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**Practicing Eucharist in the Midst of
Conflict**

Joseph Hedden, Jr.

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SERMON

“So We Do Not Lose Heart.”

Linden DeBie.

BOOK REVIEWS

**Three Books That Changed Me in My
Twenties**

By F. Christopher Anderson

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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

Joseph Heddon, Jr. has written for the New Mercersburg Review before. He co-wrote an article with Gabriel Fackre which is still one of my favorite articles that has appeared in this journal. (see *“The ‘Open Table’ in Mercersburg Perspective: A Debate Between Friends,” Spring 2008.*) His new article again reveals both his Mercersburg Theology and his pastoral practice. This is the type of article that the late Jeffrey Roth would have loved. It is both theological and practical. Enjoy.

Linden DeBie, the former editor of the NMR, preached at the 2015 Annual Convocation. Linden preached on one of my favorite texts, 2 Corinthians 4:15-16a. **“Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart.”** Linden applies this text to us in our secular age yet without forgetting the amazing things that are happening in China, India, and even Australia. This is a message we all need to hear so we do not lose heart.

The third part of this issue is less what would normally be called a book review and more what some parts of the church would call “a testimony.” Many of you have heard that I have had an odd pilgrimage to Mercersburg Theology. This article is basically a very personal review of three books that drastically changed my life in my twenties. The article reveals my pilgrimage, but it also gives us a picture of how widespread is what we call being “Evangelical Catholic.” I was a lover of Mercersburg Theology without even knowing what Mercersburg Theology was at the time!

Practicing Eucharist in the Midst of Conflict

By the Rev. Joseph Hedden, Jr., OCC, Pastor,
Emmanuel United Church of Christ, Export, PA. *A
modified form of this article was delivered as a
lecture at the Dallastown Theological Summit on
May 16, 2014.*

Academically and theologically, we are living in a time of Eucharistic renewal and revival. One of the joys of my ministry has been to read significant works by the likes of George Hunsinger, Gordon Lathrop, Juergen Moltmann and Frank Senn dealing with the Eucharist and ecumenism.¹ Due to technological advances, we have access to more information regarding ecumenical practices, as well as primary sources on the history and celebration of the Lord’s Supper, than any generation in history! In very broad strokes, ecumenical theologians of the last 50 years have recommended

¹ George Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let us keep the Feast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993); Juergen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

more frequent celebration, a clearer consensus on commonalities, and crossing the once formidable denominational lines.² One would hope that the fruit of this labor might be congregational renewal. However, sociological data is not encouraging about the fate of American Protestantism in the near future. In this paper I will examine this stagnation in congregational life and suggest some resources to bring theology and practice closer together.

Local church pastors often hear that frequent celebration of communion “makes it less special.” In terms of practical theology, the use of this language is telling. “Making *it* less special” refers to the meal, not to the host of the meal, Jesus Christ. Practically and operationally, such language implies Christ’s absence rather than his presence. Ironically, if one believes, as I do, that the meal is an encounter with our Risen Lord, one would (conceivably) want to commune with Jesus more, rather than less, often. Pastors and teachers in our churches who believe in the Real Presence of Christ

² See *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Cited in William H. Lazareth, *Growing Together in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: A Study Guide* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 51.

in the sacrament experience this paradox between what we believe and what we do most acutely.

In light of this puzzle, I must ask the question, as a Mercersburg practitioner, if the Memorialist position has won the day. Despite the formation of the Mercersburg Society in the mid-80’s, its encouragement of reading ecumenical texts, and sermons on Mercersburg doctrines, have our congregations been resilient to our teaching or have they outright rejected the doctrine of the Mystical Presence?

Yet, thinness and stagnation in Eucharistic practice abounds. It is not unique to enthusiasts for the Mercersburg Movement. As far as I can tell there is much common ground across theological viewpoints. Many pastoral theologians agree that the Lord’s Supper shares symbols, acts, and meaning with the eschatological feast in Revelation 19, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. Many agree that communion is a sign of unity. Christians of all stripes agree that the meal is a very special form of proclamation. Memorialists and Mercersburg proponents alike could agree that the Eucharist gives us resources to draw on from the Prince of Peace. Stanley

Hauerwas in one of his classes on ethics and liturgy asked his students to “consider whether Christians can get up from the meal in which Jesus has been the host and begin to kill one another in the name of national loyalties.”³ This is a remarkable statement from Hauerwas. However, the statement as it stands is too abstract, too utopian. In that same essay Hauerwas does not explicitly acknowledge the reality that every pastor knows—even after a powerful Eucharistic celebration, mere moments after we have emerged from a meal where Jesus was the host, we have witnessed devastating church conflict, say, in a congregational meeting, resulting in character assassination, wounded hearts, and sin against the Body of Christ. In other words, communing with the Risen Christ has not been an impediment to conflicted congregations and congregational meetings. On the geopolitical level, the celebration of the Eucharist at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. did not prevent the invasion of Iraq nor drone

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 162.

attacks, despite the self-confessed identification of the United States as built on “Judeo-Christian” principles.

To look at the issue from yet another perspective, do our Communion celebrations on, say, Easter Sunday or Christmas Eve represent the eschatological community prepared to proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26)? Alternatively, I argue it is more likely that our gathered congregations represent the last vestiges of a culturally captive Christendom. I would hazard a guess that large portions of the gathered congregation on Christmas Eve or Easter Sunday attend much more due to familial obligation, duty, guilt, convenience, or peer pressure, than to prepare themselves for the *parousia*, the coming of the Prince of Peace.

Again, does this mean that, despite movements of Eucharistic renewal of the past 50 years, we have failed? Have all of us—regardless of theological orientation—missed something in our celebration of the Eucharist? Are the arguments about “Open Table” largely moot in the face of increasingly secular, biblically

illiterate, and agnostic congregations?⁴ We must ask ourselves what it means to worship God and commune in an increasingly postmodern, diverse, and secular culture. Turning away, for the moment, from our present context, we need to re-examine first principles.

Conflict in the Biblical Witness

We have already identified one problem with our current Eucharistic practice. What do we do with the cognitive dissonance between communing with the Prince of Peace and our conflicted congregations?

We need to look to the Biblical witness. Contrary to our idealized and utopian remembrances of the Last Supper, all the Synoptics indicate that conflict, strife, and misunderstanding, rather than outward peace, marked the gathering in the Upper Room. The Synoptics all preserve (Matthew and Mark before the Words of

⁴ For more on the “Open Table” discussion, see Gabriel Fackre and Joseph Hedden, “A Friendly Debate on ‘The Open Table,’” *The New*

Institution, Luke after) a heated and heartbreaking discussion about Jesus’ betrayal by Judas (Matt. 26:20-25; Mark 14:17-21; Luke 22:21-23). Luke additionally relates that the teaching about greatness in the Kingdom of God arose out of a dispute among the disciples (Luke 22:24). Further, take another look sometime at Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*. Most of us remember it for the serene face of Jesus, arms outstretched, as if in invitation. I remember it hanging in my grandparents’ living room and my memory of it is largely one of comfort and peace. However, da Vinci did not paint it as a peaceful scene. He places it immediately following Jesus’ prediction of betrayal—Matthew 26:22 “Is it I, Lord?” The dynamic motion and faces of the disciples indicate that they are arguing, pleading, questioning, upset, and conflicted.

In addition, if one believes, as I do, that John 6 also serves as a Eucharistic text, we should note that after the bread of life discourse, the Jews and the disciples of Jesus are scandalized by their literal misinterpretation of consuming the flesh and blood of Christ. John 6:66 states, “From this time many of his disciples

turned back and no longer followed him.” This is an amazing statement! The image of Jesus we find here is surprising, especially if we have learned to think of him as host of the meal, standing before us with open arms.

Outside of the Gospels, the most important Eucharistic text is undoubtedly 1 Corinthians 11. Again, we must not overlook the context of the passage. Corinth is Paul’s most conflicted church, a source of deep pain for him, and deeply divided over the proper celebration of the sacrament. This division may have been in part theological (who really knows?); however, unethical practice and sin certainly contributed the lion’s share to conflict over communion. Taken together, I think it would come as a surprise to many of our congregations, and indeed, to pastors ourselves to note how often conflict weaves into the warp and weft of these essential Eucharistic texts. In contrast, then, to naïve or utopian views of what we are doing when we commune, the Supper in all four gospels and in the early Church confronts us with an undertone, or background, of conflict.

Does this situation of sharing bread and cup in the midst of suffocating conflict sound familiar? We are all too familiar with conflict in the local church. However, we often view conflict as abnormal and contraindicated when compared with the Biblical texts. Of course, we dislike conflict. We try to mediate it. We attempt to get along and play nice in our churches. However, playing nice is not a Biblical portrait of the Eucharist. The Bible is more realistic than we are often ready to admit. Perhaps the Biblical witness is warning us that this act of communion, so vital to our Christian life and practices, will often be performed in the context of conflict. The Bible warns us against naïveté or immaturity.

The Book of Acts as a way forward?

This is seemingly not good news. Even prior to sorting out our theological categories into Mystical Presence or Zwinglian Memorialism or a broad ecumenism, we encounter conflict as the background tone of the meal. We can certainly relate. In post-Christendom in the United States, every pastor, every congregation

can speak to the fear and disappointment that our rapidly changing world engenders in church folk. Congregations seek Pastor “Fix-It” to reverse decades of decline that have largely been outside of our control. When she doesn’t deliver the results from on high, the people grumble. Fear leads to misplaced blame, anger, and fighting over meager resources. This certainly sounds like Corinth.

Identifying the conflict and stating the challenge using Biblical language and images may be a first step to a kind of awareness. In other words, the Christian Church has been here before. “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

In order to state the Biblical challenge to America’s fragmented and conflicted post-modern culture, it was fashionable several years ago, to use the metaphor of the Babylonian Exile.⁵ Although I am sympathetic to the goals of the project, it always seemed to me that the metaphor was flawed in two major ways: one, the American church had been through no Zero-Hour crisis

where everything changed. The Jews of the Exile could indeed point to such a trauma --the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 586 B.C.E. Second, American Christians are too exposed to the dominant culture to be true exiles. Christians and non-Christians grow up in the same culture, watching the same television shows, speaking the same language, shopping at the same stores and so on. We drink from the same cultural wells as our Babylonian overlords. In fact, we are our own Babylonian overlords. This was less so for the Jewish community following the Exile.

So, if Exile is the wrong image, what would fit better?

Bruce Epperly has recently proposed a metaphor I prefer in *Transforming Acts: Acts of the Apostles as a 21st Century Gospel*. Epperly sees many parallels between the postmodern situation of American Christianity in the 21st Century and the diverse world of the 1st Century Roman Empire.⁶ I think he might be about right.

⁵ As in *Exilic Preaching: Testimony for Christian Exiles in an Increasingly Hostile Culture*, ed. Erskine Clarke, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1988).

⁶ Bruce Epperly, *Transforming Acts: Acts of the Apostles as a 21st Century Gospel*, (Gonzalez, FL: Energon Publications, 2013).

What can we glean about Eucharistic practice from looking through the prism of the book of Acts?

One of the helpful things we can find in Acts, and indeed throughout the canonical Biblical witness, is the diversity of the early church. Unfortunately, we are not used to reading the New Testament as a demonstration of pluralism. On the extreme conservative side of the spectrum, there is a doctrine of inspiration which sees the New Testament as a unity, harmonizing all contradiction and glossing over differences in authorial perspective. On the liberal side, some Biblical historians propose that orthodoxy and the canon primarily arose to reign in diversity and heterodox theology.⁷ However, I think both perspectives are wide of the mark. For example, Acts records geographic, cultural, religious, inter- and intra-congregational diversity. Some of the diversity is welcome as a sign of the movement of the Holy Spirit. Other examples, such as the questioning of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin, report a

⁷ For example, see Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2005). I am much more skeptical than Ehrman is that we can confidently attribute specific intentions to textual variants in the New Testament.

diversity in the midst of conflict and persecution. Against this backdrop, Luke writes about a growing, innovative church.⁸ Moreover, what is true for Acts is even more so throughout the canon. The New Testament texts themselves demonstrate a very wide diversity of viewpoint and even conflict. Compare, for example, the differences in outlook between Jude, James, or Paul, or the inconsistencies between Acts and Galatians. The early church portrayed in Acts and the canon sounds more and more to me like the pluralistic Emergent and Missional Churches of today than the cultural Christianity of the 20th Century mainline.

For our purposes today, I want to look more specifically at the connection in Acts between Eucharist and the supernatural, amazing growth of the early church. You are, no doubt, familiar with this recurring pattern: God does something amazing, which Acts often calls signs or wonders, and the number of the baptized believers grows. The first place we see this is immediately after Peter's sermon on Pentecost when 3000 were baptized (Acts 2:41).

⁸ I am aware of the issues of authorship surrounding Luke-Acts and name the author as Luke for convenience.

Six verses later we are told that the Lord was adding daily to the number of the saved (Acts 2:47). What is interesting to me here is the interplay between signs and wonders, Eucharist and Christian practices. The miracle of Pentecost *alone* does not bring 3000 people to God. It is the sign of Pentecost *plus* the preaching of Peter. According to Acts 2:42-47, signs and wonders were a regular occurrence among the disciples but interestingly Luke chooses to highlight the practices with more specificity and detail than the signs themselves. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers . . . All the believers held everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (Acts 2:42, 43-44). In Chapter 6, Luke narrates the selection of deacons, who were desired because of a conflict between the Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews as to equitable distribution of food. The disciples select seven deacons and after this commissioning to ministry we are told that “a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). Luke narrates no sign or wonder in this pericope, leaving us with the impression that it was the

provision for widows and the preaching of the Word that were primary factors in conversion. Though not always explicit or consistent, Christian ethical practices underlie church growth in the Book of Acts. It is not just Eucharist alone, nor even signs and wonders alone. The reality is much more diverse and multi-faceted.

As we have seen, the culture narrated in the Book of Acts was a time of conflict and diversity. Yet we also have these images within the church of growth, peace, and harmony. Now we know that Luke was not a neutral interpreter and perhaps he idealized the growth of the infant church. However, the template Acts leaves us is unmistakable—the church is not constituted just by signs and wonders nor just by Eucharist nor just by practices. Instead, we notice how the practices of forgiveness, charity, neighbor love, and caring for widows and orphans sit alongside the Eucharist and the action of the Holy Spirit. Acts is not a book about eradicating conflict. The stoning of Stephen, the mission to the Gentiles, and the persecutions see to that. Yet, Acts is a book about how to live faithfully in the midst of conflict. According to Acts, God calls his people to respond, thoughtfully and prayerfully, to conflict by

embodying Christian practices, alongside worship and Eucharist. No one practice is adequate by itself. The book of Acts calls us, to borrow from Romans, to “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

Let me propose what this might look like, first theologically and then practically. We are all familiar with the Reformers’ criteria for a proper church. “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”⁹ I humbly suggest that we need to add practices embodied. Calvin and Luther both assumed that Christian ethical practices would be part of the church. They presumed a world we no longer inhabit. The Eucharist on Easter Sunday is not consumed in any kind of real community (we are about as communal as a crowd at the movie theater is); essentially we are a gathering of strangers. We come together to see the show and make a transaction. If you have any doubts about our failure to uphold community in regards

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960) IV. I. 10.

to the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, one only has to look at the Daytona Drive-In Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).¹⁰ In this community, one does not need to leave one’s automobile to hear the preacher, listen to the songs, or partake in communion. You will note that by the letter of the law, Calvin’s definition does not disqualify a drive-in church. However, the mere fact that we entertain the idea that communion can be consumed in such individualistic terms, hermetically sealed from one’s neighbor, shows how far we have come from the model of Acts. (It is a grand and sad irony that the one time you can experience genuine human contact is after worship at coffee hour, where Krispy Kreme doughnuts are available.) Eucharist in a setting of strangers, divorced from authentic community, is too thin to support the practices of peacemaking, evangelism, tithing, Sabbath keeping, or Biblical Hospitality.

Turning to practical matters, perhaps it is time to reduce celebration of Eucharist in public worship. What would the church

¹⁰ See Daytona Beach Drive-in Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at their website: www.driveinchurch.net. Accessed April 3, 2014.

look like if pastors and congregations agreed to remove or reduce the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper from our main services of worship? What if, instead, we offer Eucharist to a small group within the congregation that is seeking to embody Christian practices? What would it do to our congregations if we announced, with adequate preparation and governing body support, that we were not going to be sharing in the Lord's Supper together on Easter but next Saturday at 10 a.m., for any who want to join a small group? That would put the impetus upon the individual Christian to seek out the sacrament and the community. This might cause congregants to choose between passively being "served" or actively seeking out the Lord. "Seek the Lord where he may be found. Call upon him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6). Then the only way (or one of the only ways) to receive communion in our churches would be in conjunction with the practices of our faith, attempting to model the Acts of the Apostles.

Now, it is important for me to say that I am not advocating restricting communion to only those enrolled in the small group. I've seen restricting communion abused by clergy and governing

bodies. Anyone who arrives for the meal will be communed; the difference is that they will be surrounded by a community sharing testimony, forgiveness, hospitality and so on. This model intends to marry the Eucharist to Christian practices, essentially what the Christian community has done for millennia.

Now this model is not a panacea and potentially has many pitfalls. Three major objections to this model that I am struggling with myself are as follows: (1) This sounds like a radical proposal that is just being provocative for its own sake, seeking conflict. (2) This has the potential to create a church within a church, where people in the small groups feel superior to those who are absent. And (3) This model seems antithetical to my own denominational (United Church of Christ) values. How do we square a restricted communion, however we go about it, or however well-intentioned, with being a church of "Extravagant Welcome"?

Well, first I must admit the obstacles are formidable. I cannot see this being a popular option in many of our congregations. I must admit that the congregation's education and discernment on the purpose behind such a radical reorientation of

values and priorities is a non-negotiable. And that still may not be enough. However, we might be surprised. We are rapidly reaching, if we have not already passed it, a turning point where many people at our Christmas and Easter services may not miss communion because they've never really had it. Perhaps a personal example will explain best what I mean. I served as a pastor outside Bonn, Germany, in 2003-2004, with a UCC Partner Church, the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland. A woman visited my office to request a baptism for her child. Looking at the schedule for worship, I informed her that we could baptize her child on the date she was seeking but it was a celebration of the Eucharist. The German word I used was the common word for communion, referencing Jesus and the disciples in the Upper Room: Abendmahl. Literally, the evening meal. She looked at me with incomprehension. "Why," she asked, "would a church want to have an evening meal at 10:15 on Sunday morning?" Although Germany is very secular, I would suggest that we are not too far behind, and we will find many of these folks in our pews on high holy days. Nevertheless, I believe a conversation such as the one we are

having now is worth having, even if it leads to conflict. As I demonstrated earlier, we are fooling ourselves if we believe that the issues around Eucharist are devoid of conflict. Perhaps we need to be honest about the context of conflict in the New Testament Eucharistic stories as well as in our home congregations.

As to the second objection, that this might create an in-group and out-group, I hope that hypocrisy and arrogance would be inappropriate to the values of the small groups studying the practices. Indeed, humility must be one of the practices studied and embodied. Hopefully, a sense of entitlement, or superiority, would be out of place. The small groups, as I see it, must train themselves in the essentials of discernment, confessing sin, offering and giving forgiveness.

Three, how does this square with UCC tradition? Well, perhaps this model is more a part of UCC heritage than we realize. Pietism, which had a great influence on the Evangelical Synod in North America (one of the predecessor denominations of the UCC), began in a similar manner of embodying practices. The practice of love was the third of Pietist Jacob Spener's "Six Proposals," and

small groups of European pietists met outside of the formal German church structure, sometimes without leadership by clergy!¹¹ John Wesley was greatly influenced by the Pietists and he saw the class meetings, where small groups would meet weekly and discuss the state of the soul as essential to renewal. Additionally, the non-separatist Puritans began their ecclesiastical life in a similar sort of fashion, with the intent to purify the church from within. And what could be more UCC than the Puritans? Therefore, perhaps it is up to us to reclaim these dusty and underutilized corners of the UCC attic. Perhaps someone could creatively do some theological work on these divergent traditions and their impact on the UCC as a church of “Extravagant Welcome.”

I would like to propose a personal example of how I’ve seen all these diverse threads come together in a unity. Early on during my year in Germany I received a call to bring my very first home communion to a member who was unable to attend public worship. She was a grandmother who had trouble walking. She was part of

¹¹ Jacob Spener, “Six Proposals” in *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*, Volume 4, Edited by Elizabeth C. Nordbeck and Lowell

the recent immigrant community called the Russland Deutsch. After the fall of communism in 1989, many ethnic Germans found it advantageous to return to their ancestral home due to Germany’s liberal right of return laws, put into place after World War Two. What that means today is that there is a large group of people who are ethnically German, primarily Lutheran or Reformed, and have joined Christian congregations on their return to Germany, as a way of assimilation and finding community.

The family greeted me warmly. Over coffee and pastries we talked about their religious practice in the Soviet Union. To celebrate the Eucharist, Christians would place black plastic garbage bags over their windows so that no one could see inside their homes and report their activities to the KGB. For the meal, they needed two staples that were not hard to find—bread and wine. Both were readily available and you would raise no suspicion bringing them home from market. In the absence of a pastor, Christian families hid in their home a “Predigtbuch,” literally a preaching book. It was in German, had a lectionary for the church

year, and sermons for each Sunday. Someone from the family would read the lessons for the day and, if applicable, the sermon. Eucharist would follow.

When it came time for communion, we retired to their common room. Grandmother had a hard life. She was in her seventies but looked decades older. Her health was not great and her legs were greatly swollen with edema. She had uprooted herself and her family at a time when many of us would be thinking about retirement homes and visiting national parks and so on. Yet this had not dimmed their hospitality toward their pastor, foreigner though I was. A quick calculation made me realize that I had been the guest of honor at probably their most expensive, most elaborate meal they would share all week.

In the common room, I placed the communion set on a second-hand table marred with coffee mug rings and scratches. I undid the case's fasteners and as I took the cloth off the bread and wine, every family member, including Grandmother, stood up. My first thought was that I had already messed up and everyone was standing to leave. Gradually, calmness prevailed and I realized they

were standing in praise of the Risen Lord who was truly and fully present. Christ had been present in a little apartment in the USSR in the 1960's under cover of darkness and that same Christ had brought them safe to this moment, this common room. They had celebrated communion hundreds of times in the past, often in the midst of potential conflict and persecution. Yet, they had faithfully continued their practices—singing hymns, hospitality to the stranger, offering and receiving forgiveness, prayer for healing, --in spite of the very real danger. Every member of the family stood for the entire Eucharist, including the grandmother, who was at times obviously uncomfortable. There was a great joy and thankfulness to Jesus that they could worship publicly without fear of retribution or arrest or imprisonment. This room with its worn settee and handmade throw covers was the holiest church in which I had ever worshipped. And I finally understood what my theology of Mystical Presence really meant.

When the meal and the singing was over, I gathered my things and left, going out to the car. And I was greatly moved. Chills were running up and down my back and under my shoulder

blades. And I said to myself, as I started the ignition and drove home to my waiting family, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18).

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**HOMILY FOR MORNING PRAYER AT THE
MERCERSBURG CONVOCATION
JUNE 3, 2015
“SO WE DO NOT LOSE HEART”
The Rev. Dr. Linden DeBie**

Text: 2 Corinthians 4:15-16a. Paul writes to his friends in Corinth, “Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart.”

Let us pray! Holy Spirit, come down and make us see with your light, hear in your tenor and speak with your tongue. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

But of course, Paul had every reason to lose heart. His sufferings were beyond measure and yet he persevered. Not only did he persevere, he thrived—demonstrating a joy, commitment, and contentment that was nothing short of miraculous. Nor were the Corinthians in great shape. Paul’s churches were often persecuted. Nor were they really “successful” by today’s standards. They were never large and had no resemblance to the throngs swarming to the auditoriums of today’s mega-churches. (Now these Mega-churches

know a little something of success—a success that Paul would have found astounding—maybe even perplexing!) Rather Paul’s success, if it could be called that, was a gritty holding-on-to the Gospel under great tribulation. And while his experience far exceeds most of our own struggles today, we in the Mercersburg Society have asked ourselves many times over the more than thirty years of our existence, “How can we *not* lose heart?”

Indeed, several of our past convocations struggled over our perceived desperate plight, as congregations around us disbanded and wonderful sanctuaries emptied—and still are emptying. We have, over and over again, asked ourselves, how might we stem the secular tide that menaces and robs our culture of its inheritance? That dumbs it down, not just in terms of faith, but of art and music and literature? And we have too often been the sad faces of a bygone generation—longing for a golden age that never really existed.

Now that is not to say things have haven’t changed in America. They have, and in many ways for the worse. And in spite of the fact that - as measured by such indicators as Gallup - we

remain more Christian than our parent countries in Europe, nevertheless an undeniable malaise has set in, and any number of bright thinkers in our company, theologians of national and international repute, have written powerfully about a blight that worries us to sleeplessness.

We have made offerings of profound hymnody, moving liturgies of passion and compassion, and worked hard at being inclusive and welcoming—only to have the young and even some aging skeptics respond, “too little too late.” Unlike Paul, who believed with all his heart that although his little churches struggled, his movement, the Gospel movement, was the next “big thing,” we on the other hand, have often felt eclipsed and tempted to wonder if, like the legendary elves of Tolkien's Middle-earth, our age, the Age of Christianity, is at an end and the Age of Secular Humanism is upon us.

These fears and others like them, have been expressed through the years of our meetings. And this morning I can't offer much in the way of prophecy, but rather I want to raise some points that we might want to consider.

Things that perhaps St. Paul might be praying for on our behalf today, so that we “do not lose heart.”

In two very different, yet remarkable and in many ways complementary books, one by Charles Taylor and one by Brad Gregory, the whole question of our secular age is critically considered. The jarring thesis is that to a great extent, we Protestants brought this upon ourselves. Now it certainly wasn't a conscious act in most cases, but all the ramifications of freedom and individuality - which sometimes become license, avarice, and selfishness - bloomed in the spirit of Protestant culture. Like an unwelcomed crop invading our traditional gardens, we are at a loss how to deal with it. We struggle to make sense of this blighted harvest of our own making. But Paul has set for us a formula of forbearance and hope in this beautiful passage to the Corinthians. He tells us that “everything has been done for your sakes.” That grace will be extended to more and more people, such that in our thanksgiving we express the glory of God and never “lose heart.”

Now, as I said, some of these are qualities of endurance or forbearance, in the face of trouble and that I commend to us all.

After all, who knows God's time and who knows the full mystery of his plan for planet earth? But then some of these qualities can become strategies—meant for the Church. And these are the points I want to dwell on this morning.

First of all, Paul says that everything Christ achieved on Calvary was done for our sake! But now Paul goes on to say, that was done so that grace may extend to more and more people. You see, we always were—the Church, that is - we were first and foremost a “sending out,” a missionary movement. Mission was our first calling!

I know that many of you over these past weeks with me have been preaching on or hearing the prescribed texts of the lectionary, all those texts leading up to and springing forth from Pentecost. They express Paul's deepest convictions that prophecy had been fulfilled, “that the Messiah had come, suffered and died and rose again, so that repentance and forgiveness might be preached in his name.” “As I was sent of the Father so I send you.” “You are my witnesses.” We have been hearing that for weeks now.

Beloved, it seems to me this all speaks to our calling - that we were chosen specifically for this purpose. Not, as some in the church teach today, to “get to heaven.” Nor was it ever about what God will do for “me” personally, by and by, in the sky—or in my bankbook. It was not about driving fancy cars and experiencing the gospel of success; and certainly we were not called to condemn the nations, but to pray for them; to unite and not divide people or make war; to lead them in all peace—that by word and example, we might simply show our thanksgiving. It was, as Paul said, all about what God has already done for us in Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

This, then, is the life lived in gratitude. Gratitude for all that God has already done for us. Gratitude for what God is doing currently in the world through us, and sometimes in spite of us. Gratitude for what we will attain when his kingdom has fully come. And in response to all this graciousness on the part of God, it seems to me and I know many of you, our best expression of thanksgiving is offered up in our celebration of Holy Eucharist.

In a fascinating and largely convincing doctoral dissertation, Chris Ganski directly tied John Calvin's doctrine of the Holy Spirit,

which was robust, as you know, with a post-modern pneumatology that focuses on eschatology. Put simply, where Eucharist is truly celebrated, experienced and fully realized, not just in ritual but in the genuineness of the words “living sacrifices,” there the Holy Spirit is extending the Kingdom of God on Earth.

But of course, like many of you, I have often despaired of seeing that as a reality. Especially during the 80’s and 90’s, as I gathered with you, year after year, it seemed to me that many in the church were gripped by fear and paranoia. Churches were emptying—closed and sold. Denominations were fighting over resources that were scarce and getting scarcer. “Downscaling” was a word in vogue and the feeling was one of desperation. Science declared victory over religion, kids doubted, parents gave up fighting what seemed a losing battle—to soccer and tennis and what all. School prayer was declared an affront to our democracy, and to our freedom “from” religion.

I remember that I once told our beloved Jeff Roth, who led this society in so many ways, that the very reason I took up fly fishing was to escape the stress of these discouraging cultural

trends. That was how bleak I found the situation! But what many of us did not realize was that what we truly were mourning, what we truly feared, was the loss of a way of life—not so much the way of Christ, but the way of Anglo-Saxon religion. What we feared was the loss of control.

Last week I had lunch with John Chang—he’s a Chinese speaking pastor, a sometime missionary, a colleague and a friend in Flushing. That’s Flushing, New York, where on some parts of Main Street, you would think you were in Beijing, China. He’s had some health issues due to overwork, and I told him he ought to slow down a bit. He sighed and said “Linden, I wish I was three people. I cannot keep up with the demand of thousands of Christians in China who are begging me to come and teach them.”

I said, “John, not so long ago a friend sent me a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*, with an article stating that by 2020, China would have the largest Christian population in the world. John laughed out loud and said, “The numbers are cooked. Beijing is in a panic and doesn’t want you to know the truth. China is already the largest Christian population in the world and it’s growing. And with

China is India, and Africa, and, oh, by the way, Australia is making quite a comeback.”

And yet we have no idea what all this means Will Beijing lash out? Will martyrdom become as common as it was in the first centuries? Even now we see ominous signs of that! What course will Christianity take there? Will it too become simply the best religion for doing business, in the American style of capitalism? Or will the preaching of repentance and forgiveness free the minds and hearts of millions, such that love and justice and peace shatter thousands of years of feudalism, chauvinism, racism, and injustice?

Of course, all this doesn't address the challenges we face here in rural Pennsylvania, does it? Nor does it speak to our allegedly hard-pressed and too often arrogant Western, liberal democracy, in terms of religion. Or does it speak expressly to these issues? After all, what has really changed since Paul's admonition that we are called to be faithful witnesses? To celebrate Eucharist in that authenticity that makes us “living sacrifices,” offered up to our Father in heaven and gifted with the ministry of *caritas*?

Indeed, I think the global challenges and opportunities, speak directly to us here in Lancaster, PA, as much as to Main Street, USA. But this witness must cease to be a witness to “me” getting to heaven and having an SUV until then. That was childish and stupid and never a part of the Gospel. As witnesses we are called to the principle of Christian *caritas*, a love so radical that we truly do see Christ in the eyes of the young woman sold into slavery. We see him in the confused hopelessness of the homeless man, the girl in Pakistan who wants to go to school. We hear his voice in the pleas of thousands seeking sanctuary in overcrowded boats ravaged by wind and wave, and rejected by their neighbors.

The Church is called to be a witness to these holy truths; the telling/living of God's story, which is a story that both the religious and the secular have at times ignored. Those without faith seek some rational mooring for their idealism—and there is none. But at times the faithful, wrapping themselves in a false assurance that works are irrelevant, which, by the way, Martin Marty once commented about, saying that we had better stop preaching “works availith not,” because “nobody's doing them anymore.” Anyway, by

ignoring “works” we have at times become complicit by suggesting that if what one feels inside, rather than what one does outside is what is most important, then naturally to be saved by one’s “personal relationship with Jesus Christ” trumps any notion that being saved is giving things away or loving the down-and-out in a tangible way.

Now this does not mean that sincere behavior cannot be consistent with a concern for family and a dedication to loved ones. But we cannot avoid the reality that our benevolence is practiced in a world “dominated by wall-to-Wal-Mart capitalism and consumerism” (Brad Gregory). But even as we amuse ourselves to death with our toys and trinkets, whether in our ignorance of climate change or by the “disease of greed” (to use Bucer’s term), it would appear that “wishful thinking and self-deceptive illusions have long been posing as progressive rationality and Enlightened truth” (Charles Taylor). And God is justly displeased!

In the late nineteenth century, the Catholic Church, in a remarkable reversal of ultramontanist defensiveness, began to articulate a response to post-industrial Western society and speak of

the nature of humanity, of what is desirable, of material possessions and our shared common good. The material appeared in various conciliar texts, particularly *Caritas in veritate* (2009). For me, they represent a strategy for the Church and personally, a tangible way that we can really make a difference - how we can fight back, so to speak. Literally, how we can be the witnesses we are called to be, the way we can *not lose heart*.

Caritas in veritate reiterated the claim that the natural world is God’s creation, intended by God for the flourishing of all human beings; it repeated that economics and the market are not independent of morality; it reasserted that the right to private property is not absolute but is, rather, subordinate to the common good; it restated that unrestrained acquisitiveness does not serve but rather impedes genuine human flourishing and eternal salvation; it confirmed the biblical view that the pursuit of affluence above love for God and service to others is idolatry; it argued that minimizing workers’ wages in order to maximize profits is exploitative and immoral; and it insisted that the poor and marginalized, as a matter

of justice, have a moral claim on the more affluent to share with and care for them.

“Yes, everything is for your sake, but so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. In this, we do not lose heart.”

Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Linden DeBie is pastor of the Community Church of Douglaston, New York City. He edited The Mystical Presence (2012) and Coena Mystica (2013), both by John W., Nevin. DeBie's Speculative Philosophy and Common Sense Religion was published in 2008. The January 2015 Theology Today includes an article co-authored with Bradford Littlejohn, entitled "Reformed Eucharistic Theology and the Case for Real Presence."

BOOK REVIEWS

Three Books That Changed Me in My Twenties

*Enthusiasm:
A Chapter in the History of Religion*
By Ronald Knox

*History of the Christian Church Volume VIII:
Modern Christianity, The Swiss Reformation*
By Philip Schaff

An Anthology of Devotional Literature
Edited by Thomas S. Kepler

By The Rev. Dr. F. Christopher Anderson, OCC

“Some come by slow freight.” This a comment that comedians use when they hear someone laugh long after others have gotten the joke. It summarizes my pilgrimage to Mercersburg Theology.

I did not grow up in a Mercersburg tradition. I grew up in an Irish Roman Catholic tradition. I had twelve years of Roman Catholic private school education. In my later teens I was part of the counter culture in the 60's and was converted (or better yet, returned to faith in Christ) through the Jesus Movement. I was twenty years old in 1971 and I was attending the University of Albany. I once counted up to 25 various Christian groups that I was at least somewhat involved in before I joined a United Church of Christ church in the fall of 1977.

It would take too much space for me to list and explain all of the differing religious groups I was somewhat connected to in my twenty's. A brief summary will help you get the idea. These groups

ranged from the Baptist Fundamentalist to the Catholic Charismatics to Pentecostals to a House Church group to Holiness groups to an evangelical group that followed the theology of Charles G. Finney which was morphing into a cult. I was young, idealistic, and searching for "The Perfect Church." (I did not realize at the time that if I found a perfect church it would not allow me to become a member.)

During these years three books changed my life. I had never heard of Mercersburg Theology but oddly enough one of them was written by Philip Schaff and the other two books would greatly interest both Nevin and Schaff. I did not realize that three books were moving me towards Mercersburg Theology. At the time I saw that they merely opened me up to the wider Christian Church and revealed to me the odd nature of many of the groups to which I had been known.

The first book that changed me was *ENTHUSIASM: A CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGION* by the late Right Reverend Monsignor Ronald A. Knox. This was an amazing find for me. He uses the term "Enthusiasm" as "a label for a tendency." In a book that is over 600 pages long Knox paints a history of the church where this tendency was expressed. The term was not a compliment as it was in the title of a famous Norman Vincent Peale book! Lutherans have used titles like "Schwarmerei," and "Rottengeister" (rabble spirits) to describe this tendency in religion. Francis Schaffer (the popular evangelical of L'Abri and later Christian Right fame) would use the simpler word "super-spiritual" to describe them.

The tendency that Knox wrote about described many of the groups that I had known. He had many ways of describing this type of faith. The following is a collection of the traits he wrote about in *ENTHUSIASM*. They are ultra-supernaturalism, rigorism or the opposite antinomianism, grace destroying nature, anti-reason, theocracy, perfectionism, unrestrained private judgement versus authority, direct access to God, claims of divinity, blind acts of faith, by-passing historic traditions, a suspicion that the church is unchurched, theatrical effect, anti-sacramentalism, sectarianism, a

sense of having a monopoly on the faith, a lack of humility, an elite and giving of dates for the end of the world.

Obviously one can find many things in this list that Nevin disliked about the popular Revival Movement of his era. These traits have not disappeared. Seeing such errors must have had the tendency to draw Nevin closer to the one holy catholic and apostolic church that was spoken of in the creeds. This was certainly the effect that the reading of this book had upon me.

Knox's book was a revelation to me. It made it clear to me that the groups that I was part of had real problems. It opened me up to seeing the Christian Faith and the Christian Church in an entirely new light. This was a humbling experience. Worse yet, I discovered that I had a number of these traits! This was a great shock to me. Instead of being like Paul, it appeared I was more like some of the people he wrote to in Corinth!

The discovery of this fact gave me an overwhelming desire to explore theology from the era of the early church through the late twentieth century. The ground I was standing on was shaky and I needed to find something solid to stand on. Therefore the next two books were read with an eye to finding that solid ground.

You must understand that I was part of a group that viewed John Calvin as the cause of most problems that had appeared in the Protestant Church. I had teachers who stated with the utmost authority that he was so misguided as to be evil. One teacher belittled *The Institutes* by giving us the idea that *The Institutes* that were so important to Calvinists were written by a young man. He neglected (and possibly did not know) to tell us that he rewrote the book various times from his youth in 1536 to his maturity in 1559.

Yet I was a college graduate who needed to find such things out myself. The next book I read was *HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH Vol. VIII: MODERN CHRISTIANITY, THE SWISS REFORMATION* by our own Philip Schaff. I read this book partially to understand why Calvin was so bad! I wanted to have the same authority as my teachers in pointing out his errors. Obviously it had a differing effect upon me.

The book did not convince me to be a Calvinist (whatever that term means) but it did convince me that this man was a

wonderful gift to the universal church. I still thought he was wrong on various points, but I clearly saw him as a gift to the church.

I will not attempt to summarize this book for you. I assume that many of you have read it or other works on Calvin's place in history. As *ENTHUSIASM* had led me to read Schaff, now Schaff led me to begin a life-long study of Reformed Theology. Soon after I read *Lectures on Calvinism* by Abraham Kuyper, *The History and Character of Calvinism* by John T. McNeill, and of course *The Institutes*. One may disagree with Calvin, but one cannot dismiss him. I would never be the same after reading Schaff's book. That one book changed my life.

The third book that changed me in my late 20's was written by an Oberlin College professor. (This is humorous since Charles G. Finney was the second President of Oberlin.) I picked up this book for 25 cents at a church book sale! It was one of the best investments in my life. It is titled *AN ANTHOLOGY OF DEVOTIONAL LITERATURE*, edited by Thomas S. Kepler.

There are two more recent books that are very similar and probably easier to find. They are *Devotional Classics*, edited by Richard Foster & James Bryan Smith, and *Spiritual Classics*, edited by Richard Foster & Emilie Griffin. These books include less devotional writers and also include questions and spiritual exercises that are written by the editors. I mention these books to merely help you understand what the Kepler book was like. (I assume that it might be hard to find and I am not giving you my copy.)

I did not read this book the way I read the two previous titles. I used this book for my devotions. I counted 127 writers in this collection. They range from the Church Fathers (no women authors until Hildegard of Bingen, AD 1090-1153, though it includes a number of women after her) to Barth and Niebuhr. Almost every denominational tradition is included. It includes Quakers, Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists etc. Some of the groups represented Knox had even classified as being Enthusiastic groups! I will not go into this question, but the book clearly showed me that each various part of the universal church had gifts to offer the whole church. This book strengthened my sense of the ecumenical church and my part in it.

Kepler wrote a brief biography of each author and then gave normally two to six pages of what that author had written. Daily I tried to read one of them from the Patristic Age all the way up to the 20th Century. It taught me Church History and it opened me up to the rich devotional literature that has marked the various branches of the wider church. Unknown to me I had become an Evangelical Catholic. These three books had changed my life.

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