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The Spirit and the Trinity: A Christian Perspective of Interreligious Worship

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The Phenomenon of Interreligious Worship

Several years ago, I received a desperate phone call from a couple that occasionally had visited the PCUSA church I then served.[1] A catastrophe had occurred. Their eight-year-old daughter suddenly had been stricken with a brain hemorrhage and was quickly losing the struggle for her life. Of course I immediately rushed to the hospital where I joined them in counsel, prayer, and sorrow as they made the heart-breaking decision to discontinue life support systems.

The next day I received a request from the grieving mother, asking that I participate in the upcoming memorial service to be held at a neighboring mainline Protestant church. Their daughter had been baptized as an infant there and still remained on the church's rolls. This location met with the approval of her husband, a non-practicing Jew. Though both the father and mother were nominal in terms of practicing their faith(s), at that time of profound pain, they felt a deep need for a shared worship service in remembrance of their daughter. I quickly agreed to take part and was asked to read Romans 8:31-39 during the service.

As plans further developed, a female Jewish cantor was obtained to lead as the primary liturgist for the memorial service, since the venue was a Christian church. A personal letter from a television celebrity, a family friend, spoke of faith in life after life and received applause from the congregation. A tribute to the girl by a relative encouraged us to hope that she was with God, looking down on us from a better place, from "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Finally, the version of Romans 8:31-39 I was handed to read as we walked into the sanctuary had excised all references to Jesus Christ. Speaking generically of God at such a time was deemed agreeable to a mixed audience of Jews, Christians, and most everyone

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else in American culture.[2] Including the name of Jesus, however, might be construed as a drawing of lines in a context where many would have considered drawing lines to be rude.[3]

In Protestant churches in general, and particularly in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, a funeral or memorial service is considered to be an act of worship, a "Service of Witness to the Resurrection of the Dead." That day a worship service indeed was held. However, it included elements—not of Reformed Christianity—but of Reform Judaism, Liberal Protestantism, New Age thought, and American sentimentalism, along with the muffled voice of at least one worshiper committed to evangelical and Reformed faith! This ceremony was an interreligious worship service, a patchwork of religious traditions and convictions intended to honor the dead, to comfort the bereaved, and to mediate an encounter with the Divine as each participant conceived of him or her or it.

With rising multiculturalism and religious pluralism in the United States, scenarios resembling this one are becoming increasingly common. In addition to funerals and memorial services, one immediately thinks of interfaith weddings, child dedications, and rite of passage ceremonies in families comprised of blended faiths. In a growing number of communities, Thanksgiving worship services have moved beyond ecumenical cooperation among Christian churches to include adherents to religions such as Judaism and Islam. On the United States national stage, shortly following the tragedy of 9/11/01 millions of Americans viewed a worship service convened in the National Cathedral that featured Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant leaders, with Billy Graham figuring prominently among them. Dr. Graham clearly attempted to distance himself from any perception that his presence should be taken as a carte blanche affirmation of the other faiths represented on the platform. One nevertheless can only wonder what long-term impressions most Americans retained as a result of this powerful visual presentation of interreligious unity.

In yet another example, with more direct implications for members of the PCUSA, the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions held an international council in Cape Town, South Africa, December 1999. The gathering featured daily interreligious worship, along with a host of seminars and workshops presenting methods for communing with God as practiced among the world religions.[4] In a subsequent workshop held in my presbytery, the Cape Town event was hailed as the way forward for Christianity in relationship to the world religions. At that time, Presbyterian minister Dirk Ficca—well known for his query as to "What's the big deal about Jesus?"—served as the Executive Director of the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions (a position he continues to hold).

These examples illustrate the fact that many self-identifying Christians in the North American context affirm that adherents to non-Christian world religions do engage in acceptable and effective forms of worship. Worship by non-Christians as well as by Christians is thought capable of mediating encounters with God. In a 1991 survey of religious views in the United States, George Barna sought responses to the following statement, "Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and others all pray to the same God, even though they use different names for that God." Sixty-four percent of respondents agreed with the notion, among which thirty-seven percent strongly agreed. A further breakdown of the numbers indicated that among Roman Catholics, eighty-three percent concurred with this perspective. Seventy percent of mainline Protestants assented. Even among self-identifying evangelicals, forty-six percent accepted the statement, forty-two percent rejected it, and thirteen percent were undecided.[5] As Americans increasingly believe that members of many religions both pray to and worship the same God using various names and concepts, the propriety of interreligious worship services becomes more reasonable. In fact, such services become symbolic of this shared access to the Divine as expressed through the rich diversity of prayers, rites, rituals, songs, meditations, and recitations inherent in the doxological expressions of the world faiths. What is more, by participating in one another's means of encountering God through worship, each religion is said to enrich its own doxological understanding, practice, and experience.[6]

Countering Theological Arguments in Support of the Interreligious Worship Phenomenon

This increasing phenomenon prompts many questions and issues for the church. Within this article, we shall limit our consideration to addressing four major lines of reasoning often cited in its support. After describing each rationale, a brief response that calls the point into question is supplied. Each of the four arguments makes its own unique contribution to building the case for validating non-Christian worship, and by extension, interreligious worship. Yet one shared theological theme holds them together. The Spirit is alleged to be involved actively, positively, and supportively in non-Christian worship and life. The Spirit is said to be capable of indwelling non-Christian worship as well as Christian worship. The Divine Presence animates non-Christian worship experiences in order to create communion with God as each world religion conceives of the Religious Ultimate in its own way.

The assertions of this new perspective differ from those of historic Christianity, which tend to regard non-Christian worship either as communion with demonic spirits at worst or as a potential point of contact for inviting non-Christians to worship in Spirit and Truth by embracing Christian faith at best.[7] The new perspective, however, proposes that non-Christians can engage with God

through worship via the Spirit apart from any overt participation in Christian worship in the name of the Triune God. Since the Spirit is thought to energize worship among all world religions, interreligious worship provides a platform for witnessing the Spirit at work through each faith's distinctive approach to God. This movement toward affirming non-Christian worship via the Spirit is not only proliferating due to circumstances in popular culture; it increasingly receives the affirmation in many ecclesiastical and scholarly circles as well.

1. The Spirit as a Preventative to Religious Genocide

A first motivation for building a theology of the Spirit's involvement in non-Christian worship arises out of the conviction that the great world religions must move toward unity through mutual acceptance. Despite our differences, proponents of various faiths must agree that we cannot afford further opposition and aggression directed at any single people group based on religious beliefs. Genocide justified by religious convictions is a pervasive theme throughout human history. In this regard, Christians often are thought to bear particular responsibility for the recent atrocities of the Shoah or Holocaust perpetrated against the Jews by Nazi Germany. Moreover, Christian involvement in the Crusades (1099-1291) is cited as further evidence that casts a dark shadow over the history of the church in relationship to Islam.[8] If the belief that members of another religion worship "a different God (at) a different mountaintop" can be twisted to justify such unconscionable slaughter, then this belief must be jettisoned from religious understanding.[9] The risk inherent in retaining the belief simply is too great.

Thus it is asked, what facets of a Christian view of God can be highlighted in order best to emphasize continuity with non-Christian religions concerning encountering the Divine? In our time, when feminist or womanist theologies vigorously protest ostensible patriarchal oppression in Christianity, the fatherhood of God does not present itself as a likely candidate. Any reference to God that is male gender specific is open to the criticism that it may exclude female religionists from the depths of spiritual intimacy with God sought through worship. Likewise, the figure of Jesus Christ as the second person of the Trinity invites as much recognition of discontinuity as of continuity. Focusing on any single, historical person, who is revered as the founder or source of a religion, invariably generates debate concerning the validity of religions that refuse to recognize this individual. For this reason, attempts to present Jesus as the Christian point of contact to other world religions commonly turn to discussions of "the cosmic Christ" or the "Christic spirit." Jesus of Nazareth becomes but one example of the Christ Presence that also is embodied in other religious geniuses such as Buddha, Confucius, Muhammad, and Ghandi.[10] Jesus is only "a Christ" or one manifestation of "the Christ."

In making this distinction, the concept of the Christ begins to take on a basically spiritual identity, and thus it leads to the third option—the Spirit. In the Spirit, we find a concept that avoids many of the rough edges associated with the Father and the Son when seeking peace among Christians and other world religionists. The Spirit easily can be detached from sexual identification and freed from attachment to any single historical figure. The Spirit is ubiquitous. The Spirit can reveal God and effect the divine purpose throughout history in all corners of the world. Christians may not easily be able to affirm non-Christian worship and engage in interreligous worship on the basis of the Father or the Son, but they may be able to do so through shared experiences of the Spirit. They further are liberated to learn from non-Christian worship because it is proposed that the Spirit has been active in those doxological traditions as well as in Christian practices.[11] As some scholars contend, it is preferable to begin a Christian Theology of Religions (*Theologia Religium*) with the Spirit, not with the Father or the Son.[12] Doing so provides perhaps the best option for creating an attitude among the great world faiths that protects against wars of religion.

When considered from this point of view, the interreligious worship service for the little girl mentioned in the introduction is a powerfully positive symbol. A Jewish father and a Gentile mother, joined by their Jewish and Gentile family, friends, and neighbors, were assembled to worship with each other, not to war against each other, in God's Presence.

In responding to this argument in favor of the Spirit moving in non-Christian religions and their worship, we clearly must decry Christian involvement in actively or passively persecuting members of other faiths in God's name. To the extent that the Shoah and the Crusades are examples of this activity, Christians openly should condemn them. Yet without excusing the church's role in these events, we ought to resist interpretations of history that implicate Christians too generally and universally. During World War II, Christians in the Confessing Church drafted the Barmen Declaration in staunch opposition to both the Third Reich and the German State Church, which had acquiesced to Hitler's influence. Many Christians risked and sacrificed their lives to shelter and protect Jews from the Nazis. Resisting Christians joined Jews in the death camps. With regard to the Crusades, to be sure, the church must own the bloody legacy of its knights slaughtering Muslims and Jews indiscriminately. Nevertheless, Muslims likewise had waged war against predominately Christian territories since the seventh century, subjugating the Middle East, North Africa, Spain, and seeking to conquer Europe.[13] The Crusades are a single example of unacceptable Christian counter-jihad in response to Muslim jihad, which is commanded and praised in the Koran and the Hadith.[14] Once again, Christian participation in these holy wars is not exonerated. We ought to be wary,

however, of historical caricatures of Christianity in relationship to these events.

Second, an implicit assumption in this argument is that belief in the finality or exclusive truthfulness of Christianity inevitably eventuates in Christian suppression of other world religions. Though this course of action certainly has occurred, it is not logically necessary. Christians surely can, and often have, used their convictions concerning the truth of God in Christ as a motivation for improving the welfare of people regardless of religious affiliation. Fully devoted Trinitarian worship often has propelled the church into the non-Christian world to feed the starving, shelter the homeless, establish health care facilities, oppose social injustice, and halt the advance of tyranny.

Third, belief that valid and viable worship in Spirit and Truth is linked to Jesus Christ is a central impulse for Christian evangelism and missions. The Reformed tradition proposes that the highest purpose for human beings is that of bringing God glory and of enjoying God in His glory forever.[15] That is to say, there is a fundamentally doxological center to Christian life. This doxological center that engages the Christian with God is to catalyze evangelism and missions to people living "without God in the world." The hope of evangelism and missions is that others would join the assembly of God's people who constitute the living, worshiping temple of the Spirit (Eph 2:12, 19-21). Through evangelism and missions, the church invites the world to enter worship in the glorious Presence of the triune God now and forever. Interreligious worship, by prematurely celebrating this goal with members of non-Christian religions, short-circuits the missionary means to this goal.[16]

2. The Spirit and Religious Experience

Though perhaps not apparent at first glance, this second rationale is related to the first. Contemporary culture and theology often places highest priority on experience as its final authority above all other authorities.[17] When religious experience is taken to be ultimate, it becomes self-authenticating. For example, if my experiences in worship of what I consider to be God are my highest source of authority, then by definition they must be seen as authentic. For no other counter-claims against them from other authorities—such as sacred texts, doctrines, historical traditions, or rational arguments—can possibly overturn them, since these are understood to be lesser authorities. Hence, my worship experiences are self-authenticating because no other sources are highly enough respected to refute them.

Avery Dulles describes five types of revelation that may function authoritatively for Christian faith and practice: (1) Biblical and doctrinal data may operate authoritatively when they are taken to communicate or enunciate divine revelation. (2) Historical precedents in the church may be a vehicle by which God reveals His authoritative will. (3) The presence of Christ as testified to by Scripture and the Spirit interacts dialectically with human beings to spark an encounter with God. This dialectic of Word, Spirit, and experience bears authority. (4) Inner experiences may be understood as direct encounters with God that become authoritative. (5) An individual may arrive at a new awareness or new sense of consciousness that becomes the benchmark for what is valid and vital above all else.[18] When assessing non-Christian religions and their worship, Christians historically have emphasized the authority of Scripture, creeds, doctrines, and the history of the church beginning in the biblical period and continuing to the present (Models 1 and 2). Authorities such as personal inner experience and new awareness or new consciousness (Models 4 and 5) have been viewed as valuable secondary sources to be evaluated based on these primary authorities.

In our contemporary context, however, advocates of the new perspective on non-Christian worship tend to reverse the priority of these revelatory authorities. Inner experience and new awareness/new consciousness are elevated while Scripture, doctrine and history are diminished. This occurs for at least two reasons. First, if peace and unity among all world religions are of foremost priority, it must be acknowledged that the Bible, Christian doctrine, and Christian history often clash against core tenets held by other world religions in their worship practices. Attempts to dialogue rationally and intellectually based on these authority sources inevitably expose incompatibilities. For instance, Christians argue that God is three persons in one Being. Jews claim that God is one, apart from Trinitarian associations. Muslims view the Christian understanding of the Trinity to be idolatrous. Theravada Buddhists are altogether atheistic in their understanding of the Religious Ultimate. The Law of Non-Contradiction tells us that God simultaneously cannot be three-in-one, one-but-never-three, and not-at-all. Some religions must be wrong about God; therefore, they consequently may worship wrongly and their spiritual experiences may be flawed as well. Once one admits to the prospect that various religions are right or wrong about God, however, one again may open the Pandora's Box to another Shoah, another Religious Genocide, by the religionists with the might to oppress those whose understanding of God differs. Since all avenues to these possible atrocities must be closed, it becomes natural to move away from scriptural, dogmatic, and historical authorities presented by way of rational dialogue and debate.

Second, in contrast the experiential and new awareness/new consciousness models become more inviting, for most religions share a common component of relating human experiences to God or the Religious Ultimate. If experience and awareness are deemed to be more valid than Scripture, dogma, and history, then a strong bond may be forged between the world religions. Mutual affirmation of the authenticity of religious experience among all religions becomes a shared, primary

value. Corporate experiences in interreligious worship confirm that each worshiper's approach to the Divine is true. Experience, it is said, moves us out of the pitfalls of conflict intrinsic to rational discussion about sacred texts or religious doctrines. It moves us into a deeper shared Reality.[19]

The ascendancy of religious experience in worship is quite compatible with a theology of the Divine Presence active in all world religions. The Spirit, it is claimed, is the Presence that mediates all human experiences of God. Both Christian and non-Christian efforts to engage with God through worship are used by the Spirit to create this new consciousness or new awareness in human souls. As devotees of the world religions gather to worship through the power of the Spirit, they will perceive a deeper unity in God's Presence that surpasses each faith's particular reflections found in sacred texts, dogmas, and historical traditions. Shared spiritual experiences become the first order of authority; rational explications about these experiences become the second order of authority, which then lose much of their power to divide the religions.

Applied to our opening example, if the attendees at the young girl's memorial service had been asked to describe their understanding of the Divine Being and how one relates to that Being, a broad spectrum of explanations likely would have been given. With no doubt, many of these explanations would have logically contradicted each other. If, however, the congregation felt a shared experience of a religious nature, and if a new awareness of the value of life was revealed through honoring the dead, and if these occurrences tacitly were given highest priority, then logical contradictions no longer would have created an insurmountable barrier between worshipers. Their secondary ideas about God may have been hopelessly conflicted, but their primary experiences of the Divine Presence ultimately were united, it may be argued.

Christians who subscribe to the Reformation tradition may question this elevation of personal experience and new awareness as ultimate sources of authority. It strikes against the impulse of the Reformation on at least three central points. (1) It replaces *sola Scriptura*, the final authority of the Bible, by making religious experience ultimate. Instead of Scripture setting the parameters for what constitutes an acceptable experience of worship in the Divine Presence, experience tends to determine what aspects of Scripture will be acknowledged in support of experience. While it is true that how we worship affects what we believe, it is no less true that what we believe, based on the foundational authority of Scripture, should call for an accounting of how we worship.[20] (2) *Sola fidei*, salvation by faith alone, is displaced by the experiential. To be sure, Christians should embrace the significance of experience for faith; nevertheless, the authority of human experience does not circumscribe faith. Faith circumscribes experience. In fact, sometimes faith will direct us to question our religious experiences in worship. (3) The authority of the priesthood of believers often yields to that of the priesthood of each individual. The community of those who gather together in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit no longer mediates and regulates true worship. Individual experience validates worship in the Spirit. Thus, a model of worship in the Spirit that views experience as supreme departs from the foundations of Reformation Christianity and its legacy. Upon brief reflection concerning the girl's memorial service, we quickly may recognize that *sola Scriptura*, *sola fidei*, and the priesthood of believers all were marginalized in that worship event.

3. The Spirit and Universal Salvation

A third point that contributes to this emphasis on the Spirit-Presence active in all religions and their worship practices is tied to the idea of the complete salvation of all humankind, or "universalism." While it is commonly affirmed that belief in universal salvation is a growing trend among scholars and ecclesiastical bodies, universalists offer a variety of views as to how God will accomplish this goal. (1) Some more pluralistic versions emphasize the idea that God works to establish salvation through many equally valid paths. (2) More inclusive versions claim that Christianity is the truest of all religions, but by grace God acts in and through other less adequate faiths (an in some cases, even through no faith whatsoever) to save all. (3) Another view proposes that Christianity alone is sufficient for reconciling human beings to God; nonetheless, due to the overwhelming victory of Christ on the cross, God unilaterally saves humankind in spite of its religious blindness and obduracy. (4) Still other expressions of universalism are eschatological. That is to say, when the human race encounters God face-to-face at the End, all people will see God *an sich* (in God's Self).[21] At that point, all will believe, and all will worship. Of course the unifying point to all these universalist approaches is that none shall be lost. Every human being, by one means or another, will enter the Presence of the Eternal forever.

The perspective that the Spirit operates through all religions and their attendant worship practices particularly complements models (1) and (2). These two models include the proposition that God acts in history, and particularly in religious history, to achieve salvation for all. Model (3) focuses on God accomplishing universal salvation in spite of human activity in history. Model (4) places the saving event beyond human history altogether by moving it to the eschatological domain. Those who espouse some version of model (1) or (2) often claim that a loving, generous, and merciful God, who pledges to save all people, would include them in this process during their earthly existence. A charitable God would not save merely in spite of human efforts, nor would a good God only wait until the End to involve humankind. No, through the Divine Presence, God presently acts in Christian and non-Christian religions alike to accomplish salvation. The omnipresent Spirit is

said to work out the way of reconciliation in the here-and-now through the world religions.

If this is the case, it is posited, what better place is there to anticipate the work of the Spirit than in the worship practices of all religions? For is not worship the very activity whereby the majority of human beings reach out to encounter the Divine, seeking either salvation or union with what is Religiously Ultimate? Would not worship be the most reasonable place where we should expect to find the Spirit operating to aid human beings in this quest, which is God's quest as well? Once this line of reasoning is accepted, it follows that interreligious worship services can present a vital means for members of all religions to share together in the Spirit, as the Spirit assists all in pursuit of this divine mission of universal salvation. Applying this again to our opening illustration, one may reason that if God wills to save both the little girl and everyone who attended her memorial service, the Spirit can be depended upon to have been active in that worship event. Human worship was used by the Spirit to mediate encounters with God, thus enabling the congregants to participate in God's universal saving mission.

The major difficulty with this line of argument is that it presupposes universal salvation. If one refutes universalism, however, the rest of the reasoning crumbles as well. A God who chooses to save a portion of humankind, but not all, may be expected to validate and vivify the worship expressions of that portion via the Spirit. Would one, however, anticipate that the Spirit should operate to mediate encounters with God for the portion of humankind that is not to be saved? Not necessarily. In righteous judgment, God may relinquish fallen human beings to their preferences for forms of worship that are false and idolatrous. In mercy, God may move through illegitimate or inadequate worship practices to stir a thirst for worship that truly engages with God in Christ through the power of the Spirit. The Spirit would not likely validate and enliven direct engagement with God for those who operate beyond God's particular plan of salvation, however.

It may be added that models (3) and (4) of universalism do not entail divine participation in human worship either. In model (3), God saves despite the idolatrous efforts of human beings to reach God. God reconciles all regardless of human rebellion that shuns the Spirit. In human history, only the church is the community of the Spirit at worship (albeit imperfectly). Likewise, model (4) leaves open the possibility that adherents to the world religions may worship falsely now, but they shall turn to worship truly when they encounter God *an sich* at the End. The larger point made here is that once the assumption of universal salvation that includes human participation in history is removed, so is the attendant belief that God's Spirit is mediating non-Christian worship practices. If God is not committed to saving everyone who attended the little girl's memorial service, then it is not incumbent upon God's Spirit to endorse and enliven the religious experiences of each one.

4. The Spirit, Scripture, and Christian Imperialism

It is of note that in describing the previous three points in support of the Spirit-Presence establishing the adequacy of non-Christian worship, no reference to Scripture appears. One may fairly inquire as to what biblical evidence, if any, is most frequently used to sustain this position. After all, many proponents of the new perspective do identify themselves as Christians. As Christians it therefore is appropriate to ask how the shared authority and tradition of Scripture informs their view—or any view that claims to be Christian for that matter.

Some writers, such as Stanley Samartha, forthrightly acknowledge that Scripture does not offer adequate material for building a biblical case for acceptable non-Christian worship. Samartha instead argues that if the biblical authors were given opportunity to experience the great world religions at worship today, as we do, they surely would arrive at different conclusions from the ones found in the Bible. If miraculously transported into the present, the writers of Scripture would affirm worship among the great world religions.[22] We may praise Samartha for recognizing the dearth of scriptural support for the new perspective. We should be more guarded, however, with regard to his anachronistic, hypothetical conjecture about interfacing biblical authors with contemporary times. Playing the counterfactual game of how historical figures might behave differently in another historical era is indeed interesting, but it is an insufficient basis for developing a theology of non-Christian worship.[23]

For proponents of the new perspective who do not take Samartha's approach, John 3:8 certainly is the most cited passage to support the movement of the Spirit beyond the confines of Christianity. "The Spirit (wind) blows where it wills." Alluding to this verse, Roman Catholic theologian Jacques Dupuis marvels at the Spirit's movement, unconstrained by the temporal limitations of the historical figure of Jesus. The Spirit is unbounded by the space-time continuum. To be sure, the Spirit indwells the church; nevertheless, the Spirit also inspires "in people belonging to other religious traditions the obedience of saving faith."[24] It therefore is simply a slight to the Spirit's divine liberty for Christians to presume that non-Christian worship is not a powerful vehicle for communicating salvation in relationship to God.

In a second example, the 1991 Baar Statement produced by the World Council of Churches states, "We affirm unequivocally that God the Holy Spirit has been at work in the life and traditions of peoples of all living faiths."[25] The Baar Statement supports this conclusion based on the liberty of the Spirit to blow where it wills (John 3:8). Paul Knitter, a Baar Statement author, later observed that a Spirit-centered basis for interreligious dialogue had

replaced other dialogical approaches grounded in God, Christ, or salvation.[26] The Baar Statement then became a foundational document for the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches, which took as its theme, "Come Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation." It is noteworthy that the assembly featured a worship service in which spirits of suffering people and the spirit of the Amazon Rain Forest were invoked. These were presented as particular expressions of the universal Spirit blowing wherever it wills.[27]

If one affirms the creative and vibrant movement of the Spirit throughout the world based on a passage such as John 3:8, the Spirit cannot be regarded as the private possession of the Christian church. If Christians do not monopolize the unbridled activity of the Spirit, surely Christians ought not to imagine that only their doxological efforts to engage with God are indwelled by the Spirit. It is better to recognize the Spirit blowing in non-Christian prayers, meditation, songs, litanies, rituals, and so forth. To fail to acknowledge this viewpoint is tantamount to Christian imperialism, as Samartha trenchantly asserts:[28]

> That all people are open to the activity of God's Spirit seriously challenges a legalistic dogmatism which limits the work of the Spirit to a various segment of time, to an isolated bit of geographical location and to the history of a particular people. The Spirit of God cannot be regarded as the monopolistic possession of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, imprisoned within the steel and concrete structures of Western dogma and a permanent Atlantic Charter.

In order to avoid any appearance of Christian imperialism, theologians such as Amos Yong recommend that we regard Christ and the Spirit as the "two hands of God." Both Christ and the Spirit equally represent God, but in different ways and to different constituencies. Christ is the hand of God that primarily reaches out to the church in its life and mission. The Spirit is the hand of God that not only influences the church; the Spirit further touches non-Christian religions.[29] Using this approach, the church may retain its particular identity as the community of Christ, while it simultaneously affirms the general work of the Spirit in other non-Christian communities of faith. Christians may worship in the name of Christ and may confirm non-Christian worship in the power of the Spirit.

Returning again to the memorial service, if one accepts John 3:8 as meaning that the Spirit moves universally, beyond the bounds of Christ and His church, and if one sees particular linkage of the Spirit to the work of Christ through the church as imperialistic, it becomes nearly impossible to question the possibility of the Spirit blowing as it wills in the hearts and minds of all worshipers that day, regardless of their various beliefs. What is more, while gladly holding to the presence of Christ in their personal worship (one hand), Christians in the congregation could take comfort in the ministry of the Spirit to everyone else present (the other hand). In fact, would it not arguably have been most charitable to refrain from mentioning the one hand of Jesus Christ in reading Romans 8:31-39 in order to free the other hand of the Spirit in its ministry to all?

The weakness of this line of reasoning lies in its interpretation and application of John 3:8. Though a thorough investigation of the verse falls beyond this article, a brief consideration demonstrates that Jesus' words do not indicate a global movement of the Spirit in and through the great world religions at worship. First, the Johannine context is distinctly Jewish. Jesus speaks with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, about an issue that he should understand, given his Jewish background (v. 10). It strains credulity to think that a leading Pharisee naturally would be expected to know that the Spirit moves to bring the world's people into the Kingdom of God apart from any reference to the covenant people of God. It was commonly understood that God's Spirit worked through Israel—not apart from Israel—to bring salvation to the world. One should not imagine that Jesus would have expected a Jewish leader to anticipate such a radical departure from the Second Temple Jewish understanding of salvation history.

Second, the Spirit specifically moves in order to achieve a second birth or a birth from above in the lives of men and women (vv. 3, 5, 8). Jesus is not making a generalized statement about the ever-present activity of the Spirit in all times and places. Rather, He indicates that human beings cannot control or harness the movement of the Spirit that brings people into this second birth from above. As the wind blows where it wills, beyond human control, so the Spirit acts with regard to everyone who is born of the Spirit. Being born of the Spirit then is tied specifically to "seeing the Kingdom of God" (v. 3) and to "receiving eternal life" (vv. 15-16). Experiencing eternal life in the kingdom occurs as individuals are saved by believing in Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Man (vv. 14-18). It may be concluded, therefore, that the ministry of the Spirit in John 3:8 is inextricably associated with the identity and ministry of Jesus Christ in the context of a Jewish frame of reference. These factors betray any simple application of John 3:8 to an unconditional freedom and universal mediation of the Spirit, as some progressivists claim.[30]

In addition to doubting the interpretation and application of John 3:8, we likewise should reconsider the image of Christ and the Spirit as the two hands of God. It indicates something of a "separate but equal" viewpoint regarding them. This understanding is seen as sympathetic to the Eastern Orthodox Church's contention that the Son proceeds from the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father, but the Spirit does not proceed from the Son as well as from the Father. Western Christianity—in both its Roman Catholic and Protestant expressions—historically has held that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the

Son.[31] This is to say that the ministry of the Spirit is integrally connected in witness to Jesus Christ as well as to God the Father. The Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ, not the Spirit apart from Jesus Christ.[32]

Of course, stating that centuries of Western Christians have bound the ministry of the Spirit to both Christ and the Father does not automatically make this position correct. Perhaps the new perspective is right, in which case a loosening of the ties between the second and third persons of the Trinity is appropriate. Once these ties are relaxed, perhaps the plausibility of the Spirit mediating non-Christian worship apart from Christ is enhanced. We should be cautious about casually relinquishing the historic Western understanding of the double procession of the Spirit, however. The idea of the Son and Spirit as God's two hands may be an appealing image of equability, but it also is a significant departure from Roman Catholic and Protestant doctrine. For if indeed the Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father, and if the Spirit witnesses to the Son as the means of eternal life, then we cannot assume that the Spirit operates as a catalyst for non-Christian worship apart from Christ. In fact, by eliminating the name of Jesus Christ from the New Testament reading at the young girl's memorial, the service officials were preventing the Spirit's movement. They were compromising the Spirit's freedom to witness to the Son, in whom salvation and true worship before the presence of God are to be found.

Conclusion

Underlying much of the rationale in favor of the acceptability of non-Christian worship and interreligious worship services is the contention that all doxological engagement with God is mediated directly by the Spirit. Worship for Christians and non-Christians alike is about "God and the soul, the soul and its God," to borrow the phrase of the great liberal theologian, Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930). The Spirit represents an inner sense of "independence and immediacy of religious life and feeling, [an] inner union with God."[33] This direct, spiritual access to God or the Religious Ultimate overrides a model of worship that is necessarily Trinitarian. In fact, Harnack himself viewed the Trinity as a "alien element" that unnaturally intruded between this immediate relationship of human beings to God. While many of today's supporters of non-Christian and interreligious worship might not comment as negatively about the Trinity as did Harnack, they nevertheless render the Trinity optional for valid and viable worship. In effect, a theology of Trinitarian worship is subsumed by a theology of pneumatological (Spirit) worship. Whether this Spirit of worship rightly should be identified as the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is open to serious debate.[34] If multiculturalism and religious pluralism continue to proliferate, as they most likely will, the church should anticipate that it will be pressed to relinquish its historic conviction that worship in Spirit and Truth is offered solely to the triune God, only by the mediation of the triune God, and exclusively in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.[35] The church must resist these pressures and continue to give a clear witness to her Lord.

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[1] The particular details of this historically based episode have been altered for reasons of privacy.

[2] Approximately 95% of Americans state that they believe in God, though many are "functional atheists" in terms of how they lead their everyday lives. Broad references to God, therefore, generally would not be perceived as inappropriate in the context of this service.

[3] See D. A. Carson, The Gagging of God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 347-367, for an incisive look at cultural factors contributing to our hesitancy to draw lines. Carson posits that with wisdom and circumspection, Christians are called on occasions to risk offense for the sake of the gospel.

[4] "Schedule for Capetown," Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions Newsletter 2, no. 2 (1999): 5. The next Parliament is scheduled to convene in Barcelona, Spain, July 2004. See www.cpwr.org.

[5] George Barna, The Barna Report: What Americans Believe: An Annual Survey of Values and Religious Views in the United States (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1991), 210-12.

[6] Americans increasingly are drawn to integrating aspects of various religions to suit their individual spiritual goals. Some do so while remaining centered in a particular religious traditions, while others create their own "designer religions." For more on the Sociology of this development, consult Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, Shopping for Faith: American Religion in a New Millennium (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998; and Wade Clark Roof, Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1999).

[7] For New Testament evidence often appealed to in support of each view, see 1 Cor. 10:20-22 (demonic) and Acts 14:16-17 (contact point).

[8] Valuable examples of theological responses by Christianity in the wake of the Shoah may be found in Allan Brockway, ed., The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish people / Statements by the World Council of Churches and Its Member Churches (Geneva: WCC, 1988). A most influential work portraying the bleak story of the Crusades is Steven Runciman, A History of the Crusades, 3 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

[9] "A different God, a different mountaintop" is a quotation of the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, commenting on the Jewish Harold Abrahams in Chariots of Fire.

[10] For instance, Matthew Fox, The Coming of the Cosmic Christ: The Healing of Mother Earth and the Birth of a Global Renaissance (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); and Raimundo Panikkar, The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Toward an Ecumenical Christophany (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981)

[11] Gerald R. McDermott, Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation and Religious Traditions (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000).

[12] Jacques Dupuis, Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997), 206; and Amos Yong, "Discerning the Spirit(s) in the World Religions," in No Other Gods before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 37-61.

[13] Charles Martel's victory at Tours, France, in 732 halted the Muslim invasion of Western Europe. As late as 1529 and 1683, Muslims stood at the gates of Vienna, attempting conquest in Eastern Europe.

[14] From the Koran, see Surahs 2:190-94, 9:5, 29, 38-39. The Hadith is a compilation of additional sayings and actions by Muhammad that is regarded as authoritative (second to the Koran) by many Muslims. For a helpful study of jihad in the Hadith, see Phil Parshall, Understanding Muslim Teachings and Traditions: A Guide for Christians (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 97-112.

[15.] Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, Q & A 1.

[16] John Piper, Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993, provides a fine exposition of the relationship between worship and evangelism/missions.

[17] This is designated the "experiential-expressivist" model by George Lindbeck in his influential book, The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 30-45.

[18] Avery Dulles, Models of Revelation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 36-128.

[19] Alister E. McGrath rightly notes that it is impossible to verify that these shared experiences actually are part of a common core experience that supersedes all talk about God. Nor can we verify that all these experiences actually are encounters with God either. See McGrath's The

Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 20-26.

[20] Lex orandi, lex credendi—the law of worship, the law of belief—flows two ways, both from doxology to doctrine and from doctrine to doxology.

[21] The Pluralist and Inclusivist models of universalism are widely held and with many variations. Universal salvation in spite of human effort in non-Christian religions often is associated with Karl Barth, though he was somewhat elusive about the matter. George Lindbeck is an example of post-mortem, eschatological universalism.

[22] Stanley J. Samartha, Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Interreligious Relationships (Geneva: WCC, 1981), 63-74.

[23] David Hackett Fischer, Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought (New York: Harper, 1970), 135-40, would identify Samartha's approach as "The Fallacy of Presentism."

[24].Dupuis, Toward a Christian Theology, 197.

[25] World Council of Churches, "The Baar Statement: Religious Plurality: Theological Perspectives and Affirmations," Current Dialogue 19 (1991): 50.

[26] Paul F. Knitter, "A New Pentecost? A Pneumatological Theology of Religions," Current Dialogue, 19 (1991): 32-41.

[27] Chung Hyun Kyung, "Come Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation," in Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia, ed. Michael Kinnamon (Geneva: WCC, 1991), 37-46.

[28] Samartha, Courage for Dialogue.

[29] The image of the "two hands of God" is taken from the church father Irenaeus, c. A.D. 130-200. See Amos Yong, Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 2000), 61, 65-70.

[30] For detailed interpretation sustaining my perspective from both a Catholic and a Protestant position, see Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel According to John, I-XII, AB 29 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 137-441, 144-49, and D. A. Carson, The Gospel according to John, PNTC (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 187-98.

[31] This disagreement, sometimes called the filioque controversy, helped to hasten the rupture between the Western and Eastern Churches in 1054. The Western view of the double procession of the Spirit is at least as old as Augustine's writings.

[32] What is more, the Eastern Church is supportive of the view that the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son. This position still connects the Spirit to the Son in a manner that is more direct than what the two hands image portrays. See Justo L. Gonzalez, The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day (Peabody, Mass.: Prince, 1984-85), 264-65, and Roger Olson, The Story of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000), 307-10.

[33] Adolf von Harnack, What is Christianity?, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (New York: Harper Torch, 1957), 144, 165.

[34] For further consideration of the nature of the Spirit in religious pluralism and Trinitarian thought, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Does the Trinity Belong in a Theology of Religions? On Angling in the Rubicon and the 'Identity' of God, in The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 41-71.

[35] James B. Torrence, Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), 19-41. Torrence further substantiates the erosion of Trinitarian worship in the Christian community.

Discerning The Center of Christian Faith

By William D. Eisenhower

Does the Christian faith have a center? If so, what is it? Is it something needing to be revitalized—and if so, how would we go about doing it?

These are questions which cannot be ducked. Recognizing and honoring ultimate matters of faith—distinguishing them from the mundane—all this is far too important. When we cannot, will not, or do not face them, before long we find that relatively minor concerns are being lifted up, and that things of truly saving significance are getting lost in the shuffle.

For an example: once long ago, when I was a young and fairly reckless pastor of a staid congregation, I attempted to have the flowers in our sanctuary moved from their time-honored place (below the cross; behind the communion table) to a still prominent but less central spot in the chancel.

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I believe I can say that this effort stands as the biggest mistake of my ministry. In the minds of a certain element of the membership, *everybody knows* that *God* wants the flowers below the cross and behind the communion table; and the fact that *I was ignorant* on this matter indicated that I might not be fit to be a minister.

I weathered the storm; but I've lived through (and heard about) enough ordeals like it to have become convinced: confusion about the essentials is one of the major problems of our time. But why should that be? Isn't the difference between the center of the Christian faith and the periphery perfectly obvious? Isn't it one of those things that everyone *just knows*—with the possible exception of the old guard of a very few extremely staid churches?

Lest we answer too quickly, remember: in the history of the church, the name most frequently associated with the notion that Christian faith has a crucial core and a dispensable outer layer is Adolf von Harnack. In Harnack's view, the Church's principle problem was as follows. Early in its life, heresies posed a legitimate threat, requiring a response from the leadership of that day. Creedal dogmas were developed as a counter measure, the philosophical categories for which

being of necessity the somewhat limited ones which were available at the time. The dogmatic inheritance which this process bequeathed to the Church was in Harnack's memorable phrase, "the work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel." Necessary at the time, it had the unfortunate result of obscuring the actual person of Jesus and his simple, ethical teachings. For Harnack, these latter, not the church's theological formulae, constitute the "kernel" of the Gospel—and to be grasped, this kernel must be distinguished from the churchy, creedal "husk" which surrounds it. The upshot: the message of Jesus—regarding the kingdom of heaven, the fatherhood of God, the infinite value of the human soul, and the ethical import of love—only these matters are essential and permanently valid. The rest is not.

Grenz and Rogers Seek the Center

Two recent book-length treatments tackle this issue, though neither has Harnack in view: *Renewing the Center* by Stanley Grenz and *Claiming the Center* by Jack Rogers. Given how similar they are, their differences are all-the-more instructive. Both works take history seriously; and both are responses to and attempts to move beyond the liberal/conservative divide which has polarized the American theological landscape for the past century and longer. Labeling the view which takes this divide as a given "the two-party model," Grenz argues that the opportunities of the present make it passé. For the two-party model persists in assuming that the only thing worth talking about is the dual-to-the-death underway between left and right. "The renewal of theology and the creation of a 'generous orthodoxy' in our day requires, however, that theologians move beyond this outmoded schema."[1] There are two difficulties here: for Grenz, such a renewal will only be possible if theologians welcome postmodernity as the crucial key; and he claims that the evangelical theologians are best poised to accomplish it;[2] though no indication is given why this should be so.

Rogers's project directs its hopes, not toward evangelicalism, but toward "mainstream Protestantism."[3] It is here, in "the center," says Rogers, that we find the greatest number of people struggling to deal with life in all its complexity.

> On every significant issue about 75 percent of Protestants are somewhere in the middle trying to make sense out of complex questions and to act responsibly in difficult circumstances.[4]

The initial hurdle here is that, as is no secret, the mainline churches—and of course Rogers's (former GA moderator) principle concern is with the PC(USA)—are the ones in decline and the ones in which left/right conflicts rage the most fiercely. But in his view, these conflicts and the attendant loss of members are attributable—not, as is generally assumed, to a clash over the essentials—but rather to a conflict of inessential worldviews. Because of their differing views, "(g)ood, intelligent, and devout people see things differently."[5] Who? Well, the national leadership on the one hand, and the congregational membership on the other. In Rogers's estimation, these two groups actually share a common commitment to Jesus Christ and a common background in the basics of the faith; it is their disparate worldviews which keep them away from the middle and away from each other. The solution would be for "a majority of both leaders and members to claim the center and reconstitute a common contemporary worldview."[6]

So both Grenz and Rogers argue that it is imperative that we free ourselves of the liberal/conservative polarity and work our way toward "the center." In arguing their respective cases, both give due regard to historical antecedents and developments, beginning with the Reformation in the case of Grenz and with the Puritans in the case of Rogers; both make plausible arguments about how things got the way that they are. And both contain a wealth of useful information and even wise counsel. But on the crucial question of what remains to be done, whether either is ultimately convincing remains to be seen.

Grenz's Attempt to Define the Center

The Grenz project, beginning as noted with the Reformation, takes us through the Puritans and the Pietists and into the eighteenth century and the beginnings of evangelicalism proper, typified by the phrase "convertive piety."[7] Next we are led into the nineteenth century of the Princeton theologians, and thence into the twentieth, the point at which evangelicalism became defensive and defeated, and hardened into fundamentalism.

The stage is thus set for the new evangelicalism which emerged in the 1940's. It is here that we see Grenz at his best: the Christian conservatism of the last half century is presented, brilliantly, in the form of three contrasts: Carl F. H. Henry versus Bernard Ramm; Millard Erickson versus Clark Pinnock; and Wayne Grudem versus John Sanders. The first of each contrasting pair represents the movement's traditionalist commitments; the second its pioneering spirit. In Grenz's view, the strengths of the movement can be seen in the felicitous contrast between Henry and Ramm—strengths which would have been reprised in the polarity between Erickson and Pinnock, except that Erickson grew more conservative over time. When his turn came, Grudem moved the traditionalist pole even further to the right. In our author's view, the present-day thinkers which Grudem exemplifies seem to be heading back toward the same kind of narrow fundamentalism from which the founders of neo-evangelicalism were determined to distinguish themselves.

This is a reading of recent history which makes perfect sense. It provides a serviceable platform for making the point Grenz wants to make: evangelicalism functions best when the traditionalists in their midst are creative and broad-minded—enough so as to allow room for their more innovative colleagues to explore roads less traveled. It is a reading which could stand on its own, and which could allow for the discussions at the back of the book, where he

deals with problems such as those posed by science and by the non-Christian religions, to name two.

It is puzzling, therefore, that Grenz makes reference, early and often, to postmodernism. Not that he hasn't considered that subject before.[8] For a while now, his has been a prominent voice calling evangelicals to an ambitious journey: one which involves walking together with the postmodernists where they are on track, and parting company with them where they are not.[9] No, the puzzle is that he continues that same appeal here. As noted, his thesis doesn't need it. Moreover, it dilutes his arguments where they are strong and hurts them where they are weak.

I will admit to a bias. I have not (yet) become convinced that the postmodernists have very much to offer. I cite this as a bias, rather than a conviction, because I know whence it comes: from years, long ago, of reading that existentialism offered theology insights it could not find on its own, and which it sorely needed if it was ever to make the Gospel relevant to a contemporary audience. After existentialism, it was secularism, then liberation, and then process. Now it is postmodernism. I would not, as some might, cite this progression of "isms" in order to reject them all. Some of these philosophico-cultural movements have actually had something to offer, though others have not. Existentialism, for instance, proved a useful dialogue partner for theology; as a consequence, books which related it to Christian faith had a relatively long shelf life. Secularism, by contrast, proved less useful: there was an initial flurry of interest; but if memory serves, the discussion had moved on a short five or six years later.

One can affirm all of the explicitly *theological* claims Grenz makes—regarding the importance of community, for instance—without going into debt to postmodernism. Similarly, one can agree in principle that a theological discussion could be strengthened by engaging with and drawing from the contemporary milieu, without conceding that Grenz has found the right dialogue partner. Right or wrong, the proof will always be in the pudding.

And Grenz's pudding is lumpy.

Lump #1: The Irresistible Paradigm Shift. One of 60's-era liberalism's oft-repeated slogans was, "The world sets the agenda for the church." Conservatives objected that Christians take their cues from their Lord—and that the world/culture/society is not a reliable guide.

Unfortunately, Grenz makes something of the same mistake: the postmodern condition exerts a powerful agenda-setting influence: it "calls" and "challenges" Christians to move forward and in fact makes it necessary that they do so;[10] because of its influence, evangelicals "must rethink" their doctrinal stance;[11] altogether, "the postmodern, global context has *thrust upon* (evangelicals) a new situation."[12] If space permitted, it would be important to explore the anthropology implicit in such statements: they hint at a view of humanity as in no small measure captive to the "spirit of the times," the latter thrusting itself upon the former, its critical, but still more or less helpless victim. Surely this is an implication that our author does not intend—yet it is there to be inferred every time postmodernism comes up.

Why would that be? There is a famous story from two generations ago about a preaching professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York. As innumerable preaching students have heard it, the prof criticized a student for the way he used an illustrative story. "You relied on your illustration the way a drunk uses a lamppost: more for support than for illumination." It would not be entirely fair to accuse Grenz of the same thing. Nevertheless, his project relies on the pillars of "the postmodern context" *at least as much* for support as for illumination—and in a peculiar way.

It is clear that Grenz feels that his insights require something to prop them up, presumably in anticipation of encounters with his more dogmatic, which is to say less sympathetic, readers. It is clear that he does not believe that his treatment of the development of evangelical doctrine will suffice on its own. Thus, in order to convince conservative Christians of their need to embrace the "generous orthodoxy" he commends, something more is necessary: a lamppost which, yes, sheds a measure of light—but which serves another function as well.

Personally, I think Grenz's proposal would be stronger without the appeals to Lyotard, et al. But he is right to be anxious nevertheless.

Lump #2: The Is/Ought Problem. Our author has rightly portrayed evangelicalism as immersed in and as a product of the flow of history. Call that "the *is*." He also flirts with connecting an *is/ought* with God. "(T)heology's structuring motif *is* rooted in the Christian confession of God as triune, and hence *must* be triune."[13] Here, an *ought* with us is anchored in an *is* with God. Unfortunately, not very much of Grenz's material draws inspiration from that pattern. Much more pervasive are such appeals as: because the church since Constantine has been catholic, we ought to be that way today; because Protestants since the Reformation have preached *sola fide*, we ought to preach that way today; because Charles Hodge drew upon the science of the mid-nineteenth century, we ought to draw on the very different science of our day; because Carl F. H. Henry… and so on.

This is not Christianity; it's Churchianity. It presumes that it will be enough to set forth our noble forbears, followed with an exhortation: they did X, Y, or Z back then; we should do X, Y, or Z now. But we have to ask, is talking about Hodge the same as talking about God? If not, then if we start earlier, with the Reformers, and work our way through the Princetonian and on up to the theologians of today—will that be the same as talking about God?

Viewed with those questions in mind, Lump #2 explains Lump # 1. The *ought* he wishes to commend cannot be derived from the *is* he so ably describes—which leaves his

project insecure and in need of support, which is why postmodernism assumes the prominent role that it does.

The remainder of his problems can be traced to that pair of lumps. To cite just one, Grenz says, "(u)ltimately all theology is, as the 'postmodern condition' suggests, 'local' or 'specific.'"[14] But if theology is completely local, no one would know whether it was or not (any more than an undiscovered tribe in the Amazon rainforest would know how their climate compares with the weather in Chicago); all we would know would be whatever our low-level perspective allows for.[15] And even if the claim which he makes were to happen to be true—though he couldn't know whether it were true or not—his local perspective would leave him no warrant for using the word "ultimately." But of course, Grenz, the evangelical, believes that there are certain claims about what is ultimately the case which can and should be made. It is just that Grenz, the postmodernist, finds himself asserting a contradictory thesis even before the sentence in question has run its course.

As a consequence, when we turn to asking what is this "center" which Grenz hopes to renew, it is with something of a sigh of relief that we learn that it is theological in nature and not a center of political power out of which a middle group could dominate those on the periphery—though this has sometimes been the case. Grenz notes that under the influence of the Constantinian model, calls for renewing the center have often served the ends of those believing that they alone deserve to stand in the central positions of power and prestige while others, "whose pedigree may in fact be just as long and whose claim to the 'center' equally valid are relegated to the sidelines."[16] Very much to the contrary, the center Grenz has in mind is not, for instance, "the political, social, and cultural center of the nation."[17]

> Rather, the "center" that is to be renewed is a *theological* center, and the quest to renew the center involves restoring a particular *theological* spirit to the center of the church.[18]

Rogers's Attempt to Define the Center

When we turn to Rogers, we find a rich and rewarding book, with similarities to Grenz's as previously adumbrated. But we may as well note at the outset that *his* center comes very close to the one which Grenz warns the reader not to seek. For here, the center is precisely that group which is not "the 15 percent on the ideological right and the 10 percent on the ideological left."[19] In Rogers's view, those two factions have gotten the PC(USA) into its endless round of needless squabbles. And because they have, it is time for the potentially powerful big-majority-in-the-middle to reassume its rightful role. His book begins,

> (t)he center of mainstream Protestantism is strong. On every significant issue about 75 percent of Protestants are somewhere in the middle trying to make sense out of complex questions and to act responsibly in difficult circumstances. The function of a mainstream Protestant church is twofold: To root people in the biblical tradition and to enable them to cope with the modern world. Most mainstream Protestants want and need guidance in both those arenas, and when they get it, *they think and act responsibly.*[20]

So whereas Grenz cautioned against attempts to arrogate the center to one particular party, Rogers makes it clear from the outset that precisely *that* is his intention.

Bear in mind that although the two works are parallel in their "both/and" approach—contending for both the gospel and postmodernism (Grenz) or both the biblical tradition and the modern world (Rogers)—as was previously noted, most of the points Grenz wants to make do not require authorization by the postmodernistas. This is not the case for Rogers, however. Looking to the middle, with biblical traditionalists relegated to one margin and worldly modernists to another, his project truly needs "both/and"—both the Bible pole and the modernity pole. Of course, this does not mean that he distorts either, nor that there isn't a point worth making here.

> Most modern Americans…are neither conservatives nor liberals. They have been influenced both by conservative values and by liberal insights so that they are clustered somewhere in the center. That position is more difficult to articulate and apply because it is inherently more complex. It is also more adequate to describe and deal with the complexity that is reality.[21]

No one can tell me that Rogers isn't onto something very profound here. It is unfortunate, therefore, that he misses the most important part of the picture: contra his claim, it is not the case those in the middle are the only ones that fit his description. I can't think of a single evangelical I know who is utterly unaffected by "liberal insights;" nor of a liberal untouched by conservative values. *All of us* are wrestling with *all of the above*. But if Rogers misses the mark in his three-party model—misses the mark in alleging that unnecessary church fights erupt for no reason other than that a small group of uncompromised traditionalists and an even smaller group of unadulterated modernists don't have the good sense to keep quiet—misses the mark in presuming that anyone, if not in all of present-day America, then certainly within the PC(USA) at this late date after so many have left, might still fall into one of the extremes he describes—if he misses the mark in all this: then Rogers's appeal to complexity is…well, simplistic and naïve.

Not because he overlooks the facts; his present effort is to be commended, as are all his writings, for the territory it covers. Sequential chapters introduce six motifs which represent the widely-shared religious worldview of America's first two hundred years or so. The themes which emerge in the coverage of these six motifs are: the quest for purity; the need for priorities; the question of experience; the interpretation of Scripture; the importance of morality; and the nature of Christian hope.

We can happily admit: as good as Grenz was in presenting the history of evangelical theology, Rogers is even better with the terrain he covers. Denominational history is not my field; but I suspect that no other mainline church has as capable a scholar or as skillful a story-teller as the PC(USA) has in Jack Rogers. He can make the dry fascinating—and the fascinating riveting. Unfortunately, the best church historians do not always make for the best theologians—Harnack being the classic exemplar.

For example, Rogers outdoes Grenz in the self-congratulatory praise he heaps on his "center." Missing is an appreciation for the radical nature of sin (remember his claim that when the supermajority gets the right advice, it can be counted on to "think and act responsibly"?). Thus, he can place his confidence in "good, intelligent, and devout" church people, who, after all, are not sinful, just uninformed. Once again: Churchianity rather than Christianity.

After his difficult year as moderator of the PC(USA)'s General Assembly, it is tempting to imagine that Rogers would no longer regard church majorities as sanguinely. This does not seem to be the case, however. In an article entitled "Moderator in the Maelstrom," and with the subhead "Jack Rogers reflects on his stormy year at the helm of the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s General Assembly," our author makes a startling claim about the crucial beliefs of the Reformed faith.

> Central tenets are things that either have to do with our salvation, or that we have worked through to the point where we have a general consensus on them. If something is controversial, by definition it isn't central.[22]

As a position taken by a bureaucrat from an organization in the throes of a very public brouhaha, such a statement could be excused. But Rogers was a well-respected and influential scholar before becoming moderator. How in the world, you ask, could he say something so patently contradicted by theology, history, and personal experience?

The answer is "worldview." If there are disagreements between leaders and members,

> (i)t is not that some people are smart and others stupid. Nor is it that some are virtuous and others wicked. It is rather that the worldview that some have adopted has caused them to see life in conservative terms, whereas others have acquired a worldview that gives a liberal interpretation of life.[23]

No one is stupid; no one is wicked; and…no one is wrong. Members and leaders are in near-complete disagreement, but no one is wrong.

But still, there are all those familiar problems: the unhappiness; the lack of direction; the loss of members. Because of them, the need of the hour is for a "contemporary, creative, centrist worldview."[24] One like the one we used to have, but different because life is more complex now. Not necessarily a bad idea. But taking a part to represent the whole, we can envision the worldview Rogers has in mind by considering the part which has to do with the ordination of gays and lesbians.

The stage is set with reminders of the denominational breakup back in 1741, when New Side Presbyterians and Old Side Presbyterians split the church in two.[25] "The issue was individual experience versus community norms. Which was more important: experiencing a revivalist conversion, or subscribing intellectually to the Westminster Confession?"[26] Happily, a compromise was reached in 1758, one with an important lesson. "American Presbyterianism has always had to have a balance between the validity of individual experience and conformity to community norms."[27] Today's situation, says Rogers, forms a sufficiently similar parallel: homosexual Presbyterians are asking their denomination to recognize that their individual experience (that is, their sexual practice) is a gift from God, while conservatives resist their appeal in the name of community norms (that is, Scripture as traditionally understood). Therefore, since a compromise was possible in the 1700's and because the issues are so similar, we ought to be able to achieve one in our day as well.

We can note in passing that the same is/ought problem that plagued Grenz shows itself here as well: should the Presbyterians of today reconcile, like those of 1758? Or divide like those of 1741? History can be read as commending either alternative, depending on which moral imperatives are brought to the reading.

Beyond that simple point, there are many other issues raised here, each one worthy of careful analysis. And if the analysis were sufficiently judicious, it would call attention to the learned, wise, balanced, and/or pastoral features of Rogers's treatment. But sad to say, none of this would change the bottom line: Rogers's fundamental slant makes unfair use of the elasticity of the word "experience." Yes, this term can refer to an encounter with God, as in the phrase "a conversion experience;" and yes, it can also represent the sum total of things lived through, as in "a person's sexual experience" or even "the experience of a summer in Paris."

Disagreements about conversion experiences and disagreements about sexual experiences *sound* like they are parallels; they are not. Multiple shelves in seminary libraries have been given over to books on such questions as, Is an encounter with God like an encounter with a human being? and How appropriate is the term "experience" for such encounters anyway? For Rogers to leap over the issues and place the two under the common rubric "experience" is to prejudice the discussion from the get go. (If his were a philosophical argument, we would say that he has begged the question, that is, assumed from the outset what he is purporting to prove.)

For the record, even setting the is/ought problem aside, how the church dealt with ministry candidates' spiritual experiences 250 years ago has no direct bearing on how we should deal with candidates' homosexual experiences today—except in calling attention to the fact that the church used to have better disagreements than we do now. At the risk of a lapse of judgment, consider the paraphrase: one person receives a "touch" from God; another a "touch" from a same-sex partner: surely it is obvious that the two incidents cannot be subsumed under the single category "touch" so as to be treated according to a single set of principles?

Conclusion

A generation ago, Carlyle Marnie used to say, "The Church ought to be solid at the core and mushy at the edges, but unfortunately we're usually mushy at the core and solid at the edges."

The core, the center, ought to be where we do not compromise. But if Marnie's maxim has it right, Christians are forever becoming inflexible regarding relatively unimportant matters (like flower arrangements) while making concessions left and right regarding the essentials.

In its intention, Grenz's stance is similar to Marnie's. In particular, Grenz seems to understand full well the dangers inherent in absolutizing some relative configuration of values. His problem, to one reader at least, is in admitting an alien influence into the Church's core, so that mushiness is sure to follow. Rogers by contrast, holds to a quite different view. He has no concern that a supermajority of the Church might endanger the faith: at least where mainliners in the middle are concerned, they can be counted on to be flexible where appropriate and inflexible where appropriate—and if there is a controversy, by definition it can't be over anything that truly matters.

Does Christianity have a center? Comparing *Renewing the Center* and *Claiming the Center* ought to disabuse us of relying on too simplistic an answer. Even so, a few clues do seem to emerge from our discussion. With both of our authors, we can remember that we are not the first to have to struggle with such questions—though against both, we dare not assume that the ultimate perspective we require can be found simply by rummaging through our collective past. Contra Rogers, we have to bear in mind that *we* are not the center, no matter how large a majority we might claim to represent; as a corollary, it is imperative that we avoid the temptation to "claim the center" for those like ourselves rather than for something higher than ourselves. Against Grenz, it is important to maintain that, whatever constitutes the latest philosophy the world has devised to understand itself, it can never be an *essential* part of the Church's self-understanding.

And against all manner of self-congratulation, it is imperative that we remember that the true center is where we ourselves are judged even as we are granted mercy. If the central issues have been blurred, it is often because we are hoping to escape such judgment—though of course, we end up losing out on mercy in the attempt. Thus, with Marnie, we need to confess that since exactly *that* is how all of us too often behave—and since our best theologians disagree on what should be done about it—we need the center to claim and renew *us*, rather than the other way around.

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[1] Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000), 326. The now commonplace phrase "generous orthodoxy," was coined by Hans Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" *Trinity Journal* 8 (Spring 1987): 21.
[2] Ibid., 350
[3] Jack B. Rogers, *Claiming the Center: Churches and Conflicting Worldviews* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), xv.
[4] Ibid., xv.
[5] Ibid., 7.
[6] Ibid.
[7] The phrase is from Donald W. Dayton, "The Limits of Evangelicalism," in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnson (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991), 48, quoted in Grenz, *Renewing*, 46.
[8] Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996); cf., Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).
[9] See, for instance, Grenz, *Primer*, pp. 10, 161-174.
[10] Grenz, *Renewing*, 331, 350, 21.
[11] Ibid., 340.
[12] Ibid., 350 (emphasis mine).
[13] Ibid., 213 (emphasis mine).
[14] Ibid., 211.
[15] In fairness, it has to be conceded that on pp. 318-319, Grenz describes the church as "essentially local and yet universal." At a minimum, he should have been less sweeping in his earlier judgments. But more importantly, if there are epistemological implications to the "local and yet—" passage, we aren't told what they are.
[16] Grenz, *Renewing*, 333
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Rogers, *Claiming*, xv.
[20] Ibid. (emphasis mine).
[21] Ibid., xvi.
[22] Eva Stimson and Jerry Van Marter, *Moderator in the Maelstrom*, Presbyterians Today (May 2002), p. 26.
[23] Rogers, *Claiming*, pp. xv-xvi.
[24] Ibid., p. 128.
[25] Ibid., p. 28.
[26] Ibid., p. 128.
[27] Ibid., p. 129.

Repent, Reform, Overcome:
Why We Must Restore Annual GAs

By Susan Cyre

Facing budget deficits that resulted in a loss of 34 missionaries and weary from voting on *Book of Order* amendments dealing with sexuality, commissioners to the 213th GA voted to go to biennial General Assemblies beginning with 2005. Now that six months have passed, and there has been time to reflect on such a drastic change, we should ask what serious effects biennial GAs will have on the church and whether the next GA ought to reverse the decision and restore annual GAs. Consider these reasons to restore annual assemblies:

Charting Our Course As A Denomination
The annual GA is an opportunity for the elders from local congregations to give vision and direction to the church. The investment of significant time and financial resources is well spent. No presbytery or session would consider reducing its number of meetings by half because those bodies are ruling bodies that are responsible for setting the direction and determining the objectives of the body.

Decision-Making Power Is Meant To Be Vested In Our Elected Leadership In Our Form Of Government
The accountability of hired GA staff to the elected GA will be reduced significantly by biennial Assemblies. The result will be more decision-making power vested in bodies less representative of our local congregations.

The grass roots of the church—our congregations and presbyteries—will give up a major portion of their decision-making prerogative to national staff and the General Assembly Council (GAC) if we meet only every other year. Staff are already moving in that direction. After the GAC recently adopted a statement that spoke strongly against military action against Iraq, Vernon Broyles, associate director of social justice, who helped write the statement, told the GAC, "If we go to biennial assemblies, it will become more and more important for the council to address these issues." The statement on Iraq was written by the staff leadership team, at the suggestion of Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick.

No Cost Savings Likely By Going To Biennial Assemblies
Commissioners to last June's GA were told that the annual savings for the national, synod and presbytery budgets would be 5 million dollars. Costs as reported by the Presbyterian News Service (10/25/02) now are projected to be much less: only about $815,000. And, the cost savings will be further reduced by the cost of the off-year gatherings called for by last June's GA action. It is clear there will be no cost savings and, in fact, the actual cost of both the off-year gathering and the biennial may be significantly higher than the cost of current annual GAs.

Deluge Of Business
Currently, GA commissioners must be familiar with and prepared to vote on more than 700 items of business. On the first day of the last GA, fewer than 20% of the commissioners had read all the papers. The majority of those items of business come from the offices of GA. Entities like the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, General Assembly Council, the Committee on the Office of GA, meet at least 3 times per year, generating business that eventually must come before a GA. Without first finding a way to decrease the business before the GA, commissioners to biennial GAs will be forced to delegate more business to staff, refer it to another GA, or vote without adequate knowledge of the issues.

Participation By Presbyterians In Their Form Of Government
Participation by Presbyterians in the life of their church will be decreased by biennial assemblies. In order to address the increasing imbalance between advisory delegates and commissioners, the Committee on the Office of General Assembly (COGA) is proposing that the number of commissioners be increased from about 554 to 816—a 47% increase. (This must be voted on by the next GA and then the presbyteries). However, since commissioner participation in two annual General Assemblies equals a total of 1108 Presbyterians compared to a total of 816 at each biennial Assembly, participation by Presbyterians in their form of government is nonetheless significantly decreased by going to biennial assemblies. There are better ways to correct the imbalance between commissioners and advisory delegates than the drastic step of biennial GAs.

Currently, people elected to national level committees serve for 3 year terms with the possibility of re-election for a second 3 year term. COGA is proposing that those classes be changed to 4 year terms to coordinate with biennial GAs. This will limit the number of Presbyterians who are able to participate in national level leadership.

Biennial GAs will foster the sense of disconnect that many congregations feel from the national level. The Presbyterian Church is a connectional church and the GA is our ultimate connectionalism in action. The GA is the

place where presbyteries and local sessions participate most fully. Congregationalism is already rampant in our denomination with congregations emotionally and/or financially opting out of their responsibilities to our connectionalism. Biennial assemblies will encourage that disconnect from the national level.

Disruptive Delays In Bringing Closure To Denominational Concerns

Voting on *Book of Order* changes will be dragged out for 2 years and *Book of Confessions* changes will take 4 years. Can anyone imagine the detrimental impact it will have on the denomination to vote on sexuality amendments over a two year period? We would be embroiled in far more controversy for longer periods.

The Requirement For Increased Years Of Service

The GA moderator pool of candidates will be significantly decreased. Few pastors, seminary professors, or elders can leave their jobs for 2 years. Suggestions that the vice-moderator substitute for the moderator in order to lessen the demands of the position, substitutes an appointed person for the person elected by his or her peers and will limit the positive impact of the Moderator's unifying presence, vision, and healing ministry in the church.

Resolving conflicts

We should acknowledge that our denomination is divided on many issues. Just as no pastor would counsel a husband and wife in a troubled marriage to talk less frequently, so too in our denomination, communication is essential to resolving differences. Annual assemblies allow us to come together, to meet the people in denominational leadership and to communicate the work of the church back to our presbyteries. One person drew an analogy between biennial GAs and a visit to the dentist. He commented that while visits to the dentist were costly and often painful, waiting two years between visits did not improve the situation—it made it exponentially worse.

Conclusion

The vote of the last GA to implement biennial GAs has put the church on a path that will undermine our connectionalism, limit participation by Presbyterians in the decision-making of the church, and foster more divisiveness. It will not provide a cost savings to an ailing budget and may in fact exacerbate budget concerns when Presbyterians feel more disenfranchised and disconnected from their national leadership and opt out of financially supporting a system in which their voice is increasingly limited and marginalized.

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