

# The Stromata



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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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# God's Longing

By Elizabeth Vander Hagen  
A sermon on Micah 6:1-16

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Prayer: Holy Spirit, be present in this place. Quiet us and help us to listen to you. Amen.

I remember very clearly the first Calvinette meeting I attended. It was in the basement of our church and when I got there, a small third grader, everyone seemed much bigger and they were all wearing scarves with badges on them and sitting in neat rows. I did not have a scarf or any badges - I was just wearing regular clothes. They all stood up and sat down at the same time and knew what to say and sing and when to say and sing it. It was scary and I felt lost. The only thing that was written down for those of us who were clueless was what was called the Calvinette Pledge. I can still see the easel up front with the newsprint and written on it in blue marker: What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. I memorized it as quickly as I could, hoping it would be the key to becoming a part of this strange group. It wasn't . . . being a Calvinette back then seemed to have more to do with earning as many badges as possible, and I just wasn't that into it.

So when someone suggested to me last week in the coffee shop that I could write a sermon about Calvinettes for this class, I didn't know if I should laugh or throw something. Because a lot of my life right now feels a bit like that first Calvinette meeting - if I only learn the pledge, maybe then I'll belong - maybe then it won't matter that I don't know when to stand up or sit down or how to earn my badges, if I can only learn the magic words . . .

But if there's anything today's passage is NOT, it's not about earning anything, nor is it about a pledge or magic words. It's about judgment, with a sneaky bit of hope slipped in. And it's about us and our brokenness and the only way to find wholeness and belonging.

“Stand up, plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear what you have to say.

<sup>2</sup>Hear, O mountains, the LORD's accusation; listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth. For the LORD has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel.

<sup>3</sup>“My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me.

<sup>4</sup>I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam. <sup>5</sup>My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.”

<sup>6</sup>With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? <sup>7</sup>Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? <sup>8</sup>He has showed you, O man, what is good.

And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

<sup>9</sup>Listen! The LORD is calling to the city— and to fear your name is wisdom— “Heed the rod and the One who appointed it. <sup>10</sup>Am I still to forget, O wicked house, your ill-gotten treasures and the short ephah, which is accursed? <sup>11</sup>Shall I acquit a man with dishonest scales, with a bag of false weights? <sup>12</sup>Her rich men are violent; her people are liars and their tongues speak deceitfully. <sup>13</sup>There-

fore, I have begun to destroy you, to ruin you because of your sins.<sup>14</sup> You will eat but not be satisfied; your stomach will still be empty. You will store up but save nothing, because what you save I will give to the sword.<sup>15</sup> You will plant but not harvest; you will press olives but not use the oil on yourselves, you will crush grapes but not drink the wine.<sup>16</sup> You have observed the statutes of Omri and all the practices of Ahab's house, and you have followed their traditions. Therefore I will give you over to ruin and your people to derision; you will bear the scorn of the nations."

"Stand up! Plead your case before the mountains!" God is calling his people to account and summoning the mountains to be the witnesses. God has a history of meeting with his people on mountains - giving Noah the rainbow and promise on Mt. Ararat, meeting with Moses at Sinai, displaying his power to Elijah and the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel. These mountains have seen God's history with Israel. Calling the creation to bear witness marks the seriousness of God's charges against the people.

"My people" - God addresses the people pleadingly, reminding Israel of their identity in relationship to God - they belong to God. "What have I done to you? How have I burdened you?" You can hear the pain in God's voice. "Answer me." The command is direct and passionate.

Then God tells the people their story again - the story they were commanded to tell their children and their children's children. The story of how God made them a people and gave them a land to live in. "I brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from slavery . . . remember what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered?" Can it be that you've forgotten? How the King of Moab tried to curse you and hired Balaam to curse you before you came into the land, but I wouldn't let them. "Remember your journey"? Remember how at Shittim the priests with the Ark of the Covenant stood in the Jordan and the water parted while you passed over into Gilgal? Remember how you took 12 stones from the river and set them up as a memorial? Remember your past "that you may know the righteous acts of God."

And the people get defensive. "What do you want from me?" Some money? Some sacri-

fices? How about a thousand rams? No, that won't please you. Ten thousand rivers of oil? Not enough for you. Do you want my child - will that make it up to you? Nothing's ever enough.

Do you hear your own voice in those responses? I know I can. It's never enough. There's always going to be something I should have done and didn't. No matter which needs I meet, there's always going to be more. You do the best you can - shouldn't that make God happy?

You can hear the fear behind the voices too - God, are you going to take from me what I care about most? Are you going to ask of me what you asked of Abraham? Or worse? "the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

Then the voice of the prophet. The pleading and yelling stop. "God has showed you, Oh people, what is good. What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Oh.

And then the prophet pleads, "Listen, the Lord is calling to the city". Warning, "You will eat, but not be satisfied" "Because of your sins, I have begun to destroy you" for you have forgotten the poor and you have forgotten me.

We know that, don't we. The eating but not being satisfied part. When we stop long enough, there's an emptiness, a longing. We work so hard, but we don't feel like we ever catch up. We do all the right things but don't find the approval we're seeking. We say all the right words, but they don't seem to mean much. Nothing satisfies.

And when we choose to look, we know the destruction part too. Dr. Ellen Charry, in one of her essays, observes that the children of the poor are like the canary in the mineshaft for our culture. Miners used to take a canary down into mine shafts with them as a way of watching oxygen levels - if the bird died, they would die. Whatever is happening to the children of the poor, is coming for us too. We're seeing how violence and despair are not limited to the inner-city or the Third World.

The prophet speaks of dishonest scales, of ill-gotten treasure, of riches connected with violence. Most of us know our clothes were made in sweatshops, our coffee and sugar were picked and harvested by laborers trapped in unfair share-cropping situations; we know as white North Americans we have privileges we don't deserve.

“Because of your sins, I have begun to destroy you.” Our situation is serious; our hands are not clean.

And yet, there’s the sneaky bit of hope in this passage. The prophet’s words “God has showed you what is good. . . Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” What does God require of us? What do we need to do to find the wholeness and belonging we so desperately seek? To be satisfied? To bring restoration instead of judgment? To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. All three - if *any* are missing we experience destruction.

To do justice. God has reminded the people again, as they are standing, summoned before the mountains, of their story together. How God saw and heard the cries of the oppressed poor. Over and over again throughout laws and covenant God called and calls his people to share his concern for the poor. Jesus began his ministry proclaiming good news for the poor and challenged his disciples - whatever you do for the least of these, you’ve done to me. What does the Lord require of you? Do Justice. What does that mean? Maybe it means taking the bus to school instead of your car so we don’t use an unfair amount of the world’s resources; maybe it means recognizing your position of privilege and using it to connect people with resources they wouldn’t otherwise have access to. Do Justice.

Love mercy. The story of Jonah being rescued from the whale and then angry at God’s mercy to the evil Ninevites comes to mind. So does Jesus parable of the unforgiving servant, who had a huge debt forgiven and then tried to throw

someone in jail who only owed him a small amount. Micah reminds us of God’s merciful care, in leading the people out of Egypt, guiding them through the desert even though they grumbled, protecting them from a curse by the king of Moab, and bringing them safely into the land. And we’ve tasted God’s mercy in being chosen to know and be known by Jesus Christ. Love mercy. What does that mean? Choosing to forgive. Period.

Walk humbly with your God. Judgement comes when we turn from mercy, when we do not do justice, but it also comes when we forget who we are in relationship to God. Israel gets called to task because they’ve forgotten the story, they forgot to whom they belong. Just as God called and set apart the people of Israel, God in Christ calls and sets us apart to walk with him. And it may mean walking to a cross. Neither doing justice or loving mercy are possible for long without prayer. Walk humbly with your God. Take time to sit still and listen.

The wholeness and belonging we long for, are available. We find them when we live as God designed and intends us to live: doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God. That’s the sneaky bit of hope - what we long for, God longs to give us.

Amen.



# A Pastoral Response to Henri J. M. Nouwen's "The Self-availability of the Homosexual"

By Ben Meyer

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## **Are Homosexual Feelings Less Human or Less Real than Heterosexual Feelings?**

I find that it is difficult for me to *think well* about pastoral care for homosexual persons. I have a feeling that this stems from the fact that understanding a homosexual requires an unusual stretch of empathy for the heterosexual pastoral caregiver. As a heterosexual it is hard for me to imagine or understand what it is like to be gay. I can empathize with a person who struggles with almost every kind of sin because those struggles are mine as well. But when I, then, try to empathize with those who struggle with homosexual urges and tendencies, I find myself on the other side of a wide gulf of understanding.

For this reason Henri J. M. Nouwen's article entitled "The Self-availability of the Homosexual" is both insightful and provocative for me as a reader. One particularly insightful and provocative statement that Nouwen makes is that "it is pretentious and dangerous to suggest that homosexual feelings are less human, less real, or less authentic than heterosexual feelings" (210).

This comment is insightful because it very strongly indicates that Nouwen believes that homosexual feelings are very much part of the human person. They are very real, not conjured; they are absolutely authentic; not imagined. It is important to realize this because it is my sense that the general societal homophobia with which we are all familiar tends to consider a homosexual's feelings as somehow conjured up or imagined. I find myself, at times, supposing in some ways that homosexuals display or make known their urges and feelings either for attention or for masochistic satisfaction when they are abhorred.

Nouwen's same comment is not only insightful, but it is also provocative. At first glance Nouwen's claim is provocative because most of the heterosexual population may likely disagree with what he says. My initial tendency is to think, "It in

*no way* is pretentious or dangerous to suggest that homosexual feelings are less human, less real, or less authentic than heterosexual feelings—because *that's the way things are*. Homosexual feelings are *abnormal*, thus they *are* less human, less real, and less authentic than heterosexual feelings." But is that really true or is my initial tendency merely a knee-jerk visceral reaction?

To answer this question I've got to zero-in on the crux of the statement. Is it true or false that homosexual feelings are less human or less real/authentic than heterosexual feelings? When the issue is examined up close in this way, I am forced to conclude that it cannot be true that homosexual feelings are less human or less real/authentic than heterosexual feelings. To defend my claim I must back up and explain my presuppositions or the premises that lie beneath my conclusion. Those presuppositions or premises are what I understand to be a proper Reformed anthropology. But what do I mean by that?

A proper Reformed anthropology must minimally include the following (i.e. what is given below is not meant to be exhaustive):

- Humans (both men and women) are created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27).
- Humans are given the responsibility to rule or have dominion over all the earth and its creatures (Genesis 1:26, 28).
- Humans are created to live in harmony and communion with both the Creator and the creation (Genesis 2:18, 20-24, 3:8-11).
- It is normative for erotic love to be a characteristic of solely the marital relationship (one male and one female) (Genesis 2:24-25, 4:1). When erotic love occurs outside of the marital relationship it is condemned (Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:26-27).

- God’s good creation and intentions (as outlined in the four “bullets” above) were all seriously marred and disrupted by the Fall when Adam and Eve rebelled against God (Genesis 3).
- It should be further added that *all* aspects of life (including human sexuality) are negatively affected by the Fall and our own sin. Not one single aspect of human existence is untouched by the effects of sin.
- Jesus Christ, who came to this earth as the perfect God-man, was crucified, died, was buried, and rose again to overcome the effects of sin and death in the creation (Ephesians 2:4-5). However, only those humans who recognize their *need* for a Savior because of their sin will be redeemed/made new/rescued from the deathly effects of sin (Romans 6:1-14).
- At Christ’s second coming he will renew the heavens and earth forever—sin will no longer be found in the new creation (Isaiah 65:17-25, Revelation 21:1-8, 22:12-15).

These are the tenets which I hold to be essential for a proper Reformed anthropology. These claims are the basis for my evaluative conclusion that it cannot be true that homosexual feelings are less human or less real/authentic than heterosexual feelings because *everything* human (whether homosexual or heterosexual) is adversely affected by the Fall and by our own sin. Sin *does not* make us less human or falsify/unauthenticate our feelings/experiences, but it *does* mar and disrupt both our humanity and our feelings/experiences, whether we be homosexual or heterosexual.

I must make one final comment having said what I have said above. Perfect (i.e. untainted by sin) heterosexual feelings must have existed before the Fall because God made man and woman heterosexual; perfect homosexual feelings could not have existed before the Fall because that’s not the way God created humanity. In addition, it is possible in the here and now (i.e. before Christ’s second coming) for there to be good and rightly-aimed heterosexual feelings in the lives of persons, whereas such a statement could never be

made (at any point in time) for homosexual feelings for they are never good nor can they ever be rightly-aimed. In sum, after a careful analysis, I agree with Nouwen’s comment in question, but I disagree with other comments he makes, for example: “...[N]ot the homosexual feelings themselves but the strong resistance against them causes the many personal problems with which homosexual people are burdened” (208). I would allege that it is *both* the feelings and the resistance against them cause personal problems for homosexual people.

### **Is a Pastoral Response to the Struggles of Homosexual Persons Possible?**

Given that I have already indicated above that I agree with Nouwen’s comment on page 210, I would also allow that this comment could helpfully inform a pastoral/empathic response to the struggles of gay, bisexual, and lesbian persons, especially as pastoral care relates to guarding the often damaged self-esteem of homosexual persons, although probably only in a limited way.

To get at the heart of the issue right away, let me very succinctly state how I see that Nouwen’s comment could helpfully inform a pastoral response (albeit in a limited way) to the struggles of homosexual persons. Very simply, the pastor must never convey in any way to the homosexual person by way of the dynamics of their relationship that homosexual feelings are less human or less real than heterosexual feelings. In other words, what must come first is the relationship.

For a relationship to grow and flourish its parties must be open and receptive to one another at all times. This does not imply that judgments or evaluations ought *never* to have part of any relationship for openness and receptivity require honesty in love, but this does imply that, at least at the outset, openness and receptivity can only be cultivated when judgments are reserved.

Human experience teaches us that it is frequently (if not always) wisest to refrain from “jumping to conclusions” when one encounters an experience in life which does not immediately fit within one’s life-frame of reference. Our initial encounters are usually so narrowly limited in scope that we need to give time for the picture to widen and many more of the facts of reality to seep into our consciousness. (I am speaking primarily here of my experiences and encounters with other cul-

tures.)

What I have said above automatically relates and applies to an understanding of pastoral care that would guard the often-damaged self-esteem of homosexual persons. Admittedly with homosexual persons the self-esteem is likely to be damaged to a greater degree, I think that the cultivation of a relationship must be aware of the possibility of damaging the other party's self-esteem when the relationship does not proceed along proper lines.

What I mean is that when personal judgments or evaluations are made of the other party at an early stage in *any* relationship, the possibility of damaging the other's self-esteem is likely. It is only within the safe confines of a deep and knowledgeable relationship (between pastor and heterosexual parishioner or pastor and homosexual parishioner) that more critical statements can be made. Much here is left up to the wisdom and discretion of the pastor, for a homosexual's self-esteem may be damaged to such a great degree that one may not even want to consider any other kind of pastoral response other than an empathic one for the duration of the relationship. This is a very delicate situation.

### **How Can the Christian Community Make Room for Homosexual Persons?**

This is not an easy question to answer because a great part of the Christian community (in the U.S.) has a hard time making room or time for a lot of things that it ought to make room or time for, such as: getting in the ditch with people who need help, actively pursuing opportunities to share the gospel, and desiring to see God's kingdom advanced more than acquiring their own personal wealth. I am just as guilty of these things. So, on the one hand, it comes as no surprise that the Christian community is reluctant to make room for homosexual persons in their congregations, but, on the other hand, it is surprising that the Christian community has a hard time making room or time for any of the things I've given above seeing that God's Spirit dwells richly among his people.

Let me then lay out some initial thoughts that make begin to touch on some ways in which the Christian community can make room for homosexual persons so that they experience care and acceptance as fellow children of God:

- The Christian community must pray fervently for the Holy Spirit to clearly reveal its corporate sins and miseries, and for the courage and conviction to repent and change what is revealed to them.
- The church must collectively celebrate expressions of new life in Christ in their midst as well as sorrowfully mourn manifestations of the in-growth of sin in their midst.
- The church must not place a higher priority on Christian fellowship (i.e. church = social club) than on Christian witness (i.e. church = body of Christ).
- The church should promote public personal expressions/testimonies of God's grace in one's life.
- The church must not require anything more of its homosexual members than it requires of its single heterosexual members.
- The church must enfold homosexual persons into the life of the church in the same way that it enfolds heterosexual persons.
- The church must fearlessly and frequently proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ for *all* those who believe.

This bulleted list is only a very small and weak beginning for how the Christian community or church can begin to make room for homosexual persons in their midst. I find it somewhat difficult to separate the problem of making room for homosexual persons from making room and time for the other things I have given above that are required of the church. I am reluctant to make a "special case" for making room for homosexual persons in the church over and against making room for other persons and activities, yet I realize that it is high time for the church to begin to make room for homosexual persons so that they can experience care and acceptance as fellow children of God among the people of God.

# Mixed Messages: Ordination of Women in ecclesiastical office

By Ken Vander Horst

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No other issue has caused the Christian Reformed Church greater strife than the ordination of women into ecclesiastical office. As the issue raged in the denomination at the end of the 20th century, emotions and rhetoric were both raised to unprecedented levels, while the membership records experienced departure at a similarly unprecedented scale. While many argued that it was an issue that hinged around the denomination's traditional understanding of the Bible and the interpretation of it, one wonders about the sociological or ideological forces at work in the denomination.

If one considers the history of the ordination of women in the 20th century in Canada, one finds that the issue did not occur in churches apart from the culturally-situated character of Christianity. At the end of the 19th century, a certain Mrs. Peabody, at the meeting of the Maritime Baptist Woman's Missionary Union, remarked: "God intended women to be homemakers, to be teachers, especially of little children, and to take care of sick people."<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, as evidenced in Mrs. Peabody's comments, the church has struggled with the cultural norms and ideas that other institutions of society also faced. Indeed, as Fletcher-Marsh writes, "No healthy religion is immune to the needs, demands, changes and particular circumstances of its culture. Christianity is no exception."<sup>2</sup> Thus as a society changes, the church is given an opportunity to reexamine its practices and policies. The story of the ordination of women in Canadian churches may demonstrate this truth most poignantly, for Canadian culture propagated a mixed message: women were simultaneously encouraged and discouraged to take leadership roles in the Christian church.

Prior to the 20th century, women were serving as preachers in some contexts. In fact, one could argue that women had greater freedom to

exercise power and authority in earlier times in Canada than in the late 19th century. In the Methodist tradition, women were afforded an opportunity to preach already in Canada in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Between 1885 and 1910 more than thirty Methodist women worked as evangelists, and were especially good at it because of their willingness to be cooperative with pastors. Native women were also preaching in Methodist missions as early as 1875.

In British Columbia there was a tradition of missionary women that dates back to the earliest days of missionary activity in the province and that cuts across denomination lines — Anglicans, Presbyterians and Methodists all had missionaries preaching in the 1890s. Whitehead concludes: "There is no evidence that British Columbia's women missionaries had to engage in a power struggle with male clergy in order to preach."<sup>3</sup> Given that prevailing thought in Victorian society understood women as naturally nurturing, moral, and religious, many Christian traditions accepted women not only in public morality campaigns, but also in leadership roles in churches, especially for the sake of other women and children who could benefit from women missionaries and frontier preachers.

But while accepted in preaching and missions, women's roles were also qualified. Women missionaries were not accepted not as equal partners in the work of ministry. Rather, women's involvement arose from the pressing needs of frontier missionary endeavours, either due to expansion or the absence of men. It seems that women's involvement in evangelism was accepted because their arena of service was in a "pre-Christian culture." As Christianity became established through denominational presence on the frontier, women's roles in evangelism declined, further indicating that the contemporary Christian culture was reflecting other Victorian understandings of women — that their place was in

the home, raising children, while men were more rightly to lead in the public world, especially in areas of politics and business. The mixed message of Victorian thought was accepting and yet limiting.

Indeed, as the 19th century progressed, the role of women in society became limited by “constraints of law, attitude, and tradition, and predictably lay in the fields of service which, as was assumed, women were uniquely designed to fill.”<sup>4</sup> It was considered neither appropriate or respectable for women to be taking leading roles outside of the home, and consequently the number of women preaching declined as churches sought to “become more respectable.”<sup>5</sup> The Gospel Workers Church, a revival movement in Grey County, Ontario, serves as an example. One-third of its leaders were women. But as it grew and became established, eventually joining the Church of the Nazarene, opportunities for women’s leadership declined, as it “shift[ed] in identity towards denominational respectability.”<sup>6</sup> Ignoring a rich history of women serving in frontier ministry contexts, churches became increasingly doubtful that women could handle the dangers of gospel service:

To take a young woman of eighteen or twenty years of age and send her as a probationer to some of our large rural circuits and expect her to ride muddy, lonely roads at all hours of the night, as our young men have to do is, to many of us, an unthinkable thing.<sup>7</sup>

When an Anglican order for women was being formed, founders had to grapple with the “fear that virtuous women might become tainted by association with the fallen.”<sup>8</sup> In addition to the fear factor, women were also considered to be limited in their abilities to take on serious commitments to church leadership, due to their commitments to their families. Furthermore, the flip side of the view that women were weak and that their respectable place was at home, was a view that men needed to exhibit strong masculine values of strength, courage, and purpose. The Church bought both sides of the coin. At the outset of the 20th century, the Presbyterian Church’s periodical was proclaiming that it was “The Day of

the Men” in the church and that the pastor’s job was a “man’s job.”<sup>9</sup> Imagine hundreds of male voices crooning:

Shout aloud the stirring summons  
O’er the land from sea to sea,  
Men are wanted, men of courage,  
For the man of Galilee.  
Men are wanted, men of purpose,  
Men of high or low degree,  
Each to be a fellow worker  
With the man of Galilee.<sup>10</sup>

Korinek concludes that, because the ministry was lacking a male-defined identity, clergy forgot that women had served capably in missionary capacities on the frontier and resisted including women because of fears of feminization, while puffing up their image:

The minister must be a man — a real human man — and a minister by the consecrating of that manhood to the service of the church. There is a rugged manhood in the West which one must admire, and something of the same quality, however differently embodied, is required in the one who ministers to the people in spiritual realities.<sup>11</sup>

As churches “progressed” into the 20th century, one sees a continuation of the mixed message for women. In a 1927 United Church report on the matter, it was stated that “Women are biologically predetermined to fulfill their lifelong vocation: motherhood.”<sup>12</sup> But because of the shortage of available men after World War One, many women were trained theologically and given leadership roles, particularly within the Anglican Church on the frontier. They were often given responsibilities — such as preaching and leading worship — usually reserved only for males. Such women, while challenging the myth of “women’s weakness” by having to drive in hazardous conditions as well as repair vehicles, were yet deemed substitutes for male preachers. One particular group of women, the Order of St. Faith’s in the Diocese of Brandon, also known as the Bishop’s Messengers, took up the “special task of ministering to people for whom the Church could

not find an ordained man”<sup>13</sup> in response to a mixed message. They were formed as an organization in England in the 1920s, given rigorous biblical and theological training and duties, including conducting services and pastoral care, including baptizing and funerals when no deacon or priest was available. But they were not allowed to administer the Eucharist until they were ordained into the office of deacon. In their work they encountered both opposition and recognition as those willing to do work for which no men were willing or available. When four Bishop’s Messengers were ordained as deacons in September 1971 in the Diocese of Brandon, many parishioners were confused — “I thought she was already ordained!”<sup>14</sup> Four Bishop’s Messengers were ordained as priests in 1977, for as Fletcher-Marsh assesses, “In dioceses where people had known the ministry of the Messengers, the decision to ordain women in the mid-1970s was made readily and enthusiastically. They had known firsthand the quality of women’s ministry.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, mixed messages caused confusion not simply for women, but all parishioners.

But while both encouraged and discouraged in leadership, women continued to be promoted for other ministry work. Had it not been for active Anglican nuns, and in spite of the distrust of anything that resembled Roman Catholicism, many hospitals, schools and orphanages would never have existed. Women’s roles in such work was not questioned, for “[i]n hospital and school missions women’s work was seen as the expression of women’s nature: nurturant, rescuing, protecting.”<sup>16</sup> Hill continues: “many women whose official work was nurse, teacher, or matron laboured outside those categories” — such as “keeping Sunday services going, instructing the congregation in church life, and ministering to the sick.”<sup>17</sup> Even in universally accepted church work for women there was a mixed message.

Strikingly, women were not actively involved in the promotion of women into ordained ministry. While the editors of the women’s pages of *Missionary Outlook* promoted women’s rights to preach as early as 1902,<sup>18</sup> but neither women’s groups, nor Lydia Gruchy, the first ordained woman in Canada, undertook an organized effort. The Bishop’s Messengers “apparently never were as concerned for themselves and their place in the

Church as they were with their outreach to the areas they served.”<sup>19</sup> Nellie McClung, famous for her work in championing women’s rights to vote, participated sporadically in the ordination issue, but her wit and determination often was detrimental when dealing with the hierarchy. It seems that women were paralyzed — for while determined women were more likely to ascend to leadership, “the same traits that gave success might inspire strong resistance.”<sup>20</sup> The very thinking that needed to be challenged prevented women from voicing challenge.

An exception to the rule that women did not champion the cause of women’s ordination was Emily Spencer Kirby, who, with the pen name of Constance Lynd, was busy writing in the 1920s:

If she is fit to give birth to men, to care for them, train them and to preach, is she not deemed fit to administer the sacrament or marry? ... Only three places are still closed to woman ... the Senate, the Ministry, and the beer parlours ... She is the one who first teaches the infant lips to lisp the name of Jesus; she it is who first endeavours to set the tiny feet in the right paths - yet when it comes to that day when these same children are of an age to be taken into the church — only men stand at the altar, to receive them.<sup>21</sup>

The role of challenging Canadian thinking on women’s ordination was, in line with such thinking, left to male leadership. E.H. Oliver, a mentor to Lydia Gruchy, wrote in the *Presbyterian Witness* “There is the demand of simple justice, for women carry the burden of church work no less than men ... At root the objections are still artificial, ascetic, medieval, and I fear, unchristian.” This article actually went without commentary from editors, clergy, and laity!

Fletcher Marsh outlines how the upper levels of church’s hierarchy — especially the participants of the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican House of Bishops, and eventually the General Synod of 1975, thanks in large part to the Primate of the Anglican Church, Edward Scott — took the initiative to ordain women as priests. Fletcher

concludes: "Episcopal leadership appears to have been the single most determinative factor in the positions adopted within dioceses."<sup>22</sup> The only organized opposition came from the clergy, 200 of which signed a letter in the national church paper protesting the decision of 1975, arguing that it was not in the "divine economy" for women to be priests, that it was abandoning Anglican heritage, and that it should not act alone in Christendom. Still, Anglican clergy were overwhelmingly supportive.

Indeed, through the leadership of male clergy, Lydia E. Gruchy was ordained as minister in the United Church of Canada in 1936. However, Korinek demonstrates that this event was the beginning, not the end of a struggle for the place of women in the ordained ministry of the UCC.<sup>23</sup> The issue had been dismissed at the General Assembly of 1922, where the mixed message of the Overture Committee's report was:

The Assembly recognizes gladly and thankfully the ministry of women whether in an official or non-official capacity, in very many departments of the Church's work. Congregational activities depend very largely on the devotion and sacrifice of multitudes of women, both younger and older ... The inference of these facts, however, that the whole work of the pastorate can be fully performed by a woman does not indubitably follow.<sup>24</sup>

Rather than an issue of biblical interpretation or theology or ecclesiastical tradition, Korinek reports that, "arguments for and against women's ordination concerned the firmly entrenched stereotypes about gender roles and the intricate dance of gender and society."<sup>25</sup> She quotes one who was vigorously opposed: "What the Church needs at the present time is not more femininity but more masculinity ... Will the work of the Church be made more attractive to strong virile manhood by the proposed ordination of women?"<sup>26</sup> In spite of such thinking influencing the church, the denominational vote in 1934 indicated over 80 percent in favour, and by the mid 1960s, it was left to individual presbyteries

to decide the merit of each candidate.

The Anglican Church experienced a later start to the process of ordaining women. A 1955 task force report entitled "Future Patterns of Women's Work in the Church" began the redefinition of gender-based spheres and roles, revealing the two fears that undergirded opposition to inclusion of women: women are unsuited for leadership, and women would "swamp" the structures. It recommended that women no longer be kept from full participation in the life of the church, including ordained leadership.<sup>27</sup> But the majority in the Church yet saw ordained women ministers as an exception more than a rule.

As a result, women clergy in the Anglican Church often ended up in "second-class" positions, as did those in the United Church. Gruchy's first post lasted only two years, and then she was assigned to a non-ordained position. Even when the UCC experienced a huge shortage in the 1940s and 50s, it did not try to increase the number of female recruits, even though it was using female student ministers to fill empty charges. Fears that absentee mothers, and disharmony in the home (especially when the woman is a better preacher than her preacher husband) were still prominent. At St. James Cathedral, Canada's leading Anglican Church, did not get a woman priest until 1991, thanks in large part to Dean Stiff who was purported to have said "There'll be no tits in the chancel."<sup>28</sup>

Women's acceptance as ministers and priests may also have been mitigated by the development of the ordained office of deaconess. As the UCC was wrestling with the ordination of women in the 1920s, it established for women an ordained diaconate, allowing deaconesses to perform all duties except Eucharist. Originally called "handmaidens" they worked as ministerial assistants in poor conditions with poor pay, especially during World War Two, because of a shortage of male ministers. In the Anglican Church, the office of deaconess already established in 1861 and was deemed by the Lambeth Conference of 1930 as not equivalent to the office of deacon.

A woman's calling to motherhood also curtailed women's acceptance as minister. Margaret Butler was denied ordination in the UCC in 1946 because she was married and had a child.

A 1948 UCC commission recommended that women candidates provide a certificate of emotional stability necessary for social adjustments, and that pregnant ministers resign, and still in 1962 a UCC report showed a fear about the threat to the family should a woman continue her ordination and thus jeopardize her calling to family. Indeed, as Korinek concludes, it seems that the rise of women's ordination in Canada had little to do with biblical or historical understandings, and much to do with gender ideology and the role and position of the minister in society,<sup>29</sup> with all the mixed messages that it entailed.

As the 20th century waned, thinking on culture in Canada changed, as did attitudes in Canadian Churches about women's ordination, but mixed messages still lingered. By 1986, 10% of clergy and 50% of theological students in the UCC were women, though it was hard for women to get positions, and mostly found themselves in multi-point rural charges. Since 1991, all dioceses in the Anglican Church have women as ordained ministers. In 1966 the Presbyterian Church of Canada first allowed for women ministers and elders and by 1982 there were 60 women ministers in the PCC. The Lutheran Church also was ordaining women by the 1980s though women in that denomination reported resistance in seminary.

What results does the observer of the Canadian Church's experience in women's ordination find? Undoubtedly, the resistance women experienced and the struggle to gain acceptance as ordained ministers and recognition of their calling brought Christian women workers together under the same experience. Huyck writes of this in the American churches — how seminary gave women an opportunity to meet with other women facing the same issues and to develop networks, and how women experienced tension as they prepared intellectually for ministry without certainty of acceptance and available positions available.<sup>30</sup> Scholarship surveyed for this paper was strangely quiet on the phenomenon of shared experience.

Another possible result is that women, while gaining access to ordained positions, lost their unique place and contribution in voluntary associations, where they had flourished and clearly surpassed men's associations. As women had been

excluded from participation in ordained capacities in the church, women had responded by establishing their own ministries, thus creating a rich tradition of women's ministry already before ordination. Bradbrook hypothesizes that such associations arose because in the 19th century women were "trapped at home with domestic affairs." Women's groups helped provide a sense that they were "furthering the work of the Church which in all other ways excluded them from its courts, decision making, and ordained ministry."<sup>31</sup> Muir and Whiteley add that as women were excluded from leadership, they were forced to be determined and creative in living out their callings, developing popular and effective projects.<sup>32</sup> But as churches granted access to positions that were traditionally reserved for men, opportunities for creative lay work were closed. Hill contends that "professionalization and a clericalist focus achieved ordination at the cost of long-established lay ministries,"<sup>33</sup> such as the famous Bishop's Messengers, which was disbanded in 1979 because of lack of interest.

Perhaps most surprising to the Christian Reformed observer is that in the Canadian Churches' experience, the matter of women's ordination had little to do with scripture and churches' confessional traditions. Even though the CRC may have had, and continues to have strong feelings about women's ordination, articulated at both the grassroots level as well as at ecclesiastical assemblies, CRC ought not be alarmed at the lack of fervour for Scripture's guidance on the matter for so many other Christian traditions in Canada. Christianity in Canada has always been culturally situated, as sociologist Reginald Bibby has demonstrated.<sup>34</sup> Moreover Christian Reformed theologians have continually emphasized that God works through culture — Scripture itself is a product of God working organically through human culture. Thus the development of the church's practices, attitudes and mixed messages towards culture are not surprisingly far from the practice, attitudes, and messages of broader culture.

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# A Call to Reunification and Restoration

By Amy Schenkel

A sermon on Ezekiel 37:15-28

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Ezekiel, a prophet with a priestly background, did not have a popular job. In a time of political upheaval he spoke to an audience of his peers, and his message was not what they wanted to hear. Instead of assuring them they would soon return to their beloved Jerusalem, Ezekiel warned them that they would fall into exile and Jerusalem would be destroyed. Yet, the responsibility for this destruction was their own, for they did not heed the words of the Lord (9:9-10; 30:31).

However, the book of Ezekiel does not end with the same message of gloom and doom. After Jerusalem fell, Ezekiel's message became one of hope. Not only was Ezekiel offering comfort during a time of despair, the Lord was concerned with his holy name among the nations. Because Israel's punishment left the nations unsure of God's greatness, the Lord decides to restore his holy name by restoring Israel (36:16-38). It is in this message of hope that Ezekiel 37:15-28 is found, a message given through symbolic action. It is a message from God to his people, told by Ezekiel in first person.

The boundaries for this pericope are clear. Internally, the evidence for beginning with verse 15 is the phrase "The word of the Lord came to me." This phrase also begins many other pericopes, including the following one, and shows a new revelation. The final verse of the pericope shares a similar structure with other pericope-concluding verses, and is a variation the recognition formula.

Externally, the evidence supports these verses as a single unit because of the change in literary genre. The previous revelation from the Lord was through a vision. Ezekiel 37:15-28 uses a symbolic action and an explanation of its meaning, and the following pericope is words from the Lord. Furthermore, the purpose of this pericope is different than the previous one. Ezekiel 37:14 concludes

the pericope in which the Lord shows Ezekiel a vision of dry bones coming to life. The dry bones represent Israel, and verse 14 says the reason Israel will be resurrected is so that "you will know that I the Lord have spoken." The same phrase structure is used in Ezekiel 37:28, the end of the chosen pericope, but now the purpose is to make *the nations* know that the Lord made Israel holy.

This passage begins with a visual illustration and ends with a verbal explanation of the message. According to Leslie C. Allen, this structure is a question and answer format typically used by Ezekiel to show a symbolic action and to tell about its meaning. The visual illustration (15a-19f) is held together with three key verbs: take, write, and join. Twice the Lord tells Ezekiel to take a stick of wood and to write on it. Then the Lord tells Ezekiel to join them together so they will "become one in your hand." The Lord tells Ezekiel to explain the symbolic act using the same verbs: the Lord will take Israel and join it to Judah, so they will "become one in my hand." The repeated phrase "become one in my hand" also ties the visual illustration together.

The verbal illustration (20a-28c) also has a repeating pattern. The Lord's words begin with a message about the land, he will take and gather the Israelites and bring them back into their own land (21c-21e). Then the Lord says he *will make* them one nation, and there *will be* one king over them (22a-22b). Following this decree the Lord gives information about Israel remaining clean and holy (22c-23c). Then the Lord says a familiar Old Testament phrase, "They will be my people and I will be their God" (23d-23e). The pattern then repeats itself in the last part of the Lord's speech. The Lord brings a message about the land, this time that Israel and her descendents will live in the land forever (25a-25d). Then the Lord says he *will make* a

covenant of peace and it *will be* an everlasting covenant (26a-26b). Following this decree the Lord gives more information about Israel's holiness, that God will dwell with them, which is only possible in a holy place (26c-27a). Finally, the Lord repeats the phrase "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (27b-27c). This repetition leads up to the climactic verse of this passage, the purpose behind the Lord's actions: "Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever."

A closer look at particular words and phrases that relate to the overall themes in this passage will give depth to our understanding of its complete meaning. Many of the words and phrases show the relationship between this passage and Ezekiel's other prophecies, as well as other Bible passages.

The words inscribed on the two sticks indicate what they symbolize. On the first stick the Lord instructed Ezekiel to write "Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him." In 930 BC the Israelite Kingdom had divided, and "[O]nly the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the house of David" (I Kings 12:20b). They were subsequently called the Southern Kingdom. Ezekiel inscribed the words "Ephraim's stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him" on the second stick. Ephraim, Joseph's second son, is associated with the Northern Kingdom, the people who broke away from Judah (Isaiah 7:17). Therefore, the two sticks symbolize the two divided kingdoms.

Werner E. Lemke, professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, points out that the division into two kingdoms was never granted "religious validity by many Israelites," including the prophets. In fact, Ezekiel used the name "Israel" to refer to all of God's people.

Yet, the division was many generations deep and must have been a way of life for most people. In verse 17 we learn that Ezekiel is to take the two sticks, representing the two nations, and to "join them together" so they will become one. Therefore, the Lord anticipates the question that will come from Ezekiel's countrymen (18b-c). Just as in Ezekiel 24:19, when the people wonder about Ezekiel's wife's death and his lack of sorrow, the people know that Ezekiel's prophetic actions here

are not without meaning. A prophet's whole life, including his actions, is involved in telling God's message.

Whether this is a literal joining together, or a symbolic one, the meaning is still the same. The two nations, Israel and Judah, will become one (19f). Other prophetic texts also point to this unity. Hosea 1:11 says "the people of Judah and the people of Israel will be reunited..." Isaiah 11:13 and Jeremiah 50:4 also say they will be reunited.

The Lord's words "gather" and "bring them back" in 21d-e are a recurring theme throughout Ezekiel. Even in the first part of Ezekiel, when Ezekiel is proclaiming judgment on Israel, he offers these words of hope. Ezekiel 11:17 says, "...I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again." See also Ezekiel 20:42, 36:24, and 39:27.

The people will be gathered back into the land. Their forefathers had been in the promised land as a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. The land symbolized fellowship with the Lord. Yet, the people did not fulfill their end of the covenant because they did not follow the laws and decrees of the Lord while living in the land. Therefore, they were subject to the judgment Ezekiel talks about in the first part of his prophecy. However, now the Lord says he will bring them back into the land, a sign of promise and hope for this nation.

Verse 22 says they will be one nation, on the mountains of Israel, an example of the type of imagery often found in poetry. There are other references to the mountains of Israel in Ezekiel, such as in 6:2-3 when the Lord says, "Son of man, set your face against the mountains of Israel...O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Sovereign Lord." In this context the mountains of Israel seem to have a negative connotation, but in Ezekiel 37:14 it appears positively: "There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel." One might draw the conclusion that the mountains of Israel refer to the people of Israel, but in Ezekiel 36:8 both are mentioned separately: "But you, O mountains of Israel, will produce branches and fruit for my people Israel, for they will soon come home."

One understanding of the meaning of these

mountains is that they represent the scene of salvation. This makes sense in the context of this passage. Israel's restoration to God will take place as one nation in the land, and it will be their key to salvation. Those who are saved can be in God's presence. According to Keel, mountains often represented temples or paradise in the Old Testament, other places where God dwells.

This passage uses kingship language to portray the future kingdom. In 22b the Lord says there will be one king over the people, and in 24a he says David will be that king. Obviously, since David lived about 300 years before Ezekiel's prophecy, this phrase cannot be taken literally. Later, in 25d, David is called their "prince." It appears that "king" and "prince" could be interchangeable, as in Ezekiel 7:27. Whatever the case, the kingship language does imply a hierarchy. In Ezekiel 34:24 the Lord says that He will be the king, while he will install an earthly leader as the prince. Furthermore, David is always called a servant in this passage (24a, 25d), one who serves the Lord.

Professor Lemke claims that David symbolizes Israelite unity in this passage, as opposed to a specific historical figure. Lemke also says that the messianic motif is muted in this passage. However, throughout the Bible the Messiah is referred to as the Son of David because he will be David's descendant. Since all prophecies (and all of Scripture) finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, it is important to see this leader as an actual historical figure- the Messiah.

This leader is also referred to as the shepherd in 24b. Ezekiel 34 uses the imagery of shepherd and sheep extensively. In that chapter the Lord is frustrated with the inabilities of the current shepherds (leaders) of the people because they have let the sheep (people) be scattered. Verses 34:11-16 say that the Lord himself will take over the job of shepherd; the Lord will look for his lost sheep and bring them back into the fold again. The previous shepherd leaders were types of the antitype, the Lord. To the Israelites this meant they would be brought back into the promised land, and into fellowship with God, as one nation of God's people.

The phrase "they will be my people, and I will be their God" (23d-e, 27b-c) reminds us of the words the Lord spoke in the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 17) and in the New Covenant (Jeremiah

31:33). The first time this covenant was based on the condition that Israel remained obedient. However, the new covenant is an unconditional promise, given to God's people only through God's grace, not because of anything his people earned. Ezekiel 26 calls the new covenant a covenant of peace, a phrase also found in Ezekiel 37:26, an everlasting covenant.

Finally, parts of this passage refer to God's holiness. In the Old Testament the Lord gave the Israelites rules for remaining clean. The Lord would only be present with them when they were clean and holy. 24c says the Lord will cleanse them from their sinful backsliding, much like the Israelites were to be cleansed through sacrifice. The Israelites could stay clean and holy by following God's laws and decrees (24c-d). Because the Lord has cleansed the Israelites, he can put his sanctuary, his dwelling place, with them forever (26d-e). The passage ends with this declaration: "Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever."

These many key phrases and words show the important themes woven through this passage. The most important theme is a message of hope to God's people. Ezekiel's message of hope is already sprinkled throughout his judgment to Israel and the nations (11:17; 16:60-63; 20:42, etc.), but it becomes a major theme in the last part of his prophecy. In this passage we learn that the Israelites can have hope because God has established an everlasting covenant of peace with them. This covenant is not based on anything the Israelites have done, but only on God's grace and mercy. It is possible because the Lord will cleanse his people.

However, we know from looking at Israel's history that they cannot remain clean and holy on their own. These two nations are likely to turn their backs on God and break their end of the covenant with Him. Yet, God decides to restore them, and to bring them into a new covenant, back into fellowship with Him. Instead of falling into a repetitive cycle of covenant breaking and brief restoration, God decides to establish one king over Israel who will represent them in this new covenant. We know that this king is Jesus Christ, the Messiah, because he is the only one who can keep the covenant perfectly. Through the life and work of

Jesus Christ the Lord will dwell among his people forever.

We see how Jesus fulfills this prophecy in the New Testament. Just as Ezekiel conveyed God's message of unity and restoration to God, Jesus more perfectly fulfilled this prophetic role,

“[F]or he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (Ephesians 2:14-16).

This passage beautifully explains that Jesus fulfills the covenant of peace on our behalf, since he is our peace. He came and died on the cross so that his people can be unified together, and can be restored in their relationship to God.

As the church, we are also called to fill this prophetic role of unity and restoration. Too often today's church is divided because of opinions on issues that are not central to our restoration through Christ. Other nations, people who are not part of the family of God, see our squabbles and they are not drawn to the God we worship.

My husband and I are currently planting a new church. New churches emerge for many reasons. Some churches begin out of a desire for a different worship style. Some churches begin out of a rebellion against long-standing traditions. Some churches split because they disagree about which human leader to follow. These are bad reasons to plant a new church because they do not promote unity within the body of Christ. The church is called to be unified, that it may be restored to the Father through Christ. All of these other issues often cloud our vision, and we begin to focus on our own needs and wants. The church exists to serve and worship God, not ourselves.

Henry and I are planting a new church because we strive to see God transform the lives of those He is calling to Him. Because our focus is on what God will do through this church, and on how we can further his plan, we have struggled to keep selfish issues at bay. For example, currently we are looking for committed Christians to join our ministry team, the team that will lay the foundation for

this church. As part of the search process we carefully ask interested people their motivation for joining this church. Many people are interested in beginning a new church because they would like to see more contemporary music during the worship service than in their current setting. Others want to join because they have an agenda they are pushing, maybe they hope this new church will change the way Classis Grand Rapids South feels about women in office, for example. These motivations are focused on ourselves, and are the cause of many divisions in the church.

But God calls us to something higher. We are called, as a church, to set our own needs and wants aside for the sake of the kingdom. If God has called us to minister to the downtown Grand Rapids professions, as we believe he has, we have to be willing to use whatever means he provides for us. If the unchurched people downtown are most comfortable talking to a pastor in a restaurant, then God calls us to change our dreams of a large, fancy building for the sake of the call. If the unchurched people downtown learn to worship God through polka music, we must be willing to swallow our own desire to play the guitar and to instead learn the accordion. (Luckily, this is very unlikely☺). Jesus became something he probably would not have wanted to become- a human with human qualities- for the sake of the ministry. We are called to do the same for the sake of the church.

And if our motivations are pure, if we strive to worship God fully with all our hearts, souls, bodies, and minds, thereby restoring our relationship with Him, and if we invite others to join us in that worship, thereby restoring unity in the church, we will be fulfilling our call to the prophetic role as found in the Great Commission. Ezekiel called Israel to restoration and reunification, just as Jesus did while he was on earth. This is also our reason for planting a new church, and we must not let worldly desires confuse that calling.

# A Note from the Editor

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In the Winter 2002 issue of *The Stromata*, there was an editorial speaking about getting back to the Gospel here at the seminary. This editorial was intended to be a discussion starter, not an anti-academic protest. I was hoping to create a dialogue about our seminary education. I only had a few people give me their feedback and engage in discussion. Some told me that I was “right on the money.” Some told me that I was wrong or that they didn’t like it. Others told me that even though I was trying not to be anti-academic, it came across that way—creating a presupposition of who I was and what my intentions were here at CTS.

I would like to apologize for the editorial. It was written to create a discussion here at the seminary. It backfired. It lacked tact and weight and should have been crafted better to engage the community.

We make mistakes in life. It takes a wise person to realize that and a strong person to admit to it. I had to have mine pointed out to me. As we travel along this bumpy road, we are still learning here. Let us help each other out along the way and bring each other home.

In Christ,

*Josh!*