

1998

## Full Issue, Number 5, Summer 1998

The Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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# INTERSECTIONS

faith + life + learning

NUMBER FIVE

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## Contributors to this Issue

### *Focus:*

- L. DeAne Lagerquist.....*You Don't Seem Angry: Methodological  
Confessions Of A Lutheran Lay-Woman*
- Kyoko Mori.....*Redemption Through Imperfection*
- Conrad Bergendoff.....*A Community That Connects*
- Elizabeth Baer.....*Walls: Talk At Gustavus Adolphus College*

### *Discussion:*

- Robert W. Funk.....*The Quest Of The Historical Jesus: Problem & Promise*
- Mark Allan Powell.....*Response to Robert W. Funk*

**INTERSECTIONS**

**NUMBER 5, SUMMER 1998**

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DeAne Lagerquist, St. Olaf College; Anne Pedersen, Augustana College (Sioux Falls).

**Cover:** Photo Montage by Forest Walker, "Signs of The Times"

# Purpose Statement

This publication is by and largely for the academic communities of the twenty-eight colleges and universities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is published by the Division for Higher Education and Schools of the ELCA. The publication presently has its home at Capital University, Columbus, Ohio which has generously offered leadership, physical and financial support as an institutional sponsor for the inauguration of the publication.

## What is the purpose of such a publication?

The ELCA has frequently sponsored conferences for faculty and administrators which have addressed the church - college/university partnership. Recently the ELCA has sponsored an annual Vocation of the Lutheran College conference. The primary purpose of INTERSECTIONS is to enhance and continue such dialogue. It will do so by:

- \* Lifting up the vocation of Lutheran colleges and universities
- \* Encouraging thoughtful dialogue about the partnership of colleges and universities with the church
- \* Offering a forum for concerns and interests of faculty at the intersection of faith, learning and teaching
- \* Raising for debate issues about institutional missions, goals, objectives and learning priorities
- \* Encouraging critical and productive discussion on our campuses of issues focal to the life of the church
- \* Serving as a bulletin board for communications among institutions and faculties
- \* Publishing papers presented at conferences sponsored by the ELCA and its institutions
- \* Raising the level of awareness among faculty about the Lutheran heritage and connectedness of their institutions, realizing a sense of being part of a larger family with common interests and concerns.

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## From the Editor

This issue of INTERSECTIONS illustrates the great diversity of interests and points of view we intend for all our issues. **DeAne Lagerquist's** essay is a wonderful example of the intersection idea, exploring the connection between faith orientation, academic methodology, and personal outlook. The essay by **Kyoko Mori** explores the dimensions of art (and its contrast with ritual) with some vivid examples from her own experience. **Elizabeth Baer**, disclaiming any gift of prophecy, explores the metaphor of falling walls within academia and the role that chapel plays in doing that. The talk by **Conrad Bergendoff** is included here as a memorial to him. We had originally been in contact with him to write a "What I Have Learned" column for this issue. His passing last December made us value these earlier words of his all the more. Our thanks to David Crowe for facilitating and editing the text of that talk. The "Discussion" section of this issue features a provocative essay by **Robert W. Funk**, the founder of the Jesus Seminar, and an engaging response by **Mark Powell**, himself a prolific author on New Testament texts and issues. We're sure these essays will generate further discussion in our pages.

As I have talked with the editors of other journals I have discovered that I do not have the problem that most of them have. They have the problem of receiving many more manuscripts than they can possibly use. Consequently the time between when someone submits an article and when it finally appears in print can be, in the case of some publications, years. As I said, we do not have that problem. Though the quality of submissions to INTERSECTIONS has been excellent, the quantity has been "just barely enough." So, what I'm urging is, *send us your good stuff!* I know there are more excellent chapel talks, excellent essays, excellent poems, excellent reviews, responses, and excellent works of art that should be shared in these pages. Share your gifts!

We hear occasionally that there are problems with the distribution of INTERSECTIONS on the campuses. We've heard stories of boxes unopened, copies undistributed, and of people who want copies who haven't got them. If that is so on your campus, please write and let us know. At present we have the name of one person on each campus who has agreed to be our distributor. If we've got the wrong person, or are routing it the wrong way, or are not sending enough copies to your campus please let us know. The most successful distributions we've heard about are at faculty meetings, where we've been told "they go like hot cakes."

In the past I have used this note from the editor to recommend some good books. This past year has been a sabbatical year for me (a whole year of Saturdays!) so I have a list of good books to recommend, all of which are non-specialized enough to be pursued by the intelligent reader. I hope you find time to read some of them.

### Best books recommended by colleagues:

Kieran Egan, *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding*. (1997, Univ. Of Chicago).

Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*. (1989, Houghton Mifflin).

**Best books found while browsing:**

Daniel Kemmis (The Mayor of Missoula, Montana), *The Good City and the Good Life*. (1995, Houghton Mifflin).

David W. Gill, editor, *Should God Get Tenure? Essays on Religion & Higher Education*. (1997, Eerdmans).

Sallie McFague, *Super Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*. (1997, Augsburg Fortress).

**Best books in my own field:**

Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Philosophy*. (1996, Allen Lane / Penguin).

E.M. Adams, *A Society Fit for Human Beings*. (1997, SUNY).

**Best books recommended by my kids:**

Freeman Dyson, *Imagined Worlds*. (1997, Harvard).

Anne Colamosca & William Wolman, *The Judas Economy: The Triumph of Capitalism and the Betrayal of Work*. (1997, Addison Wesley).

**Best picture books:**

John Gribbin & Simon Goodwin, *Origins: Our Place in Hubble's Universe*. (1997, Overlook Press).

Gary van Wyk, *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of South Africa*. (1998, Harry N. Abrams, publ. ).

**Best poetry:**

Wisława Szymborska, *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*. (1995, Harcourt Brace).

**Best fiction:**

Rereading Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*. (1971, Noonday Press).

If you have such a list, share it with us!

Tom Christenson, Capital University

**From the Publisher:**

Intersections and the Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference give focus to a rich heritage of learning. It is a heritage that enables a community of scholars, as the late Ernest Boyer once said, to "probe both the deep places of the mind and the deep longings of the human spirit." This ability, as we know, is not frequently found in higher education today and the lack of it has become an obvious weakness in late twentieth century education. This journal and the conference with which it is connected are meant to widen the scope of inquiry that the separation of mind from spirit has curtailed. I hope they will continue to be places of exciting and important ideas.

At the 1998 conference, another announcement will be made to strengthen this effort. I will be able to tell you of a publishing project named in honor of the late Conrad Bergendoff, a scholar and former president of Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. His writing, speaking, and teaching were penetrating expressions of faith and learning. Every few years the Division for Higher Education and Schools will publish a volume in the Conrad Bergendoff Series. These works will be written primarily by faculty from our ELCA Colleges and Universities and will support the development of an Academy of Scholars in Lutheran Higher Education.

The first volume, written by Professor Ernest Simmons of Concordia College, is now being published and will be available at our Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference this summer. It is a book to help faculty explore this heritage of learning and will be, as I indicated, the first of ongoing publications from the various academic disciplines.

My hope is that these three ventures - Intersections, The Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference, and the Bergendoff Series - will be vehicles to help faculty in our colleges and universities expand scholarship that probes both mind and spirit. If we do, we will benefit both church and academy. Just as importantly, we will also provide a distinctive education for students that is as rich as it is rare.

Robert W. Sorenson  
Division for Higher Education and Schools  
ELCA

# YOU DON'T SEEM ANGRY: METHODOLOGICAL CONFESSIONS OF A LUTHERAN LAY-WOMAN

L. DeAne Lagerquist

Having just read my M.A. thesis study of four female abolitionists, a colleague puzzled, "You don't seem angry." This was in 1981. Women's history was not at its beginnings, but it wasn't mature either. The ERA's ratification was still a possibility so the term post-feminist was still in the future and there wasn't much talk of backlash. In my seminary classes there were more women than before, but still we were unusual enough to be noticed. I had been working as a volunteer advocate at a battered women's shelter. In most places some women were angry and most had legitimate reasons to be at least a bit annoyed with society or people, institutions or the past. Learning to acknowledge and to express anger went contrary to the ideals for feminine behavior many women had learned. Nonetheless, anger was present in scholarly as well as popular writing, discussion and activity.

Why didn't I seem angry as I recounted the lives of four extraordinary women whose lives were devoted to addressing the evil of slavery? Why didn't I sound angry as I considered how their own lives echoed the limitations of slavery? Why wasn't I angry as I realized that their lives were less than they might have been and that what they were had been ignored for so long? At the time I had a quick response. I noted that positive changes had been made. I suggested that the historian's evaluation must look both to what has been achieved and to what is left to be done. Those were legitimate and even handed responses to my colleague's question. At the time I was satisfied with them. I didn't stop to ask if I really was angry without being able for various reasons to express that anger.

## A Narrative Account of the Emergence of My Method

Now, a decade and a half later, I have a more complex response which must include asking if I am angry. In the

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years between I have earned a Ph.D. from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago; written lots of papers and read scores of books; taught hundreds of students; and engaged in unending conversations with colleagues. I have been angry about what I have read and have not been able to read, about what has been said to me, about not being heard, about things I have been asked to do, not allowed to do, and have done. The fault has been mine as well as others'. But when I listen to myself teach or to my contributions in conference discussions or read my own writing, I note that most of the time (there are exceptions), I still don't seem angry. This is despite my judgment that life, now and in the past, is unfair and my conviction that anger would be an appropriate and justifiable response to that unfairness.

My activities in that fifteen years have also pressed me to be more reflective and self-conscious about my pre-suppositions as well as about my methods of study and interpretation. The University of Chicago is famous (if not infamous) for its obsession with methodological issues. My first quarter there I heard Martin Marty lecture on methods in the study of religion and read all the assigned books. While at Chicago, and forever afterwards if one is a graduate, scholars are expected to be articulate about their method. And feminists make a similar demand for honest disclosure of one's own commitments.

Coming as I do from a confessional tradition both of these expectations seem reasonable, at least on one hand. On that hand, it is good to state clearly what one thinks and to give a good account of one's faith, as Peter exhorts us. There is, however, another hand. (For Lutherans there is always another hand.) On that other hand I have reservations about salvation by methodology. It is possible to get the method clear and still to come to bad or wrong conclusions.

From the professor whose lectures on methods in the study of religion I heard I also heard a maxim that I have often quoted. He said, "If the people you are writing about don't recognize themselves, you've missed them." I understood him to mean that even if your method is impeccable and articulated in heavily footnoted, dense prose, it is possible to

miss the subject of your work. This maxim has served me well. I added it to my earlier observation about evaluating in both directions and willingness to admit change for the better. Perhaps I was on my way to a method, even if it was something of an anti-method.

If I was, it produced the same result. When Marty wrote the preface to my study of women in the American Lutheran churches, he too noted, "this could have been a work inspired by anger. It is not."<sup>1</sup> Unlike my colleague, he was not puzzled by this. Rather he went on to say that the book (my book) "gives signs of care, or love." And he suggested that the love manifests itself in patience. Marty, and anyone else who has spent more than an hour with me, knows that I am not naturally patient. And he admitted as much when he concluded the paragraph, "There must have been good restraint here."

I got a job teaching students, many of them in their first year of college taking a required religion course that did not interest them much. Some of them got excited by the material; others stayed resentful. One of the later type taught me an important lesson about being a teacher. He came close to saying that his poor grade was my fault. He came so close to accusing me that I was compelled to examine myself to see if I was at fault, if he had come near to failing the course because I had failed him. (This sort of confession is also familiar to Lutherans.) Facing it straight on, looking at myself as clearly as I could, I found that I had not been without fault, but neither was my failure the sole cause of his. This was the moment in which I began to conceptualize my task as a teacher on analogy to a gymnastic spotter. The gymnast can be shown the moves and moved through them and caught when falling, but only the gymnast can perform the routine. The spotter can not be the gymnast. So I added to my method, take responsibility for what is yours, give others their own responsibility.

With graduate school friends I took part in an AAR session concerned with using autobiography as a source for studying women's history. I read autobiographies by late 19th and early 20th century American women: Vida Scudder, Dorothy Day, and Pauli Murray. They were leaders in their churches, though in uncharted ways; they stayed in their churches, though in provisional ways. I read some contemporary women's autobiographies and reflections on their own lives. And I wondered a good deal about why I

was so attracted to this sort of material. In the midst of the reading, writing, and giving of the paper I realized that encountering ideas clothed in lives--in the particularities of lives presented by the living thinker of the ideas--both gave me better access to the ideas and imposed an ethical claim on me. Because the ideas were embodied in persons shaped by the world around them I could see where the ideas had come from. Seeing that and knowing the thinkers of the ideas was like being a friend to the authors. Yet another piece of this method emerged.

The participants in that session, the ones who were alive and reading papers, are part of a group of friends with whom I have been having an endless methodological conversation for all these years. It circles around a question about feminist scholarship. Can one be a feminist scholar without studying women? And if so, what would distinguish the scholar/ship as feminist. We have no claim on this question as our own. Our intense and episodic discussion has been informed by others whose work we have read or with whom we have talked. We wrote papers about this issue and gave them together in front of our peers.

In mine I spoke of being both a feminist and a denominational (Lutheran) historian.<sup>2</sup> I considered the similarities in relationships of author, subjects, and audience. In the least developed section I tried to discern how being Lutheran influenced my historical work. I referred to my sense of vocation and I hinted that my understanding of simul justus et peccator might lay behind my willingness to measure both what has been accomplished and what remains to be done. But that was it. I couldn't see more.

When I wrote that paper, and ever since, I have been chipping away at the task of writing a history of Lutherans in the United States. I'm trying to write it with a different plot, not the one about institutional mergers. This plot is to be about learning to live with diversity, inside and out. I want this to be a book about being Lutheran, not just about the Lutheran churches. And every day that I work on it I know that it won't be all that I want it to be, nor will it be all that many potential readers are hoping for.

In this work I have been aided by teaching undergraduate students, many not Lutheran, few of whom will be historians, and by conversation with several colleagues.

With one of them I have become engaged in a second endless, if episodic, conversation about Lutheran culture. We ask if there can be such a beast. We wonder if it would have to be more than one. We suggest what these Lutheran cultures might have in common. We recall our experiences as Lutherans who have lived both in the Midwest and on the west coast and who study what we are. And we wrote a paper together.<sup>3</sup> We really wrote it together. Some of the words are his; some are mine. Some of the ideas are mine; some are his. In some places I can tell which are which because we disagreed or because his language is more sophisticated than mine or because we captured the dialogue. In other places I've forgotten which is which.

In the last months, the connections between being Lutheran and how I do my work have come clearer and I can see more. The connections may still be like trees walking, but I can describe them. Three events have been crucial: the ELCA Convocation of Teaching Theologians, teaching a seminar on Christian Women in the Third World, and the Lutheran Women's Pre-meeting of the AAR/SBL. The topic of the first was pluralism.<sup>4</sup> In the second I have been challenged by the witness of careful readers of the Bible whose starting points are other than my own. At the third I heard fertile discussion of papers in which Luther is read with unexpected partners, Mary Daly and feminist philosophy of science among them.<sup>5</sup> One tender fruit is my "sudden" ability to articulate my method, to say why I hope not to seem (or to be) angry.

### **A More Explicit Discussion of the Method that Emerged**

This method grows out of four Lutheran themes as they interact with one another. Although explanation requires that I present them in series and in a specific order, in practice all operate simultaneously and require one another. Together these four inform, and have long before I could say how, my approach to my work as scholar and teacher. Each theme might be taken to imply, or to generate, a step in the process of "interpretation." However, that is not to suggest that the goal of understanding is achieved by mechanically following a method. That would be counter to the first theme. And, in so far as understanding is finally a miracle (a gift of God's grace, though not a saving gift), I'm not at all sure that I'm willing to suggest that any human effort is alone enough for achieving it. Already my confession is

mixed in with my method. The mixture will continue.

I. The first theme is original sin, a doctrine not much in favor among moderns living and thinking in the post-modern age. Neither are Americans in general nor feminists in particular fond of this teaching which posits a profound crack cutting through all of God's good creation. Perhaps one evidence of such sin in me is the tenacity with which I cling to the notion. I hope that I do not do so naively. I am aware of how sin has been characterized in ways that have hurt women and I know that humans have connived ways to point to the speck in one another's eyes without tending to the log in their own. I have done it myself. Nonetheless, I am convinced by several witnesses--the Bible, history, and my own experience among them--that the world is flawed in fundamental ways that humans can not repair by our own effort.

In a larger systematic matrix the move from assertion of original sin is to questions of Christology and soteriology. But this is not a discussion of the whole of Christian teaching, it is a discussion of one Lutheran laywoman's method. And here the implication of recognizing the pervasive stain of original sin is simply the corollary that no interpretation is ever perfect. All interpretations are flawed by our shared state of sinfulness, by the limitations of our specific circumstances, and by the ways that sin inhibits our ability to understand one another.

Thus I assume that no reading of the Bible, or of historical evidence, or of the world today is ever perfect. This assumption requires an unwillingness to accept any particular reading as the final reading. This may seem a likely support for a hermeneutics of suspicion, but I intend rather caution. That is the attitude to be practiced not only toward others' interpretations, but also toward my own which is also flawed by the same forces. Perhaps this might be called the step of caution and humility.

II. The second step comes from Luther's Small Catechism, his explanation of the eighth commandment. This commandment may not spring directly to mind as what it prohibits is not a temptation much on our minds. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Luther does not limit this commandment to plagiarism. In typical fashion he begins his explanation with the injunction to fear and love

God and then turns the negative restriction into a wider ranging exhortation to positive action. That action includes defending the neighbor, speaking well, and explaining the neighbor's actions "in the kindest way."

Now, how can this be? If sin is so pervasive, aren't these actions of my neighbor likely to be ill conceived and perhaps even evil? Indeed. But here we are urged first to depend upon God ourselves and then to see others with divine eyes. It is true that no interpretation is ever perfect and no action or motive is ever pure. Mine included. In the marketplace this leads to the warning, "Let the buyer beware." We expect that the seller will try to cheat us by offering inferior or dangerous goods.

In the marketplace of ideas and interpretation, however there is a second move. After caution and humility must come generosity and forgiveness. These attitudes are no more popular in the academy than in the world at large. Yes, we can find the occasional, exemplary figure who truly is "a gentleman and a scholar." But enough graduate students have been told to go for the jugular when they diagnose weakness in someone else's work, or have left the seminar room bleeding, to convince me that urging generosity and forgiveness will sound odd.

Nonetheless, I am even more convinced that if all our understandings are cracked, we must be kind toward one another and gently bind up what is broken. A method beginning with original sin will recognize that humans (scholars included) come to their work with less than honorable motives and that the work that results is flawed and can be toxic. But if the next step is to obey the eighth commandment, then my method must also allow that the motives are mixed and can include honorable ones. Further it strives to attribute the best possible motives and to find the most true and useful reading of the work. Both imperfection and value are acknowledged in others' work as well as in my own.

III. This mention of others moves to the third theme. In the Catechism the Christian is oriented (that is to say turned) toward the neighbor. So too in On the Freedom of a Christian where Luther relocates good works. They are no longer an effort to attract God's favorable notice, but rather a grateful response to gracious divine action. As response

these works are done in God's presence but directed toward the neighbor in whom one sees Christ and for whom one reflects Christ. Seeing Christ in the neighbor is both a call to attend to the neighbors' needs as to Christ's own and an opportunity to learn of God.

In both ways the neighbor has a claim on me: to humbly offer the best, though imperfect interpretation I can make and to generously receive my neighbor's best, though also imperfect interpretation. The inevitability of imperfection in all interpretations combines with this orientation towards neighbor and allows me to see the necessary, corrective social dimension to interpretation of the Bible, history, or the world around me. Neighborly cooperation in the task will not achieve a perfect interpretation; nor can it overcome the reality of sin. But the exhortation to see Christ in my neighbor, to attend to my neighbor's needs, to be myself a "little Christ" compels me to try to overcome the distortions that sin creates between us and to work together for a more adequate, though still imperfect, interpretation.

IV. Then comes the question, what shall I (or now we) do with this work of the best, but still flawed, interpretation we can make together? The fourth theme is vocation--the call God makes to me to use what I have been given for the benefit of others. Perhaps this is merely re-sounding the third theme, the turn toward neighbor. Certainly it is the neighbor to whose benefit my gifts are to be used. Still, I think that there is more to be said about interpretation as a specific articulation of the common call to discipleship.

To place interpretation in the frame of calling is to locate authority with God in whose work I am delegated to participate. I am responsible in my work not only to my inner self, or even to my human community, but also to the one who is Truth. Both of these consequences increase the weight of the task and could prompt me to flee with Jonah onto a boat heading away from Nineveh. I am enabled to stay on shore when I recall that the calling comes after divine grace, not before. Further the calling that comes with, but after, grace is far larger and more encompassing than reading texts and trying to make sense of them. The fearsomeness of the task of interpretation is reduced when I recognize that there is other work to be done. Feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and visiting the lonely ground this heady, ephemeral work in embodied and immediate work.

This is all the work of discipleship, of following after Jesus to the places where he intends to go. And it is all done in the odd time described as already, but not yet, a time of incompleteness and imperfection longing for that which is not yet but will be.

### **Applying This Method**

The true test of any method is in its application to specific cases. And mine is no exception. Even to write abstractly about how it might be applied is a step away from what needs to be done. Nonetheless, something must be said about how it might be done. I think that this simple method can be applied in almost any circumstance from reading a text to conducting a class. It works with the biblical texts, with theology, and with historical documents. No doubt its most vulnerable spots are precisely in its confessional grounding. I can not say if it will serve as well without that rootage.

I do know that these themes and their related steps undergird my approach to history and inform my understanding of Lutheran higher education. When I read about the past and humans in it I assume that they were flawed in common human ways and in ways specific to their time and place. I expect that their own testimony about their actions and thoughts are limited by those flaws and that my reading of their testimony is flawed in similar ways. I must come to them, their times, and their lives with caution and humility.

On the other hand, if I am to read, think, and write I can not be paralyzed by suspicions. Rather I resolve to not bear false witness against these folks, most of them dead and thus intensely vulnerable to the power of my interpretation. I look for their best hopes, their best actions. I allow them the limits of their circumstances and take account of those as I consider that for which they can be held responsible. I attempt to be generous and forgiving about what they did wrong so that I don't miss what they did right.

If I am able to see both their imperfections and their contributions, I am able to learn from and with them. Building on their work, I endeavor to move a bit closer to a more adequate understanding of this world we share, even across the barriers of time. And I do this not solely for my personal pleasure or professional advancement. I am

responsible in my work to God who is the source of life and is beyond time. What I learn must be of use to my neighbor.

The convictions behind this method, which I articulate in the language of four Lutheran themes, also stand behind my work as a teacher in a college associated with a Lutheran church. I find that a profound notion of the pervasiveness and depth of original sin is a realistic beginning for participation in any institution and especially for a college where our temptations are so often concerned with self-promotion or protection. Moreover, to be engaged in education requires that one regard the world and one's students as lacking in some way. If they were not, what is the job about? But I must not face colleagues or students self-righteously, without an equal sense of the depth of my own fatal flaw. The task of education begins with caution and humility.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, if I am to learn and to teach I can not be overcome with despair. Rather I resolve to not bear false witness against colleagues, or students, or the people we study together. We are all alike in that we are imperfect and we need one another's generosity and forgiveness. If I fail in this I will miss what these others have to offer and I will discover that they become increasingly unable to receive what I offer them. We all become the poorer, more ignorant, and to be pitied.

Claiming this commonality of imperfection and insight might go a long way toward overcoming the chasms widened by out polite unwillingness to speak for, or even hope to understand the speech of, someone unlike ourselves. For all the salutary benefits we have received by listening to formerly excluded voices, we have not helped ourselves if we replace one sort of privilege for another. One of the joys of having neighbors is the opportunity to share and to exchange. I borrow an egg from you; you enjoy my flowers' scent; we use your snow-blower to clean both driveways. The interaction is not without caution or without generosity. It changes lives, but we do not move in together and become one family. So too in the classroom. My students and I are compelled to look to our "neighbors", in person and on the page, with the hope that we will learn from them and the expectation that some of what we learn comes from the familiar and some from the difference.

What we learn does not stay in the classroom or on the campus. My college urges its graduates to "lives of worth and service." The task of interpretation--of doing history, of studying, of learning--is not an end in itself; rather all that is done with the gifts God has given is returned by use for the benefit of others. Finally my method is the expression of my

world view. It is my response to God's calling. I hope that in my work I turn toward my neighbor with humility and generosity as well as with caution and forgiveness. If I am angry, may it be the anger of grief at my failures, not rage against what can not be changed.

#### NOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> L. DeAne Lagerquist, From Our Mothers' Arms: A History of Women in the American Lutheran Church (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987).
- <sup>2</sup> . Published as "Who I Am and What I Do" in The Cresset, (March 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> . Michael Aune and L. DeAne Lagerquist, "Desperately Seeking Culture: Is There American Lutheran Culture?," RRA/SSSR 1996.
- <sup>4</sup> . "Martin Luther in Feminist Focus," Currents in Theology and Mission Feb. 1997, Vol. 24, No. 1.
- <sup>5</sup> . "Pluralism: Promise and Problem," Currents in Theology and Mission October 1997, Vol. 24, No. 5.
- <sup>6</sup> . Mark Schwehn writes about the cultivation of virtues in the work of teaching. In particular he addresses the need for humility. Exiles From Eden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 44-65.

## REDEMPTION THROUGH IMPERFECTION

*Kyoko Mori*

One spring in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I had a revelation about why art is spiritual. Even though dance is the only art form whose primary language is movement, all art is in perpetual motion. Without this perpetual motion, our experience of art can never be spiritual or redemptive.

I was at the museum with a friend who wanted to show me his favorite paintings and sculptures, as a way of sharing his history with me. So there was a context of something spiritual--a kind of communication--that underlay our visit. He took me through the part of the museum that houses Marcel Duchamp's work and led me into a small, dimly-lit room to see *Etant donnes*, Duchamp's last work. The room was the size of an average office in a typical college or business building; the wall facing us had a pair of old wooden doors without a handle, surrounded by brick work. The scene reminded me of an abandoned garden or estate that was permanently boarded up. As I approached the doors, I noticed that there were two tiny holes around eye level. My friend stood in front of the doors, looked in, and then moved away so I could do the same. I stepped up to put my eyes to the holes.

What I saw on the other side immediately riveted me to the spot. Directly before me was a stripped female body laying on its back, her face covered with tangled hair, one foot so close to the door that I couldn't see it. Her legs were spread apart, but there was nothing except a smooth indentation where her genitals would have been. Lying in a pile of leaves and broken branches, she appeared both violated and tidied up. I stared at the body for about fifteen seconds before I realized that she was holding a lamp. Her left arm, with the lamp, was pointing toward the scene behind her, which was quite beautiful--with trees, leaves, mossy rocks, a pale blue sky, and a glowing waterfall in the background. Filled with a sense of wonder, I stared at the scene.

I'm not sure how long I was standing in front of those doors, but finally, my friend whispered, "Look." I took my eyes away from the peepholes and turned around. The room, which had been empty when we first entered, was crowded.

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Several people were lined up behind me, waiting to find out what I was looking at. After I moved away from the doors, my friend and I stood in the back of the room, watching all the people as, one by one, they went up to put their eyes to the peepholes. Each person stood there a long time. Some people said nothing as they stepped aside. Others muttered or shook their heads. One man said, "Didn't do anything for me," as he and his family walked past us and left the room. My friend and I waited until everyone was done, then we, too, left.

As we walked away, we knew that we had experienced a magical moment. We'd had the honor of being collaborators or accomplices of Duchamp's, setting the piece in motion for him. Just for a few moments, Duchamp was in that room with us, watching all those people watching what was on the other side of the doors. He was sharing the joke with us--especially about the man who said, "Didn't do anything for me." That man was so right and so wrong at the same time. For days, weeks, he would be telling all his friends about this piece that "didn't do anything" for him. If someone asked him what he saw at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Etant donnes* would be the piece he was most likely to describe in detail--he had come to know that piece in ways he hadn't come to know the paintings or sculptures he might have thought that he loved unequivocally.

Later that evening, my friend and I had an experience that was a perfect counterpoint to *Etant donnes*. We were walking in the historic district, looking for a restaurant that wasn't too crowded or too empty. It was Sunday evening in mid-March. The sun had set and the wind was turning cold, we were shivering and talking about the past that hadn't been perfect for either of us. We'd lost track of exactly where we were, when we came to the square where the Liberty Bell was displayed. Although my friend had been to Philadelphia many times, he had never seen the Liberty Bell; I hadn't either. So we walked over to the glass-encased structure in which the bell was housed, even though we could see immediately that this was a hideous thing both in concept and execution--a glass cage for a piece of history. Three people were standing in front of us pushing the buttons that turned on the pre-recorded explanation about the bell. As we approached, a tape-recorded voice was saying something about the Liberty Bell in German. One of the people said, "Hey, maybe we can hear about it in Japanese next." My

friend and I stopped for about two seconds and then left--not disappointed exactly, but certainly not moved.

The whole set-up around the Liberty Bell was a parody--though not an intentional one--of a spiritual experience. We were presented a patriotic and almost holy object enshrined in glass, while the German voice went on, "speaking in tongues." This experience became counterpoint to what was really a spiritual experience--seeing the Duchamp. The spiritual quality of art has everything to do with the process that is in perpetual motion, rather than with the subject matter. As far as the subject matter was concerned, the Liberty Bell was more likely to be spiritual than *Etant donnees*--a peepshow involving a disturbing landscape with a dead nude. But the setting of the Liberty Bell was completely static and obvious. *Etant donnees*, on the other hand, happened in a series of small mysterious motions, as perfect as a beautifully choreographed dance. First, we entered the small room and my friend showed me how the piece progressed as we walked toward the doors, stood in front of them, and he put his eyes to the peepholes. When he moved away and it was my turn to look, I had to take in the scene, one detail at a time from the nude to the lamp to the waterfall, my gaze drawing an arc across the landscape. When the arc was complete, my friend showed me how we had set the performance aspect of the piece moving by stirring up the curiosity of all the people in the room. We stepped back, and the piece continued to move until everyone was through. It came to a rest when the last person was done, but it was only waiting to be set in motion again by another group of viewers. In the meantime, as we left the room, everyone who saw it, even the man who thought it didn't do anything for him, was embraced into the same perfect motion. Even now, that piece goes into motion again and again in my mind, in my writing.

The perpetual motion of *Etant donnees* was larger than the sum total of all the people who were there, who participated in it whether willingly or not--just as in church, the spiritual force that moves through us is far greater than the sum total of all of us and our capabilities. What we experience is a communion that transcends our individual capacity for perception, understanding, beauty, or goodness. I believe that writing is spiritual and redemptive for the same reason. Though the writer and the readers are not all in the same place at the same time, a powerful force of understanding can be set into motion through books. As a reader, I've had moments when I felt as though I were being blown across a huge expanse of water or land by another person's writing, carried far beyond my narrow understanding of something I wasn't even thinking about consciously till only a moment

ago. It doesn't bother me very much to learn later--as often is the case--that the person who wrote those words was not a perfect and wise human-being all the time. We are redeemed, or given those moments of understanding and grace, not by the writer but by the force or the process that is larger than all of us combined.

On a personal level as well as the communal, I suppose I turn to writing as a redemptive act, but this is a complicated notion. Just as *Etant donnees* is more spiritual than the Liberty Bell, everything about writing is a paradox: writing is not a redemptive act or process in an obvious or easy way. Many people think that by writing about our great suffering or our painful past, writers find an outlet for our emotions and a way to put the chaos of our pain into an order that leads to spiritual and psychological healing. But that is too easy and obvious an interpretation. The truth is much more complicated.

There is a significant difference between rituals of healing and art. Rituals are primarily about comfort and consolation. When we make objects like charms, amulets, or memorial stones that bring about an inner peace, talk or write letters to the dead to tell them the things we couldn't say in this life, we are practicing a ritual, not necessarily art. Rituals are what we do to put boundaries on our pain so we can begin to manage and understand it. I don't disparage rituals at all. In fact, I'm often quite moved by them, but they are not the same as art, which forces us to look at the truth, whether painful or not.

I have a lot of respect for rituals, but art, faith, and redemption would have to be more than a source of comfort.

I am in as much need of comfort, ritual, and healing as anyone else, but I don't expect my work to give me comfort. The urge to work, for me, is primarily an urge to work--not to heal myself or to increase my joy. I don't turn to my writing to redeem or heal myself in times of pain, but I'm always working whether I am moving through good times or bad, so whatever I am experiencing inevitably colors what I write. In times of pain, then, of course I turn to my work--though perhaps no more so than when my life is calm and perfect. If I find comfort in turning to work, it isn't because I think I'll find answers there or ways to solve my real-life problems. When my whole life seems like a big tangle of confusion or pain, work is one of the few things that can still give me satisfaction: I enjoy the act of writing and rewriting, the process itself regardless of its outcome, whether it makes me wiser or not.

Many people seem to believe that writing is a redemptive act because the process takes the chaos of reality and puts it into a more controlled arrangement, a perfect order. Through her or his discipline and work, the belief goes, the writer conquers the chaos of her or his pain, makes sense out of the almost-unknowable, and experiences an emotional or psychological release. The way I experience it, the process is the exact opposite: as I get deeper into the writing process, I move from the orderly to the more chaotic, everything-under-control to I'm-not-sure-what-this-really-means-any-more. While at work on the first draft of any project, I don't agonize over what I'm writing about--rather, I am full of anxiety about how to write it. Whatever turmoil I feel is about how the piece is or isn't coming together--I'm upset that something in the plot doesn't feel right, I seem to have too many characters scattered about the novel, I can't get my main character from one place to the next in a natural and smooth way, or if it's non-fiction, I'm bothered that the voice I'm using sounds too chatty or too austere, that I can't quite find the thread of what hold all the details together. These things keep me awake at night and make me a difficult person to live with, but I'm not fazed by the *content* of what I'm writing about, such as how I feel about my past or what insecurities I have about various issues in life. I don't have the problem that my feelings are so strong that I cannot control my writing. The opposite is true. No matter what I write, the first draft I finish is too neat and ordered, almost too beautifully written in a superficial way. There's a lot of control there, maybe too much control. To get my books to be everything they are meant to be, I have to go back and crack open the beautiful surface and pull out the murky depth of feeling. That's what revisions are about. My books always have to get worse before they can get better. I suppose that process can be seen as true healing--moving from superficial understanding to deeper realization--but psychologically, I would have been just as well off on a day-

to-day basis if I'd never taken up the writing project, if I had stayed where I was at the beginning--in a place where I thought I had a complete handle on everything. A little denial isn't always a bad thing. There is nothing wrong, in terms of living from day to day, with all the small defense mechanisms our minds resort to, to stay comfortable and happy in an imperfect world. I don't write to feel better because I'm very good at this sort of healthy denial, and I usually feel fine enough in a general way. I write to write better, and if there is redemption in that, it's because redemption is more than being happy or comfortable. Writing is redemptive because we are encouraged to let go of our initial easy, superficial understanding, and then we are forced to find something deeper and potentially frightening but true.

No matter how much deeper our understanding, however, the finished product is never perfect. Regardless of the many revisions and many attempts to find a deeper truth, nothing I write is perfect or flawless. I don't expect it to be. In fact, the slight imperfections and flaws are essential to art and to the concept of redemption. I remember watching some master potters working at the wheel in a pottery village I visited with my mother when I was eight. After they were done with each vessel on the wheel--bowls, vases, cups--the potters would take the perfectly shaped vessel between their hands and skew it ever so slightly, so that each one was different and slightly imperfect. That's how these vessels differed from the mass-produced pretty porcelain cups we saw at department stores. One was art and redemption through imperfection; the other was decoration, fine taste, comfortable living. They're both necessary but not the same.

*Parts of this essay are excerpted from Kyoko Mori's Polite Lies (Henry Holt 1997.) reprinted with permission of the author.*

## A COMMUNITY THAT CONNECTS

*Conrad Bergendoff*

*Dr. Conrad Bergendoff graduated from Augustana College (Rock Island) in 1915--at the age of 19--and from the Augustana Theological Seminary in 1925. He later earned a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, and a Th.D from the University of Uppsala (Sweden). The author of many books and articles, Bergendoff concentrated on Swedish Reformation history, Martin Luther's works, and Lutheran church history in America. He served as President of Augustana College from 1936 to 1962, and President of the Augustana Seminary from 1936 to 1948. Augustana's fine arts building is named Bergendoff Hall.*

*In 1995 the Augustana community celebrated Bergendoff's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, and in December 1997 mourned his death.*

*The following remarks are excerpted from Dr. Bergendoff's address marking the opening of Augustana's new library in 1990. Though Bergendoff's brilliant chapel talks are legendary, he used that occasion to make more casual remarks about his 80 years of Augustana memories.*

*These remarks were prepared by Dr. David Crowe, who has been at Augustana College for nine years. Crowe splits his time between teaching English and serving as Director of Honors Programs.*

The happiest days of one's life, I think, are the days when you are preparing for teaching and look forward to a career in academic work. Augustana has been richly blessed with teachers and as I look back over my life, it's because I've had contact with teachers on both sides of the ocean that have shaped my own life . . . I congratulate the teachers here. If you can get to my age, nothing will give you greater satisfaction than to think of the success of your students.

I've been here since 1912, when I came as a student to Augustana and joined St. John's Lutheran Church, where I have been more or less throughout the years. So my life has been centered right here in the Quad Cities. What has given me the greatest joy here is the opportunity to try to bring together part of the various activities which have been sort of put away each in their own corner. It isn't what you yourself, by yourself, do - but what you've been able to do in cooperation with other people that gives you some kind of meaning in your own life.

And certainly, I think today of students. I was a little surprised that the mayor of Rock Island counted me among the fathers here at Augustana. The only other one that I think has done that is a student that came to me when I was in Wallenberg Hall and said, "Are you still alive?" He had seen my name around here--he thought I was one of the fathers or founders of Augustana. I'm not quite that old. No, I don't call myself one of the fathers. I call myself one of the sons.

My father graduated here . . . So my connection with Augustana, it goes way back to the earliest days. And the

students, when I came back here in 1912, were a small group. We were only 200 students. Strange thing is . . . I never thought we were small. Never thought it was a small school, even if we were only graduating a class of thirty. After all, size is pretty much within you, not outside of you. It's what you yourself think that makes you a part of the greater whole. The thing that has struck me all through these years is how Augustana has been anticipating a global education. That's now the thing today in the education field.

We've done that here since 1960. All of the faculty in 1960 and in 1875 when [the College] came [to Rock Island] were graduates of European universities. They were part of a much greater academic world than most of the institutions in the middle west, or even in the east. Bonds that we've had with Sweden from 1860, when you go back to the literature, you're reading letters to the university professors of Uppsala, you're following the curriculum that they had. In 1910 the Rector Magnificat--I like that term, Rector Magnificat--of Uppsala was here on the campus. And he said the graduates of 1910 would match any of the graduates of Uppsala at that time. And that's, what, only 50, 60 years ago? No, I guess eighty years ago.

We've been a part of a much larger world than we ourselves have understood. And all of these contacts have given us an outlook that has made the institution a liberal arts college in the true sense of the word. Last week, what was it, 77 students came back from Asia. That's been going on over twenty years. I doubt you'll find many colleges that have had a more universal output in their whole history than Augustana has had. And I've tried to use my writings and

research the last few years to discover things that we've forgotten. And we find in these early beginnings, something that has given us the inspiration for all the years that have followed. I said Augustana seemed to us large even in 1912 and now we're over 2000 students, we're part of a global educational world. It should give us some sense of our own importance in the task that we're having to do with students.

And how can anyone who spent his life with students regret that kind of career? To be able to see this younger

generation . . . and feel that we have somehow connected with them. You'll find our graduates all over the world. Pick up the alumni directory and you'll find them in practically every part of the world . . . many of them in high positions, even university presidents. So, it's not a small school, and it's not a small world. And to be able to connect our world with the world as a whole--that gives a liberal arts view. And to me that's been the great advantage of spending the years here--that our view has taken us to the ends of the earth.

## Walls: A Chapel Talk at Gustavus Adolphus College

September 11, 1997

Elizabeth Baer

*(Joshua 6:1-21) Now Jericho was shut up inside and out because of the Israelites; no one came out and no one went in. {2} The LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have handed Jericho over to you, along with its king and soldiers. {3} You shall march around the city, all the warriors circling the city once. Thus you shall do for six days, {4} with seven priests bearing seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, the priests blowing the trumpets. {5} When they make a long blast with the ram's horn, as soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and all the people shall charge straight ahead." {6} So Joshua son of Nun summoned the priests and said to them, "Take up the ark of the covenant, and have seven*

*ark of the LORD." {7} To the people he said, "Go forward priests carry seven trumpets of rams' horns in front of the and march around the city; have the armed men pass on before the ark of the LORD." {8} As Joshua had commanded the people, the seven priests carrying the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the LORD went forward, of the LORD passed on, blowing the trumpets continually. blowing the trumpets, with the ark of the covenant of the LORD following them. {9} And the armed men went before the priests who blew the trumpets; the rear guard came after the ark, while the trumpets blew continually. {10} To the people Joshua gave this command: "You shall not shout or let your voice be heard, nor shall you utter a word, until the day I tell you to shout. Then you shall shout." {11} So the ark of the LORD went around the city, circling it once; and they came into the camp, and spent the night in the camp. {12} Then Joshua rose early in the morning, and the priests took up the ark of the LORD. {13} The seven priests carrying the seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark The armed men went before them, and the rear guard came after the ark of the LORD, while the trumpets blew continually. {14} On the second day they marched around the city once and then returned to the camp. They did this for six days. {15} On the seventh day they rose early, at dawn, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times. It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. {16} And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the*

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people, "Shout! For the LORD has given you the city. {17} The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live because she hid the messengers we sent. {18} As for you, keep away from the things devoted to destruction, so as not to covet and take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel an object for destruction, bringing trouble upon it. {19} But all silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are sacred to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD." {20} So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. {21} Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.

Some years, I have selected a topic for my autumn chapel homily and then chosen the Biblical verse accordingly--years when I have spoken on travel to Israel, learning Japanese, and the splendor of the season of summer.

This year, I decided to accept Chaplain Elvee's assignment. Encountering him on campus a few weeks ago, I asked him why he'd chosen this passage about soldiers engaging in battle as a text for the Dean upon the occasion of the opening of school. He laughed his easy laugh and mumbled something about the Dean blowing the horn.

No offense to you musicians, but I'd been ruminating on the *walls*, not the horns, as I read and reread the passage. I thought first of one of my favorite Robert Frost poems, "Mending Walls." You remember this poem--the narrator's neighbor believes that "Good fences make good neighbors" and the narrator questions:

"Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offense.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down."

I thought, too, of the Holocaust, an area of study in which I both teach and do research. There were the walls around ghettos in which Jews were confined. One book, which presents an autobiographical account of involvement in the Jewish resistance movement at the Warsaw ghetto is entitled On Both Sides of the Wall. It is written by Vladka Meed, a woman I had the privilege to study with in 1994. Another book about the period, simply entitled Walls, is an account by a righteous gentile, Margaret Zassenhaus, whom I knew

while living in Maryland, who outwitted the Gestapo on many occasions. Both of these women would be inclined, I believe, to agree with Robert Frost: "something there is that doesn't love a wall."

Of course, in reading the passage about Jericho, I also thought of Berlin and its Wall, a wall inside instead of surrounding the city. The Berlin Wall was a real barrier that constituted part of the metaphorical Iron Curtain, such a central feature of the mental landscape of my childhood. The Berlin Wall came down in a triumphant moment in 1989 and is now more or less eradicated, creating all kinds of challenges for that city. Something there was that didn't love that wall either.

I'd been wondering where to take the homily from there when, during the new faculty orientation last week, a second year faculty member gave new faculty some advice which helped me. In providing tips on how to survive the first year at Gustavus, he urged his colleagues to go to chapel. He confessed that he'd gone out of curiosity rather than a particular religious conviction and he'd been surprised at how much he learned from and about this community by listening to homilies.

And that reminded me of something I have long reflected upon: the ways in which homilies at Gustavus are often acts of self-disclosure. Faculty, students, and staff members speak autobiographically, establishing a level of intimacy in this discourse different from any other discourse on campus. I have come to believe that this is one of the well-springs of community on our campus. This discourse is, perforce, different from those in classrooms, committee meetings, the Canteen, dorm rooms, and different, too, from electronic communications and scholarly presentations.

The discourse is also intertextual. It is not uncommon, as the year unwinds, for one homilist to refer back to what previous homilists have said. In that way, we establish connections with one another that are very powerful and very personal. We demonstrate that we listen, we reflect, we react to what our colleagues say from this pulpit. In such intertextuality, we acknowledge influence and caring and memory, three of the mainstays of working and living together.

Now, I grant you that this homily is becoming more about literary criticism and that literary criticism is becoming more autobiographical. When I embarked on the writing of my dissertation in 1976, I was forbidden to include the word "I" anywhere in the 100+ page text except under the acknowledgments section. This taboo has gradually changed

from observation in the first person being ventured tentatively by literary scholars to such personal observations being validated and then being valorized. I wonder if homilies at Gustavus have taken a similar course? Or if they have always tended to be an opportunity for members of this community to speak from the heart, from personal experience, from personal beliefs. Maybe someone with a longer history here than I will respond to this query in a future homily.

Having gone this far, I might as well admit that this is becoming what the lit crit bunch would call a metahomily, that is, a homily about homilies. So I'll go a step further, and quote from Chaplain Elvee's invitation--or some might say--admonition--to the community about chapel. Faculty received this in our mailboxes last week.

He says. "[Chapel] is a time for the College to meet together as a community, to celebrate the simple fact that we have collegial concerns for the higher life. The chapel mediates between classroom, athletic field and the larger society. In it we do a bit of intellectual and cultural celebrating. We also express our common (and sometimes not so common) moral, aesthetic and religious concerns. . . ." He gives us quite broad permission here to do as we will.

So, since I've claimed that homilies are often autobiographical and intertextual, here goes. One of my experiences in giving these homilies has been empowerment. It's not something named in Elvee's description, but I don't think he'd say it's excluded either. As many of you know, I was raised in the Roman Catholic tradition. At that time, girls could not become altar boys, nor were women EVER allowed to speak from the pulpit. The first homily I gave at Gustavus in 1992 was an amazing experience. Although I'd given literally hundreds of lectures from podiums in big lecture halls, from behind tables in storefront libraries in small towns in Vermont, in smoky conference rooms, etc etc., I had never been invited to speak aloud in a church. It makes me feel very differently about spirituality to have had the experience of hearing women's voices here.

Intertextuality. Have you noticed that I complained about my verse assignment at the beginning of the homily and that President Steuer did so yesterday? Yes, this is one of those homily tropes, almost a staple. We get to chide Elvee in public!

Getting back to Joshua and his walls. . . what does all this about discourses and intertextuality and autobiography and metahomilies and tropes have to do with Joshua fit the battle of Jericho? I like to think of the Chapel discourse as a superb opportunity to help us understand one another, to break down the walls of misunderstandings and stereotypes that differences sometimes build. There is an ecumenism here which I believe is one reason our chapel tradition has stayed alive, while so many others have withered. We genuinely talk with one another in this place. When one speaks personally, intimately, from the heart, it is not possible for the audience to deny that person his or her experience. Instead, we are invited to enter it, to see from a new angle.

Oh, all right. Maybe I am blowing that horn after all. Elvee is probably chortling by now. It is a call to all of you to be here, and be part of this conversation.

"There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him  
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'"

By the end of the poem, the narrator has not seduced his neighbor to rethink this adage. I hope the year ahead will be an opportunity for you to rethink assumptions, pieties, stereotypes, and that you'll do some of that rethinking right here. LET'S MAKE THOSE WALLS COME TUMBLING DOWN.

#### **Authors Note:**

*Given the F3 tornado which hit our campus full force on March 29, this final sentence now seems eerily prescient. Many walls indeed came tumbling down, as well as roofs, 80% of our windows and 90% of our trees. But the Chapel walls, I am happy to report, stood firm, and the graceful Chapel spire that was lost will be replaced this summer. Most amazing was the survival of the eternal flame in the red glass lantern suspended from the Chapel ceiling. When it was discovered still burning, by Associate Chaplain Brian Johnson, after the 230 mph winds had torn through the campus, it became a symbol of hope for us all.*

## DISCUSSION:

# THE QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS: PROBLEM & PROMISE

*Robert W. Funk*

### Introduction

The quest of the historical Jesus is the pursuit of the discrepancy between the historical figure and the portraits of him in the gospels. The problem is to distinguish fact from fiction in the twenty-two ancient gospels that contain reports about what he said and did. The quest is thus essentially a search for reliable data.

The popular view is that Jesus did and said everything that is reported of him in the four New Testament gospels. After more than two centuries of critical work we know that is not true: the New Testament gospels are a mixture of folk memories and creative storytelling; there is very little hard history. Furthermore, we now have the text, in whole or in part, of eighteen additional gospels to consider. Like the New Testament gospels, they too must be evaluated critically. The first task of the quest is to establish a firm database from which to reconstruct aspects of the historical figure of Jesus.

Many scholars believe we can isolate at least a small fund of reliable historical data. Of what value are those data? Does knowledge of the historical Jesus carry any significance for Christian faith?

Responses to this question fall into two discrete categories, which I will refer to as "parties." On the one hand, the Apostolic Party insists that knowledge of the historical Jesus does not and cannot affect how we understand the Christian faith. The content of the faith was once and for all determined by the "apostles" and early church councils. On the other hand, the Jesus Party believes knowledge of the historical Jesus does matter and that Jesus should have something to say about the religion that claims him as lord.

The difference between these two parties may be expressed in these two formulations:

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(1) *Jesus reveals God as the absolute monarch of the kingdom of God.*

(2) *In his confession, "You are the Anointed" (the messiah),<sup>1</sup> Simon Peter reveals who Jesus is.*

The Apostolic Party vests its faith in the faith of the apostle Peter, as expressed in his confession. The Jesus Party believes that Jesus, and not Peter, ought to have the primary say about the faith that posits him as its author.

There is also a third party, the Bible Party, that cannot always be distinguished from the Apostolic Party: the Bible Party is willing to risk everything on the New Testament, with or without the confirmation of the creeds. The New Testament reveals the convictions of a select group of early believers headed by the apostle Paul.

The three parties represent three options: The Jesus Party makes Jesus the catalyst of the faith; the Apostolic Party bases its claims on the confession of Peter and the creeds; and the Bible Party takes the New Testament as the foundation of its faith.

For those who have taken the decisions of the ancient ecumenical councils as normative, the insertion of the historical Jesus into the equation has a destabilizing effect: Jesus may not support the vote of the councils. For those who have vested everything in the reliability of the New Testament gospels, the foundations have already been shaken as a consequence of two centuries of critical scholarship. But for others, especially for those for whom the ancient creedal formulations have begun to lose their cogency, any success in rediscovering the founder of the faith is filled with promise regardless of its consequences.

For the most part during its long history, Christianity has been preoccupied with the status of Jesus rather than with the kingdom of God, which was the focus of Jesus' teaching. Christians call on converts to confess that Jesus is lord and personal savior. Christian leaders tend to follow that with demands to support and honor the church and accept the teachings of its leaders. As a result of the quest, however, we are being challenged to ask ourselves whether those requirements square with Jesus focus on the kingdom of

God.

The discrepancy between Jesus' views and behavior and the institutional church is joined by a second entirely modern problem. In his famous demythologizing essay of 1941, Rudolf Bultmann pointed out that the ancient cosmology that frames the Christian message is no longer functional. We no longer believe in a three-tiered universe, heaven and hell, a second coming, a final holocaust, and life after death. These features do not fit our knowledge of the physical universe. They should have awakened us long ago to the possibility that such elements may not be an adequate vehicle of the Christian message. That possibility is reinforced as it becomes clearer that these items were not part of the message of Jesus. We may be clinging to the old worldview in order to retain our theological and ecclesiastical brokerage systems.

My basic propositions, then, are these:

[1] *The quest of the historical Jesus is the pursuit of the discrepancy between the historical figure and the representations of him in the gospels.*

[2] *The quest of the historical Jesus is the search for reliable data.*

[3] *The quest of the historical Jesus assumes that some reliable historical data are recoverable.*

[4] *Knowledge of the historical Jesus matters for faith.*

[5] *The recovery of the historical figure of Jesus may precipitate a sweeping reformation of the Christian tradition as it enters the third millennium.*

● [1] **The quest of the historical Jesus is the pursuit of the discrepancy between the historical figure and the representations of him in the gospels.**

The quest assumes there is some discrepancy between the historical figure of Jesus and the way he is depicted in all the surviving gospels. Were there no discrepancy, there would be no need, indeed, no incentive, for a quest. The quest implies that what Jesus said and did has been fictionalized, misrepresented, or distorted to some extent in these ancient texts. Critical scholars---those whose historical judgments are not driven by theological commitments---generally subscribe to this point.

How do scholars know there is a discrepancy? The principal reason is that the gospels themselves vary in the pictures they present of the historical figure. That, in turn, leads scholars to suspect that the gospels were not written by eyewitnesses. These two issues are worth close scrutiny.

### 1. The synoptics vs. John.

In the modern critical study of the gospels beginning as early as the eighteenth century, it became apparent that the Gospel of John presents a very different picture of Jesus than do the so-called synoptic gospels---Mark, Matthew, Luke. In John, for example, Jesus speaks in long, involved discourses, while in the synoptics Jesus' discourse consists by and large of short stories we call parables and one- and two-liners that look like proverbs or epigrams. In the synoptics, the subject of Jesus' teaching is the kingdom of God or God's domain; in John, Jesus makes himself the theme of his own teaching. In the synoptics, Jesus' concerns appear to turn outward on the poor, oppressed, sinners, and defiled; in John, his vision is focused on his own status and the status of those who belong to his community. It is often difficult to believe that the synoptics and John are actually depicting the same person.

As a consequence of these and other discrepancies, it became almost axiomatic in the last two centuries of critical study to hold the view that any real history of Jesus of Nazareth is to be found primarily in the synoptics rather than in John.

### 2. Matthew and Luke rewrite Mark

Most scholars believe that Matthew and Luke based their gospels on the gospel of Mark. If Matthew and Luke are doing no more than copying (and revising) Mark, do they provide us with independent information about Jesus? Again, the common judgment is that Matthew and Luke add little or nothing reliable to Mark when they are revising their source. However, Matthew and Luke may have made us of independent traditions---stories and sayings---where they depart from Mark. These "stray" traditions may contain important information about Jesus.

### 3. Mark and Q.

As biblical scholarship emerged from under the censorious eye of dogmatic theology during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it became clear that even the synoptic evangelists differed considerably from each other in the way they represented Jesus. And then with the emergence of the Q hypothesis---a sayings gospel common to Matthew and Luke---and the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas in 1945, the contrasting images of Jesus multiplied still further. The Gospel of Mark represents Jesus as preparing for his death almost from the beginning of his public life. Jesus three times predicts his own death. At one point Jesus even interprets his own impending death as "a ransom for many."<sup>2</sup>

The Sayings Gospel Q, on the other hand, has no passion narrative, no predictions of death, no resurrection stories, no birth and childhood stories. In Q Jesus is primarily a teacher

of wisdom, although he does occasionally cure people. The orthodox interpretation of Jesus' death and resurrection had apparently not yet taken root in the formulation of gospels. Whether or not an early gospel like Q could have existed continued to be debated until the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas in 1945. Thomas contains 114 sayings attributed to Jesus; it has no narrative framework, no passion story, no resurrection stories, no birth and childhood tales. It is now certain that sayings gospels once existed, but were in fact suppressed by the orthodox tradition once it had taken root and come to dominate the councils of the ancient church. Three very different pictures of Jesus thus emerge from the ancient gospels: the one propounded by the Fourth Gospel, the portrait offered the synoptics, and the itinerant sage that appears in the earliest of these, the sayings gospels.

#### 4. Enlistment of the first disciples: fact or fiction?

Those who read the gospels without the benefit of critical knowledge often assume that the gospels are made up of reports of eyewitnesses. Those eyewitnesses are presumed to be the principal figures who are mentioned in the gospels as early companions of Jesus---Peter and Andrew, James and John, to mention only four. What then about the stories that tell how these first followers came to be disciples? Are they the reports of actual events?

In the first chapter of Mark,<sup>3</sup> the evangelist records two stories in which first Peter and Andrew and then James and John are enlisted as followers of Jesus. In each case the pair is fishing on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus comes along and calls out, "Become my followers and I'll have you fishing for people." They abandon their nets right then and there and become his disciples.

The two stories in Mark are carbon copies of each other. The motivation for the fishermen to abandon their livelihood and follow Jesus is not given. All Jesus has to do is challenge and they respond. Jesus speaks with authority. His presence is electric.

Folklorists describe such scenes as idealized or stereotypical. In them, Jesus is a figure who commands and whom all obey; that figure is a retrojection into their original encounter with him from the standpoint of the faith later followers acquired. Put differently, the scenes in Mark, repeated almost word-for-word in Matthew, are not real scenes but the product of an imagination informed by the subsequent course of events.

When Luke comes to this point in the copy of Mark he has before him, he doesn't like what he reads, so he tells a

different story. In Luke's version,<sup>4</sup> Jesus borrows one of the fishing boats, pulls out from the shore, and teaches the crowd on shore from the boat. When Jesus has finished teaching, he asks Simon Peter to pull out into the deep water and lower the nets for a catch. Simon protests: "We've been at it all night and haven't caught a thing." But he follows instructions. The result is a catch so huge Peter must summon other boats to help with the haul.

In Luke's account, James and John are now partners of Peter rather than a second, independent pair; Andrew is not mentioned. Luke has reduced two stories to one. In Luke's version, Jesus tells them the same thing as he does in Mark's account: "Follow me and I'll have you fishing for people." And, as in Mark's account, they abandon everything and become disciples. There can be no doubt that these stories refer to the same event.

As Luke rewrites Mark, he borrows a theme from another story, probably an appearance story, and rewrites the call story so that there is proper motivation for the trio to act as they do. In other words, Luke is a better storyteller than Mark (and Matthew).

There is a third version of this same set of events in the Gospel of John.<sup>5</sup> In John's version, Jesus is still in the Jordan Valley where John is baptizing (in the synoptics, Jesus has left John and returned to Galilee). Andrew and an unnamed disciple hear John the Baptist refer to Jesus as the lamb of God and begin to follow him. The next day Andrew finds Peter, his brother, and brings him to Jesus, who immediately changes his name to "Rock."

The day following Jesus finds Philip, who is also from Bethsaida, the hometown of Peter and Andrew. He says follow me and Philip does. Philip enlists his brother Nathanael who also becomes a follower. They then leave for Galilee.

The very least that can be said about these three versions of the call of the first disciples is that the gospel storytellers remember the inaugural contact with Jesus very differently. Different pairs or groups are involved, and in the Johannine version the location is different. In the earliest version, Mark, no motivation is supplied; in Luke and John motivation is supplied. Yet the words Jesus speaks are almost identical and the response is immediate and absolute.

The principals involved either did not remember clearly how they came to be involved in the Jesus movement, or the stories they may originally have told were repeated and

elaborated so frequently that they developed along rather different lines. In the process the tales became more and more idealized or abstract and for the modern historian less and less believable as reports of specific events. They became legends rather than eyewitness reports of particular events.

● **The quest of the historical Jesus is the search for reliable data.**

In his huge ongoing work, *A Marginal Jew*, already running to two lengthy volumes, John P. Meier, a Jesuit who teaches at Catholic University, states that the quest is a search for reliable data. In this he is doing no more than asserting the view to which all questers for the historical figure of Jesus subscribe.

If the quest is a search for reliable data, that should be our first goal: to agree on a database of reliable data. That was the goal the Jesus Seminar adopted for itself when it began its work in 1985. In the interim, the Seminar has sorted through all the words ascribed to Jesus in all the sources surviving from the first three centuries of the common era. It has identified those words that, in the judgment of the Fellows of the Seminar, were most probably spoken by Jesus. When we had completed that task, we turned to all the reports in all the gospels of what Jesus did and carried out a similar evaluation. The result was the creation of a twin database: The first was published as *The Five Gospels*, the second as *The Acts of Jesus*, which has just now appeared.

It was not until we had finished the first two phases of our work that we permitted ourselves to interpret that database. Our interpretations took the form of profiles of Jesus prepared by individual Fellows. Profiles of Jesus comprise the third phase of the Seminar, a phase that is just now drawing to a close.

In our assessment of the data, we developed criteria---rules of evidence---to serve as guidelines. Those criteria were accompanied by a history of individual stories in most cases as a part of the evaluation. In *The Five Gospels* and *The Acts of Jesus*, we color-coded the results of our deliberations and endeavored to give a brief account of how we reached our conclusions.

Our intention in creating a color-coded report was to make its contents immediately evident to the general reader without the necessity of reading hundreds of pages of

commentary. In addition, it took as its model the red-letter editions of the New Testament widely known among readers of the Bible. To our great surprise, *The Five Gospels* made it onto the religion best-seller list for nine months.

The task of establishing a compendium of reliable data seemed to me to require a wide spectrum of collaboration on fully ecumenical terms. The make-up of the Seminar appeared to guarantee both. Hundreds of scholars were invited over the years to participate. Nearly two hundred have contributed to one degree or another. More than seventy-five scholars have signed the two reports. To sustain that kind of effort over a thirteen-year span is no mean achievement.

Yet the response we have elicited from some colleagues who did not participate has been nothing short of uncivil. We have been the object of rancor, vituperation, name calling, and scathing satire. Rather than enter into critical dialogue about the emerging database, scholars have felt it appropriate to attack members of the Seminar personally. In many cases, these responses have violated the canons of professional behavior.

There are three reasons, in my estimation, we have gotten the kind of response we have. First, we caught our colleagues by surprise in exposing widely held academic views to public scrutiny, perhaps for the first time in this century. The fact that parish minister and priest have withheld this common information from their parishioners contributed to the surprise. The revelation of a closely guarded secret deepened the chagrin felt by many colleagues. An angry rebuttal is often the defense needed to buy time for thought.

Secondly, *The Five Gospels* intervened directly in the way scripture is read and interpreted. The quest began to destabilize the canon---the authority of the New Testament gospels---and to introduce strange new documents into the discussion.

Thirdly, the gradual demise of neo-orthodoxy, the theological consensus in the previous period, produced pangs of trauma. I make this third suggestion out of experience: many of us in the Seminar have gone through one painful transition after another as we struggled toward a new consensus. At some point in the life of the Seminar, perhaps only after eight or nine years of extended debate, the Fellows began to act as though honesty, confession, and candor were the proper mode of behavior; posturing receded and then largely disappeared.

● [2] **The quest of the historical Jesus assumes that some reliable data are recoverable.**

Those who take the quest seriously believe that we can actually succeed, at least in some particulars, in distinguishing the historical figure from the gospel representations of him. But we do not think that our reconstruction will stand up for all time, that we have finally and absolutely recovered that historical person. On the contrary. Just as we have attempted to identify and correct the mistakes our mentors made in their quest, others will follow us to fix the mistakes we have made. Nevertheless, we believe enough in the integrity of our work to think that we have caught sight of the historical figure now and again in the pages of the ancient gospels.

Our confidence rests on the axioms we share with many if not most critical scholars. First, the synoptic Jesus is closer to the historical figure than the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel. Second, Mark is the first narrative gospel to be composed and serves as the narrative framework for both Matthew and Luke. Third, we believe the Sayings Gospel Q was an early written source of which Matthew and Luke made use. Fourth, we think the Jesus of Q and the Gospel of Thomas is closer to the historical figure than the Jesus of the synoptics. On the basis of the sayings gospels, it appears that two characteristic speech forms of Jesus were parables and witticisms we call aphorisms. They serve as the basis for a voice print with respect to both style and content. The isolation of an authentic body of Jesus lore then served as the basis for identifying things he may have done.

In tandem with this series of steps, we reviewed and revised the history of the gospel traditions.

We agreed, again with most critical scholars, that the birth and childhood stories were developed very late in the tradition and contain very little by way of historical reminiscence.

After a review of the scholarly literature and extended analysis of the texts, we agreed that the resurrection was a private event open only to select believers, that the reports were a compendium of different stories, that none of the inner circle of male disciples saw the angel at the tomb, only the women. Further, we agreed that Paul was the only one who claims to have seen the risen Lord who has left us a written report.

On the other hand, we agreed that the crucifixion of Jesus was a public spectacle, open to all observers. The reports of

the passion of Jesus reflect a single story, with a variety of detail. Much of that detail was suggested by prophetic texts, including the Psalms. We were divided on whether some early stratum in the Gospel of Peter was the original source, or whether the passion narrative was created initially by Mark. The end result of these deliberations was to reverse the brief characterization that prevailed at the beginning of this century: the gospels, it was said, consisted of a passion narrative with an extended introduction. We conclude that the gospels were really a collection of sayings and anecdotes with a passion appendix.

In spite of these qualifications, or perhaps because of them, we concluded that a fairly substantial body of historical information about Jesus of Nazareth is recoverable from the gospels. In this respect, the Jesus Seminar falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum: there are those who think the gospels contain virtually no history, and there are those who think that the canonical gospels are nothing but history.

I am aware how sketchy this brief summary is and how misleading it may be in some formulations.

● [3] **Knowledge of the historical Jesus matters for faith.** The first three theses bring us to a crucial junction in this series of propositions: Knowledge of the historical Jesus matters for faith.

*What is at issue?*

One way to put the problem is this: For the orthodox Christian community, faith was faith in the faith of the first disciples. We believe because they believed. And we believe what they believed.

For other believers, faith was faith in Jesus himself. Peter and others in the inner circle around Jesus apparently had faith directly in him: their faith was not mediated by someone else. The question arises: Can we know enough of the historical Jesus for us to say we have faith directly in him, without the intermediate agency of the first believers?

The issue is even more complicated than that. For some faith in Jesus is faith in him as the messiah, or son of man, or son of God. On this view, Jesus is the object of faith.

For others faith in Jesus is to trust what he trusted. On that view, it is not Jesus who is the object of faith; his Father, God, is the true object of faith. Better yet, his Father's kingdom is the real object of faith. Jesus did not call on people to believe in God; he called on them to trust the

creation, including other human beings. As he viewed it, the world is God's kingdom or God's domain. The object of Jesus' trust was his perception of how the world is meant to work.

This set of possibilities can be set out in three propositions, as we did earlier in identifying the three parties:

- (1) *Jesus points to the kingdom of God*
- (2) *Peter points to Jesus*
- (3) *The New Testament points to the apostles*

It would appear that faith in the New Testament is a derivative faith, twice removed from the kingdom of God. Even faith in the faith of Peter and the apostles is secondhand faith. The question then becomes: Did Jesus call on his followers to believe that he was the messiah, the apocalyptic son of Adam, or a miraculously begotten son of God? If he did not, were his followers justified in calling on subsequent believers to do so?

Jesus seems to have called on his followers to trust what he trusted, to believe that the world was God's domain, and to act accordingly. That dramatic shift in understanding could trail a radical reformation in its wake.

● [4] **The recovery of the historical figure of Jesus may well serve as the catalyst of a new beginning for the Christian movement as it enters the third millennium.**

A glimpse of the historical figure of Jesus may trigger a renewal of the Jesus movement. The words and deeds of Jesus were the catalyst of the original movement. There was an organized cluster of activities before there was an institution---a religion in the formal sense. The rediscovery of the historical Jesus may prompt the creation of a twenty-first century version of that early stage.

As the Jesus movement aged, an institution and an ideological orthodoxy began to emerge. As they did, the role of the words and deeds of Jesus began to diminish. What he did and said was gradually eclipsed by what was done to him---birth, crucifixion, resurrection---interpreted in the mythical framework of a dying/rising lord. By the time we come to the Apostles' Creed (mid second century), the acts and words of Jesus are no longer central. Indeed, the creed itself has an empty center---it lacks any reference to what Jesus said and did, only what was done to him.

The historical figure has been so overlaid with the Christian myth that the historical figure is overshadowed by the

adoration of him as the Christ. In the course of this development, the iconoclast became an icon.

If the Christian movement readmits Jesus into its counsels, he will be a powerful critic of sedimented institutions and orthodoxies. That is what happened in the waves of reformation that swept through Europe in the sixteenth and following centuries. His voice could again revamp Christian practice and belief.

Even a partial recovery of Jesus of Nazareth will serve to purge the clogged arteries of the institutional churches, arteries blocked with self-serving bureaucracies and theological litmus tests designed to maintain the status quo. His voice will redefine the nature and parameters of the Christian life.

Here are a few hints of what that voice is like.

#### 1. A trust ethic.

Most of us have been immersed in a work ethic: we labor to produce the goods of life and the good life and our virtue resides in that labor. Jesus advocated and practiced a trust ethic.

He admonished his followers to take no thought for the morrow, for food, clothing, and shelter. The flowers of the field and the birds of the sky were his paradigms of trust.

Passersby would supply urgent needs, as the parable of the Good Samaritan indicates. When a loaf of bread was required in the middle of the night to feed late-arriving guests, neighbors would respond because the laws of hospitality required it.

Like the Israelites in the Sinai desert, disciples are never to ask for more than one day's bread at a time. They need not plan ahead, for:

*Ask---it'll be given you;  
seek---you'll find;  
knock---it'll be opened for you.<sup>6</sup>*

Jesus has a fresh regard for the order of the natural world, the universe, its creator, and its inhabitants. He trusted God absolutely. He took preparations for the future to betray a lack of trust.

#### 2. Celebration.

Celebration is the by-product of trust. One reason the Seminar believes Jesus could not have been an apocalyptic prophet is his impulse to celebrate. Apocalyptic is for those

who mourn the corruption of creation; it is not a program for the future; it is the counsel of endtime despair.

Celebration runs like a golden thread through the authentic stories and witticisms of Jesus.

A woman loses a coin, sweeps the dirt floor of her house to find it, and then spends that coin and more to celebrate her good fortune.

A shepherd goes in search of a wayward sheep, leaving ninety-nine behind to fend for themselves. The successful recovery of the lost sheep prompts a celebration, which usually required the slaughter of a lamb, in this case perhaps the one that had just been recovered.

The father of a recalcitrant son celebrates the return of the prodigal by throwing an elaborate party after welcoming his son as an oriental potentate with robe, ring, and sandals. The frugal, loyal older son demurs at the extravagance.

Celebration is the natural aftermath of the discovery of a valuable pearl or a cache of coins in a field.

When Jesus is asked why he doesn't fast, he responds: "The groom's friends can't fast while the groom is present, can they?" Jesus celebrates at one symposium after another, to the extent that he acquired the reputation of being a "glutton and a drunk."<sup>7</sup>

A trust ethic and the celebration of life prompt Jesus to conceive of God's domain as a kingdom without boundaries and a society without brokers.

### 3. a. A kingdom without social barriers.

In contrast to the Mosaic code, which called on Israelites to honor father and mother, Jesus has this to say:

*If any of you comes to me and does not hate your own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters---yes, even your own life---you're no disciple of mine.*<sup>8</sup>

Kinship in God's domain transcended blood and tribal ties. In that realm, there is neither Jew nor gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, as Paul puts it, to which might be added, neither Greeks nor barbarians, neither Americans nor foreigners, neither heterosexual nor homosexual. Indeed, Jesus admonishes his followers to "love your enemies." Such love breaches the ultimate social barrier. The citizens of Jesus' kingdom were the poor, the hungry, the sad, the persecuted. Jesus advises his followers: "Those not against

us are for us."<sup>9</sup>

Jesus expresses this new code in an open table: he eats and drinks with the unclean, the socially ostracized, the toll collectors and prostitutes, in violation of established social mores. And yet, when the *Didache*---a second-century manual of discipline for the emerging church---sets down the rules for the eucharist, it stipulates that only those who have been baptized in the Lord's name may participate. The Christian community had already begun to put back into place the barriers that Jesus had torn down.

In the kingdom of God as Jesus envisioned it, there are no theological litmus tests. It is not what one believes that counts, but whether one is at home in a fenceless community.

### 3. b. A society without brokers.

For Jesus, God's domain has no use for brokers.

In a brokerage system, mediators are the necessary link between patrons like God and emperor and those in need. Jesus did away with all brokers.

He says to those whose paralysis or blindness has been cured: **your** faith has cured you. Not I have cured you. Not God has cured you.

In the parables Jesus invites listeners to cross over to the kingdom of God. However, they must make the move on their own initiative. They need not come by way of Jesus or even by way of God. Jesus could not have spoken the words the Gospel of John attributes to him: "No one comes to the Father unless it is through me."<sup>10</sup>

Those who require forgiveness can be forgiven only if they sponsor forgiveness: forgive and you'll be forgiven, says Jesus. Jesus is out of the loop; even God is out of the loop. In prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to ask for the remission of debt only to the extent that they themselves have remitted the debts of others.

Jesus recommends that the rich young man sell all he has and give the proceeds to the poor. He doesn't say give it to me, or give it to the church.

The brokerless community Jesus had in mind stands in strong contrast to the broker-laden structure contemplated by the Pastoral Epistles and even the apostle Paul. Jesus obviates the need for mediating priests and clergy, even a mediating church.

#### 4. A kingdom without cult rituals.

The Jesus movement early on declared Jesus to be the broker of God's grace. They did so by interpreting his death as a blood sacrifice to compensate for the sins of humankind who were not qualified to atone for themselves. The old sacrificial system was thus carried forward in a new and more sophisticated form: only one sacrifice was needed because of the quality of its victim.

The sacrifice of Jesus was extended into the new institution by means of the Lord's Supper or the eucharist: "This is my body," "This is my blood," are the key phrases. It is doubtful that this sacrament can be traced back to Jesus. In any case, the idea of the atonement does not stem from Jesus: It is a contradiction of his fundamental dedication to a brokerless kingdom.

The same can be said of baptism. The practice is probably a carryover from earlier allegiances to John the Baptist. Jesus' indifference to purity codes and his apparent lack of interest in repentance suggest that the Fourth Gospel is correct: Jesus did not baptize; the practice belonged to his disciples, probably those who had previously been followers of John.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus' attitudes towards fasting and public piety are congruent with his notion of a brokerless kingdom: fasting does not go with celebration, and those who practice public piety have received all the reward they will ever get.

#### 5. The entrance to the kingdom

In his parables Jesus issues an invitation to cross over to God's domain. The rich are unable to find the door to the kingdom, but the poor, the hungry, the sad don't even have to look for it. That is because only those morally and religiously disqualified may enter. Put differently, insiders are out; outsiders are in. One should take care to understand these terms non-literally (in a kingdom without boundaries, there are no insiders and outsiders).

In the parable of the vineyard laborers, those who worked the entire day are disappointed in the standard wage; those who labored only one hour are paid the same amount. Those who did not expect to be invited to a royal banquet are

ushered into the hall in the parable of the Great Supper. The parable of the Pharisee and the Toll Collector contrasts the behavior of an "insider"---a pious Pharisee---with that of an "outsider"---a toll collector. Jesus endorses self-effacement rather than exhibitions of moral superiority.

To be an "insider" in the kingdom one must be an "outsider." That requirement is never rescinded. A sinner is an "outsider"--- from the standpoint of those who thought they were insiders. Krister Stendahl once remarked that Christians are indeed sinners, but they prefer to think of themselves as "honorary" sinners. For Jesus they are real sinners (outsiders).

In God's domain, Christians (insiders) are without privilege. Christians (insiders) are never superior to non-Christians (outsiders). Christians are not the exclusive brokers of God's grace. The irony is that many Christians claim superiority and monopoly in the name of the Jesus who never asked anything for himself and insisted that his disciples ask nothing for themselves.

Earlier I mentioned Rudolf Bultmann's suggestion that the Christian proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus was no longer believable unless it had been translated into non-mythical language. The fact that the kerygma and creed are no longer believable should have awakened us to the possibility that it may not be the appropriate vehicle for the Christian gospel.

In addition, the creed and kerygma may not square with what we know of the historical Jesus. The creed and kerygma are preoccupied with the status of Jesus rather than with the kingdom of God; with the status of the apostles and the church, rather than with Jesus' vision of a world under the direct aegis of his Father. We may be clinging to the kerygma only in order to retain our ecclesiastical brokerage systems. Jesus may prompt us to abandon the institutional church. Who would weep for its loss if its only function is to protect Christian privilege?

That is how radical the coming reformation may turn out to be.

## NOTES

1. Mark 8:29.
2. Mark 10:45.
3. Mark 1:16--18, 19--20.
4. Luke 5:1--11.
5. John 1:35--42, 43--51.
6. Luke 11:9--10.
7. Luke 7:31--35. The Fellows voted this passage gray on the grounds that the phrase "son of man" may have referred to the apocalyptic son of man. But they agreed that the contrast with John the Baptist was historically accurate.
8. Luke 14:26.
9. Mark 9:40.
10. John 14:6.
11. John 4:2.

**BEYOND DATA: THE POETRY OF FAITH**  
**A Response to Robert W. Funk's**  
**"The Quest of the Historical Jesus: Problem and Promise"**  
*Mark Allan Powell*

I have been asked to respond to Robert Funk's essay. I do so with two caveats:

1. I have spoken and written much about Funk and about the Jesus Seminar that he represents. Most often, I find myself in the position of defending them from unfair assaults and calling attention to the significant contributions that they have made to the world of scholarship. Now, as a respondent, my role must be that of critic, at least it must be that if I want to avoid redundancy and be interesting, and I do. But I hope that what follows is taken within the context of essential support for Funk's commitments and achievements as a respected colleague in scholarship.

2. I have probably been asked to respond in my capacity as a New Testament scholar, but I don't care to do that, partly because--as just indicated--the disagreements then become somewhat pedantic. The arguments can be made: John Meier, who Funk cites as supporting his goal of building a reliable database, disagrees quite sharply with Funk as to what actually constitutes that database. Like many scholars (including me), Meier remains unconvinced that the Gospel of Thomas offers an independent or early witness to Jesus or that the reconstructed Q document offers substantially more reliable information than the Gospel of Mark. Likewise, Raymond Brown and many scholars (including me) remain unpersuaded by arguments that indicate the passion narratives were formed late, after the sayings tradition was well in place. But if such arguments can be made, they also have been made and there seems little point in rehearsing them here. Let us acknowledge, as Funk does, that many of the details of his work are still under debate--indeed, the very database from which he works and the methods and criteria through which it is both established and interpreted remain controversial subjects for scholars (including me) who are committed to the same basic goals that he pursues.

I prefer to respond to Funk's paper as a Christian and as a pastor, hoping that this stance will offer comments that are

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more thought-provoking. In this capacity, I must say just a word about the concluding tone of the paper, which is really the only part of it that irks me. Funk says, "Jesus may prompt us to abandon the institutional church. Who would weep for its loss if its only function is to protect Christian privilege?" As an ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I can speak only for my little branch of the institutional church, but our 1998 Directory lists 28 colleges and universities, 213 primary schools, 1378 early childhood education centers, 233 general health care centers, and 2108 social service organizations. It lists numerous mental health facilities, recovery centers, adoption agencies, employment services, literacy programs, food pantries, counseling services, refugee centers, AIDs hospices, advocacy groups, retirement homes, women's shelters, and other "institutional" agencies devoted to improving the physical, mental, emotional, sexual, social, psychological, political, ecological, and spiritual well-being of every creature on this planet. It does strike me, then, as a bit unfair to imply that this institution (or others like it) have as their "only function" the protection of Christian privilege.

But now that I've got that off my chest, let's go on to matters more substantive to Funk's proposal. I can organize the rest of my remarks as commentary on the following revealing remark: "*Jesus, and not Peter, ought to have the primary say about the faith that posits him as its author.*"

I wonder, first, to which "faith" Funk is referring. Christianity takes Jesus to be the object and content of its faith but does not necessarily claim him as its founder. When (as in Hebrews 12:2, KJV), he is called the "author of faith," the reference is to the spiritual, risen Christ who creates faith (trust) in the hearts of believers. There is no indication that the historical person of Jesus bequeathed to his followers a catechism of Christian dogma. When I was twelve years old and studied catechism in Confirmation class, my pastors told me quite plainly that many of the church's cherished beliefs were not found as such in the New Testament (much less in the words of the historical Jesus). I learned not only about how Peter and Paul shaped the faith now called Christianity but also about how Augustine and Luther and Bonhoeffer and countless others had continued to shape it. By the time I was confirmed I knew that "justification by grace" came from Paul, that the doctrine of the Trinity came from

Athanasius and the Nicene council, that the concept of the “real presence” of Christ in the Lord’s Supper came from Martin Luther, and so forth. At some level, I was keenly aware that if the Jesus of first-century Nazareth could be beamed up by the Starship Enterprise and deposited in the middle of one of our Sunday morning services he would be confused to say the least. I knew this, but it didn’t bother me. Why does it bother Funk?

Funk thinks that Jesus, not Peter, ought to be the one who defines “the faith.” Faith based on Peter is derivative faith, second-hand faith. This position strikes me as a bit like that of political conservatives who complain that certain policies of our government (e.g. social welfare programs) were not part of the original design for our nation as mapped out by those quintessential “founding fathers.” So what? Can’t ideas be judged on their own merit, regardless of origin? What’s wrong with a faith being “derivative,” that is, based on the accumulated insights and experiences of others? If, as Funk asserts, a fundamental quality of the faith movement Jesus began was “trust in other human beings,” then I would think such a faith would have to be derivative, indeed that it would celebrate this fact, point with pride to the numerous human sources from which it is derived. Or, if as Funk asserts, a fundamental quality of this faith is a rejection (or at least suspicion) of “brokers,” then I would think that such a faith would have to renounce any attempt to make the ideas of one person (the historical Jesus) the absolute authoritative norm for authentic doctrine.

The word that I do appreciate in the italicized sentence above is primary. Funk rightly notes that Christian theology has often neglected the insights of Jesus himself in favor of the insights of others concerning him. “Christianity,” Funk says, “has been preoccupied with the status of Jesus rather than with the kingdom of God.” The creeds leave a blank between “born of the virgin Mary” and “suffered under Pontius Pilate,” a blank where the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus should come. Funk is not only correct in these observations but he is right to call Christianity to account for them. He is right to say that the recovery of the historical figure of Jesus may serve “as a catalyst” for new and profound developments in the Christian movement. But then, in the first paragraph under the section in which he describes this “new beginning for the Christian movement,” he indicates that “the recovery of the historical Jesus may prompt the creation of a twenty-first century version” of the early stage, that is, of the faith before Peter or Paul or countless others added their two-cents worth. Is that the only viable alternative to the neglect of the historical Jesus? A repudiation of everything that has happened since?

Funk seems to conceive of that period we call the ministry of Jesus as a magic moment in time, so pristine that any accretion must be evaluated negatively. Naturally every theological development must be critiqued. History progresses by fits and starts, with gains and losses. One may ask whether the development of Trinitarian theology or sacramental practices were gains or losses. In fact, theologians have always and will always debate these matters. But to assume that such developments must necessarily be losses simply because they are developments seems naive; indeed, it seems anti-historical, even anti-intellectual. It seems almost like an inverted fundamentalism: there is no need to argue the theological validity of a proposition if we can show that it is derived. Only the presumably underived words and deeds of the historical Jesus are to be regarded as sacrosanct, as fundamental.

I go now to one example of how the rejection of what is derivative impoverishes faith. The example concerns what—since Bultmann—has been called myth. In the Jesus tradition, myth is by definition derivative. Jesus spoke in aphorisms and parables, but he did not tell myths, and from the historical perspective of the Jesus Seminar, all of the actions of Jesus reported in the language of myth must necessarily be deemed inauthentic. In other words, the language of myth so prevalent in our Gospels belongs to a later generation of the Jesus movement. Still, Bultmann himself viewed myth as a vehicle for expressing religious truth. If Funk’s paradigm of avoiding derivative faith holds, then myth will not simply be demythologized; it will have to be cast off altogether, as part of the baggage of second-hand religion. In my mind this impoverishes faith, with regard to theology, and even more profoundly, with regard to piety.

Ultimately, we must consider whether faith or religion can be based on data alone. Indeed, we may have to ask whether authentic faith can not only transcend data but stand in tension with it. We must consider whether authentic faith can include piety as well as theology, appeal to the heart as well as to the head. I think that piety is to theology what poetry is to prose. Like prose, theology is utilitarian, functional. When we really want to communicate unambiguously, prose works better than poetry. But poetry enriches life in other ways, and it works very well when what one wants to communicate is ambiguity. To expand this analogy (which of course does not work on every level), let us imagine that historical data is the “grammar” of faith. Ignore grammar and you get sloppy prose; ignore historical data, and you get sloppy theology. But poetry is not constrained by the accepted rules of grammar and piety is not constrained by the reliable data of historical research.

There is, of course, a lot of bad piety, just as there is a lot of bad poetry, but the evaluation of either as such is somewhat subjective and not wholly determined by the standards that would apply to other genres of thought or literature.

I could turn to Thomas Merton or Teresa of Avila and find compelling illustrations for this point, but that's too easy. I deliberately choose an unsophisticated example instead. I just called our local Christian radio station and asked them what the Number One Christian rock song in Columbus is this week. It's a tune by the group Audio Adrenaline that consists mainly of the following line sung over and over again: "If I keep my eyes on Jesus, I can walk on water." The record has sold over a million copies to people who presumably find it quite inspiring. I doubt that very many of these consumers understand the lyrics in a literalistic sense. That is, I doubt that many think that if they literally see Jesus in some aqueous location and fix their gaze upon him they will be supernaturally empowered to walk across the water without sinking. They do not understand the song this way because it is poetry and they know that. What it expresses is not a theological proposition regarding an existential occurrence in space and time, that is, something historical, but piety, something that transcends history through metaphor.

The Jesus Seminar deals with data, the stuff of history. Funk does not think that the historical Jesus actually did walk on water, much less enable Peter or others who kept their eyes on him to do so. My guess is that this conclusion would be troubling to many Audio Adrenaline fans. Why? Can't the piety expressed in the song be authentic even if the historical data that is loosely referenced by it is contestable? I think that it can, but does Funk think so? I don't see how he can. Such an appeal to myth is clearly derivative.

Funk suggests three reasons why the Jesus Seminar has met with resistance: it exposes widely held views to public scrutiny; it destabilizes the canon; it exemplifies the demise of neo-orthodoxy. These may all be correct, but I suspect a basic resistance to the Seminar comes from a perception (right or wrong) that it offers a prosaic understanding of religion based on data alone. The Jesus Seminar is perceived

(rightly or wrongly) as lacking any sense of spirituality, any appreciation for the inner yearnings that drive most people to religion in the first place.

Marcus Borg has been the most obvious exception to this caricature. A prominent member of the Seminar, he also speaks forthrightly of his current experience of "the post-Easter Jesus." He speaks of "meeting Jesus again, for the first time," language that recalls Ricoeur's concept of "the second naiveté." But Borg exhibits a different attitude than Funk toward data that is deemed historically inauthentic. He does not discard such materials as "derivative" but maintains that they "are valuable and illuminating precisely because they enable us to hear the voice of the community" (See Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship [Philadelphia: TPI, 1994], p. 174). Even if Jesus himself did not say, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:32), the fact that early Christians attributed this designation to him reveals something about the vividness and intensity of their experience that remains significant for faith.

One can easily fall off the cliff on the opposite side. I think Schweitzer did so when, after deciding that the historical Jesus was too strange to meet modern demands of faith, he took to advising people simply to experience the spiritual Jesus who can be encountered rather uncritically in the Gospels. Historical Jesus studies can and should inform theology, and our theology can and should inform our piety. Again, this is where Funk is strongest. His study of Jesus reveals one who calls people to trust, to celebrate, to renounce privilege, to overcome barriers, and to eliminate brokers. All valid themes, seldom heard in Christian preaching. The data gathered through historical research bring such themes to the fore and thrust them into the limelight.

But ultimately the religious needs of many--most--go beyond what data can reveal. We do not need to pick which ditch we will fall into. What we need is a wholistic faith, one that holds piety and theology together, one that appeals to the heart and the mind, that includes history and myth, poetry and prose.

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California Lutheran University  
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Carthage College  
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Concordia College  
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