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By Robert W. Jenson

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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

The opening article is a Mercersburg Roth Prize Paper given by Luke Sayers. He is a graduate student in the English Department at Baylor University, where he has been honored as a Baylor Presidential Fellow. He received his MA in Theological Studies from Westminster Seminary California and BA in English Literature from Grove City College. His research interests include 20th century American literature, postmodernism, media ecology, the Bible and literature, and 19th century Russian literature. You will notice that Luke's English Literature training has been put to good use in this work on Nevin. (I would love to see him return as an English Literature professor at F&M!)

The second article I was fortunate enough to experience live when Herb Davis gave the lecture in Berlin, Germany. It was given to German and American pastors and lay people at the 2018 UCC/EKBO Colloquy. The colloquy centered on the theology of Martin Luther King. Herb shared his experiences working in the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960's. In the Spring 2018 issue of the NMR I asked for some memories of Gabriel Fackre and serendipitously Herb's presentation does just that. I would still like to have more remembrances of Gabe and Dorothy for future issues of the NMR. Herb Davis is a long time member of the Society and a retired UCC pastor.

Peter Schmiechen and Joseph Heddon are both long time members of the Society. Peter retired as President of LTS and Joseph pastors Emmanuel Reformed United Church of Christ, Export, Pa. Both of the sermons were given at the 2018 Annual Convocation.

I wrote the brief book review on Robert W. Jenson's brief book; *A Theology in Outline: Can These Bones Live?*

Enjoy the issue!

An Eye for an Ear: John Williamson Nevin's Visual Metaphor for an Audible Church

Luke Sayers

Like a stock pot, metaphors simmer for tomorrow's soup. Metaphors reshape thought by translating perception into language, experience into expression, and cognition into communication. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson summarize, "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."¹ One might add that theological conceptual systems, like ordinary ones, are metaphorical in nature. Theologian and churchman John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886) was a poet in his use of metaphor. Born into the early 19th century, Nevin inherited the romantic affinity for organic metaphors and natural imagery. "Nevin's writings," Walter Conser affirms, "are suffused with biological allusions, organic metaphors, and developmental images."² Even his most technical theological writings are suffused with talk of oak trees, streams, and loam. As a Christian Nevin also inherited a world of Scriptural images and motifs, many of which complemented his Romantic disposition. Water, wine, and vineyards are common in Nevin's vocabulary. These images, however, were not laid atop his theological musings as mere rhetorical flourish. Rather, as Conser explains, "Nevin also used these linguistic conventions to express more formal

¹. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

². Walter Conser, "Nevin on the Church." In *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth-Century America: Essays on the Thought of John Williamson Nevin*. Edited by Sam Hamstra and Arie Griffioen. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press Inc, 1995), 105.

theological points.”³ Metaphor itself constitutes Nevin’s doctrinal imagination. His ecclesiology especially depends on a web of visual metaphors.

Dangerous trends in 19th century revivalism and American sectarianism convicted Nevin of the need for a high and dignified ecclesiology. He learned to express a renewed appreciation of the church through various visual and organic metaphors. These metaphors allowed him to propose an alternative to the churchly degradation common among his contemporaries. Because his metaphors were primarily visual rather than aural, however, he too neglected essential characteristics of the church.

Most common to Nevin’s thought are scriptural metaphors stewed with Romantic organicism. Jesus’ discussion of the vine and the branches in John 15, for example, lies at the root of Nevin’s ecclesiology. “The union between the vine and its branches is organic,” Nevin comments, “They are not placed together in an outward and merely mechanical way. The vine reveals itself in the branches; and the branches have no vitality apart from the vine. All form one and the same life.”⁴ In just a few sentences Nevin presents many of the ingredients of his ecclesiology, foremost of which is the organic union between Christ and the church. This union is a natural, and almost spiritually genetic, bond growing out of the inner life of a seed. In contrast to this natural bond stands mechanical union, a motif Nevin rejected. Mechanical metaphor can communicate lifelessness, brutality, and artificiality. It cannot signify the union between Christ and his church. Mechanistic human constructs, by extension, whether denominational affiliations, Finney’s revivalistic “new measures,” or church politics, cannot explain union with Christ because they risk transforming the church into a system of human techniques rather than a mystical body.

³. Ibid.

⁴. John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*. Edited by Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker. (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1966), 236.

Nevin's comments on John 15 also allude to the common life shared by Jesus and his followers. The bond between them was not merely formal or institutional, but communal and intuitive. The harmony between Christ and the church flows from the vital union of both. Nevin uses the Pauline analogy of the church as the body of Christ to make this point clear. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 12:14-26, Nevin says, "The relation here exhibited involves, of course, a real life union, of the most intimate character....It is the presence of a common *life*—the animal spirit, as it has been called—always proceeding from the head into the limbs, and having no proper existence in a single limb under any other form."⁵ The life principle of bodily wholeness is essential to the union. New life courses from the head to the body, vivifying and empowering every member, every muscle, as blood through veins. Paul may not have explained the metaphor in so many words, yet Nevin insists on this interpretation. He cautions against any interpretation that distracts from the fundamental principle of a shared life. Reducing the head and body metaphor, for example, to a conception of a "political corporation" is an injurious interpretation. When the head is simply an authority figure by whom the body is to be "ruled and conducted," Christ becomes a despot rather than a deliverer.⁶ Furthermore the union between head and body cannot be reduced to a "mechanical conjunction," but rather it must be "organic, in the fullest sense of this term."⁷ In other words, the head is neither attached to the body as a prosthetic nor is it decapitated by retaining a spiritual bond only. The bond must be intimate, shared, and even perichoretic.

By preserving the intimacy of the union inherent in these scriptural metaphors, Nevin was attempting two things. First, he was recovering the role of the church as the mediator of divine grace and even as the keeper of the keys of the kingdom. Second, he was combatting the antithesis between the visible and invisible church. A spiritual solipsism ran rampant in Nevin's America. The

⁵ Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 237.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 236-237.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

enthronement of the subjective religious experience had, in his mind, entirely divorced the gospel from the church community, as if each individual can establish and maintain the name of Christian apart from any connection to the church. Independent decisions and experiences triumphed over participation in the corporate life of Christ. W. Clark Gilpin credits this trend to the work of Charles Finney: “Finney gave the appearance of reducing religion to this immediate spiritual experience and rendering superfluous those liturgical and sacramental institutions through which the church traditionally had mediated divine grace.”⁸ The church, in other words, had been demoted from the mediator of grace to an aggregate of believers.

Membership in the church, in this context, had less to do with participation in the new life of the organic community of Christ than with a common profession of faith. Darryl Hart points out that Nevin was unsatisfied with this view: “For Nevin, the body of Christ and membership in the body took on greater significance than any single decision or intention by an autonomous rational agent.”⁹ Autonomy here is the key word. Nevin could not tolerate Christian autonomy. Not only does it detach believers from the institution designed for their spiritual good; it also insults the bride of Christ, for whom, in some sense collectively, the blood of the lamb was shed. Scriptural metaphor allowed for no room for such autonomy. Branches cannot live apart from the vine, and a body soon dies apart from its head. The little attention Finney’s preaching gave to union with Christ confined union to the individual. James Hastings Nichols comments on the scene: “Nevin’s opponents generally agreed that salvation meant some sort of union with Jesus Christ, but they contended that this was separable from the church—or at least separable from the visible church. The invisible church was simply the sum of such individuals redeemed by

⁸ W. Clark Gilpin, "The doctrine of the church in the thought of Alexander Campbell and John W Nevin." *Mid-Stream* 19, no. 4 (1980), 418.

⁹ Hart, D.G. *John Williamson Nevin: High-Church Calvinist*. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2005), 97.

Christ.”¹⁰ A sum—again a mechanical and mathematical metaphor—pales in comparison to the organic, vivacious reality Nevin sought to restore to the church.

One consequence of Nevin’s emphasis on the organic and communal life of the Church was his vision of a reinvigorated liturgy. Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, public prayers, and other liturgical practices all became a vital part of a Christian’s new life. A decision to associate with Christ was no longer the center of the church’s ministry. Instead, a Christian must commune with the visible church—the outward, embodied reality of the people of God as they practice life together. In *The Anxious Bench* Nevin says, “This spiritual constitution is brought to bear upon [a Christian] in the Church by means of institutions and agencies which God has appointed, and clothed with power expressly for this end.”¹¹ The ordinances Christ gave to the apostles in the form of the sacraments and the ministry are irreplaceable since those ordinances are not merely reflections, but rather integral manifestations, of the Christian life. To replace them with human inventions is not merely a quibble in evangelistic method, but an essential transformation of the gospel.

A purely inward, subjective, and invisible union between Christ and Christians was for Nevin insufficient grounds to reinvent the shape of Christian ministry. Faith is not an independent commitment but, as Lee C Barrett affirms, the act of “participating in the life of the church.”¹² The idea of a private faith, therefore, is unimaginable, for faith, in Nevin’s definition, is a public act. Nichols again helpfully points out that “Faith involved submission

¹⁰. James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 154.

¹¹. John Williamson Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*. In *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*. Edited by Charles Yrigoyen Jr. and George H. Bricker. (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1978), 110.

¹². Lee C Barrett III. "The distinctive world of Mercersburg theology: yearning for God or relief from sin?" *Theology Today* 71, no. 4 (2015): 330.

to this social and historical reality.”¹³ The metaphors of the vine and branches or the head and body, therefore, comprise more than mere illustrations for Christ’s union to his people. They are the cognitive template for union with Christ and Christians interdependence. A branch cannot share in the vine without acknowledging other branches, and a member can only participate in the head insofar as it is one with the body. Union to Christ, in other words, is union to the church.

If the strength of Nevin’s highly organic interpretation of these biblical metaphors is its restoration of the importance of the church, its weakness is that it tends to conflate Christ and the Church. If the two are organically one, sharing in the same principle of life, then what distinguishes the head from the body, and what separates the branch from the vine? Nevin does not shy away from this conclusion of unicity. The image dictates the conclusion. He even calls the church “the fullness of him that fills all in all,” through which Christ reveals his “inmost life.”¹⁴ Just as the body cannot live apart from the head, Nevin asserts the validity of the converse:

In a deep sense, thus, Christ himself is made perfect in the Church, as the head in our natural organization requires the body in order for its completion. There can be no Church without Christ, but we may reverse the proposition also and say, no Church, no Christ. The Incarnation would be shorn of its meaning, if the fact were not carried out to its proper world development in the Church.¹⁵

Nevin’s emphasis on the church’s union with Christ evolves into an intermingling of their natures. Christ and the Church transcend union to reach unicity. In contrast to other reformed views such as covenantal union, Nevin’s view instead verges on the perichoretic. Christ, rather than being the federal and forensic head of his people,

¹³. Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 277.

¹⁴. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 221.

¹⁵. John Williamson Nevin, “The Church,” in *The Mercersburg Theology*. Edited by James Hastings Nichols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 66.

is mingled in essence with the life of his people. At various points in his writings Nevin even needs to defend against the anticipated charge of pantheism.¹⁶ He does so, however, not by distinguishing Christ from his creation, but by distinguishing the church from the world. Implicit in this defense, however, is the assumption that pantheism is defeated so long as the whole of creation is not conflated with God, even while allowing the nature of some creatures (the church) to be conflated with God.

Another problematic consequence of this organic metaphor is the threat it poses to the incarnation. By affirming a near unicity between Christ and the church, Nevin makes the church the continuation of Christ's incarnation in the world. Nevin acknowledges that Christ in his humanity ascended into heaven, but he asserts, "This was to make room in fact, however, only for his own return in a higher form of existence."¹⁷ That higher form of existence is nothing less than the church itself. "It is composed of a vast number of individual members," Nevin says, "but these are all actuated by the power of a common life, and the whole of this life fathers itself up ultimately or fundamentally in the person of Jesus Christ."¹⁸ The temptation to suppose that church membership grants one the privilege of being a continued part of the incarnation is strong, but it does present questions about reality of Christ's ascension and true humanity. The God-Man can only be truly human insofar as he remains the ascended Jesus. True human nature does not exist in an aggregate. Paradoxically, then, the theologian who takes the incarnation as a central dogma perhaps does the doctrine great harm.

The organic metaphors of scripture are only some of those that Nevin employs in his ecclesiology. In most cases, however, Nevin opts for visual metaphors. He discusses buildings and light, acorns and oak trees, politics and agencies. Describing his life work Nevin says he would be content "to pull down a single one of all

¹⁶. W. Bradford Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity*. (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 66.

¹⁷. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 230.

¹⁸. Nevin, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 37.

those walls of partition that now mock the idea of catholic unity in the visible Church” and would be feign even to found a sect that would place millions “beneath its shadow.”¹⁹ Later Nevin refers continually to the light of the church. The unfolding progress of history will bring “in due time to light” those schisms in the church and allow the broken body to heal, then the “whole world shall appear transformed into its image and resplendent with its light,” all because the Word who became flesh “brought to light” life and immortality.²⁰ The consistent reference to light only confirms the visual bias with which Nevin defines the nature of the church. Buildings, shadows, light—these are the images Nevin sees as integral to the nature of the church. The consequences of this bias toward the visual both help and hinder his ecclesiology.

In many ways these visual metaphors enrich Nevin’s ecclesiology. Nevin’s love for the visual matures in the form of charity for the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

I believe in the holy catholic Church. The Church is one and universal. Her unity is essential to her existence. Particular Christians, and particular congregations, and particular religious denominations, can be true to themselves only as they stand in the full, free sense of this thought, and make it the object of their calling to fulfill its requisitions.²¹

Nevin did not believe in any Gnostic or Docetic sect that claimed to have preserved the true form of Christianity apart from the church as it exists visually. Nor did he grant an audience to those who denied the catholic church’s perpetuity through history. For the church to be the holy catholic church it had to be both visible and historic, not a secret society or a church within the church, not an esoteric elite, not an eschatological in-breaking at historic intervals. It exists as the embodied manifestation of life in Christ, visible to the world and enduring the hurricane of history. Nevin truly believed that the gates of hell should not prevail against the church.

¹⁹. Ibid., 49-50.

²⁰. Ibid., 52, 58-59.

²¹. Ibid., 36.

Consequently, Nevin was unashamed to challenge the traditional visible/invisible church distinction. He did not reject the idea outright, but he did reject any interpretation of the doctrine that resulted in a dualistic understanding of the church, as if two distinct churches—one spiritual and invisible, the other physical and visible—stand in contrast. He acknowledges the distinction so long as the unity between invisible and visible endures. The invisible church must correspond with the visible church: “Humanity is neither a corpse, on the one hand, nor a phantom on the other. The Church, then, must appear externally, in the world. And the case requires that this manifestation should correspond with the inward constitution of the idea itself.”²² A truly human Christ demands a truly human church, visibility included. The reverse is also true, as Littlejohn says, “a docetic Christ will lead to a docetic church.”²³ The incarnation, therefore, demands a legitimate, embodied, visible church.

The materiality of creation requires that the church be visible as well. Overemphasizing the invisibility of the church degrades the sacraments, incites schism in the visible body, undermines an appreciation of created reality, and subverts the incarnation. Nevin points out that “An invisible state, or invisible family, or invisible man, is not so great an absurdity and contradiction as an absolutely invisible Church.”²⁴ In this sense, then, one of the great strengths of Nevin’s visual metaphor is the challenge it poses to a neo-Platonic contempt for materiality and embodiment. If nothing else, visibility protects the church against escapism, Gnosticism, and Docetism.

His defense of visibility also protects Christianity against Christian solipsism. An entirely invisible church disallows the individual Christian from knowing his corporate family. Other members of an invisible church are merely an illusion, like the shadows in Plato’s cave. If invisible forms are true reality, then

²². Nevin, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 41.

²³. Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity*, 68.

²⁴. Nevin, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 60.

human faculties cannot access other people. Sight, sound, and touch are untrustworthy, and rationality alone cannot embrace another person's mind. Thus what Nevin saw as a dualistic tendency to detach the true church from its visible embodiment left the Christian entirely alone. Within the church "there is no room here for individualism or particularism as such. An individual dissociated entirely from his race would cease to be a man."²⁵ Likewise any Christian dissociated entirely from his church would cease to be a Christian. The revivalist tendencies of the "new measures," on the other hand, failed to recognize a sense of belonging between an individual and a corporate body. Christianity is a life marked by a metaphysical glue that binds each member to the next. "Partaking in this way of one and the same life, Christians of course are vitally related and joined together as one great spiritual whole, and this whole is the Church."²⁶ But this vital relationship is only possible when Christians can know and see one another in a visible body.

Another visual-tactile metaphor Nevin uses for the Church, similar to the Biblical image of the vine and branches, is an oak tree. The two differ, however, in that the vine metaphor communicates the vital union between Christ and the church whereas the oak tree depicts the organic development of the church through time. "The oak of a hundred years," says Nevin, "and the acorn from which it has sprung, are the same life. All that we behold in the oak lay hid in the acorn from the start. . . . And parallel with this precisely is the constitution of the Church."²⁷ The essence of an ancient oak is cradled in the shell of the smallest acorn. Its oakness is as vitally present in the germ as in the species. So too the church, from its infancy, shares the same genetics in maturity. Despite the vicissitudes of church history, with all the schisms and controversies, the institution of the visible church remains the same. Those differences manifest through time are but various dogmatic expressions, contextually determined, of the same visible church. Nevin puts it this way: "Joined together in the common life of

²⁵. Ibid., 41.

²⁶. Ibid., 40.

²⁷. Ibid.

Christ, in the possession of one faith, one hope, and one baptism, the various divisions of the Christian world are still organically the same Church.”²⁸ Although the church seems to have embraced mutually exclusive beliefs and practices through history, those seeming contradictions are but the church’s efforts to display its full reality as it has its exists in Christ. The actual church of sin-strained history, however, will never perfectly reflect the ideal church of the eschaton.

Nevin’s view of historical unity even acknowledges schisms as the Great Schism of 1054 and the Reformation. Even these divisions do not rupture the ideal church. They are, however, varying expressions of the members of the same visible body. As Nichols summarizes, “The church is a living and therefore changing organism. To some extent structure and offices are adjusted to varying circumstances, and each of a variety of forms may be legitimate in appropriate conditions.”²⁹ The great divergence in belief and practice between various branches of Christendom would seem to undermine Nevin’s defense of the visibility of the church, but Nevin contends that both unity and visibility are preserved through the distinction between the ideal and the actual church. He defines the distinction thus: “We take Idea here in its true sense, by which it expresses the very inmost substance of that which exists, as distinguished from its simply phenomenal character in time and space. As such it is not opposed to what is actual, but constitutes rather its truth and soul.”³⁰ The ideal church, therefore, is that toward which the actual church lurches in constant struggle. With Hegelian momentum the church cascades through history, synthesizing the many churchly tributaries in ecclesiological progress. Over time conflicts in the church between theses and antitheses that will synthesize as the ideal church emerges. The acorn, in other words, will mature into a tall, strong, rooted oak, unshakable by any storm of conflict. As it grows, however, some

²⁸. Ibid., 42.

²⁹. Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 271.

³⁰. Nevin, *The Mercersburg Theology*, 58.

may be tempted to mistake the branches for the trunk or assume its corruption because of a gnarl or blight. But in reality, the tree is one.

Because historical visibility and ideal unity depend on the oak metaphor, his view precludes any mechanical or political metaphor of the current church. The quest for visible unity is not achieved through any ecclesiastical politic. “The conception of a Church to be manufactured by the sect mind,” Nevin asserts, “enthroned for the time as the higher power, called to sit in judgment on its claims, is itself an infidel absurdity.”³¹ Neither congregationalism, a confederacy of denominations, nor the papacy—all political and non-organic symbols—can successfully bring about the peaceful unity of the visible church here and now. These are theses and antitheses, not the final synthesis of the ideal church, because they are human constructs rather than the divine essence of the church organic. The bias of political or industrial metaphor simply aggravates disunity and promotes a sectarian spirit. No amount of ecclesiastical power or organizational finesse can successfully accomplish total ecumenical consent. Small ecumenical projects ought to be undertaken, but never imposed by force of will. The leaves cannot force the oak to grow.

Nevin’s love for the visible, embodied church together with his ecumenical resistance to denominationalism reveal a deep tension in Nevin’s thought. On the one hand, the church is visible, organic, and communal, in contrast to the docetizing of the invisible churchers. On the other hand, Nevin experienced friction with every branch of the visible church. The Congregationalists are too individualistic, the Presbyterians too sectarian, and the Roman Catholics too authoritarian. “The Church ought to be visibly one and catholic, as she is one and catholic in her inward life,” Nevin says, yet he is unable to embrace the present, though wounded, church, instead hoping for a Hegelian realization of a future ideal church. Faith, not sight “and not in the way of intelligence” is the mode of apprehending the church.³²

³¹. Ibid., 117.

³². Ibid.

Ironically, then, Nevin's greatest strength is his greatest weakness. Visual, organic metaphor inspired his love for the church incarnate, yet those same metaphors forced him to disembody and etherealize the church by relegating the true church to an ideal future. Nevin explains,

Nature itself is only relatively true and real. It finds its actual sense, as we have seen, only in the idea of humanity; and in this idea at last, only as actualized in the mystery of the incarnation. It is all a shadow and sign of the real; but for this very reason, not the real itself....The fashion of the world is ever passing away, like a scenic show."³³

The only way for him to preserve the organic unity of the mystical body of Christ in terms of visual metaphor was to introduce the caveat of time. Paradoxically, then, Nevin falls into an error similar to the one he sought to avoid: spiritualizing an embodied church.

Overdependence on visual metaphor explains this tension. This imaginative and linguistic horizon of sight gave Nevin a vocabulary to express the reality of the visible church, but it also tormented him when he could not see such a church before him. In his personal life, Nichols points out, Nevin agonized over the thought that all branches of Christianity were in schism: "Apparently Nevin never solved the doubt as to the validity of the ministrations of divided and independent successions in the ministry."³⁴ It is also well known that Nevin was often a sparring partner with contemporary theologians like Charles Hodge. Hart reminds readers of Nevin to be cautious when looking to Nevin as the paragon of Christian ecumenism:

Because twentieth-century Protestant ecumenists would look back to Mercersburg for inspiration to soften the barriers dividing Christians, the historical image of the Mercersburg theologians has been one of charity and tolerance. But often overlooked is that the very catholicity of Mercersburg developed in the crucible of theological controversy, and it

³³. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 210.

³⁴. Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 280.

initially alienated as many Protestants as it pleased or persuaded.³⁵

Nevin's theology, admirably hopeful for Christian unity, often brought not ecumenism but anxiety.

The problem with Nevin's metaphor is not that it is visual—indeed most of them are Biblical—but that they are almost always visual. His choice of one mode of perception, the visual-tactile, biases his imagination toward one conception of the church at the expense of many others. Isolated visual perception, paradoxically, becomes a kind of blindness. Organic metaphor is helpful, but for Nevin it is disproportionate. Scripture uses a host of other metaphors for the church that need to be taken together to inform a balanced ecclesiology. Along with Nevin's emphasis on the vine and the body, Scripture speaks of the people of God as a family, citizens, the bride of Christ, guests at a feast, and an assembly of hearers. The aural motif embedded in the last example is an important corrective to Nevin's view. The Church as *ecclesia* is fundamentally a called congregation, an aural community. The people of God are voiced into being by God's speech. Animation happens as they hear God's Word and listen to one another. Even when seeing through a glass dimly, sound breaks silence and makes God's presence known, and where God's presence is, there is the church. Nevin, however, says the power of Christ in salvation is lodged in his flesh "as the necessary medium of communication with the human race," making the incarnation the central event of Christ's salvific ministry.³⁶ With the incarnation as his theological starting point, Nevin sometimes forgets that it was the Word that became flesh. It was the sound of God to humanity that preceded the sign of God to humanity. Nevin substituted an eye for an ear in emphasizing visual metaphor over other aural metaphor in his interpretation of the church.

The imaginative horizon of the audible metaphor greatly expands a purely visual landscape. Hearers have an essentially

³⁵. Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 115.

³⁶. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 85.

different mode of thought than seers. Hearers interiorize sound without recourse to a visible reality. The church as an assembly of hearers, then, forms its identity as a unified body not by visible and material manifestation but by sonic proclamation and reception. As many people can hear one sound, so many churches form one church. The sound of the Word gives the church its reality as an historic and embodied entity without falling into Nevin's anxiety-inducing glaucoma. Divisions in the visible church, therefore, are overcome by unity in the audible church. In addition to Nevin's oak, metaphors like echoes, dialogues, and proclamations ought to be used to describe the essence of the church. The ancient proverb "speak that I may see thee," therefore, proves to be true. Without speech and audible metaphor the organic-visual metaphor of the church is silent. The Word became flesh. An aural and visual Christ creates an aural and visual church. The hypnotic trance of the visual sense only is too great a burden for the church. As with Nevin, no one sense should anesthetize the others, lest ecclesiology suffer.

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Memories of the Civil Rights Movement in America led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr

*The Rev. Herbert Davis (Retired UCC Pastor)
The Pastor Colloquy in Berlin, Germany, August 13-17, 2018*

Thank you for inviting me to share some of my experiences in the Civil Rights movement led by Rev. Dr. King Jr. I am told that most of us understand English. I have no ability in German and many American friends would say I do not speak English too well. If you get confused please speak up.

In the early 1960's I was a young pastor in a village congregation four miles west of Lancaster, PA, and moderator of the UCC Lancaster Association [Penn Central Conference, the United Church of Christ]. I moved to Chicago in 1964 and later to New England, where I retired in 1994.

Two general comments:

1. The Civil Rights Movement was an Afro-American movement for justice, spearheaded by courageous, heroic black American citizens, led for the most part by Rev. King, who I felt was a prophetic voice in our time, a gift to America, and it had a great influence in my ministry. White support was support; it was not our show. At best, we were the chorus line. The Civil Rights Movement made significant and dramatic changes in America; it did not wipe out racism.
2. America is a racist nation; it is in our blood. Many of our historic policies are racist and enacted under some of our finest leaders. Some of our most cherished myths make it difficult to face slavery as an American holocaust. "All are created equal" is a cornerstone myth, and "You can be anything you want to be if you work hard enough" in strange ways gives support to racism. We are a self-righteous nation, thinking we are exceptional rather than different. It's hard for us to confess and face our sin. At the same time, I would not say that most

Americans aren't racist. I would agree with Niebuhr: "Moral Man and Immoral Society." As a young man in the military I was stationed in southern communities where segregation was in full practice. I didn't see or feel anything wrong. How often are we living in the midst of evil and do not sense it?

My first participation in the Civil Rights Movement was in a demonstration in Lancaster, in the early 1960's, against an old, respected, honorable department store, Watt and Shan, which was located in the city square.

Dr. King came to national importance in the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955-56, a violent disruption of the social order in a nonviolent way to bring about justice. The public demonstration for racial justice became a national model by the early 1960's, and this demonstration against the department store was one of the first in Lancaster. The NAACP and the local African Methodist Episcopal pastor asked for support.

A friend of mine, Gabriel Fackre, Professor of Theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary called me to participate. I went along. We met in the little Black church just south of the city square. The Black pastor led about 20 of us in prayer. We lingered a long time in prayer because we all were afraid. Most of us had never demonstrated publicly before.

Eventually we sang "We Shall Overcome," and the Black pastor led the group carrying the American flag. We carried signs for justice, jobs, and dignity. We were protesting discrimination in hiring, no Black clerks, and for dignity, Black women were not allowed to try on a dress in the store or return a dress if it didn't fit. The resistance to hiring Blacks or respecting them as citizens was deep and did not change for years.

In Lancaster we demonstrated to desegregate the swimming pool, the schools, and the post office. The injustices were deeply rooted in this small, conservative, Lutheran, Reformed, Mennonite community that understood itself as an all-American city

It was difficult for local congregations and pastors to respond. Tensions were high, but the national UCC played a positive, supportive role. Rev. Andrew Young was a UCC pastor and part of

Dr. King's leadership team. Bob Spike on the UCC national staff for justice involved the UCC in a number of civil rights projects. Resolutions at national and state level supported Dr. King and the movement. Local congregations could support racial justice through an annual offering for racial justice.

We were also involved in the March on Washington in 1963. This was the first national protest by the Black community. There was a lot of fear propagated by those opposed to civil rights that thousands of Blacks gathered would be violent, undisciplined and un-American. There were real attempts to discourage participation in the march and to picture Blacks as too incompetent to pull off such a huge demonstration. There was a lot of apprehension in the Black community.

At this time Rev. Dr. King had the amazing trust of 88% of the African American community, and his endorsement and call for a March on Washington received overwhelming support. Black people came from all over the country, from little towns, urban area, to witness for justice.

During the March I was sitting next to an old black man from a little town in Alabama who had travelled days to be present and was joyful to be at the march. White folks were invited to participate in the March on Washington for jobs and justice.

Again, Prof. Fackre called and said the UCC should have a busload at the march as a witness of our support. I wrote a letter to all UCC congregations and institutions to announce we had a bus scheduled; we got a bus full, including many professors from Lancaster Theological Seminary and Franklin and Marshall College.

As we know, the March was a nonviolent, peaceful celebration of the American Dream of justice and liberty for all. Rev King gave his, "I Have a Dream" speech, which I didn't hear because we were sitting way back around the Reflecting Pool. But the March was inspiring. We came home that night with joyful, hopeful hearts. Dr. King spoke at F & M College in Lancaster that winter. The movement of justice for the African American Community was growing.

In May Prof. Fackre called again with news that the UCC was trying to get volunteers to go to Mississippi, one of the worst segregated states in the union, to participate in a voter registration drive. This was a prelude to the Mississippi Summer project led by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, to get college students to spend part of the summer in Mississippi attempting to get black citizens to vote.

This was for me the most dangerous, emotionally- draining confrontation with white power in the South. Experiencing just a few days of the awful injustice of segregation and the power of white supremacist was terrifying. I announced to my congregation at worship on Sunday that I was participating in the voter registration project. As folks left some wouldn't shake my hand, some put money in my hand, some said they would pray for me. We were to leave Sunday afternoon. It was a very tense time in our congregations.

Prof Fackre had enlisted three volunteers, Doyle Luckenbaugh, a seminary student, Prof. Fackre, and me. We drove to Nashville and slept at Fisk University, a black college, and took a bus to Canton, Mississippi. On Monday we reported to the Freedom House, center of operations, staffed by young black men and woman.

I was assigned housing in Rev. and Mrs. McRae's home. He was the local black Baptist preacher, who was to be my team leader during our stay. Rev. and Mrs. McRae were two of the most courageous people I know. They lived in a four-room house built on pillars, no foundation. They offered extravagant hospitality. To take me, a white man, into their home made them the enemy of the social order and subject to possible violence. He later became a leader in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

That night we three were ask to eat at a local restaurant. One of the goals of the project was to let the white power structure know that the Black Community had white support to disrupt the segregated social order in Mississippi.

We had a fine meal and the owner of the restaurant joined us after dinner. He wanted to inform us of the situation where 30% or

more of the community was African American. He wanted to educate us as to the threat the Blacks, who were lazy, undisciplined, always late for work, couldn't be trusted, and sexually wild, were to a civilized white community. He asked me how many blacks lived in my community. Of course, there were none. He rightly claimed we didn't know their concern. He suggested we deal with the problems in the North and let the white people deal with their community. He informed us that they were defending their way of life. We outsiders didn't understand and we should go home. If we persisted, we would be hurt.

The next morning, we were assigned to eat at another breakfast grill in town. We three and three students from Eden Seminary went for breakfast. We sat for an hour before being waited on, then waited for our meal. We could sense the tension and hatred. I noticed a group gathering outside the restaurant, a big fellow with a limp walking back and forth, and a formation of police in the background.

After eating we went to our car. As we were getting in the car the fellow with the limp attacked one of the students from Eden and punched him in the face. He fell to the ground bleeding. He was behind me. We had no training in nonviolence. I was not a nonviolent person, but violence wasn't an option. The attacked didn't know how to respond. It was a strange encounter for me. I stopped, looked at the man with the limp, bent over and picked up the Eden student, put him in the car, and went back to the Freedom House. The Eden student needed medical attention, and they left Canton. We never ate in restaurants in town again. We had coffee and donuts at Freedom House.

Every day we were assigned a Black neighborhood to canvass. We were seeking persons to register to vote. This was one of our goals, as well as to let people in small communities know they were not alone in their struggle. Most days Rev. McRae went with me.

During the week one young woman tried to register to vote. It was a humiliating experience for me. We went to the town hall. There was a very heavy police presence that looked threatening to me. There was a poll tax to be paid. There was a literacy test to be

taken. She read part of the state constitution without any problem. Then there was a historical exam. Ten questions that would be impossible for a Ph. D. in Mississippi history to answer. After each failed answer the registrar would admonish the young woman for being stupid, for trying to vote without any education. He would welcome her back at any time once she studied her history. Voting was not for stupid people like her. I was a failure in getting voters registered.

One night three Freedom House staff and three of us visitors went out of town to a little Black church, to witness to the congregation that some white Christians were supporting them. It was dangerous for whites and Blacks to ride together in a car as equals. We arrived at a little old church, went inside to find the church empty.

Black churches were seen as a threat to white supremacists. Hundreds of Black churches were burnt and bombed during the Civil Rights Movement. Violence against Blacks was normal, with over 3800 lynchings and over 500 murders during the Jim Crow era, 1880's to 1960's.

It was no surprise that the church was empty. A Black man in the woods began to sing spirituals, calling the folks to worship. The congregation gathered. The Staff from Freedom House conducted the gathering in worship and rally. We sang. We prayed. There was a little preaching, and then we visitors were asked to testify. They believed that the Spirit would provide, but the Spirit didn't seem to help me.

I don't remember what I said, but I can't forget what I saw. I looked out over the congregation, not a university professor present, not a corporation CEO around, not a celebrity in sight, just poor, powerless, uneducated people against a police state, against money and power, against three hundred years of oppression.

All I could think of was the Exodus. It was Moses and the slaves against an all-powerful sun god, against chariots and horses, against an army and the Red Sea. It was a hopeless situation. I looked into the faces of the congregation and saw a hope, an integrity, a faith that amazed me. They seemed to know that Moses

was in Egypt land. They seemed to be hopeful when there was no hope. In their weakness they seemed strong.

It was God using the nobodies to overcome the somebodies. I mumbled to myself, “Holy S----, they may just pull it off.” I must have mumbled something to the congregation, but the congregation, the nobodies, gave me hope. The meeting ended with “We Shall Over Come” and “We Shall Not Be Moved.”

We left Canton on Friday. Four or five weeks later, June 21, three Civil Rights workers were murdered.

I left Lancaster in the fall of 1964 to be assistant pastor at St. Paul’s church in Chicago. Fred Trost was just installed as pastor and wanted someone to identify with the urban community. I was not qualified for the task. I grew up in a small coal mining town; my wife was a farm woman. We never lived in a big city. We were young and dumb, and, I think, believed the gospel and it was there that we had an opportunity to work with Rev. Dr. King’s ministry in Chicago in 1966.

Sermon at the Mercersburg Society:

June 4, 2018

Peter Schmiechen

“That They May Be One”

John 17:9-26

(In my humble opinion)

*(Title given by Bishop Nathan Baxter,
who was unable to preach because of illness.)*

Let us begin with a story:

An American woman, a descendant from slaves, knocked on the door of the Queen and asked: “May I come in? I want to marry the prince.”

The Queen replied: “Are you by yourself?”

“I will not bring my father, because I choose for myself, but I will bring my mother.”

“Anyone else,” said the Queen.

“Well, I think I will bring a black preacher.”

“We have heard about such people. That will be interesting. Anyone else?”

“And a black gospel choir.” The queen paused, and then said, “My husband is not into swaying or clapping. But I guess that will be alright. Is that it?”

“I would like some of my friends to be there, and yes, the guy that sang at Diana’s funeral service.” There was no reply, so she went on: “And I will bring a young black cello player. But he will play Ave Maria.”

“That sounds nice. Anyone else?”

“I would like Diana’s sister to read a love poem, if you don’t mind.”

The Queen replied, “If you insist.”

So the young woman entered the church all by herself, except for little children, one having lost his two front teeth. At the entrance to the choir her new father-in-law escorted her to the prince. When all were assembled, including people in love and not in love, married and divorced and re-married, those unfaithful and those with cold hearts, the black preacher spoke of how love would change the world. He kept talking about love being the only thing that could redeem us, even make us into a family. When he sat down, the black choir began to sing. People had to turn around to see them, because they were in the back of the church. Those way up in the chancel could not see them at all, especially when they began to sway. Then the prince and the young woman exchanged vows, rings, promises of love, and were declared married. While they were signing the official book, the young black man played some songs, including Ave Maria. Then the prince and the woman walked down the long aisle hand in hand. When they got to the entrance of the church, they stepped out into the sunlight and kissed. The people cheered.

The meaning of their exit was not clear: were they just leaving the assembly, or were they being expelled, or were they fleeing those inside the church? One was reminded of the ending to the movie, the *Graduate*, where the lovers escape and lock the people in the church with a cross. In this case, the assembly included the royal and religious heads of the Anglican Church, people from all over the world and all walks of life. They had gathered for a special occasion, which required that they set aside their likes and dislikes, their grudges and arrogance, and act as if, for an hour of waiting and an hour of watching, they were as one. Did they get the black preacher's message or merely tolerate his reminder that we are to love one another. Would the peace hold?

The great powers of this world did not take much notice of the event, letting it pass without a tweet. They assumed it would not change much and last for only the weekend news cycle. After all, it was just religious talk and confined to a church. What do they know about holding the world together, about security, about being one? And in Houston they made plans to bury ten more victims of gun violence. Even this will be soon forgotten.

Against the cynicism of the world and our own inability to love, The Gospel of John tells us something about unity. Chapter 17 gathers together themes Jesus has already shared with the disciples.

Jesus rejoices that he has made known God's name to the disciples, who share in his glory as they love one another.

As the Father and Jesus are one, so the disciples are united with Jesus and with God, that they themselves may be one. By their unity the world will know God has sent Jesus.

But the world, under the influence of the evil one, does not know God, Jesus, and will hate the disciples. Therefore Jesus asks God to protect them by sending the Spirit of truth.

We have heard these themes all of our lives. "That they may be one" is the great inspiration for Christians all over the world. But we hear the positive message but tend to ignore the exclusiveness in the Johannine writings. In this gospel it is quite clear that Jesus will unite the disciples—but not the whole world—with God. Most of the time we look the other way, or just skip these hard verses, as for example, last week we read John 3:16-17, but skipped verse 18. Sometimes these hard sayings generate unusual responses. When hearing I John 5: 12, which declares that those who do not have Jesus Christ will not have life, one preacher began his sermon with the exclamation: "Well, there goes my family, as well as my Jewish, Muslim and secular friends."

As important as this problem in John is, for the moment I wish to focus on the lack of unity among Christians. Our unity is supposed to be a witness to the world, but if that is the case, we are not doing very well. So what are our options?

One solution is that we attain unity by loving one another. The Johannine writings are loaded with commands to love one another. But we have not been very good at that; in fact, I am not sure we know much love. So while the command to love is repeated time and again, such a strategy has limits.

A second solution is to create unity by reaching agreement. Indeed, the ecumenical movement has made this a major strategy: study and dialogue lead to agreement and agreement leads to unity. But here also there are serious problems. At every point we are confronted by variety, differences and disagreements. For example, at one point in his commentary on John, Raymond Brown simply declares that he cannot unravel the tensions and differences. They are built into the text. If Raymond Brown says that, then it must be serious.

I was reminded of a birthday card I received from my younger son: The cover showed Jesus teaching the disciples and saying: “Listen carefully and get this straight...” On the inside Jesus says: “I don’t want to end up with four versions!”

The fact is that we have lots of versions: four gospels, councils and traditions, East and West, Roman Catholics and lots and lots of Protestants, and churches breaking out into fights on a regular basis. We are unable to agree on essentials because everything has become an essential. Faced with this reality years ago I concluded that the church of agreement is dead. If we are to find unity, it will have to be in another way.

But I must mention one agreement which holds some hope. This is the Leuenberg Agreement. In 1973 Lutherans and Reformed declared that since they agreed on justification by grace, the other differences between them are not grounds for division. That is a major breakthrough. Quite amazing! Whether such an approach can be applied to other situations is not clear. Since it requires a compelling point of agreement, it does have the limitations of the strategy of agreement.

A third option for discovering unity is the quest for justice and peace. Nathan Baxter added the subtitle to his sermon because, in his humble opinion, working together for justice may be an alternative to the strategy of doctrinal agreement. In Black Lives Matter, the Me Too protest, and in the protests of high school students regarding gun violence, we see the Spirit prompting a call

for justice. Whether these movements will bring Christians together has yet to be seen, but they do testify to the fact that God will raise up voices and the Spirit will create new forms of unity.

So where do these reflections leave us as we hope for unity among Christians? Let us begin by admitting that unity is not in us—in our love, agreements, or work. John 17 makes it clear that unity is from God. Any unity among us is created by Jesus drawing us into the circle of love, shielding us from the evils of this world and our own evils, and supporting us with the Spirit of truth. It is the grace of God that is the source of our unity. There is nothing we can say or do to generate it. Unity is a gift we receive.

Upon hearing this some may object that this is just another appeal to unity based on agreement. Like Leuenberg, we have to agree on what the gift is? To make matters worse, am I not the one who has argued from this very spot that the gift can be described in at least six essential ways? My response is that while Christians may well name the gift in different ways, the gift is not a conclusion based on my or our agreement. It stands as something over against us. Grace is both a judgment against our disunity as well as a new birth of community. It leaves me defenseless. It disrupts my life. It takes away my life and gives me new life.

The NT is very clear that new life is a gift from God: In Mark, one enters the new community by repentance and faith; in John one must be born again, in Paul, one must die to the old self and rise to the new life in Jesus Christ. How many times must one repent, be born again, or die to the old? Every day of our lives. Every time we come to the table, the only thing we can do is to repent and believe, let the Spirit give new birth, and die and rise with Christ. In this world of infidelity and violence, you can break the bonds of the old world and walk through the door into the sunlight of a new day. Grace does create a new community, a safe place, where we are called friends and family. At this table, the death of the innocent shall not be forgotten; here there will be

remembrance and sorrow; there will be hope for new life and joy in new beginnings of love.

The gift is not a new plan, a new strategy, a new three step program. It may be that our unity will only be inspired and become real at the table, in friendship, or in acts of witness in the world when those who have been violated, those who are quite young, lead us toward the light. Given our history, that may be enough for now.

So come to the table. Jesus is already there. Jesus invites us and we are his guests. It is not for us to decide who may attend. Come to the table, not because you must but because you may, come to testify not that you own the answer, but that you love our Lord, and stand in constant need of heaven's mercy and help. Come not to express an opinion, but to seek a presence and pray for a Spirit. It is all gift, all grace. Amen.

A Sermon Preached at the Mercersburg Convocation. June 6, 2018

By Joseph Hedden,

Pastor, Emmanuel Reformed United Church of Christ, Export, Pa
Isaiah 58:1-12

Walter Brueggemann in a commentary on Second and Third Isaiah wrote that the modern equivalent for the many sins found in Isaiah 58 can be called privatization.³⁷ Privatization of worship means I know what I like in worship and what I like in church. We seek our own interests and those interests serve my sense of self. The people of Israel approach the Lord and say, “We humbled ourselves. We have fasted but you, O Lord, have taken no notice.” (Isaiah 58:3). But, it’s clear, the people did not share their bread, their money, their resources. They did, in other words, what they wanted to do anyway and they complained that they didn’t get proper credit for it from the Lord.

Brueggemann wrote this commentary in 1998, and 20 years on the cultural situation in the United States has only gotten worse. Privatization has been weaponized. Privatization runs rampant in our economic life and cultural life. Our prisons are for profit and so

³⁷ Walter Brueggemann, Isaiah 40-66: Westminster Bible Companion, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press: 1998), 189-190.

are our cyber and charter schools. Our housing developments are private.

We've even privatized truth, no? Fake news! Privatization is a tool that allows Christians to hold contradictory beliefs and practices. At the same time that children are separated from their parents at the border by ICE, Liberty University, a Christian institution, is pouring cash into "The Trump Prophecy" documentary. I fail to see how this project advances the cause of the gospel and I predict the film will be a case study in privatization. It will be long on hagiography, short on facts. Or to mis-quote Han Solo in *Star Wars*, "Don't tell me the facts. Never tell me the facts."

Privatization is a tool which allows people of faith to cheer deeds and words of violence, while claiming to worship the Prince of Peace.

Well, what's the way forward? A major key to Isaiah 58 could be, a Gabe Fackre might have suggested, to root ourselves in the Great Story, the Christian Story.³⁸ Isaiah 58 starts with worship and moves to ethics. From the perspective of *the* Story, one place where Christians might have some sense of unity across ideological lines is in the Great Story itself. I believe it was Leander Keck, New Testament Professor Emeritus at Yale, who once suggested that the reason church attendance is so much higher on Easter and

³⁸ Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine*, Volume 1, Third Edition. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

Christmas is because those stories are the only stories the vast majority of people know. So, while Christians may not agree about hymnody, liturgical styles, ecclesiology, or how to interpret the Christian Story, we still have the Story. And we can go back to it again and again.

On the ethics side of Isaiah 58, I think we don't respond well to the poor because we don't know the poor. We don't know their story. It's hard to share bread with the *quote*- poor – *unquote* in generalities. It is easier to share bread with someone whose name we know and when we know her story. For those of you who are pastors, I'm sure you can recall stories of church members who have been very inflexible—on divorce, on welfare benefits, or on race—until their own adult child needed welfare or married someone from another faith. Then, you saw their opinions begin to soften a little. I think that's partly because they know their story.

Have you heard of the Narrative 4 movement? It's a worldwide non-profit co-founded by Irish author Colum McCann and Lisa Consiglio. A trained facilitator from Narrative 4 organizes a large group at a school or community event into pairs. The first person tells their story. The second listens and then re-tells the story in the first person. Narrative 4 has used this technique in schools and universities; with the bullies and the bullied; with political adversaries. Their post-event research has found that this process assists a marked and measurable increase in empathy between the story partners! As you hear and interact with the other,

you begin to know her desires and fears and empathize with her story.

Notice that the Narrative 4 process parallels how you and I were exposed to the Christian Story. You don't start the Christian story in the first person. You heard the story of Jesus in the Temple or Isaiah preaching to Israel; either from the pulpit or a Sunday School teacher or a trusted friend. At first, you overheard the gospel. But the real transformation of self came when the Biblical story became my story. The Christian Story truly became powerful when I could tell it in the first person.

So, to play around with the Narrative 4 process a bit, how might we teach Isaiah 58 in the first person? What would it look like for you and me and our church members to tell the story of the poor from the perspective of the poor? Narrative 4 suggests that such a process might increase empathy. In fact, the Scriptures help us out greatly in Chapter 58, for God's Word itself is in the first person. God tells his Story and it's our Story. I would encourage us to practice telling God's story in the first person:

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your

healing shall spring up quickly; your vindication shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard (Isaiah 58:6-8).”

Amen.

BOOK REVIEW

A Theology in Outline: Can These Bones Live?

Oxford University Press, 2016.

By Robert W. Jenson,

Transcribed edited, and introduced by Adam Eitel.

Reviewed by F. Christopher Anderson

Close to twenty years ago I read Robert W. Jenson's two volume SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY. I recall enjoying it and being challenged by his Lutheran insights. I still have the volumes with my highlighter marks all over them.

Therefore when I saw this very small book that contains the transcribed lectures to Princeton undergraduates in 2008, I was immediately interested. Not counting the Bibliography the nine chapters are only 115 pages! The immediate problem was that this book was priced at \$29.95! (BTW the pages 117-134 contain a comprehensive bibliography of works by Jenson.)

I am very happy that, on impulse, I bought it. Since then I not only have read and enjoyed it but my newly retired therapist wife read it also. Weeks after I read it Wendy would ask me questions on each chapter that made me think about the book a second time.

It falls into the genre of such books as Dorothy and Gabriel Fackre's *Christian Basics*, Karl Barth's *Dogmatics in Outline*, C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, Emil Brunner's *Our Faith* or John Stott's *Basic Christianity*. All these books seek to summarize the Christian Faith in less than 200 pages!

The organization of the book is most similar to the Narrative Theological approach of the Fackres. These are the chapter titles. 1) What is Theology? 2) Israel. 3) Jesus and the Resurrection. 4) The Triune God. 5) Creation. 6) The Image of God. 7) Sin and Salvation. 9) Can These Bones Live?

(In reviewing the book I realize that the book has been transcribed by Adam Eitel from lectures given to undergraduates but I have chosen to use phrases such as “Jenson writes” to steer away from complicated sentences that would have to point this transcription out each and every time.)

Jenson believes that theology is “reasoned talk about God.” (6) He points out the importance of the question “What in the world could it mean that someone has been raised from the dead?” (9) He emphasizes that you cannot grasp much about Jesus or Christianity without knowing “...a whole lot about the Jews.” (9)

He stresses that God “has a people with whom he talks.” (15) He writes “Personally, I am always more inclined to trust in an ancient people’s own account of themselves than what modern critical scholars may dream up as replacements for them.” (18) On the resurrection he states with approval: “Pannenburg went so far as to say that Jesus’s resurrection is the only historically plausible proposition that covers the evidence.” (34)

Certain parts show that he is able to discuss briefly theological issues that have filled whole volumes. One of these is his discussion of how the Apologists and their “Logos Theology” opened the area that Modalism moved into with Arius and how Athanasius and the Cappadocians responded to this difficult situation. He even brings up Jewish theologians and what he has labeled “Dramatic monotheism” on this topic of the Trinity.

His section on Creation is wonderful in that he presents only four options: the sex-birth option, the great cosmic victory option, the Deist option, and Israel’s doctrine. Then he points out the simple and humbling truth that “There is not a day devoted to us.” (61)

His discussion of The Ten Commandments is very refreshing. He writes “...the good life that God proposes to human beings is not individualistically defined. It is rather *collectively or communally* defined.” (75) His discussion of The Image of God brings this insight together with his previous work on Israel. “Notice, then, that the doctrine of the *imago dei* is just an extension of Israel’s basic principle of religion. God talks to Abraham and Moses and Moses and Abraham talk back.” (69)

In speaking about sin Jenson ties in his teaching on The Ten Commandments to state: “Sin can be most simply defined as whatever breaks up this community.” (75) He points out that the Church has not come to agreement on such loci as Original Sin or a Theology of the Atonement but he is not afraid to give his personal perspectives on each.

There is much more to this little volume that is worth our time and discussion. He writes in the last chapter “If Christendom was a marriage between the gospel and Greco-Roman civilization, then we may regard Modernity as a long, drawn-out divorce.” (105)

In concluding a discussion of the historical-critical method Jenson seems to echo Barth in the last paragraph of the book. He writes: “In my judgment, theology responds best by trusting the gospel’s own interior rationality, and then building in its own metaphysics, its own vision of reality.” (115)

I hope that these few tidbits from this volume might draw you into reading the book. I believe there is a special place for books that are done well in this particular short genre. They help intelligent lay people to grapple with their faith and they help those who have read long tomes of theology to review the basics of our faith and to prepare themselves for the simplicity of preaching and teaching.

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