruits Congregation: a Stewardship Guide for Church Leaders, (Orland Park, IL: Firstfruits, A Ministry of the Barnabas Foundation, 1996). p. 8.

⁴"Ordination of Elders and Deacons," p. 1005.

⁵The NIV provides a good translation of the word εὐδοῦται in this verse. It is preferable to the NRSV, which reads, "put aside and save *whatever extra you earn*."

⁶Van Groningen, Changing Times, p. 27.

⁷Don Posterski and Gary Nelson, Future Faith Churches: Reconnecting with the Power of the Gospel for the 21st Century, (Winfield, B.C.: Wood Lake Books Inc., 1997). p. 123.

⁸Posterski and Nelson, pp. 143, 144.

⁹Jay Van Groningen, Changing Times, New Approaches: A Handbook for Deacons, (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1996), pp. 29-32, 70.

¹⁰Jay Van Groningen, "Guest Lecture," Church Polity, September 25, 2001.

¹¹Van Groningen, Changing Times, p. 65.

¹²Van Groningen, Changing Times, p. 28.

Reflections From Behind the Chalice

by Dave Gifford

A flood of thoughts and feelings went through my mind on Sunday morning as I served the Lord's Supper as an elder for the first time at Ridgewood Christian Reformed Church. I decided to put them on paper in the hope that they might benefit some of you the way they have benefited me.

I think Communion is one of the most neglected evidences for the truth of the Christian faith. How could anyone but an all-knowing Creator devise such a perfect summary of Christian teaching using only bread and grape juice? It symbolizes so much: a bleeding body on a cruel cross; a merciful free banquet for weary souls; a toast and a feast to celebrate the victory of Good Friday; the unity we share with Christ by his indwelling Spirit; the unity we share with each other under the same cross and at the same table; our humble reception of free forgiveness; the rich flavor of the goodness of our Lord; our digestion and integration of God's promises and commands; our proclamation to a hungry world 'until Christ comes'; the cup of suffering we share with the Lord (our own daily crucifixion with Christ); a preview of the future messianic banquet.

I am beginning to think that God kept telling his people in the Old Testament to 'be still' and not use many words in his presence, but we didn't listen. We produced word-crunchers like Calvin and Barth and the multitude of Christian preachers and writers today (myself included). We enclosed God in our walls of poetry and prose, so he decided the only way we were ever going to quiet down in his presence long enough to encounter him and meet him was to put food in our mouths. Even so, we manage to shrink the food to would-be

croutons and a sip of juice, and we surround the Lord's Supper with a special four-page liturgy of words inserted into the usual three-page liturgy of words.

After the service I went and did likewise. I tried to teach my catechism class about the Lord's Supper. I saw that God was a far better teacher than I. He created the perfect visual aid to drive home his message, a visual aid that could be seen, touched and tasted. But I, like my theological forefathers, sucked the life out of God's perfect illustration by translating it into a barrage of words and concepts for my class, reducing the presence of Christ into what one of my professors calls a 'cognitive dump.'

On Sunday morning as I stood with a chalice in my hand I began by seeing things through my feeble human eyes: I worried someone would notice my aging shoes. I growled at the fact that my new tie clip popped out on the way to church and promptly disappeared. I wondered whether I would stand in the right spot and whether I would do everything 'decently and in good order.' I wished I hadn't forgotten to buy *Tic-Tacs* before church. I worried that by repeating the same nine words ('The blood of the Lord was shed for you') over and over in such quick succession I might eventually treat them like a meaningless mantra. I was afraid I would somehow lose my sense of awe at the frightening, yet liberating, truth they contained.

But for a moment I was also allowed a glimpse of Ridgewood Church through *God's* eyes:

I saw hungry and thirsty people, feeling broken and poured out themselves, lining up for much-needed food. I felt the satisfaction that a server in a downtown mission kitchen must feel.

I remembered how the Lord's Supper is a moment of decision when we must choose between the Lord's table and the table of demons (1 Corinthians 10:21). **I saw** the people filing past me as those who were 'fed up' with the smorgas-boards offered by the shopping malls, the magazine racks, the radio dial, their TV remote controls, the theatre marquees, and the 'New Video Rentals' section. These enticing banquets had left them unfilled. They were now convinced that *the Lord's* table was the table for them, that *this* was the food that lasts.

I saw people forget for a moment that they were male and female; black, white and Asian; management and labor; rich and poor; young or old; for or against women's ordination. For a moment, whether in the pew or at the front of the sanctuary, we took our stand together before the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I saw two or three people walk by who chose not to take Communion. I remembered when I converted to Christianity in high school. At my first church we were told to examine ourselves before the Supper. I thought at the time that somehow I had to be 'good enough' to take Communion. I realize now that we could *never* be good enough. The Table is all about grace, all about *not* being good enough. I see now how self-examination is meant to root out hypocrites who would take the bread and the cup in a mechanical or unrepentant way. It would be a shame if a truly repentant person missed out on a blessing that is rightfully hers because shame or guilt crowded out the good news of forgiveness and mercy.

I looked with wonder at the 'drive-by dunkers' who didn't look me in the eye or wait for me to finish telling them that the blood of the Lord was shed *for them*. Were they worried about holding up the line? I hoped that someday they could realize that this cup, this space, this *grace*, is a gift just for them, and they have every right to linger for a moment and revel in God's mercy.

I smiled at the few people who responded with a grateful 'Thank you' or a thoughtful 'And for you also.' Their response was completely unnecessary, and I think they knew it. But they had imbibed (and now embodied) the catechism's emphasis on gratitude. And in their reciprocity they showed that the meaning of the word 'communion' had truly taken hold in their hearts.

I saw before my eyes what I taught as a missionary in Ecuador: that the miracle of the sacrament is not a transformation of the bread and wine but a transformation of God's people.

Thank you, Ridgewood Church, for the opportunity to see you, and myself, through God's eyes. I hope these reflections in some small measure return the favor.

The Trinity

By Jordan Ballor

William Ellery Channing's criticisms against the doctrine of the Trinity are made up of numerous specific observations, but are in general made up of two claims: that this doctrine is "irrational and unscriptural."¹ For Channing, these two notions are linked, as God's revelation in Scripture is necessarily subject to human reason, for he knows no other book "which demands a more frequent exercise of reason than the Bible."² In addition, Channing characterizes the doctrine of the Trinity as a teaching that is essentially tri-theistic and therefore unscriptural. His understanding of God is "one being, one mind, one person, one intelligent agent, and one only, to whom un-derived and infinite perfection and dominion belong."³ This is the first point at which Trinitarian doctrine seems to falter. The doctrine of the Trinity holds that there are three infinite and equal persons in the Godhead, and therefore the doctrine implies that there are three beings or minds. Channing quickly moves on to summarize this as teaching that there are "three Gods," and that the doctrine of the Trinity necessarily and inevitably leads to regarding the three persons as "different beings, different minds."⁴ In this way, Channing first attacks Trinitarianism as an irrational doctrine, which violates the tenets of monotheism.

Having shown that the doctrine of the Trinity clearly is irrational, Channing next attempts to prove that it is unscriptural. The deity of Jesus is the point at which his most illustrative points are made. Channing writes that in the New Testament, "not one word is said implying that objections were brought against the gospel from the doctrine of the Trinity."⁵ More will be said concerning this later, as Channing's arguments themselves are critiqued. Suffice it to say that for Channing, the

lack of discussion explicitly or implicitly in the New Testament shows that the doctrine of the Trinity did not exist, is unscriptural, and was a product of later Christian thought.

By placing Jesus as equal to God, Channing condemns Trinitarianism for exalting a human being to the level of God, which as its main effect takes from the Father the "supreme affection which is his due" and transfers it to the Son.⁶ The doctrine of the Trinity therefore espouses a sort of idolatry. Trinitarianism, in Channing's estimation, clearly makes the Son more attractive, lovable, likeable, and merciful than the Father, and in this way does injustice to the Father's character.⁷ Trinitarianism is in this way nothing more than an accursed idolatry.

This erroneous doctrine has further effects, as it mars our devotion, effectively dividing our worship three ways, and leads us to minimize the sacrifice of Christ's crucifixion. Since in this system Christ shares the incommunicable attributes of God, his immutability "robs his death of interest, weakens our sympathy with his sufferings, and is, of all others most unfavorable to a love of Christ founded on a sense of his sacrifices for mankind."⁸ As Christ never truly or fully experienced the pain, suffering, and shame of the cross, his sacrifice becomes merely symbolic and relatively insignificant.

For all these reasons, among others, Channing clearly sees Trinitarianism as irrational, stating that one can be three and still remain one. He also sees no scriptural basis for the doctrine of the Trinity. Channing is so sure that Trinitarianism has no biblical basis that he issues this decree: "We challenge our opponents to adduce one passage in the New Testament where the word God means three per-

sons, where it is not limited to one person, and where, unless turned from its usual sense by the connection, it does not mean the Father.”⁹ Some sort of response is apparently not only expected but also demanded. A response to this challenge follows.

The Gospel of John begins with the lines, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”¹⁰ There is no ambiguity in this reading. The Word is Jesus Christ. He became flesh, and yet, is God!¹¹ This is clearly, in answer to Channing’s challenge, a verse that refers to God not as the Father, but as the Son. There are numerous other scriptural texts which speak to the truth of Jesus’ divinity, as in Hebrews 1:3 (NRSV), “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the *exact imprint of God’s very being*, and he sustains all things by his powerful word (*italics added*).” Channing’s interpretation of passages such as these is reductive and minimalist. He interprets “the comparatively few passages which are thought to make him the Supreme God, in a manner consistent with his distinct and inferior nature.”¹² This approach is entirely circular, however, as the underlying belief of Jesus’ non-divinity is already assumed, and all of Scripture is then brought into accord with this external assumption. This is clearly interpretive *eisegesis*, not *exegesis*.

Channing draws a major point of disagreement with the effect of the Trinitarian doctrine, that it elevates something so mundane as a human to the level of the Almighty God, creating an obscene idolatry. Channing’s picture of the Trinitarian tradition is quite simply a misrepresentation. God the Father is not just a condemning judge who is humankind’s enemy. Jesus is not simply our good friend who stands up for believers before the vengeful judge. Jesus was sent out of the Father’s love and mercy on the one hand, and on the other, Jesus has been given all things, the authority

both to judge and to forgive.¹³ Channing represents the doctrine of the Trinity in a jaundiced way, and this serves to undermine his arguments from their very inception.

Channing writes that there was no record in the New Testament of controversy surrounding Trinitarian doctrine, and that this proves that the teaching is a late and artificial doctrine. It can easily be contended, however, that the first controversies surrounding this doctrine can be found in the reaction of the Pharisees and scribes to Jesus’ words and deeds. Nearly all of the accusations of blasphemy that are leveled against Jesus consist of the contention that Jesus is elevating himself to the status of God.¹⁴ The claims of Jesus to being divine were clear to the Jews, and so the Pharisees and scribes are among the first to deny Jesus’ divinity.

In addition, Channing is operating under the common, but faulty, nineteenth century assumption of the primitiveness and ignorance of humanity in antiquity. He writes on the unity of God, “We conceive that these words could have conveyed no other meaning to the *simple and uncultivated* people who were set apart to be the depositaries of this great truth, and who were *utterly incapable of understanding* those hair-breadth distinctions between being and person which the sagacity of later ages has discovered.”¹⁵ This sort of modern elitism is problematic at best.

Where Channing contends that the doctrine of the Trinity is irrational, those who espouse the teaching would claim that the theologian’s responsibility lies first in being faithful to Scripture, and that external philosophical and rational concerns are of a secondary nature. While he is operating from a slanted perspective totally dependent on human reason, it is not surprising that Channing entirely discounts Trinitarian doctrine. For, as Channing writes, “if God be infinitely wise, He cannot sport with the understandings of his creatures.”¹⁶ This is a bold statement, and it is one that is reflective of a viewpoint that elevates

human reason beyond its proper place. Philosophical concerns ought properly to be the *ancilla*, or handmaiden, to theology. One of Channing's chief errors lies in his nearly unrestrained dependency and trust in human reason to correctly and accurately interpret Scripture. He does give faint lip service to the normative value of Scripture, stating, "we believe that God never contradicts in one part of Scripture what He teaches in another; and never contradicts in revelation what He teaches in his works and providence."¹⁷ Nevertheless, the external normative value of human reason is clear in Channing's interpretations, and he does much violence to those supposed "not very numerous"¹⁸ passages that proclaim the divinity of Christ.

Channing's reliance on human reason, his artificial interpretation of Scripture, and his inaccurate presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity all serve to undermine and effectively negate his criticisms of this doctrine. If Scripture interprets Scripture, then the interpretation must be selected which does the least violence to the whole of Scripture in general and the specific text of Scripture in particular. In this case, the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly attested to be numerous passages, and also can easily be brought into congruence with the entirety of the Bible. For Channing's brand of Unitarianism to take root, one must minimize and twist Scripture to fit with a preconceived notion of rationality.

End Notes

¹ William Ellery Channing, "Unitarian Christianity," from *The Works of William E. Channing*, 1882; repr. Burt Franklin, 1970, page 371.

² *Ibid.*, p. 368.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

⁷ C. Plantinga responds to this caricature in kind, stating that this misunderstanding "has sometimes been yoked in the minds of unitarian critics." He explicitly has Channing in mind. Cf. C. Plantinga, "The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity," *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (1988), p. 38.

⁸ Channing, p. 375

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

¹⁰ John 1:1-2, 14a NRSV.

¹¹ Jehovah's Witnesses view this verse as so important that their translation was changed to read "a god" instead of "God." Cf. the *New World Translation* John 1:1 and David A. Reed, *Answering Jehovah's Witnesses Subject by Subject*, Baker Books, 1996, p. 116-7. Channing makes the same error, "It is our duty to explain such texts by the rule which we apply to other texts, in which human beings are called gods," p. 375. This translation of *theos* as indefinite clearly violates Colwell's Rule of translation, cf. The Article, class handout, NT 215B, *New Testament Interpretation*, Prof. D. Deppe, CTS, Oct. 1, 2001.

¹² Channing, p. 375.

¹³ John 3:35

¹⁴ cf. Matt. 26:63-68 and John 10:30-33

¹⁵ Channing, p. 371. italics mine

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 375.



< W) | V*
(Shalom)

I sit alone, solitary, a tiny dot.
A family forms, the I becomes we.
Together we cry out “LORD!”
Together we pray. Together we weep.
Selah

Some with hands lifted up.
Deliverance
Some with fists shaking.
Deliverance
Some with hearts praying.
Deliverance
Selah

Our enemies plot and plan against us.
Our enemies lie in wait. Watching us.
But you, Oh LORD, act.
You hold us close in comfort.
You hold us tight as kinsman.
Selah

You see our misery.
And come down
You hear our cries.
And come down
You feel our tears
And come down
Selah

Together we pray, together we weep.
Together we cry out “LORD!”
A family forms, the I becomes we.
I am not alone, solitary, a tiny dot.

By Josh!



What is God "saying" when He is "silent"?

By Ken Vander Horst

Two Christian writers. Two lives lived reflecting on the nature of the Christian faith and the God who is the Author and Finisher of that faith. Two compelling novels. Two tragic missionary enterprises. One nagging question: *What is God "saying" when He is "silent"?*

In comparing and contrasting these two novels, the reader has an opportunity to ponder the possible answers that Endo and Elliot suggest to the question of God's lack of response to the difficulties of his servants Rodrigues and Margaret.

The tales are widely divergent in their settings. In *Silence*,¹ Father Rodrigues is a 17th century, Spanish, Roman Catholic priest of the Jesuit order who travels to the recently closed island of Japan after hearing that his mentor and predecessor to Japan, Ferreira, has apostatized in the face of severe persecution. Rodrigues travels the same road as his suffering superior. He meets with the Japanese Christians who, in spite of severe persecution, long to meet with him, say their confessions, and receive the Eucharist. After a short ministry to two Christian communities, Rodrigues is captured by hostile officials, and subject to the torments of the same ruler who broke Ferreira. Rodrigues struggles to retain his faith in the agonizing silence of his imprisonment — a silence broken only by suffering, ridicule, and natural noises; a silence that remains until Rodrigues is ready to apostasize.

In *No Graven Image*,² Margaret Sparhawk is a 20th century, American, Protestant missionary who journeys to the hinterland of Ecuador to be the first Protestant to proclaim the Gospel message to a tribe of

natives that has been reached only by Roman Catholic missionaries.. She travels with excitement and determination, looking forward to the successful conversion of natives to her tradition's expression of the Christian faith, intent on winning them over from the Roman Catholic Church. She is not met by eager listeners, but slowly introduces the Gospel to one family living in the mountains. The slowness of her work and the difficulty in transitioning into the local culture brings a barrage of questions about her image of what missionary work should be like. Her questions go largely unanswered, and her faith is shaken.

Though in divergent settings, these two tales are equally disconcerting if the reader dares not expose her or his faith to these stories of failure in mission. Already in the opening chapter of *Silence*, there is an ominous atmosphere lurking over Rodrigues and his companion Garpe as they undertake the journey to Japan. During their voyage, they suffer from ceaseless rain, unbearable heat, and disease. The first Japanese person they meet is Kichijiro, who reeks of alcohol. The Spanish priests have no alternative but to trust Kichijiro, who reveals his previous exposure to the Christian faith when he mutters "Santa Maria" and "gratia." Upon arriving on Japanese soil, they plunge into icy cold water and heaven only sends rain and more rain. But there is a glimmer of hope: the first word they hear is "padre."

Margaret undertakes her journey under brighter conditions, and yet also has an ominousness looming about her. She clings to the theme "Fear not, for I am with thee" (Elliot, 3) though she struggles to know

if she belongs in Ecuador. Her sense of calling is further eroded by the heat and alienation she experiences, and she is unable to share the pietistically aggressive perspectives of her fellow missionaries, who spout platitudes such as “God won’t let lambs go astray” (Elliot, 21) and “nothing is too hard for the Lord” (Elliot, 22). Nevertheless, Margaret convinces herself of her divine mission:

There was a certain element of apprehension of the unknown as I contemplated my arrival in Indi Urcu, but the knowledge that the MacDonalds had prayed for someone to work with the Indians, when they had found that they themselves could not, was to me the final seal that the course I had chosen was God’s course. (Elliot, 23)

Armed with her confidence, she betrays her patronizing attitude when arriving in the village, asking such questions “Will they like me? let me in? treat animals better? become more than Catholic?” (Elliot, 30-31), and pronouncing “Unreached, every one of them, but God helping me, I would reach them” (Elliot, 32).

Unlike Margaret, Rodrigues is not confident. He begins his ministry to the persecuted Japanese Christians, meeting silent Christians like Ichizo whose faces have become like masks. He wonders why God has so burdened his own, and is pained that he cannot understand such bitterness. Noises like dogs howling, cats mewing, babies crying during baptisms, footsteps quickly retreating from him all reinforce the terrible silence of God — the lack of affirmation that God would sustain him and the persecuted Christians for whom he risks life and his faith. Rodrigues is so overcome by what he faces that he and his colleague are often silent out of fear, causing their flock to be dismayed as their priests. The fledgling community is hopeful when all the peasants remain silent when being asked to identify Christians, a stark contrast to Kichijiro who shouts his righteousness when not under the surveillance of the magistrate. But rather

than being rewarded for their faithfulness to their priests, some Christians are detained, leaving Rodrigues burdened with guilt: I feel the oppressive weight in my heart of those last stammering words of Kichijiro on the morning of his departure: “Why has Deus Sama imposed this suffering upon us? And then the resentment in those eyes that he turned upon me. ‘Father’, he had said, ‘what evil have we done?’ (Endo, 54-55)

Margaret too becomes burdened with guilt — she does not know how to share in a letter her “failure” with a potential convert in a city visited earlier. It seems she has set overly-elevated expectations of missionary piety — she questions her need for a mirror, square corners, a closet, and good dish soap. She is also plagued by the cross-cultural nature of her mission, for she is appalled by the cruel treatment of an Indian by a Spanish white at the post office, and by the harsh words of the grocer. The simple purchase of a chair from a native becomes an occasion for frustration: “How exactly was I supposed to interrupt their lives?” (Elliot, 71) Through her frustrations, high expectations, and difficulty speaking to Pedro and Rosa, her first contacts, she questions her own salvation, for she resurrects her teenage fears that she is damned because she is unsure whether she has ever brought someone to Christ. But once again, she convinces herself of the impending success of the mission:

He [Christ] could not fail. It was not simply my own success and reputation that were at stake — it was clearly the success of the Gospel message itself, the reputation of God and all that He had promised in His Word. (Elliot, 78)

Rodrigues is rarely convinced of anything except his despair at the silence of God, as his peasant Christians are martyred and he is forced to flee. He looks to the sea (the instrument of torture and death) for answers, but it remains silent, just like the

silence of God. When he journeys in solitude, waiting for imprisonment, he meets Jesus while looking in a pool of water, but this affirmation of his faithful following of the Savior brings him no relief. He hears only crows and cicadas, and even forgets the answers given him in his years of training by his mentor Ferreira. Finally, he is captured, and the only sounds he hears is the call of the cicada and the beseeching of his betrayer, Kichijiro, who cries out for forgiveness.

Margaret becomes a captive to her struggles to understand the meaning and purpose behind her missionary work, her own sense of spirituality, and the sacrifices of other missionaries, which she feels are far too drastic. She attends a missionary conference, but rather than feeling affirmed and encouraged, she feels claustrophobic — she does not fit in with the others, and the missionary identity propagated at the conference is clearly not. She despairs: “I capitulated to their arguments that the deficiency of my missionary work now must lie in my own lack of prayer, my failure to surrender to the Lord, and my imperfect apprehension of the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Elliot, 111) Then she meets Dr. Lynn Anderson, who begins dismantling Margaret’s false image of missions.

Like Margaret, Rodrigues faces arguments — not from colleagues, but an interrogator. The samurai questions the silence of God in the face of suffering and his threats. Everything points to a silent God — the sea and land, the Christian village which had been burnt to the ground. He prays, but the silence continues, until finally he hears “I will not abandon you.” But this one break is not enough to encourage him, and when he listens for reassuring words again, only the turtle dove breaks the silence. In the depths of despair, Rodrigues is paralyzed and remains silent to Kichijiro’s request for pardon. He wonders whether or not Jesus experienced the silence of

God. When the silence becomes overwhelming, Rodrigues finally meets Ferreira.

When they are working together, Lynn interrogates Margaret: “What would happen to your idea of God, for instance, if you found that your work was useless?” (Elliot, 114) “Did God ever destroy anything which He Himself had built?” (Elliot, 122) These questions, along with the puzzling distinctions made among missionaries, reveals to Margaret her own internal conflicts. She has difficulty in accepting her supporting organization’s retraction of coworkers. In her silent despair, she is awakened to new possibilities: “Was it possible, after all, that the reasons for the shortage of missionaries were sometimes inscrutable, not to be explained so simply as ‘the church of God is asleep.’” (Elliot, 146) In spite of such revelations, she continues to struggle with her preconceived notions of missionary work — she wishes that dispensing the Gospel could be like giving injections, and is not motivated to help non-Indians with Lynn. But once again, Lynn breaks down her image by stating starkly, “Jesus told us to do what is true. I think the truth needs no justification, no defense.” (Elliot, 157) There is no response from Margaret.

Rodrigues too does not respond to his former colleague Ferreira. The latter speaks persistently, but avoids words about his old life. Rodrigues can hear nothing else except his formerly faithful hero, and initially responds to his call to apostatize with silence, so that all that is heard is a fly buzzing. Being relegated to his cell, he reads “*Laudate eum*” etched in the wall, and once again hears a voice: “When you suffer, I suffer with you. To the end I am close to you.” (Endo, 161) But any reassurances are interrupted when Rodrigues hears Kichijiro’s voice asking for forgiveness, which leaves a bitter taste in priest’s mouth, so that Rodrigues puts his fingers in his ears to shut him out. Then, slowly, he comes to recognize the sound of

Christians in the pit. His faith finally falters when he hears Christ tell him to trample on the *fumie*. When he does so, the cock crows. After his release, he hears singing and bells in the streets. Only then is he able to perform his priestly duty, and he hears Kichijiro's confession.

Margaret, released in part from her imprisoning image of missions, learns to accept herself as a white woman. She is not triumphalistic at Pedro's initial belief, and is unimpressed by Mr. Harvey's attempts to capture proofs and exhibits of God's work. She recognizes that "Harvey had not come to learn but to document what he already assumed." (Elliot, 190) Yet she still wrestles with the image of missions she is assuming, doubting about her usability, her calling, the seemingly useless and frantic everyday deeds. She dares not write "honest" prayer letters, even though she recognizes her hypocrisy: If there were times when I must be willing to pay any price for what was called the 'advancement of the Kingdom' there were also times when I must be willing to let such a price — climbing a mountain for example, in rain and mud and darkness — be paid in vain. (Elliot, 209)

After Rosa shatters any success in translation and teaching by questioning the need for them, Pedro becomes dreadfully sick, and Margaret "kills" him with her injection of antibiotics. Then Margaret hears God speaking: "It was indeed the voice of God, still and small, that said 'And omega.'" (Elliot, 240) Confused, Margaret abandons the image of missionary work that inspired her initial undertaking to Ecuador:

I do not write prayer letters any more, for I have nothing to say about my work. It seemed, on the night of Pedro's death, as though *Finis* were written below all I had done. Now, in the clear light of day, I see that I was in part correct. God, if He was merely my accomplice, had betrayed me. If, on the other hand, He was God, He had freed me. (Elliot,

242-243)

Instead, she despairs:

And God? What of Him? 'I am with thee,' He had said. With me in *this*? He had allowed Pedro to die, or — and I could not then nor can I today deny the possibility — He had perhaps caused me to destroy him. And does He now, I asked myself there at the graveside, ask me to worship Him? (Elliot, 244)

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Where is the missiologial payoff when reading these books? A reader may be tempted to look at the triumphs of Christianity in other times and places, relegate these novels to the category of fiction, and ignore the challenges that both Endo and Elliot bring to triumphalistic perspectives of Christian missions. But to do so would mean not only dismissing fine literature, but also missing the opportunity to break down our "graven images" about what missions should really be like, and to take the opportunity to listen to God in his silence.

What is God "saying" when He is "silent?" Johnston, Endo's English translator, writes in his forward that Endo is teaching the reader that a non-Christianized people need a Christianity that suits their national character (Endo, xviii). This is not as apparent in *Silence* as it is in *No Graven Image*. While Endo's work suggests that the 17th century was simply not the time for Christianity to flourish in Japan, Elliot does not paint a picture of a closed society in Ecaudor. Were it not for the tragic death of Pedro, Margaret would likely have continued her translation work and teaching. The problem in Ecaudor was not a closed country, but a closed missionary. Margaret's preconceived notions about missions — her graven image — was the greatest impediment to the Gospel in the mountains of Ecuador. However, once her image began breaking down, her mission work was able to progress. Rather than focusing on the imperfection of the Catholic expression of the Christian faith for the natives, Margaret

needed to be shaped by the country and culture that she was serving, and thereby bring a Gospel that was palatable to its people.

A second possible element that the reader learns about God's apparent inactivity in mission situations that are, in human estimation, desperately in need of his intervention is that He desires worship and praise even when human plans for missions are destroyed. While these are Elliot's musings at the end of her book, it seems that *Silence* is a more pointed lesson of the need to submit to God's will in the face of failure. While responding to God's call to serve a people opposed to the Gospel, are we willing to accept failure? Jonah struggled to accept success in his missionary endeavour; 20th century Christians struggle to accept failure in missionary endeavours that are sometimes deemed successful even before they are undertaken! Like Margaret, it is easy to assume that mission activity cannot fail, for "Christ cannot fail." But how should we react when a sovereign and omnipotent God chooses to fail?

Third, it seems that God's absence or silence — perceived as failure — is also an opportunity He uses to teach that the Church must be humble about "heroic" missionaries. Rodrigues had been on a mission not simply to serve the Japanese Christians, but more importantly, in the estimation of his Jesuit order and the Catholic Church in Spain, to discover whether or not heroic Ferreira had actually renounced the faith, and, if so, why. Though it seemed inconceivable to men of a devout order in comfortable Spain, it was not to the Dutch traders who initially reported the apostasy, nor was it inconceivable to Japanese samurais who devised devilish schemes to produce renunciations in the most heroic of priests. Did these Jesuits not consider the denial of Peter, the boldest and bravest of the disciples?

Finally, it seems that the silence of God offers us an opportunity to reflect on his

sovereignty. Without explanation, without words of assurance, Endo and Elliot suggest that God ordained two missionary enterprises to fail miserably. Missiologically, this means that He is free to have his Holy Spirit work in ways that are inscrutable to us. Is the Church willing to entrust its resources, its reputation, and its missionaries to a God who ordains failure? Can we still give glory to the one who sometimes seems to fail at blessing our efforts to accomplish his kingdom vision?

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A Brief Biography of Both Authors:

Elisabeth Elliot was born in Brussels, Belgium, where her parents served as missionaries.³ She moved to Philadelphia when she was 5 months old. At the age of 10, she accepted Christ as savior, and later accepted Christ as her Lord at the age of 12 (Archives). Inspired by the writings of Amy Carmichael, she attended and graduated from Wheaton College where she met Jim Elliot. After college, she went to Ecuador as a missionary. In 1953 she married Elliot, and together they worked on translating the New Testament into the language of the Quichua Indians. A daughter, Valerie, was born in 1955. Ten months later, Jim was killed by the Auca Indians while trying to bring the Gospel to the Quichua tribe. In spite of this terrible loss, Elisabeth continued her work among the Quichuas and later lived and worked among the Aucas. After she returned to the United States, she married Addison Leitch, a professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He died of cancer in 1973.

Elliot now serves as writer-in-residence at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, where she lives with her husband, Lars Gren. Among dozens of books are the well-known works *Shadow of the Almighty*, *Passion and Purity*, *The Journals of Jim Elliot*, and *A Path Through Suffering*.

Shusaku Endo⁴ was born in Tokyo in 1923 but moved at an early age to Manchuria with his mother. At the age of 10 he returned

with his mother after she and his father divorced. When she converted to Catholicism, he too was baptized, but later he felt it was against his will, as was the marriage his mother later arranged for him. As a teen he suffered the ridicule of his peers for being associated with a Western religion. The Second World War intensified the ridicule, and left him confused after the bombing of Japan by those he considered his spiritual brothers. After the war, he traveled to France to pursue studies in French Literature, but became dreadfully sick. Feeling that he was rejected by both his homeland and Christianity, he underwent a crisis of faith. By visiting Palestine, where he researched the life of Jesus, he came to understand Jesus as the suffering Savior. Shortly after returning to Japan, he saw a 17th century Japanese Christian artifact. This event sparked his reflection on his Christian faith and began many years of prolific writing. He wrote at the rate of one novel per year well into the 1980s.

Endo's books have been translated into over 25 languages, and thus he has become one of Japan's most famous authors. He died in 1996.

End Notes

1 Shusako Endo, *Silence*. Translated by William Johnston. New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1980. Page references will simply be offered in brackets, preceded by "Endo."

2 Elisabeth Elliot, *No Graven Image*, Crossway Books, Westchester Illinois, 1982. Page references will be offered in brackets, preceded by "Elliot."

3 The information in this brief biography was gleaned from *Elisabeth Elliot*, written by Lisa Barry, available at www.backtothebible.org/gateway/elliott.html, and from a transcribed interview from the Billy Graham Center Archives at Wheaton College (*Collection 278*, Elisabeth Howard Gren, T2 Transcript, 1985) which is available at www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/trans/278t02.htm.

4 Biographical information was gleaned from Philip Yancey's article *Japan's Faithful Judas* (Copyright *Christianity Today*) available at www.baobab.or.jp/~stranger/mypage/endo.htm.



Worry

By Amanda Black

1. *My own translation of key sentences from the pericope:*

²⁵Διὰ τοῦτο λέγω ὑμῖν· μὴ μεριμνᾶτε τῇ ψυχῇ ὑμῶν τί φάγητε [ἢ τί πίητε^{1/4}, μηδὲ τῷ σώματι ὑμῶν τί ἐνδύσησθε. οὐχὶ ἡ ψυχὴ πλεῖον ἐστὶν τῆς τροφῆς καὶ τὸ σῶμα τοῦ ἐνδύματος; ²⁶ἐμβλέψατε εἰς τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ὅτι οὐ σπεύρουσιν οὐδὲ θερίζουσιν οὐδὲ συνάγουσιν εἰς ἀποθήκας, καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος τρέφει αὐτά· οὐχ ὑμεῖς μᾶλλον διαφέρετε αὐτῶν; ²⁷τίς δὲ ἐξ ὑμῶν μεριμνῶν δύναται προσθεῖναι ἐπὶ τὴν ἡλικίαν αὐτοῦ πῆχυν ἓνα; ²⁸καὶ περὶ ἐνδύματος τί μεριμνᾶτε; καταμάθετε τὰ κρίνα τοῦ ἀγροῦ πῶς αὐξάνουσιν· οὐ κοπιῶσιν οὐδὲ νήθουσιν· ²⁹λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐδὲ Σολομῶν ἐν πάσῃ τῇ δόξῃ αὐτοῦ περιεβάλετο ὡς ἐν τούτων· ³⁰εἰ δὲ τὸν χόρτον τοῦ ἀγροῦ σήμερον ὄντα καὶ αὔριον εἰς κλίβανον βαλλόμενον ὁ θεὸς οὕτως ἀμφιένυσσιν, οὐ πολλῶ μᾶλλον ὑμᾶς, ὀλιγόπιστοι; ³¹μὴ οὖν μεριμνήσητε λέγοντες· τί φάγωμεν; ἢ τί πίωμεν; ἢ τί περιβαλώμεθα; ³²πάντα γὰρ ταῦτα τὰ ἔθνη ἐπιζητοῦσιν· οἶδεν γὰρ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος ὅτι χρῆζετε τούτων ἀπάντων· ³³ζητεῖτε δὲ πρῶτον τὴν βασιλείαν [τοῦ θεοῦ^{1/4} καὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτοῦ, καὶ ταῦτα πάντα προστεθήσεται ὑμῖν· ³⁴μὴ οὖν μεριμνήσητε εἰς τὴν αὔριον, ἡ γὰρ αὔριον μεριμνήσει ἑαυτῆς· ἀρκετὸν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἡ κακία αὐτῆς.

²⁵ Because of this, I say to you all: “Do not be anxious (about) your earthly life; (about) what you will eat, or what you will drink, neither (worry about) what you might you will wear. Is your earthly life not (worth) more than food and the body more than clothes?”

²⁶Look at the birds of heaven (and see) that neither do they sow, neither do they harvest, neither do they gather for storehouses, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more valuable than they? ²⁷But who among you by worrying is able to add to his height even one cubit?

²⁸And why are you anxious about clothes? Observe the lilies of the field, how they grow. Neither do they toil nor do they spin. ²⁹I say to you, that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed as one of these. ³⁰But if God so dresses the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is being thrown into the furnace, how much more (will he dress) you, ones of little faith?

³¹So then, do not be anxious saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we be clothed in?” ³²For all these, the Gentiles search for, and, your heavenly Father knows you need all of these things. ³³But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all this will be added to you. ³⁴So then, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious itself. The trouble of the day is sufficient.

1. A brief word study

All of the words in the passage are interesting and many are rare to Matthew and the New Testament. The most important word to this passage is the verb *μεριμνάω* (to be anxious). Grammatically in imperative form, there are three explicit not to worry. It means not to worry, be anxious, or be unduly concerned. The verb occurs again in verses 27, 28, 31, and 34 in this particular pericope.

These five occurrences of the word are the only ones in Matthew. Like this first verb, the rest in the passage are colorful. When referring to Solomon in his kingly garments, the word is *περιβάλλω*, which when translated literally, means to throw around. It primarily refers to the walls of a city and secondarily refers to clothing someone. It finally means to “plunge someone into misfortune.” It is quite clear from the context that only the second meaning is possible. The more common word for being clothed, *ἐνδύω*, is used in the other references to being clothed. The verbs used in terms of seeking in verses 32 and 32 are important. In verse 33, the command comes to seek (*ζητέω*) the Kingdom and righteousness of God. Its basic meaning is “to seek or to look for.” In the previous verse, a stronger form of the verb is used (*ἐπιζητέω*). It can mean to search for, inquire, discuss, or more strongly, to strive for and wish.

Like the verbs, the nouns are colorful. First, it needs to be said that earthly life in verse 25 is an uncommon translation of a common noun, *ψυχή*. When seeing that word on a vocabulary test, nearly every student would write down “soul.” In Greek, this word has a broad depth of meaning, from the basic life force to the seat of emotions. Its basic meaning is soul, but that a broad concept, as is seen in the meanings of this noun. Bauer strongly suggests that this word best means earthly life in this passage.

ἡλικία is a rare word, meaning stature. Along with the idea of height, this word refers to age and span of one’s life, often carrying the meaning of being sufficiently old enough to

experience something or of being of legal age. Scholars argue about the meaning of this word, since many assume that it refers to the idea of height, while others argue that it refers to the lifespan. The understanding of this word helps to set the meaning of the following word, *πῆχυς* (cubit). The word likely originally meant, “forearm,” setting this as a distance of about 18 inches. In early Christian literature outside the Bible, this sometimes has the connotation of spiritual growth.

1. The exegesis of the pericope including historical and literary context:

It is helpful to view this pericope as a conclusion to both the chapter and the final two pericopae of the chapter. The chapter begins with a command to show piety to God rather than to humans. It then follows with discussions on prayer and fasting. Then in 6:19 and 18, the exhortation to store up treasures in heaven rather than earth shows yet another contrast between God in heavens and people on earth. It is made more explicit at the end of this pericope (the verse which immediately precedes verses 25-34). It is said that no one can serve two masters—God and mammon.

So after the discussion of private piety, prayer, fasting, and storing up treasures, comes the section about worry. It too sets a contrast between an earthly way of acting and one that responds to being in the Kingdom. The connection between verse 24 and 25 is also shown grammatically. The familiar opening “I say to you” (*λέγω ὑμῖν*) is present, but it follows the opening words “Because of this” (*Διὰ τοῦτο*). The preposition *διὰ* shows a connection between the two ideas and the pronoun *τοῦτο* takes it antecedent from the previous idea. One finds a richer meaning when this pericope is explored in context.

Now more about the pericope at hand—verses 24-27 and the pericope as a whole begin with a command not worry about our earthly lives and vital actions to sustain it, namely eating, drinking, and wearing clothes. Each of these activities is essential to daily life,

but two rhetorical questions remind us that our life is made of up of more than food and our bodies are greater than the clothes wrapped around them. Then Jesus appeals to the first example from nature, that of the birds. This is also a command to look at them who are hopping around, sharing space with us. There are three things that the birds do not do; they do not reap, sow, or store grains from the harvest, all three of which are essential for eating. In our world of cereal and 7-11's, it is easy to forget the importance of farming to provide our daily bread. But the heavenly Father cares for the birds that eat every day without performing any agricultural activities. Then are two more rhetorical questions to close this subsection: Are you not more valuable than the birds and can you change your height by worrying. The first three questions assume a yes answer and the final question a no answer. Worrying does not affect the result of having our earthly needs taken care of, and we see that when we listen closely to the four rhetorical questions. It is just as worthless and impossible as trying to make ourselves taller.

The second subsection (verses 28-30) employs the example of the lilies. The meaning of lilies likely includes other spring flowers. While the example of the birds addresses the worry of eating and drinking, this addresses concern over having clothes to wear. Again, the lilies do not do what humans do to be clothed. They do not toil or spin wool for their garments, but yet they are more splendid than Solomon dressed in his kingly finery. Again, this was a time before Vogue magazine and the Fashion Channel, so is likely the most amazing outfit ever worn. The audience likely had to imagine what Solomon wore. At any rate, like the birds, a loving creator cares for the lilies. Again, this section closes with a rhetorical question assuming a positive answer. The ones of little faith worry that they are less taken care of than the grass, which is burned after an all-too short season of flourishing.

The final sub-section (verses 31-34) presents a response to the loving creator's

care. The same command in the same verb form that opens the section is given with the word, οὖν, (therefore) highlighting the logical connection between the command and information just presented. We are not to worry and the content about which we are not to worry is presented in three questions. Again, a contrast is presented between the world and God in heaven. The Gentiles/pagans/nations worry about these things. Without a connection to God the creator and enslavement to riches, they spend their whole lives actively chasing after things that money can buy like food, spirits, and designer tunics. There is never contentment and peace because there is always something better to chase after. But Christians serve their master and creator and do not have to chase after what money can buy. They are to chase after much more important things—God's righteousness and the kingdom itself. It is then all these things—from the context, food, drink, and clothing (our earthly needs) will be met.

The final verse of this section features the same prohibition against worry for the third time this pericope. We do not need to worry because each day has enough trouble. This final verse shows us the truth that we do have trouble each day and that is not erased when one steps into the Kingdom. It gives us the ability to deal with our momentary troubles in the light of the surpassing greatness of knowing God. We will have trouble in this world, as John 14 says, but we are not to worry. Verse 24 presents a contrast between two masters—the Father in heaven and worldly riches and shows the impossibility of serving both. Since those who are in the kingdom cannot serve worldly riches, they serve a loving creator. They simply have no need to be anxious, because they are cared for as the lilies and the birds, even when daily trouble arises.

A clear statement of the central theme of the pericope: Those who follow God do not need to be anxious about meeting their needs for

survival, because their Creator and heavenly Father sufficiently cares for them.

1. A description of four published interpretations of the pericope:

Dallas Willard regards this passage tells us that we having nothing to worry about in this life. “I recognize how strange, even strained, it sounds. But that is only because the entire posture of our embodied self and its surroundings is habitually inclined toward physical . . . reality as the only reality there is. Hence, to treasure anything else must be wrong. It is to rest on illusions” (208). We do not need expensive therapy or to expend an excessive amount of energy to make ourselves better, as those who follow money are resigned to do. We have our treasures in the realm of heaven, so life is not about food, clothes, or drink.

John Stott titles this section “a question of ambition,” and in his exegesis, this passage is closely connected to the previous ones. This is a type of challenge from Jesus—a call to action. The best master is the one most worthy of our devotion, so we need to choose this day whom we will serve. Since we have rejected the one, we do not need to worry about our earthly lives and that which is connected to serving riches. “We shall not be anxious about the one (for we have rejected it), but concentrate our mind and energy on the other (for we have chosen him); we shall refuse to become engrossed in our own concerns, but instead seek first the concerns of God” (160).

Much like Willard’s view, for Lloyd-Jones, this passage is one of immense comfort and it comes as promise of the Son who speaks with the authority of his Father. It also shows us the difference between the biblical view of life and the worldly one. “The Bible teaches us everywhere that that is the one thing that matters in life. The biblical view of life, in contrast to the worldly view, is that life is a journey, a journey full of perplexities, problems and uncertainties. That being the case, it emphasizes that what really matters in life is

not so much the various things that come to meet us . . . as our readiness to meet them” (195).

Guelich sees this section as the fulfillment of the Lord’s Prayer request to “give us this day our daily bread.” Worry is more than hurried forethought, but is a striving to secure one’s needs. We need to look at the actions of the creator to see this. “Jesus does not simply promise his followers that God will provide for his own because of a simplistic view of creation . . . Rather, Jesus sees creation in light of the presence of the new age, the coming of God’s sovereign rule into history. Only in light of the new age, the coming of the Kingdom, does Jesus assure his own that the Father in heaven will act of their behalf” (370).

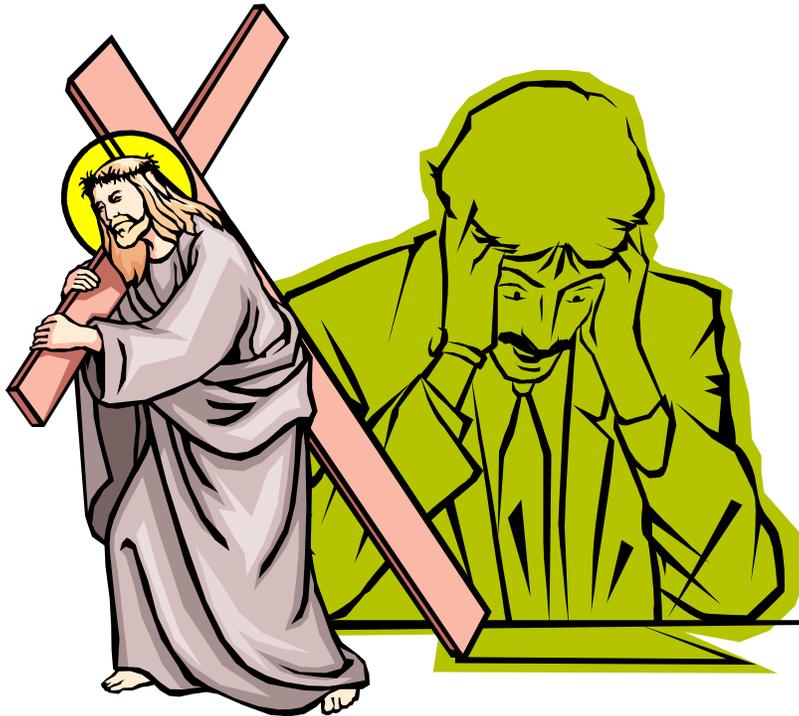
1. Two clear applications of the teaching to contemporary issues:

Joe is standing in line waiting to register for the next semester of classes. He is worried how he will be able to handle calculus, organic chemistry, speech, and medieval philosophy on top of playing intramural soccer. He is so wrapped in the coming semester that he is not thinking about his classes he’s taking now and doesn’t work out a plan for finishing his work this semester. He also forgets how he has survived tough schedules in the past and had even prospered when classes were busy.

Ellie’s daughter is taking swimming lessons at school and needs a bathing suit in order to participate. It is Friday and her daughter needs a bathing suit for school on Monday. She has no money left in her checking account and it is November, so it is nearly impossible to find a bathing suit in the store. She promises her daughter that she will be able to swim on Monday with her class. So, Ellie works hard, makes some calls and finds a bathing suit for her little girl. She borrowed a suit from her niece. When Monday rolls around, the swimming lessons are a true joy.

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Editorial—

Where do we go from here?

By Joshua S. Benton!

As we have traveled this bumpy road together, getting jostled on terms and comps, we have all swam through the sea of hermeneutics, examining all that there is. At one point in time or another, we have put on our exegetical scuba gear and back flipped into that vast ocean of hermeneutics, swimming through the vowels and consonants of deceased declensions and languages. Each of us swims into our own cave of ideas. One filled with those pulled by the rip tied of kingdom come, another swept by the eddy of covenant. All of us flotsam and jetsam of theology. Each camp proclaims that the other cannot see the forest through the trees, and yet all of us at times can't see the poetry in the Psalms, or the Gospel through the Greek.

Have we gotten ourselves so stuck in the mire of the bottom of the Hermeneutical Sea? That we have forgotten what the sun looks like shinning off the wise watery waves?

Late into the night I pour over my tomes assigned to me by our loving and mentoring professors and I wonder if these words (that are presently being seared into our brains) will at all take affect when we have left this place and enter into the real world. As of now, we are all but pacing tigers in a carnival cage, pacing back and forth, to and fro. We diligently perform for everyone, not letting who we are truly surface. Yet, once the cage has been unlocked we at once pounce out, finding ourselves in some foreign land where we no longer can speak the language.

Just but two years ago, I realized that poetry was throughout the Bible. For years, upon years, as I read the Psalms, the Song of

Songs, Isaiah, and Lamentations, I had no idea in the world that this might be poetry or any form of literature at all. I had never seen it treated as such, so why would I even dream it was. The Psalms were quoted as part of the Gospels; Isaiah was quoted to proclaim the coming Christ; Song of Songs was told to me as an allegory of God's love for his people (never would a loving intimate relationship have been mentioned in Sunday school); and so forth and so on. And yet, as I sat in a small undergraduate class, I heard for the first time about Hebrew poetics and forms of literary devices. This was not just dry words upon an inspired page anymore, these words to me were the thoughts and emotions, the cares and concerns, the loves and toils of those who have gone before. No longer was Genesis chapter one something to argue as theology versus science, but it was the fact that God began the world with poetry! Most of all, Jesus, the Father's own Son, the second person of the Godhead, as he hung on the cross, muttered out the saddest line from poetry I had ever heard, "Lord oh lord, why hast thou forsaken me." There is life in the words that we read, yet this at times becomes secondary instead of primary. Oh, please, give the psalms back to the poets, the writings back to the authors! We had them to begin with before they were squandered by the likes of Irenaeus who proclaimed that the accounts in Genesis were but examples of our falseness as compared to God's perfect world.

The same is true with the Gospel. They were written as euaggelion—as proclamations of the good news, that the victory is ours! death has lost its sting!

But no, it gets tossed aside. Instead we begin to look not at the literature, those beloved words alive upon the page, but instead at the literary-grammatical-historical interpretation. “Oh,” they mutter, “the Gospel of John is okay, but it’s all kai this and kai that, Now Paul, he’s a tough nut to crack.” Then take Paul. Paul wrote for the theologians, those of us who are like Peter agree that Paul is hard to understand.

No, give us back John who brings to life the ministry of Jesus so vividly, Jesus walks not only on the water but on the words themselves. And yet, we focus on the theology and not on the written word proclaiming the victory of Jesus Christ! Even Paul, we see is crafty with his words. We’ll keep him too.

Sometime in October when the leaves are at their peak, I sat in our beloved coffee shop, hearing a dispute betwixt two brethren. Both arguing some deep theological point. I sat there inhaling their words, my nostrils on fire with the heat of the argument. And then walked up Travis, one of our many construction workers. “Great,” exclaimed with one of Annie’s pizza’s in hand, “I’ve been wanting to sit in on one of these.”

And so, he seated himself, nestled in, ready to be instructed. After a few moments, he leaned over to me, the dust of his job now in my nose rather than the dispute. “Uhm...” he began, “what in the world are they talking about?”

As I began to explain to him in theological baby talk what exactly my two brothers were saying, he scratched his head. “Don’t make no difference to me” he proclaimed. “But, I was just wondering, where’s Jesus in all this?”

It hit me in the gut, and came out as a laugh.

What will take us years to understand, he said in a heart beat. With all our digging, diving, and searching; with all our nit-picking and bickering, have we lost sight of why we came here in the first place? Not just those in

the M.Div program—not just MTS and ThM and PhD, but all of us, those who’s ministry is most important of all, those of each department, those who are our professors, those who are in the MA programs, those who just want an education—have we all forgotten why we are hear?

What we need is some good old fashioned Gospel Preaching. We need to proclaim from the mountaintops that Jesus Christ died for our sins. The rest, well the rest can come later. So, we come, we come with hopes and dreams of preaching the living word of Christ.

And yet, hopes and dreams are dashed on the rocks of our beloved ocean of hermeneutics. We come here, Scripture in our hearts, the Gospel in our soul and the want to share God’s word with the world on our mind—and we get stuck with Hebrew. What does that tell those who are coming in who love the CRC and wish to preach the Word of God?

We can argue our theology in the coffee shop and in the faculty lounge, and we can study our Hebrew and Greek verbs until kingdom come and back again, but we can never forget the Gospel. We can’t see the Gospel through the Greek! When might we set down our books and stand in awe of God? When can we crawl out of the hole of tradition that we dug and see the changing world around us? We are slowly, yet surely getting there, but we must never forget the Gospel. Without the Gospel, we are but stupid people paying too much money to argue, we might as well start a bowling league instead.

B a p t i z m a

(baptism)

In the wet sand, my toes wiggled;
Twisting the tiny grains around:
Coffee brown, yellow, black
A myriad of colors.
My relieved toes squirmed,
Yearning to take root:
Never to be away for so long;
Never to leave again.
I breathed in deeply,
The salt air filling my lungs.
Every particle racing, racing
Through my blood.
Making me one,
One with the ocean,
One with the world.
The waves delivered a wet Pacific:
Around and around my ankles
The cold water, mixed.
Sand and grace
Exfoliating my soul,
Washing away
sin, grief.
In my heart I sang a hymn,
In my eyes twinkled a Psalm.