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Why Christology Is An Endangered Species

By James R. Edwards

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The warnings on cigarette and alcohol advertisements are curious paradoxes. "Warning: the surgeon general has determined that smoking is hazardous to your health." "Warning: the surgeon general has determined that pregnant women should not drink alcohol." The products and the warnings speak to two ingrained but incompatible convictions of modern life: the commitment to unlimited freedom, and yet an interest in doing the right thing. The warnings betray the two faces of American life—the Libertarian and the Puritan—that are also present in the American church. We are witnessing an explosion of experimental and alternative theologies, some quasi-Christian, others unChristian, but all attractive in various degrees to our commitments to freedom, self, and personal fulfillment, whatever the cost. The church also hears the voice of Scripture, however, like the surgeon general, warning that our cravings can kill us. The church is enamoured with a theology today—and has been for quite a long time—that is detrimental to its health, and on which it cannot survive.

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A Theology of Creation over a Theology of Redemption

My thesis, simply, is that we are witnessing a paradigm shift away from a theology of redemption to a theology of creation. The theological center is shifting from a Christocentric theology to a *theo*centric theology; from the Second Article of the Creed to the First Article; from a theology of God's redemptive acts and promises in history, to a theology of the state of things in their natural order as being the rightful and final expression of God's will. We are witnessing a shift in theology from what God can and will do in the gospel to what God did once for all in creation.

Concomitant with the shift from Christology to creation is a shift away from the doctrines of sin and repentance, which according to the preaching of the cross are essential to the reception of new life in Christ. The new theology argues that what *is*, is essentially good and right. The paradigm shift changes the theological proclamation of

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the church from a call to transformation according to the image of Jesus Christ to one of God's affirmation of who I am as I am made, without any further need for change. The proclamation of the saving grace of the gospel has usually been expressed in transitive verbs of conversion—believe, turn, repent, follow. The new theology is couched in intransitive verbs of being and becoming. We are, in short, witnessing a shift from a theology of transcendence to a theology of immanence in which statements that are putatively about God are in fact statements about humanity, human community, and creation. Theology "From above" in being replaced by theology "from below" that has strong affinities with Deism and Unitarianism The new theology is solipsistic: the one thing worth living and dying for is the self.

The Current State of Affairs

Several years ago I was swimming off the beach of Moro Bay, California, and noticed to my dismay that the shoreline had changed. The shoreline had not really changed, of course, but because a riptide was carrying me rapidly out to sea my position with respect to it had. I want to suggest that the church is being carried by a riptide of a different nature. The shoreline has changed, and we are no longer in the same place we were—or thought we were. Like confused swimmers we ask how we ended up where we are, and how to get back to shore.

God as *Imago Hominis*

The initial contours of our problem were adumbrated by Ludwig Feuerbach's concept of religion as wish-fulfillment. According to Feuerbach, humanity projects its essential needs onto the canvas of eternity and baptizes them as "god." Feuerbach reversed the Biblical teaching of humanity as the *imago Dei*; rather, according to him, God is the *imago hominis*. Feuerbach needed to eliminate the person of Jesus Christ from the divine equation, for Jesus gives God a very specific face and profile. But if Jesus as the visible expression of the invisible God is blurred, or erased, then humanity is freer to paint the face of God however it likes.

Feuerbach advanced these ideas in *The Essence of Christianity*, first published in 1841. Feuerbach recast Hegelian Idealism in a manner openly hostile to confessional, Trinitarian Christianity. His blueprint marks an essential shift from a theology of transcendence to a theology of nature, and particularly human nature. For Feuerbach, man is the one true *ens realissimum*. Feuerbach removes the disguises of earlier Enlightenment theologies and plainly, even antagonistically, promotes a theology from below as opposed to a theology from above. It is a theology based on the assumptions of naturalism (the universe as a closed system, in which everything that happens can be accounted for by prior observable causes) as opposed to a universe that has not only been created by God but is also *sustained* by God (Col. 1:16), and is being *redeemed* by God at the cost of God's entering the created order in the person of Jesus Christ.

The year 1841 may seem to anchor Feuerbach's ideas, and others like them, to the distant and dormant past, but this is not the case. They remain active in the blood stream of the modern world, as is evidenced by the words of Hans Asmussen in his opening address to the Synod of Barmen in 1933. "We are raising a protest against the same phenomenon that has been slowly preparing the way for the devastation of the Church for more than two hundred years. For it is only a relative difference if whether beside Holy Scripture in the church historical events or reason, culture, aesthetic feelings, progress, or other powers and figures are said to be binding upon the Church."[1] The immediate protest of the Theological Declaration of Barmen was lodged against the "orders of creation" e.g., whether one was Aryan, Slav, or Jew—over a theology of both the *newness* and *oneness* to which God calls *all* people in Jesus Christ. Its ultimate protest, however, was against a theology of immanence over a theology of transcendence, a theology of creation over a theology of redemption.

A. Natural Religion of the Enlightenment

I should like to mention four factors that have diminished and compromised Jesus Christ as the unique revelation and salvation of God. These four factors are not alone responsible for the contemporary drift away from Christology, and indeed other factors could be added to them. Nevertheless, the four I shall mention are examples of the modern tendency to define the gospel in terms of immanence rather than transcendence.

The first of them is Enlightenment rationalism. The time span of "two centuries" mentioned by Asmussen refers, of course, to the gestation period of the post-Enlightenment world, during which the church has been tempted to compromise and accommodate its theology to the nascent and heady scientific worldview of philosophical naturalism. An axiom of Enlightenment rationalism was its dogmatic denial of the possibility of miracles. Anyone who has read Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (ET, 1910), a classic statement of this accommodation, will remember the fanciful and often strained insistence with which Enlightenment scholars sought either to account for the miracles of Jesus on the basis of purely naturalistic explanations, or to eliminate them altogether. The result, as Thomas Jefferson's New Testament evinces, was a much smaller New Testament, consisting primarily of Jesus' personal example and his moral teachings, as opposed to any atoning value of his death on the cross, save as an example of compassion. The reduction of the message of the gospel to "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man," from which Jesus himself was effectively eliminated from the saving equation, was a defining hallmark of Enlightenment theology. To be sure, the defiant

dogmatism of Enlightenment rationalism against the possibility of the miraculous has abated somewhat today, but its influence certainly remains in a prejudice against miracles in general, including most miracles recorded in Scripture.

B. The Debate over Creation and Evolution

The exchange between science and theology—at least in its modern phase—dates to the conflict over the heliocentric cosmology of Copernicus and Galileo verses the geocentric cosmology of the church in the seventeenth century. The initial encounter of science and religion was essentially not one of faith versus scientific reason, for the early architects of both the scientific method and worldview—Galileo, Johannes Kepler, Robert Boyle, Isaac Newton—were committed churchmen and devout in their religion, if not wholly orthodox. They believed, in the words of Francis Bacon, that God had revealed himself in two "books": the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture. They knew the second book as well as the first, as is evinced by Boyle's mastery of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek in order to read and understand the Bible. They reveled in the correspondence of the two "books," convinced that the "Supreme Creator" and "Grand Artisan" of the world was one and the same author of Scripture. These early pioneers were intent on proving the compatibility of natural science and Christian faith, a fact worth recalling in our day when the two are often regarded as incompatible and even antithetical.

Even among the early scientific patriarchs, however, one notes a subtle but perceptible shift of emphasis toward nature and away from Scripture. The early formulators of the scientific method were intent to show that Scripture conformed *to* the world revealed by reason and natural observation, thus endowing nature with a priority over revelation. Moreover, in the long and formative history of the debate over creation and evolution the theological conversation has revolved almost exclusively around the First Article of the Creed—God as creator. In the debate over cosmology and natural origins, the Second Article—Jesus Christ as redeemer—has played virtually no role, and indeed has been regarded as negligible, as evinced by Newton's denial of the doctrine of the Trinity and Locke's denial of the deity of Jesus Christ. The debate between science and Christianity, in other words, is essentially a debate between science and *theism.*

It is important to recall, however, that according to Scripture, the doctrine of creation includes the Second Article as well as the First Article. The Gospel of John says that "all things were made through him (Christ as the Word of God), and apart from him nothing came into existence that was made" (1:3). In Colossians, Paul writes that "in him (Christ as the Son of God) all things were created in heaven and on earth, the seen and unseen, whether thrones whether lordships whether rules whether authorities; all things were created through and for him . . and all things consist in him" (1:16-17). Christology is therefore not a negligible article of faith in the dialogue between science and religion, but an essential aspect of it, according to Scripture.

The debate over human and cosmic origins continues, of course, to the present day. One of its most significant examples, in my judgment, is the Intelligent Design movement, which aims, on the basis of scientific evidence, to test the assumptions and evidence of dogmatic naturalism. Intelligent Design thinkers are presenting fascinating evidence and arguments—and succeeding in promoting a stimulating debate—for evidence not of random and inchoate evolution but of intelligent design in the natural order. Yet even in Intelligent Design, which on the whole is friendly to confessional Christianity, the significance of the doctrine of the Incarnation has yet to be fully explored.

C. The Encounter with World Religions

A third cause of the present drift toward a theology of immanence is the influence of the encounter with other religions, which began with the Christian foreign missions' impetus in the nineteenth century, and which, because of modern communications and transportation systems, continues unabated today. The increase in knowledge and dialogue with other religious traditions has not left our understanding of Christianity unaffected. On the whole this encounter has had positive consequences for Christianity and is to be welcomed. It has taught us how much Christianity shares in common with other world religions, particularly in the fields of ethics. Most religions, Christianity included, agree on a broad range of ethical principles and ideals, roughly summarized by the Golden Rule, even though there are significant differences in how those principles are understood and practiced.

At other points, however, the encounter of Christianity with other religions has taught or reminded us how significantly Christianity differs from other religions, particularly in the nature of God, its concept of revelation, and the meaning of history. This is especially evident when Christianity is compared with Eastern religions. The point at which Christianity differs most from *all* other religions, however, is in its doctrine of the Incarnation. No other religion—ancient or modern, world-wide or local—claims that its God has become a fully incarnate human being, as does Christianity.[2] This claim obviously distinguishes Christianity in a very particular way from other religions. In the present quest for a lowest common denominator on which all religions can agree—and perhaps eventually unite—the particularist claim of the Incarnation is sometimes judged as an exclusivist, perhaps elitist, claim of Christianity. In Jewish-Christian dialogue, for instance, Christian theologians have on occasion attempted to mitigate the differences between Judaism and Christianity, motivated in part, no doubt, by a desire to atone for past injustices of Christians toward Jews—and also, hopefully, to guard against future ones.

In an effort to lessen or alleviate the supposed-exclusivity of Christianity and to enhance its compatibility with other religions, a high and orthodox New Testament Christology has sometimes been surrendered in favor of a generic theism, a predominantly First Article faith.

D. Gay Theologies

The point at which most Christians and churchgoers are likely to encounter a theology of immanence over a theology of transcendence is in the thought and rhetoric of gay and lesbian thinkers. This is the fourth and most pronounced expression of my thesis. The advocates of homosexual orientation and lifestyles clearly express a theology of immanence in their insistence that homosexuality is primarily, or exclusively, of genetic origins. As such, they assert that it is inborn and innate rather than learned, and hence constitutive of the individual self. A line attributed to the fallen angels in Milton's *Paradise Lost* expresses gay apologetics, "We know no time when we were not as now."[3] The assertion that gay persons have been "born that way" carries an apparently self-evident legitimation, for what has been given by God must be good—and cannot be made better by change to something else.

This line of thinking, which is often naively accepted, carries implications that few would be willing to accept. Who among us would be prepared to say that a person born with Down's Syndrome or with tragic birth defects is born such according to God's will? The same thinking can justify forms of behavior that are clearly aberrant and harmful. Would a penchant for violence, aggression, laziness, selfishness, or sexual indulgence also be regarded as the will of God? To do so attributes monstrous proportions to God's will. In truth, we do not always know why things are the way they are. Some people are born to great advantage and others to great disadvantage, but none can be said to deserve the state to which they are born. We cannot simply assume that what *is*, is of God. The doctrine of the fall is an instructive bulwark against the above theological error. None of us comes into human experience with a perfect genetic code. The various flaws that we all experience in our own nature are present in various forms in the larger fabric of creation. One of the chief glories of the Christian gospel is that it liberates us from determination by fate, heritage, genetics, and the past. We are neither judged nor saved on the basis of what we bring into this world. *All* participate in sin—of which, according to Scripture, homosexual practice is one expression—and *all* are offered redemption in Jesus Christ. The final word of the gospel is not what we *are*, but what we can *become* through the redemption wrought by the cross of Jesus Christ.

What is an Evangelical and Reformed Response?

These four currents—Enlightenment rationalism, the encounter of Christianity with modern science, the encounter of Christianity with world religions, and the influence of gay theologies—have had the affect of defining Christianity in other than Christological categories. Whenever something other than the cross becomes the defining symbol of Christianity, then what is symbolized is something other than Christianity. To strike Christ and the cross from Christianity is to strike salvation from Christian belief and proclamation.

I wish in conclusion to shift from the above analysis of the current state of affairs to the question of a proper evangelical and Reformed response. That response can best be prompted by posing a simple question: Is the way things are the way they must always be? Surely, the word of the Apostle is the abiding hope of humanity: "Those of us who have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it?" (Rom 6:2) Christians believe in another order of existence than the one we now perceive, the order originally created by God which, through the redemption wrought by Christ, is being renewed by grace and will be completed at the eschaton.

Karl Barth asks this question in his *Epistle to the Romans*: "Can we appeal to the fact of creation, and then proceed to treat the motions of the body and the course of this world as willed by God, or at least as permitted by Him? Can we, with our eyes fixed upon a redemption which is not available in this world, proceed to conclude peace, or at any rate to arrange an armistice, with the world as it is?" [4] This question cuts the Gordian knot of a theology of immanence. We are not summoned to conclude an armistice with the world, but rather in the power of the resurrected Christ to protest all other lords and powers of this world.

In his *Religious History of the American People*, Sydney Ahlstrom commented that practically every heresy in church history could be recounted in one form or another in twentieth century America.[5] The elevation of a theology of creation over a theology of redemption reintroduces the ancient heresy of Marcion, which, among other things, separated the creator God from the redeemer God and pitted them against each other. Marcion was wrong, as is the modern variant in the battle between a theology of creation and a theology of redemption. Creation and redemption are not the works of two separate deities. In the final analysis they are not even two separate works of the one God, for the creator God is revealed in Jesus Christ, who is the image of the invisible God. "In Christ were created all things in heaven and upon earth, the visible and invisible, whether thrones or lordships, whether rulers or authorities. All things were created through him and for him" (Col 1:16). At the heart of creation is Jesus, the Savior. Isaiah rightly saw and proclaimed that the only God who could and did

redeem Israel was the God who *made* Israel: "This is what the Lord says—he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you. . . . For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your savior'" (Isa 43:1-3).

Swimming for Our Lives

Earlier I used the analogy of being caught in a riptide and carried out to sea. How did I get back to shore? I had to swim for my life. The church today must swim for its life. It is once again beset with an array of opposition not unlike the church that produced the Barmen Declaration. The first article of Barmen is as necessary and salutary for our time as it was in Germany in the 1930s: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and death."

Listen again to Ulrich Mauser's words on Barmen: "The Reformation of the 16th century is often said to revolve around three claims: Jesus Christ is the only agent of salvation, Scripture is the only judge of Christian faith, and faith is the only door to justification before God. Barmen adds a fourth 'only': Jesus Christ is the only revelation of God. The one Word of God is in its power of revelation without rival and without competition, it tolerates no supplement beside it, and it is not in need of support by any evidence outside it." [6]

If Jesus Christ is the only revelation of God, then it immediately becomes clear that without Jesus Christ the concept of "God" loses all definition. As Feuerbach said, the concept of God then becomes synonymous with any number of human projections. Apart from Jesus Christ, God is no longer a *Gegenuber*, a definable reality apart from us with whom we must contend, but simply a mirror or mirage of human longings and desires. It is thus apparent how disastrous it is to collapse the doctrine of Christology into a simple doctrine of God, for if we shift Christology into *theo*logy then the concept of God, and theology itself, is robbed of all meaning, for without Incarnation, "God" can be conceived of in any way we like. Hence, as Feuerbach understood, once Jesus Christ is eliminated from the saving formula, theology loses its moorings and can drift into myth and superstition.

In asserting that Jesus Christ is the only revelation of God we are not saying, as Mauser reminds us, that outside Christ there are no things valuable, beautiful, true, and necessary for life. Nor is the effect of article one of Barmen to denigrate human reason, art, industry, and community. What it does deny, however, and what the church today, as in Nazi Germany, needs to reaffirm, is that the complexities of human nature and society and the course of history and the splendors of the universe and the judgments of humanity are not either the source or content of the church's proclamation of the saving gospel of grace manifested in Jesus Christ. This Jesus, "the one Word of God," is not discovered through human reason or historical criticism; this Jesus is not the echo of the voice of conscience or culture or history; this Jesus is not simply a model of or for humanity. The Incarnate One who alone is sufficient to save us from all these and other powers is the one who "attested for us in Holy Scripture," and it is He alone whom we must hear, trust, and obey—in life and in death.

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[1] Quoted from U. Mauser, "The Theological Declaration of Barmen Revisited," *Theology Matters* 6/6 (2000), 10-11.
[2] See James R. Edwards, "Aren't They All The Same? The Uniqueness of Christianity among World Religions," *Student Leadership Journal* 9/2 (1996), 13-15.
[3] *Paradise Lost*, Book V, line 856.
[4] Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 214.
[5] Sydney Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).
[6] Mauser, 11.

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More Than One Way?
Affirming the Uniqueness of Christ's Person and Work in a Pluralistic Culture

By Dennis Okholm

Adapted from a presentation at the Word and Spirit Conference, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, May, 2001.

Increasingly, any worldview consensus the U.S ever had is breaking apart. Today there is no escape from the rival religious and moral claims that surround us. We live in an age of "pluralism"—a challenge to orthodox Christians who make exclusive claims such as "Jesus Christ is the Lord of the universe." This exclusivism does not set well with a culture that prides itself on letting each person have his or her own opinion when it comes to matters of religious belief or moral behavior. Such claims are increasingly viewed as intolerant or arrogant by a culture that demands that we accept different ethical and religious beliefs as equally valid. The implicit claim is that there are no real differences between moral and religious systems. These are just culturally-derived matters of taste. In the academic arena some theologians at Christian seminaries have bluntly rejected Christianity's exclusive truth claims; as Rosemary Radford Reuther once put it, "The idea that Christianity [has] a monopoly on religious truth is an outrageous and absurd religious chauvinism."

Why Pluralism Now?

There are many reasons why the consensus is breaking down and why Christianity's exclusive claims sound so outrageous. Besides a swiftly shrinking planet made accessible by advances in communication and transportation technology, the demographics at home are changing. As an example, the fastest growing religion in the U.S. (let alone in the world) is Islam; estimates are that in the past 7 years alone, there has been a 25% increase in the number of mosques in the U.S. And whereas in the 1960s it would have been nearly impossible to find a "Happy Hanukkah" card in the local Hallmark, now the signs in our community don't even read "Merry Christmas," but simply "Happy Holidays."

Perhaps the most profound contributor to pluralism in our culture is the proliferation of choice. Just a stroll down the cereal aisle of the local supermarket is enough to paralyze a shopper with overload; indeed, in 1996 the average grocery store carried 30,000 product choices, an increase of over 300% in 20 years. The supermarket of spiritualities is nearly as prolific: in 1999 the *Encyclopedia of American Religions*[1] listed over 2100 different religious groups in the U.S.—a doubling in two decades. It's enough to make sociologist Alan Ehrenhalt lament that most of what we do on a daily basis resembles channel surfing, "marked by a numbing and seemingly endless progression from one option to the next, all without the benefit of a chart, logistical or moral, because there are simply too many choices and no one to help sort them out."[2]

In addition to the breakdown of an ostensibly "Christian" consensus, technology's marvels, changes in demographics, and the proliferation of choice, another factor contributing to the rise of pluralism is the privatization of religion—the kind of thing that Robert Bellah named "Sheilaism" in *Habits of the Heart*.[3] This privatization is exacerbated by diminishing loyalty to denominations and the rise of so-called "community" (albeit untethered) churches. These characteristics of contemporary American spirituality fit like a well designed glove on the receptive hand of our consumer mentality. Even our Christian churches suffer when folks join a church as a result of comparison shopping rather than of divine calling.

The Practice of Pluralism

In part, these factors account for the rise of a formidable form of religious pluralism.[4] Vignettes of this pluralism in actual practice illustrate what is at stake for the church.

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The August 1998 *Utne Reader* announced the lead article on its cover: "Designer God: In a mix-and-match world, why not create your own religion?" Entitled "God with a Million Faces," the essay discussed the recent trend of -style religions" or "religion a la carte." One example the article cites is the cult of Anne Marie: it includes one member who has turned her spirituality into a creative collage of Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, quantitative physics, and childhood Christian remnants.[5]

Unfortunately, the same kind of creative syncretism is becoming all too common in the Christian church today. One prime example was a recent PBS Christmas special using a script written by the narrator Thomas Moore, author of *The Care of the Soul*. In his narration, interspersed with wonderful renditions of Christmas songs and hymns (some of which, in a spirit of Northern hemispheric exclusivism, celebrated the "dark night" and barren cold of December), Moore lures us into the "real" significance of the holiday:

> Although I was brought up as a Catholic, and know and love the stories and rites of Christianity, Buddhism has also profoundly affected my life, as have the ancient religions of the Greeks and Romans, Chinese wisdom, and African practices. At a certain level, every religion is a world religion, and in that spirit we can imagine a world Christmas, a holy time where the emphasis is on the mystery of human life, and not on sectarian arguments over doctrine and theology [presumably about the incarnation of the Word]. The "real meaning" of Christmas is not what you believe, but how deeply and genuinely you are transformed by the spirit of the festival in the direction of hope, peace, and community.

Aside from the fact that the last sentence could equally apply to a *Peter, Paul, and Mary* concert I attended at Ravinia, Moore expands the fellowship when he makes the following assertions:

> With all its traditions and theological niceties, Christmas is still fundamentally the celebration of the world's birth and life's nativity. Nothing could be more important to this celebration than whatever it takes to waken the child wherever it is sleeping.
>
> This is the real meaning of Christmas—the Child—whatever this Christmas child mysteriously might be, come to life, found everywhere, the source of hope and, tender and mild, the way toward peace. We will never fully understand Christmas, but we can believe in it and allow the world to be refreshed by it. We can let its spirit enter into us and do its work in our hearts. We can honor it by observing its traditions as thoughtfully and intimately as we can. As we give ourselves to it, it will bless our lives. As we tell its story and sing its song, it will transform us. Then others will find the mystery in us and be entertained and refreshed by it.[6]

It's not just the Christian meaning of Christmas that is challenged by contemporary pluralism. Easter's significance is undermined as well. A *Chicago Tribune* headline is paradigmatic: "Message of Easter Transcends Religions." The article was about Muslims, Jews, and Christians using Easter as an occasion to celebrate each other's rituals. Nothing was mentioned about the soteriological significance of Christ's resurrection.

The danger in this designer approach to religious faith and syncretistic practice is that it does not lead to conversion; indeed, it tends to reinforce self-deception. In this regard, Frederica Matthewes-Green's comment is poignant:

> We are so indoctrinated by our culture that we can't trust our standards of evaluation. We can only gain wisdom that transcends time by exiting our time and entering upon an ancient path—and accepting it on its own terms. We can only learn by submitting to something bigger than we are. The faith I was building out of my prejudices and preconceptions could never be bigger than I was. I was constructing a safe, tidy, unsurprising God who could never transform me, but would only confirm my residence in that familiar bog I called home. I had to have more than that.[7]

This reminds us that what is at stake in this discussion of Christ's claims over against contemporary pluralism is not merely the eternal destiny of people, but the quality of their lives *now*—that is, whether or not they will flourish.[8]

We should not underestimate the viciousness of this pluralism nor the severity with which it attacks the Christian's claims about the particularity of Christ.[9] For instance, during the keynote address at the recent UN Millennium Peace Summit, conference sponsor and media mogul Ted Turner shared his story about growing up in a Christian church in the South and hearing talk of the exclusive claims of Christ. He was cheered when he announced, "There is one God who manifests himself in different ways." But this pluralist's assertion did not keep him from wagging his finger at the Christians who believe that Christ is the only way to salvation—a reprimand that echoed his 1990 speech in which he called Christianity "a religion for losers," ridiculed Pope John Paul II, and declared the Ten Commandments outdated.

Again, the intensity of the attack is felt *within* the Christian church. Some Roman Catholics denounced the Vatican for its document "On the Unity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church" a clarification of the Second Vatican Council's position on the "principle of tolerance and respect for freedom" and the equality of the "personal dignity of individuals," which Ratzinger noted had been "manipulated and wrongfully surpassed" to teach the equality of religious doctrines. And in a Chicago presbytery meeting a few years ago, a panelist advocating the legitimacy of the homosexual lifestyle adamantly insisted that it was time for the church to stop telling the culture what to think

about sex, and time for the church to listen to what the culture can teach it about diversity in sexual practices.

Sometimes the viciousness is personal. In fact, my acquaintance with religious pluralism has not been confined to the theoretical and abstract. Several years ago I was asked to join a panel at the National Headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Wheaton. The topic was "Many Faiths, One Reality," and I shared the platform with a Sikh, a Buddhist monk, and a Jain. Though I tried graciously to make it clear that the Christian story was not easily convertible to the other religions represented on the panel, the panel moderator (who was the national president of the Theosophical Society) correctively pointed out after my presentation that the Christian belief in the resurrection was really no different than some of the others' belief in reincarnation.[10]

That same year I was a guest on a popular Chicago radio program. The evening's topic was precipitated by a book on salvation in a pluralistic world that my colleague and I had recently edited. A quarter of the way into the show when the host pressed me to assert my adherence to the exclusive claims of Jesus in John 14:6 (even though I would be reminded twice that the "Jesus Seminar" had cast doubt on the authenticity of Jesus' words), the Jewish rabbi on the panel began an hour-and-a-half attack on my faith as a doctrine that had undergirded the Nazi Holocaust. Though even the Muslim imam saw through the rabbi's politicization of the conversation, I went home that evening emotionally wounded, especially by the rabbi's closing insistence that he would die for the rejection of Jesus Christ and teach his children to do the same. That open wound did not close for over a year.

So I do not underestimate the vicious challenge that contemporary pluralists pose to orthodox Christians who affirm with John that when Jesus was born 2000 years ago it was the unique and definitive incarnate revelation of God in human flesh and who affirm with Paul that, when the Kingdom that was established by Christ's resurrection is consummated, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Defining Pluralism

Before responding to pluralism we should more carefully define what pluralism is. There are actually two types of pluralism—descriptive and normative (or ideological).[11] The first is welcomed by the Christian; the second must be rejected.

Descriptive pluralism is just that: it describes the actual situation in which we live, where people with a diversity of moral and religious commitments live together in the same physical space. We all agree not to use social and political force to suppress any citizen's free thought, expression, or practice, unless that freedom harms someone. That does not mean that we have to *like* other views. It does not prohibit us from *appropriately* expressing our disagreements or dislikes. And it allows us to *respectfully* attempt to *persuade* others out of their views.

On the other hand, normative pluralism insists that all religious claims are equally true and valid. This amounts to relativism and leaves us with little more than matters of taste and self-expression. (There is a variation of normative pluralism in the writings of Troeltsch, Hegel, and the early Schleiermacher which insists that some religions are *more* valid or plausible than others.)

Perhaps the most prominent spokesperson for normative pluralism in religion has been John Hick, especially in his book *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. His thesis is that "we always perceive the transcendent through the lens of a particular religious culture with its distinctive set of concepts, myths, historical exemplars and devotional and meditative techniques."[12] Hick is going beyond descriptive pluralism at this point by insisting that the existence of religious pluralism is itself a religious *truth*: the major world religions end up referring to some ineffable transcendent Reality. For Hick, all major religions are "true" to one degree or another (depending on their ethical orientation). What appear to be differences among religions arise only because of our varying cultural and historical contexts. If they result in a life of love and concern for others, the claims of the Buddhist, the Muslim, the Christian, and even the atheist must be accepted as equally true and salvific.

This sits well with many people in our culture—from academicians to talk show hosts. The point of many discussions in the university and in the media is not to arrive at the truth of the matter, if the "matter" has to do with religious beliefs and moral values. The point is simply to keep the discussion going and respect the divergent points of view, because, as one talk show guest said about pornography, "The great thing about our society is that you can have your opinion, and I can have mine."

According to Lesslie Newbigin's analysis in *Foolishness to the Greeks*,[13] what undergirds this attitude is a post-Enlightenment Western division of the world into two realms. One realm is the *public* world of scientific fact that explains *how* something occurred by examining its causal connections. Claims which can be verified through the scientific method (such as "atoms exist") are assumed to be true; people would be fools to deny them and talk show hosts would lose sponsors if such claims became the topics for debate. The other realm is the *private* world of religious beliefs and moral values, which deals with *why* and *what for* questions: Why is there a world? What is the purpose of human existence? As a society we have found no way to reach agreement on what human life ought to be. So claims such as "Homosexual behavior is morally wrong" and "It is only through Jesus of Nazareth that a person can be saved" are banished to the realm of private

opinion. Our religious beliefs and moral values have been "democratized" in a way unthinkable with most claims in the public realm. That makes for good ratings on talk shows, but it should not be acceptable to Christians who confess the Nicene Creed on Sunday.

It should not even be acceptable to any thinking person who must admit that there *are* some things that are *absolutely* wrong and some things that are *absolutely* right in the realm of morality. For instance, ramming jets through the World Trade Center towers to kill a few thousand people because devotion to God demands it is not a matter to be left up to personal taste or private opinion. Presumably, any honest person in our pluralistic society would not say, "What the terrorists did was okay for them, but it would not be okay for us."

Responding to Pluralism

How do we respond to such pluralism in the religious arena? Isn't our culture right to assume that if pantheism works for one person and Christian theism for another then what is true is "what works for you"? There is something to be said for this pragmatic test. After all, we Christians *do* argue that Christian orthodoxy results in a flourishing life. Indeed, the problem with heresy (from the Greek word meaning "I choose") is that it will kill you. But when a Christian makes a religious claim, such as "Jesus of Nazareth is the *only* way to God," he or she is stating a truth about reality which, if true, excludes all rival claims of the naturalist, pantheist, dualist and deist—let alone all non-Christian theists. Either this claim is true and all other similar claims are false, or it is false and some other (or no other) religious claim is true. This feature of truth-claims is a lesson my son Ryan learned one day when he ran out of gas in our van. Over against his sister's warnings, his insistence that the fuel gauge was not accurate did not alter the reality that the van was indeed about out of fuel. Truth and reality do not adapt to us; we must adapt to truth and reality.

Beyond this rather obvious point, how can the orthodox Christian affirm her claims about Christ's unique person and work in our pluralistic culture? How should we conceive the act of God in Christ having ultimate validity for all people in all places at all times? A good approach will involve both a defensive and an offensive strategy.

What's Wrong with Pluralism?

On the defensive side of things we begin by noting that although relativism is often a characteristic of postmodernism, a proposal like Hick's really smacks of *modernism*. That is to say, the valuable lesson postmodernism has taught us is what some folks in the academy and even in the seminaries have failed to appreciate: there is no such thing as a completely detached observer; we are always interpreting reality through the eyes of our own social location. But Hick's pluralist approach buys into modernism's "myth of the neutral observer" (even though he insists that he comes at religion from the Christian camp). There are three problems with this kind of modernist pluralism.

First, it is arrogant. Pluralism applauds the infamous tale of the four blind men who touch different parts of the same elephant because it appears to illustrate the fact that all religions are merely different partial ways of knowing the same "God." One blind man holds the tail and concludes he has a rope. Another feels the elephant's side and concludes it's a wall. The third man grasps the leg and believes he is embracing a column. The last mistakes the elephant's trunk for a snake. In like manner each religion is experiencing the same God in different ways and calling it different names. But the pluralist's appreciation of this metaphor is really arrogant, because the only person who actually knows that each blind man is touching the same reality is the enlightened, all-seeing, unblinded pluralist! The implication is that the rest of us are to be pitied unless we too can become as privileged as the supposed neutral observer who stands back watching the human race.

Second, it is presumptuous. Alistair McGrath calls Hick's modernist imperialism a form of "intellectual [14] Ironically, Hick knows that not all religions are equally plausible *as they stand*. Indeed, religious experiences in other religions *are* different experiences, not just different *interpretations* of religious experience. All religions are "ways of salvation," but not all salvations are the same. Concepts of the transcendent reality and of salvation differ from religion to religion, and to reduce them in such a way that all phenomenal religions are simply referring to the same noumenal reality turns out to be an intolerant imposition on cultured despisers of religion who do not *want* to be told that they are going to have to end up in some universalist heaven. Worse, it is an act of violence against unique explanations of salvation offered by the world's religions. In the end, McGrath is right when he writes of Hick's pluralism: "The belief that all religions are ultimately expressions of the same transcendent reality is at best illusory and at worst oppressive."[15] (A blatant example of this presumption occurred on *Oprah*, when she would not tolerate an audience member's skepticism about God's existence. When the agnostic admitted that she *did* believe in love and the "human spirit," Oprah insisted that she therefore *did* believe in *God* and told her to sit down.)

Third, normative or ideological pluralism ends up trivializing religions. Hick's admission that he is a Christian who does not take the incarnation seriously is a bit like a person who takes pride in being a Texan but believes the territory still belongs to Mexico. In the popular idiom, this trivialization showed up in an advertisement for an HBO special entitled, "How do you spell God?" Listed were the names Vishnu, Jesus, Buddha, Wakonda, and—because they privileged Judaism or did not know what they were putting in the ad copy—

Jehovah *and* Adonai. These are not merely different *spellings* of "God." They represent different *conceptions* of transcendent reality—conceptions that are sometimes as incommensurate as Islam's denial of the crucifixion of Jesus and of a triune God and Christianity's *central* insistence on both. But the pluralist will not tolerate real differences in an ultimate sense. In the end, this trivialization cuts off *genuine* dialogue among religions and devalues the exchange of ideas that adherents consider to be more than mere opinion. Ironically, this "intellectual Stalinism" is usually committed by us Westerners who think that our brand of normative pluralism must be carried to the rest of the "ignorant" people in the world as part of the "white man's burden."

Asserting the "Scandal of Particularity"

How might the offense play out the exclusive claims of Christ? First, our strategy requires a proper attitude. Commitment to an unswerving confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior actually opens up dialogue with those who differ from us, for commitment to *this* Christ permits no smug self-righteousness. The more we are committed to confessing the Christ of the Gospels, the more we the church are committed to a confession that stresses service (especially to those on society's margins), moves outward in mission, and respects the freedom of the Other even to reject Christ. We can insist that Christ is the ultimate norm or criterion for determining where and how God's self-revelation takes place, while allowing for other sources of the knowledge of God, which Christian theologians have referred to as general revelation.[16] We can learn about ourselves in the light of other religions. We can accept what is compatible in other religions, while confronting what is contrary, albeit even in a peacemaking posture. At the same time, we elevate the particularity of the Christian faith without letting that commitment to particularity become a mere matter of personal taste like a predilection for Ben and Jerry's *Chunky Monkey* or Woody Allen movies.

Paul admonishes Christians to have the mind of Christ as they imitate him in the humility of his incarnation (Phil 2). Indeed, if we are to follow Christ in humility, the claim that Jesus Christ is the definitive revelation of God and the only one through whom one must come to God does not mean that we know everything about God. There are still mysteries to be unveiled. Still, partial truth is not untruth nor inclusive of all claims made about God. If I see someone heading toward Milwaukee on the Dan Ryan Expressway in Chicago when he wants to get to Gary, Indiana, the loving thing to do is to point out his error without haughtiness. I might not know all there is to know about getting to Gary itself, but I know enough to realize that heading north is not compatible with the traveler's destination.

With this same humility we must admit that Christianity has not produced the highest attainment of ethical behavior; in fact, it stands accused of immorality in the Crusades and the Holocaust. Indeed, one of Hick's primary reasons for rejecting the exclusive claims of Christianity has to do with its relative lackluster ethical performance vis-à-vis the practitioners of other major religions. Certainly Hick is correct in his assessment, yet the fact remains that the claims of exclusivity have not to do with the ethical performance of Christians, but with the identity and salvific work of Jesus Christ. While it is true that Christianity is guilty by association, it is equally the case that Christianity cannot be reduced to an ethical religion. To do so is to confuse salvation with morality. That said, it is the case that *if* Christians *did* live up to the demands of Christ this world *would* be a far better place.

The second bit of offensive strategy begins with the recognition that the church's job description is to *herald* the story of Jesus. The church's most effective witness is to *be* the church—to be *more* (not less) Christian in a dominant culture whose fundamental assumptions are contrary to the Christian faith. This is precisely what folks like Stanley Hauerwas and Lesslie Newbigin have been saying. In Hauerwas's terms, the church is to be a "resident alien" living out God's story in the world.[17] The current dislocation of the church in a world that lacks consensus is an opportunity for the church to intentionally define itself theologically and culturally, not unlike those in Babylon to whom Jeremiah addressed his letter of encouragement (Jer 29:1-14). As Newbigin put it, the church is to be a "hermeneutic of the Gospel" in its day-to-day life. The church is a witness to the coming Kingdom, speaking the "language of testimony" rather than hawking a commodity like a pushy salesperson, arguing the case like a defense attorney with a rationalistic, evidentialist brief, or deciding the case for the world like the jury or judge (which it is not).[18]

By the way, that the church is *not* the judge is good news to people who have experienced bad calls in a ballgame. In fact, we fallible Christians cannot pontificate in either direction about the exceptional cases—those who never hear the claims of Christ, people with mental deficiencies, and infants who die. We place our confidence in a God who is both merciful and just, and with whose judgments we will be pleased when they are revealed.

In heralding the story of Jesus, the church also rests confident in the victory of Christ's resurrection over the powers. The Christian church does not require cultural privilege nor social recognition to flourish. My visits to Sudan have convinced me of this fact. But the loss of privileged status in a *pluralistic* world should not discourage Christians from learning and teaching the biblical story. We should not apologize for making universal claims about creation, sin, and redemption. We should boldly proclaim that this world's history ends with the victory of Jesus Christ and no other rival. Because we see the world in a different way—in the light of a defining story that embraces all time and all things (Eph 1:3-23)—we may sound strange to a world that is at home in its religious concoctions. In fact, what could sound so

incomprehensible to our consumer culture but the proclamation of a grace that cannot be earned? The church lives its life and professes its faith in a way that cannot be understood apart from the God who is definitively revealed in Jesus Christ. Our morality does *not* make sense outside of the church and Jesus' vision of life. To the watching and listening world, severed from a proper understanding of the biblical story, our actions and words *should* look and sound like a foreign culture and a foreign language. But it is a culture and language rooted in the biblical story for which we must not apologize; indeed, it is a story that provides a sense of coherence in a fragmented, decentered, pluralistic environment.

Third in our offensive strategy and implied by what we have just said, we cannot give up our claim that Jesus Christ *is* the definitive revelation of who God is. This is the "scandal of particularity." But it is not an arrogant or imperialistic claim if Christ is indeed the one who establishes the eschatological kingdom. Pluralism is similar to the ancient heresy of modalism. The problem with modalism is that one can never be certain that God will not pop out on the world's stage wearing another mask that we have never seen and did not expect—a fourth or fourteenth manifestation beyond the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the same way, Christian particularism means that, because God *has* revealed himself normatively in Jesus Christ, we will not find out later that some other religious adherent's conception of God, such as that of a Montana skinhead, had equal validity. (The fact that pluralists do not want to allow such conceptions of God into the pantheon of religions indicates that they are exclusivists of some sort. For example, presumably they would question the alleged revelation of God to the terrorists who attacked the USA on September 11.)

If the church compromises its claim of God's definitive self-disclosure in Christ, then, as George Hunsinger has written, such "compromises of her loyalty will slowly devastate the church," just as they did in Nazi Germany. With appeals to Barth, Hunsinger continues:

> The church prepared to offer binding loyalty to Hitler was a church which had died the death of a thousand smaller compromises. For more than two hundred years, it had been trying to divide its loyalty between Jesus Christ and other supposed sources of divine revelation. Whether reason, conscience, the emotions, history, nature, or culture, some second authority was continually proposed and ratified alongside the first. But no claim of exclusive loyalty can tolerate an external loyalty that is equally binding and obligatory. The attempt to turn an either/or into a both/and could only mean that the church's loyalty was compromised and divided. For whether the church realized it or not, no second authority, however apparently benign, could represent anything other than an exclusive and competing counter-claim to that of God's Word. By the time Hitler came along, the church was incapacitated by its history of compromises.[19]

Fourth, and finally, we must learn to distinguish what is nonnegotiable from what is not centrally important to the faith. The extent of our openness to other religions is constrained by our confession that God is the creator of all that is, that God is triune, that Christ is fully human and divine and thereby the sole means of our salvation, and that the Bible is our unique and normative scripture for belief and practice. In the essentials, maintaining orthodoxy—the "straight beliefs" that enable us to function well in life (just as orthodontics straightens teeth to enable us to chew well)—is key to avoiding heresies that will leave us crippled in self-centered legalism or escapism. We will have to marry conviction with compassion—particular claims with universal appeal. In doing this we can approach our pluralistic culture with the universal claims and universal appeal of the Apostle Paul, who wrote of Christ in the pluralist society of the Roman world:

> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of *all* creation; for in him *all* things were created . . . *all* things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before *all* things, and in him *all* things hold together. . . . For in him *all* the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all* things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:15-20)

To paraphrase Lesslie Newbigin, we have entered into a relationship with Jesus, through whom the creator of the universe has revealed himself and through whom we now understand and direct all of our lives. There is a whole community of us who are in this situation. And everyone is welcome to join!

[1] Ed. J. Gordon Melton, 6th ed. (Detroit: Gale Research, 1999), see p. xiii.

[2] Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City: Discovering the Forgotten Virtues of Community in the Chicago of the 1950s* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 272.

[3] Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), see chap. 9.

[4] Pluralism is not a new phenomenon in the experience of the church. Certainly the New Testament church encountered religious and moral pluralism in the Roman empire. And C. S. Lewis addressed it with reference to the "Tao" in his essay *The Abolition of Man*. But the degree and intensity of the pluralism we are experiencing today is arguably unprecedented due to the factors we have rehearsed above.

[5] Cf. George Barna, *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators* (Waco, TX: Word, 1996): The "new perception of religion" is "a personalized, customized form of faith views which meet personal needs, minimize rules and obstacles, and bear little resemblance to the 'pure' form of any of the world's major religions." They are less logically consistent, but more pragmatically useful. Also, see Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993):

younger Americans have fewer qualms about reinventing their religious lives.

[6] Both quotes are from disc 2 of *The Soul of Christmas: A Celtic Music Celebration with Thomas Moore*, produced by Susan Piver and edited by Rick Rowe, on the Upaya label (New York, 1997).

[7] *The Utne Reader*, August 1998, p. 48.

[8] See Ellen Charry's case that a flourishing life is the result of *By the Renewing of Your Minds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[9] I prefer the term "particularism" in place of "exclusivism" (or "restrictivism"). The latter has a history of association with arrogance, intolerance, dogmatism, and closed-mindedness. Nevertheless, particularism insists that Jesus Christ is not only divine, but the unique Son of God incarnate who came in a particular time and place in history to reveal who God is and to redeem us from our sins. This confession is as old as Athanasius' argument in his treatise *On the Incarnation of the Word*: "Particularists argue that salvation is available only through faith in God's special acts in history, culminating in Jesus Christ. The other options by contrast construe salvation pluralistically, as being independently available in many cultures and religions, or inclusively, where Jesus Christ is the normative fulfillment of the salvation available throughout other cultures." From *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), p. 17.

[10] Such a claim is refuted by Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 12-13.

[11] I first heard the distinction characterized this way in a lecture by Keith Yandell, professor of philosophy at University of Wisconsin, Madison.

[12] (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 8. A good summary of Hick's position (written by Hick himself) is found in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. (Advocates of three other positions respond to his essay, and he does the same to theirs.)

[13] (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), see chaps. 1 and 2.

[14] See *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, pp. 206-08.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 207.

[16] There are different points of view within the circle of orthodox Christians about the salvific efficacy of general revelation. E.g., see Clark Pinnock's inclusivism and Alistair McGrath's Post-Enlightenment Particularism in *Four Views*.

[17] See *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

[18] See *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), esp. chap. 18. Also, see *Foolishness to the Greeks*, chap. 3.

[19] George Hunsinger, "Where the Battle Rages: Confessing Churches in America Today," in *Dialog* 26:4 (Fall 1987): 264-74.

Repent, Remember, Overcome: A Proposal to Renew the Church, Part 3

By Susan Cyre, Philip Keevil

Theology should shape and instruct polity. Yet, in the church today, polity is often found instructing theology. Therefore, any attempt to bring renewal to the church must be attentive to polity. We first must restore proper governance so that theology and pastoral care may reassume their proper place in the church.

In order to restore theology and polity to their proper relationship, there are three areas that need to be addressed:

1) Presbyterian government is self-government. That means there is an implied requirement that our leaders demonstrate fitness for the exercise of their offices before they are ordained and installed. Fitness for leadership at the most basic level means a demonstrable knowledge and acceptance of God's Word revealed in Scripture, knowledge and acceptance of the doctrines of the church as expressed in the *Book of Confessions* and of our form of government found in the *Book of Order*.

2) Our form of government is designed to give lower governing bodies free and open access to higher governing bodies to hold them accountable, to redress wrongs, and to facilitate changes to advance the mission of the Gospel.

3) Our form of government requires that higher governing bodies hold lower governing bodies accountable to the Gospel which is given expression in our Confessions. Teaching must be sound and practice must conform to teaching.

What are the problems that are hindering us from reaching these three goals? Let us begin with 1) An assurance of fitness for leadership on the session and presbytery level. We will address the General Assembly level in the next issue of *Theology Matters*.

Assurance of Fitness for Leadership on the Session Level

1. Instruction in Reformed faith. How can we instruct all church members in our common faith? Charles Colson quotes a distressing Barna poll that found two-thirds of the American people believe there is no such thing as absolute truth and "53 percent of those claiming to be Bible-believing, conservative Christians said there is no such thing as absolute truth. A majority of those who follow the One who says, 'I am the truth,' profess not to believe in truth" (The Body, p.178). Even those of us who consider ourselves evangelical Christians are swimming in the sea of postmodernism's autonomy and relativism far more than we realize.

2. Examination of elders. We must be assured before ordaining and installing elders that they know and accept doctrines of the Reformed faith expressed in the Confessions, and the governance of the church in the *Book of Order*.

One Presbyterian church has written a "Biblical Standards for Christian Leaders" statement that includes sections on Personal Standards, Spiritual Standards, and Leadership Standards. The session requires that all those being considered for leadership positions, even Sunday School teachers, sign the statement. A copy of the statement is available on the *Theology Matters'* web site theologymatters.com.

3. Teaching and Pastoral Care Ministry in the Christian Moral Life. Has there been adequate teaching that the proper response to the Gospel is to lead an obedient life in conformance with Scripture's standards? How can we help our congregations minister more effectively to those caught in the cultural moral confusion of our age?

Assurance of Fitness for Leadership On the Presbytery Level

1. Examination of clergy. Some presbyteries are ordaining clergy and allowing clergy to be received into the presbytery without adequate examination of their theology and their knowledge and acceptance of the Constitution. Half of our commissioners to General Assembly are clergy. In the next section Dr. Philip Keevil presents some suggestions for improving this process.

2. Election of GA commissioners. Some presbyteries. that have voted consistently on amendments in support of biblical ordination standards, nevertheless send commissioners to General Assembly who do not support those standards and instead advocate for changing them. How can we work for reform of the presbytery election process so that we who vote have knowledge of the theological and moral positions of those on whom we are voting?

Examination Responsibilities

We all have moments in our lives when the issues of the times seem to come together. I had such a moment a few years ago during a Presbytery meeting. A candidate was asked how a person became right with God There was an awkward silence followed by, "I suppose everyone has to answer that for themselves."

The purpose of this section is to discuss the role we play in the examination of clergy candidates by the Committee on Preparation for Ministry(CPM), the Committee on Ministry(COM) and the Presbytery. There are three major concerns: Seminary education and its possible deficiencies; the readiness of the candidates to confront the moral questions of our times; and, their readiness to function in the context of a reformed faith. There are other questions too: What are people actually ready for? What do they believe they are called to accomplish? What will they preach? What are they preaching now? How will putting them into a pulpit further the great ends of the Church? Is there an agenda at work in their lives inconsistent with this call? What have been the resources for their spiritual nourishment for the past several years?

In order to properly evaluate a candidate's readiness for ministry, presbyters need to know the doctrines of the church as witnessed to by our Confessions. We need to be aware of the current attempts to make the third person of the Godhead the new focus, so that religious experience and spiritual illumination take the place of the mighty deeds of God in Jesus Christ. Salvation through spiritual knowledge or personal "revelation" apart from Scripture is not consistent with Scripture's teachings and the Confession's witness. If the Spirit's revelatory work in comparative religions takes the place of Christ, or if experience becomes the hermeneutic or prism through which and by which truth is determined then we are Gnostics rather than Christians. CPMs and COMs, and commissioners to presbytery need to be aware of these trends.

Presbyters must evaluate a candidate's willingness to live in conformance with the standards for sexual behavior in the Book of Order G-6.0106b. This paragraph directs us to the Confessions. The issue of sexuality should be raised in the context of the larger question of the individual's relationship with these foundational documents. What does it mean to be guided by them? How do they instruct us? There is also the question of accountability. Will this individual submit herself to her peers?

On the question of sexual behavior it is always best to be direct. "Does your life conform to the standards required for ordination as set out in this paragraph?" It is also important to emphasize repentance. As people of Reformed faith, we place such weight on confession that our worship of God begins with it. Is the candidate willing to confess and acknowledge his/her sin and brokenness. We are in peril of legalism if our concern is to merely catch people in bad behavior. Our concern is always redemptive.

We should avoid theological abstractions. Our questions must be specific. For example, someone may affirm the resurrection, but understand the word to mean something far removed from what most of us intend by it. The same is true for other doctrines. "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Is Jesus Lord of all? Do you believe in the incarnation? Tell us what you mean when you say that Jesus died for our sins"

The post-modern culture around us claims that words are signs without referents and therefore all language is semiotic metaphor. Everything is subjective. Nothing has objective reality outside the constructs of individuals and the groups to which they belong. As a result, abstractions tell us nothing about where a person stands on any of the theological questions of our time. James reminds us that the demons believe God is one (Jas 2:19). Questions need as much specificity as possible.

Here are suggestions on how we might ask questions:

- What happened to the body of Jesus following His death and burial?
- A member of your youth group says, "The Trinity is a great way to think about spiritual things. Of course, we don't take it literally do we?" How would you respond?
- I like your statement on baptism, especially that you believe in infant baptism. The question I have is this: If someone should grow up to repudiate their baptism, are there consequences; if so, what are they?
- If a person refuses to believe in Jesus, are there any consequences? If so, can you describe them?
- If someone on the street should say, "Why do we have to believe in Jesus? Why isn't it enough to believe in God and try to live by his laws?" What would you say?
- Is there any part of the Bible you would not regard as God's Word? Could you name it?
- The moderator of the 2000 General Assembly said that the core of the Christian faith was the statement of Paul in Acts 16:31, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." What does that statement mean?
- How is a person saved? What do we need to be saved from?
- How can I know my sins are forgiven?
- When the tradition affirms that Jesus of Nazareth was two natures in one person do you believe that is literally true?
- If I had been there when Jesus rose from the dead what might I have seen?
- You are an Associate Pastor in a large congregation. The evangelism committee on which you serve as a staff member wants to canvas the community to invite people to a special service of introduction to the church. One person asks you into their home. During a conversation she says, "I used to go to church. I have always tried to live a good life, and recently I began a journey which has taken me to Buddhism. I still believe in Jesus, but I see no need to go to church. After all, the only thing that matters is that we are sincere, right? You are not a fundamentalist are you?" How would you respond?

Examinations on the Floor of Presbytery

When someone arrives on the floor of the Presbytery it is usually too late to determine if she/he is qualified or ready to receive a call. For this reason some presbyters conclude that there is no point in asking questions. Presbyters, however, can make a difference even when the process of preparation has reached this stage. We need clarity on our goals. They should include the following:

- Alert the Presbytery to a potential problem.
- Alert CPM and COM that certain things will not be tolerated; demonstrate where some of the members of Presbytery draw lines.
- Help to ensure that in the future important facets of a person's thinking or life-style will be taken more seriously by the committee of jurisdiction.

We also need to dispense with the myth that presbyters may not inquire into the theology of inquirers who are being examined for candidacy. This simply is not true. An inquirer becomes a candidate by demonstrating that he/she has received a call. A part of the process by which that is determined involves his/her understanding of the nature of call in the Reformed faith. That itself opens up a large area of theological discourse. Further, the literature that inquirers submit to move from inquirer to candidate involves reflection on at least one aspect of their theology. Questions might include:

- Tell us how your understanding of the nature of Scripture affects you in hearing and responding to the call of God in your life.
- As a candidate for the ministry you are responding to the call of Jesus Christ; some people claim that Jesus is just one path to God among others, and that all the religions of the world are authentic manifestations of saving truth inspired by the one Spirit. Do you believe this?

Serious examination of those who are being considered for leadership in the church is a responsibility which should not be dismissed or taken lightly. The refusal to ordain and/or install into leadership those who are not adequately prepared is not an act of wrath but mercy, "so that the great ends of the Church may be achieved, that all children of God may be presented faultless in the day of Christ" (D-1.0103).

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Study 8: The Book of Revelation
Chapters 12-13: Visions of Cosmic Conflict

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One of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, which Christians have prayed throughout the centuries, is *Thy Kingdom Come*. Near the end of chapter 11 of Revelation the declaration is made in the heavens: the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah. This petition of the Lord's Prayer is finally answered. God's kingdom has come. At the same time, the non-linear nature of John's vision is most clearly seen at this point in his narrative. The beginning of chapter 12 describes further conflict and trial. It is clear that the world has not yet become the kingdom of our God. With chapter 12 we begin a new scene, Scene Four. Unlike the previous two scenes of seven seals and seven trumpets, the visions of this scene are not numbered. Scene Four consists of visions of cosmic conflict. In it we see the drama of human salvation history against the backdrop of heaven conflicts.

Where do you start to tell the world's history? John's vision in this scene begins with the birth of Jesus Christ. Revelation 12:1–12 is a retelling of the Nativity in highly symbolic language. We are told explicitly in vs. 1, 3 that what John sees are signs and portents. These images are obviously not to be understood literally, they point to some truth beyond themselves. First, we see a woman clothed in brightness about to give birth to a child. Next, we see a crimson dragon ready to devour the child. The dragon has seven crowns. He has unquestioned and complete political authority. He has ten horns. A horn—think of a rhinoceros—is a symbol of great power. The dragon has ten horns: he is powerful beyond our measure. We are not left in doubt as to the identity of the dragon; we are told in v. 9 that he is Satan.

In v. 7 we see that the consequences of this birth are not Christmas Carols and chestnuts roasting on an open fire, but war in the heavenlies. The result of this war is that Satan is cast forth from the heavenly realms. When did this event occur? The reference is probably to a time during Jesus' ministry. The Lord Jesus tells his disciples after they return having preached that news of the Kingdom of God to the villages of Israel (Luke 10:18) "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning."

Unable to harm the child, and now defeated and evicted from heaven, Satan then determines to harm Christ's followers (vs. 13–17). He attacks the woman but she is given wings like an eagle (Isaiah 40:31) enabling her to escape the dragon's persecution. The dragon next spews forth a cataract of water. Throughout the Psalms the imagery of the overwhelming flood is used to portray our sense that evil is about to drown us. Though the threat is real, the woman (and her offspring) are protected. How long are they protected? John's enigmatic phrase for a time, and times, and half a time equals the number three and one half. As we learned in our previous study, the number three and one half is a symbol of the time in-between. It is the time in which we live. The protection offered is for the entirety of the time between the arrival of the promise and its fulfillment.

Satan's Allies

After the repeated defeats of chapter 12 Satan is in need of help. In chapter 13 we meet the two beasts: one from the sea and the other from the earth, he recruits from the underworld to serve his cause. The sea beast is a terrifying creature. He is a patchwork: part leopard, part bear, part lion. He too has seven crowns symbolizing earthly authority and ten horns symbolizing brute power. The image is probably intended to be that of the Roman government in particular and the power of the state in general. It is an image of civil governments extending their reach beyond the authority given them in God's economy. Sadly, civil government often does make war against God's people. The creature's blasphemies should probably be understood as the tendency, in Roman times and in the present, of giving its rulers divine titles: Nero was *Savior of the World*; Augustus was *Divinus*; and Domitian was *Our Lord and our God*. In v. 3 there is a description that one of the seven heads appeared to have been mortally wounded but was now healed. The image is that of a previous battle between this creature and the Lamb of God. Some commentators seek to tie this image to a particular Roman Caesar (or a coming false messiah), but I think there is a better interpretation. God's pronouncement of judgment upon the Serpent in Genesis 3:15 is seen traditionally as the first Messianic prophesy of the Bible. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." This bruised head has now been accomplished in John's vision. When did this battle take place? It was fought at Golgatha and in the Garden Tomb. Christ's resurrection is the crushing blow.

The second beast is not as powerful, for he has only two horns. However, the source of his power and influence is his ability to deceive. He is a substitute, offering a clumsy imitation of the Lamb of God. Jesus Christ is the image of God. This beast is in the image of Satan. The two beasts together symbolize the twin challenges faced by believers in all ages and locations. On the one hand there is the coercive power of those in civil authority who resist the work of Christ. On the other, there is the deceptive

influence of false religion that undermines Christ's work and leads people astray. Intimidation and deception are the two great forces arrayed against the church.

In v. 18 we encounter the mysterious (and well known) number of the Beast – 666. John tells us that interpreting this number will take wisdom. If we wish to see beyond the deceit then we must do so through the exercise of thinking biblically, Christianly. As before, we will resist fanciful interpretations and note the following. It is possible that this number was well known and associated with the Emperor Domitian. It was under Domitian that the church experienced the closest to a systematic persecution by the Roman Empire. But the meaning lies deeper still. As we saw in our previous study of the symbolic numbers of Revelation, the number six is the number for sin. It is the number that is one short of perfection. The principle word translated as sin in the NT (*hamartia*) is taken from the sphere of archery. It means to miss the mark. Sin misses the mark. Further, in Hebrew idiom, intensification is achieved by doubling. If something is very red, then in Hebrew it is rendered **red, red**. The repetition intensifies the meaning. The highest form of intensification is three-fold. We say that God is holy, holy, holy. He is intensely holy. He is as holy as you can get. We see then that the three-fold repetition of the number 6 symbolizes the intensification of sin. It is sin at its greatest.

The mark of the beast, 666, is upon small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave. This means simply that they are enslaved to sin, incapable of doing otherwise. The sad fact is that this is the false counterpoint to the assurance of God's people who were *sealed* in 7:4. God's own belong to him and are so marked, sealed. Satan's own also belong to him, and they too are marked, their fate is also sealed.

However, John's message is not one of discouragement. He offers a word of encouragement at the end of the beast's description. In v. 10 John counsels patience and endurance even in the face of hardship, loss and martyrdom. Our temptation is to follow the way of Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane: to offer force against force. John counsels simple faith in God. V.10 is central to the application of the Book of Revelation in our lives. "If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed." Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. Because of its fantastic imagery, Revelation particularly appeals to those who desire the near apocalyptic announcement and establishment of God's justice. The temptation is to believe that we can play a role in catalyzing the arrival of God's kingdom here on earth. We want to march on Hell to the tune of *Onward Christian Soldiers*. But here (and, notably in the Eph. 6 descriptions of the armor of God) we are not called to march, but simply to stand. The counsel of v. 10 stands against our desire to bring in the kingdom appearance. Apparently, in the spiritual realms, simple endurance yields the fruit of victory.

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