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Crash Helmet Worship and the Flow of Christ's Life

Tom Lush

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**Doctor of the Church, Professor of Theology,
Mercersburg Society Founder, Craigville Theological
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The Mercersburg Society has been formed to uphold the concept of the Church as the Body of Christ, Evangelical, Reformed, Catholic, Apostolic, organic, developmental, and connectional. It affirms the ecumenical Creeds as witnesses to its faith and the Eucharist as the liturgical act from which all other acts of worship and service emanate.

The Society pursues contemporary theology in the Church and the world within the context of Mercersburg Theology. In effecting its purpose the Society provides opportunities for fellowship and study for persons interested in Mercersburg Theology, sponsors an annual convocation, engages in the publication of articles and books, and stimulates research and correspondence among scholars on topics of theology, liturgy, the Sacraments, and ecumenism.

The **New Mercersburg Review** is designed to publish the proceedings of the annual convocation as well as other articles on the subjects pertinent to the aims and interests of the Society

From the Editor

F. Christopher Anderson

I am one of many who love it when Rev. Dr. Tom Lush leads worship at the Mercersburg Annual Convocation. His various gifts include pastoral sensitivity, theological insight, liturgical wisdom, and musical insight. I actually asked him to write a practical essay on the methods he uses in preparing leading these liturgies. Well he has failed me. Instead he has given us a powerful and practical essay on the theology of worship. This essay is much like Bonhoeffer's book on community, *Life Together*. Instead of painting a rosy picture of community, Bonhoeffer exposed many of our shortcomings. This essay makes us reexamine much of what we do in worship. I have told Tom that this essay should be the first chapter in a series on what I originally asked.

Those of us who know Herb Davis are always waiting to be surprised by his comments. He has kindly taken up my encouragement and he has written a remembrance of our own dear Gabriel Fackre. (Gabe once told me that Herb was the "best preacher in America." We may take this up for debate at the Convocation.) I do not think there is anyone who would be better suited for sharing a reflection on the Rev. Dr. Gabriel Fackre than Herb Davis. It is even hard to think of one without thinking of the other no matter how they differ in personalities.

The last article is the result of the Rev. John Pinder's hearing our own William Rader speak on Civil Rights at LTS. John got so interested that he went back and read Bill's 1978 dissertation *The Church and Racial Hostility: A History of Interpretation of Ephesians 2:11-22*. Bill has been a theological treasure. He studied under Karl Barth, translated Eberhard Busch's book on the Heidelberg Catechism, and his wife had much to do with Marcus Barth's commentary on Ephesians. Bill's health is not well and this is a fitting honor for all he has meant to so many of us.

Enjoy this issue!

Crash Helmet Worship and the Flow of Christ's Life

Tom Lush

“Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?”¹ This question, asked some time ago by author Annie Dillard, comes back into my head every once in a while. Dillard goes on to ask if anyone has the foggiest idea what sort of power is often blithely invoked in worship. She suggests that worshippers should be wearing crash helmets and that ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares and then lash people to their pews. Something *happens* in worship. A power is let loose as the liturgy is spoken, hymns sung, the Scriptures read and interpreted, and the Supper shared.

I made known Dillard's thoughts to the congregation I serve in my sermon on the fourth Sunday after Epiphany. The gospel reading was from Luke, chapter 4. Jesus is in his hometown synagogue and serves as lector. After the reading he sat down and offered a sermon so powerful that it enraged people to the point that they attempted to murder him. Now that's power! I asked my folks that day why they never wear crash helmets when they come to worship. Don't they fear that the power of God let loose in our worship may rock the room and throw us to the floor?

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp.40-41

There were chuckles and smiles; I don't think anyone took me seriously. But behind the suggestion that crash helmets are appropriate in worship lies a serious issue. What sort of power do we imagine or expect in the worship service? How we answer this question has an effect upon how the one preparing the liturgy crafts the service and also an impact upon how the liturgist leads. Over my decades in ministry the number of people leaving worship who say, "Nice service pastor," far outnumbered those who say, "Powerful service, pastor."

I constantly have to remind myself that the goal is experiencing the power of God, not feeling nice. So I never begin the worship service with the words, "Good Morning." If I run into you at the Post Office then a wishful "Good Morning" is fine. But is that all we've got to offer at worship – "Good morning"? Do we have anything more powerful than the mundane greeting used commonly throughout our culture? I look people in the eye, extend my arms, and say, "The communion of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you all." By this greeting I hope to draw the congregation from the natural order of this world to the Supernatural, and from the wishful to the powerful.

Worship is meant to be a life-giving encounter with the living God. There should be a pulsating energy present that enlivens and enhances the life of those worshipping. Is not a tenet of Mercersburg theology that salvation and life flow into the congregation from Christ, the head of

the body? The church gathers to draw life from Christ in a common-union, or communion, in which believers progressively mature. Christ is the “root” and the “fountain” of a new order of life.

John Nevin, the father of Mercersburg, wrote that natural birth inserts a person into the life of Adam. This is a life of rebellion against God aimed at living independent of God. Spiritual birth, however, secures a like insertion into the life of Christ. So worship isn’t simply learning about Jesus or learning some guidelines for being a “good” or “better” Christian. Nor is worship repeating in a monotone voice the “correct” liturgy approved by the Mercersburg experts.

The essence of the Christian life is Christ’s insertion into my life and my life inserted into Christ. The goal is union with God or communion. This union with God comes through Christ who flows his life into those who trust in him. The flow continues in the church today for the church is “the depository of all the life powers of the Redeemer.” There is a living, organic union in which Christ dwells in his people by the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit the believer is transformed; the life of Christ is reproduced so that the true human character which Christ exhibited in his person is exhibited in the believer also.

Whenever the church gathers for worship, we are seeking to be open to, and enter into, the life of Christ that flows to us by the grace of God. This transfer of Christ’s life to

us is not mechanical nor does it happen simply by our effort to be spiritual. Salvation, new human life in Christ, is a communion that reaches over by the Holy Spirit into believers and once there, goes to work with constant “reproductive energy” until at length the whole person is transformed into Christ’s image. This is a lifelong process of growth and development.²

So worship that reflects Mercersburg theology embodies a focused attention on the flow of Christ’s life into the lives of worshippers. It is my responsibility as one who crafts the service, and also leads it, to be aware of how the liturgy and music either assist, or obstruct, the flow of Christ’s life to the faithful who are gathered. Nevin insisted that “the power of religion be present in the soul” of the one who is called to serve at the altar. He cautioned against a “want of inward spiritual force” and boldly proclaimed that if the liturgy is dead and powerless in the pastor’s hands, “the fault is not in the forms, but in the minister himself.”³

The spiritual robustness of the leader impacts the authenticity and effectiveness of the worship. If the pastor is ignorant of the power of the worship symbols, lethargic in the speaking of the liturgy, or disbelieving of the potential of the Holy Spirit’s empowerment of the

² I have summarized here Nevin’s thinking that is expressed in *The Mystical Presence* (Lippincott, 1846). The phrase “the depository of all the life powers of the Redeemer” is found in a sermon preached by Nevin to the 1847 Synod of the German Reformed Church. The sermon was titled, “The Church.”

³ I am quoting John Nevin from the *Anxious Bench*, published in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, edited by Charles Yrigoyen and George Bricker (The Pickwick Press, 1978).

given signs and symbols, the worship may indeed be found to be anemic. It is the pastor's comprehension of, and trust in, the living, divine presence, and not his/her personality, that is critical for an energetic, authentic, and faithful worship of God.

As I prepare the liturgy each Sunday I have to ask myself if I am just *picking* the hymns and *selecting* theme-appropriate litanies in a mechanical fashion, or am I crafting a narrative through words, songs, and actions that enhance the flow of Christ's life into the worshipper? Am I just "filling in the blanks" as I select the hymns to be sung and the liturgies to be spoken, or am I working out a dialogue with God that worshippers can enter and make their own? Is there a narrative in the *ordo* that gives voice to the fact that my own relationship with God matters?

For the confession of sin I can say, "I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what I have done and what I have left undone." There is truth in that statement. But I have found that there is a deeper truth and richer authenticity in acknowledging that I wanted to try living life my way before I was willing to consider God's way. I haven't just made a few mistakes here and there. I haven't just said some words that I shouldn't have said. I haven't just done some things that were wrong, nor just walked away at times from responsibility. The decimating truth is that I have trusted myself while refusing to trust God. I have placed my desire for understanding and control above my trust in God's love.

So I find myself exposed by the words of priest and author Richard Rohr. “What it all comes down to is this: one day a man must wake up and realize, ‘I’m a complete dumb ass, and I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.’ Mature spirituality might well begin only at that point.”⁴ Why can’t a confession of sin read something like this: “Lord, I’m a complete dumb ass who has not trusted you. I’ve fallen and can’t work my way out of the mess that I have created. So here I am laying my life before you, gracious God. Free me from my rebellion and sin, and raise me up to new life.” I admit that this may not read like “proper” Mercersburg liturgy, but it truly opens the way for Nevin’s call for “the power of religion to be present in the soul.”

The life-flow of Christ, the power of the Redeemer, works with the existing raw material of our lives when the great Physician enters the soul. Years ago a woman told me that she cleaned her house *before* her cleaning woman came so that it did not appear that she and her family were dirty. How many believers think that they have to clean up their lives through their own efforts *before* they allow Jesus to flow deep into their hearts? The thinking being that we can’t let Jesus see who, or how, I really am.

Eugene Peterson has described the life of David as a “labyrinth of ambiguities, not unlike our own.” There is that in David’s life to admire and other things to abhor. David is not a model for imitation. His story is an

⁴ Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation* (Loyola Press, 2010), p. 37.

“immersion in humanity” that is very much like the humanity conditioned by our culture and flawed by our sins in the present time. “The story of David is not a story of what God wants us to be but a story of God working with the raw material of our lives as he finds us.”⁵

David’s story is spread out in the First Testament with great detail so that we can see how God shapes the life of salvation when God is given the raw material of flawed humanity to work with and to work on.

The flow of Christ’s life into the worshipper is enhanced when a truth-filled *encounter* takes place. An encounter is a back and forth; an authentic presence that gives and receives. Encounters with the Holy can be found all through the Scriptures. God calls Moses to go before Pharaoh. Moses responds, “I can’t. I don’t know how to speak.” God says, “I’ll be with you.” Back and forth. Mary informs Jesus at Cana: “They have no wine.” Jesus responds: “Woman, what concern is that to you and me?” Back and forth. Peter says, “I’ll never deny you.” Jesus responds: “You will deny me three times.” Back and forth. These are encounters of truthful discourse.

Nevin touches on the concept of an encounter in the *Anxious Bench*. He writes about the need of the impenitent to acknowledge their guilt and misery which are part of the “controversy” with God in which the rebellious are involved. When the rebellious fully engage themselves in the laying down of the weapons of their

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *The Way of Jesus* (William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), pp.87-88.

rebellion, they can then cast themselves upon the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. The question is, will the rebellious one repent and “yield his heart to God or not?” The yielding of the heart is the encounter whereby truth is spoken by the person in rebellion and mercy is sent back by God.⁶

The essence of encounter is being authentically present to the living God so that one can receive the fullness of God’s saving work. It is the opposite of worship whose theme is, “I will give you satisfaction. You want religious feelings? I will give them to you. You want your needs fulfilled? I’ll do it in the form most arousing to you.” Encounter does not promise worship that is interesting, relevant, and exciting so that those present are guaranteed to “get something out of it.”⁷ Encounter is an experience that changes people. Real change occurs not so much through ideas and new information but by truth that is felt in the heart and that can be drawn upon. Encounter is the braiding of the knowledge of one’s rebellious, ego-centered nature with the knowledge of God’s life-changing love and grace.

If liturgy is the “work of the people,” I wonder if that work should sometimes be an honest sharing of the condition of the self when the congregation gathers.

⁶ This discussion can be found in the aforementioned publication of the *Anxious Bench*, pp.59-60.

⁷ See Eugene Peterson’s discussion of Baalism and harlotry on pp. 109-110 in *The Jesus Way*. Also, Peter Schmiechen in *Gift and Promise* (Pickwick Publications, 2017) discusses an evangelical framework for the Supper in terms of an encounter with Jesus Christ and the new life that he brings on p. 231-232.

Some congregations are known to hand out name tags for all the members to wear so that members and visitors alike can get to know one another. Is it possible that, instead of wearing name tags, congregants could enter worship wearing tags that are descriptive of their condition that day? Could tags be hung around the neck reading “happy,” or “concerned,” or “thankful,” “depressed,” “hopeful,” “discouraged,” or even “marriage in bad shape”?

The tags would show the results of doing the work of naming honestly the human condition being offered to God that day. Perhaps the Scripture readings and some of the spoken liturgy that same day could lift up the possibility of those tags being the raw material for new creation through the flow of Christ’s transforming grace. When the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians he has hanging from his neck the tags that read “persecutor of the church” and “unfit to be called an apostle” (1 Corinthians 15). Paul goes on to testify to his re-creation, stating, “But by the grace of God I am what I am.” Is it possible that the power of hope, and the power of new life, may be found flowing profusely to the one who has risked vulnerability by honestly expressing his/her human condition?

And while the liturgy is the work of the people, there is also to be experienced in the worship the saving work of God in Christ. Peter Schmiechen points out that the priority at the Table is God’s act in Christ. Jesus is the initiator “announcing the kingdom, gathering disciples,

inviting people to his table, and ultimately keeping faith with God in the face of death.” Schmiechen affirms that all of Jesus’ acts and words that are directed to his guest at the table invite a response from them. “Only Jesus creates the meal, gives, announces, and commands; the disciples receive and respond to what Jesus has done.” That response may be as simple as “Amen,” or saying, “Come, holy Jesus, come.” The spoken response affirms that something is indeed happening. The Supper is not a return to Good Friday but “it is the encounter with Jesus Christ and the new life he brings.”⁸

I don’t understand all the dynamics of human work and the divine work in worship. I can’t explain exactly how Christ’s life flows into my life, but I can trust the mystery of the fact that Christ is present and is doing the work of flowing his life into my life. Mercersburg theology affirms that salvation is a work *done in us*, not beyond us. Faith is a life, not just beliefs. The mystery demands participation if there is a work to be done in me. Mystery requires pilgrims who are ready to journey into the expansive territory of God’s heart and work and grace. And if salvation is a work done in us, do we not have to take regular expeditions into the interior rooms of our hearts and practice contemplation?

How will the worshippers know about these expeditions and journeys, and the mystical presence of Christ, and the

⁸ In the 5th chapter of *Gift and Promise* Schmiechen’s discussion of “An evangelical Lord’s Supper” gives helpful insights not only into the evangelical nature of the Lord’s Supper but also into worship in general. The discussion begins on p. 229.

mystery of the Trinity's work and impact upon human life, unless worship includes testimony by those who will risk being vulnerable. Does liturgy have to be just the words printed on the page to be read, or can liturgy be the work of the worshippers giving voice to their thanksgivings, concerns, challenges, and hopes?

At a recent worship service I began not with the typical church announcements but with the question, "What difference does Christ make in your daily life?" One woman bravely broke the silence by saying, "I sometimes have the problem of anxiety rushing over my life. I have learned to pray that anxiety, telling Jesus about it rather than trying to fight it off by my own efforts. Over time, the impact of anxiety upon my life has lessened." One could hear a pin drop in the room. All were listening intently as real life liturgy was spoken. I am suggesting that occasional testimony, in the worship hour, by the faithful, to one's life being impacted by Christ, will assist all the worshippers in recognizing the flow of Christ's life into their own souls and will affirm that the flow of Christ's life into human life really does matter.

On that Fourth Sunday of Epiphany, when I shared Annie Dillard's questioning the lack of use of crash helmets in worship, I challenged my congregation to show up the next Sunday wearing a crash helmet, thus demonstrating that they are ready for the impact of God's work upon them. The Fifth Sunday of Epiphany was celebrated with no one wearing a helmet. It's what I expected. Helmets, such as bike helmets, not only protect the wearer from

injury: they also carry a message. The message is that there is danger in the activity being undertaken. The message of the bike helmet is that it is possible that I could fall off the bike and be injured. The danger in worship is that I may lose control of my life, feel pain, be exposed as an “I’m-an-OK” fraud, and be challenged to travel a new road.

The refusal of congregants to wear a crash helmet may be the “NO” of the people. Resistance! Is it not possible that the flow of Christ’s life into our human lives could be perceived as threatening? Worship that is religious but free of encounter, mystery, testimony, and the work of receiving Christ’s life-flow appears to be more comfortable. It indeed is. The worshipper is left in the safe position of being a silent observer. Resistance to change, to new paradigms, and to taking on vulnerability is normal. That resistance, however, must be received, explored, and challenged.

New possibilities for new forms and approaches for Mercersburg- based worship need to be explored.⁹ The

⁹ Peter Schmiechen’s *Gift and Promise* is a good place to begin. While it is an exploration of the Lord’s Supper that moves beyond the traditional link of the Supper to atonement theories of penal substitution, the book offers many insights into communicating new life in Christ. For one, how about offering this invitation to gather for worship or to partake of the Lord’s Supper: “Friends, this is the good news. God does not treat you the way the world does! In the kingdom you are not to be used and abused, rewarded according to what someone thinks you deserve, or valued according to worldly standards.” P. 281.

questions need to be asked in church councils and in congregational meetings again and again. Why aren't worshippers being given crash helmets? Why, indeed, are the ushers not strapping people to the pews and issuing life preservers and signal flares? Is not the life-flow of the crucified and risen Christ going through this place?

Many mainline churches are stagnant, if not in outright decline. Some sit idly by waiting for the old days of filled pews and Sunday School rooms filled with children to magically return. Others advertise an invitation to attend the worship service in the local newspaper. Some seek the advice of outside consultants or pursue the latest innovations aimed at "attracting" new worshippers. My question is, how's all that working for you? My guess is that these attempts at re-igniting a fire in the congregation are not working well. My suggestion is that we have to find the path that taps into the life-flow of the living Christ. That path will include the practice of vulnerability necessary for an encounter with the living Christ, testimony to the impact of Christ's presence and work upon one's life, and both an awareness of, and participation in, the mystery of God's presence and kingdom breaking into life in this world.

The path to new life also requires pastors who will challenge congregants with questions like, where are all

the crash helmets? The life of Christ is flowing in this place so get ready for something to happen in your life!

Reflections on Rev. Dr. Gabriel Fackre:

**Doctor of the Church, Professor of Theology,
Mercersburg Society Founder, Craigville Theological
Colloquy Founder, Friend.**

Herb Davis

Gabe's father was an Arabian and Orthodox Christian. His mother was a devoted Baptist. What an interesting marriage. Gabe grew up in Brooklyn and was baptized as a believer in the Baptist church. He planned to be a physician but at an Ambassador the King summer camp he was called to ordained ministry. He is an evangelical. He married Dot, an Episcopalian. He just couldn't stay in his safe bubble.

He goes to the University of Chicago to study theology, a great Baptist institution, and ends up being ordained in the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Isn't that weird, an Arab, Baptist, evangelical, with an Episcopalian wife, being ordained in a little ethnic German denomination that baptizes infants and loves Calvin and Luther.

Leaving the great university, he served as pastor of two little E&R mill town congregations for ten years with a ministry that saw persons defined not as steel workers or union members or bingo players or housewives but as Ambassadors of the King Jesus. After receiving a Ph.D.,

he becomes Professor of theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary for ten years, where Mercersburg theology had a voice, and then on to Andover Newton Theological School in a very rich community where New England Congregational life is center stage. He served as Abbott Professor of Theology at ANTS for 25 years. Gabe was never in a nice safe, comfortable bubble; life was always rushing in on him.

This was also true of his family. Dot did not always agree with Gabe. The children did not always fit into the picture. Some great theological discussions happened around the Fackre dinner table. They were not in a safe haven but a rocky ark. Family was not defined by agreement but love. Is it any wonder that Gabe always talked about the full orb, the great tradition, and that Jesus Christ was the only voice we should listen to in life and in death.

In the late 50s and 60s the battle cry was the church for the world, and the world set the agenda. The call to clergy was to leave the table and the pulpit and join God on the barricades of justice. The local church, the institutional church, was an obstacle to justice ministries. Life together in a place where people bear one another's burdens and share one another's joys was obsolete. Gabe was one of the few who taught the importance of the local institutional life. His catch phrase was "St. John's by the gas station" He used that phrase in Gabe and Dot's first book on the church, *Under the Steeple*, and in one of his last books. St. John's was located in a community where

people live daily lives. Gabe never wanted to separate the altar and the local church from the loving work of Christ. Yet he did not want the world to set the agenda. He insisted that “ 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 in death.” The church is not defined by culture.

Do you remember Gabe’s slogan for the language issue? During the 70s and early 80s one of the big issues was the language of God. It was an exciting time for God was shining new insights on his word. God was not an old white man. In some congregations a woman would stand in protest when the word *Father* was used. It was a teaching moment for Gabe. He said you have two ends of a pencil, the eraser end and the writing end. He said don’t use the eraser, don’t erase ;add to. He wanted us to include the whole life of the church: from Abraham and Sarah to the present, don’t leave anything out. Theology develops and changes, new truths come from the scriptures and tradition, but this generation isn’t the end, superior to all others. Gabe refused to let the faith be defined by late 20th century, American culture. We were more than the present. So don’t erase, keep the baggage, add the new.

Gabe was an ecumenical Christian. He longed for the unity of the church. He deeply believed in the UCC hope, “that all may be one.” In the 1990s Gabe was on a committee in dialogue with Lutherans, Presbyterians, Reformed Church in America, and the UCC, with the

hope that these Reformation Churches would recognize each other's ministries and affirm a common agreement of the faith. At some point in the dialogue, which lasted many years, the other communions pushed the UCC out and said we were theologically irresponsible. A lot of UCC folks were not as excited about the ecumenical talks, but not Gabe. He became a lion in the wilderness, insisting that we be judged by our confessions, not just our practice. He hounded the others with documents and letters until the UCC was invited back into the dialogue. Gabe never wanted the UCC to be a sect, the pure righteous doing the will of God, better than others. He wanted the UCC to be part of the whole, related to those beer drinking Lutherans, those Wall Street Presbyterians, those fussy Dutch reformers. He never wanted us to say, "we have no need of you." This ecumenical spirit extended to the evangelicals and the Catholics. We need each other to affirm when in the right and admonish when needed. We are part of the One Holy Evangelical, Catholic, Apostolic Church.

When President Clinton sexually abused a young woman at the White House, most of us Democrats and liberals gave him a pass. We said you have to be flexible and who am I to judge. Not Gabe; he judged. He wrote two books concerning Judgment at the White House and called for President Clinton to resign. President or peasant, we don't use others for our own pleasure.

Gabe was set free from the myths of modernity but not "for self-indulgent" but through love to become slave to

one another. to love the neighbor. Early on he had a sense of neighbor in need. He led a protest at the University of Chicago in support of African American faculty members. His early ministry in steel towns was to steel worker, mill hands, giving voice to the powerless. In 1964 he led a group of clergy to Canton, Mississippi, just before three civil rights workers were murdered, to help in voter registration. He experienced the evil of segregation in Mississippi and came home to be the spark plug for the white civil rights effort in Lancaster city and county. It was a family effort. Dot and the children were deeply involved in school desegregation. They made a difference in church and community. At one point the family diet was controlled by justice issues: no lettuce, no grapes, and worst of all, at one time no wine. Gabe always wanted to get out of protest and marches for justice and peace and just focus on theology, but he never could. Being free in Christ means loving the least of these our brothers and sisters.

Gabe wasn't always right or gentle and kind. He had enemies, but he never demonized his enemies. Like all of us he sinned and came far short of the glory of God. And so he needs the blood of Jesus, he needs our prayers and songs to sneak him into the church triumphant.

Gabe is dead but does have a word for us today for living as gracious people who have received grace upon grace, grace overwhelming sin, for living as a forgiven people who forgive those who sin against us. How do we live, as free to love the neighbor as ourselves? What would

Professor Fackre say to these questions? You know the answer. I can see Gabe and Dot with the whole cloud of witnesses, and Gabe is shouting. Can you hear him? “Get the story straight and get it out.”

Thank God Almighty for Gabe Fackre’s witness to Jesus Christ to whom we all belong. Amen

DISSERTATION REVIEW

A Response by Rev. John Pinder
To William Rader's 1978 Dissertation.

The Church and Racial Hostility

A History of Interpretation of Ephesians 2:11-22

by
William Rader

1978

J.C.B. MOHR (PAUL SIEBECK) TUBINGEN

In the introduction to his 1978 dissertation, William Rader indicated it was “prompted by a contemporary problem facing the church: the wall between blacks and whites in the United States.” Bill went on to clarify that he was not motivated by this problem in the church in general but rather by the experience of serving as an associate pastor in “an inner-city church in Cincinnati whose once-white neighborhood had become predominantly black- a situation common to many city churches in the United States.”

Who would have thought that over forty years later, the church would have made such little progress in dismantling the racial wall? Probably most African Americans would be the glib or probably not so glib answer. As I write this, the recently elected Governor of

my home state of Virginia is under pressure to resign his governorship because he donned “black face” while he was in medical school.

Jesse Jackson, reminding us all of Martin Luther King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, published only a few months ago in an African American newspaper an op-ed column entitled “Where is the White Church?”, implying that the white church is still far too uninvolved in doing enough about U.S. racial hostility.

As many of you know, Bill made a wonderful presentation to the Lancaster Theological Seminary community entitled “From the Front Lines of the Fight for Freedom.” It's still available on VIMEO. His talk chronicles his personal and ministerial journey in the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. Since his dissertation provides little personal material from his own faith journey, I'd suggest watching it again before turning to his dissertation.

Focusing on one particular scriptural passage, Ephesians 2:11-22, Bill addresses a particular question that may seem to have little theological “sex appeal” in our racial environment today: “[W]hat are the implications of the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in the New Testament period for the reconciliation of blacks and whites today?”

Having grown up myself in Richmond, Virginia, once the capital of what I now view as the infamous Confederacy, I was initially disappointed to discover that Bill doesn't address the southern churches' false

applications and interpretations of scripture once used to defend slavery. In an online video I once heard Brian McLaren at Westminster Cathedral in London say that the American South's false biblical defense of slavery had never been systematically and publicly refuted in the way he thought necessary. But Rader is primarily concerned that the Christian church throughout the world remember and grasp her own true nature. If the church will only be true to her real nature, her very being in, of, through the sharing of Christ's love, then the best way of reconciling "racial hostility" within the church and thereafter the world will surely be found.

By examining the best commentaries on Ephesians from the earliest centuries until the time he wrote his dissertation, he provides a remarkably thorough and searching exploration of what the best Christian leaders in every century have had to say on his topic. Others can and undoubtedly have refuted the false exegesis of America's southern preachers who spewed "racial hostility" while claiming to defend slavery on genuine biblical grounds.

I remember my own New Testament professor at Bangor Theological Seminary, Burton Throckmorton, saying that New Testament scholarship had reached a pinnacle in Germany and German universities and seminaries. When confronted with what we in the U. S. have finally come to know as "America's original sin"-slavery and the subsequent racism that still haunts our national life - Bill was no doubt very wise to step back from the emotional rhetoric of either the southern biblical

defenders or the abolitionist biblical attackers of what an older classic American historian referred to as our “Peculiar Institution.”

As a retired UCC pastor who gave all too little time to scholarly work, I stand in awe of Bill's thorough scholarship in his Ph. D. dissertation. The scholarly discrimination and exquisite care with which Bill examines every conceivable commentary written throughout the long history of the Christian church on the central passage he chose for his thesis -Ephesians 2:11-22- has got to be received as a model of scholarship. I certainly won't pretend to have carefully read it all myself.

In his conclusion Bill asks the hard question that challenges the church today more than ever: “Has [the church] not been involved for the most part in supporting racism in contradiction to its nature as described in Ephesians 2:11-22 ?”

In personal conversation with Bill, I learned that St. Peter's Church (now Wisdom's Table) has served as a key church in his faith journey. Recalling when he was a struggling, somewhat confused (theologically at least) philosophy major at Franklin and Marshall College back in the late 1940s, he describes a particular class for young adults taught at St. Peter's by an F & M professor in which this simple witness was given: “To me

God is best understood as being like Jesus.”

I imagine this statement might seem so obvious to many lay people that it would hardly be worthy of notice, but those who have really struggled with the intellectual and philosophical complications of so-called “simple” faith in God may better appreciate the profound simplicity of what to Bill were revelatory words.

In the history of the United Church of Christ St. Peter’s has been no ordinary church. The pastor of St. Peter's, representing the Evangelical and Reformed Church side of the union, became the first Co-President of the United Church of Christ in 1957.

In his dissertation Bill Rader reminds us that any church unity that doesn't include the ending of racial hostility is inevitably a bogus unity. *When the church views herself in the light of Eph. 2:11-22 then it is impossible for her to be conformed to the divisions which exist in society. It is her nature to be the place where divisions are healed, and so to be the servant of this healing in the world also.*

At a time when so much attention is given to psychological and sociological aspects of racial hostility, it may seem simplistic to suggest that our best answer to racial hostility may be found in good ecclesiology. (Now there's a word I seldom remember using as a pastor!) Bill

doesn't extend his claim for Eph.2:11-15 as far as did C. H. Dodd, who argues that “the relation of Jews and Gentiles is paradigmatic for relations between nations.” Rather Bill believes it's the racial hostility of “nations within a nation “that America faces today.

In the conclusion to his dissertation, Bill suggests that “...a Christological approach to the relations of groups such as races and nations ought to be more thoroughly explored.” I'm reminded of that original young adult class Bill described from his college days in which the F&M professor suggested that the best way to understand God was simply to look to Jesus. Wasn't his professor at least hinting that the best way for the church to know her true identity would be to follow a Christological path?

I'm not aware enough myself of scholarly literature to know if any scholar has responded to Bill's challenge, although in our present religious climate of focus on appreciating and respecting the diversity of world religions, it would seem that his focus on Christology might easily be seen as making Bill far too much of a Christian triumphalist. In our current context we do need to pay careful attention to the diverse voices of at least the most significant world religions. Here is another reason for watching Bill's LTS address on Vimeo before reading his dissertation. The gentle,

respectful and very humble manner in which Bill shared with the Lancaster Seminary community about his Civil Rights experience would belie any effort to paint his Christology as triumphalist.

For Christ is Lord, not only of the church but of the world. If the author of Ephesians could interpret Christ's work in one of its aspects as the reconciliation of hostile groups to one another, then we can see the breaking of centuries-old barriers of race in the contemporary world as part of his work today. p. 255

Although Bill's poor health didn't allow him to participate in her classes, Dr. Amanda Kemp of Franklin and Marshall College taught approximately fifty members of the St. Peter's Wisdom's Table congregation, a series of classes entitled "Racial Justice by Heart." Although her focus was never explicitly Christological, a key part of her teaching was, to my mind, at least implicitly Christological in a powerful way. When addressing anyone who made a racially hostile remark, she recommended a healer's first taking an inner spiritual almost "felt" stance, which to me profoundly expressed the love of Christ for each of us and for the world. There was a clear spiritual

dimension to Dr. Kemp's practical teaching about dealing with racial hostility, which was to me profoundly Christological- admittedly not Christological in letter but surely Christological in Spirit.

A wonderful memory of Bill and a worship experience St. Peter's congregation and I shared with his interracial extended family came at St. Peter's Wisdom's Table on Christmas Eve. (I believe it was the year before last .) Before I say more about that Christmas Eve service, let me first share something more from the Vimeo recording of Bill's Civil Rights address to LTS. The recorded session concluded with a question and comment time. Near the end Bill's African American son-in-law offered a moving witness about how much it meant to him to be part of Bill's family. Now married to Bill's daughter, he jokingly suggested this made him a “pseudo-Rader.” In the Christmas Eve service I am remembering Bill's intergenerational family took up an entire row, maybe a half dozen rows in front of where I sat. As is common in our worship there was a wonderful diversity of Christmas hymns and songs, and Leonard Cohen's hauntingly beautiful “Alleluia” was played. At one end of the pew sat Bill with

almost a dozen members of his interracial family, including boisterous African American and Caucasian older teenagers and young adults beside him. As Cohen's anthem played, Bill's entire family began to sway, at first very gently and then, especially as the younger members caught on, the swaying increased dramatically from side to side to the music. I for one was moved to tears. I sometimes think that our own interracial families may best point the entire church towards the degree of racial healing for which Christ must surely yearn.

Here on Christmas Eve we shared a living symbol of Bill's Ph. D. solution to "The Church and Racial Hostility." His very own family was expressing the solution through the bodily dimension of musical swaying before our very eyes. "A-le-lu-i-ah." Alleluia! Indeed.

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Information Deborah Rahn Clemens

deborahrahnclemens@gmail.com

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